

PHILIPPINE NO WAVE

This is not a film movement

KHAVN

*"I just need to say THANK YOU for making this!
It's a major read for me as we share similar cinematic visions (and among others, political instability).*

Your book is gold."

– APICHA TPONG WEERASETHAKUL

EDITED BY DODO DAYAO, MABIE ALAGBATE, ACHINETTE VILLAMOR PROFILES BY RICHARD BOLISAY, DODO DAYAO, OGGs CRUZ

**STARRING National Artist KIDLAT TAHIMIK
LAV DIAZ ROXLEE BRILLANTE MENDOZA
RAYA MARTIN JOHN TORRES AURAEUS
SOLITO MES DE GUZMAN ADOLFO ALIX
JR. JEFFREY JETURIAN DITSI CAROLINO
SHERAD ANTHONY SANCHEZ PAOLO
VILLALUNA ELLEN RAMOS ATO BAUTISTA
RICO MARIA ILARDE**

Introduction by National Artist BIENVENIDO S. LUMBERA

"Filipino cinema continues to be an inspiration to me!"

- **Amir Muhammad** (*Matahari Books | Da Huang Pictures*)

"It may be easier to proclaim than to start a revolution. But for the digital cinema of the Philippines, nothing could have been easier. The revolution began the moment it was proclaimed and 10 years later, the times are still a' changing."

- **Philip Cheah** (*Singapore International Film Festival | Locarno International Film Festival*)

"The digital revolution happening in the Philippines in the past decade extends beyond the works created. This book captures the spirit of film activism at its best where the film community actively reaches out to find their audience. How can anyone not be moved by this invitation to be part of a great revolution?"

- **Bee Thiam** (*Asian Film Archive*)

"Filipino digital cinema has marked the last decade as no other development in national cinemas worldwide, providing great excitement and inspiration to all the film lovers who could discover it. This book helps us understand how the Filipino digital new wave came about, lets us know the people who contributed to its ascent, and gives us hints on where it may possibly head. All directly from the inside."

- **Paolo Bertolin** (*Venice International Film Festival*)

"Here we have 16 filmmakers—these punk poets, monsoon-drenched desperadoes, romantic dogs—talking to their own tribal chief about the slaughterhouse of being independent, being misunderstood, and being Filipino. They confirm and bust the myths about their so-called attempts to pick the lock into the pantheon of 21st century global cinema, and they supply valuable perspectives about the forgotten past and the possible future of Pinoy cinema, their soft nest and their elevator to heaven or maybe to the gallows."

- **Kong Rithdee** (*Bangkok Post*)

"Emerging from a context of economic and political violence, as sadly evidenced by the murder of Alexis Tioseco and Nika Bohinc or—as I'm writing these lines—the establishment of "martial law," during the past ten years, Philippine Cinema has become powerful, fertile, inventive and radical. Exceptional phenomenon in history—for once cinema is not born from the will of a State or an industry, but from the energy of fiercely free young filmmakers. This indispensable book, edited by the great 'social-realist insurgent' Khavn De La Cruz, recounts their struggle."

- **Nicole Brenez** (*University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne | Cinémathèque Française*)

"The Philippines' "digital underground" is one of the most vibrant, essential and utterly diverse film scenes in the world today, with artists so unique they could each be their own "new waves." Their aesthetics are as different from one another as they are from the rest of world cinema, but all are united by a shared willingness to break the boundaries of film genre—and filmmaking. Featuring game-changing veterans like Kidlat Tahimik and Lav Diaz to young turks like Raya Martin and John Torres, these interviews provide an invaluable insight into the Philippines' digital revolution, why it's happening, and—even more importantly—how to make it happen anywhere. Why should you care? Because these filmmakers are changing how we look at movies, and—more importantly—how we should be creating them: with total freedom from budgets, limits, and rules."

- **Jason Sanders** (*Filmmaker Magazine | Pacific Film Archive*)

"For people who care passionately about an art form, there is always the danger of stopping at a certain historical point and saying, 'It's all over, let's think only about the past.' Maybe they're tired of the effort of staying contemporary, maybe they've lost the capacity to respond to new ways of perceiving and thinking about their art form, or maybe the potential for their art form to produce important work seems to them to have run out. As far as cinema is concerned, Khavn De La Cruz's anthology offers a powerful rebuke to such defeatism. The book documents the richness of a national film movement, one of the most vigorous and accomplished on the contemporary film scene, that shows no signs of imminent exhaustion. Even if you have never seen any work by the filmmakers represented, if you care about the future of cinema you should read this book."

- **Chris Fujiwara** (Editor, "Jerry Lewis" /
"The Little Black Book: Movies")

"In the past decade, digital filmmaking has enabled a talented new crop of Filipino filmmakers to gain worldwide acclaim and acceptance through film festivals at home and abroad. What distinguishes their work from the new cinema movements in other places is the awareness of their own country's cinematic legacy: the sociopolitical concerns prominent in the works by Mike de Leon, Ishmael Bernal and Lino Brocka. However, history has shown that every "new wave" floods and ebbs. As such, the continuation of current successes will depend on whether this generation's talents can communicate their vision to an audience beyond those within festival circuits. Luckily, the pragmatism and resilience shown by these artists (not to mention budget constraints) are evidences of their ability to adapt and evolve cinematically. The 2000s, then, could mark just the beginning in the current evolution of the new Filipino cinema."

- **Raymond Phathanavirangoon**
(*Hong Kong International Film Festival*)

"There should be a Mad Dogs and Englishmen-style 'rock tour' documentary made about the contemporary film festival circuit equivalent of Joe Cocker and his travelling troupe: I mean that close-knit band of contemporary Philippine filmmakers who have burst upon the cinephile world in recent years. In the minds of many, this newest of national 'new cinemas' is exemplified by the long, minimalist, demanding films of 'the elder' Lav Diaz; the highly ironic and deliberately artificial 'history films' of young Raya Martin; or, even younger, the lyrical avant-garde visions of Sherad Anthony Sanchez. But there is still more variety in this Philippine New Wave, from the humanist neo-realism of Adolfo Alix, Jr. to the crazy digital-video-with-live-music 'happenings' of Khavn De La Cruz. And there is a past to this independent movement, important precedents that we are only just coming to know outside the Philippines. Political, urgent, experimental, impulsive, risk-taking, challenging audiences and demanding recognition: this is what the Philippine New Wave is all about. And these mad dogs sure know how to party, too."

- **Adrian Martin** (Co-Editor, "Movie Mutations" /
Rouge Film Journal)

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"I wish there were more books on Philippine cinema."
— Alexis Tioseco

Introduction

To be an old man when the early indies began to break was to wake up in surprise and sharp delight that the world of the Tagalog movies I had grown old with was such an artificial, narrow universe. The CCP had been running an annual competition for what was then known as “alternative films,” but I had treated it as but a side-feature of the film scene. It came up, with nurture from Hammy Sotto and his staff with a number of interesting works, but I failed to see what was forthcoming from the young filmmakers and continued to patronize the output of the studios. Then came digital cinema.

Digital filmmaking opened up the world as the studio films had made it. And we were faced with so many doors that opened up the Philippines and the Filipino. The world beyond Luzon, particularly Manila, was revealed in all its diversity and cultural variety. The Visayas and Mindanao became part of the map of the country, and we were thrilled to see landscapes and communities we had read and heard about but not experienced. But it was the people who were introduced to us in narratives that were fresh and undaunted that was most exciting to encounter. There were gays and small-town

politicians, the impoverished in settings other than Tondo or Sapang Palay, middle-class lovers in the most unexpected situations, families who communicated in languages unfamiliar to Manila ears, ethnic Filipinos whom we meet in narratives strange in their complications.

In this book of interviews and biographical sketches, editor Khavn De La Cruz and publisher Noel Ferrer allow us to meet 17 of the most articulate proponents of what they call the “Philippine New Wave.” Going over the remarks and accounts of their initial attempts at filmmaking, we realize that in spite of the demurrer in the title “This Is Not a Film Movement,” we are confronted with a growing synergy that animates young filmmakers and heralds genuine change in the Filipino film scene. So far, the limited accessibility of their output in the established exhibition venues has generated an audience of mainly young people, students and fresh graduates of urban colleges and universities. Nevertheless, it is a growing audience and one looks forward to a future when accessibility will cease to be a liability.

In the meantime, we have the filmographies of the key filmmakers and we note how a number of them have reached audiences outside the Philippines and gained for Filipino movies interest and respect. *Philippine New Wave: This Is Not a Film Movement* is an introduction to the “indies,” and the achievement they represent so far. Meeting their featured proponents, we congratulate them for their artistic reach and confidently predict that the best is yet to come.

BIENVENIDO S. LUMBERA

National Artist for Literature

Editor's Preface

Point of no return. The digital revolution is among us. There are more filmmakers making films than there has ever been, and that's counting the so-called golden age of the 1970s and the short film movement of the 1980s. There is a new Philippine cinema—same as the old Philippine cinema, only different—shot on digital, making the festival rounds, and can it have your attention please? And would it help if we gave it a de facto name? Philippine New Wave, which it is, in many ways, and which it hasn't been called.

Here they are—outlaw storytellers and pulp punks and social-realist insurgents and no-budget poets whose singular common ground may well be their stubbornness to bend easy to the whims of the industry and how each has a body of work that has gained a swiftly accelerating international following. Has there been a point in time when the country boasted of this many filmmakers simultaneously active and acclaimed? These are exciting times for filmmakers, film buffs, and for film.

Fifteen of the most significant, most exciting digital filmmakers of the revolution and two forefathers—they are the frontliners of a rapidly growing movement. They are here because of their pedigree and stance. And they are here to talk to you off the cuff, from the gut, without blinders. They talk about cinema, about art, about culture, about process, about independence, about love, about the future. Listen up.

KHAVN DE LA CRUZ

Kamias Road, Quezon City

25 June 2010



PROLOGUE

Kidlat Tahimik

Kidlat Tahimik is fondly referred to by younger filmmakers as the Grandfather of the Philippine New Wave. Born and baptized as Eric de Guia, Tahimik's first film *Mababangong Bangungot* (*Perfumed Nightmare*, 1977) is acknowledged by foreign critics for its experimental verve and its undaunted critique of our neo-colonial vices. In *Perfumed*, we are introduced to his cinematic alter-ego: the quintessential post-colonial Filipino man who is unaware and seemingly ignorant of the eccentricities of the evolving post-modern world. This alter-ego would inevitably find its way to all of Tahimik's public appearances, where the childlike director, dressed in a *bahag*, would dance, eagerly reminding his fellowmen of the almost always forgotten connection with our native roots.

While Tahimik is best known for *Perfumed* and *Turumba* (1981), it is *Why Is Yellow The Middle Of The Rainbow* (1994) that can be regarded as his masterpiece, the quintessential Tahimik picture. *Yellow* is a sprawling yet very personal epic that serves both as a document on the history of the nation from the trying Martial Law years to the betrayed hopes of the EDSA Revolution and as a

diary of Tahimik as he struggles with family life through the turbulent times.

Tahimik is probably one of the most instinctive filmmakers around. He fondly calls this instinct his *Sariling Duende* (Inner Dwarf), referring to the mythical playful creatures that usually thrive in forests. He constantly reminds younger filmmakers to tap their *Sariling Duende* for inspiration, an advice that has turned current Philippine cinema into a myriad of styles and approaches, with the explicit social realism of Brillante Mendoza and Jeffrey Jeturian, the personal essays of John Torres and Raya Martin, to the cinematic experiments of Lav Diaz, Khavn De La Cruz and Sherad Anthony Sanchez. Simply put, Philippine cinema owes much of its successes to Kidlat Tahimik and his *Sariling Duende*. (*Oggs Cruz*)

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT THEM, JOIN THEM

I resisted video as a whole for quite some time. All my infrastructure and equipment were in 16mm. I had a pretty independent set-up in Baguio. I had a sound transfer machine, an editing table, cameras, and all I had to do was come down to Manila for my laboratory and mix sound. Then video came. This was around the late 1980s. All my filmmaker friends in San Francisco and Europe started selling their film equipment. It looked like video was the way. They regretted it later however. For me, though, it was more a question of video equipment being still very expensive. I remember my first video camera, the one I used in my film *Takedera*. It was given to me by the Buddhist priest who was in it. And then later, Panasonic donated this analog editing system. That's what I used to finish the video version of *Takedera Man Amour*. But that was just the way to get a grant. But then with digital, everybody was talking about it. My son Kidlat was using it. And then I learned how to use Final Cut Pro. That was it. If you can't beat them, join them.

I don't understand it when 16mm filmmakers abroad say, "Oh, I miss the tactile touch." You really touch the film. You cut, splice, and hang it. There are a lot of movements.

With digital, you just click and drag, click and drag, click and drag. I can't blame my son if he doesn't use my old equipment. But I still found it very healthy. *Bakit Yellow ang Middle ng Rainbow (Why Is the Middle of the Rainbow Yellow?)* was invited to this video festival. I asked, "Why are inviting this? This is film." I was told, "No, it's because you handle your 16mm camera like a video camera." I didn't get then what he meant by that. It was only last night that I realized what he meant by that while I was watching the *Yellow* film in the University of the Philippines (UP) Film Center. It was the impulsiveness of the shots.

END OF AN ERA

I'm always ready with my Bolex, ready to catch anything, and I usually did. This is even more so with video, which always complemented my playfulness. I now have lots and lots of tapes and I'm beginning to enjoy editing them, and every two years, I'm always waiting for the JVC Be My Catalyzer contest. Video is also a substitute for me now. I'm getting old and naturally, the Bolex is heavy to carry around. But until the Philippine Information Agency (PIA) lab closed three years ago, I was totally still ready to shoot in 16. One day, PIA lab called me, "Sir, the lab is closing down already. Can you take all your footage with you?" I had to take out one room full of rusty cans. I told myself this was not just the end of Kidlat Tahimik. PIA was where we all were: Raymond Red, Roxlee; that's where we always bump into each other. That was the end of an era.

When I brought out all my cans, I performed a little ritual. I went down to the vault, and took off my pants. Of course I had my *bahag* (indigenous loincloth). I then took the cans to the lobby, and placed them in a pile. I sat down for an hour, pondering my next move, which was in and of itself a performance as well; but it was a ritual for the ending of an era.

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF FILMMAKING

I remember I was in Baguio with my 16mm equipment. I founded the Sunflower Cooperative. It was like, "You don't have equipment? Use mine." Sometimes, if I have extra stock, I'll also give it to them. That was intimidating for a lot of people. A roll of 16mm is expensive, and that's just three minutes per roll. Now, with the mini-DV which costs so little, you can do one hour. There is ease in the way you can take your shots and the lab is inside your camera as well, because you see the results right away. There is instant joy in the instant results and the instant capability. There's a lot of flexibility in the hands of the filmmaker.

And then, there's the cost. Your *sariling duende* (inner dwarf) can complete a story as long as you have the equipment and some few friends to do your acting. Or in my case, I just jump in front of the camera. I used to do that with the Bolex. I'll set up the tripod, and then measure the distance, and if there's anyone passing by, I press the button and take a shot. Sometimes, they're my kids, any passers-by. Now you can just really shoot anything. What more if you have a little bit of a budget? And then there's the encouragement you get from institutions like Cinemalaya and IndieSine. YouTube too. Now, filmmakers have an instant audience.

That doesn't mean you're a good filmmaker, but at least your *sariling duende* can be encouraged to keep telling its story the way it wants to tell a story without any impositions from the producers. Imagine this: I was able to work with my Bolex and somehow make those films of mine in the 70s and 80s. What more now? I could definitely finish my Magellan film, the one that got stalled, after 28 years. Using digital, you can scan it. In digital, you can transfer to film, or vice versa. The democratization it gives you is on so many levels, even spiritual. And it ultimately means your "duende" gets to play more. Just the weight of the equipment is a big plus, the way it gives you more mobility and flexibility. You just shoot with no regard to cost because the cost is minimal. It's freer.

SARILING DUENDE

It's funny. Just earlier, a student interviewed me and asked me to define independence. Independence, on one hand, is anything the studios don't do. But I think there's another dimension of independence, and I think it's an independence from formula.

You can have a very technically polished film and I can still feel your *sariling duende*. To me, that's still independence, but sometimes you feel that some filmmakers—and they may be aware or not—are only interested in sex and violence. These two surely make things interesting, but if that's the main reason for making a film, and it's a key to become a blockbuster, it will inevitably suppress your *sariling duende*—those unique stories that you have in you.

Your *sariling duende* frames the world in a way that is specific to you and that's what we should encourage. That's what the world is waiting for, I think. It's not waiting for you to clone *Star Wars*, no. They're not looking for another remake of *Rush Hour 28*, or *Indiana Jones 25*. I'm not talking about plebiscites, but there are audiences who are looking for something fresh and new.

Sariling duende is a term I put together. It that has nothing to do with Federico Garcia Lorca. Some people ask me if it's about Lorca but I have not read him. I would like to read him now, that's about it. To me, *sariling duende* is always a playful, sometimes impish, always naughty entity in a forest, beneath a rock, or inside a house. "Sarili", it's like an entity within you that frames the world in a unique way. It starts with: Where were you born? Who are your parents? Who are your first teachers? Did you grow up by the sea? Did you grow up in the mountains? Did you grow up in Forbes Park? Or in Tondo? When you combine all your cultural influences plus your personal circumstances, the way you interpret any event in the world will all be affected by your *sariling duende*.

McFILM

I'm not talking about the *sariling duende* as an ego trip, no. I'm talking about your unique set of filters, the way you color things. Unfortunately, that's what we're losing now because of how much films cost. The artform fell into the

hands of producers. That's why I call them McDo film formulas. There's an expected taste. You finish it, you get full but 30 minutes later, you're hungry again. Are we making the world richer with our stories? That's what it's all about.

INDIAN AND SOLDIERS

I had a retrospective some time back and it was ironic that I was showing my films for four days at the Videotheque and one day at the cinema and it was like, I was the Indian and I was surrounded by soldiers. In the Videotheque, they were showing this one film *Binyag (Baptism)*, and in the cinema, there was another, *Butas (Hole)*. They're both independently-produced films. I'm not commenting on them; I'm just saying that they have their reasons, they're probably even artistic, but their *sariling duendes* are being locked in.

But besides that, there are also the Born Agains—and in the University of the Philippines Film Center, wow. Like many cinemas in the country who rent out their cinemas on Sundays because they're losing profit, the UP Film Center is also doing that already. At the very end of my last film being shown there, we were already a bit tired, and I wanted to leave my equipment just for one day and pull it out the next day. They were saying, "Sir, you have to take everything today." I said, "Why?" They replied, "Because tomorrow morning, the Born Again group will be here again." Wow, locked out on either side, either by religious fanatics or formula films.

PRESIDENT TAHIMIK

My entry into film was accidental. I think it came out of my being a Speech and Drama Major in UP. My going to Wharton was only an accidental off-shoot. I was accidentally elected president of the UP Student Council, and I thought I was "Presidentiable." Presidentiable, hmm. That's why I took up my M.B.A. All of that is what formed my *sariling duende*. In

UP, I was an upper middle class boy, a member of the bourgeoisie, an Upsilon Sigma Phi fraternity member. They were the ones who made me the accidental chairman of the Student Council. After Wharton, maybe there was already an urge for me to de-Americanize myself, so I went to France afterwards. The French have this certain chauvinism towards Americans. I studied economics, worked in an international economic organization where I studied developmental problems, and did comparative studies for fertilizer distribution. I wasn't totally focused, or maybe I was totally uninterested because it was just a means of making some money.

It's a bit like the fertility of soil. You have the soil, then rain, then the sediment, and then maybe a bit of ashfall from a nearby volcano, then a dog shits on it and fertilizes it. All these elements give that particular piece of land a particular richness. I think *sariling duende* is like that. So my "Wharton-ness," if you will, my "fratman-ness," and even my coming from a well-to-do family, my mother being a mayor of Baguio, all these may have given me a certain angle, which I could've gotten stuck in that upper middle-class view of the world.

HAPAO HIPPIE

I became a hippie in the commune where I met my wife. I learned to get my feet and hands dirty. And then now, these last few years, I've been immersing myself in Ifugao culture. Before, I was romantic about their culture, always looking at it from a distance; but since I have become accepted in the village now, the romanticism comes second. My *sariling duende* is being remolded by the *Iban*. Hopefully I can still make a few new works on video. I don't have the stamina for a big production anymore. But I want to finish *Memories of Overdevelopment*, on film, that's the only one I want to finish. I'm still looking for a way to tell the story.

BRUSH YOUR TEETH

I hope to stay with that community until this participatory video project is completed. It was ten years ago when I went to Hapao, Ifugao, and I started a video project there. I exploited the user-friendliness of this little gadget, not like the old Bolex where we had to measure the light, manually focus, send it back to the lab, which is intimidating to new users, especially to rural folk. I got the instant joy of seeing the results right away, help them pick up this gadget and use it. The general idea was that when I go there, I'm framing it with romantic eyes. I pass the camera to them, since it was so easy to learn to push the button and hold the camera and not shake it so much, and recharge the battery—those are the things I teach them. And don't forget, brush your teeth. When you brush your teeth, charge your battery. Little things like that. And by leaving the camera in the village for 365 days, they can easily access it. They will be getting a lot of things that I would never be able to get. Now, what do we do with all the footage? It's like home movies, within the tribe. But, shall we archive them, give them to UP, sell them to Discovery Channel, or have them shown to the youths in Hapao just like real home movies?

SHAMANISM 101

Whether you like it or not, we have this phenomenon called public schools. Whether you like it or not, every village in Ifugao already has a public school. That is my deal with Department of Education: can we use the 40 minutes once a week or twice a week to show what we and they have shot? There's a small group of people who can operate the video camera. They shot the *mumbaki* (shaman) talking for 40 minutes with no cuts. Maybe they were talking about the herbal varieties used for healing, or somebody explaining the *bugor* ritual, which is like their baptism but is more of like registering your child with the gods. I think by now we have enough material, with 53 weeks still in the

semester. Even for just 26 weeks, there's already something there. But that would start from grade 3, 4, 5, 6, and up to high school. So that before they leave, they may already have both the conscious and unconscious appreciation for their indigenious strengths that comes from their culture. For centuries, grandparents and parents were taught that the Ifugao culture is primitive, that it is pagan, that it is backward, that it is Anti-Christian. All the pejoratives used were absorbed by their generations, so they swept it under the rug. We now have a way to neutralize that.

I hope this attitude does get neutralized with this latest experiment of mine. Ninety-five percent of the kids are still ashamed of the *bahag*, and are still ashamed of the *mumbaki* ritual. Now, if only five out of the 100 kids every year at least get curious, maybe they won't be ashamed of it anymore. Ok, they might go one step further and ask their grandparents about it. If only five, every year, out of every 100 kids, start to become curious, it becomes some sort of supply and demand.

REFORESTATION

The elders who have the knowledge are disappearing. They are in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. But there is zero demand, because for centuries, they were taught to turn their backs from their own culture. Neutralize that with those five kids every year, and in 20 years, and you'll have 100 kids. It's like reforestation. Let's say, out of every 100 trees, only five survive this year. Next year, they're going to plant again, another five years, another five trees. After 10 or 20 years, there would be more trees. They gain momentum, start to reinforce each. If there are five kids each year getting curious about their culture, maybe the demand will grow, and one day, you could get rid of these video cameras. It's like your temporary oral transmission process for now because

somehow it's being interrupted. But now, consider the camera as a surrogate oral transmitter. At least it's being taught in classes and maybe you will develop a new attitude towards the culture you grew up in or that your parents grew up in. Maybe the culture will continue to live, not die.

ROUND-PEGGED CULTURE WITH SQUARE-PEGGED INSTITUTIONS

I'm an optimist. I don't believe culture can really, really die, but it does erode and it does get buried under all the irrelevant foreign values. I think that's the problem of our country. We're a round-pegged culture, but our institutions are square-pegged. Whether it's government, whether it's business models, whether it's even filmmaking models, it's the square peg that we inherited from abroad, these patterns of running their society. But we are a round-pegged culture. We have a very strong sense of community, of togetherness. We're not individualistic like them. That's why even if there are checks and balances from the American political institutions which we inherited; it still doesn't work for us. We have a different internal usage. So if we learn to use our round peg culture, I think that's when we can have control. We're all trying to be New Yorkers whether we're filmmakers or whether we're ordinary citizens. That's why we can't get our act together.

THE FIRST WONDER OF THE WORLD

Now, back to the participatory project, hopefully it can help a new generation to first, become curious then to appreciate. The rice terraces is not the third wonder of the world. It's the first. It's older than the Egyptian Pyramids, older than the Great Wall of China, and it was not done with slave labor. It was with a strong sense of culture that they built those terraces. After three millenia, wow, it became a wonder of the world! But maybe our ancestors also reached their zenith there. They didn't have to build the atomic bomb, they didn't have to build airplanes, they didn't have

to build cars, they didn't have to be dependent on oil economy because they've already reached their zenith. They were probably content until a big brother came in and showed them the consumerist world.

INDIOGENIUS IN A NUTSHELL

My best friend, Lopez Nauyac, always mispronounced the word indigenous. He'll say "indigenius." I would always call it cosmic mispronunciation. Then later, I further mispronounced it, acknowledging the fact that we were colonized, we were "indios". We have been indio-nized. But in spite of that, the genius of the indigenous culture is still within us. We just have to recognize it, and let it flow out. That's what should be flowing within us. Indio-genius—that culture.

THE CRAZY AESTHETICS OF THE VINE BARK SOAPBOX

Remember that one sequence in *Yellow* film, where I was in the soap box derby? In 1965, I joined the 1st Philippine Soapbox Derby. The soapbox I made was covered with vine bark, against every principle of aero dynamics. It was my crazy aesthetics.

MY DREAM IS TO LEAP IN MY BAHAG

When I went to UP, I tried to be an engineering student. You're 15 years old. How the hell would you know what you want to be? I just followed after my dad, who was an engineer. I ended up in Speech and Drama, just to make sure that I could get my degree. I became a groupie of both Behn Cervantes and Lino Brocka. Maybe that gave me a little sense of acting, so I'm my favorite actor, apart from being the cheapest actor available. I could have ended up in theater. My uncle was the painter Victor Oyteza, and VOCAS (Victor Oyteza Community Art Space) is named after him. He's the brother of my mother. He used to tease me and I couldn't really understand him. But if I didn't

become a filmmaker, I think I would have probably ended up as an artist. I'm not sure where or which domain I would have been in. Sometimes, I think, I'd love to be a dancer, ballet *eh?* But dance doesn't like me. But my dream is to still make a few leaps... in my *bahag*.

ACCIDENTAL FILMMAKER

This is probably another thing that helped form my *sariling duende*. Baguio was a small town, we had three or four cinemas, and it was so cheap to go to the movies in those days. Then my mother became mayor and we got free passes. And I would go see Jerry Lewis three or four times.

I came to cinema like most of us, as a medium for entertainment. Hollywood movies were all big influences, and, you don't realize, while you're being entertained, how much of it shapes you. When you play Cowboys and Indians, nobody wants to be the Indian, because in the movies, the good guys are the cowboys, the white men. You become aware, because of this, of the cultural impact of film. And especially if it is a foreign film, or your local industries are clones of that outer influence, then those are the values recognized by the generation. And it becomes exponential because cinema is being multiplied on television channels. Especially with today's cable, you can see remakes of everything.

I stumbled into film accidentally, and thanks perhaps to the timing of things, I became aware that I was not entering it for the money. I'm not entering for the glitter, the glamour. Maybe the people I encountered in Germany, people like Herzog or the students I met there, they have this inner framing that I appreciated, which is what I was looking for in the *sariling duende*. But knowing the potential of cinema in terms of molding minds and molding cultures; that's my concern now, which I try to express as a teacher. And up to today, this thing has been misused. But I don't want to be judgmental; it's just a concern, seeing how it's not

being used to bring out the indigenious strength of the Pinoy.

"NI HA, NI HO" CULTURE

"Ni ha, ni ho" is neither this, neither that. Sometimes, it's used as an expression. This is from Nonoy Marcelo and I found it so profound and culturally speaking, it could be strength, in that we're neither East nor West in the absolute sense. There's balance in it.

SELF IN THE OTHER

Purists question my use of English in some of my films. But I've seen a lot of films in Tagalog, except the formulae were copied straight off of Hollywood films. The word Filipino is already cross-cultural, anyway. We were named "Philippines", after a Spanish king, Philippe.

I was also probably influenced by my wife's book, "Kapwa: The Self In The Other" (Katrin De Guia, Anvil Publishing, 2004) but I also recognize this. There are many values to that, whether you grew up with Filipino parents in New York or you grew up here where the same values are transmitted or nurtured. The Other, the shared self, everything we do, it's not like individualistic society. The "me first" happens in the urban societies, but empathizing with the Other is still the stronger virtue. I saw that in my being Pinoy. And I think, because my wife is German, it mirrors back to me that it can be a strength. Like, efficiency-oriented teaching will tell us that to be a good businessman, you have to control your tendency to be helpful to your friends, because you have to stick to your career, stick to your path. You have to. And that's what's encouraged in the dog-eat-dog world, right? From what I see, my kids are also mirroring that to me because I enjoyed letting them grow up in a public school. Their friends are from all kinds of classes. Everybody assumes that I sent my kids to Brent, but the last thing I'll do is have my kids Americanized.

MY NAME IS KIDLAT TAHIMIK. I CHOOSE MY VEHICLE, AND I CAN CROSS ALL BRIDGES.

Then there's my choice of Kidlat Tahimik (Quiet Lightning) as a name, I fought for that in the courts. I won in the lower court, but automatically, the Solicitor General has to challenge it. I lost by a technicality. My lawyer was in an accident that year, and he wasn't able to fix things. When I got turned by the Solicitor General, we had 10 days to appeal to the Supreme Court, but we missed the deadline. So, I was trying to find other ways. You know you can not start a new trial again unless you have new evidence. Some of my friends were saying I was just making a big fuss of it, was just being cute. But see, I was not just making a fuss of it. I had no choice when I was one week old. Did you have a choice as to your name when you were one week old? I was 33 when I chose the name Kidlat Tahimik. That doesn't make me Pinoy necessarily, but it adds to it. I named my kids Kidlat, Kawayan and Kabunyan, to the chagrin of my Catholic relatives.

ALTERNATIVE PINOY CALENDAR

I celebrate Rizal Day, my season ends on January 6, Tandang Sora Day. I start my season November 30, Bonifacio Day. Is that just for effect? I get a joy out of it, and if I get some more people to celebrate Tandang Sora Day, I'd feel good.

BAMBOO CAMERA

But the essence of my being Filipino is outside all these outer symbols. I feel I just have to dramatize them because that's what people recognize. Like the bamboo camera. It's a nice metaphor. One day, we will have a working bamboo camera. But when I gave the Bamboo Awards some time back, was that just another act? No, I really wanted to encourage the *sariling duende* that I saw in all those films, and at the same time define what I meant by *sariling duende*. If I can encourage these people, maybe one time we may even have a *Sariling Duende* Film Festival. It's really

a consciousness to distance myself from the colonial culture. My Americanized duende seemed content in its cocoon. I had to break out of it. Maybe I am romanticizing the *bahag*. Maybe I'm overdramatizing but I have to so I can drown out, what, *Star Wars*, maybe. I'm not personally against that, no. Of course, I think George Lucas still has his own *Sariling Duende* in making a film like that.

LINO BROCKA

Well, when I came back from abroad, with my hair worn long and my Wharton diploma torn, I stayed with Lino Brocka whenever I would come down to Manila. And then at that time, all of my friends from Wharton were saying, "Oh, I want to make a film, come on. Let's see what you could do." They were willing to take a chance on me. I never had any experience, but they were willing to take a chance on me. They had what you'd call "poker money," worth P20,000. In those days, P20,000 was maybe like P200,000. But even so, they wouldn't have lost if the film didn't earn. But they were going to show to 20 people times 20,000 that's about P400,000, which, maybe, today will be like P4 million, P8 million for an independent attempt. So they had that, and they could always call more people because they were bankers, ex-Wharton guys—Christian Monsod, Vic Puyat. Also, Lino had a group already, what they call "industrial partners." They had a group, they had a cinematographer, actors like Lolita Rodriguez.

I told Christian Monsod, "Wait a minute, I'm not ready." So I brought them together, and they formed Cinemanila. Cinemanila was not a festival that time. It was a corporation. Because of that, I think that was where Lino first let loose his own *Sariling Duende*. It was a story that took place in his hometown, in Nueva Ecija. I liked the process, I saw how it blossomed. When I saw the final product, I thought the make-up wasn't so good, but as a whole, it stands out to me as a film that he really wanted to

do. I can't remember other films that I liked as much as I liked that one, but I know I do like a few Dolphy films.

DOLPHY

I appreciate Dolphy. I think there's indio-genius humor there in his films. Sometimes, we judge comedies. We're used to *Mr. Bean*, Hollywood, but his comedy is a mosaic. Maybe it's something that you want to call his doing, like Charlie Chaplin, only cruder. Dolphy combines things from different sources. Maybe because they had a team to help make everything feel seamless, that it comes together as a feature film. Maybe that's a Pinoy trait.

MANUEL CONDE

As a child I saw Manuel Conde's *Juan Tamad* movies, they were my favorite. I remember one sequence there, I think it is from the political satire, *Juan Tamad Goes to Congress*, where he's riding a carabao, and the cop flags him down. The cop tries to smooch money off of him. "Okay, here's your offense, whatever it is.... let's see how this works. Where's the primera (first gear)?" The carabao goes "Ennnngggg..." "Where's the segunda (second gear)? Tercera (third gear)? Horn? Quarta (fourth gear)?" He pressed on one horn. "Kwarta (Money)" I like his playfulness, apart from the fact that he not only directs, he also acts in his films.

JOSE RIZAL

I also like Mike De Leon's *Bayaning Third World (Third World Hero)* and *Sisa* by Mario O'Hara. Wow! It's probably irreverent to those who are serious about the literature, but I think it was just Mike's way of giving the characters in Rizal's books a new frame. I don't think he was putting down Rizal's work or his genius.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

There are many more images mixing in my head, but as a child, I was a Hollywood freak. I also used to see a lot of

Tagalog films—*Philippine Tarzan*, *Bondying* with Fred Montilla, I think.

ANTI-HOLLYWOOD

I saw *Dances With Wolves* when I was teaching in San Francisco. I liked it. When I came back home six months later, I went to see it in the SM mall, and I was like, wow! First, I was surprised that the Filipinos responded to it. It's not your typical Hollywood film because it is mostly subtitled, but they got it. And that's the thing I liked, not only because of my bias for indio-genius people but that it was also very anti-Hollywood.

STORYLINE

With my first film, *Perfumed Nightmare*, I thought of a general story line, which was very shallow: the small town boy who wanted to go to the big city, the small town boy who wanted to make good abroad. My catalyzer was the jeepney, the visual catalyzer is the jeepney driver, and somehow, a jeepney is brought abroad. I had no script so if I think of anything else, we just shot it.

SOUND

We had problems with sound so we mostly shot scenes silent and then laid in a voice-over. Some people take that as style so that gave me freedom to mangle, to rework a scene to any purpose.

TIME

I remember that time, after the first year, I promised Katrin I would finish this film before her birthday in May. And then about a few days before that, I showed it to Werner Herzog and he told me, "I don't think you will finish in time for Katrin's birthday. I think you will need another year." At that time, Katrin was finishing art school. Kidlat was already born at that time, and I promised her that after I finished the film, I would take care of Kidlat so she could finish her



Some More Rice

thesis. Then after one year, here comes Herzog, telling me I'll need another year to finish it. Werner came with me to the house. I remember that time the house was being painted so there were scaffoldings out front for the painters. "Come on. Let's have coffee under the steel scaffoldings," Herzog said. That was where he announced to Katrin, "I think you better let Kidlat work another year." And because it was coming from him, she resigned to the idea a little bit more.

That whole process of trial and error, and opening up to time, not having a play date, and being free to change the dialogue, the concepts, even scenes that have already been shot—that was my main working process with my first film.

SCRIPT

I had a lot less freedom with *Turumba*, because I was required to submit a script. So I wrote a script just to get the money, but once I started on the film, I ignored it, except maybe as a guide that's why it was very tight and lateral.

NOTHING IS PERMANENT

I don't have a pre-set scenario. I always play with what I have. My footages are like tiles in a mosaic. You shuffle them, change them around. In my process, nothing is permanent. It's very much like the way I built VOCAS. No architectural plans, no blueprints. With film that's also my style, just like my life.

KINO DESPERADO

I think *Perfumed Nightmare* is still my favorite. I'm amazed that even after 30 years, it's still being shown. It's not generating a lot of income, sure, but it's like it has a life of its own. It's not only relevant to Filipinos, it has a universal appeal. The small town boy who wants to go to the big

city—globalization is still a thing that affects lives here and there. The egg lady losing her source of income in the supermarket—all that was a metaphor in that film. I think it still holds today, doesn't it? Up to now, I still get astonished. "Did I really do that?" I mean, the film language was maybe out of desperation to tell that story. I combined sequences in such a way that it's not literal but in the end it made sense, and yet it gave credence to a story line but with very unusual visuals. But all that came out of the desperation to finish a story. That's why it's still my favorite film up to now. Like, every time I see it, I still discover new things in that film that I never noticed before. It's like it has many levels on its own. And it wasn't cinematic, intellectual, who could have planned that? With everything that happened after so many years, I'm still surprised that I put that there, and yet, all my discoveries still seem to be relevant. Even my kids, they notice things. Sometimes, they lipsynch. They know the lines. They grew up with that film as a repertoire.

A TALE OF TWO LOLAS

One of the most amazing characters in my film is the *lola* (old lady) in *Turumba*. She started telling me a story about her appearing in *zarzuelas* (musical plays) during her youth. She started telling her story, as a part of warming up but I told the soundman to turn on the Nagra. I told the cinematographer Boy Yñiguez to start shooting. We were then able to capture her story—how she was in fact the highest paid zarzuela actress.

That ran parallel to the story of the other *lola* in *Perfumed Nightmare*, the one I worked with in Paris. She sold me eggs during the four years that I was staying there on that street. Every time I went out, she always had her carton in front of my front door. When I came back, I had resigned from OECD as an economist, had become a hippie, and was

ready to do my own film. I came back to Paris and told her I wanted to do this film about her and myself—our little love story. We never talked about film before, but when I told her that, all she said was, “It’s very strange, Kidlat, that after 50 years, you’re making me come back to cinema.” Turns out, around 1925 to 1926, she had been in a dozen films as a double. They kept calling her back. She must have been good. It was the first time I heard she’s worked in films. So there I was, a young, first time director, and there was my egg lady who had abandoned cinema.

She described one film where she doubled for the lead. In the scene, there were these hunters who were running after a princess in the snow, and all of a sudden, she was surrounded by 12 wolves that protected her from the hunters. The title of the film is *Le Miracle de Loups* (*The Miracle of the Wolves*.)

Four years later, she retired and lived in an old folks’ home about 400 kilometers south of Paris. When I went there for my first Paris film fest, I was looking at the programme and I saw that *Le Miracle de Loups* was being shown. I had forgotten our conversation but it seemed very familiar; this young woman surrounded by wolves in the forest, and then I recognized her. I called the old folks’ home asking for permission if she could go. However, she was already so frail.

THE BUZZ

I get all kinds of interviews. While most people just want to get it over quickly, sometimes, some are inspiring. Boy Abunda went up to Baguio for Panagbenga (Flower Festival). They were going to do something about Baguio, interviewing different people for five-minute segments, and I was one of them. Somehow, he spent more time with me, and he asked a question about the Sariling Duende theory. And I thought this guy is just, you know, *The Buzz*—

gossip, and all that. But he spent 15 minutes talking about it, until finally he gave me an entire hour. It was only supposed to be a Panagbenga special, but there was so much more to talk about. I haven’t seen the segments, but if it was a filmmaker, or one of you guys asking me about the Sariling Duende, I would have already elaborated on it. But it was 2005. How many people would know about it? For it to come from somebody like that, one who usually asks trivial questions about your sexual life, yeah, that was a memorable question for me because I didn’t expect that from that kind of show.

F-I-L-M-M-A-K-I-N-G VS. F-I-L-L-M-A-K-I-N-G

There was also this teacher in an American university who interviewed me. I developed the idea of “cups of gas” filmmaking versus “full tank credit card” filmmaking. She asked me to differentiate between what I was doing and what the mainstream was doing and I said that it’s like wanting to go on a cross-country trip, say, East Coast to West Coast, or from North to South in the Philippines. You can do it through the usual way: by planning everything you need to know, making sure there’s gas in the tank and in the reserve tank, and that your credit card is full. You finish your cross-country. You finish it in two weeks. It’s an efficient trip.

Or you can do it with this: you don’t have money, you can only buy one cup of gas at a time. You drive with the cup of gas and you beg or steal or borrow your next cup of gas. Maybe it takes you three years to get from the East Coast to the West, but you have a more interesting trip. That’s the “cups of gas” method of filmmaking.

It was also in that same interview that filmmaking was misspelled. Instead of F-I-L-M-M-A-K-I-N-G, it became F-I-L-L-M-A-K-I-N-G—fillmaking. And you think that’s what the film industry is like—filling up shelves with commodity,

and when it's all gone, to replace it. This is the commodification of filmmaking as against true filmmaking where the Sariling Duende of the auteur is a primary concern.

PHOTOGRAPHY + DRAMA = CINEMA

I had a lot of interest in drama: in telling stories and developing characters. At the same time, when I was in Paris, I also developed a passion for photography. I go around and take a lot of pictures. I thought, "If you combine photography and drama, then you have cinema." That was a defining moment. Let's say that the elements have been narrowed down and they were just swimming in the back of your head. I was even thinking of going back to theatre.

WALK THE TALK

When I quit my job in Paris, I had this play that I couldn't finish because I had a nine-to-five job. And then I said, "I should try to take a sabbatical. I should try to take a break." I needed money. So I went to Munich to try to make a few thousand dollars but I didn't make the money that I should've made so I ended up in a commune. I met my wife. Then I started helping this film student. Then I met Werner Herzog through him when he became a substitute for the student's teacher. Later, Herzog asked me to act in *Kaspar Hauser*. I realized that I wanted to do this, too. I had a Super8 and I had this friend who had a Bolex but wanted a Super8, so we swapped. Ever since then, I point my camera and just did it. That's the defining moment—walking the talk.

NATIONAL ARTIST

I remember I was in a committee that chose Fernando Poe, Jr. for the National Artist Award. I'm not saying that there's politics involved there, but I saw it. He had a body of work, and these were really feel-good films. And maybe they were the Hollywood clones. He even had a lot of cowboy films.

However, I felt that he was consistent and fine, I have no objection with that. Then somebody said to me, "You! You should have been awarded!" Then I said, "I was part of the committee." I think the National Artist Awards are serious, and it's a box, very conservative and also political. And I just play around when I make films. My definition as a filmmaker is kind of murky.

THE FIRST MAN TO GO AROUND THE WORLD IS A FILIPINO

I want to finish this Magellan film. I think it's a story that should be told. It is not the white man who was the first man to go around the world. It could have been one of us. We can never prove who was the first one to go around the world, but the things that Pigafetta wrote about does open up the possibility, and nobody can disprove it right now, so why not play with the idea now? Will that have any impact on global cinema or national cinema? No, I don't think so. But at least it might have an impact on our youth. We bash ourselves in the newspapers too frequently these days that maybe all we really need is a little feel-good film about this crazy guy in a *bahag* who went around the world, and maybe, just maybe, he was the spiritual master of Magellan. I want to finish that film in this lifetime.

HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

We have a lot of potential. I think the handwriting's on the wall. The fact that our new guys are going around the world—Khavn De La Cruz, John Torres, Raya Martin—is good. Maybe they will gain more experience to make a kind of cinema that can also be shown in the malls. But it would take a lot of miracles, even if you compromise a lot. But I think that what's happening will influence the next generation. It's simply something they cannot ignore. They'll have all the excuses—taxes, piracy, Hollywood—so many excuses, but they're really stuck with the formula.

They're drowning in mediocrity. They're stuck with consuming McDo films. Now, you have to be careful of that—whether the independent filmmakers can also free themselves from the formulas. We also have to try to develop our audiences somehow. Remember, we've also been brainwashed that sensationalism is the key to a good film.

AMERICAN IDOLATRY

I still think we're the chosen race but I like that term—American Idol—because it's not just the title of a TV show for me, it sums up our cultural history. These square peg institutions are so effective, like the TV stations, the advertising agencies, even our universities. We've always been cloning Americans. It's bad enough that our films are clones of Hollywood, but our TV too? It's too bad because I think we have a lot of very creative people, and I'm sure we could create really interesting programs.

TRUE INDEPENDENCE

I just had a retrospective, the first time in 14 years, at the UP Videotheque. As I sat and watched my films, I know that there are 800 people lining at the Film Center next door to watch gay porn. Still, it was a relatively full house anyway, since the seating capacity of the videotheque was about 80 to 90. Indie filmmaking is a phenomenon. It's probably here to stay, partly thanks to digital technology. Maybe a lot of seeds have been planted, and the reforestation is happening already. The audiences are also growing. But does it need—and I'm not talking about guidance since I sound like a preacher—some re-evaluation to make the filmmakers aware that true independence is not just from the producers, but from the formula?

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1977** *Mababangong Bangungot*
(*Perfumed Nightmare*)
- 1979** *Sinong Lumikha ng Yoyo? Sinong Lumikha ng Moon Buggy?*
(*Who Created the Yoyo? Who Created the Moon Buggy?*)
- 1980-present** *Ang Balikbayan*
(*Memories of Overdevelopment*) - work in progress
- 1981** *Olympic Gold*
- 1982** *Yanki: Made in Hongkong*
- 1983** *Turumba*
- 1983-1994** *Bakit Yellow ang Gitna ng Bahaghari?*
(*Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?*)
- 1987-1989** *Takadera Mon Amour*
- 1990-1992** *Orbit 50 (Letters to my Three Sons)*
- 1995** *Our Bomb Mission to Hiroshima*
- 1996** *Bahag Ko, Mahal Ko (Japanese Summers of a Filipino Fundoshi)*
- 2000** *Banal-Kahoy (Holy Wood)*
- 2003** *Aqua Planet*
- 2005** *Some More Rice*
Tatlong Atang at Isang Pagnakaw
- 2007-present** *Bubong (Roofs of the World! Unite!)*



Adolfo Alix, Jr.

Numbers sometimes speak louder than words.

In just four years, Adolfo Alix, Jr. has already made 11 feature films. Do the math and that's around three films a year, or one full-length in four months. At his rate, Alix will have finished a hundred films by the time he turns 64.

There seems to be no stopping that rate, though. After *Aurora* and *Karera* this year, he is helming two more projects: *Kalayaan (Wildlife)*, about Filipino soldiers in the Spratly Islands; and *Porno*, about people who work as porn dubbers.

But these numbers, like the ink of pen to writers, also tell something about the filmmaker himself.

The haste of moving from one project to another could be a virtue of priority, a knack for tolerance, or a sheer addiction to scuttle. Perhaps, given such choices, it could also be the lethal combination of the three. The assault of ideas may have driven him to make more films, never wasting the time in his hands, restless as he is. Alix's films are *made* after all—finished, submitted to contests, shown in regular runs, winning in festivals here and abroad

(the most an independent filmmaker could ask for)—and that maybe is his strongest trait, coming up with new material year after year and getting something out of them.

Yet these are numbers that cannot be ignored; numbers that will always matter; and behind them Alix represents the passion that hopefully never gets old. (*Chard Bolisay*)

FILM IS THE IDEAL, DIGITAL IS NECESSARY

Donsol was my first film. I didn't make any short films before that. I started out as a scriptwriter for both mainstream and independent. Digital technology gave a lot of filmmakers a chance to make their films, so in that sense it's important. It democratized the medium and made it possible for a lot of us to make our first films when we couldn't before because there was no budget, no grants or producers or financiers. Digital opened the windows for us. It was a viable option, an alternative.

But I've also worked with 16mm. And film is still the ideal, the ultimate. I'm a purist in a lot of ways. *Manila* was shot on Super16, *Batanes* on 35, because it had studio backing but also because the format suited those stories. But there are a lot of stories that you can tell better with digital. There are stories that suit that format better. That's not to say that those are the only stories you can make.

Digital is becoming the norm, even in Hollywood. Here, being a Third World country, it's almost necessary, if only because we have so many stories to tell and so little means to tell them. Digital gives filmmakers the kind of latitude that they wouldn't normally have with film.

FILM LETS YOU BE WHATEVER YOU WANT TO BE

As a kid, every afternoon I'd tune in to Channel 9 and Channel 13, watching old Tagalog films. I found that powerful and exciting—to be able to hold an audience captive just by telling your story. In college, I took up Mass Communications. There was this writing process class. I've always been interested in writing and that class became my springboard to writing screenplays. However, writing screenplays can be frustrating.

FILM IS INTERACTIVE

For me, the interface between film and film audiences, as opposed to those of the other arts, has an added

dimension. It has something to do with character empathy, I think. And you watch films sitting in a dark room for two hours, so you're hostage to it, it's more immersive.

THE POWER OF CINEMA

Writing is my first love—prose, mostly. That's what I'd be doing if I wasn't a filmmaker. I'd still write screenplays. Filmmaking fascinates me—its power to mold and shape an audience. There'll always be someone to share the process with.

INDEPENDENT = FREEDOM

Independent film, loosely defined, is whatever that is produced outside of the studio system. That film is a relatively younger art gives the filmmaker more leeway. And for me, "independent" really means having all the leeway to do what I want to do, regardless of where I'm doing it. As soon as limitations are imposed on that, it's no longer independent.

FILIPINO-NESS

My stories are innately and even uniquely Filipino and it goes without saying because I'm Filipino. My first film *Donsol* revolved around a butanding (whale shark) interaction officer who is watching over a small community. *Adela* was about a woman who used to be a radio personality. These are very Filipino tropes. Every time I make a film, I think about character first. Are they real enough for someone in the audience to recognize? I'm trying to tell the story to the audience as much as I can mirror what's going on in the country, but at the same time, making some kind of stand on the subject like *Aurora*, which was about a social worker kidnapped by the lost command. That was very reflective of current events.

The world is shrinking, accessibility is easier, and everything is reduced to generalities. When everybody's doing the same thing, you tend to lose personality. A Filipino film used to

be about slums, prostitutes, and gays. But it shouldn't be. There's more to it than that.

ENTERING DIFFERENT WORLDS

I was at the right place at the right time. When I was in college, there was a Film Development Foundation workshop for scriptwriting. It was during summer vacation which lasted for three months, and I had nothing to do. They had this yearly contest, which was open to everyone. My submission, *Ada*, won first prize and Carlitos Siguion-Reyna made it into a film entitled *Kahapon May Dalawang Bata* (*Yesterday, There Were Two Children*). Doors opened after that. I wrote *Munting Tinig* (*Little Voices*) for Gil Portes. I then wrote for TV.

Every filmmaker's first film is always important to him. Usually that's where you find out what kind of filmmaker you are, although sometimes I disagree that the first film defines the filmmaker. I grew up in Nasugbu, which is near the ocean so I am familiar with the world in *Donsol*. However, the world in *Kadin* (*The Goat*), my second film, was a world I wasn't familiar with. It's set in Batanes and in the vernacular of the area. I like that—immersing myself someplace I know nothing about and coming out of the experience with something I didn't have before. All my films are like that. *Tambolista* (*Drumbeat*) is very urban. My last film, *Karera* (*Ante*), is about horseracing. I don't do horseracing, but after the film, I became fascinated with it. Every film is a journey for me and often it's more important than the destination.

THE ART OF WRITING

After watching Lino Brocka's *Orapronobis*, my friends and I couldn't stop talking about it for almost a week. But the defining moment where I realized I wanted to write films was in college when I saw *The Bicycle Thief*. I studied through the Film Development Foundation. Doy Del Mundo

was there, and also Bibeth Orteza, who adapted my script *Ada* for her husband Carlitos to direct. I interned with them and met John Torres, who was apprenticing for Carlitos. I saw the process up close.

I'm not a fast writer. Well, it depends. Some scripts take a long time to write. But I don't sit down in front of the computer without knowing any of my characters. It takes a while but once I figure them out, it becomes easier and faster to write. It took me a long time to write *Munting Tinig* for Gil Portes, much as it was about a teacher and I was then teaching scriptwriting and basic filmmaking myself. Getting it produced took even longer. I came away from that experience knowing not to depend on the studios and that anyone can produce a film. I learned how to fight for my film. I gathered the patience and resilience to be able to make a film the way I want to make it.

NOT JUST MACHO DANCERS ANYMORE

Philippine cinema is not just about macho dancers anymore. The climate of the past five years has been interesting at the very least. Independent cinema has been around for a very long time. There's Raymond Red and Kidlat Tahimik. But its presence is a lot stronger today. The mainstream of course is still the same. It's all about formula. Now, people are looking for an alternative and there's a lot more diversity and range among the indies in terms of themes and aesthetics. There are a lot of different voices. That is thanks to digital. Of course democratization means everybody can be a filmmaker, which is dangerous too.

MUTE CINEMA

I went to the CCP (Cultural Center of the Philippines) library to look for Manuel Silos' *Biyaya ng Lupa* (*The Grace from the Earth*) and saw how ahead of its time it was. That was very influential. There's Gerry De Leon, and his *48 Oras* (*48*



Hours) was vivid and very visual. There's Mike De Leon of course, with *Kung Mangarap Ka't Gising* (*Moments in a Stolen Dream*), *Kisapmata* (*Blink of an Eye*), *Itim* (*Black*). Of course, there's Lino Brocka. I really love *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko Ng Liwanag* (*Manila: In The Claws Of Neon*) and *Insiang*, especially *Insiang*. There's Ishmael Bernal. *Bicycle Thief*. There's the Dardennes with *Rosetta*, *La Promese*. There's Paul Thomas Anderson. I thought *Magnolia* was weird. Then there's Lav Diaz, Jeffrey Jeturian. A good film for me is something you can still get even if you mute the sound.

INSTINCT

I always fall back on my instincts. If I want to do something, I do it regardless of the odds. Is that a pro or a con? I don't know. But it gets crazy not to be able to express something that's brewing inside you. And I tend to do different kinds of films.

My process varies with each film. I still have about 20 screenplays written that haven't been filmed yet and what's weird is that the past 11 films I made didn't come from this stash. They're all new. It usually starts with a single idea for me. *Donsol* came from a news item about the migration of the whale sharks in a small community. *Kadin* came from something I saw on Oprah about someone who gave away cows in South Africa. With *Tambolista*, I read the script in some workshop in 1997. Out of all the films I've made, only six of them were my own screenplay: *Donsol*, *Kadin*, *Adela*, *Aurora*, and my half of *Manila*. *Manila* came out of a conversation I had with Raya Martin. It's a tribute to the Brocka-Bernal films.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Pre-production is at the heart of my films. It has to be planned well. Even when shooting with a minimal crew—which I've done on *Aurora*—here was just me and my two actors and around 10 people in the jungle. I don't do

storyboards; I like to be more organic. It's more exciting. In *Batanes*, my co-director Dave Hukom and I would throw ideas to each other on structure and flow. *Adela* was ultimately a collaboration with Anita Linda, where we talked at length about the character and what the film was after and let her be. There was no coaching at all. That's the most important thing when you're shooting: the communication.

FILMOGRAPHY

2006 *Donsol*

2007 *Kadin (The Goat)*

Tambolista (Drumbeat)

Nars (Nurses)

Batanes (co-directed with Dave Hukom)

2008 *Daybreak*

Adela

Imoral (Amoral)

2009 *Manila (co-directed with Raya Martin)*

Aurora

Karera (Ante)

2010 *Romeo at Juliet (Romeo and Juliet)*

D' Survivors (The Survivors)

Presa

Chassis

Muli (The Affair)



Ato Bautista

Ato Bautista isn't going to make a film that is unlike him. The way he carries himself, the way his mind lingers on the heart of darkness, and the way he positions his characters in such grave situations—he could only be as truthful as the eyes that let him see the world. Just by watching his films, and even without meeting him, one can tell that he is a man of remarkable attitude.

He may well be a character in his films; he exists in them like a man running, breathing heavily, wanting escape, wanting revenge, and wanting a better life. His frequent collaborator, Shugo Praico, knows him a lot, and in his scripts there is a marriage of their ideas, which strikes hard with personal experiences and observations, filled with characters whose words they also speak, and whose lives they have also lived. Bautista and Praico pull the rope at each other's end, but their films—*Sa Aking Pagkakagising Mula Sa Kamulatan* (*My Awakening From Consciousness*, 2005), *Blackout* (2007), *Gamot sa Pagkabagot* (*Cure for Boredom*, 2007), and *Carnivore* (2008)—all fall deep inside the jungle of the city, the violence of their characters never concealed, and the harshness of the circumstances never

understated. Bautista knows that the surface can never be pretty at all times. His spunk is that attitude that confronts the ugly with a much uglier face. (*Chard Bolisay*)

FITTING FILM IN THE STATE OF LIFE

Film does not recognize us. They don't see what we do. Out of 94 million people, not even 0.5 percent have seen our works. It may even be at .00 percent or something. So the things we do for the country— are they even able to watch it? It's an absurd idea that maybe it's just us who understand each other. Brocka was commercial, and he will be watched even if it's a one-day, last-day film for him. When I started out as a filmmaker, I believed in Brocka. I believed in Bernal, in Mike De Leon, in Peque Gallaga, in these Filipino masters. Brocka had 69 films. Out of the 69 films how many of them are topnotch? Let's say about 10 percent. If we educate the masses, our fellow Filipinos, majority of which, at 80 percent, are really, really poor— these are the people in the D and E economic brackets. Let's say, at 80 percent, the films he did were meant to educate the poor, Brocka would've been a hero. Let's say he's the greatest Filipino filmmaker to date. 10 percent to educate the Filipinos, and 90 percent of those, what? He blinded his fellow Filipinos 90 percent of the time. He educated only 10 percent of the time. So sometimes, I can't help but wonder how you're going to compensate— for lack of a better term—the crime that you've committed? 90 percent of the time you're committing a crime to your fellow men, and 10 percent of the time, recouping for it.

THE WRONG ALPHABET

Brocka was saying that he has to make five films just to be able to convince the producers or the studios for him to make one good film. So you blind your fellow Filipinos five times out of six. How can you equate that? It's like you're teaching them the wrong alphabet—A to Z—and you give only half. They're being turned into idiots five times. They will be taught correctly only once. I became a filmmaker because when I was younger—when I graduated from UST (University of Santo Tomas)—there's this enigma, this puzzle. Do you know who the Filipino is? That was the enigma to me. It's a puzzle. After making three films, I

came to a point where I asked myself, "What am I doing?" I'd be lucky to have a full house for one screening and I've never done that.

SOMETHING PURE

In reality, we're still on the ground. If someone curious enough does a research on us— like I did with Raymond Red, The Reds, The Lees, Nick Deocampo, and everybody, even Lino Brocka, although Brocka, Bernal and company were studio, asking, "How were they able to do that (fill up a movie house)?" They'll find out we came from the middle class. Let's say, I'm a kid, and 20 years from now, I research on a certain filmmaker. I'll find out that the reason he was able to get a full house was because he didn't have to worry about buying a toothbrush, buying Colgate, soap, or what he'll eat every day because he's from the upper middle class. What about me? How is that going to be possible? We're the only ones who can understand that. Businessmen still have a stronghold over the industry, and the businessman's purpose is to make business. You can't blame them. They're not artists and they're not crazy. They turn everything into a business. The bottom line is you really can't make your work pure unless you become indie. Then again, if you're indie and you make something pure, nobody will watch it because it just doesn't reach them.

ENIGMA

I still haven't learned. That's been my problem ever since. I still haven't learned. I still make films. That's the enigma to me. The things we're doing, what is it for, really? The works of Brocka—what are those for as against what we're doing now? Are we just indulging ourselves? Did I make a mistake in choosing this profession, if it can even be called one? Did I err in using a medium that is actually not suited for this level of lifestyle? Because I'd say we were from at least the lower middle class, because we were able to study. But that time, when I wasn't finished with school yet, we could probably be even past the lower middle class because the

only one working then was my father. My mother was a housewife while my father was a provincial police. So how is it that as a college student, I dreamt of becoming a filmmaker when for me it does not fit my state in life? It's probably for the rich only, for those who don't have to think about daily living costs. It pains me to see the younger filmmakers of today. They ask me what's my job, then I answer "Director," then they ask me, "But aren't you one, also?" In other words, a filmmaker has to ask his fellow filmmaker—or at least a filmmaker he knows—what his job is.

THE RIGHT TO DREAM

I don't have money right now but even if I do get money, I will not save it. I'll just continue making. I still ask myself that, actually. I'm a fan of Kidlat, but most likely, Kidlat does not have to worry about his daily expenses. I'm not criticizing anybody. These are just the thoughts that I have been mulling over in my head. Do I have the right—as a person who can only live on sufficient means—to dream of being an artist? Does the Filipino even have the time for art when what he concerns himself with every day is food? I don't even know if there's still such a thing as a hero today. Can I be called a hero or the other filmmakers as well? Probably not. We're probably just indulging in our vices as well, too. Maybe what we're doing is a vice, I don't know. It could be. I mean, who are the only ones that enjoy doing drugs? It's just the addicts themselves, right?

INDULGENCE

It's indulgence. The people who did watch our films probably did so just because they wanted to check it out, and not necessarily because they wanted to actually see it—like, when you watch *Transformers*, you really want to go see it. You pay P160 to experience *Transformers*. Our films are on exhibit that's why people come to it. It's not that expensive, anyway. It's not 5.1 Dolby either, so I don't know—maybe now, I'm just asking more.

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

I'm asking myself if what I do really is for the country. I am personally happy with what I do. But as an artist, I have to ask—after three films—if in the future, my films will still be seen by the people or if it would still be there. The works of Bernal and of Brocka are still being shown on TV because those are studio-made. They're popular because 90 percent of their films are popular, and that's why we know of their good films. They probably won't remember the mediocre ones that they did, but the 10 films that were done well are being remembered. So for us who don't necessarily want to make studio-backed films, will we be given the chance to be remembered in the future?

TV SPOONFEEDS THE AUDIENCE

I did—and I'm still doing—TV work. What I think of TV now is that it gives the people what they're looking for. I used to believe that the audience we have is an intelligent audience, but now, I have to think and rethink that. I'm having second thoughts, because I just might have too much faith in the Filipino audience. Maybe I expected too much from them. Maybe I just wasn't able to compare and see if my understanding of my work is the same as with their own understanding of it. I might have overestimated them. These questions I'll probably answer in ten years' time, maybe after another three films, or maybe when I get to do my own soap opera. Let's take a look at Jon Red. We know Jon Red because we are in the indie movement, but I wouldn't say he is well-known in terms of him being a household name. In fact, had he not done *Eva Fonda*, his works wouldn't have been seen by the majority of the Filipinos. I don't know if he's proud of that work, but he sure made a lot of people happy.

What I think about TV now is that you just give to the people what you think is within their understanding. I don't know if that is the Brocka's perspective since I didn't know

him personally and I can only speak for myself. But maybe we do agree that the TV's audience is just being fed with what they need to see. I've been told that what we do in TV is service. I don't know if it's really service to just give the person what they need to know accordingly.

FOREIGN FESTIVALS

The festivals we attend to showcase our films are very educated, and yet they are the ones still receiving the education from our films. That's what pains me to see. I was excited when I first came to the festival, but come to think of it, I did this for my fellow Filipinos. These people in foreign festivals, they've already watched a lot, and yet here I am, still contributing some more to their intelligence. More people have seen my works abroad than here, and that's a fact. My films abroad get full house.

I don't know if it's because the films were just really meant to be seen outside of this country. We'll never know. It's also not the same as with the Filipinos overseas who watch via TFC (The Filipino Channel). What they do there is decent and dignified because they're not stealing. What is dignified, anyway? That's one of the questions that would be difficult to answer. Had I been asked five years ago, I would probably have had a better answer because I was still idealistic then. But as time passes by, it becomes harder to answer these questions.

DIGITAL MADE SHARING OF IDEAS POSSIBLE

All my films are in digital format, save for that one short film in Mowelfund which is in 35mm. I'd say that digital filmmaking has a lot to do with my filmmaking. If not for it, it wouldn't have been possible for me to shoot my first film in 2004, and then later on, release it in 2005. Maybe I can do it after 10 years with 35mm, but I don't think I can afford film by myself. My only capital is my ideas, myself, and Shugo, who's also a co-producer. We're the only investors of our own films. Having DV technology made

my films possible. I was able to share my ideas, was able to tell a story using the medium that I know and love. Had it not been for digital, my three films would not have been made. Digital gave me the access. It used to be that the only ones who had access to the 35mm were the studios because they have the money to spend. If not the studios, then there are the millionaires or artist millionaires.

STORYTELLING AS LIFELINE

I don't think I can live without storytelling. Basically, it started with my love for telling stories, sharing opinions and ideas about the world around me. I couldn't imagine myself not sharing a story. I was just built that way, and I can't deny it. That's why although I may still have questions as to why I am here—doing this—I still do it anyway. Even if you're in the dark, you still walk to get to that unfamiliar place. I think my being a filmmaker is rooted in my being designed as a person, as a storyteller because I didn't do my first film to earn money. It would be a good bonus, yes, but that was not my primary concern. Had that been my priority, then why did I bother making a second one when the first film didn't earn money? The third film too? So there must be something more than money, there must be something more than fame.

ATO, THE SINGING COOK

Had I not done film, I think I would have gone to Music or the Culinary Arts. If you combine the two, I can still come out as a director: Singing Cooks. Before I became a storyteller/filmmaker, I was a musician. That was my first dream. I think about 90 percent of the youth during the Alternative Explosion in the early 90s dreamt about being a musician. I just found myself to be not that good a musician. It occurred to me when I was in college, "Hey, I think I can be good at filmmaking." So that's why I pursued it and risked everything for that art form or for that profession.

Cooking relates to filmmaking because you have to choose your ingredients. You can cook a lot, but you should only choose the finest. It's also in your taste and skill. You're the chef. Fast food would be what the majority wants delivered in the fastest way possible; you can choose to give this or not. So in that sense, I'm probably a chef because I choose my own colors, my dish, the ingredients, what I want to add in, take out.

FILM IS THE MOST EXPENSIVE FORM OF ART

The difference between filmmaking and other art forms is that the former is very expensive. Even if you say it's in the digital format, it's still very expensive. Even if you don't have that much budget, it's still expensive. You need the help of other people, of friends to help you out so you can make the film. It's still expensive. You need to talk to more people who can help you carry out your art form. Unlike the novel, you can do research but ultimately, you can do it on your own. You just have to write it down. If you're a poet, even if you don't have a pen and paper, you can be a poet. You can just memorize your ideas. If you're a musician, you need only a guitar. If you don't have a guitar, you can use anything at home as a make-shift instrument. But the filmmaker, he will need a camera undeniably. It's impossible to make film without the moving image. Even if your moving image was done as a still, when you patch them up, you'll still need a machine to do it for you. I think that's the main difference.

Another would be the audience appreciation. For literature, you have to be literate in order to understand and appreciate what was written. For paintings, apart from the appreciation, you need to also study the art so you can better appreciate the painting, particularly if the painter is not a realist because the person can only understand what is blatantly shaped and formed. They can pretend it's avant garde or abstract, but they will still need education for them to be able to say that it is so. Or if the person does

not care about the meaning of the painting, he will still need sufficient education to go to those places exhibiting the paintings unless they're painted on the streets, in which case it would be vandalism.

ALT & UNDER

Honestly, I am not happy with the term "indie" and how it is currently being used. There's been a shift in its meaning. When I was still studying, we used to call it "underground." We called it a "movement." We called it "alternative cinema." It can be displeasing to the eyes of the people, or they may not understand it, or it's low quality, dirty, gritty, but you can still define it "Oh, underground..," "Oh, alternative...," "Oh, art, within the circle." Today, if you say indie you don't know where you'll position yourself because everybody can call what they do indie as long as it's independent. Or to some people, "That's digital, so that's indie." That's why I'm not happy with it. I don't know where to place myself.

If I tell another person my film is indie, it could be that his understanding of it is that since it's digital, it's low quality. "Nobody's seen that because it's indie, right?" Before, it used to be that if you say "alternative cinema"—although they may not know the movement—they can identify with it and say, "Ah, you're one of the artists who's doing art, who's doing what they like, what they do. So you're a director..." That's not the case now. "What do you do?" "Film." "How many have you done?" "Three." "What's that, indie?" "No, it's film." "Yeah, so is that indie?" "Yes, indie." You say it's indie just so you can come to an understanding. It saddens me that I have to say my works are indie to justify why I have done only three films. That's how I look at indie now—I can't define it.

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

If I were to give a name to what we're doing, I'd say they're personal works. Before, it was called "alternative, underground," but really, these are personal works. It's the

personal works of Rox Lee, Lav Diaz, or Khavn De La Cruz. Even if they call it trash, it's personal. Nobody ever does that, or nobody ever did that for a studio, for a boss. You do it for the sake of doing it as an art form. Now, some still do it for art form, and some label their works— even if it's not personal—as an independent or as an indie work. So that's the hardest term to define because different camps use the word indie. And these camps, these are usually the camps whose voices are commonly heard. It's still media. The voice of our country is still that of the media's. What is media? They're mainstream. What is mainstream? These are owned by businessmen who don't even care about knowing what really is the meaning of that term, or of that movement, if it's still a movement.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

Just to add to that, if someone asks if that's indie or what, that's actually a wrong question. That's the worst question an audience can ask about your work. The only thing you should ask is, "Is that film?" And if you did make a film, what they will tell you next is, "You did a good job, I am pleased with it," or "Your work sucked, I didn't like it at all." They shouldn't care if that's indie or studio or if it was financed by the Catholic Church or whatever. It's just very convenient sometimes to hide behind the term indie, which for others isn't actually that convenient. Like for me, it's not convenient at all, precisely because it has this connotation that isn't right. "Ah, that's indie, therefore it's free. How come there's a price to it, when it's indie?" or "There, you're making an indie right now! Because it's digital, and the lighting looks it and it looks like you're shooting my lips. That must be indie."

BRASH YOUNG CINEMA

Besides being born in the Philippines with both Filipino parents, I'm Filipino because I feel Filipino and as much as I hate many things here in my country, I love her and I want to live here for the rest of my life.

I'll also kill for my country. I don't want to die for my country, though; let the other threats foreign and domestic bastards die for theirs.

How does my country define me? I don't know. Maybe our country shouldn't define us for now because it has such a fucked up image. Our leaders fucked it up; the Filipinos who don't have any pride and shame fucked it up, we fucked it up pretty badly.

I think it would be best if I was the one who defines my country. It's not easy and I sure am working hard for it. I'll define her with the work I make and the image I represent most especially when I get invited to film festivals and visit other countries. In a big way this responsibility affects my art, meaning, I want no fuck ups or should I say, I don't fuck it up when it comes to my filmmaking.

I sound brash and arrogant but it's just what it is.

SCRIPT, THE MOVIE

When I was 19 and in third year college, my mentor was touring schools to teach writing. The finals was to make a short film by groups. Of course, even in college, not everyone believes in your vision, so you start to become independent. I wasn't elected director because I didn't have a big group of friends in college. I borrowed a camera, wrote my script, shot it myself, and tagged my roommate along. What I came up with was very pure, and I did it not only because it was for the finals but also because I really wanted to finish it. At the end of the day, there was a contest and other people saw the potential in me. One of them was Ricky Lee, who was a judge at that time, and Mario Hernando. I got the three most coveted awards. That's when I felt it, although I wasn't expecting I'd win anything. In fact, I wasn't there at the awarding, I just found out I won when I got there. So that's when I felt that maybe this is my talent right here. Maybe this is my contribution to society. Maybe



Sa Aking Pagkakagising Mula Sa Kamulatan (My Awakening From My Consciousness)

here I can be important. Everyone wishes to be important, may it be a mother a father, or a cigarette vendor. Everyone has a role, and I was one of the people also looking for my own role. When I saw I had potential in this field, that's when I decided that this will be my role, and this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. Because of that, I had an affirmation because prior to that, nobody's told me I was good at anything. But that moment in my life, other people who are not your family saw what you can do, and affirmed, "You're good, you have talent."

That was *Script*. It affirmed to me that that's where I should lead because I was never really good at anything else. At that point in my life, I realized that I can bet on this. I was never a good musician when I was trying to be one, even if I loved music at that time. Even myself, I don't believe that I can be a very good musician because other people, when they hear music, they can play it after a couple of hours. I never had that kind of ear or musicality. I may have the heart for it, but it wasn't courageous enough to invest or to sacrifice for that art form. So I broke up with my first love. When I decided that this is what I will do, that's when I felt that I don't care anymore if it was going to be hard, if I will be able to reach my dreams, if I will be a director. I didn't think about it. All I was thinking about was that I will be a director, I will be a filmmaker, or at that time, as I would call it then, I would be a writer. I didn't know then that writing was an altogether different thing. I noticed at that time, I was writing so I could turn it into a film. Writers—from what I know and from my experience—they're more giving and patient in some ways with their art form. Because aside from writing it for themselves, they write it for somebody else so they can use it.

I wrote a script for the scriptwriting workshop, which will eventually be a short film. And because I have no support from other people, from my classmates, and everyone else

from the Theater Guild were taking their finals, the short film that I shot was about how I wrote the script that I've written for a short film. So that became my short film, which is entitled *Script*. It's about the script that I wrote.

50 YEARS AFTER

Future of Cinema? No idea. I used to have an idea, but I figured, nobody can really predict it. I can't predict it. I can only hope that in the future, Philippine cinema is not only defined by poverty and gay films.

How do I see films 50 to 100 years from now? I can't see anything. Perhaps 50 years from now, films aren't shot using real film anymore, but rather, it is shot by a different medium. But filmmakers still call themselves filmmakers, and they still call the new medium film. Well, it doesn't matter what they call it anyway; I just hope that 50 years from now I'll be famous, rich, happy. I can still fuck, and still make films, and a hundred years from now people of the world still watch my films, love it, as they did 50 years before.

TAXI DRIVER, SCORPIO NIGHTS

My most favorite film is Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Why? I don't know; perhaps I relate to it most especially when I was in college. I just felt the isolation and the eagerness to do something. Find one's purpose in the dirty big city. Find one's purpose here in this world. I guess I found it when I decided to become a filmmaker. Martin Scorsese is also my favorite director of course, along with David Cronenberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Roman Polanski.

My favorite Filipino film would be Peque Gallaga's *Scorpio Nights* and my favorite foreign film would be Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

Favorite directors foreign and local are Peque Gallaga, Mike de Leon, Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Alfred Hitchcock.

Asian cinema also had a huge influence on me—Wong Kar Wai, Zhang Yimou, and Takeshi Kitano. Some of the Mexican filmmakers too, like Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro Innaritu.

VIOLENCE IN MY FILMS IS MY HEART'S WAY OF REVOLTING

Among all those I mentioned, my favorite scene would be from *Taxi Driver*. He was writing in his room about his perception of the environment around him. Actually, I was able to relate to *Taxi Driver* because of how Travis Bickle perceived his surroundings. I was also a bit like that. I came from the province, and I hated it—at least my province, my hometown. I had illusions of leaving. I thought that Manila would be a better place, but when I got here for college, I found out it's even harder. But I loved and hated the place at the same time because there were many new things to see and to learn. That was the hardest time of my life, first stepping foot in Manila. Travis Bickle was a simple person who liked it clean. He was seeing the filth and he wanted to change it. He saw a child prostitute who he wanted to save. I think I had gone through that phase in college. I was exposed to the filth of the place, saw it, and wanted to do something about it. But Travis wasn't able to do anything about it, so he ended up using violence. Well, I have not resorted to violence up to now, but my films can be violent. Maybe that's why I am attracted to violence. I think that is my heart's way of revolting. It's screaming out, "I want change." That's what I show in my films—that there are unsightly things that you have to see. I also don't believe much in squatter movies or poverty movies because I didn't really live in a squatter. I did experience that kind of life, but not fully. And neither did I look at that place in that way when I was visiting my distant relatives there. I did not look down on that place.

THE END IS THE BEGINNING IS THE END

My concept starts out as a mere concept. I don't really think about it all that much. Sometimes I'd be smoking my cigarette, sometimes I'll be in the bathroom, or while watching a movie, then inspiration strikes. Then, it will turn into a film, just like what happened with *Sa Aking Pagkakagising*. Then there'd also be *Blackout* that we devised; that one's a fruit of our experiences. *Carnivore*, we got it from our experiences and feelings from way back in college. There'd be those projects also that are custom-made for those who requested it. Eventually, it turns out we'll also be the one to produce it.

SHUGO PRAICO

When I get a concept, I call up Shugo and we'll talk about it. If he likes the concept, he'll develop the story. He's just better at developing the story. I think my strength is in coming up with the concept and with the creation of the scenes. So Shugo is the one who organizes and writes it down; he puts in the form.

One thing we have to be able to agree on even before he writes down the treatment or the story is what exactly the story is going to be about. Then once the script is done, that's the start of the hardships.

Writing the script doesn't take so long. Shugo is one of the faster writers I've seen. I think the fastest he's done would be *Alaala Ng Tag-Ulan (Memories Of Rain)*. He finished that script in three days. What happened with my third film, *Carnivore*, was that originally, it was supposed to be my second, as a follow-up to *Sa Aking Pagkakagising*. So that script, it actually has a *Sa Aking Pagkakagising* feel and touch. Essentially, *Carnivore* was my third film, but it was my second screenplay. We've actually formulated a lot already, pre-prodded and visualized a lot as well for what would have been the second film.

FAST FILMS

The shoot is easy and fast. From the three films I've made, the system I devised was that I should shoot fast. The equation there is the longer you shoot, the more expensive your film becomes because you spend more time needing to pay people and the equipments. But now, I don't think I'd want to shoot that fast anymore, except if the film really is fully mine. Or at least I was paid right for me to shoot it expediently. My goals have become different, and my visions have expanded. I still want to make small films, but it has to be mine.

The first one, I shot in five days. *Blackout*, I shot in 10 days. The biggest film I've done is the last: *Carnivore*. I even shot it quicker than *Blackout*. I shot it in seven days and one day for scenario. Eight days in total. My goals then were different. The goal then was to shoot as fast as you can, with the quality that isn't 10 days or eight days. Now, I don't think I can still be able to prove that to the producers, or to anyone else. What I want now is to make a film, even for just a few days, maybe 15 or 20 days. There's just so much that I was looking for in my three films that I was not able to do because they were all done so fast. I think I could have done better. And every film that I make, it makes me humble that I missed out on a lot, even if it does turn out beautiful. The filmmaker, at the end of each film, becomes more mature. You become more learned at what you do, because you experienced it first-hand.

STORYBOARD

I don't use storyboards; I don't think they're applicable here in the Philippines. When I was studying in Mowelfund, I learned about the discipline of storyboarding. But I don't think it applies to the discipline of shooting style in the Philippines, because here, we just use whatever is available. Storyboard is for planning, but you can't plan so much if the only thing that you would be able to use is whatever

that is available there. Paul Thomas Anderson has a huge budget, but he also doesn't use a storyboard.

When I read Shugo's script, the scene is already there in my head. My only problem then is how I will be able to do it. I feel more suffocated when I have to draw it out, because I also won't be able to shoot it. That's even more frustrating for me. But personally, I like that process of storyboarding. If it's even possible to do animatics, why not? It's a dream to be able to apply those processes here because it is admittedly good.

COLLABORATION IS MONEY—IT SAVES YOU TIME

For post-prod work, while other filmmakers are wary of cutting their works, I enjoy it. In that way, I believe I am lending out more of my service to the film, even more than while I was shooting that scene. I am very particular with editing. I really sit down and cut it. It's the last time that I can direct the film so I might as well sit on it. I'm also particular with the angles and acting. Actually, I'm particular with everything—even with music and sound design.

I think I've found my best collaborator in Shugo. It's hard, especially in the independent industry, because you can't just get people to work for you and impose on their time when you can't pay him. You have to be able to compensate for the things he won't be able to do if in case there isn't enough time, or he's not capable of doing. The next process I'd want to be engaged in next time is for me to be able to collaborate with someone to whom I'll say what I want and he'll be able to do his thing. I think I get exhausted more focusing on the processes that I don't really have to be looking out for so much in the first place. It would be nice to have someone as passionate or as good as you, that you can each have particular roles—you on directing, he'll be on editing, etcetera. Collaboration feels so good, plus it's also money, in the sense, that you're buying time. At

the end of the day, you're the director and producer. You'll really get drained, emotionally, financially, physically.

FIRST WORK IS THE FIRST LOVE

I always believe that the filmmaker's favorite is his first work, no matter how imperfect or expensive it is. As to what my most loved film is, I can't choose. All of the works that I did, at the time that I was doing it, that was me. I can't be mad at myself. I can't be ashamed of what I was at that particular time. But the idealism of the first film is still different, especially if it was you who produced it. When I play *Sa Aking Pagkakagising*, it makes me think about stopping the player, just to be conscious that I am watching it. It still strikes me, it brings me wonderful memories. It's the time when I got many, many friends. And in the course of time, these friends became lesser and lesser. Turns out your friends who helped you with the first film do not necessarily fit your next two films. You can't exactly blame them because you all had different purposes when you made the first film together. But in the end, you'll see that the ones who stick with you are those who like their purpose when making your film. Or they could have just stayed for fun and camaraderie.

THE WORD "FILMMAKER"

At the end of the day, I was only able to call myself a filmmaker when other people called me a filmmaker. The word filmmaker is treasured by each filmmaker, even the wannabes. In order for you to be called one, you have to be able to prove it to yourself, and to the other filmmakers who have actually done something. It's a very sacred label, so sacred that you can't just call yourself a filmmaker just because you feel like it. It takes some sort of time, discipline, devotion, and recognition by other filmmakers for you to be able to call yourself a filmmaker. A filmmaker does not call himself a filmmaker.

Anybody can be a filmmaker. In fact, being a filmmaker is the easiest thing. But proving that you are a filmmaker may take you a lifetime. Maybe some filmmakers were filmmakers three years of their life, and some are filmmakers until they die. So maybe, a true filmmaker is one who dies as a filmmaker. Now, I can say that I'm a filmmaker, and I would want to pledge and promise, not to the page, not to the reader, but to myself, that I'll live as filmmaker and I'll die as a filmmaker.

CINEMA IS EVERYTHING

The first thing that comes to mind when I hear the word cinema is moving pictures. If I add something to the moving pictures, then that tells a story. To put it romantically, cinema for me is life. Cinema is everything that you transform into moving pictures.

FILMOGRAPHY

2005 *Sa Aking Pagkakagising Mula Sa Kamulatan*
(*My Awakening From My Consciousness*)

2007 *Blackout*
Gamot Sa Pagkabagot (Cure For Boredom)

2008 *Thrillecine*
Carnivore

2010 *Di Natatapos Ang Gabi (The Night Infinite)*



Ditsi Carolino

Given the fact that Philippine cinema thrives in providing escape in the form of fabricated tales and entertainment to a people whose realities are far too depressing to constantly be reminded of, the documentary has never been given its proper recognition. With the possible exception of Ramona Diaz's *Imelda* (2003) which was fortunate enough to receive a commercial release through both the efforts of an enterprising local studio and the fact that its subject matter is sensational to begin with, documentaries are relegated to late night television along with the news and tabloid talk shows. Ditsi Carolino, who is perhaps one of the most compassionate filmmakers around, understands the documentary form within the framework of Philippine cinema, and works around it. Without sacrificing the value of verity, Carolino's films always flow with a sound narrative framework and infused with as much drama to incite the most emotional of reactions from her audiences.

Minsan Lang Sila Bata (*Children Only Once*, 1996) tackles child labor in the vast sugarcane fields of Negros. *Riles* (*Life on the Tracks*, 2003), on the other hand, documents the lives of poor families who are forced to live alongside railroad tracks. *Bunso* (*The*

Youngest, 2005) concentrates on delinquent children who are jailed alongside adults. Finally, *Lupang Hinarang* (*Hindered Land*, 2009) is a continuously evolving piece on the struggles of farmers with an agrarian reform program that simply does not work.

Her films are all advocacy pieces which are meant to inform the world of the injustices that thrive in what supposedly is a Christian and democratic country. However, much more than the information that Carolino explicates is the humanity she makes sure she gives to her subjects. Despite the youth of the children in *Minsan Lang Sila Bata* and *Bunso*, despite the abject poverty of the Renomerons of *Riles*, despite the outrageousness of the political demonstrations of the farmers in *Lupang Hinarang*, these characters are always depicted as human beings, stalwart and honorable in the face of adversity. Ditsi Carolino is perhaps the most compassionate filmmaker in the country. (*Oggs Cruz*)

DIGITAL MAKES MY FILMS POSSIBLE

Of all the documentaries I've done, only one is not digital. That was the first and only 16mm film documentary I made in a workshop sponsored by the Goethe Institute. The subsequent documentaries I made are all digital—either funded by NGOs or self-funded, meaning low-budget or no-budget documentaries—and they're impossible to do on film because of the cost.

I am drawn to observational documentaries, where you can film for hours and hours. That kind of freedom is possible because tape is cheap and digital cameras are light. Even if you don't have funds to hire a crew, you can still shoot on your own.

But the biggest difference for me would have to be the intimacy that digital affords.

If I had to shoot with a cameraman and a soundman all the time, I would have missed out on some of the most intimate scenes I've shot on a digital camera. Alone.

In a scene I shot in *Riles (Life on the Tracks)* for example, my main character, Pen, after a fight with her husband, tells me that she's worried sick about what's going to happen to her family when she dies. She keeps quiet for a long time, lost in her thoughts. Then she breaks into song, very softly, almost inaudibly to anyone else. I get goosebumps while she sings to herself. That sequence turned out to be the climax of my film and I wouldn't have captured it if there were three of us filming Pen in this cramped room in the slums.

The camera I'm using now is a small Sony HD camera, very handy for observational docs. It's a gift from a friend who saw and liked *Riles* so much, she asked me, "What camera do you want? I'll give it to you." I got a small digital camera.

Now even if I don't have funding, if I stumble upon a very compelling story, I'll just go out there and shoot.

IF NOT FILM, I'D BE DOING NGO WORK

If I weren't making docs, I'd probably be an NGO worker, doing development communication. Not just directing films, but a jack of all trades—managing projects, planning a media campaign, shooting, writing, blogging—whatever it takes to get your advocacy across. Then again, the reason I got into documentary filmmaking was because of NGO work.

For me, the next step is a kind of zooming out and looking at your contribution not just as a filmmaker but as an advocate for social change, seeing how you can best use your film to get people to act.

For example my new work in progress *Lupang Hinarang (Hindered Land)* is about the Sumilao and Negros farmers. It's not enough that the film gets made and launched. Now, I am collaborating with some very creative people and seeing it from a larger communications strategy. How do you get viewers to care about this issue and pressure their congressmen and senators to act on the bill to help the farmers? How do you keep the issue from dying, to keep people from forgetting just because it's no longer in the headlines? How do you tell the story so that ordinary people realize that something is wrong if after 20 years, farmers are still unable to get the land that should have been theirs under the law?

FILM FOUND ME

I'd say film found me, rather than the other way around. I never thought I'd become a filmmaker. I studied Sociology at the University of the Philippines and thought I'd become a teacher. But before teaching, I wanted to get out of Manila and work in some exciting and challenging place in

the province, where I would get to know what's happening in the real world. I ended up in an NGO in Davao. I was hired to do research for audio-visual productions but because it was a small NGO, everybody multi-tasked. I learned to write and to shoot stills. That's where it all started.

I liked shooting a lot and the stories were always about the marginalized—farmers, workers, indigenous peoples, the urban poor. It was just a matter of time before I shifted from photography to moving images.

I was watching *The Probe Team* on TV, liked what I saw, and joined them as a production assistant. It was a great place to learn the ropes but after three months, I realized I wasn't cut out for current affairs work on TV. The networks give you a week to a month to do a story but the films I wanted to create needed more time for the stories to unfold. I also wanted more time with the subjects.

I guess I was just led to where I could actually do my best, step by step. The thing was to respond to the stirrings inside. I don't really have a problem listening to what's inside. I follow my instincts, what interests me the most, and somehow, I fell for documentary filmmaking.

FILMMAKING IS COMPENSATORY FOR MY WEAKNESSES

Why filmmaking? One, I'm able to express myself creatively this way. Two, I've found a way to try and make a difference.

I wish I could write well, but writing doesn't come naturally to me. I like photography, but I'm not really a talented photographer. I like NGO work—because I love advocacies and the thought of being able to make a difference—but I'm not really good at organizing.

But I love and can do a little bit of the above—shoot, write, advocate, manage, immerse. And even my “weaknesses” serve my filmmaking. Since I'm not really into writing, fine; let the pictures do the talking. I hate writing narration; I let my subjects talk instead. Since I can't capture the essence of an event in a single frozen image, then I'll capture it in a series of shots and sequences. My cinematography isn't outstanding? That's okay, as long as it's intimate.

I can't immerse in a community for months or years the way an organizer does, but I can get close to a subject quickly and have them feel at ease. I have a natural curiosity for people and I'm amazed by even the most ordinary subjects.

INTERESTING AFFIRMATION FROM NARRATIVE FILM DIRECTORS

It came as a surprise when my films won awards. At some point, I started to believe that maybe, as my friend Fr. Jack suggested, I had a gift. The first film I made that got reviewed was *Minsan Lang Sila Bata (Children Only Once)*. It won at the CCP (Cultural Center of the Philippines) and the Film Academy. The late Ishmael Bernal was one of the judges and he came up to me and told me he really liked it. I was like, “Uy, THE Ishmael Bernal took notice!”

Then Peque Gallaga wrote a glowing review of the film. Coming from such respected directors, and not just documentary peers—which are few to begin with since only few make cinematic docs in the country—that was really very encouraging affirmation.

FILIPINO AND THE PHILIPPINES IN DITSI DOCUS

Many filmmakers I meet in festivals like going to other countries to document stories. For example, if Iraq is hot in the news, they go to Iraq. If it's China, they go to China. I myself do not have the compulsion to shoot anything

outside the Philippines, unless it's a film about Pinoy abroad.

It's important for me to have this level of intimacy with my subjects. So if I do not speak the language of the subject, I have a bit of a problem.

Of course, other filmmakers don't have this problem. One of my idols is Gary Kildea, an Australian filmmaker, and he did a couple of documentaries on the Philippines, *Celso And Cora*, and *Valencia Diary*. Celso and Cora is about an urban poor couple here in Manila while *Valencia Diary* is about villagers in Bukidnon during the presidential elections in 1986. When I saw both films, I was envious. Why does it have to take an Australian to create such insightful and in-depth documentaries about Filipinos?

I feel that there are so many stories to tell right here.

ADVOCACY DOCS

People remember my films that have won awards like *Minsan Lang Sila Bata* about child labor, *Bunso (The Youngest)* about kids in jail, and *Riles* (about a family who live along the railtracks. But I also did lesser-known films like *Salome* about domestic violence; *Dapit-hapon Sa Tambakan (Twilight In Smokey Mountain)* about child scavengers; *Mula Pabrikang Hanggang Fukuoka (From Factory To Fukuoka)* about women workers; and some short videos that show NGO best-practices. My recent work in progress *Lupang Hinarang* is about farmers fighting for their land.

We are also editing a yet untitled film about a small-town mayor in Bicol, Abang Mabulo who ran against Dato Arroyo in the congressional race. Dato has an entire machinery behind him, his mother's political clout and influence. And here's this man, Abang, with very little resources but big on principles running against him. It's a David and Goliath

story, where someone just responds to a call because the right thing needed to be done.

If you notice, all the films that I do are about the challenges of ordinary people, especially the poor, those at the fringes who are struggling. I guess my NGO work anchored me to social-issue docs.

The films I make are like immersion pieces, where I see something and want to share what I've seen with others. *Lupang Hinarang*, for example. If only people knew that this is what's really happening to our farmers. It's frustrating to think that the agrarian reform program has been around for twenty years but only 20 percent of lands for compulsory acquisition have been redistributed. Landlords are holding on to their land fiercely. And some of these landlords occupy seats in Congress, so they will never vote against their economic interest. If only more people knew what this struggle for land was about, maybe they would be moved enough to act.

My friend, filmmaker Nonoy Dadivas, told me he once read an article in Time magazine that advocacy films do not really make a difference. Still, it doesn't stop me from trying.

CRACKING THE DISTRIBUTION CODE

I really get a thrill out of more and more Pinoy films getting featured in festivals because even if we make films differently, you get some kind of Philippine panorama. A Pinoy sensibility somehow emerges. And that's exciting because in the past, if you look at a festival catalogue, there might be one or two films selected from the Philippines or none at all. So to see an entire Philippine panorama in the festivals is exciting.

Hopefully, with more and more indie filmmakers, we can learn from each other how to be sustainable and work smarter with funding and distribution. It's an entire industry out there, and we need to engage it as an industry and not just rely on grants.

So what I see is more co-prods happening, with better distribution, so that filmmakers are able to sustain themselves and make the next film, even without grants.

With my documentaries, it's the same thing. My film *Riles* was bought by the BBC in the UK territory and that helped support the pre-prod for the next film. Locally, I'm screening in schools and that helps a lot. Now, I'm collaborating with some social entrepreneurs so we can screen in more and more schools.

FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

If you have the independence because of the funding—editorially and creatively—you can pretty much tell it as it is. That kind of creative independence defines indie filmmaking for me.

So the challenge is: Can you make a film even without grants or funders? Can you market and distribute your film so you raise enough to make the next one?

Nobody gets rich making documentary films. But it is possible to act smarter, and to work at becoming sustainable as a filmmaker. I just haven't cracked the distribution code yet. But other people have. I like the thought of becoming this docu filmmaker who's also a social entrepreneur. Making docs to change the world and doing it sustainably!

NARRATIVE EXPLORATIONS

On the creative side, I like to explore the documentary assuming more and more narrative elements in order to

get the audience a bit more engaged so it doesn't feel preachy nor propaganda. It would feel like they're just watching a movie—a movie about real people in real time; but in the process they get to think more critically about a social issue. Hopefully that moves them into doing something.

I like the films of Kim Longinotto, a British documentary filmmaker. Her films look simple—no frills in the editing, just simple cuts. But the way she structures her films—it really feels like you're watching a movie: a true story with real people well-told through dramatic structuring.

That's what I want to play with—more character-driven docs, more creativity in the structure, more evocative music so you really capture the drama, the emotion of the story.

FILMS FOR CHANGE

Apart from filmmaking satisfying a creative need, I like to see my docs used to advocate for change, to help get a message across.

If you're working with farmers or workers or civil society groups, you can easily find yourself against very powerful, wealthy interests who can hire PR or ad agencies to advance their positions.

So how do you level the playing field? What can you do so your film becomes a springboard for people discussing and acting? There are small actions that many people can take in order to come up with a difference.

GAY KILDEA

I really like Gay Kildea, the Australian documentary filmmaker. It's a shame that he doesn't do too many—I think he makes one film every seven years. I don't know if he's turned digital now to try to make it affordable. He's a big influence on me because one, seeing his films made me



Riles (Life on the Tracks)

realize that what I really wanted to make were cinematic, not TV docs. Two, his films are about very compelling social issues yet he has a way of doing them that is not stereotypical, not didactic, not educational, not in-your-face preaching. It's a movie, it's a story, it's a good film! But you come away thinking, "So this must be the life of a squatter in the train tracks, or in a remote barrio in Bukidnon." Except that it's no longer JUST a squatter family, it's Celso and Cora. And not just anywhere but a barrio in Valencia. There's a face, a name. Not cardboard characters, but flesh and blood, in all their humanity.

KIM LONGINOTTO

Kim Longinotto, I like her because she has this incredible empathy and intimacy with her subjects. She makes films about women—*Gaea Girls*, *Divorce Iranian Style*, *The Day I Will Never Forget*, *Sisters In Law*. Her films are all about women: how society disempowers women in different countries but also how the women assert themselves and fight back. I really envy her ability to film from one culture to another, and yet she achieves this amazing intimacy with her subjects. And she shoots the films herself! I met her at my film school in England and she's such a lovely, gentle, warm woman.

DOMENESCH

Balseros by Spanish filmmaker Juan Carlos Domenesch also inspired me. That documentary is absolutely creative in its approach, taking all of seven years to film. After watching it, I felt that if I could make a film like that, I can die.

RANDY DAVID

In a way, that's where the curiosity began, the interest in what's going on in our society, to see it and try to understand it. What are the forces at work? How come this is happening? It's a perspective I learned from the discipline. And were it not for Professor Randy David—he

triggered my shifting to sociology from a pre-med course—I may have ended up becoming a doctor.

VIR MONTECASTRO

Vir Montecastro is an inspiration, of course, because he taught me photography at a time when I thought all I could do was research and "do serious stuff." Vir was the one who told me I had an eye for photography. And that encouraged me to keep shooting and working with images. If not for that early encouragement, I may never have gone into filmmaking. Photography led me to making documentaries.

SOCIETY OF JESUS

I am also a great admirer of three Filipino Jesuits and I hope my work has been influenced by them—my dear friend and swimming buddy, Fr. Jack Carroll, the holiest man I've met, whose heart and work is so close to the poor; Fr. Ben Nebres, president of the Ateneo de Manila University, who's gung-ho about stepping up and doing what you can to help in nation-building; and Fr. Manoling Francisco who's a prolific composer and lyricist. I love his songs and they're sung by choirs everywhere yet he's very unassuming, very humble. Fr. Manoling's attitude seems to be, "I am just His instrument, composing is my way of responding to the love and gifts I have received, my way of giving back."

NGO PROJECTS

My processes are varied but there are commonalities.

An NGO might approach me with an issue they want to tackle. In *Minsan Lang Sila Bata*, the NGO partners wanted to raise consciousness about child labor, to go against the popular notion that it's okay to have child labor in a poor country. So they ask me to do a documentary that will tell the story of some child laborers and in the process shake people up. The NGO partners and I agree on objectives, key

messages, a schedule and budget, and then they give me the freedom to do the film as I see fit. I start going on location research, finding my subjects.

This can take anywhere from three weeks to three months. It took me three months to find my subjects for *Riles*. If there's an NGO, it's easier because they already have a relationship to the people or communities I'm checking.

IMMERSION

I like pre-production the most because you're just talking to people, getting to know them and you don't have to lug around equipment yet. You're just listening a lot, immersing—also taking note of who might come out interesting on cam.

Usually, I'm not shooting at that point. Just going on immersion. It's tempting to shoot, but I'd rather wait. I don't like filming people and in the end, they're not in the final edit. So pre-production can take me anywhere from a month to three months.

NANA BUXANI

And then I'll go with my camera and usually it's a tiny crew of two. Many of my films I shot with Nana Buxani, who's a photographer, painter, and cinematographer. I prefer to shoot simply—no lights, one camera, a crew of two, me and an assistant or me and a cameraman. I like the intimacy and flexibility of a small crew with light equipment.

Once I shot with four people because some interns wanted to see me work and help. That was the biggest crew I ever had.

Shooting can take anywhere from one month to two years—on-and-off—depending on the story and how long it unfolds. I like shooting observational docs. I stay as close

as I can to my subjects and film them in action or interacting with others. I prefer to film them in conversation rather than hold formal sit-down interviews. I tend to shoot a lot, typically 30-40 hours of footage.

My dream is to film three documentaries simultaneously, working back to back with three editors as the stories unfolded. I take a lot of time editing.

CREATIVE EDITING

I like pre-prod and shooting, but editing is torture for me. For someone who works in a field that is so technical, I am clueless when it comes to techie stuff. I'd rather be out in the field talking and filming people than face the computer for weeks and weeks and weeks. That's why I need to work with really creative editors.

Since I came back from film school in 2002, I really value collaborating with a creative editor. It's important for me because you can get too close to the material. I shoot most of the time and tend to look at footage chronologically, or with baggage from the shoot, or be influenced by events around the shoot. The editor just looks at the material with fresh eyes.

Plus, I like the interaction. I feel alive when I'm in the field, talking to people. But when I'm editing, I feel like I'm stuck in the editing room with hours and hours of footage. That's why I prefer collaborating with an editor, working with someone who's almost like a second director, helping me shape the 35-70 hours of raw footage into a dramatic hour-long or feature length film.

For *Riles*, it took me three months, working alone, to come up with a four-hour assembly. Then we got an Italian editor, Valerio Bonelli, also from the National Film and Television School, to edit from my assembly. Because the budget for

the editor was tiny—although it was the biggest line item in the production—we could only afford him for six weeks. But he was very, very good (he was assistant editor for *Gladiator* and *Black Hawk Down*) and since then, I've always collaborated with an editor.

For *Bunso*, I got a British classmate, Emile Guertin, on board and he edited for three months. Again, that was a very productive collaboration as he loved documentaries but had a keen sense of editing narrative.

For *Lupang Hinarang*, it's been very different because it's a self-assignment, a passion project, with no funding. We've been working on this film for more than two years and it's still work in progress. I collaborated with two fresh film graduates, Cha Escala and Valen Valencia, in editing the film. It's not yet done, but at least we were able to give it some shape, enough to screen it in a campaign to help the farmers. Interestingly, we're also showing this film in progress to help raise money so we can shoot some more and do a final edit.

THE HEROIC

So far, *Riles* and *Bunso* are interesting for me. *Bunso* helped a lot in the lobby efforts to pass the juvenile justice bill. If that means children no longer have to go to prison at that age, then I'm glad that I was able to help in that way.

With *Riles*, I'm very proud of it because that film was very intimate. And it celebrates the Pinoy spirit in a way that if you see this family, they're very poor, but still there's something special about them, the way they sing their hearts out, the way they handle their everyday problems, always with humor and a sense of faith or fatalism.

I like to think the subjects in my films are like simple people doing the heroic.

Pen from *Riles* is a cancer survivor, an ordinary housewife, a laundrywoman. And yet, in many of our screenings, people say during the Q&A, "You inspire us." In the midst of poverty, she decided to adopt not one but three children who needed a mother. It's very rare to find people like her. Or Eddie, the balut (duck egg) vendor. He doesn't earn enough to feed his family, his wife has cancer, and the house they've lived in for 17 years is about to be demolished. But he's always funny.

CRITICISM

Riles, I'm also proud because I did it as a Filipino graduate student in England and the BBC bought it, and paid serious money for a student film. At the film school, I was very timid. I'm not big on film criticism. If you ask me what I think of a film, I'd probably say a few words while my classmates at the film school all sound so smart when they critique films. But when we presented our graduation films, *Riles* stood out among the documentaries.

WHO DO I CRY ON NOW THAT YOU'RE GONE?

It is probably the one where Pen was crying and singing at the same time. While I was shooting it, I could hardly hear her voice—all I knew was something was happening and I was getting goosebumps. Her hand was on her forehead, and when she started singing, she was like thinking then singing to herself. I couldn't quite catch the lyrics. And it was only when I edited the scene with the radio mic amplifying her voice that I heard everything.

When I heard the song—she was asking her mother, "Who do I cry on now that you're gone?", I just cried and cried in the cutting room. It was so moving, so incredibly sad. Like a belated discovery of a scene that I knew was powerful in the shoot but did not really understand until I got to the editing.

I always pray that I have the creative skills to make the scenes work, so people absorb the moment the way I did. And what I experience firsthand also becomes the same experience for the viewer who can only see and hear the two-dimensional projection.

IF YOU DIDN'T BEAT ME UP, I WOULDN'T BE HERE

Of course, there's also that scene from *Bunso* when Bunso confronts his mother. When Bunso asks his mother, "When do I get out of jail?", his mother says, "You shouldn't be released, you haven't changed." And Bunso answers back, "I haven't changed? Is it always my fault? If you didn't beat me up, if you were good parents, I wouldn't be here." And in the heated exchange of words, this eleven-year-old speaks more like the adult. This kind of eloquence coming from a child is hard to forget.

We almost missed that scene in the final cut because the raw footage ran for almost 40 minutes. And the three minutes we cut was the early part.

But when we showed the rough cut to filmmaker friends, Nonoy Dadvivas said, "I know you have a soft heart for these kids but I think there are some kids who really have criminal minds. I think the hard-nosed realist in you should come out."

So we looked for extreme close-ups of Bunso, where you really see his defiance and it was in looking for these shots that we found that gem of a scene between Bunso and his mother.

THEM WHO HELPED ME

Pen is a very strong character in *Riles*. It's only now I realize see her inner strength because I hardly saw her cry during the shoot; she was really fighting it, trying hard to be strong for her family. She's been fighting cancer for like eight, ten years.

Sometimes I ask myself if it was me who helped them, or them who helped me. I can get so caught up in the editing, so obsessive-compulsive. Then you see this woman who just did the best that she could with what she had. She plodded on, fought on with great resilience. That helps me put things in perspective.

DEFINITION OF FILM

Oh, gosh! I'm so not into these things! That is so not me to define things. I'll just do it, but I won't define it. I'll complete it, I'll shoot it, I'll let others experience it the way I experienced it. I'll show it and let them feel it. In pictures.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

It was a simple question, a fairly common one at that, too. It's just that he was the first to ask me that question. It was Alexis Tioseco who asked me, "Why do you make films?" He wanted me to write an essay about it but I don't like writing, so I never wrote that essay.

But I've always thought of Alexis' question, and I'm often asked it during Q&A's when I screen my films.

I make films because of the need for social justice, because filmmaking is how I am able to make a difference in the struggles of the poor. It defines my life choices—the kind of films I make, the topics I choose, the characters I pick, the films that inspire me, the filmmakers and people that inspire me.

OPEN TO MYSTERY

You have to have that sensitivity to the stirrings of what's inside, and sometimes, to be open to mystery. Why am I so moved by this? Why is it that when I see certain characters and capture them at a particular moment, I feel so moved? Sometimes I'm even more affected when I see it in the final edited version compared to while I was actually talking

to them. I know it sounds strange but it happens to me sometimes.

Maybe film has a way of encapsulating things or a reality in a time frame where you see and experience things differently.

FOLLOW YOUR INSTINCTS

In *Minsan Lang Sila Bata*, I shot kids carrying bags of cement, and then we showed the film to their mothers in Dipolog. According to the community organizers there, two mothers cried while watching the film. I was surprised because they see their children work every day, carrying hundreds of heavy cement bags and getting body pains. Yet it was only after watching my film that they cried for their children? Or I don't know why I got goosebumps when Pen started singing in *Riles*, but I'm glad I kept rolling. You go where your instincts lead you. If you can't articulate in the beginning, that's okay, as long as you follow it.

SACRIFICE

I personally believe in making sacrifices. The past two years, I hardly earned anything because I chose to follow the stories of farmers that was very compelling, but had no funding. There are a lot of worries attached to it. How do you make a film with no budget, how are you going to pay the editor?

Eventually, hopefully, we'll be able to make films even without grants. It's a challenge but these challenges really stretch you. If a story is so important to you, then do it! Just film it while it's happening. It's good to have the courage to follow your heart because you never know where that takes you.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1991** *Masakit Sa Mata (Eyesore)*
- 1993** *Dapithapon Sa Tambakan (Twilight In Smokey Mountain)*
- 1996** *Minsan Lang Sila Bata (Children Only Once)*
- 1999** *Mula Pabrika Hanggang Fukuoka (From Factory To Fukuoka)*
- 2001** *Salome*
- 2003** *Riles (Life On The Tracks)*
- 2005** *Bunso (The Youngest)*
- 2009** *Lupang Hinarang (Hindered Land) (work in progress)*



Mes De Guzman

Although he is more popular now as a filmmaker, Mes De Guzman started first as a writer. He placed third in the Palanca Awards for his teleplay *Karatula (Signage)* in 1993; and won both first and third prizes for *Plebo (Plebian)* and *Ang Lalaki Sa Bubong (Man On The Roof)* in 1995. His collection of short stories, *Barriotic Punk: Mga Kuwento sa Baryo at Kanto (Stories From The Barrio And The Street Corner)*, is published in 2002 by the UP Press. As the title suggests, the stories are musings on life in small towns, back when people still listen to music in vinyl and watch movies in Betamax—those seemingly carefree years between the 70s and the 80s—that are described so well his characters float in description. De Guzman's writing is light and sincere, but never lacking in depth. His first novel, *Rancho Dyanggo*, won the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) Grand Prize in 2004.

In film, on the other hand, De Guzman received acclaim after winning the Ishmael Bernal Award for Young Cinema for *Batang Trapo (Rags)* in 2001. It became his door to international festivals, and his preparation to helm full-length features. He made two films in 2005: *Diliman (Darkening)*, which depicts the frustrations of a writer, and is somewhat

autobiographical; and *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong (The Road To Kalimugtong)*, about two kids who walk miles just to go to their school in Benguet. *Kalimugtong* is a touching work, a view of life in the poor yet cheerful countryside that reveals De Guzman's sharp eye for the mundane, criticizing bureaucracy without clamor, showing poorness without dramatizing it. With support from the Hubert Bals Fund of the International Film Festival Rotterdam, he went back to the province and made *Balibayan Box* in 2007.

His films don't get much run in local theaters except during festivals, and even in these rare occasions the screenings are not well attended. But the very few of this audience, more importantly than anything else, remember such experience. De Guzman's affinity is more with the province, as he takes the time to show his films there—the audience to whom his films are really made for. Now happily married and residing in Nueva Vizcaya, here in Manila he is sorely missed. (*Chard Bolisay*)

BIG LEAP

I went through 35mm, then video, analog, then digital. This digital revolution that we have right now is, to me, such a big leap primarily because it's very accessible. I'm able to go with the flow because I know how to use the computer since I also do graphic design. So it was easy for me to learn Adobe Premiere, Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop and I was able to integrate those in making a film. Even writing a script is faster now because you do it on the computer. My experience with 35mm was kind of a bloody process. When I did *Batang Trapo (Rags)*, it took us eight months for a 15-minute film. And we spent around P400,000. I think I even shelled out P100,000. Then Mike De Leon, Cesar Hernando and Fuji Film helped out so I was able to finish it. Now, I think it's going to be hard to do it again because it really ate up a lot of money and a lot of time. When we entered the digital age, to me it was just like making a short story or a novel. Making films in this digital age is just like making a novel. You have an idea, shoot it. That's also my method. For example in *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong (The Road To Kalimugtong)*, that didn't have a script, but it did have a storyline of three pages.

FOUR-MAN CREW

There were literally only four of us who made the film: Albert, the Director of Photography; Bob, who is in-charge of sound; Noel, the all-around assistant; and me. So we shot it, and while we were shooting it, the dynamics were changing, probably because I was a writer and a director at the same time. So it can easily change along the way. It ended up that I didn't follow the outline. It became just some sort of a guide. In my head, I was adding up stuff, but wasn't putting it on script. If I followed the script, it would have come out differently. It was also a big help that I studied editing. The story was completed on the editing table, and it was made really easy because of the digital

tool. When I learned how to edit, I said, "Hey, it's really easy to edit, and it's really easy to make a film." It gave me some leeway. First of all, how much is a roll of film? In my experience with *Batang Trapo*, it was really expensive, and the method of production was very hard. When the digital revolution came, of course I didn't think of it as a shortcut to making films; but I felt it was more apt for me since I do work on the computer a lot. So it became really handy to me. It's like an iPhone that's very complete.

FILM IS JUST ANOTHER TRIP

Since I'm a writer too and I also make short stories and novels, I saw that films are the extension of my stories. What literature can't do, I'll do here. I'm not turning my back on literature; but to me, they actually complement each other. As an artist, you're able to gauge if this work is fit for prose, or film. Not to make it complex, but I do have varying likes. I like paintings, sculptures—in fact when I'm abroad, I really do go to galleries if I have the time. It gives a different kind of pleasure even if it's just a magazine with a nice layout, or a nice picture. It's like there are so many things I want to do. With filmmaking, everything's there. There's music, there's design, they're all combined right there. So it satisfies my appetite for creation. But it's still different with sculpture. Like right now, I'm working on something in Vizcaya, my home province. It's a huge sculpture made of stone. Much as I enjoy it, filmmaking is definitely just another portion of my life. It's not the totality of my life. For me, filmmaking is just another trip.

I CAN DO IT WITHOUT THEM

And with digital, while I'm not saying it absolutely made things easier, but learning the process certainly was easier. I've made five films since starting in 2000: *Batang Trapo* was shot on 35mm, the other four were digital—*Diliman (Darkening)*, *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong*, *Balikbayan Box*, *Ang Mundo Sa Panahon Ng Yelo (Ice Is The Earth)*, *Ang*

Mundo Sa Panahon Ng Bato (Stone Is The Earth). And if I have an idea right now, and I have a bit of money, I can do it right now. Unlike with film, you'll really have to look for a producer first, wait for a long time. I also experienced that. I had a script I was pitching to Star Cinema, went to meeting after meeting after meeting and it still did not materialize and it took so long. Recently, I was in talks with this producer, but, well, not that I snubbed him, but now I can say I don't need this. I can now do it without them. I just need a little money—sometimes, I don't even need money—and I'll be able to shoot. I have my own equipment anyway. Digital filmmaking is like first aid for a filmmaker.

THREE-IN-ONE COFFEE

Film is a complete form of art. It's like those three-in-one sachets of coffee. Of course, it lacks in certain aspects, but in totality, it's all there. Personally, I tend to tweak with design, composition, everything, even the costume. I really do get involved with the littlest details, so sometimes, it takes a while to shoot. I'm very particular with those things, probably because I'm a graphic designer. For example, for this film, I only want this particular color palette. I'm very conscious about those things. Dialogue, too, because I'm a writer too, and for me, every line has meaning. Sometimes there's no script, I just tell my actors what to say. Don't add, don't omit. Some actors are given leeway, of course, especially in my current film. Here in *Ang Mundo sa Panahon ng Yelo*, everything's a one-liner.

For example, Joe Gruta, the actor, was shocked. He just came from a shoot with Lav Diaz, and he was so scared. So I said, don't worry, these are all one-liners. He said, "Ah, really?" So I just told him the lines. He didn't even read them. So I think it's easier to experiment with digital. You have much more room to experiment. Technically though, it's still young. I just don't know how come it was not made accessible sooner. Like Betamax? Maybe it's because

the cameras were expensive. My take on that is that the past formats couldn't catch up with the computer. We definitely owe a lot to the computers. The cameras and the computers have this communication, synergy. Actually, the things you shot on Betamax, you can now fix it with Final Cut, Premiere. These prosumer cameras, these DVXs, they caught up with the software, with the hardware too, how it evolved, plus they've gotten cheap. If it weren't for these things, I probably wouldn't be a filmmaker now. I'd have done maybe one or two films. Or I'd have gone mainstream.

LANDSCAPE

The landscape is so different now. I used to have so many scripts, all stashed away. But now, all you need is an idea and you can do it even without a script. Now, if you want to play with words, just put it in a novel. But it also depends on the mood. So it's really a big deal. Plus, there's the lifestyle too. You go home to the province; you bring your whole studio with you: computer, camera, that's it. It's just one luggage away. Also there's the decentralization of art away from Manila. You know how they say that art can only be found here in Manila, no longer. There's a lot of art booming in Mindanao, in Visayas, so I thought why stay here in Manila when I can go to Vizcaya, since that's the topic of my film anyway.

100% HOME-GROWN

This latest film I'm doing now—*Ang Mundo Sa Panahon Ng Bato*—is actually very experimental. I utilized the locals there. I held an audition and I utilized neighbors—true Ibanag, Isinay, and Ilocanos. So I saw that not only was I getting to choose my actors, I was also able to help. For example, there's a farmer in my crew. We just taught him how to do sound, and it's already a big deal because now we have a home-grown sound man. Plus it's also heartwarming to see that your crew is 100 percent

Vizcayano. Even with the economy, we're able to help them. Then, they also understand the process of what you're doing, they do have cable TV there already, and they realize, "Ah, so this is how it's done. It's hard." They come to this realization because they see it over and over until they get sick of it. At least they get some knowledge about filmmaking. Sometimes, they wonder why they are in the cast, "Can we be actors when we're not good-looking?" You're breaking the conventions that way, that if you're not good-looking, you can't act. So from that, it's just pure talent you rely on. And it's actually good training, although of course, that's already been explored by other foreign directors. Not so much locally, though, so it's still a new approach to things. That's my dream—to have a crew that's one hundred percent from my location. I've actually kind of done it already with *Ang Mundo sa Panahon Ng Bato*. I'm from Vizcaya, my actors are from Vizcaya, only one percent are not from there. My DOP is from Manila, Albert Banzon.

THREE EARTHS

Ang Mundo sa Panahon ng Bato is part of the trilogy *Tres Mundos (The Earth Trilogy)*. The two other installments are *Ang Mundo Sa Panahon Ng Yelo*, and *Ang Mundo Sa Panahon Ng Bakal (Steel Is The Earth)*.

THE EARLY INDEPENDENTS

The term indie—independent—is I think, any approach different from the mainstream, shoestring budget, that's indie, like Vinterberg and Dogme, Tarantino and Rodriguez, among others. But we were already doing that in the Philippines. As far back as Manuel Conde, we were producing films independently. You had Chiquito producing his own films, and FPJ (Fernando Poe, Jr.), too. FPJ, well, his production outfit got bigger over time, but he started out small. Then, Imus Productions, a production company, they did *Nardong Putik (Mud Leonardo)* with Ramon Revilla, and they made a lot of money. There's also Kidlat Tahimik.

They weren't called independent then. We were there first. The thing with Filipinos, though, is that we always look to the West for approval. I don't really approve of that way of thinking.

AUTEUR = MULTITASKER

Indie for me is being able to do everything on your own, maybe with the help of one or two people. You multi-task. In the mainstream, you just direct, somebody else brings you coffee, whatever. You hear about so-called indies with foreign producers and big budgets. What's with that? Digital indie, for me, is something you do yourself: auteurist, your vision. You wrote it, you directed it, you edited it, you did the sound design, too. That's what I try to do. It brings out the auteur in me. Like Kidlat's films. Kidlat's almost a brand name. His films are unmistakably him. Anything less than that is like factory product. It could be that you designed it, but someone else wove it for you. I have a deeper respect for filmmakers who multitask. It's the true spirit of indie. Not to say you literally have to do everything by yourself. Writing at least, maybe editing. Music, probably.

FOLLOW YOUR OWN RHYTHM

It's really up to you. If you like it, if it makes you happy, that's what should matter. Sometimes you doubt your final product, and you question your intentions, but you'll overcome that. You'll learn to stop being conscious about it. That's the great thing about this. Also, same as with novels, you can re-write, re-do. Like in *Ice Is The Earth*—I thought up this scene I wanted to add. And I did. Half-day shoot. If I were shooting on film, that would be difficult, what with the costs, the scheduling. Some digital filmmakers have elaborate set-ups, very mainstream, so it's not as easy. They cast actors. I'm open to casting actors but scheduling could be a potential setback in that it might end up dictating me. That's why I prefer non-actors, as long as they fit the role. It works better. *Kalimugtong*



Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong (The Road to Kalimugtong)

wouldn't work if I cast a professional actor in it. It's not an issue of format, it's more conceptual. The format is immaterial, as long as the concept is tight. One of my brothers, Rene, is a painter. He saw one of my graphic works and asked me how long it took me to do it. An hour, I said, using Photoshop, Illustrator—it looks just like a painting; it may feel different but the impact is the same. My brother's now using Photoshop as well—Illustrator, Flash. He's learning about the technology. It's very easy to get engaged. Of course, what you say with it is still what matters. But it's very exciting for me. I'd like to enroll in a few special effects classes. Follow your own rhythm, and do what you want to do.

VARIETY SHOW CULTURE

Are my ideas Pinoy? It's difficult to say because of how small the world has become with Facebook, with Friendster, and you can't deny the effects, the influences of other countries. We're products of colonialism and we're not even halfway to building our own identity, like Japan or Korea, like South America, then you suddenly have a surge of new influences. And we haven't really gotten over the way we look up at everything American, and in film, everything Hollywood. The superiority of the West, we still uphold that. I don't know. But we do. Our mainstream films, our TV are patterned after the Hollywood model. There's something there, but I don't think it has evolved fast enough, or as it should, which should be into something new, something unique to us. That's how I see it at least. It's tough to define what Pinoy is. It's not about someone wearing a loincloth but to some parts of the world, that's what Pinoy is: wearing a loincloth. I met this Brit once who thought we didn't have any mall, and that we traveled around by wooden boats. I have a hard time defining it and at some point, I'm not that interested in defining it. You look at our retrospectives and it's—well—I'm thinking that's what makes us unique maybe. We have a little of everything.

Just like chopsuey. Like a variety show. We love variety shows. And you could say that's a reflection of our culture. And that it's not our problem anymore. Just make films.

EVERYTHING STARTS WITH WRITING

It starts with writing, for me. Everything starts with writing. I like short stories. I read a lot, too: Rogelio Sikat, Edgardo Reyes, Carlos Bulosan, Jun Cruz Reyes, *Agos Sa Disyerto (Desert Wave)*. This was in high school. Literature was a huge influence. It informs my filmmaking in a major way. At the same time, I also encountered the works of Kidlat Tahimik. Not to mention Edward Pincus' *Guide to Filmmaking*. My classmates in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya thought I was weird for reading this. I went to the University of the Philippines because I wanted to be a writer. But I also went to Mowelfund. I enrolled in this scholarship. I made my first film in analog, *Awit Ng Lilik (Song Of The Sickle)* when I was 17. It was a four to five minute short about the Mendiola Massacre, but I experienced how hard it was. It got honorable mention at the CCP (Cultural Center of the Philippines), but after that, I put some distance between myself and filmmaking, mainly because it was difficult to do it and try and write, too. And it was expensive. I was actively writing: film criticism, book reviews. I bought books with the money I earned from doing these.

Batang Trapo was an idea I had when I was teaching in Philippine Science High School. There wasn't any digital cinema then. But Cesar Hernando suggested I asked Fujii to pay me in film stock for the posters and brochures I used to make for the company. I think we got 15 rolls or more. Editing was the next hurdle and thanks to Cesar again, Mike de Leon provided us with an editing room. It took us a month to shoot, because of the rains. And I had to borrow money from people just so I could finish it. Then endless nights of editing followed. But it paid off. *Batang Trapo* was my passport internationally. I went to Cannes

because of it, even earned a little money—not much, around P60,000. But the French government took care of everything. *Diliman* was where I first learned to edit. *Kalimugtong* was the first film I made without a script. I posted that in a week because of the deadline for Cinemania—editing and sound design. My wife sat beside me and spoonfed me dinner. I didn't sleep for a week. And it had the same effect as *Batang Trapo*: brought me abroad, earned some money. It toured the country and is still being shown locally and internationally. It was recently in Pusan. I was able to buy a camera and projectors because of it. It made me realize that it could be done: producing, directing, even distributing. Digital made it all possible.

BRIGHT FUTURE

The future is bright if you look at it holistically. It's really up to us how we use the technology. I don't really need to go to Manila anymore. My family is in the province. There's Internet access here. The standard of living is lower. I can make my films, my art here. I can even earn from it. And it's fun.

FROM MILLS & BOON TO JACO VAN DORMAEL

I used to read those Alfred Hitchcock short story collections. I got that from my mother. She also had a lot of Mills & Boon books. When I was bored, I'd go read them. Also, comics for rent. I remember reading *Agos Sa Disyerto*, and being blown away. I used to think all good literature was in English. Then I read this and realized that I was wrong. That inspired me to write in Tagalog. I've been writing since high school. But short stories are my favorite form. Then we got a TV and I started watching these foreign films. There was this film on TV, *Away From Home*, a Depression-era B melodrama. I think my curiosity for filmmaking started here.

It was only in Mowelfund, though, that I saw all the local classics—the Brockas, the Bernals, and also the Truffauts and Kurosawas. I liked *Seven Samurai*. Cesar Hernandez had a huge collection of local films. And that's how I saw Mike De Leon's work. Then I saw *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko Ng Liwanag* (*Manila: In The Claws Of Neon*). There were a lot of other films, foreign films—Jaco Van Dormael's *Toto the Hero*, Roy Andersson's *Songs From The Second Floor*, Kim Ki Duk's *The Isle*.

I also like Romy Suzara. I enjoyed watching all these absurd pop comedies—Tito, Vic, & Joey, Chiquito, Dolphy. That's cinema, too.

ALMOST LIKE MAGIC

Kalimugtong is unforgettable. We shot it in a week on a very small budget, and we shot it in Benguet so the weather was wonderful and we would wake up in the morning, drink our coffee, have no real game plan—we'd just shoot. And it was almost like magic. No pressure, no headache. And when we went to Venezuela with the film, the foreign filmmakers couldn't believe it. I'd like to do something like that again in exactly the way we did it.

AMERICA'S IN THE HEART

I'd like to make a film out of Carlos Bulosan's *America's In The Heart*. I read that as a kid. And he's also a Northerner like me. And it's about family. A lot of my work has to do with family.

THE WORLD IS STILL BEAUTIFUL

There's this novel by Lazaro Francisco called *Maganda Pa Ang Daigdig* (*The World Is Still Beautiful*) and there's this line there, "The world is still beautiful." The existence of digital cinema is a positive thing. Who can tell what happens next but then who cares? We're very lucky to live in a time like this. The future can only get brighter. The world can only get more beautiful.

FILMOGRAPHY

2001 *Batang Trapo (Rags)*

2005 *Diliman (Darkening)*

2006 *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong*
(The Road to Kalimugtong)

2008 *Balikbayan Box*

2010 *Ang Mundo sa Panahon ng Yelo (Ice Is The Earth)*
Ang Mundo sa Panahon ng Bato (Stone Is The Earth)



Lav Diaz

Talk to Lav Diaz and you find he's a bottomless passion pit of story. To paraphrase one of his song titles, his is a life lived. Given that, theoretically, stories are a filmmaker's arsenal and given that his cinema is a staunchly narrative one, he's bursting with grist to feed the mill. His work may not be overtly biographical but he's been feeding that mill with fervor, basking in the creative emancipation brokered by his double-gauge post-Regal independently-produced fiery baptisms, *Batang West Side* (*West Side Avenue*, 2001) and *Ebolusyon Ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (*Evolution Of A Filipino Family*, 2004). The latter took more than a decade to finish. He takes faster to finish a film these days. His last four as of this writing—*Heremias*, *Death In The Land Of Encantos*, *Melancholia* and the Jeonju-commissioned short *Butterflies Have No Memories*—are only the ones that have been shown, but a handful more gestate in varying states of completeness, even as he preps to shoot new ones.

There are still people who mill outside the peripheries of his work, fixating on the length, daunted. Lav would prefer, of course, that they get over it. On one hand, it's reductive to pin his aesthetic down on how long his films run. On the

other, the fixation tends to obscure the more determined qualities of his work—the clairvoyance of knowing exactly where to put the camera, the emotional vigor, the gravities of lives, the unfathomable heartbreak. Lav is, in many ways, a classical filmmaker, and ostensibly a storyteller. And his cinema, contrary to rumor and regardless of running time, is narratively penetrable, dramatically cathartic. Like any good story should be. (*Dodo Dayao*)

DIGITAL LETS YOU FULFILL YOUR AESTHETIC VISION

Digital liberated my cinema. I'm free. Cinema is finally ours. The artist owns the medium now. This emancipation shall push cinema to greater heights. This emancipation shall push culture to greater heights.

CINEMA IS A VERY POWERFUL MEDIUM

Cinema is not just the most modern medium. It is arguably the most powerful. Not to say that painting, music, literature, architecture, theater and dance are lesser art forms; but cinema, in the realm of experience and interaction, easily and subliminally spreads consciousness, which is the essential dialectics of cultural growth. There is immediacy and transcendence, even urgency. You watch a Khazakstan film, and you're immediately transported to Khazakstan. You see this whole new culture. You are able to experience new cultures, new worlds, perspectives. Watch Tarkovsky or Bresson or Antonioni and you can have a sense that you are being transported to different realms.

I am more aesthetically fulfilled in cinema.

ALL MY WORKS TELL ONE STORY: THE PINOY STRUGGLE, HUMANITY'S STRUGGLE

The Filipino struggle, the Philippine culture is a big inspiration to my works. That's what I represent. I'm just one of those who use the medium to tell a story about the struggles of the Filipino. But the Filipino struggle is very universal because it is very much a part of humanity's story.

Batang West Side (West Side Avenue) tackled the Filipino diaspora in America, a diaspora that pictures a culture of dysfunction. You can see it there. In *Ebolusyon (Evolution Of A Filipino Family)*, you can see the 17 years of martial law. The discourse focuses on why that epoch, that period, should never be forgotten. That's the darkest part of our

history. One Filipino, the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, destroyed our whole psyche. Marcos institutionalized the culture of corruption and neglect, and megalomania. And you can see it now with the present system, with Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's megalomania, neglect and corruption. It has become a culture—being thick-faced in politics. *Ebolusyon* is an examination of a very dark period of our history. We have to confront the past if we want to move forward as a nation. With *Heremias*, you can see the individual struggle of a Filipino who has no era, no name, no place, but it's the Philippines. There's the individual character that just keeps walking, the whole country as a backdrop of the cross he is carrying. With *Death in the Land of Encantos*, it's an artist defining his role in the nation. He left for seven years because he can no longer take the sadness, the pain, the poverty, the struggle of his nation. But when he left, that's when he saw clearly its true state. His death is just a metaphor, and his schizophrenia-paranoia is just a characterization of the true state of the country. The Filipinos have schizophrenia-paranoia. We have no memory. We forget so easily. We have a culture of denial. The backdrop of this whole devastation is represented by the beautiful and majestic Mayon Volcano. That's the paradox of the Filipino, the Philippines. It's very beautiful, but we neglect it. And it destroys us, this neglect. *Melancholia* deals with the void, the deep sorrow of the country. I created characters and stories about the *desaparecidos*, but it's all about the void that we just can't fill, the sorrow of the Filipino that we can't cure. *Walang Alaala ang Mga Paruparo (Butterflies Have No Memories)*, the *Jeonju Digital Project* in South Korea, is the same. The discourse is about neglect and post-colonial issues, post-multinational corporation discourse. We want to go back, we just want to go back to that superficial prosperity that the colonial powers gave us. The yearning to have the Americans back, or the mining companies back, or the multinational companies back, is just because of a lack of

understanding and awareness of the political and economic nature of their presence here; that behind the façade of prosperity, we destroy our environment and, ultimately, we destroy our own psyche.

All my films are just essentially one film combined, all about humanity's struggle, all about the search for truth and meaning.

DEPRIVATION LIT UP THE FIRE IN ME

I started in Mowelfund doing shorts. But actually, I made just two obscure shorts, because I'm poor. Those who were able to shoot then were the rich students/ workshopers who could afford to buy the film rolls. That time, it was just the Super8 and 16mm, so I really couldn't afford it. Then, filmmaking was just all dreams. The shorts we made weren't fulfilled because we didn't have the budget, and we were competing for this lone, broken Steenbeck, or this 16mm camera, also broken, some Super8 cameras. They were just exercises. It's all dreams, which is really good because your fears, the dearth, your shortcomings all create something in you—a fire, a push. You keep thinking, "*Just give us the chance and we're going to do it!*" And that's what happened with independent cinema now. It's this collective dysfunction in our psyche that we're now filling up. That's the real effect right there.

This deluge of works we have right now, they're not here just because of the arrival of digital technology. It answers the issue of deprivation that was harbored in the Filipinos before. Now that we own the brush, come on, fuck you. We can now fuck the world. Freedom is fundamental.

By fate, I was given this chance to go to the US. There, in New York, I saw that I can do cinema again. So I shot and shot. I did a docu on 16mm. I just kept shooting. I was moonlighting, borrowing equipment shamelessly, doing

odd jobs, just so I could buy rolls. When I came back, while I was finishing *Ebolusyon*, Regal Films invited me. I was able to make four films there, although the films were highly compromised. I still love my works there, though. That period helped define my creative space, and taught me what needs to be done: that freedom of the artist is most imperative. So when I was given the chance with *Batang West Side*, I did it. This was the fulfillment of my aesthetics, of free cinema, a cinema that is not just for profit. I want to make films on my own terms, and I want the so-called audience to embrace my films on my own terms. No more fences, fuck you, everything on my own terms. From the creative process to the so-called audience, all on my terms, I don't have to please and appease anybody but me. If we want Philippine Cinema to surge ahead, that's all we have to do—no compromise. If you want to be part of a cultural revolution, don't compromise, please. The greatest enemy of art and life is compromise.

CINEMA CAN ONLY CONTINUE TO GROW MORE POWERFUL

Cinema is still very young, only 100 years old. Digital came along and now, new routes and possibilities. This shows that the horizon of cinema is very wide, that's there's still so much more to explore and you don't know what's really going to happen. The "death of cinema" as they keep saying ad infinitum is just not true. There are many incarnations of cinema happening right now. I'd call it incarnations because it now has a lot of mien, a lot of colors, everything, the palette, the canvass, they change every time, so diverse, wherever you look. Now there are great new cinemas in Mexico, in Iran, in Romania, in Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, and you can connect cultures, the past and the present and the future. The discourse is more earnest and profound now.

Cinema will become even more powerful. Cinema is one that readily embraces technology. This easy fusion makes the issue of changes in perspectives or introduction of new perspectives and re-introduction of perspectives quite easy, too. And naturally the issue of growth follows. Here you will look at cinema as a really great tool for cultural advancement. Subliminally, because of the great discourse in cultures that cinema is offering, cinema is pursuing its unwritten role as one of the greatest cultural tools of humanity.

As a human being and an artist, I realize, understand, and accept that life will always fail us. This is truth. Humanity needs answers. And I believe cinema is one venue or realm where I can find answers, solace and discourse. I need to believe in this so that I can continue believing in cinema and life and my worth. Mathematics or science seeks proof for every conjecture. But cinema's purpose is not to seek proof but to understand life more. Bazin asked the question, "What is cinema?" The answer is that it can be anything, the possibilities are limitless. The horizon remains vast and open.

And so we've come to the biggest question: "Can cinema offer philosophical truths?"

Tarkovsky said we can only put cinema as poetry because the serious filmmaker is a poet, but cinema keeps evolving especially in its discourse on aesthetics. Cinema as we know it now offers an earnest discourse on truth, beauty, knowledge, and wisdom. The metaphysical discourse in Tarkovsky's monumental works keeps begging for answers on the very first fundamental philosophical query, "What is the meaning of life?" This I believe—21st century cinema will become the arena of the epoch's next Kant, Sartre, Aristotle, and Socrates. Philosophy is in the realm of cinema now.

THE COTABATO WEEKEND FILM SCHOOL

As a kid, I remember *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* being shown repetitively, as a side bar or a front act for the main show. It was always showing in one of those double-billed movie houses in Tacurong, Cotabato. The movie house was called French Theater. From childhood to high school, they'd always show that film as part of the double-bill. Of course, as an innocent kid, you get pissed because you keep seeing this same film. The walls of the theater were plastered with large photos of that film. There was one wall all covered eternally with the face of the great Klaus Kinski, his eyes wide open, and he was wearing this helmet. I didn't want to look at him then, he looked crazy, terrifying. But when I got older and developed a keen interest in cinema, I realized that the film is a great work. The work was visionary. The struggle, the madness of the work, the character Aguirre was pure poetry. I wanted to be like him. I suddenly wanted to cross a ship in the mountains as well; that kind of madness. After a while, you'll also dream about making something like that. The influence is very strong, symbolically, metaphorically and everything. It really stayed in my psyche. And of course, we were also battered with Fernando Poe films, and Dolphy, everything in Pinoy cinema. That was about eight movies a week, every weekend with my father. Come high school, we of course went along our own ways. Then, in college, I saw *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko Ng Liwanag* (*Manila: In The Claws Of Neon*), and it was a landmark of cinema for me. That was my real awakening. I was in first year college in Ateneo de Manila at that time. By then, you already had an idea of what was going on in the country. You see the struggle of the Filipino under Marcos' martial law. That was also the moment I realized the importance of the creator of cinema. I researched. Who the fuck was Lino Brocka? I started thinking not just about the film. I also wanted to enter the psyche of the one who created it. Who is this person? I saw that he was a serious



Melancholia

artist, a serious Filipino who wanted to do something for cinema and for the country. I got to know the persona, and I admired Lino. And although he did a lot of very commercial melodramas, you still watch the works because he really has become one of your heroes. Sometimes, you'll question why he did these bad films.

Of course, there was Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, for lack of films to view in Mowelfund back then. That was the one that showed me that you can structure your storytelling in very different ways. *Rashomon* is a huge influence, and it affected my creation of *Batang West Side*. The search for truth can start anywhere. That film helped me liberate myself on the issue of form and content.

There were films that were not as good, but they remain important to me because they are still in my head. Like *Galo Gimbal* starring Joseph Estrada and Johnny Montiero. They were the only characters in the film. Looking back, it was a film about an argument between an ex-convict and Satan. They were having a great discourse on good and evil, and it was in high contrast black and white. The images really stayed in my mind. I'm looking for a copy, but I don't think there's one anymore. I don't even know who the director was. There's also the Fernando Poe film, *Matimbang Ang Dugo Sa Tubig (Blood Is Thicker Than Water)*. It was about two brothers separated by war. I loved this one particular scene: there's news that the Japanese are coming, and the people were in panic and fleeing this little village. Only one truck was available, so there was a mad scramble to get on it. When the truck ran, the young Andy Poe was left behind, and the siblings were separated. That scene was unforgettable, harrowing, heartbreaking. That scene truly defined the horrors of war. I want to recreate it. How do you shoot the poignancy of that scene? These films still haunt me. I want to see them again.

Eventually, in the 90s, when I was in the US, I discovered some masters of cinema, the French New Wave, the Russians, the Italians, Antonioni, Tarkovsky, Bresson. I studied them. I watched their films and I read books about them.

CREATIVE CONTROL

I used to need a script. I still need a script. It's just that my process has changed and evolved. With *Ebolusyon*, although we still had a script, when we go to the locations and I know they're appropriate for the characters of the story, then and there, I would write a scenario. Like, when we go to a place, for example in Marinduque (with *Walang Alaala Ang Mga Paruparo*), when I got there, we went around doing a location hunt. That night, I wrote the script and we were shooting the following day. That's how it went: script at night, shoot in the morning. *Heremias Book 1* really had a script. *Batang West Side* had a script, too, but I changed a lot of things. A week before principal photography started, I revised the whole script. The one that won in Palanca, I revised it. With the new ones like *Heremias Book 2*, which is still unfinished, *Encantos*, *Melancholia*, up to *Butterflies Have No Memories*, that was the process I followed. We go to a location, I write the script at night, shoot the next day. Or maybe, if I'm inspired, I can write a few more pages so we could shoot for two, three days. It's important now that I see the location. Somehow, the locations make it easier for me to create the story and the characters. Of course, before we shoot, I give the script to the actors and the staff. We discuss and prepare. If they have questions, they have to be answered then and there so that come shooting day, everything is ready. So the process is very clear. Of course, I also do the camera work. We only have a few people working with us now, unlike in the old set-up. When I did the four studio works, there were about 50 to 60 people on the set—really crazy. You're shooting this simple scene, but there's this fiesta around you; so many people,

people were pretending to be moving but doing nothing; a flirty starlet in tight shorts—unbelievable, very distracting. Now, I just need four, five people when I shoot. These would be the key people. You get a production manager to arrange all that you need, a production designer, an electrician, soundman, that's it. Sometimes, I shoot alone. And I edit my films. There is creative control.

I WANT TO WATCH "THE MIRROR" OVER AND OVER AGAIN; I CAN'T BEAR TO WATCH "ENCANTOS"

I love Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* because it's one great paradigm of a true, great cinema, just like most of his works. It is aesthetically fulfilled. *The Mirror* has a kind of canvass that every time you look at it, there's something new to see. It's got that magic, and that's great cinema. You always discover something new, it's as if I always have this new understanding of life. How come I can watch this film over and over again? It's akin to a favorite song, *The Mirror* inspires me. Every time I see it, it feels like I want to go out in the streets and shoot a film. That's the effect. This film tells me always that I am a filmmaker.

Death In The Land Of Encantos is very personal to me. It's the life and death of the artist. It's not just a political film, albeit politics strongly resounds in that film, but it is very much about the struggle of the artist. The discourse is of the artist trying to define himself and find meaning, his role in society, his own humanity and his own usefulness. I was heavily affected by the devastation that happened in that area—super typhoon Reming's devastation of Bicol in 2006. I feel so connected with the people there. I personally knew a lot of them. Some are close friends. I felt a deep connection with those who died because I shot two films in the area before the destruction. We mingled with them, had coffee with them, passed by them, saw them, bought some stuff in there little stores, and then we were shooting right over their dead bodies. It was harrowing and surreal. I see myself right there in *Death In The Land Of Encantos*.

And it's a cinema that I find hard to watch because I break down. I can probably just peek at some scenes, then, I'll leave because I cannot stand it. That's my cinema that I find so hard to watch. The emotional attachment is just so great. There is unbearable loss.

As for some favorite scenes in my films, I really like this discourse on shabu (crystal meth) in *Batang West Side*. I enjoyed that scene. It defines not just the madness and chaos of our nation, but also of my own madness, of the creator, this fraud artist Lav Diaz. Also, that long scene in *Encantos*, the long discourse between Hamin and Teodoro. If you intellectualize the whole story, it's actually just one character. There's no Teodoro, no Catalina, no Hamin, it's just the artist conducting self-discourse and self-critique and going toward this journey of madness and destruction. The so-called characters and the desolate landscape are mere points and arcs of the great debate inside the psyche and persona of the artist. *Encantos* is the artist's fear, his struggles within and without, his truths, his dreams, too.

THE EYE OF THE FUTURE

Cinema is the lens where we can create and recreate our world, a mirror where we can see our world, our dreams; where abstraction can become reality; there is the image. Cinema is the eye of the past, present and the future. It will be the eye of the future because we can still recreate our past through cinema. We will remember the world because of cinema. We can recreate our memories because of cinema. We can even change our memories because of cinema.

THE INDIE PHENOMENON AND THE GREAT CULTURAL DEBACLE

The independent scene in the Philippines is a cultural phenomenon. It changed cinema as we know it here. Suddenly, from what used to be an artistically and aesthetically barren cinema landscape, there's now this deluge of healthy and progressive artistic activity. Credit

that to digital. Digital leveled the field. The very feudal set-up of making movies vanished.

But we are suffering from a great cultural debacle. The masses remain ignorant, they remain in a limbo, and they remain detached from aesthetic discourse, besides the fact that the status quo remains unsympathetic to their plight. And besides being the supposed beneficiaries of progressive cultural discourse, they must be educated on the issue of struggle. And a big part of that education is that they must also struggle to understand the creator, the artist. Here the role of the academe and critics is imperative.

THE INDUSTRY SYNDROME

A big issue is how Filipinos look at Philippine cinema. They are still very much afflicted with The Industry Syndrome. Until today, people still refer to cinema as “Ang Industriya” (The Industry). Everything about cinema is a part of the industry. Movie writers, movie stars, and even a lot of film directors and film workers call filmmaking as the industry. Filmmaking is just entertainment and business. It’s an industry. A film is great if it makes money. And so, for the last one hundred years of cinema here, the masses were fed with the most commercial works stunting their understanding of the arts, of society, of life.

DESTROY IGNORANCE, DESTROY APATHY

The people don’t know how powerful the cultural effect of cinema is. It can be a cultural tool to educate our masses. Look at life from a higher level of understanding. That perspective is what the masses lost.

In a country like the Philippines, the filmmaker must be part of that struggle, the destruction of ignorance of the masses. If we are going to use the word revolution, that’s it, a real destruction of something very feudal and fascist in our culture. If you want to call the independent

movement a revolution, then let’s destroy this level of ignorance. Let’s elevate the perspective of our society. Destroy ignorance, destroy apathy. That could be the ideological line of the the Philippine New Wave.

WHY ARE YOUR FILMS SO LONG?

I’m free. Cinema must be free. Art must be free. I understand freedom. It could be the most essential truth of man’s existence. And I do understand that that truth is very broad and can be very abstract. But I must define my works and my existence in that realm. This is a very short life and we can only contribute little. I want to be part of the struggle to emancipate humanity. In my own humble way, I can only offer my cinema. My cinema is free.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1998** *Serafin Geronimo: Kriminal Ng Barrio Concepcion*
(*Serafin Geronimo: Criminal Of Barrio Concepcion*)
- 1999** *Burger Boys*
Hubad Sa Ilalim Ng Buwan (Naked Under The Moon)
- 2002** *Hesus Rebolusyonaryo (Hesus The Revolutionary)*
Batang West Side (West Side Avenue)
- 2004** *Ebolusyon Ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*
(*Evolution Of A Filipino Family*)
- 2006** *Heremias (Unang Aklat: Ang Alamat Ng Prinsesang Bayawak)*
(*Heremias (Book One: The Legend Of The Lizard Princess)*)
- 2007** *Kagadanan Sa Banwaan Ning Mga Encantos*
(*Death In The Land Of Encantos*)
- 2008** *Melancholia*
- 2009** *Walang Alaala Ang Mga Paruparo*
(*Butterflies Have No Memories*)



Rico Maria Ilarde

Rico Ilarde seems to operate on the belief that horror, like all pulp forms, can be more than a manic popcorn thrill, that it can be, in fact, a genuine mode of expression, a platform for dialectics even. Not that he's above losing homicidal grotesqueries so they can run amok and do all sorts of creepy scary bloody shit. His is a pulpy, arcane bestiary—quarry zombies, and mud honeys, and water devils, and genetic tinkering gone wrong, ugly wrong.

Horror being the pop cinema staple that it is, you'd think Rico would be a shoo-in for the mainstream A-list. But his filmography is slim. Weaned as he was on a grim and chiseled strand of 70s American genre cinema, Rico is hardcore old school and doggedly unfashionable—rigor supersedes flash, ambience trumps shock, prosthetics over CGI. Pathos and ruefulness and empathy tend to permeate his work, as well as characters with a little more blood in their pulse. Not things that go well with popcorn. But he's bullheaded, and even the films he made during his exhausting but productive tenure in the belly of the beast that was/is Regal—*El Kapitan: Dugo Ng Birhen* (*El Kapitan: Blood Of The Virgin*), and *Babaeng Putik* (*Woman Of Mud*)—refused to adhere to the house style and got away

with it for the most part. It's with his last two features, though, *Sa Ilalim Ng Cogon* (*Beneath The Cogon*) and *Altar*—both shot digitally, and untethered from studio tendrils and compromise, and, indeed, with his very first, 1998's self-produced *Z Man*, that his unmistakable auteurist imprint would bear out his persistence of vision. Smells like indie spirit, yeah. (*Dodo Dayao*)

FILMMAKING IS BRUTAL, DIGITAL IS ACCESSIBLE

My first digital film is, technically, *Sa Ilalim ng Cogon* (*Beneath the Cogon*). The reason I got inspired to pursue digital films was, basically, because I had been jobless for some time. I had done two mainstream films for Regal, the first of which was *El Kapitan: Dugo ng Birhen* (*El Kapitan: Blood of the Virgin*), the one with Monsour del Rosario and Klaudia Koronel. That made money back in '99, so Mother Lily (of Regal Films) gave me another shot at making a film soon after. She gave me a bit more leeway, so that ended up as *Ang Babaeng Putik* (*Woman of Mud*). After that experience—and you know how the mainstream industry works—each studio has its own idiosyncrasies, in this case, Regal Films. I was just really exhausted, and also I wasn't too happy with the way the movie was released. In a way, maybe it wasn't completely their fault, because during that time Klaudia Koronel's films came out one after the other. We were the fourth release in a row so it really hurt the box office. I was totally worn out from the experience, after basically pouring my heart and soul into the film, plus, add the fact that *El Kapitan* and *Putik* happened in quick succession. I stopped attending meetings with Mother 'cause I felt burnt-out. She sort of got tired waiting for me and moved on, so I was kind of jobless for a time—close to two years, in fact. So here I was, trying to pitch to other producers, trying to get something off the ground, nothing was happening. Nothing.

People were talking about digital films, about the accessibility and the availability of digital technology. If you knew how to use it properly, they were saying, it could look film-like. During that time, I had seen a couple of Khavn's films and Jon Red's, too. I saw *Astigmatism* and these other films that I can't recall now. You know how brutal filmmaking is; there are phases in your life that you'd rather forget or not think about. It gets buried in the recesses of your mind. We (my partner Mammu Chua and

I) decided that if we could piece the money together, maybe we could do a film not encumbered by what a studio was dictating. Because even if you say that Mother Lily gave me more freedom with *Babaeng Putik*, it was still not complete freedom—far from it. I said, if we could come up with the money, then we'd do it. What initially instigated it was my first financier, Roger Garcia. He's a Chinese-American citizen who was educated in England and had a wide experience with filmmaking that included programming film festivals, producing, writing—a real seasoned industry guy. He said that he would plunk down an X amount of money for the film so that inspired me. And then by some weird stroke of fate, the friend of my older brother Nilo was interested in the venture as well, and mentioned he was also willing to invest some money in our film.

In indie films, there are varying schools of thought. I'm from the line of thinking that if you have a good location, that's already 30 percent of your film—especially if you have a very strong location. So that's how I structured my story-line basically. I had access to this abandoned subdivision that was all cogon grass, and there was this clubhouse that, I felt if we structured it in a way that the action was mostly in there, maybe the story could spring solely from that location. I then wrote this story about an ex-soldier who was left by his wife, and it became his personal mission to find out why.

Basically, when I do these films, I don't really think they're strange. First, I allow myself to daydream about it. I get inspired to write my plots by plugging into the key images of my daydreaming and also, to some degree, into my old film influences. But it really is not a conscious decision on my part to tell myself that I'm going to mix genres and make something weird. That's just the way they turn out. Like *Babaeng Putik*, there's this hot, sexy lady who comes

out from a giant fruit. Some people found it too freaky. Mother said, "What the hell is that?!" But in my head, it's not. So anyway, that's how *Cogon* turned out. It's a thriller at its core, but there's a love story mixed into it, and includes a heist as well, and some kung-fu. But basically, it's been labeled as a horror thriller. If I were to classify it, it would be a noir-ish, horror-thriller.

ON DIGITAL CINEMA

Digital is such a broad format now. In the old days, in its infancy, it was associated with indie films. But now, a lot of TV shows in the US are shot on HD. Some, even on HDV. Originally, it used to be for guerrilla filmmaking but now everybody's using it, so many people have gotten into the technology—like the Oakley people made the Red Camera, Panavision created the Genesis, Arri has its own. It's become such a broad format people shouldn't generalize about it because you might actually sound foolish. There are already many formats, many different capabilities.

SEEING THROUGH CHARACTERS

Someone said film is the only art wherein you can show both the character and what the character is seeing, as opposed to photography or painting, or music. Since it's the only medium wherein you can do that, it's the perfect tool for storytelling. I got into filmmaking because I saw lots of movies growing up. My dad used to take me to the latest Clint Eastwood films, Charles Bronson films, Bruce Lee films, disaster films like *Earthquake* and *Airport* and *Towering Inferno*. A lot of them were pretty bad but that's what got me interested in cinema. And I also got influenced by my eldest brother Dino, who's a pilot now for Northwest. He actually had a more sophisticated taste in films, and a sense of aesthetics than the rest of us. He would tell us this film or that film was good, and as it turns out, they were auteur-driven films. My dad's colleague on TV at that time—Bobby Ledesma—had one of, if not the biggest, film

collection of Betamax tapes in the Philippines. So we'd borrow from him, in his house in BF Homes. We'd go there on weekends—me and my late younger brother Paulo—and borrow, watch, borrow, watch.

Eventually, I filed all of my favorite films in my mind. The montages, my favorite action scenes, favorite suspense scenes, I studied shot per shot. This was even before I had a video camera, so that's what inspired me, turned me on to film. I was just a teenager at that time. And then in high school, I did one film using this old VHS camera entitled *The Killers* (as an homage to the director Don Siegel). I filmed it for my English class starring my classmates and it was well-received by the teacher and the class. Of course I was very thrilled about it. Then I wanted to take up filmmaking, but my dad didn't want me to.

Originally, I was supposed to study Business Administration in the University of the Philippines. At the last second, my dad changed his mind and allowed me to study in the States, in the Bay Area. The school there was pretty low-tech. I sort of regret not going to LA, even though all the professors were telling me I should go to Los Angeles for my style of filmmaking. That school was an art school; they mostly taught an esoteric style of filmmaking. They felt that because of my style which was heavy on film language, montage, that stuff. But I was stubborn. I didn't want to go to LA because my brother was also in the Bay Area. But eventually, I also went to LA for a several months, in the USC/Universal Studios Film Program. It's partly in the USC campus, then you get to go to Universal Studios, it was cool. Eventually, I lived behind Hollywood Boulevard, at North Grace Avenue. As it turns out, Hollywood Boulevard was full of hookers and drug dealers, that was the street scene there. Of course we didn't know that. My dad and I were so naive, because otherwise, you wouldn't bring your son there since that area is tough. I lived there

all alone for one year. It was still cool, though. It was a cool experience.

STIRRING THE POT

Why do I make films? I don't know, I guess I can't do anything else. When I was a teenager, I got turned on with film. I said, WOW, this could be a cool thing to do, to come up with stories, tell stories, and tell them well with compelling images. The influence of cinema is felt around the world. For example, the rebels in Myanmar bought the pirated version of *Rambo 4*, and it became their training manual. It goes to show you the power of film to make an impression, to stir emotions. That's what I want. I see myself as a visceral filmmaker. I like moving people, whether through fear or excitement or sadness, the whole pot of emotions. I like stirring that pot.

AN INDIE STATE OF MIND

Indie is like a state of mind. Here in the Philippines, there's a tribal aspect to it, also, which is inherently Filipino. There's all these camps that I'm friends with, but I don't think I belong to any. My films don't fall into the familiar brackets of what's expected of Pinoy indie films: poverty, social realism, experimental, or gay, which has become a huge subgenre on its own. I personally don't want to be pegged into any group or genre, because for me, a great film is a great film.

Tony Rayns asked me during a Q&A in Vancouver, "How difficult is it to shuttle between mainstream and indie?" My answer was that I don't want to differentiate between indie and mainstream. It's just a matter of being smart about the choices you make. I also did an email interview with film critic Noel Vera. He asked me to define indie and mainstream. I said, "I guess I don't. I just want to be smart about the creative choices I make." And then I explained to him, in indie, that the filmmaker is the main engine from

day one to the end of the process. Meaning, he has input in everything, beginning from the very germ of the idea, to the conceptualization of the story, up to the final cut, and down to the sound design and scoring. In mainstream, sometimes it's not out of the realm of possibilities, that the director is the last one hired of the upper echelon staff. Usually, there's the lead stars first, the guy and the girl. Of course, you have the main producer, then the LP, then the script— the script written with a star in mind. And then they'll finally think about which director can fit into the project. So if you're going to get into a situation like that, you have to be aware, be cognizant of where you fit into the puzzle.

With my backlog of experience, what I've noticed in the mainstream industry now is we've come into a phase which is the lowest point in time in terms of how much clout a director has in mainstream filmmaking. I feel the reason for this is that jobs are so rare to come by and that there are so few movies being made. Mainstream producers tend to just plan for the MMFF (Metro Manila Film Festival) now, the exception being the big studios like Star Cinema. In our guild the DGPI (Directors' Guild of the Philippines), we're nearly all next to jobless. Producers just tend to quickly move from one to the next if they don't like you, or if you tick them off in some way. I heard from Joey Gosiengfiao before that back in the day, they let him burn down a whole town for a Ramon Revilla movie he was shooting. Imagine, *direk* Joey wasn't even an A-list action director. But he had the clout, the juice. They gave him the support and budget to burn that fucking village down. Wow, that's heavy. Those days are gone, man. Those days are gone. You don't even see action films being made anymore, no more.

Sometimes both camps—indie and mainstream—want what the other side has, whether it is financial rewards or critical acclaim. Point is, the great thing about the attention

accorded to the indie filmmakers, especially abroad, is that it's something that money can't buy, and something a mainstream director would love to have. Of course pesos and centavos always get into the equation, but at the end of the day, it's a creative endeavor and who wouldn't want to be critically applauded abroad? In my case, I was so thrilled because as a kid I used to buy Film Comment magazine. To be included in it, that is, when I finally got mentioned, I said to myself, "Damn, it took me like 20 fucking years, man, and to be treated like a fucking dog in this industry for just about half of that, and yet, I made it into Film Comment, dude—that's the magazine I bought as a kid."

SOMETHING TO LOOK UP TO

I'm basically classified as a genre filmmaker. But if you watch my films, there's always a small bubble of dialogue there about the social realities in the Third World, specifically the Philippines. I try to find a subtle way of inserting it. Like *Babaeng Putik*, with John Arcilla's character Lt. Ramil, his whole life he felt he was being used and abused—whether by soldiers, or NPAs, or whatever. So he said, "Fuck you all!" He sees a chance to get what he wants as a form of delayed justice and/or warped reward and he rapes the character of Klaudia Koronel. There's the cinematic monster in Klaudia's character—she's actually a flesh-eating creature underneath her human form—then there's the human monster in Ramil, which. Which is worse, really?

If you're a Filipino and you have a conscience—whether as an artist or as a human being—you're always one elbow nudge away from misery, and are among people who are hungry. A lot of people don't have work in this industry. You deal with these people constantly, so that keeps you close to reality. Most times, the way the old school directors treated their people was to humiliate them, scream at them, belittle them. I don't agree with that. For me, I want to give kids a different example to look up to. A lot of stuff in the

Philippines is just plain conning. You become a con man to get ahead. Pretend to be a leader/politician when your original vocation or job has reached a dead end. Pretend that you made a good film by having a friend write a glowing review. Pretend that you're a great artist because you were given an award by your fellow conmen. I don't want to be a conman. I want to stand or fall on my own merits.

DEFINING MOMENT

Finally, my dad agreed to send me to the States to study. I went to school but then dropped out because I wanted to start working on films already. I started directing action scenes for my dad's TV show *Kahapon Lamang* (*Just Yesterday*)—about 3 episodes. And then my dad ran for mayor of Makati, but he didn't win, so he had a lot of free time. Out of the blue, he said, "Why don't we make a movie?" I said, "Are you sure? What if we don't recoup your investment?" But, we made the film. We decided to remake a short film that I did in film school called *Z-Man* and expand it into a feature film.

Z-Man is something of a sci-fi, action-adventure, martial arts film, like my version of *Blade Runner* here in the Philippines. We shot in 35mm, super low-budget, starring Toby Alejar. He was the only recognizable name in the cast, the rest were unknowns. Turns out, *Z-Man* was also a character in an old Andy Warhol movie, which I wasn't aware of. I didn't know; I hadn't seen the Warhol film. We shot it with a Tagalog cast, but in English. In a way it was my variation of the Cirio Santiago films, but more surreal.

Actually, this was already indie from way, way back. My dad, being the maverick that he is, sometimes his ideas would make absolute, brilliant sense, and sometimes not. He said, "We'll make one print, one positive print of the completed film, put the reels in our luggage and then fly to LA." We did just that and once in LA we knocked, literally

knocked on doors, called people up, and wrote several letters, and then this distributor—which later on became a huge company for indies today—looked at the picture and bought it. This is where my dad and I made the mistake. I had no more say though. My dad said, “I left you alone making the film, now you leave me alone with the business end, the selling.” So he signed the contract. It took a while, about two and a half years—before my dad recouped his investment, even if it was a really low budget film.

The sad part of the story was my dad decided this was all bullshit. It was a bitter experience for him. “You’re on your own,” he said, adding that filmmaking was not his cup of tea. If I wanted to pursue film, I would have to do it on my own.

I wanted to chase my dream and avoid doing clerical work for my dad just to earn a paycheck, and besides, I didn’t want to relive the *Z-Man* experience so soon after. I began looking for work everywhere. It was really hard. I applied to everyone and got quickly rejected. I had to work from the bottom up. I ended up working for Mike Sellers. He’s an American guy, who had seen *Z-Man* and he liked it enough to hire me. He used to make Tagalog films with his company, Pacwood. That was my first stint. My job title there was Associate Producer, but actually, I was doing all around stuff: casting, writing, arranging meetings. It was actually just about 10 years after *Z-Man* before I got to direct again—a feature with Regal.

It was also almost a decade on and off with Mike because we would have bitter arguments from time to time. I’d leave, then I’d come back, or he’d call asking me to return. Then, I saw this tabloid ad with Mother Lily. This was the era of the *pito-pito* films (films made in seven days back in the 90s). They actually put out an ad in the tabloids, “We’re looking for new projects, new ideas, new directors.” They

sent it out as a press release. I asked my dad if he knew Mother and he calls her up. She’s old school so she knew who my dad was, and she said yes to checking out my demo. It was a mix of *Z-Man*, short films, AVPs, commercials. She liked it, said none of it looked “dated” at all, and then she signed me up.

But signing did not automatically mean I’d have a picture. The contract itself was kind of unrealistic. It was for 16 feature films for four years. Even if you were a top director at that time, to do three a year would be plenty already. This one stipulated four movies per year! It took me just about a year before I was able to shoot anything. What happened was I had to sit in all these meetings. As long as she had a meeting, I had to be there. I wasn’t getting paid for any of it—just free food, a lot of Chinese food.

It was in those meetings that I met Lav Diaz and Jeffrey Jeturian. They had signed ahead of me, and turns out, their works were included in the upcoming Good Harvest Film Festival. Good Harvest being Mother’s “boutique” division for low-budget projects spearheaded by Joey Gosiengfiao. I was told to go and watch, so I did and immediately noticed a lot of the shots were blurry. Turns out, it was the time of the *pito-pito*, and of course, they were using some of the worst equipment of Regal, because the good equipment was being used for the big projects. That crop of Good Harvest Films was very *auteur*-driven, like the films Mario ‘O Hara made for them. Imagine he made these depressing films that were beautiful and original, but had no commercial value. I used to think then that Mother was near-crazy for green-lighting these films, but, because these were the days of the famous Asian crisis, I figured she was just wondering what the hell Regal could do to get the masses to watch Filipino films again. It was like the crisis hit the film industry, too.

She told me, “Rico, this is Lav. You’ve met, right?” “Yes, Mother.” “Check out what he did. See if there’s a producer in the Philippines who would actually make something like it.” Then she ordered Glen Marcelo, the then right-hand man for publicity, to set up the screening room upstairs. “Watch it,” she said. I watched *Burger Boys* right then and there. For a mainstream film it was really weird!

The dilemma during those days was that Philippine cinema was near-invisible in the international film circuit. Before the advent of the *pito-pito* films, there was a cinematic vacuum left after the absence of Brocka, Bernal, and Mike de Leon. Philippine cinema became nearly non-existent, and then it kind of rose again because of those *pito-pito* films of Jeffrey, Lav, and Mario O’Hara. *Pila Balde* (*Fetch A Pail of Water*) went around the festival circuit, *Kriminal* too, and then *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan* (*Naked Under the Moon*). O’Hara’s *Pangarap ng Puso* (*Demons*) also garnered attention as this one-of-a-kind oddity. *Ang Babaeng Putik* also generated strong buzz during its screening in Italy and generated sales interest from France. The French though had a difficult time negotiating with Regal. Suddenly, the festival programmers started talking a bit about the Filipinos again. But then just as suddenly, Mother Lily, the producer responsible for letting us spread our little wings by opening the bird cage—so to speak—clipped our wings, deciding from out of the blue that the *pito-pito* “experiment” had outlived its usefulness and closed the doors to Good Harvest just when things were taking off on the international front, that’s when she closed shop.

What was extremely disheartening about it was that Lav made his most accomplished work at that time with *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan*, a huge leap over *Burger Boys* and *Kriminal*. And then Jeffrey too, his budget shot up from *Pila Balde* to *Tuhog*, and it showed. And I went from making *Dugo ng Birhen*, a straightforward, zombie/ kung fu action

film, into more surreal, weird territory with *Ang Babaeng Putik*. Just when we were all about to do strange and unique but still somewhat semi-accessible, “commercial” films, she suddenly lost the stomach for it, wanted to do Star Cinema-style films, and after that, you saw a lot of glossy, saccharine-sweet films from Regal. She immediately did a Joyce Jimenez-Aga Muhlach romantic film. Bigger budgeted films, very glossy and overtly commercial, with the more established directors were in her roster. In the meantime, I was jobless. Lav flew back to New Jersey, drifting until *Batang West Side* (*West Side Avenue*). Jeffrey, I think, ended up on TV doing *Maalaala Mo Kaya* (*Will You Remember*), and eventually to Seiko Films with his sex comedies.

Just as the Good Harvest was quickly winding down to an early, untimely demise, Roger Garcia managed to write a very potent article about the “movement” in the acclaimed American magazine *Film Comment*, but more specifically about Lav Diaz’s films. Years later, I gave my own personal issue to Lav as a gift. That article might be the sole existing account, in a credible cinema publication, of that special time in Regal Films’ history. That is, besides Noel Vera’s constant reference to it in his own online blog.

But props also has to go to Mother Lily—she was the only producer in the whole Philippines to have the foresight, wisdom and *cojones* to give us all our breaks.

PHILIPPINE CINEMA FORECAST

Now that I’m going to festivals abroad, I realize there’s a separate culture at work within each festival. It’s important that you have a programmer championing your work. Then, I noticed experimental filmmakers like Khavn, Raya Martin, and John Torres—right now they’re in good shape. There are definitely people abroad who are interested, who see the merit in the works, and are committed to support it by



featuring it in festivals. Now, in terms of the regular commercial films, I don't know. It's like even the producers are wondering what to do because Hollywood films are just flattening them at the tills.

I don't want to think about where our commercial films are going 'cause someone said in order for the filmmakers to be discovered and have the right platform to show what they're capable of, there also has to be a new group of producers— those who are business-savvy enough and possess some film literacy. If you do not give these kids a chance, it's like you're cutting them at the knees. Like your own children who are only starting to walk, then you suddenly break them at the knees. You need to support them a bit, see where it leads. It has a function, too, 'cause it's true what Joel Torre said before in an article, it can play a part in nation-building. Every time I go to festivals abroad, I tend to feel like we're the poorer relations in the Asian family. That's because other filmmakers abroad are respected and supported by their own governments.

AUTEUR-DRIVEN INFLUENCES

I got influenced a lot by auteur-driven films. I'm a little biased for American Cinema in the '70's, the ones made by the so-called Bratpack: Coppola, Scorsese, Spielberg, Brian dePalma, all of these guys, including William Friedkin. Terrence Malick's *Badlands*, I liked that a lot. Of course, my initial influence was Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry*, because my dad was a big Clint Eastwood buff. My brother Dino told me to watch it, too. When I saw it, it was so visceral, cinematic, it's like, *whoa!* I think they call them policiers in France. As I told Noel Vera once, I watched possibly every police or crime film from the '70's. Sam Peckinpah and Walter Hill are heroes of mine, too.

I also loved George Miller's *Mad Max*. Actually, I've kind of forgotten about it now, but for a while, in my 20s and early 30s, that was my main goal—to make my own *Mad Max*,

that type of B-movie, weird and arty at the same time, the type that you can watch again even after how many years and it still has an effect on you. That's the true test of film for me—one that stands the test of time, right?

I like lots of filmmakers. John Boorman is another. He did *Point Blank*, *Deliverance*, and *Excalibur*. I also like the early Spielberg, *Duel*, and *Sugarland Express*. I still watch *Duel* to this day. *Taxi Driver* was a huge influence on me. *Sisters* by Brian de Palma, all the Clint Eastwood films. *Clockwork Orange*, Stanley Kubrick. Very influential. There! Talk about timeless. *2001* and the rest, there's still a timeless quality to it. You study it now, the sense of design, sense of aesthetics, photography, acting—that's what I'm aiming for.

WET SKIN MEMORABLES

Of course, as a kid, you'll always remember the wet t-shirt explosion. In *Pepeng Shotgun*, Tetchie Agbayani crashes her bike. She falls in with Rudy Fernandez in the rice-fields and gets her t-shirt all wet. I saw it on VHS, uncensored, with its long love scene. Just like any kid growing up, with your hormones and all, you want to watch that stuff. I also remembered the shoot-out, of course. It was pretty good. I don't know if that was inspired by Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss*, but it also had a climax with the mannequins at the end. I guess, Romy Suzara did his own take on that. It was pretty explosive and well-choreographed. I also remember Celso Ad Castillo's *Uhaw na Dagat (Ocean in Thirst)* back then, which was bizarre. There were these orphan girls on an island and all they do is swim in wet t-shirts until a circus arrives in a boat, complete with midgets, clowns, and a mute strongman played by Roland Dantes, whom the girls fought over. It felt very European.

Oro, Plata, Mata (Gold, Silver, Death) was absolutely ballsy for its time. As a kid, I remember seeing Peque Gallaga's picture in the Sunday Panorama magazine. He looked like

some badass *tisoy* in the jungle. Turns out he was a La Salle boy, too. When he mentioned that *Oro* was like *Deliverance*—with the jungle and all—I just had to watch it! I even bought the issue of *Film Comment* magazine where they mentioned the film. The critic there said, “The movie was a bit of a mess, but a stunner.” A stunner, not bad!

I also saw *Kisapmata* (*Blink of an Eye*) in the cinemas as a kid. Disturbing stuff. The Mowelfund guys, they’re very partial to Mike De Leon. That’s a common thread with them—Mike De Leon is THE icon for them, which is completely understandable. I saw *Itim* (*Black*) on TV, already as an adult, during Holy Week, I think. It was very impressive. It’s sad that he just about quit making films. But then again, who can blame him? I constantly think about quitting.

THE INVISIBLE MAN

Even when I first met Roger Garcia, all these foreign guys, all they wanted to do was meet Lav Diaz or Jeffrey Jeturian. I was friends with Lav and Jeffrey so that was fine. But after a while, it kind of got to me when they kept asking, “By the way, you are...?” I just took the good with the bad and let it slide off me. At that time, I was somewhat an unknown entity—I guess, an invisible man. But in my mind I was saying, “One day you’re all gonna see. My films are fucking cool, man.”

A filmmaker is like a fighter. After you’ve done all the training and planning, you have to trust yourself, have confidence in yourself. Once you lose that, you don’t want to end up in the big stage saying, “Oh no! What the fuck am I going to do?”

DREAMING THE PROCESS

I daydream a lot about my films first before I put a single word on paper. When some of the images first come to me,

I try to latch onto some key visuals and then form the story from there.

When I got older, say, like with *Cogon*, I thought about what was available to me, accessible to me that I can save money and still make a really cool film. That’s another thing I noticed while growing up, nobody wanted to make “cool” films in the Philippines. But since my background was comic books, rock music, hip-hop, Prince, martial arts, all that, I said I wanted to make cool films from where I was coming from.

I daydream and then try to pinpoint the main emotional thrust of the story and something that excites me. And then later on, this is what I observed, starting with *Babaeng Putik*—the characters seem to come to life for me with real emotions. After *Dugo*, I took a close look at what worked and what didn’t, and then I purposely tweaked my style.

My process starts out at first with images and dreams, and eventually transitions to giving the story structure. When you’re making thrillers, structure is very important. I grew up watching Tagalog films, and for me, the number one weakness of Tagalog films is that even the best scriptwriters here can’t seem to competently write and structure thrillers. Structuring a thriller is very important to me. It has to be like a staircase: you can go up, you can go down. But towards the end, the momentum should be going up.

I tend to work really fast—sometimes not out of choice, but because the funds are there already and the line producer is already plotting the schedule, blocking people’s schedules. So I’ve learned how to work fast.

After the script, pre-production is where I usually take my time, where I make battle plans for the actual shoot. My

films usually have a lot of action and suspense. If you've done that before, you'll realize that, automatically, the coverage of the scenes take as much as four to five times longer than if it's a dramatic scene. It has to be planned ahead of time. Actually, that's the secret to my indie style of filmmaking—it's pre-planned down to minute details.

Post-production is a bloody affair. If you want to live up to a certain standard, everything takes hard, time-consuming, strength-sapping work. Everything. I co-edited *Altar*—actually, all my films—but I've never taken any credits for the others. Even with the sound design, I actively participate in that. I've lent my voice on practically every film I've worked on. I dubbed the voice of the monsters in both *Putik* and *Cogon*, dubbed the screams of actors like Nor Domingo and John Arcilla, and I did the voiceover of the girl ghost in *Altar* as well. With scoring, I sit through the whole process with Malek Lopez. That might be the most fun of all. When you work with a genuinely talented musician like Malek, you tend to get pleasantly surprised constantly and it gets emotional when you start to hear the music, especially when, originally, it all began by humming bars to the images. It feels almost magical.

THE PERFECT FILM HAS YET TO COME

I might not have a personal favorite among my films. I feel that my perfect film has yet to happen. But there are snippets, like in *Babaeng Putik*. I feel like I've done some of my best stuff there. Also in *Cogon*. The climax definitely, I was telling Mammu, some of that I feel is my best work. The scenes where Yul smashes the picture frame, and then Johnny B sneaks in with a pistol. That whole suspense sequence. And the performances. I'm pretty happy with that scene. And then portions of *Altar's* ending as well. It's a simple ending but I'm so proud of that. Some haters get on me for my *Shake, Rattle and Roll* episode, *Aquarium*, telling me it was silly. Well, it was supposed to be silly, it's an MMFF entry! But it's a lot of fun! What I did was try to be

visually witty. The visual wit, the playfulness, the inventiveness of the shots, that's what's important.

In commercial filmmaking, when you're a hired gun or a mercenary, you need to also respect the producer's intent for the project. Not unless you want to be jobless. Film is a craft. Once you've mastered that, then you can break the rules or at least turn it upside down, right? That's the real essence for me. Once you've gotten a certain level of the craft down, then you can improvise. For me and my films, I attack it the same way. Once I become really playful and inventive, riffing, it's like you're improvising and going by pure feel and emotion. You're getting in the groove and then you can really give up the funk as George Clinton wisely said. And I'm proud of that. It means I've put the necessary work in and now I can be playful while creating.

CASTING COACH

I have good memories of my time spent with my cast. With Monsour del Rosario, we hit it off because he said to me that it was the first time he worked with a director who knew all the obscure martial arts films and who was a martial arts geek like him. Growing up, he was also watching those films: *Force Five*, *Good Guys Wear Black*, *Billy Jack*, *Force of One*. *Billy Jack* was a 70's cult hit—very low budget. But there was that fight scene in the park where they used Bong Soo Han, a Hapkido expert. I thought it was the star Tom Laughlin because the editing was so good—awesome scene. Monsour knew that as well. Imagine, an Olympian, an Asian champion, Bronze medalist in the World Championships (our very first medalist in Tae Kwon Do), and he allowed me to choreograph his fight scenes. Wow, that's like a badge of honor to me! I was on cloud nine.

I enjoy collaborating with actors, getting my hands dirty with them, so to speak, in building up their characters from scratch. It's tough work physically and emotionally for both parties, but I've learned to enjoy it. I think one of the

most talented actors I've worked with so far would probably be Julia Clarete. You kind of have to try and rein her in a bit because she's an uninhibited performer—very brave and daring, really pretty and with loads of sex appeal!

Klaudia Koronel—I've worked with twice already. She's cool. She's very intuitive as an actress and doesn't want to indulge herself in the analytical process too much. I felt that before she even had an opportunity to do her best work, they pulled the plug on her career. That's what's lacking here in the Philippines. There's no genuine caring for the talent, and no real honing of their skills. If you are the way you are and the masses like you for it, that's it, that's good enough. They feel that there's no need to improve one's self unlike abroad. Even managers get lackadaisical. Once you're not the "IT" thing anymore, that's it—put the talent in the scrap heap and then move on to the next piece of fresh meat. This business is unforgiving like that. Then again, we still have the consummate actors like Ronnie Lazaro or Nor Domingo whose commitment to the craft is beyond reproach.

Here's my take on it. I might anger a lot of people with this. It's like there's a dynasty culture going on in the Philippines, wherein the sons of famous personalities inherit the fame and the paycheck that comes with it—the notoriety as well. Here's the thing: a lot of times, the children are inferior versions of their fathers or mothers, when it shouldn't be that way because more often than not, the parent went up the hard way, the difficult way. Now, the kids, they have much more access to information, to proper education, to skill lessons, right? It shouldn't be that way. In anything, let's say with cars or cell phones, the new model should be an upgrade over the older one, right? That's the problem with our country. There's like an outdated system permeating everything and it's everywhere. Politics, business, delivering of basic services, it's just like a vicious cycle. So who's left to give another method or example when everyone thinks there's only one way to get ahead in society?

Let's say, like myself or my artist brother Nilo, or even my sister Liza, for example. We're not saying that we're better than our dad, but I would like to imagine we're certainly different than him. And then at our chosen field or vocation, I feel we've attempted to up the ante. We're trying to raise the bar.

UNFORGETTABLE QUESTION

I am always asked about contemporary Asian Cinema. How am I influenced by the recent wave of Asian horror films? In truth, it has very little bearing on my work. But I certainly enjoy watching some of those films. I've been doing fantastic/horror films since my teens.

In Korea, they asked me, "How has Korean cinema influenced you?" I didn't want to be impolite and just said that Korean cinema had and still has a huge influence on my filmmaker friends back home. I guess I'm old school in that regard. The films that influenced me in the past are what still inspire me to this day. I've kept those films in mind, even as I've put my own personality into my works.

When I made *Dugo ng Birhen*, a certain friend told me, "Why are you doing a silly zombie film when people are making stuff like *The Blair Witch Project*?" This was back in 1999. I just told him it was my dream to make a zombie-style film, that I had affection for the genre. Now who's to tell me not to make it? I'm sure he changed his mind once the zombie-picture wave happened a few years later. I guess I'm not a fashionable filmmaker. If I'm influenced by Asian horror then it would be with old stuff like *Onibaba*, *Kwaidan*, or *Demon Pond*.

WHY

If I were to talk to a group of young filmmakers, I'd ask them, "Why are you doing this?"

The film industry has been in trouble for the past decade, and it really is not improving. There are limited amounts of jobs

and gigs available to people in this industry. There's absolutely zero guarantee of anything, unless you're related to someone in a position of influence. I used to think it would personally help me having a TV icon for a father, but it didn't turn out that way. It took me a fucking decade to direct again after *Z-Man*—a decade! That's pretty sick, and not in the good way.

People can say, hey, I'll make commercials and get rich that way. It's easier said than done. A lot of the successful commercial directors today came straight from the ad agencies, which means, they weren't filmmakers to begin with. They were former creative agency people who understood the dynamics and demands of the advertising industry and this enabled them to make a smoother transition into becoming what they are. So, there's no guarantee that the same exact formula will work for you. At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself why you are doing this. If you are able to answer that, then fine, go ahead.

In filmmaking, there's always a strong chance things will not go as planned. You can pour your heart, soul, and life savings into a film. But what if you don't get any acclaim for it? Or a single centavo back for all your troubles? And your own mother doesn't even like it? You have to be able to answer that question yourself: Why am I doing this?

PUBLIC DREAMS

I don't want to sound pretentious, but Luis Bunuel had a quote about cinema, and it's perfect for me. "Films are like public dreams," he said. "When the lights go down in the cinema, that means you are entering sleep, and when the celluloid lights up the screen, then that's dreamtime." Perfect.

FILMOGRAPHY

1988 *Z-Man*

1999 *El Kapitan: Dugo Ng Birhen*

(*El Kapitan: Blood Of The Virgin*)

2000 *Babaeng Putik (Woman Of Mud)*

2005 *Sa Ilalim Ng Cogon (Beneath The Cogon)*

Shake, Rattle And Roll 2k5 (Aquarium Segment)

2007 *Altar*

2009 *Villa Estrella*



Jeffrey Jeturian

Kubrador (*The Bet Collector*, 2006) represents a turning point in Jeffrey Jeturian's creative growth. The film—about a grieving mother whose daily routine of dodging police raids and other hazards while plying her usual routes and collecting bets in her meager neighborhood—eschews typical melodrama for in-your-face realism. The film emphasizes the most universal of human struggles, punctuated by the bet collector being guided through life by her son's consistent apparitions, in the midst of a Philippine-specific conflict such as poverty and *jueteng* (an illegal gambling game).

Before *Kubrador*, Jeturian dabbled in different genres: family drama in *Sana Pag-Ibig Na* (*Enter Love*, 1998); social realism in *Pila-Balde* (*Fetch a Pail of Water*, 1999); erotica in *Tuhog* (*Larger Than Life*, 2001); screwball in *Bridal Shower* (2004); romance in *Minsan Pa* (*One Moment More*, 2004); and satire in *Bikini Open* (2005). Consistent in all of his films is a restrained quality, a delightful surprise given the fact that Philippine cinema favors indulgence over subtlety. Probably most notable in all of Jeturian's works is respect towards his writer, whether it be Chris Martinez,

Ralston Jover, or Armando Lao. Humble enough to admit that he is a mere conspirator in the filmmaking process along with his writers, Jeturian, a very talented craftsman, is a rarity in a movie industry that has honed directors with egos much larger than their talents. (*Oggs Cruz*)

FORMAT AFFECTS STYLE

My films in digital format are *Kubrador* (*The Bet Collector*), *Bikini Open*, and the new one I'm doing, *Parangal* (*Recognition*). Up to my fifth film, I was shooting on 35mm.

I think *Bikini Open* and *Kubrador* were perfectly timed to benefit from the advent of digital technology. *Bikini Open* was a satire on reality TV shows and public affairs programs that blur the line between reportage and entertainment for higher audience ratings. With *Kubrador*, I was going for a semi-documentary, super-realistic style.

When I was still using 35mm, it somehow affected my style. You have to be very conscious of your shots, very precise, because you want to make every penny of your production budget count. As a result, your shooting style and treatment are affected or even compromised. Instead of using continuous shots or handheld camera shots, you try to economize by using cut to cut. The formulation of style is therefore academic and standard.

Take intercutting, for example: from a master shot you go into a solo whereas with digital, you're free to explore different styles because you're not conscious about scrimping your funds.

That is one of the prime advantages of digital technology. The director has more freedom to explore and experiment with various styles. With 35mm, the cost makes the director more careful and calculated in handling the camera. It limits your style. To cite an example: for my first film, we were given only 20,000 feet of 35mm film stock to use. It was almost like shooting a television show—all of your shots had to be pre-planned so you could stay within the 20,000 feet limit. That's what happened with *Sana Pag-Ibig Na* (*Enter Love*) and *Pila Balde* (*Fetch a Pail of Water*).

THE POWER TO MOVE PEOPLE

Even as a child, I knew I wanted to be a filmmaker. It was from the time I saw my first Tagalog film. I was around seven and my *yaya* took me to the Globe Theater in Quiapo, which showed nothing but Tagalog films.

I was scared entering the theater. It was very dark, and there were so many people, so I clung to my *yaya* tight but as soon as I saw the image on the screen, it was fascinating. As far back as seven years old, cinema already had a magical hold on me. From that point on, I was a movie fan. That film was *Dedicated To You*, a comedy with Susan Roces and Eddie Mesa—some cheesy musical drama.

As a child growing up, Susan Roces was my idol. It was only in high school that I saw the films of Lino Brocka. The one that had the biggest impact was *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko Ng Liwanag* (*Manila: In The Claws Of Neon*). I studied in San Beda, in Recto, at the heart of Manila, and that was Brocka's milieu. The film made me see a side to the city I grew up in that I wasn't aware of—different lives. It made me want to become a filmmaker in the hope that my films would have a similar effect but being shy and introverted, I had no idea how I was going to become one.

I enrolled in UP (University of the Philippines). This was the 70s. There was no degree course in film yet and I wanted to major in Broadcast Communications; but I got scared of the performance courses, I ended up taking Architecture. I did like to draw. But after four years, I panicked during my thesis. I just couldn't imagine myself at the drafting board. I thought I was going to make a mediocre architect so I shifted back to the course I originally wanted, Broadcast Communications.

It was the closest I could get to a film course and immediately after shifting, I flourished. I was enjoying

myself and without even trying, I gained the respect of my teachers and my fellow students. It was a sign that I was moving in the right direction. Still, filmmaking seemed like a farfetched goal.

After studying in UP, Marilou Diaz-Abaya took me in as part of her staff on *Baby Tsina*. The workshop lasted six months, and with no salary. The film took another six months to make, and the policy in the film industry at that time was that after 10 weeks, you don't get paid anymore. So if you've already gone through your salary for the project, that's it.

That was fine with me. I actually felt I should be the one paying them. I was learning a lot and I loved the work. It fired up my determination. This was really what I wanted to do. From production assistant, I moved to script continuity then became an art director and I moved up to production designer after that. It was during my stint at the Art Department that I started thinking. I had to be on the set ahead of everyone, and after, I have to clean it up and I'm the last to go. I didn't go to UP just to end up a janitor and it's not like I was earning much either. But the fulfillment of doing what you wanted to do won out, of course.

Working with different directors was an education in and of itself. Most of the time the movies were trash but it's up to you to edit out what you can use and what you can't, in terms of the things you learn. There were times when I thought I could do better than the director I was working for but, of course, you just kept your peace.

Telesines were all the rage back then. These made-for-TV movies were very low-budget, sort of like how independent films cost today. GMA 7 started that. They didn't have the production mechanism that they have now with the soaps—

this was back in the 1990s—a little before the *pito-pito* films, so they were outsourcing the work to the movie studios and to some independent producers as well. This gave a lot of young directors a break. Raymond Red made one; Jay Altajeros and Mac Alejandre too.

I got my break directing with telesines but it wasn't exactly the ideal platform for finding your aesthetic because of the tight schedules. The challenge was to finish shooting in two days to stay within budget. That means you have two cameras set up, block the actors and just pick from either one shot or the other shot. There wasn't much room to do anything else. I did three or four of these.

Then, Mother Lily Monteverde entered into a contract with ABS-CBN to produce a certain number of films for their library. Every Saturday, ABS-CBN premiered Tagalog films and they were looking to stock up on content, hence the deal. They would be like slightly higher-budgeted telesines but with ten days to shoot and a theatrical release.

At this time, it was do-or-die for me. I've wanted to direct a film for so long that I didn't care if I had to spend my own money. I just wanted to have a film to show. I was already 38. I'd spent 15 years in the industry. And I could make a telesine in two days. Ten days was relatively easier. I wasn't scared. I saw my break right there.

PITO-PITO: FILM IN SEVEN DAYS

Pito is Filipino for seven and *pito-pito* got its name because Johnny Cruz could make movies in only seven shooting days. It was very limiting. You only had a P2 million budget, you could only use non-stars—or one star—then the rest will be unknowns. Your maximum film stock allotment was 20,000 feet—go over that and you buy your own film. That meant no epics.

My *pito-pito* batchmates were Lav Diaz, Mario O'Hara who used *pito-pito* to make his comeback, Anton Juan, Behn Cervantes, Johnny Cruz, Ces Evangelista, Ed Lejano, and Kris Michelena. I had to haggle with the producers so I could get Lee Meily as my cinematographer and Armando "Bing" Lao as my writer. Bing and I had a deal that when I directed my first film, he would be my screenwriter. I've worked with Bing for a long time back in the telesine days, and we've been friends since the screenwriting workshops of Ricky Lee. I was a fan. At the time producers were wary of his work because his scripts were non-formula, uncommercial. The producers preferred melodramas with happy endings. Bing's scripts were a lot darker.

The first film I did was *Sana Pag-Ibig Na (Enter Love)*, which was heartbreaking. I was happy with the film. But it closed the same day it opened. It didn't even have a chance to make anything. If it had, of course, that would've been mere icing on the cake. But I thought it was a waste. And for us filmmakers, it was like going back to zero. I didn't want to become a one-shot director.

I proposed to direkt Joey Gosiengfiao who was in charge of several of us for Regal— including myself and Lav Diaz— about organizing an event to launch all the *pito-pito* movies and he and Regal agreed. That led to the Good Harvest Film Festival at SM Megamall. And the audience response was positive. Lav's first movie for Good Harvest was actually *Burger Boys*, but it was delayed so it was his second film *Kriminal Ng Baryo Concepcion (Serafin Geronimo: The Criminal Of Barrio Concepcion)* that got shown and they liked it. Mario O'Hara's, too. *Sana Pag-Ibig Na* got some okay reviews too. Then, I was given a second project, *Pila Balde (Fetch A Pail Of Water)*. It was an old TV script by Bing. We dug it out of his files. Joey Gosiengfiao said to make it sexy. The material was social realist but we managed to rework it without compromising its integrity. I liked the

result but it became obvious the industry had different priorities when it came to films at that time. *Tuhog (Larger Than Life)*—which came after—was like taking a swipe at the industry. I enjoyed it very much. The censors X'd it. Ironically, the sex scenes here were integral to the film. They weren't extraneous insertions. It pissed me off. But I was willing to cut out a few scenes. But when we took it back for a second review, they had cut it without me. I was furious. I snapped back at Joey Gosiengfiao and called him a pig. I was so pissed off at him. Every morning, I'd call him up and scream, "Fuck you!" When he picked up, I'd hang up on him. It took a while for me to get over it. But I made peace with him just before he died, but I just can't get over that memory. And I never burned my bridges with him or with Mother Lily, but that was because I was afraid they'd hold the film hostage. It was theirs, after all. It was my cut that survived, though, and that went to the Venice Film Festival. Lav had to deal with the same things, I think. But I think one good thing that came out of the *pito-pito* experience was that it paved the way for local filmmakers to get attention internationally.

WRITING WITH RICKY LEE

It was around 1983 that I took Ricky Lee's screenwriting workshop. I think it was the first. I had little writing experience, but I'm a lazy perfectionist. I never finish anything because it never makes me happy. I think it's more difficult to write because it takes a lot out of you. It's more naked. I realized I couldn't be a writer. I didn't have the skill or the patience.

'INDEPENDENT' SHOULD MEAN MORE THAN 'MADE OUTSIDE A MAINSTREAM STUDIO'

The definition of independent filmmaking right now is very broad. Anything made outside the studio system is automatically independent, regardless of sensibility. I agree that on one hand, it should be free of the constraints and

dictates of commercial filmmaking. No formulas, no stars, no special effects, no big budget. Some filmmakers merely work outside the studio system but their works have a mainstream sensibility, like those gay films for one.

Sherad Anthony Sanchez's *Imburnal (Sewer)*; the works of John Torres; the works of Lav—*Batang West Side (West Side Avenue)* was the last film I saw of his—that's what I consider real independent filmmaking. Films made for the sake of making them.

STORIES THAT AFFIRM WHAT IS PINOY IN FILIPINO SOCIETY

A lot of people don't like that I show poverty in my work like the way I did in *Pila Balde*. There have been accusations that this is the shortcut some filmmakers take to get attention from international film festivals. But how many Filipinos live below the poverty level? Eighty percent? Ninety percent? Poverty is a reality, and it is a big part of the big picture.

Bikini Open was a reaction to sensationalism in public affairs shows with their celebrity news anchors. This was at the height of the ratings war between the two giant TV networks, ABS CBN and GMA. *Bikini Open's* come-on was sex but it was a satire on all that.

Kubrador uses a day in the life of a *jueteng* collector as a prism to see there's a desire for the average Filipino to get out of the country—an act of desperation.

REMAKING OLD FILMS IN DIGITAL

If I shot *Tuhog* now, the part that happens in the real world would be more documentary-like—grittier, no blocking, no artifice, shot in digital of course. The part that happens inside a movie would still be in 35mm. I'd change the look. But the soul stays the same.

Pila Balde shot in digital would be more like Kubrador. I'd leave the ending more open-ended, lessen the drama if not totally take it out. *Bikini Open* would probably be more documentary-like. *Bridal Shower* and *Minsan Pa (Once More)* were meant to be shot in 35mm. That was an aesthetic choice. I wouldn't reshoot those two in digital.

DAY OF IRONY: INSPIRATION, FULFILLMENT, DEATH

I was a production designer for PETA (Philippine Educational Theater's Association) when Ellen Ongkeko was given a break to make a *telesine*. She knew I wanted to direct and was gracious enough to let me do one scene. It was a very simple scene, and I was in the OB van when I felt the high come over me—the ecstasy. That night, my *yaya* came to the set and told me my dad had a heart attack. I rushed off the set but didn't make it to the hospital on time. The irony, of course, is that one of the happiest days of my life was also one of the saddest.

That's always been a big regret—that my father didn't live to see me live my dream. I felt guilty for all the years wasted at the expense of my parents shifting from one course to the next. But they were always very supportive. Most parents aren't supportive when it comes to a career in the arts.

LIKE

The films that stuck with me in college were Bergman, Truffaut, Ozu—*Tokyo Story*, also Kurosawa—*Rashomon*, *Salaam Bombay*, Zhang Yimou—*Story of Ju Dou*. I always thought Hollywood was a little predictable. These were different, untraditional, fresh, and deceptively simple.

Locally, there's Celso Ad Castillo's *Burlesk Queen* which is very gritty, raw, and very rich. I also like *Kisapmata (Blink of an Eye)*, *Ganito Kami Noon Paano Kayo Ngayon?* Also *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko Ng Liwanag (Manila: In The Claws Of Neon)*. But *Insiang* is my favorite Brocka.



Kubrador (The Bet Collector)

ICING

It was during post-prod on *Sana Pag-Ibig Na* that I realized I'd made a good film, and that even if it didn't earn any money it would be alright; and of course it didn't earn any money. I was a little disheartened but that didn't last. Making money's just icing.

NATURAL HISTORY

Bridal Shower was inspired by Francois Ozon's *Eight Women*, which was a satire on whodunits. After watching it, I wanted to make a comedy centering on upper-class women poking fun at their hypocrisy, and their double standards. Seiko was producing but fortunately, they didn't force me to make a typical Seiko film. Bing wasn't as into it as I was so we asked Chris Martinez. He was a fan of *Tuhog* while I was a fan of his play *Last Order Sa Penguin* (*Last Order In Penguin*). Bing supervised Chris through his five drafts. Usually what happens, after a script is finished and I've read it, I sit with the writer and see if our takes align. Once we've aligned, that's when I start doing my work.

Kubrador was Ralston Jover's script but Bing was supervising, more or less the same capacity he has in Brillante Mendoza's films. As soon as I read the script, I knew I wanted Gina Pareno. I'd worked with her on *Bridal Shower* and on TV. Her talent's undeniable, but I've always been partial to comedians because they're more natural. Nida Blanca in *Sana Pag-Ibig Na* was like that, and her performance—not to mention her willingness to make a low-budget film like that—was a crucial ingredient to the film's success. During the premiere, the audience burst into applause after her big scene. It was just too bad she wasn't there that night. But she called me up a year later, after the film was nominated at the Film Academy Awards, and thanked me for making her part of it.

We could only afford to pay Gina for six days but we shot for twelve so for six days; she was working for free. She didn't bother charging us. With dramatic actors, for the most part, it's a performance. A lot of foreigners were surprised to find out Gina was a professional actress, a mainstream actress at that. They thought she was a real person. That's how good she was.

FAVORITE WORKS, ACTORS, PEOPLE

Tuhog, for the satire. But *Kubrador* was the point where I matured as a filmmaker. It is my first real-time film. Real-time is just what it implies—a film shot in real time, much like a documentary, with very little editing and you try to get as close to real life as you can, where your POV is fixed, limited and not omniscient. *The Dreamlife Of Angels* was a real-time film. *Rosetta*, too.

Nida and Gina are probably my favorite actresses. Gina and I became close friends after going to so many festivals together for *Kubrador*. I owe a lot of that to Bing, of course, who's been with me from the very start. Also, cinematographer Boy Yniguez, who agreed to do our small film despite his workload and his stature; Leo Abaya, my production designer; and Joji Alonso for having so much faith in me. Among the people I've worked with, these are my favorites, and the ones I owe a lot to.

THE NEXT FILM

My next digital film is *Parangal*. There's a little problem at the moment with the scheduling of the cast so it's temporarily on hold but it will be the next one, I think. *Parangal* is about a music professor who dies. He's gay, and he's survived by his lover and his family. It's a film about the effects of his dying on these two parties. It's in what Bing and I call poetic mode, which is hard to explain. There's a scene where the family ransacks the house he lived in and his pet dog keeps barking at anybody who

touches his master's things. They make excuses to the dog why they were never around when the professor needed caring for. Another scene has the professor's *yaya* being left behind by the hearse as it goes to the wake, and she runs after it, and it stops, and the casket falls out, and the professor gets out, and gives his *yaya* last wishes. That sums it up, I think— scenes like those. It's all new to me, out of my comfort zone, so everything's uncertain but it is also very exciting. I always tell other filmmakers this—with the fears that come from trying out something new also comes excitement, let that win.

**IF I WERE NOT A DIRECTOR,
I'D BE BITTER AND FRUSTRATED**

I used to think all I needed was to make one film and then I could die; but the experience of *Sana Pag Ibig Na* was so fulfilling, I didn't want to die anymore. I wanted to make more. And if I didn't become a filmmaker, or if I found out I didn't have what it takes to be one, I can't see myself doing anything else and I would've been very unhappy, bitter, and frustrated.

WANT IT BAD ENOUGH AND IT WILL HAPPEN

Want it bad enough and it will happen. That's the truth. Make your film with honesty, most specially honesty to yourself. And don't give up. I also believe that if you will it to happen, focus your energies to a goal, it will happen. There's no excuse not to make films anymore.

FILMOGRAPHY

1998 *Sana Pag-Ibig Na (Enter Love)*

1999 *Pila Balde (Fetch A Pail Of Water)*

2001 *Tuhog (Larger Than Life)*

2004 *Bridal Shower*

Minsan Pa (One Moment More)

2005 *Bikini Open*

2006 *Kubrador (The Bet Collector)*



Khavn

Aside from being a filmmaker, Khavn is also a daring nihilist, a fervent film enthusiast, an expressive poet, and an inimitable musician. Although he dabbles in various disciplines, it is always his filmmaking that becomes the core of his artistry. At best, he infuses his filmmaking with his proficiencies in the other arts, creating a filmography that is always dynamic, always persistent in pushing the envelope.

Iskwaterpangk (Squatterpunk, 2007), a high-energy rollercoaster ride into the slums of Manila, and *Ultimo: Different Ways Of Killing A National Hero (2008)*, a drastic interpretation of Jose Rizal's final poem *Mi Ultimo Adios (My Last Farewell)*, are best experienced as concert films, with his band named The Brockas playing the soundtrack. *Paalam Aking Bulalakaw (Goodbye My Shooting Star, 2006)* exposes Khavn as a romantic as he gives life to characters that recite his poetry as declarations of everything that is wrong and right in love. In *Maynila Sa Mga Pangil Ng Dilim (Manila In The Fangs Of Darkness, 2008)*, he digs deep into the Philippines' collective fascination with Lino Brocka and fashions a reimagining of the late great director's *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko Ng Liwanag (Manila: In The*

Claws Of Neon, 1975) that is both an ode to Bembol Roco, whom Brocka discovered and groomed into a terrific actor, and a lament of the state of the Philippines' classic films, left unseen and deteriorating because of neglect and negligence. Khavn's nihilistic philosophies are expressed in his film manifestos, *Ang Pamilyang Kumakain ng Lupa (The Family That Eats Soil, 2005)*, a look into the most dystopian of cinematic dysfunctional families, and *3 Days Of Darkness (2007)*, a horror film that forgoes every cinematic convention to deconstruct the genre.

Trailblazing seems too plain a word to describe Khavn as an artist. One only needs to watch a handful of his films, listen to his rule-breaking music, and read his works to experience the irresistible madness, the horrific beauty, the indecipherable power of Khavn's art. (*Oggs Cruz*)

DIGITAL AS INSURANCE POLICY

By 1999, I had already shot one short on 16mm and a lot more on video8, one of which I also turned into a full-length feature: *Kamias: Alaala Ng Paglimot (Kamias: Memory Of Forgetting)*. Then I wanted do a “real” feature, because the previous one was more of a collection of shorts. I had a script—*Ang Labindalawa (The Twelve)*. During that time, I had the option to either shoot on film or digital. Lee Meily—my cinematographer for *Amen*, the short I shot on 16mm—was willing to collaborate with me on the feature. Shooting on digital, though, meant I could use my own equipment. That was already a big deal back then, owning your own camera. You have this safety net that insists that even if your feature film doesn't make money, you can still make another one, because you're not tied down by the whims of funding institutions or studios. But who knows what could have happened if I had shot it on celluloid? Maybe it would have turned out a better film, maybe not. We'll never know.

A lot of filmmakers took a gamble back then—almost selling their houses, making bank loans. It paid off for a few. But for many, it didn't. After pooling all their resources into that one big project and having it fail, they ended up taking on other career paths. For me, in a way, the choice to go digital was an insurance policy.

Kidlat Tahimik was my mentor at some point. And he kept pushing for the democratization of filmmaking through video. He was an advocate of making films using a video camera. At that time, it was a radical paradigm shift—shooting on video; it was amateurish. Video art, sure, but mostly video was for home movies. It could be art, but it couldn't be cinema. The bias against it was overwhelming.

But it was not so much asking, “Why digital?” as, “Why not digital?” You don't ask a painter why he paints with oil or

watercolor or acrylic and which is better because it's absurd, because the issue is immaterial, almost non-existent, in painting. But in cinema, back then, it was an issue when it really shouldn't be; that's just politics, economics.

Of course, had the digital revolution not happen, I'd still be making films, only at a slower rate. Between 1999 and 2009, I had finished 25 full-length features. If I had been shooting on film, that number would have dropped dramatically. I'd probably make one a year. In terms of quantity, there would be a drop, but not in quality. In the end, though, format doesn't and shouldn't matter. You can write poetry on your mobile. Same thing applies to cinema.

OTHER CAREER PATHS, MOSTLY ART

If I didn't go into filmmaking, I'd still be doing something creative—writing, most likely. Poetry, fiction, plays, music—I still do that, but if I hadn't been putting a lot of my energy on my films, I'd have more books and more songs and more poems. I hadn't been conscious that I was actually putting more energy into the films than the other stuff I love, but in a way these have been fused into my films, too. I say that when I retire, I'd go back to painting. Maybe if I didn't go into film, I wouldn't have to wait until retirement to do that. But who knows? These are all just big “what ifs.”

FILM AS CUMULATIVE ART

Film combines all the other art forms until it becomes something else with a life of its own, with rules and possibilities: pop films with radical ideas and avant-garde films with pop sensibilities. That's more interesting than the usual shallow pop films and difficult experimental films.

STRUCK BY LIGHTNING

I never wanted to grow up and be a filmmaker. I wanted to be a zoologist because I wanted to draw animals. I wanted to be a concert pianist, at some point. Then a poet. In a

way, filmmaking became an extension of my poetry, my writing. It is with writing that I was able to express myself, which I had applied to music afterwards and then later to film. I used to like watching films, like any other kid. Watching shows on TV, reading comic books. But it was passive, normal, and not obsessive. Even when I finally got into art, I leaned more on writing. I wanted to die writing, like Neruda. To live on my own Isla Negra, writing until I die.

Then I saw Joey Agbayani's *Kidlat (Lightning)*. I saw it on TV. *Probe*, I think. It's this satirical black comedy where this journalist was interviewing some sleazy, obviously lying politician. "May lightning strike me if I am lying," the politician said. Outside, it was raining. Every time he answered questions, the journalist's pencil would animate, grow longer, short, twist, until, in the end, it flew out of his hand, turned into a giant pencil and, like lightning, struck the politician right through the heart. I was about 19 then—3rd year college—and I was blown away. I was so blown away that for my write-up in our literary journal, *Heights*, I had written that I wanted to make a short film before I die.

I had a friend who had gone to Mowelfund Film Institute. I always thought one has to pass through the eye of a needle to get in there and I never aspired to. I was happy being a writer. I had a small readership in school, and it was enough to keep me writing. Then, after college, nobody wanted to publish my books, and I lost my readers just like that. The audience is important. And it was frustrating for me as a writer, to lose them.

I joined this Gawad CCP contest, but didn't win. The next year, I joined again. This time, I had two entries. I still didn't win. But someone took note of one of my entries, some reviewer and it got a mention in his newspaper column. The other short that I entered to Gawad, I gave to Kidlat,

probably intending to submit it to the Tokyo Video Festival as well. When I was a student under Kidlat, he would show us films about it. That's how I knew. JVC sponsors it. And he did submit it there and it won. That was *Alaala Ng Madaling-Araw (Memory Of Dawn)*. The first three short films I did after college actually had post-production work done. I spent a bit for editing. But then, after that, I ran out of money. I did have a camera, one of those home video cameras. My parents bought it, but they weren't using it, so I said I might as well use it to do my own thing. But I didn't want to spend for editing anymore, not that I had the money, so how? I decided the only way to do it was not to edit at all—shoot-edit, and it was so raw there were parts when you heard the click of the camera as I turned it on and off. That was *5 Shorts*. That actually had a script. *Alaala Ng Madaling-Araw* had no script. So that was the experiment for those films: one had a script, the other one didn't. Actually, I was expecting *5 Shorts* to win in Tokyo because it had a script; instead, it was the one without the script that won. And it had no subtitles. I'm not even sure if they understood it. It ran for about 20 minutes.

FILM IS FILM IS FILM

In the end, all these are just labels that could mean anything or nothing, but not to cop out and try and give a straight answer; independent is basically anything that is independent of the studio, from the moneymen.

The term gets tricky to define when one talks about aesthetics. Independent aesthetic, for me, is anti-formula and experimental. You try and go for uniqueness, for something new.

But like I said, these are all just labels. A film is a film is a film is a film. Who cares if it's some avant-garde obscurity, or the latest Hollywood film? If it does something for you, if it moves you—that's it. If I would have one gripe, maybe

it's in the distribution. It's almost impossible to find something that isn't Hollywood. Here in the Philippines, the ratio of Hollywood films to others is 9:1. It's that bad. But we can't just get rid of Hollywood. There seems to be this cliché that indie means dark, difficult, socio-political. I don't agree with this. It's about the filmmaker's vision—keeping it intact, uncompromised.

Is the Filipino audience ready for that level of cinema? I don't think so. Not at this point. They've been spoonfed by GMA 7 and ABS-CBN for so long. They're used to being boxed in. They like that box. They're not aware that there's something outside that box. They're not stupid, just clueless. That's actually one good thing about piracy—the accessibility of all forms of cinema. Of course, the bulk of pirated movies still leans towards Hollywood. Think about it though, back in the day, audiences admired Manuel Conde, Gerry De Leon. What has changed? It's conditioning, programming. I don't think the Filipino audience will evolve on its own. Mass media needs to be more responsible. It has to do something. But it's not in their interest for audiences to become more diverse, more open so that's not going to happen anytime soon. Force-feeding them is probably not the right way to go, but the viewers should be given more options. How exactly? I don't know. There was one proposition that Film Appreciation classes should be taught in all schools nationwide. Efren Penaflorida, the CNN Hero of the Year, had a good idea. But instead of pushing around a cart with books, fill it up with DVDs of films, great films.

TO BE PINOY, OR NOT TO BE PINOY

To me, on the one hand, you're a Filipino. Yet on the other, you're not. You're not a Filipino, but instead, you're human, a soul, who just happened to have been born in the Philippines; but really, you're not much different from other nationalities in the world. On the other hand, it is undeniable

that you are Filipino because you were born here, you speak this way, and you have these experiences. So those two views affect you consciously and unconsciously. These will inevitably come out in your films. But for my films, although I sometimes consciously use traditional Filipino images, that is not what makes my films Pinoy. Not because you put on a Barong Tagalog; it means it is already Pinoy. Of course, we do have similarities with other Asian countries, and we also have strong Western influences from America, and Spain, too. So it's actually all these experiences that make up the Filipino nation. In a way, it's also difficult to explain being Pinoy; add to the fact that we have 7,000 plus islands, and all these religions.

All my films are Pinoy. First of all, I created them, and then I shot it here. But as for the theme, there's no consciousness for me to create a "Pinoy" film. I don't think my films can be boxed within a singular theme, and I think this is aligned with the Filipino's image because our identity also cannot be boxed into one singular definition. So yes, I think there is a struggle right there between your being Pinoy and your being not Pinoy. If you put different Pinoy films alongside one another, shot in different locations, what'll probably come out are entirely different things. At the same time, even if you shoot in just one location, the results would still be different—this time because of the varying styles. In a sense, you can say that the Filipino is a world citizen because of its diversity.

REHASHING PROVIDES NEW OUTPUT

I've always wanted to do commercial pop films. But something else always happens. When I made *Idol: Hero/Villain*, I thought I was at last making this very accessible, commercial pop film. I was wrong. I'm thinking of *Mondomanila* in pop terms, too.



Iskwaterpangk (Squatterpunk)

As far as world cinema is concerned, I'm thinking Filipino films won't be making much noise worldwide in two, three years but I could be wrong about this. They keep saying our days in the spotlight are numbered. They've been saying that for a while now, and we're still here. Locally, I think more and more filmmakers will continue discovering the potentials of film as a medium. There will be more filmmakers and more films. The thing is to keep them fresh. Ezra Pound's "Make It New" maxim, that's important to me, because on the one hand, there's nothing new under the sun; it's all a matter of presenting it. Repetition and variation are good because new things can come out of this.

KAMIAS VIDEO CENTER

There was a video store just near our house in Kamias and they had all these obscure cult films. They taped over the VHS tapes so that sometimes if you fast forward a movie after the credits, there would be parts of a porn film. I used to do a lot of fast-forwarding but I didn't find much porn. But there was this gory horror film, *Drillmaster* or something, so instead of finding porn, I found a gore film where someone was driving a drill through a guy's head. One tape I borrowed had a documentary about NAMBLA, that's the National Association of Man-Boy Lovers of America. Pedophiles! After that was a documentary on AIDS patients. Depressing.

I have many influences, actually. There were screenings at the Ateneo Art Gallery. They were showing these rare laserdiscs: *Bicycle Thief*, *Seventh Seal*. I remember that very well. But I've always been attracted to black comedy. Roy Andersson's films have left a mark on me like *Songs From The Second Floor*. There was a scene with a magician sawing a girl in half and literally accidentally saws her in half. In that scene in *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta seemingly came back to life, there was a certain Christ-like

quality I liked. I mentioned Joey Agbayani's *Kidlat*, of course. I also liked *The Man Without A Past*. I'm a big fan of the absurdist, the surreal, even in literature; that's the stuff I'm partial to. But with music, it's more difficult to put a peg on what I like.

I'm now making "Commander Kulas," a film heavily influenced by the paintings of Jose Legaspi. It's an experimental take on the Don Quixote story with Sgt. Pepper in the lead. Of course, every film has its own influences. For "*Idol*": *Bida/Kontrabida* ("*Idol*": *Hero/Anti-hero*), my pseudonym was Ronwaldo Kaufman. Ronwaldo is taken from FPJ's real name Ronwaldo Reyes, and Kaufman is Charlie Kaufman. Even when I write, I wear my influences on my sleeve, or at least in the pen name I use.

I watch a lot of pop films. They influence me a lot, if not the most, like those brothers, the Farrellys, the Marxes. I grew up on local movies on TV, a lot of Lito Lapid, Chiquito, Jun Aristorenas, Tito, Vic, & Joey. I remember one Tito, Vic, & Joey movie set in a house haunted by the family that was massacred there. Disturbing, really. I liked Mike de Leon's *Kakaba-kaba Ka Ba?* (*Will Your Heart Beat Faster?*) And his short film, *Aliwan Paradise*, which was his satire on *Maynila* (*Manila in the Claws of Neon*). But really, all these classics by Bernal, Brocka, De Leon—I lump them all in the same category as those Lito Lapid and Tito, Vic, & Joey films. I grew up on all of them.

I'd like to undertake a massive restoration or at least a preservation drive for these local pop films. Among others, archiving here is a terrible problem. The one I'd like to preserve and restore the most are Manuel Conde's *Juan Tamad* films out of the simple fact that I never got the chance to see them—just the posters and stills, and hearsay.

FINDING THE ALCHEMY IN FILMMAKING

My process changes with each film. Different game, different rules. I edited *Buryong* while I was shooting it: shoot, edit, import. It's vital, not everything will be on script. I shoot films in a day to save on costs but also to maintain a certain energy level—Day Old Flicks. Some take a couple of days. *The Twelve* had, I think, 14 shooting days, 14 very relaxed shooting days. We'd sometimes shoot one scene in an afternoon, nothing so hectic, unlike *Mondomanila* which had a lot of scenes but we shot it within five days, give or take. I once shot 12 short films in less than a week, in Spain, as part of this short film contest among the guests. But that was a special circumstance. I average three features a year. I never had experience with deadlines, because I have never worked under the dictates of a studio, but I keep internal ones based on festival schedules, which is alright. Some people put down writers who write for the Palancas. I don't mind. Sometimes we need deadlines. It's a way to get you to finish something. Winning is secondary.

There's a certain synergy between cast and crew that has to happen, an alchemy which can be difficult as the crew changes with each film. Sometimes we'd have a big professional one, like in *Mondomanila*. Other times, I'd have interns or friends, neighbors. Picking a crew is like picking actors.

Post-production is what takes up a lot of time. I've been working with my editor—Lawrence Ang—since 2005, but I rarely sit down with him during post. I mean, apart from he living in Quiapo which is a long way from where I live, it's about respecting his work process. I'll check up on him, see if I'm happy, see if he's happy, but it's collaborative in the sense that he's left on his own to do what he thinks is right. Same goes for my cinematographer, Albert Banzon. Usually we meet about what I have in mind, and sometimes I throw concepts on the table and then I let him loose. It's a trust-based thing.

ON INSUBORDINATION

Mondomanila is my favorite work. It's a synthesis of everything I've done and I'm aware of that, I was sampling myself, if you will, and the degree of play here is a lot more exhaustive than before. That makes me happy.

I'd sometimes have a hard time with some cast members. They tend to be more bullheaded than me. I don't like that much. I told my dad about this one actor who was giving me problems and my dad, he found it funny, he said at least I had a story to tell and he had a point. But that guy was still a pain.

On "*Idol*", my production manager and one of the lead actors got into a tiff over the lack of an emoticon on a text message, so the actor walks off the set, never to be seen again, and over a smiley! And we'd already shot a lot of his scenes. I could re-shoot everything he was in, but the additional day's of shooting was not exactly very appealing so out of sloth, I had to come up with a surrealist solution and ended up using a different actor in every scene playing the same character.

I had another actor walk off the set of another film. But that was because he had smoked a little too much. He didn't know what he was doing.

UNLIMITED RICE, BOTTOMLESS ICED TEA

I'd like to finish *Edsa XXX: Nothing's Ever Changed In The Republic Of Ever-Change* and *Larombata (Childplay)*. The scripts are done, but I think I'll be working on *Son Of God* first, a collaboration with a Danish filmmaker. There are a lot of other projects, but they're all in my head at the moment.

My real dream project, of course, would be to be given a year, with no idea of what to do, an unlimited budget, and

to have the finest special effects at my disposal. And to cast anyone and shoot anywhere in the world. That'd be ideal.

CINEMA: POETRY, THERAPY, EXORCISM

Cinema is poetry. It is also history and culture and art. And it is what you make of it. An escape. A kind of therapy. An exorcism.

ENJOY ART, ENJOY LIFE

If you want to be a filmmaker, then make a film. Life's too short and shouldn't have room for anything negative.

TO EXPLAIN IS FUTILE

People ask me what the point of my work is. That bugs me, more so when they ask it condescendingly. It's a stupid question, and an offensive one.

Someone asked me that during the Rotterdam Q & A for *Ang Pamilyang Kumakain ng Lupa (The Family That Eats Soil)*. I think my answer was something like, "Don't judge a book by its margins." Bottom line: if you don't get it, you don't. Once the film's made, the filmmaker's work is done.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1994** *Buro! (The Wake)*; *Saranggola (Kites)*
1995 *Kamatayan Ng Presidente (Death Of The President)*; *May Isang Sundalo (There's A Soldier)*; *Epekto Ng Beer Sa Isang Aktor Na Gumaganap Kay Hamlet (The Effect Of Beer On An Actor Portraying Hamlet)*
1996 *Five Shorts*; *Alaala Ng Madaling-Araw (Memory of Forgetting)*
1997 *Mr. Duck Egg Trilogy*; *Sometime In August*; *Bertdey (Birthday)* *Akong Ang Duwendeng Hindi Aka (Akong, The Dwarf That Is Not)*; *Barbeque*; *Dog Day Afternoon*; *Pigs (Baboy)*; *Sorry Ledh*; *Deaf Wish*; *Kids*; *What's The Story? Morning Glory*; *My Room*; *1/4 Day In A Life*; *Susunduin Ko Si Ledh Sa Simbahan (I'm Gonna Fetch Ledh From Church)*; *Young Writers Interview*; *Kukunin Na Ng Meralco Ang Likod Namin (The Electric Company's Gonna Get Our Backyard)*
1998 *Amen, A Brown Comedy*; *Pagtingin Sa Salamin (Looking At The Mirror)*
1999 *Kamias: Alaala Ng Paglimot (Kamias: Memory of Forgetting)*
2000 *Ang Labindalawa (The Twelve)*; *1.The Passenger (Moving Along)*
2001 *Greaseman*
2002 *Pugot (Headless)*; *Barong Brothers*; *Tungkol Sa Wala (John Cage)*
2003 "IDOL": *Bida/Kontrabida: D' Bayani S. Makapili True Story: Pasasabugin Ko Ang Ulo Mo Sa Mga Bala Ko Dahil Gawa Na Ang Lapida Mo, Ako Pa Ang Nagbayad, Dahil Gusto Kong Magsayaw Sa Ibabaw Ng Puntod Mo Sa Sementeryo, Hayop Ka!!! ("IDOL": Hero/Villain: The Bayani S. Makapili True Story: I'm Gonna Blow Off Your Head With My Bullets Coz Your Tombstone Is Already Made, I Even Paid For It, Coz I Wanna Dance Over Your Grave In The Cemetery, You Animal!!!); Sa Wakas (At Last)*

- 2004** *Buryong*; *Kristo*; *Walang-Saysay Na Pasyong Mura Ni Hesus Corazon, Dyus Kong Sukat Ipanlamig Ng Puso Ng Sinumang Inibig (The Profane And Senseless Passion Of Hesus Corazon Who, By The Disgrace Of God, Freezes The Heart Of The Loved One)*; *Ang Pamilyang Kumakain Ng Lupa (The Family That Eats Soil)*; *Lata At Tsinelas (Can & Slippers)*; *Mondomanila: Institusyon Ng Makata (Mondomanila: Institute Of Poets)*; *Small Ali*; *Hindi Ako Si Batman (I'm Not Batman)*; *Dinuguan (Blood Stew)*; *Bass*; *The Bag Is Closed But The Heart Is Open*; *Dehado*; *The Rape And Murder Of Virginio And Virginia P*
- 2005** *Aswang Ng QC (Vampire Of Quezon City)*; *Tatlong Araw Ng Kadiliman Zero (Three Days Of Darkness Zero)*; *Bahag Kings (G-String Kings)*; *Paalam Aking Bulalakaw (Goodbye My Shooting Star)*; *Carta Abierta A Todos Los Terroristas Del Mundo (An Open Letter To All The Terrorists Of The World)*; *Dos Superheroes Cagando, Un Musical De Mierda (Two Superheroes Taking A Crap, A Toilet Musical)*; *A Todas Supermenas Que He Amado (To All The Supergirls I've Loved Before)*; *El Superman Que No Podia Volar (The Superman Who Couldn't Fly)*; *Superman Enamorado (Superman In Love)*; *Aquaboy*; *Pornoman*; *Esperando A Un Superheroe (Waiting For A Superhero)*; *Superheroe En La Cama (Superhero In Bed)*; *No Te Enamores De Una Superheroe (Don't Fall In Love With A Superhero)*; *Doppelganger*; *Superheroe Pasado (Last Superhero)*; *Rugby Boyz*; *Our Daily Bread*; *Victim 21*; *Third Day Of Darkness*; *Bulalakaw (Shooting Star)*; *Bahag Kings*; *Nakalimutan Ko Na (I've Forgotten)*
- 2006** *Ultimo: Distintas Maneras A Matar Un Heroe Nacional (Ultimo: Different Ways Of Killing A National Hero)*; *Ang Pinakamahabang Sandaling Wala Ka (The Longest Moment You're Not Here)*; *Iskwaterpangk (Squatterpunk)*; *Bravo (Ultimo)*; *El Amor Es Valiente (Love Is Brave)*; *Matandang Eastside (Oldeastside)*; *By The Suez Canal*; *The Incredibly Heart-Rending And Fantastically Forbidden Legend Of The Toxic Mango That Bestows A Multitude Of Lessons To All Brave Citizens Of The New Planet Alibuhod*; *Isla Puting Bato (White Rock Island)*; *Soft Night*
- 2007** *The Muzzled Horse of an Engineer In Search Of Mechanical Saddles*; *Philippine Bliss*; *Bangungot Na Bangag (Overdosed Nightmare)*; *Maynila Sa Mga Pangil Ng Dilim (Manila In The Fangs Of Darkness)*; *Tatlong Araw Ng Kadiliman (Three Days Of Darkness)*; *The Last Gag Of Buster Quizon (Nothing Funnier Than Unhappiness)*; *Patay Na Babae Sa Loob Ng Bahay (Dead Woman In My House)*; *Literature*; *Malay Siya, Mali Siya (He's Aware, He's Wrong)*; *Coffee Today Is Better Than Yesterday*; *Zombie Mariachi*; *Kontra Madiaga*; *Pamilya Kariton (The Pushcart Family)*; *Namamasko Po (Christmas Alms)*
- 2008** *Day Tingnga Ti Misterto Ti Kristo Negro (The Middle Mystery Of Kristo Negro)*; *Blackworms*; *Tatlumpu't Apat Na Kulob (Kulob34)*
- 2009-2010** *Cameroon Love Letter (For Solo Piano)*; *Ang Paglilitis Ni Mang Serapio (The Trial Of Mister Serapio)*; *Hindi Kita Kilala (I Don't Know You)*; *Mondomanila: Kung Paano Ko Inayos Ang Buhok Ko Matapos Ang Mahaba-haba Ring Paglalakbay (Mondomanila: How I Fixed My Hair After A Rather Long Journey)*; *K*; *Ang Kaisa-isang Konsiyerto Ng Kagila-gilalas Na Kombo Ni Kumander Kulas At Ng Kanyang Kawawa Subalit Sakdalan Nang Kulay Na Kalabaw Sa Walang Katapusang Kalsada Ng Kamyas (K: The One And Only Concert Of The Amazing Combo Of Commander Kulas And His Poor But Very Colorful Carabao In The Long And Unwinding Road Of Kamias)*; *Son Of God (co-directed with Michael Noer)*



THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

Raya Martin

The two existing parts of Raya Martin's vividly referential History Trilogy—the silent film delirium of *Maicling Pelicula Nang Ysang Indio Nacional* (A Short Film About The Indio Nacional, 2005) and *Independencia* (2009) with its resplendent soundstage forest and Cannes pedigree—mash up and embody the two things above all else that seem to pique him as a filmmaker: history as ghost story, cinema as pure form.

And both do so more perceptibly and more pertinently—if not more sublimely and more poetically as that would be the similarly Cannes-pedigreed but unrighteously underseen *Now Showing* (2008)—than the rest of his current filmography, which scuttles exclusively between (apparent) biography and (alleged) history, the two genres that tend to make prim, reverential curators and/or taxidermists of nearly every filmmaker who dares wade into its muck.

Raya's fascination with the archaic may be self-evident—and it's really closer to love than anything, and love is love even if it is a gleefully fetishistic love—but his aesthetic urges are

primarily dialectic—interrogate the present by going back to the past. His, ours, the republic's, cinema's. His superpowers remain his skittishness and his fidgety experimentalism and his nerve. And it's the rummaging about that happens in the pasts he goes back to, the re-imagining rather than the speculating, the bodysnatching rather than the embalming, that cranks the voltage of his best work up and makes it sing. (*Dodo Dayao*)

A DIFFERENT LEVEL OF REALISM

Digital is economical, it's practical cinema. If you want to shoot, you get up, you shoot. That's the kind of latitude digital gives you. At the same time, it has its own set of aesthetics. It's not just a cheap alternative to making films. It has its own look, its own perception, and it also provides its own unique experience. I'm very conscious about those things and for me, digital has a different level of realism, different from other formats. That, I think, is its most important factor, the way the quality of the image is as close to what our eyes see, the way it's like a default setting for reality.

The prologue of *Indio Nacional* was shot in digital; *Autohystoria*; my first documentary, *Island At The End Of The World* too. My short films, the projections: *Life Projections*, *Track Projections—Possible Lovers*, *Now Showing*, *Next Attraction*. They're mixed formats. I like that. I like how that reflects my consciousness. You live in the now; at the same time, you have this nostalgia, this longing—I can't let go of that because it's a very rare sensation and also I feel, with each new generation, that we will progressively lose this sense of history. That's why I always go back to film.

Olaf was my first film. Back then, I had no consciousness of the schism between video and film or whether one is more audience-friendly, more accessible, more commercial. I just knew I wanted to make a movie. I was 16 or 17 then.

THE MOVING IMAGE

I come from a family of writers. My father is a journalist. He also wrote prose and poetry. My brother followed in his footsteps, and he also writes poetry. I tried writing when I was younger, but couldn't grasp how to make the words my instrument of expression. I did, however, have this fascination with images, that's why I took up photography

as a kid. I moved to video eventually. After high school, I chose to go to film school but failed. But it sank in, eventually, that I needed to make films. But film, not in a commercial sense—but film as images that you make move. Or just images. At some point, I tried applying to be a photographer's assistant. But they never got back to me.

I'D EITHER BE IN THE VISUAL ARTS OR A PRIEST

If not film, I'd be in the visual arts. I remember drawing a lot as a kid, painting, collage, found objects. I don't have a technical bone in my body. That's why photography sometimes annoys me. All the technical stuff. When I was a kid, I remember making collages, doing drawings, working with paint, working with found objects and glue. It's just now that I realize that I do have my roots in the visual arts. I could be in photography now, but I also realize, especially now that I am in cinema, that I am not actually a very technical person. I get irritated with photography's technicality, so much so that it deters me from just getting into it full on. I find it very limiting although of course, there are also limitations in cinema when you work with either film or digital. Cinema really is an instrument of limitations. I mean, you only work with the images that you see in the viewfinder or in the monitor. But when I was a kid, I also wanted to be a priest. There's something personal about it, which is why, like cinema, I'm always guided by the notion that I am not out to make the great Filipino film, or the perfect short film or whatever. My goal is very personal which is for me to find myself, find out what my purpose in life is. It's very philosophical. That's what keeps me grounded and focused.

I did write before, like articles, and I also tried to write poetry, as well as short stories. But at the end of the day, I still consult it with my brother, I let him edit it, double-check. It's like there's always something I'm unsure of. What I'd want from a medium is something that—regardless

if all the people in the world leave me—if I give birth to my work, I am sure of it, even without referring to anyone or asking for anyone's help or advice. That's what I feel with film so that's what I want to do.

THE UNCERTAINTIES OF INDEPENDENT CINEMA IS ITS GREATEST APPEAL

I don't know what I'll be doing next. I'm into historical fiction now but tomorrow, I might feel like doing a genre film or *I Am Cuba 2* or what the fuck. You go by your mood, you go by what you feel like, and that's the liberty you have as an independent filmmaker. If I worked in, say, Star Cinema and I was Cathy Garcia-Molina, all I have to do is wait for the next celebrity love team, make a story around them, and that's my next film. I can't work that way.

I HATE FILM SCHOOLS

Film school teaches you basic film language, sure. Film school exposes you to film writings. Film school also enables you to watch films: *Citizen Kane*, Maya Deren, Russian cinema. What film schools don't teach or allow is breaking the mold, finding your voice which is more important than film writings, film language, films. In the University of the Philippines' Mass Communications course, they prepare you for a job in Star Cinema, in ABS-CBN, in GMA. The reason I'm very outspoken about my hatred for film schools is because I want the students to be aware not only of those options, but that they have other options. Film schools tend to obscure this. Film schools harbor and propagate a particular idea of cinema. That's bullshit. Cinema's been around for only a hundred years; it's only right that we're still fumbling in the dark to define it. It's still a long way from saying this is cinema and this is how to make a film. Film students should be aware of that.

A PINOY FILM IS JUST A MATTER OF MIRRORING YOURSELF

When making my films, I don't necessarily ask myself whether this is Pinoy enough, or how this will impact the Philippines. My films are like mirrors I portray parts of myself on. As much as possible, I try my best to portray those parts of myself accurately and honestly. I'm Filipino. That's what makes my films Filipino. Not the wardrobe, not where I shot it. You can shoot a film in fucking Cavite but if its ideology and sensibility is Western, then it isn't a Filipino film. But Lav Diaz can shoot a film in New Jersey and it will still be very, very Filipino.

CERTAINTY IS THE ULTIMATE FOE

Up to now, I'm still not that sure if I want to remain a filmmaker. Maybe I'm a filmmaker by default. But I don't want to be certain I think because once I am, that'll be the end of it. I stop asking, and lose my drive. Certainty is the ultimate foe.

THE MOST IMPORTANT MOMENT IN MY LIFE AS A FILMMAKER

Deciding to shoot my first film *Ang Isla sa Dulo Ng Mundo* (*The Island at the End of the Earth*) without regard to of what will happen, how people will perceive it, how I will market it was the most important moment in my life as a filmmaker. I took the bus, bought a plane ticket, flew to Batanes where I didn't know anyone and didn't know where to go and just shot and shot and shot.

THE FUTURE OF PINOY CINEMA: KILL AND RESURRECT

It's a cycle. It's always been like this as far back as the 70s, possibly even further back. Shitty films will be made. There will be a slump. Then the mainstream will get back on its feet. Good films will be made. Shitty films will be made. It's inescapable. Just let it be. Kill and resurrect. Then with each cycle, evolve.

THE LOSS OF NOSTALGIA

I was talking to my dad, lamenting that there's an entire new generation that video has deprived of this sense of the past, this sense of nostalgia, and he said that was exactly the same thing artists of his time said with the advent of television. It really does come down to perspective, then.

CINEMA IS SO MUCH, MUCH MORE THAN ENTERTAINMENT

Seeing Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* in class opened me to the reality that cinema is so much, much more than entertainment. *I Am Cuba*, too, which exposed me to activism with heart. But I grew up on horror films: *Halloween*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Blair Witch Project*. I liked Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes' *Aswang* a lot—a very dialectical film, believe it or not; also, very Filipino. Bernal, I like, too. *Manila By Night*. But I think the best Filipino filmmaker is Mike De Leon. I love *Kisapmata (Blink Of An Eye)*. The one film that really stuck with me, growing up, was Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*. That was one of my first encounters of cinema, so there's a degree of nostalgia in it.

MAN-MADE

Cinema is man-made. Also, it's the only art form that requires a contraption, relies on science. It's not like dancing or singing where the art is given over to something beyond us— God, biology, whatever.

INDIE IS NOT JUST A MODE OF PRODUCTION, IT'S AN IDEOLOGY

Indie is not just a mode of production. It's an ideology. You make films outside the mainstream, in the periphery because there should be no room for compromise.

I'm guilty of my own compromises, sure, like when I used name actors for some of my films. It was a very conscious compromise on my part. I thought I needed to do it to survive in the industry, a career move—I was young then. But some people have said I'm only using my youth as an excuse. So be it.

MY EVERCHANGING MOODS

My process changes constantly. Sometimes it happens very quickly, very organically, like with *Possible Lovers*. Sometimes it's very intensive, like with *Indio Nacional*. I was writing notes for two years before we even shot a single frame.

I write scripts, sure. *Autohystoria* took up half a page, I think. *Possible Lovers* was written on my cellphone, on the bus going home. *Now Showing* was a five hour film. I wrote it for one semester, then, for another four months. Then when I did my residency, I kept writing for another four months.

With *Independencia*, I collaborated with a scriptwriter. I'm starting to warm up to collaboration. That's what cinema is anyway, a constant collaboration, unless you're Stan Brakhage, who locks himself in a room and paints on celluloid. But even then, he's collaborating with the celluloid.

PRODUCTION

Economics dictates production always. I shot *Now Showing* in five days. *Independencia*, I shot in 15 days, which is longer than an average independent film shot in Manila, regardless of format. *Autohystoria* took me two days. *Possible Lovers* a few hours. *Island At The End Of The World* was shot in two weeks, and then I edited it for six months.



Autohystoria

I always work with an editor. I never edit. I really hate editing, the feeling of being shut in a room. I get bored. I prefer to go out, explore. *Island At The End Of The World* took six months to edit because I was studying at the time. I shot over 20 hours of footage. *Indio Nacional* was edited for my thesis, and then for my feature. I don't remember how long it took. *Autohystoria* was edited in two weeks. I added the opening walk sequence after. *Independencia* took two weeks, but the editor worked only thrice a week.

I DON'T PICK FAVORITES FROM MY CHILDREN

I always tend to favor my recent work. I also tend to want to forget everything I've done before that. But I can't. It's selective amnesia, maybe. My favorite, at the moment, would be *Independencia*. I think I've grown as a filmmaker and I think it shows there. The last one improves on the one that came before it.

But I can't pick favorites. I love nearly all of them, for different reasons: *Olaf*, my first film, if only for making me realize that I can actually make one; *Bakasyon* because of the discipline it taught me of working with film; *Island at the End of the World* for the sense of independence it gave me; *Indio Nacional* was very satisfying on a lot of levels; *Autohystoria* I did for the hell of it and I love it for that; *Now Showing* was very, very personal. That was my life in those five hours.

My least favorite is *Manila*. I think I was able to do what I wanted to do within the parameters, and also I had the experience of working with movie stars. But it was difficult with all the limitations. I thought that was stupid. I don't think I would want to put myself through that again.

PARTING SHOT

I struggle with myself constantly—always, always looking for answers. I haven't found them yet. That's why I'm the last person to ask for something inspirational to say.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2004** *Bakasyon (Vacation)*
Ang Isla Sa Dulo Ng Mundo
(The Island At The End Of The World)
- 2005** *Maicling Pelicula Nang Ysang Indio Nacional*
(O Ang Mahabang Kalungkutan Ng Katagalugan)
(Short Film About The Indio Nacional
(Or The Prolonged Sorrow Of The Filipino)
- 2006** *Life Projections*
- 2007** *Track Projections*
Long Live Philippine Cinema!
- 2007** *Autohystoria*
- 2008** *Possible Lovers*
Now Showing
Next Attraction
- 2009** *Manila (co-directed with Adolfo Alix, Jr.)*
Independencia



Brillante Mendoza

We cannot take Ebert's axing of Brillante Mendoza, for instance, as a mere flash of random hatred. We cannot take for granted how in three consecutive years, Mendoza has managed to present his films in Cannes: once in the Director's Fortnight, and twice in the Main Competition. We cannot discount the fact that a few months after winning for *Kinatay* (*The Execution of P*, 2009), *Lola* (*Grandmother*, 2009) was a surprise entry in Venice. We cannot be oblivious of his feat as the most awarded Filipino filmmaker internationally, with retrospectives left and right, and with invitations to judge film competitions here and there.

Mendoza has paved the way for other filmmakers to be recognized abroad, for arousing their curiosity in our stories, and for triggering a certain amount of interest in our diminishing regard for social responsibility.

Although greatness doesn't always come with luck, greatness always stays. Greatness prevails, greatness impresses its mark, and greatness is remembered. Mendoza, with his films, does not only represent the Filipinos at present—the struggle to make a living, the political nightmare, the amorality,

the letdown of socio-economic strife—but he also holds out the future on top of them, like a flag raised in surrender. In his films, he commands the realities of our condition to speak for us, downplaying sentimentality in favor of realism that oozes with filth and hopelessness. Mendoza figures in the renaissance of Philippine cinema as the bearer of such esteem, of such determination to pique different audiences across the world, and of such courage to point the camera at the places where no one dares to point at. He seems to be running a race against filmmaking itself, continuously challenging and exposing himself to new experiences, doing what he wants to do—mindless of his critics.

And that's a principle better than any Palme d'Or in the world. (*Chard Bolisay*)

DIGITAL IS ACCESSIBLE

Digital filmmaking, first and foremost, is economical, accessible. Later on, I realized how much it is easier to use. The camera is small, you don't really need lights, like, we shot *Manoro (The Teacher)* in the mountains, just six of us among the Aetas for six days, and everyone was multitasking—I was doing lights, production design. It all comes down to those two things: economics and accessibility. I did shoot my second film *Summer Heat (Kàledo)* in 35mm but that's because the location called for it. It was too beautiful. And both *Foster Child* and *Serbis (Service)* were in 35mm. Both times it was the material that dictated it, and also the budget.

ONE DAY, I WILL BE A DIRECTOR, TOO

I used to work as a production designer. I worked with a lot of mainstream directors. Even back then, I already wanted to be a director. And I was already observing the process. I was remaking the film they were shooting in my head. But when no offers to direct came, I shifted to advertising. Making commercials is an entirely different world from making films. It was also very lucrative and very comfortable. But something was missing. Then an offer to direct came and I took it. I tweaked the material a little and shot it.

MOWELFUND AND TRONONG PUTI

Tronong Puti (White Throne) was actually the product of a scholarship grant with Mowelfund, a partnership with Ateneo. But my batchmates—who were all very outspoken—began to question the way things were being run. “How come of all the scholars, we're the ones paying?” We left and formed our own group. That's when we started making our own projects, basically teaching ourselves how. We talked to the facilitators, those who were already in the industry like Ricky Lee, Peque Gallaga, Marilou Abaya, and Fiel Zabat. We told them we were leaving the scholarship,

doing things on our own. We did a lot of work as a group—like short films, but I didn't get to direct. I was doing mostly production design. But *Tronong Puti* was one of those works.

STEPPING STONE TO DIRECTING

Passion is your only stepping stone. Of course, you have to be familiar with basic film language. But your background hardly matters. Everything rests on passion and having something new to say, knowing what story you want to tell, and knowing how to tell it with your own distinct style.

All my films—if you notice—don't have elaborate production design, almost the opposite of the films I did production design work on. The less production design, for me, the more authentic. I don't try to filter reality.

FINDING WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR

I didn't have money to make films. I had a lot of fears, lacked confidence, mistrusting even the trust others put into me. But I was looking for something, and I wasn't quite sure what. You could say everything fell into place at the right time. I was happy and comfortable with my advertising career but I was also bored. It came to a point when the work was done in my head as soon as I saw the board. It became too easy, I could do it with eyes closed—there was no more challenge. Then I started making films, and it was like weight lifting. It felt so good. My energy for it seemed limitless. That's how it is to this day.

EVOLVING, THE DEFINITION OF INDIE

The definition of indie is constantly evolving. Today, indie is becoming mainstream that it isn't “indie” anymore, not like in the 70s or 80s. It's fashionable. But without an audience, you can't really call it mainstream, can you? Why do you make films? Why do I make films? To make money? Win awards? Go to festivals? I don't know myself. A calling?

A passion? All I know is that I want to make more films. “Indie” stands for independent, right? And independent means you don’t care. Bottom line: just keep making films.

POVERTY ON FILM

The fact is, the truth is, that 85 percent of the people in the Philippines are poor. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. And I’m not really that interested in telling the story of the 15 percent. A foreigner who’s never been to the Philippines or to Southeast Asia came up to me after seeing one of my films, and said he saw our beautiful country and our beautiful people in my film. I like that.

INSPIRATIONS

Ishmael Bernal’s *Relasyon (Affair)* inspired me to want to tell stories through film. It was one of the first films I saw, and the first time I was suddenly conscious of the director. Like most Filipinos, I watched movies for the stars. I worked backwards from there, catching up on the local films I missed like other works of Bernal like *Himala (Miracle)* of course, Lino Brocka’s *Insiang*, Celso Ad Castillo’s *Pinakamagandang Hayop Sa Balat Ng Lupa (The Most Beautiful Animal In The World)*, also *Ang Madugong Daigdig Ni Salvacion (The Bloody World of Salvacion)*; and that scene where Pilar Pilapil is rowing a boat, it was very sensual, very memorable. There’s also an action film he made with Lito Lapid. Celso was an original, very unique and very visual. I liked the gloss of Peque Gallaga and I connected with his work because we were both production designers. The one Mike De Leon film I loved above all was *Kisapmata (Blink Of An Eye)*.

Truffaut’s *400 Blows* and De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* are almost like models for me when it comes to all aspects of my filmmaking, from acting to storytelling to the way the camera moves. Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* is also a favorite.

RESEARCH

Research is my favorite phase of the filmmaking process. It takes up 50 percent of the actual work. I like it because you meet a lot of people, find out a lot of things. It’s the longest phase of the whole process, and sometimes the film you started out to do changes along the way—sometimes into something totally different. *Tirador (Slingshot)* started out about electoral politics through the eyes of a taxi driver but it eventually became a look into the lives of petty criminals. Sometimes, it takes longer than expected. We researched *Serbis* for five years. That was supposed to be the next film after *Masahista (The Masseur)*. The writing follows later, someone else writes, but I’m very involved in it. But I try not to get too involved because I tend to lose perspective when that happens. It’s always better to keep a certain distance from it. Writing usually takes a few weeks to a month. Then there’s preproduction which is very, very intensive. I try to make sure my actors don’t perform but instead become the character. I take them with me on locations during the preproduction stage, continuously talk to them, and discuss with them their characters, their characters’ stories, just so I won’t have to talk with them at length anymore once we get on set. All this preparation is the reason why I only shoot for a few days. It’s not that I’m a fast worker, it’s just that we prepare extensively. Post-production takes longer, like a couple of months. After we finish a rough cut, I distance myself for a couple of days before going back to it. I don’t stop editing until I get the cut I want.

LIVE FOR CAPTURING THAT MOMENT

In *Tirador*—more specifically, in the fight scene between Julio Diaz and Coco Martin—I gave them different instructions that the other didn’t know about. Since their choreography couldn’t mesh, they ended up having an actual fight, which is what we shot. Another example from the same film was Angela Ruiz, wherein her dentures fell



into the muck. I didn't ask her to look for the dentures, but she went ahead and did; she'd stopped acting and became the character. Another time we had to reshoot a mall scene because I had one of the actors replaced, but we didn't have a permit anymore, nor could I afford to get one, so we did it very guerilla, just have the actors go in the wall and act; and that scene where the cops chased the students, the only direction I gave was to run and the camera will just follow so that's what they did and the people actually thought they were real pickpockets. Capturing a real moment, that's what I was after in *Tirador*—and what I've been after as a filmmaker.

ACTORS SHOULD BECOME THE CHARACTER

Coco Martin knows how not to perform. He becomes the character. That's why I respect him a lot. He's very young, but he has a very mature perspective of his craft. He does research, takes the scenes somewhere else. Jiro Manio is another. There was one scene in *Foster Child*, where he had to cook and I was surprised at how familiar he had become with the place we were shooting in. He cooked as if he had lived there all his life.

THE PURPOSE WILL REVEAL ITSELF IN TIME

I thought that making films would be what I would want to do for the rest of my life. But right now, I have this urge to teach—almost a calling—impart everything I know and learned, have this dialogue with students. Of course, I probably won't be making films for the rest of my life and it's likely I'll be doing something else after. What that something is, I don't know. But I'm not worried. Whatever it is, whatever purpose, it'll reveal itself in time.

A FILMMAKER'S GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT

It's not really the awards or the money but it's how you impact an audience, how much of the film they will carry with them after the lights go up and they've gone back home. How long will they carry it? A couple of days? A

week? Did it change them or the way they see things? Open their eyes to something? And it doesn't necessarily have to be the entire audience. Someone once came up to me after a screening of *Foster Child*, and she couldn't contain herself—she was shaking and crying and she held my hand and all she could say was, "I'm a foster mother." That was very touching and gratifying. If I could do that with just a couple of people in my audience, I've achieved the ultimate.

NOW THAT WE'RE BEING NOTICED BY THE WORLD, DON'T PASS UP THE CHANCE

The whole world seems focused on the country now, in terms of cinema. They're waiting for what comes next. For the last few years, there has been a new generation of filmmakers making a lot of waves. It used to be that Lino Brocka was Philippine cinema. That's not the case anymore. It's exciting, but it's also challenging because expectations have become rather high. But this is our chance, and I feel it's our responsibility not to let it pass. The opportunities are there for the grabbing. Let's grab it. Let's show the world. There's a lot more attention given to Southeast Asia in terms of world cinema these days; it's veered away from Europe where it used to be. Nobody wants it to end but these things come in cycles so we have to make sure we make the most of our time in the cycle. The technology is there not just for making films, but for making films better.

CAPTURING THE REAL

Someone once asked me why I make the kind of films I make. I want to capture reality, truth—as simple as that. I don't want to edit it or make it pretty. Ugliness, corruption, poverty—whatever else is out there that needs to be exposed. You know that I figuratively put myself in all my films—that's part of the truth I want to put up there. It's a little like baring your soul.

FILMOGRAPHY

2005 *Masahista (The Masseur)*

2006 *Kaleldo (Summer Heat)*

Manoro (The Teacher)

2007 *Foster Child*

Tirador (Slingshot)

Pantasy (Fantasy)

2008 *Serbis (Service)*

2009 *Kinatay (The Execution Of P)*

Lola (Grandmother)



Sherad Anthony Sanchez

With only two feature films under his belt, Sherad Anthony Sanchez has already proven himself to be one of the country's more formidable filmmakers—unrelenting when it comes to his art and unresponsive to the pressures of his financial backers. *Huling Balyan Ng Buhi* (*Woven Stories Of The Other*, 2006) once had Bembol Roco as part of its cast. The final film however is devoid of his presence, or any presence of commercial cinema whatsoever. The film is at once a visual poem, a document on the war in Mindanao, a lament on the dissipation of culture, and a mindboggling puzzle that is not meant to be solved but only to be experienced. Despite its impenetrability, the film earned Sanchez numerous accolades here and abroad.

Imburnal (*Sewer*, 2008) is an even more taxing endeavor. Five hours long, with staggered sequences that contain scenes that showcase the most banal and most mundane moments of living, and infrequent escapades towards explicit sexual depictions and utterances, the film is frustrating because it is impossible to decode and is a perpetual mystery. Yet, as what we have learned in *Huling Balyan*, Sanchez's films are not

meant to incite vapid intellectualizations. They are pure cinematic experiences, nebulous and mysterious because Sanchez does not insist on imposing his world-view on his audience but only suggests incitement, inviting the audience to partake in the filmmaking experience, and turn Sanchez's carefully synchronized images, musical cues, and manufactured atmospheres into starting points for discourse.

Sanchez, mature beyond belief, is undoubtedly one of the most promising filmmakers in the country. (*Oggs Cruz*)

THE ULTIMATE WEAPON OF PINOY CINEMA

The ultimate weapon of Pinoy cinema is the diversity of its aesthetics. In other countries, the interest often dies because of the singularity of their aesthetics. Diversity is necessary for a more dynamic exchange of energy, inspiration, discourse. This is what I would encourage more from our filmmakers—to keep their voice, protect their vision. Aesthetics spring from us continuously, from the French New Wave to Russian old-school montage to edgy Kurosawa-Hitchcock narratives to Southeast Asian. We even have Latin American modes through the works of Brillante Mendoza and Jeffrey Jeturian. It's on hand or developing. The only aesthetics that Philippine cinema doesn't have is a good mainstream cinema.

Everything with a Filipino sentiment, context and truth, and what's more interesting is the continuous discovery of filmmakers especially from the regions where there are no concepts of rules, tradition or influence, or are scrapped for a unique craft of their own—it would seem that our weapons really would be the amount of filmmakers pursuing their own visions.

A lot of Filipino filmmakers, the ones of note at least, have found a way to express the personal through the political and vice versa. They work with this huge social canvas to say something personal. Location is my canvas. Experience my paint.

DIGITAL IS WRONG FOR MY AESTHETICS

A lot of people say, given my aesthetics, that digital is the wrong format for it. And looking at my work, I have to agree with people who say it should have been shot on film. I actually consider it irresponsible on my part as a filmmaker to use digital because I know my aesthetics. Then again, given my age, my immaturity as a filmmaker and with film, you can't afford to make too many mistakes;

you have to be more in control. But I like mistakes. Mistakes, some mistakes, tend to expand the cinematic experience. It's truer in a way. I'm open to digital if only for how much room it gives you to explore.

WHY FILM? BECAUSE I HAVE NO EYE-TO-FOOT COORDINATION

I don't know why I went into film. I can't write. I can't paint. I can't make my hands do what I want them to do. I don't have eye-to-foot coordination so I can't dance. Only with film have I found a way that I could be. I don't even consider filmmaking a talent. But it's a way of saying my piece. If people say they don't understand it, so be it. I don't understand it myself. That's why I made it. Film is my means of connecting with other people.

THE MIDNIGHT COOK

Cooking is the closest thing to film for me because it communicates through sensations and not through logic—which is not to say that there's no room for logic in cinema but cinema is beyond logic. I don't really have to understand a work of art thoroughly. I don't like having that power over a piece of art. That reduces art to science. Art's struggle is to veer away from science.

I do cook. I cook whatever I feel like cooking. It's also a great way to bring our family together. If they find out I'm cooking something, everyone stays over at the house. I cook all afternoon but I only serve food at midnight. I don't know why that is. I don't think I've done that with a film though—screening it at midnight.

When people ask me why I'm depressed, I tell them it's because I can't cook, which means I'm having trouble hooking into a sensation for a film. Something's off. That's when I recognize that I have things I should resolve before I can make a film.



As clichéd as it is, love is really the secret to making a film—love for the medium, love for the people around you, love for yourself, love to the point that you extend yourself to all these. It's the same with cooking—this love for the people you'll be feeding.

CINEMA IS CINEMA

The cliché is that film combines all the six arts. But I find each artform unique unto itself. Each has their specific level and degree of sensation. Literature is literature just as cinema is cinema.

INDIE? INDIFFERENT

I don't like using the label indie because that's what it is now—a label. Well, I'm indifferent to it. It's become inadequate. There's mainstream, there's not mainstream, there's cinema with producers and cinema without. A lot of independent films have very mainstream sensibilities. If we must use labels, I'd rather go for "alternative"—alternative to formula, to convention, to the mainstream.

FILIPINO-NESS IS NOT A CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

The funny thing is most people think that when we make our films, we are overly conscious about being Filipino. But we're not, are we? All this identity shit is causing regionalism. It's as important to encourage regional cinema as it is to encourage Philippine cinema. But to reduce yourself to your ethnicity is full of shit. I've been asked if Philippine culture is losing its identity. What identity? I don't think now is the right time to define it anyway. It's still a work in progress.

DEFINING MOMENT

Everything started with *Apple*, my short film and with my teacher, Quark Henares, who enabled me to do it. As a tribute to my teachers, I consider Quark my paper, and Bing Lao my pen. I had the idea in my head since I was in high

school and I didn't know I was going to be a filmmaker; all I knew that it was going to be made into a film someday.

But there was no defining moment. Nor is there any breakthrough, if you will. I just make films. Think, do, and put in heart. I get uncomfortable when someone calls me "direk" (Filipino slang for director). I'm uncomfortable with calling myself a filmmaker. I'm uncomfortable with labels. They're reductive. Or you can just blame my immaturity. Basically, I'm an advocate of culture. And the platform for my advocacies is cinema.

HOPING FOR A LIFE THROUGH THE PROCESS OF CINEMA

Making films, for me, is a process of actualization—a process of gathering yourself and healing, a genuine exercise of being, of becoming who I really am. I'm hoping to get a life through the process of cinema.

I hope that we can cultivate an aesthetic that expresses the dynamics between the social and the personal.

THE ATENEO WAY

My exposure to film came very late in my life. I have few influences in terms of film. But Ateneo was a big influence. I studied there from grade school until college—Ateneo de Davao and then Ateneo de Manila. Ateneo molded me to become a student, a student for life. Ateneo encouraged me to think, to be curious, and to ask questions. There's an undercurrent of the philosophical and that shows in the works of filmmakers who came from here. Khavn's has that curiosity. John Torres' films may be very spiritual and personal, but they're also very philosophical. The same goes with Lav Diaz.

RAPED BY JOHN & MARSHA

You know how it's like to spend your childhood looking for a way to express the experience inside yourself but not

finding any? That was how I grew up. I tried dancing, and drawing, and writing, and they weren't it. If you're from Davao, being a filmmaker was not an option. I only saw the possibility of cinema when I got my first VHS player and started watching films. There was no film in particular but rather films—cinema, in general. Ishmael Bernal's *Nunal Sa Tubig* (*Speck In The Water*), Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon* (*Evolution Of A Filipino Family*), Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* and *Cache*, also Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* or *Ivan's Childhood*, Bergman's *Persona*. These are some of the films that spoke directly to the experiences inside me.

John & Marsha was, I think, the first movie I saw in the theater. I think I slept through it. I don't remember anything about it. I remember going into the theater and then—nothing. Just like amnesia, like I had been raped. Something did happen inside that movie house.

THE SCRIPT IS NOT MY GUIDE; IT'S A GAUGE OF MY READINESS

An idea has to gestate in me for at least two years. That's what has happened with all my films, even the short film. My process changes with each film. And as much as the process will bring an experience into life as a finished film, the process is an experience unto itself. If you thought *Imburnal* (*Sewer*) was very repulsive, you have no idea what I went through while making it.

Does the script come first? It depends. I usually have a script when making a film, but that's not really the film I end up making. The script isn't even a guide; it's just a measure of my readiness. It just means I'm ready to make my film. I usually take it apart until all that's left is the first and last sequence. When Cinema One interviewed me before making *Imburnal*, the panel expressed concern that like with *Huling Balyan* (*Woven Stories of the Other*), I might change the script I submitted again. It's a risk on their part.

POST-PRODUCTION IS LIKE POST-PARTUM DEPRESSION

You have to listen to the process. That was what I learned while making *Huling Balyan*, which was not sensitive to the process at first because I wasn't listening. We were making it, knowing we would fail, but we just laughed at it. We had one week to shoot a feature. We never thought we would finish it. Surprisingly, we did. With *Imburnal*, I had learned to listen to the process. I was palpitating while I wrote the screenplay, the screenplay which I eventually abandoned.

The thing with film is that you're working with a lot of people and you must be in tune with their energies, their mistakes, their flaws, their issues, personal or otherwise. The location has its own process. The material, you must get along with all that. It takes me half the shoot. It's like a dance. You have to catch the right rhythm, the right meter; everything else follows once that happens. I really try to be more sensitive to the call of the process.

It's almost as if I'm possessed when I shoot. I have this unstoppable energy, and it goes just as fast. It's become a source of my prowess. I don't have specific memories but I do recall this sense of being consumed. Even the crew around me notices it. In fact, I first heard about it from them.

Post-production is like post-partum depression—coming down from this high you get from shooting and then you leave all that behind and sit in front of the computer. With *Imburnal*, I was so depressed that I couldn't edit. And I had to edit it myself. It was that kind of film. When my crew found out, they went to my house to keep me company. They didn't know how to edit, but they were there to uplift my spirits so I could. And I did. I also cooked for them, played VJ, picked out movies for marathons. I needed some

energy to rub off on me. And my crew gave me that. They don't have any idea what I'm doing but they trust me implicitly, which is very important.

I like working with musicians. I have so much respect for music but it's a totally different experience, separate from filmmaking.

THE APPLE, THE SHAMAN, AND THE SEWER

Apple was the film that showed me that it was possible to make one. *Huling Balyan* was a spiritual and magical experience, and extremely enlightening. *Imburnal*, however, was totally different, dark. It showed me, not just the skeletons in my closet, but the *imburnal* or sewer inside of me. It was a shocking, disturbing, and very dark experience not because of the cast or the filmmaking but because making it cost me so much as a person. But it was ultimately very healing.

ADVICE FOR ASPIRING FILMMAKERS

Just recognize that the value of cinema is beyond images.

FILMOGRAPHY

2005 *Apple*

Iyak Ni Maria (The Cry Of Maria)

Abstraction

2006 *Huling Balyan Ng Buhi*

(Woven Stories Of The Other)

2008 *Imburnal (Sewer)*



HAY ARAW KA RIN



DANCE
FESTIVAL

Aureaus Solito

In *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (*The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, 2005), Aureaus Solito reveals the coming-of-age of a gay boy who lives with his family of petty crooks who inevitably falls in love with an upright cop. *Tuli* (*Circumcision*, 2005) is about a young uncircumcised man who becomes the third party to the lesbian relationship of two women who are shunned for their alternative lifestyles. *Pisay* (*Philippine Science*, 2007) documents the lives of children while studying in the prestigious Philippine Science High School. *Boy* (2009) is about a boy who sells all of his comic books to be able to afford a night with a macho dancer.

A review of Solito's filmography will immediately reveal a thirst for telling stories about the invisible and marginalized: the gay boys of *Maximo Oliveros* and *Boy*, the shunned lesbians and uncircumcised man of *Tuli*, the sheltered geniuses of *Pisay*. However, instead of depicting these characters as outsiders in a community with a conceived social norm, they are depicted with normalcy. Their issues on the other hand are treated without the sensationalism that would usually accompany such stories. Granting Maxi's affection towards a

cop years his senior with the gentleness and innocence it deserves, the boy's first sexual experience the poetry that should accompany such a beautiful awakening, the students' scholarly aspirations, the typical conflicts of growing up within a larger social framework, and the deviants' rebellion a cultural depth. Obviously, and contrary to the many criticisms to Solito whose more recent works seem to lack the intriguing audacity of his brilliant *Suring And The Kuk-ok* (1995), Solito remains a filmmaker of indubitable integrity, investing much of who he is to the films he has and will be directing. (*Oggs Cruz*)

SERENDIPITY LED ME TO DIGITAL

I got into digital filmmaking by accident. Yes, accident. Or, serendipity. I really believe in the magic of serendipity. *Basal Banar (Sacred Ritual of Truth, 2002)*—my documentary about the issues in my tribal land in South Palawan—was the last 16mm film edited in PIA (Philippine Information Agency) before the machines there got busted, and they eventually phased out their facilities. When that happened, that was the end of the 16mm. That was why I went digital. I still love 16mm so much, but there are no more machines for developing in the Philippines.

When Cinemalaya came, they had this fund for digital films for P500,000. I got to do my first feature. Actually, since 1995, I've been looking at doing a fiction feature for about ten years, about my roots in Palawan. But no one wanted to produce an indigenous film. Through Cinemalaya, I got to do a fiction feature film, *Ang Pagdadalaga Ni Maximo Oliveros (The Blossoming Of Maximo Oliveros)*. After that, every year, I got to make a digital feature: *Tuli (Circumcision)*, and then *Pisay (Philippine Science)* then *Boy*. From waiting ten years to do a feature film to doing a feature film a year—that's how dramatically digital revolution changed things for me.

The first time *Maximo* competed at an international film festival was at the Montreal World Film Festival. The digital film competed against 35mm films. *Maximo* was the only digital film there, and people were actually surprised. They were awed by how *Maxi* looked like film. We did a digital projection in Montreal. Eventually, when my film won the Golden Zenith for First Fiction Feature Film during the awards ceremonies, I said during my acceptance speech, "This award is for the Third World. Digital filmmaking has democratized third world to first world countries, and has evened out the playing field. Technology has given us a voice. Our imagination can now be expressed. We might be poor, but not in spirit."

AESTHETICS IS THE SAME, ONLY THE TOOLS HAVE CHANGED

Actually, my aesthetics never changed. I applied what I know about cinema. It's the same; only the tool has changed. The only difference is that now the cameras are lighter and more compact. You can now enter places that you couldn't enter before. You can also film in a more intimate community, in a more intimate matter. The intimacy of the medium is what makes it revolutionary. When we shot *Maximo* in my street in Sampaloc, it was very easy. The people weren't even looking at the camera. Compare that to what would have happened if I had used a big crew that's normal in a 35mm filming set-up. That's the good thing about it: you can now get into the tiniest spaces—something you cannot do with 35mm camera. In terms of speed, everything's a snap; you can just edit right away. You don't have to do synching, unlike with 16.

I WENT BACK TO MY ROOTS, AND THERE I DISCOVERED FILM

I started in the Theatre, as a playwright. I wrote my first play *Esprit De Corps* when I was 17, thanks to the late great Rene Villanueva who was my playwriting mentor. The play was eventually staged in CCP (Cultural Center of the Philippines) and was published in two anthologies: *Mga Bagong Tinig ng Dula (New Voices In Theatre)* in 1987 and *Ladlad: An Anthology Of Philippine Gay Writing* in 1993. Eventually, as a Theatre Major at the University of the Philippines, I also directed, designed sets, and acted in Theatre.

That was also some kind of serendipity—how I became a director. When Chito Jao, the artistic director of ALAMAT, Alyansa Ng Makabayang Teatro (Alliance Of Nationalist Theatre) couldn't find a director to direct the third play, *Ang Nazarena* by Chrsi Millado as part of the trilogy of Rizal women *Kutsilyo, Pamaypay, At Yantok (Knife, Fan, And Stick)*, he asked me to direct it. I staged *Sisa* with 25-foot-

long hair, as a metaphor for the oppression of women. When the play worked and received good critical reviews in UP, I realized then, “Hey, I can actually direct!” I eventually formed my own theatre group, the UP Tropa Experimental Company.

One night, while I was at the 1992 UP Creative Writers Workshop, all the writing fellows told ghost stories. When it was my turn to tell a story, I told them about the Kuk-ok, shapeshifters, and the magic in Palawan. The other fellows were so amazed and told me, “That’s like Garcia Marquez’s, your mom’s stories.” It was really something special. Even Roger Sikat—who was my mentor in UP—told me not to go to another country but to go back to my roots, and trace where these stories came from. When I did my playwriting and directing thesis *Ang Maikling Buhay ng Apoy (The Brief Lifespan of Fire)* about the Palawan myths that my mother told me when I was a child, I promised myself that I’d trace my roots back to Palawan when I graduated.

When I returned to Palawan, I found out that I did have indigenous roots, that my mother came from a lineage of Shaman kings—the Tungkul, and that she belongs to the Palawanons or Palaw’an tribe. When I attended this sacred ritual called Basal, and there I saw the shamans falling into a trance-like state, I was inspired. Eventually, I lived with my tribe for for quite some time, and I myself experienced this magical trance. I realized that I needed a different medium to express this experience.

When I got back to Manila, there was the Mowelfund workshop. In one poetry reading, while I was reading a poem I wrote, Nick Deocampo saw me and invited me to become a scholar at the workshop. It was an animation 16mm film workshop. There, I was able to make my first short film in 16, *Ang Maikling Buhay Ng Apoy, Act 2 Scene 2: Suring And*

The Kuk-Ok (The Brief Lifespan Of Fire, Act 2, Scene2: Suring And The Kuk-Ok), which was based on a scene from my thesis play.

I was just brought here, to filmmaking. I could have been a scientist. But then when I was in Philippine Science High School, we were made to direct Rizal’s life in *Noli Me Tangere*. The scenes I directed were a hit with the students and teachers. Eventually, it got to the point that whenever I directed a scene, the students from the other classes would come. I had a box-office hit, I had a following among my fellow students. So directing really was my talent—either in film or in theatre, digital or 16, and hopefully, eventually, 35. But they’re all just mediums—theatre, 16, 35, digital. I’m first and foremost a director. I only realized that now.

FILM CAPTURES EVERYTHING

In film, you can do documentary, you can get the real thing. I can’t transport the whole Palawan onto the stage. I can simulate, yes, with lights or something, but somehow, with film, there is this unfolding that you capture. It’s a definite unfolding. Unlike with theatre, with every showing, it’s different. With film, if there’s something you want to say, you have to capture it either in digital or celluloid. If I saw the ritual, I can’t have it simulated in theatre. It’s much better if they see the actual texture. Film is also texture—I mean, it’s the exact texture of the culture.

YOUR OWN VISION OF THE WORLD

Independent filmmaking is when you realize your visions. Every person, every artist sees a universe. I see the world in frames. Sometimes I see images, and I want to be able to capture them. So when you say “Independent Cinema,” it feels very good because you’re free to do what you want. If you’re in the mainstream, you’re choked, you’re being told what to do. With the Indie Spirit, you’re free to realize your own vision of the world. All artists do that, but as an



Ang Pagdadalaga Ni Maximo Oliveros (The Blossoming Of Maximo Oliveros)

independent filmmaker, you transform cinema into art—an art form.

TORN BETWEEN THE WORLDS OF FILIPINOS THEN AND TODAY

I grew up in Sampaloc, the heart of Manila but genetically, I also have the blood of the Palawanon tribe running through my veins. The Tabon man, the oldest man in the Philippines, is genetically similar to the Palawanon. So, I came from the lineage of one of the first peoples in the Philippines. But, I was part of the first generation from our tribe that was not born in the ancestral land. It is the interweaving of these two worlds, of this ancient and this modern world, that molds my vision in my art. I grew up around the slums, but I have this nice house around the slums, so basically, I understand my neighbors, who have also been my friends for some time. This is reflected in my cinema.

I am torn between two worlds: of the Filipinos then, and the Filipinos today. It's also hard because it's like I'm always in a trance, as if I'm two persons in one—like a world bridger.

TECHNOLOGY IS BOTH A BOON AND A BANE

Personally, I want to be able to do my dream film about my people—my tribe, the Palaw-an. I want the world to know what we're really like as a people. It's one of the least known tribes in the world. That's my dream. Once I'm able to do that, I want all my films to be just about Palawan—Palawan and Sampaloc, because Sampaloc is the heart of Manila. I don't think I can make upper class films because I don't know their world. Films like those from the mainstream, those false movies, fantasy movies—they just give the people false hopes anyway. I want to show the ancient Filipinos, what we really are. This desire is also reflected in *Maximo*—the ancient “tribe-ness” of the people.

For Philippine films, we're on the verge of the golden age. At the same time, we have this huge responsibility, you know. This golden age will disappear, too. But I feel that we must go back to the drawing board—not necessarily all the way back, but since we're now being recognized worldwide, I miss the time of, say, Brocka, who was being recognized by the masses. I also hope that there comes a point in time when indie becomes mainstream. Actually, that's really where we're headed now, but the question is how. I hope this is the way to it. Let's not miss the opportunity. I mean, cinema has been an art for just a hundred years, so it's still relatively very young. There's still a lot of possibilities. It can go many places; *marami pa tayong sasaing bigas* (we still have so much rice to cook).

In terms of digital flow, there's still so much more that can be expressed. There are so many more cultures that have yet to be seen which can help further the understanding of humanity. Technology is also a factor because currently, it is alienating the poor. But at the same time, technology can help make the world see the poor, so it works both ways. So it's up to the “Tungkuls” or the shamans of cinema to heal and to show the world what humanity is.

MELODRAMA MIXED WITH MAGIC

Nunal Sa Tubig (Speck In The Water) by Ishmael Bernal is a favorite. It's got that certain folkness to it, the abstract mysticism. Then *Insiang* by Brocka, the classic tragedy. You know, they're tragedians before. That's why all the films during the 70s had violent endings. Their thesis then was that, in a society under a dictatorship, under martial law, tragedy is the end. There's no redemption. That's why the things they did then were all going downhill. I also like Peque Gallaga's *Scorpio Nights* for its eroticism. It was able to capture the really erotic Pinoy eroticism. Kidlat Tahimik's

Turumba is also my favorite. He's ahead of all these films about how modernity affects small communities. I was also lucky enough to experience the Golden Age of Philippine Cinema in the 70s, when quality Filipino films were being shown in moviehouses, and people were lining up to watch them.

Internationally, I like *400 Blows* by Truffault. I saw *400 Blows* at the Centennial of World Cinema, and that's when I decided that I do want to make a coming-of-age film someday because the film made me cry. I also love Kurosawa's films, *Ran* and *Rashomon*, for example. *Rashomon* was shown to us in Pisay (Philippine Science High School) when we were freshman. It opened our minds right away to the greatness of cinema. I was like, "Damn, our teacher is opening our minds too early!" But seriously, that's what we need. You need to open the minds of the people to the many possibilities otherwise the people in power will maintain that you can only go up to this point. That's all you can do, there are no other possibilities. So for me, it's really a sin what this mainstream people are doing. It's the absolute sin on humanity, on their own people. You impoverish the person, you make a whole generation stupid.

My mother was also an influence, probably because of the magic realist landscape that I grew up in. This world that I grew up in—Sampaloc—is melodramatic, mixed with magic. I guess it's contradictory, these paradoxical selves.

NO SHOT LISTS, NO PREPS

As I said earlier, first and foremost, I am a director. So, I really want to direct. During the time I was in theatre, I wanted to do plays. I have to be passionate about what I'm directing, what I'm doing. When I did the documentary about my tribe, I really, really love my tribe; and there was

this oppression happening, so I wanted to show what was happening. My requirement is I should be saying something, I want to change something. There has to be passion.

When I read *Maximo*, I was looking for a progressive gay film. I said, "Okay, I want to do this."

When I read Jim Flores' *Tuli for Viva*, I said, "Wow, it was near the folkness of my tribe!" I understood it, so I wanted to do it.

In *Pisay*, when we were building it, I was inspired by my classmates who were exiled to other countries because of political reasons, by my classmates who were kicked out—all of these things. As long as I understand, as long as I like it, as long as I believe in it, I want to say it, make something out of it. For example, in the ritual, you want to have your fortune told. So there, as long as you want to do something, there's super intention.

Ka Elmo, when I directed *Tuli*, you know, he got my style. He told me, "Aurachus, I'm really shocked." I said, "Why Tito Elmo?" He said, "You don't do shot lists?" I said, "Yeah." "Amazing! You don't do shot lists!" He caught it—that I don't do shot lists, I don't prepare. Instead, I practice my cast, the energy is high, and then zoom! I'll be able to think about the framing, the shot. I'll tell my cinematographer, "This is what we'll do." That's how instinct works. Even in theatre, I follow the same process. I don't do blocking; I don't do paper block. Instead, the scene will just really unfold. My style is more aural.

Afterwards, I enjoy watching my films with an audience. Because I'm still a ritual person at heart, there always has to be an audience and I must see if I've succeeded. That's one thing I learned from Tony Mabesa, the theatre director—you don't direct a play, you direct the audience.

I LOVE ALL MY CHILDREN

Well, all of them are my children, so I love them all. As for the film closest to me, I have two, maybe. That's a difficult question. I mean, there are two universes that I understand: the Sampaloc universe and the Palawan universe. I think *Basal Banar* captures my Palawan universe. But, I still have to make that fiction film about my tribe, which is my dream. But one thing that is captured in *Basal Banar* is our rituals. The Elders in the film have passed on but not before telling the story of our people. Watching it again is kind of hard for me because these are elders that I love, and they've died, and they told the story of our people, and it's like their legacy to me.

As for the Sampaloc side, it's *Maximo Oliveros* because, a Filipino from abroad told me on Facebook, "You know, I saw *Maximo* abroad, and I saw our streets." He was also from Sampaloc. That film—it's not necessarily about *Maximo*. Somebody also told me, "Actually, this film is an ode to your streets, to Sampaloc. It's your love for your streets."

FILM IS LIKE A MAGICAL RITUAL

Film is the weaving of experiences—the sight, feelings, taste which were not seen, felt, or tasted by others. You go through a different experience in your life rife with truths, lies, images, trance-like stages. These are then what you dig deep into when you create a film. That's the only way for them to see. You give that experience a body. You embody through film the experiences you went through, your emotions. Then other people see it, and they themselves see it in their own persons. It's like a ritual—you sprinkle magic everywhere, elements that you put in to achieve a certain catharsis from your audience. That's film for me.

I'm still making films, still learning, still searching for truths, still going through rituals, still rediscovering my Palawanon voice. I'm still looking for this style that's uniquely mine, that's really Palawan, the Palawan-ness of things.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1995** *Ang Maikling Buhay Ng Apoy,*
Act 2 Scene 2: Suring At Ang Kuk-Ok
(The Brief Lifespan Of Fire,
Act 2 Scene 2: Suring And The Kuk-Ok)
- 1996** *Ang Huling El Bimbo (The Last El Bimbo Dance)*
- 1998** *Impeng Negro (Black Nuisance)*
- 2002** *Basal Banar (Sacred Ritual Of Truth)*
- 2003** *Larong Digmaan (Playing War)*
- 2004** *Larong Kalye (Street Games)*
Tawa (Laughter)
- 2005** *Ang Pagdadalaga Ni Maximo Oliveros*
(The Blossoming Of Maximo Oliveros)
Tuli (Circumcision)
- 2007** *Pisay (Philippine Science)*
- 2009** *Boy*



John Torres

Equal parts hunter-gatherer, documentarian, and diarist, John Torres is a one-man rebel without a crew, without a script, without a cast, without a map, without much of anything resembling conventional moviemaking tropes. All he has is his camera, the germ of whatever it is he's inclined to pursue, a surfeit of curiosity and a willingness, perhaps even an eagerness to succumb to the inevitable machinations of vicissitude. Taken one way, it's like some iteration of found narrative, the way he forages for footage then traces, or makes up, the joins that would connect them after.

Break it down and it's merely reversing the method—shoot first, script later. It's how documentaries are made, really. Except that documentaries have more coordinates guiding it, are more zeroed-in. John's work is more random, more prone to organic moodswings, and more often than not spins off into fictional tangents. But he does tend to place himself in all his films—the *Otros Trilogy* of shorts that sift through the wreckage of a breakup, the nervy paranoia of *Todo Todo Teros*, the shapeshifting *Years When I Was A Child Outside*—bonding with

it, almost physically, almost uncomfortably, essentially becoming both creator and creation. It has nothing to do with narcissism and everything to do with a purer symbiosis between filmmaker and film. And they are documentaries of a sort, documentaries of the self and all the attendant permutations that go with that. It is that autobiographic vibrancy that makes them *sui generis*. That, and the poetry of people that is its beautiful fallout. (*Dodo Dayao*)

DIGITAL MAKES YOU FEEL AT HOME

Because it's cheap. Let's start with the cheapest—the first camera that I used. It was a camera at home—it was just there, almost like an appliance. You're at home using that camera, even your family and the friends that you shoot are at home with it. That affected my choice because that's the aesthetics. You want to be able to capture, more than anything else, what is real, the lack of self-consciousness on the part of the people you're shooting. It started when I was young; I liked gathering images that I see from after. And of course, the digital medium is the most ideal because you don't have to set it up, and you don't have to wait for it to develop. You can rewind it, play, forward, record, pause. Plus, it's cheap. But since it's also cheap, it's just lying around in the house, so in turn, I was very comfortable with it being an extension of my hands and eyes.

"GOD, BREAK MY HEART." AND HE DID.

I tried to write. My dad wrote self-improvement books. That was the stuff I read growing up rather than stories. And there was this pressure to become a good writer. I never considered myself one. But I was predisposed for the arts, I think, because I've always had this need to express, this need to ask, and ask, and find answers. They were like these images in my mind. These became my friends growing up. Also, words I heard from afar, sounds I made up, it all mixed in my head. It entertained me as a kid.

My interest in cinema came in high school. We had a Film Appreciation class in my sophomore year: editing, and cinematography, and continuity, the language of certain angles.

I always felt sheltered and spoiled as a kid and up until high school, all those issues of growing up—I didn't have those. My childhood was happy but it was also a little boring. In one prayer meeting I was in, I prayed to God, "Is this all

there is to life? Break my heart." And He did. I found out that my dad had another wife, another family, and debts. The house we were living in was being repossessed. One by one, our cars, all our furniture were gone. I was devastated then. I didn't have the coping mechanism for that kind of loss. I saw the heartbreak on the folds of my mother's face, her grief. Then, even our maids, I felt, one by one, started to get sick, and it was like, "What the?!!!" My then-girlfriend, I was going to marry her, I was going to be with her for the rest of my life I thought, but she left me and had a change of heart. All of this happened in one year!

That was in '99. I was doing freelance work, making good money. But the family business went down. We were actually the first to explore new media, in schools at least, but now everybody had adapted to it. We used to burn interactive CDs. My dad was such a serious hobbyist with video, editing, photography. We had all the equipment that we needed, that's what I used to practice on. But all that were gone. I had a business, I lost that, too. I lost my girlfriend. I quit my job, which paid well. I wore a *barong* every day. I had a future there. But I just quit one day, for no reason. I had a hard time coping with what was happening.

INDIE IS TELLING THE STORIES I WANT TO TELL

Telling the story you want to tell, the way you want to tell it, without being pressured by anyone other than yourself—that's the definition of indie that I like. I'm independent because I'm able to do what I want to do, at my own rhythm, in my own voice.

I WANT MY FILMS TO BE WATCHED, BUT I WILL NOT SPOONFEED AUDIENCES

I do everything myself. Sometimes when I feel the urge to shoot at one in the morning, I just get up and go out. You can't drag anyone into your shoot if you do it that way. I

also don't wait for a budget to make a film. When I started doing my short films, I'd even borrow cameras. I am independent on one hand but I am very dependent on other people's wealth of experience. I am very dependent on the skills of the people, the colleagues, who help me out sometimes. I may not be dependent on financial backing, but I'm dependent on the help of others. Although you're not relying on financial backing, you still rely on the help of others. I am independent because I don't bow down to what makes money, what the majority of the public wants but I do want people to watch my films. But I won't spoonfeed the audience.

PROUD TO TELL THE WORLD I'M FILIPINO

You hear my voice on my films, literally and figuratively. It sets the tone, that's what is Filipino about it. In *Todo Teros*, it started with this infatuation with a Russian girl I saw in Berlin. That was my 30th birthday, my first time to go out of the Philippines, and that was the first time I was able to tell to people about my country. I was proud. I never felt that pride before. Somehow being lost in Europe brought it out.

FIRST STEPS

Continuity was the most entertaining thing for me in that Film Appreciation class in high school. We were asked to look for gaffes in period films, like gladiators wearing watches. That was fun, man. But it was the sense of detail that made me realize the huge responsibility a filmmaker had, but at the same time it felt like a lot of fun to put together. I think that was the moment I got hooked.

Later, our teacher Paul Daza would make the class watch a lot of Spielberg. I thought about taking up communications in college. There weren't many technical courses. There was the one under Noel McRae, video production; and cinematography under Yam Laranas. That

was it. But watching the films under Father Nick's Filipino and European Film classes helped me most. It was really hard at first to watch all these different kinds of films, but it was learning by immersion.

But after graduation, I forgot about all that—my dream, cinema, everything. My girlfriend was my priority; we were going to get married. I needed to save up, but much, much later, we split up and I was devastated, broken. I quit my job; became a bum for two, three months. It was almost Christmas. I was praying for rescue. Then, almost immediately, my aunt from Seattle called me, "John, I was just thinking about you. Do you want me to invest in whatever you want to do?" I thought of getting my own space, in Katipunan, somewhere to mope at first but something I could eventually turn into an editing studio. That's what I was trained to do anyway. I built that space on my own, just me, picking the tiles, the furniture myself. And I started to write again. Lyrics at first—music was, is my first love. I play the guitar. And I would just play and play and play, exorcising, trying to figure things out. There were no initial plans to make films. But the camera was just there, lying around. Sometimes, at night, I would go out and just shoot, whatever, no plan, no idea.

That was 2003, right about Holy Week, and I went to Dela Strada Parish along Katipunan where people were praying. It felt good going out, seeing other people, shooting. My ex, she was from White Plains and I drove by her house and I remember thinking I'll never see this person again. I saw this door with a painting on it, a couple, almost embracing; I took a shot of that too. A lot of people started hanging out the place in Katipunan, and I was shooting them, too. They didn't mind. Somehow they'd gotten used to seeing me walk around with a camera. The place wasn't making any money, and there were no editing jobs coming in. I felt like I still had something to do.



Todo Todo Teros

One afternoon, I was in my room, and I digitized some of my footage. The cameras I had been using were old and beat-up, and the footage was full of glitches, artifacts but I started editing it anyway and found myself trying to link scenes with words, and it was exciting. But what was I saying? My film, my footage didn't have actors and was low budget. And I was thinking of other people's films—Kidlat Tahimik's, Jon Red's. It was a flash of inspiration. The next morning, when I woke up, there were all these words in my head rushing to get out. And that was it. That eventually became *Tawid Gutom*. It was orgasmic, man. And it was very personal. It came out of what was happening to me. *Tawid Gutom*—means having just enough to make it through the day. I was hanging about waiting for something to happen, someone to come and after weeks of nothing but bare white walls and sitting alone, playing my guitar suddenly, someone knocked on my door—and there was this beautiful girl, and I became infatuated. She wanted to have something edited.

THE FIRST FILM IS LIKE YOUR FIRSTBORN

The first film will always be special. *Tawid Gutom* was a small step but a turning point. It was the hardest one to make and the one I love most. It's like your firstborn, really.

VERY JOHN TORRES

What makes a John Torres film? The voice? The tone? The images. I've only begun exploring that. The narration—it adds something, an intimacy. My friends say it's "very John Torres" but I don't know what that means.

When I moved from the romantic themes of *Todo Todo Teros* to tackle family—my family in *Years When I Was a Child Outside*, I asked myself if I would still be able to evoke the same intimacy, the same longing. It was more challenging. How to keep it from my family was the most difficult one. I wanted to distance myself from them and at the same time explore that blood bond.

I don't like deadlines. It could be that my process came from that. It starts with a desire to know something, most of the time, something deeply personal. It also starts with shooting randomly until something strikes me, something I feel I need to show people but that doesn't necessarily mean a film will grow out of it. It's a start though. I shoot and edit, shoot and edit. Sometimes I re-shoot. Sometimes I stage "scenes." It's very organic. And around 40 percent of the way in, that's the point of no return, the point where I say I have a film in the works already. The point where I say the film is finished? I can't pinpoint it; I just know it without question that I'm done. It just becomes clear. That's my process, I guess—connecting the dots, shooting and editing, shooting and editing—and waiting.

NAKED CINEMA

"Are you just jacking off?" someone asked in a Q&A.

Umm, probably. But what's wrong with that? In all my films, I do put myself up there on the screen. Naked, in a way. So maybe.

FIRST BREAK

Alexis Tioseco. I remember. He saw my films at MovFest, and later he called me up and he wanted me to go with him on this TV guesting stint—Studio 23. I was at someone's birthday party and I didn't want to go but I eventually said yes which I don't regret. I met Khavn, everyone. I met Roxlee. I even gave him a DVD of my films and he sent it to Singapore, to Philip Cheah. Two months later, someone told me that I was going there. My films were screening. I was ecstatic! That's how it began, yeah. With Alexis, of course.

GLAMROCK

My influence outside of film, like I said, is music which is my first love. I liked glamrock—all those hair metal bands.

Posion, Guns n' Roses, Metallica, Skid Row, even Megadeth sometimes. And Eric Johnson, Satriani, guitar heroes, man.

It's no secret that I loved Kidlat's *Perfumed Nightmare*. I'm a bigger fan of Mike De Leon than I am of Brocka or Bernal. *Kisapmata (Blink of an Eye)*, I really liked that. *Bayaning Third World (Third World Hero)* too. Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Rizal* was entertaining, I thought. Carlitos Siguion-Reyna was also an influence. I saw *Ligaya Ang Itawag Mo Sa Akin (They Call Me Joy)* and *Selya*. And I was part of his *Kahapon May Dalawang Bata (Yesterday Children)* in 1999, seeing the process up close, and there was a lot of waiting between set-ups. I realized I didn't have the patience for that. But it was a terrific experience. Kieslowski, I like. My favorite work of his is *The Decalogue* but in college, Guiseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* blew me away, and Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thief*. Right now, I think, Lav Diaz is like our master filmmaker. But I really like Roxlee's attitude towards filmmaking—that sense of having fun, of following your own rhythm, it shows in his works how much he enjoys the process. That's not something you can compromise.

FILM IS A GIFT

Film is a gift. It's grace. You have to transcend the notion that you're a "filmmaker" and become more open to collaborating with God. It's very spiritual to me. Faith is vital in my filmmaking. Not to sound holier-than-thou, but I do try to make films in the image of Emmanuel, God-with-us, a broken mirror of love, rooted in suffering but with a glimmer of hope.

FILM IS LIFE, FILM IS GIVING

I'm interested in filmmakers who didn't go to film schools, had no communications background like I did, but who have issues in their lives and the desire to explore them even if it meant doing it on your own, with no producer, no crew. One of my most beloved local poets is actually a

mathematician, a scientist. A lot of local filmmakers seem infatuated with the notion of being a "filmmaker." Life outside cinema is more important. Your films are your witness. When you die, your film doesn't die with you. It sticks around, it's just there. Your raw material should be you—your life, your beliefs. Also, immerse yourself in everything, not just cinema. Keep learning. Don't stop. And tell yourself you can only go so far and the rest is the help of others. Always, always give back, share what you know. Like Lav did, like Rox, like Carlitos. Give back.

FILMOGRAPHY

2005 *Tawidgutom*

Salat

Kung Paano Kita Liligawan Ng Di Kumakapit Sa Iyo
(How Can I Court You Without Ever Holding You)

2006 *Gabi Noong Sinabi Ng Ama Kong May Anak*

Siya Sa Labas (Night When My Father Told Me He
Had A Child Outside)

Todo Todo Teros

2007 *Years When I Was A Child Outside*

2010 *Ang Ninanais (Refrain Happens Like Revolutions*
In A Song)



Paulo Villaluna and Ellen Ramos

Unmistakable is the visual aesthetic of Ellen Ramos and Paulo Villaluna that it alone carries their films in a whole different dimension. There is a preference for ambiguity—to reserve judgment and to be somewhat on the side of the purely artistic. Their films, however, could be made with such intent: to be dreamy, to mimic the transience of everyday relationships, and to adorn their lives with luscious spirit, with pretty images and soft music for the eyes and ears to feast on. The ambiguity goes along with the highly stylized compositions, the painterly use of colors, and the playful use of lighting to emphasize the inner disturbance of their characters. This texture brings their films into such heights that it is impossible not to be moved by them, and not to be tempted to see what stays behind. (*Chard Bolisay*)

DIGITAL BEGINNINGS

Paolo: Since we were trained in film, coming from the Mowelfund Film Institute, we were really hoping to make films on film, celluloid. Our short films were 16mm, 35mm. When we quit Mowelfund, we had an offer from Viva Films to do *Ilusyon* (*Illusion*) after they saw the documentary we made for Jon Red. *Mamboboso* (*Voyeur*) was the title of our documentary. Actually, when Jon Red invited us to make the behind-the-scenes for his film *Boso* (*Peep*), we warned him we couldn't do the usual commercial behind-the-scenes, that's why it ended up sort of like a documentary.

Ellen: But, as educators, of course we've tried our hands at all kinds of toys of filmmaking whether film, digital, U-matic, or whatever.

Paolo: In fact, when we left Mowelfund in 2000, we already executed the first digital workshop. Mowelfund was in transition then, and we were hoping to introduce this new medium since we know that film language is film language, regardless of format. We were just trying to train with the new format.

Ellen: We did it for the love of Jon, actually. Just to have someone properly document his filming experience, and since we were Jon's friends, he was properly presented.

Paolo: Actually, both *Mamboboso* and *Boso* were in 2005; the workshop was in 2000.

Ellen: So for us, we just really wanted to taste that kind of environment for fun.

Paolo: We were actually surprised when Viva offered us to make *Ilusyon*. We were thinking, "Why the offer? Do they know what they're getting themselves into?" The budget for *Ilusyon* was so small. We proposed to shoot it on

celluloid, but Viva didn't want the risk. We had one condition for Viva: we'd accept the offer, despite the low budget, and shoot it on digital long as they gave us total creative freedom across the board.

Ellen: Did we want to go with Viva? The usual argument that we were selling out was there. That was an "in" term then, right? But then, it became a challenge, plus we wanted to transform a Viva Hot Babe.

Paolo: Oh yeah, it was a challenge.

Ellen: That was our M.O.

Paolo: We demanded creative freedom, but Viva also made one demand. We were free to do our own casting, write the script, all that. The only thing they demanded was that we cast a Hot Babe, just the lead. And there's an anecdote there.

They originally wanted us to cast Maui Taylor. It was going to be her comeback film. But since the film was set in the 50s, we felt that if she were to wear 50s outfit, she'd look like President GMA. That would've been funny. Thank god they let us choose another Viva Hot Babe. We chose Jaycee Parker. It was a challenge for us.

When Jon was making *Boso* and we were documenting it, we saw that it was possible for you to do a personal film using money that came from a big production outfit. The good thing about Viva at that time was that they were also going through an experimental stage. They still hadn't realized that they could earn from digital films. You see today, Viva's exploited the format, earning from straight-to-video softcore films and releasing all those badly made gay films. At that time, we were lucky because they were willing to take the risks. So they gave Jon Red a break, they gave us a chance but after *Ilusyon*, the box office returns

weren't what they expected. So it was, "Fuck that, let's just make sexy films." That's when they struck it rich.

SELLING THE DRAMA

Paolo: We're old school, coming from Mowelfund, so we're purists in a way. And then we end up doing our first full-length film for Viva? It was a dilemma. I consider Jon Red as a father so I came to him and asked, "Jon, people might think that we've sold out, even if we have full creative freedom." He said something that I took to heart: "Paolo, we're not selling out, they're buying in." He was right. What if they want to invest? I mean, why not? As long as you demand and retain your creative freedom. There's not much risk on their part anyway because the investment is minimal, and they can recoup it on video sales alone. And back in 2005, it was prestigious for a major outfit to hire an independent filmmaker. I always remind students this every time I hold a lecture; that digital cinema started in 1999 with Jon Red and Khavn De La Cruz when they made *Still Lives* and *The Twelve*, respectively; but the format really took off in 2005 thanks to the triple punch of Cinemalaya, Cinema One, and Cinemanila. Then digital films started winning awards locally and internationally, and the media hype began. The studios saw them as prestige films. The equation seemed to be that if you wanted a film that will win awards, hire an independent filmmaker. I don't think it's selling out since we created an environment where we could do what we want. We even demanded final cut. That was unheard of back then for mainstream producers like Viva.

Ellen: Viva producing our first film was still an opportunity. I don't think my family will give me a million pesos to make my own film, right? And I can compartmentalize my entire spectrum of expression like I can easily lock myself up at home and do my own stuff. I can go back to animation, or make short films. I don't really care if I never see the Viva people again. We've accepted that they're really just one of

many avenues and that we have other stuff going on. It's an experience that in the end became valuable to us as filmmakers.

NEXT TOPIC: FILM

Paolo: I fell in love with cinema in high school. Personally, I set myself up to be a socialist politician, even writing a thesis in high school on how to transform our country into socialism. But in my junior year, for some strange reason, maybe because I was fair skinned, my classmate's sister from the University of the Philippines (UP), who was majoring in Film, got me as an actor. It was called *Singsing (Ring)*, I think, and it actually won in the Gawad CCP. It was by Jose Maria Acosta, and I was the lead actor. When we were shooting, I said, "Fuck, so this is how films are made." The experience deglamorized everything. Of course I was already a film buff then, but seeing the process up close and firsthand, I fell in love with it—the process. When I reached fourth year, I decided to take up filmmaking. In college, Kiri Dalena—Sari's sister—became my schoolmate in UP Los Banos. When Sari found out I was interested in filmmaking, she mentioned Mowelfund. Fortunately, there was a workshop going on at that time and I applied. That was the first time I met Ricky, Ellen. I think I was 16 or 17. I applied in the animation workshop. So I was in love not only with the filmmaking process, but with the animation process as well.

I didn't come from a well-off family, so all the children had to earn for the family. Come thesis time, I shot a short film, and of course I had to spend for it. My father was a bit against it, so he withdrew my allowance. And I literally couldn't get out of the house. Ellen would call, my dad would answer, and he'd say I wasn't home. I was blacklisted I think, for a year in Mowelfund, because I've already shot half my film but I never finished it. This was *Panalangin Ni Rosario (Rosario's Prayer)*. It was based on a short story by Albert Camus.

I continued studying Communication Arts in UP Los Banos, then in UP Diliman. That's when I was sure I wanted to be a filmmaker. I wasn't even aware of the term "indie" then. My Mowelfund training ingrained in me one thing: cinema is self-expression. It didn't even cross my mind to enter mainstream cinema, to work with movie stars. I applied in Theater Arts at UP Diliman to learn how to act, and how to make actors act. In 1998, there was an audition for minor roles in the Mowelfund compound for Nick Deocampo's *Mother Ignacia*. All the theater actors went to Mowelfund applying for certain roles. I landed the part of a Spaniard, and all my friends had the Pinoy parts. So I was back in Mowelfund but this time as an actor. On the second shooting day, the assistant director was struck with measles. Nick was really pissed-off. He was shouting on the set, "Fuck you, all of you! Who's gonna take the place of my AD? Who among you can do production work?" Without hesitating, I raised my hand. Nick shouted, "From now on, you're the assistant director!" The next day, I was the assistant director.

In 2001, I shot a film for a Mowelfund workshop—a documentary called *Palugid (Margins)*. The film won the Urian and at that time, it was only the second documentary that won the Urian. The first was Julie Lluch Dalena's *Yuta (Earth)*, and that was, like, 15 years ago. That kind of validated me as a filmmaker in the community.

Ellen: I actually finished an architecture course in college; took the board exams, too.

Paolo: And she graduated Summa Cum Laude. In the boards, she placed 9th.

Ellen: I didn't have any life outside architecture aside from the graphic work I was doing. Joey Agbayani was my classmate, and I think he planted the first seeds of filmmaking, of cinema in me. Sometimes, he'd invite us

over to his house to do some project but actually he would show us films instead. In one of my humanities classes in UP, somebody showed a re-edited, re-mixed *Bonnie and Clyde*, which turned out to be by Jon Red. He was the one who opened me up to the possibilities of non-narrative cinema. When I saw that and also found out that there was a workshop happening, I had already graduated from school so I had all the freedom to redirect my career path. I remember I was the last person to apply at Mowelfund that year. It was already late in the afternoon, and I barely made the cut-off.

I fell in love with the process, too. For 12 years, I was a staffer at Mowelfund. No regrets. I don't think I've had my fill yet really. It's like, the things you learn, it's never enough. And I did everything, even if I wasn't ready, like directing a feature for example. I'm primarily an animator. I like working alone, and I'm very soft-spoken, I don't really like directing or delegating, that's why I picked animation as my field. Roxlee said an animator is God and he's right. It's purely accidental that I ended up teaming with Paolo—well, not really purely by accident. You can thank Jon Red for that.

Paolo: Let me put it into context. If you graduate from Mowelfund, these are your choices—work in advertising, in mainstream cinema, or make independent films. Or you teach, become a Mowelfund staffer. And there's a long lineage of filmmakers who worked as Mowelfund staffers—Raymond Red, Yam Laranas, Neil Daza. That's why Ellen and I ended up as Mowelfund staffers. Ellen was there before me; I stayed there for five years. She taught production design and animation, while I taught production management and directing. Ellen was the head of the educational program. I handled the special projects like the film festivals: *Pelikula't Lipunan (Film & Society)*, the embassy festivals. For the longest time, we were really in different fields. Then in 2003, we fell in love.



Selda (The Inmate)

Ellen: We became partners.

Paolo: We became partners. We felt like we can put our resources together. Our first film was an animated short.

Ellen: *Godspeed*.

Paolo: *Godspeed*, yeah. I remember we were so strapped for cash at that time, and there was this competition by Nike and we won 2nd place. Cash! That was our first film together.

I THINK I WANT TO BE A FARMER

Ellen: If I weren't a filmmaker, I'd probably still be in graphic design. I always come back to that: illustration, design. I like working alone: designing and illustrative arts. Eventually, I think I want to be a farmer.

Paolo: Me, I'd probably end up as an actor, a theater actor. Or not. I'm too short to be an actor, and too fat. That and teaching at Mowelfund. I—we—love teaching, sharing all this with the kids. If Ellen decides to be a farmer, then I'll just stay home and read books. No idea how I'll make any money, though.

Ellen: Sometimes I feel this frustration with filmmaking and I end up asking myself, "Did my film change anything in the world? Did it contribute to society?" I mean, hardly anyone watches cinema. At least, the farmer, he harvests what he sows. If he sells the harvest, he feeds his family. Of course, most of the time, it doesn't matter; you just keep on making your art, then let the work speak for itself. But some days, I just want to plant.

Paolo: I totally understand and agree with her. Ellen is 11 years older, so there is wisdom.

Ellen: Just 10.

Paolo: Ah, 10. We balance each other out, I think. My art is very selfish and indulgent. Hers is more generous, has more outreach. It could be why our partnership's so strong.

THE INDIE IDEAL

Paolo: The definition of independent cinema was so clear during the 70s, the 80s, and even the 90s. The digital boom in the early 2000's redefined it; we romanticized the ideal, how it made celluloid film unnecessary, how everyone could be a filmmaker, how anyone could make any kind of film they wanted, no matter how personal—finally a format that can democratize cinema. But now, indie just means a low-budget mainstream narrative film—it has no aesthetic definition anymore. When it broke out in 2005, independent cinema was supposed to co-opt the mainstream. What happened was the other way around. The definition has become technical; now it simply means a film not produced by a mainstream outfit. But I think the definition should be aesthetic. It has to be about content, about unique and personal voices. Full creative freedom—that's what I consider independent, regardless of where the money comes from.

It's important to define what independent cinema really is, for academic purposes at the very least. And the lines between mainstream and independent should never blur. Having both run parallel to each other—not necessarily competing against each other—makes for a very healthy cinema.

Ellen: It's never been defined for me, and the discourse is getting a little redundant. It's all about sensibility, I think.

THE PINOY ELEMENT

Paolo: The first three films we made were very personal, almost a metaphor on Ellen and myself, our partnership, our co-existence, our adjustments.

Ellen: And all our films after are like that. We don't set out to deliberately represent the Filipino in our films. We're Filipinos. The environment is Filipino. That's it. It's also universal, which we prefer.

FIRST BREAK, DEFINING MOMENT

Paolo: *Ilusyon* was a rewrite of something Jon Red wrote and sold to Viva. We shot it in four and one half days. And it was screened at Cinemania and eventually invited to Pusan; it was even bought and got distributed there.

Ellen: It gave us a good break that we did not seek out. It just happened.

Paolo: After that, offers came in from different studios. But we didn't want to make films for the sake of making them if it meant doing what the studio wanted.

Ellen: We try to avoid reducing filmmaking to a livelihood, to work.

Paolo: But we also had to make a living. And we had to do very low-profile work in order to survive. By 2007, the work trickled out. That's when Leo Dominguez came to us with *Selda* (*The Inmate*). We were not his first choice; Aureus Solito was. But that was fine with us. Again, *Selda* made the rounds of festivals. We were very happy with it.

Ellen: Our aspirations for our films usually end with the DVD release. Good thing our producers make the effort to promote it, send it to festivals.

Paolo: 2008 was the year I got a regular weekly directing gig doing *Storyline*. I was making a living again. Then, in 2009, Jacky Woo saw *Selda* and got in touch with Leo. His first question to him was, "Can you make me act?" So Leo called me up and asked me the same question and I said yes, jokingly. Then the next day, Leo called and said it was

a go. Jacky Woo would produce the film—regardless of what the script was—as long as he acted in it. We had the material for him. That's how *Walang Hanggang Paalam* (*Endless Farewell*) happened.

Ella: This was the one got an X rating.

Paolo: There's no nudity, no violence—just one shot where sperm hits someone's face. That was the reason for the X. These MTRCB (Movie and Television Review and Classifications Board) reviewers are idiots.

Paolo: The dream film we want to make is about this family who travels from Manila to their province on a pedicab. It needs a bigger budget than what we're used to. Hopefully we'll get to produce it in the very near future.

PROCESS

Paolo: It starts with an idea. Either from me or from Ellen.

Ellen: Between the two of us, though, he's the writer.

Paolo: But Ellen knows structure. I write it, she reads it, then tells me if there's anything wrong. In the end, it's always a consensus, a mutual agreement from pre-production to storyboarding to shooting to release. And very organic. It's a balancing act, really, like any collaboration.

PERSONAL FAVORITES

Paolo: I have two. Before we made *Godspeed*, we were commissioned to do this animation OBB for a TV show.

Ellen: *Art Jam*.

Paolo: We had some severance money from quitting Mowelfund, and we used it to buy a computer, and then this commission came, and I think that's when we realized how perfectly we fit—that we can actually work together.

Ellen: *Ilusyon* was memorable. And I'm really proud of *Selda*.

Paolo: *Selda* was magic. I'm not sure how we pulled it off given the constraints. But we had a good cast.

Ellen: And a good staff.

LUCKY CHARM: RAUL MORIT

Ellen: Raul Morit is our lucky charm. He has to be in every film we make.

Paolo: It's almost like we're carrying the torch of the generation that came before us whenever we cast him because he was from the generation that came before us, and he was in all those Raymond Red, Jon Red short films. We're aesthetically very old school anyway—classicists, rule of thirds. We honestly don't feel part of the new school of hip filmmakers.

POWER OF CINEMA

Paolo: Cinema is a loudspeaker of culture. It's the best way for a society to express itself.

Ellen: Cinema concretizes the psyche of a society into a medium that's very accessible for sharing.

MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES

Paolo: Micheal Ondaatje was the jury head in Thessaloniki where Sid Lucero and Emilio Garcia tied for Best Actor for *Selda*. He came over and said it was a very powerful film, and that it could've won the Grand Prize had we not shot it on digital.

Teddy Co saw *Selda* and told us it was the first Pinoy film with a gay scene that he really liked. Those two things meant a lot to me, to us.

Ellen: I remember I was curating a screening for high school students in Baguio, I was not familiar with Cesar Hernandez's

work, and I thought we were screening for college students. But his experimental 16mm film *Kalawang (Rust)* was on the program which had found footage from *Scorpio Nights* and the students were shocked. It was the first time they saw an erection onscreen. I fought the impulse to cover the lens with my hand. I let the film roll.

TREKKIES

Ellen: *All That Jazz* made cinema unsafe, and uncomfortable, and exciting. Its impact on me was huge in all aspects. Also Jan Svankmajer's films. He's my hero. Wes Anderson's an influence. Paul Thomas Anderson too. Gus Van Sant. But Svankmajer towers above them all.

Paolo: Bernal's *Manila By Night*. That's my favorite Filipino film. I really, really like Jon Red's *Astigmatism*.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* changed my life. Deckard may be the first fictional character I had empathy with. I saw *Seventh Seal* in UP, and I immediately became a Bergman fan and a huge influence on us. I'm also a fan of Truffaut's with *Jules and Jim*.

Ellen: But we've also rediscovered *Star Trek*.

Paolo: Everybody should watch *Star Trek*.

THE THIRD GOLDEN AGE

Paolo: Nick Deocampo declared the 70s as the 1st golden age of local independent cinema, when Kidlat Tahimik first came out. The 2nd Golden Age was when when Raymond Red and Nick Deocampo burst into the scene. I think this is the 3rd Golden Age.

Ellen: But we haven't peaked yet.

Paolo: No, of course. But this is the healthiest Philippine Cinema has ever been.

FILMOGRAPHY

2005 *Ilusyon (Illusion)*

2008 *Selda (The Inmate)*

2009 *Walang Hanggang Paalam (Endless Farewell)*



CESAR ASAR
PLANET OF THE NOBLES

EPILOGUE

Roxlee

Roxlee's *13 Commandments for Independent Filmmakers* was exactly what it said it was — manifesto as gospel. And Rox lived it to the hilt, has been living it even before he drafted it. Parse his filmography—*The Great Smoke*, *Juan Gapang (Johnny Crawl)*, *Lizard*, *35mm Man*—and it's a splendid chaos: at turns creepy, funny, unsettling, adventurous, whimsical, humanist. Brainpan grenades and visionary aneurysms. At the height of his fervor, he was cranking out these D.I.Y. films, mostly on 8mm and 16mm, one after another. This was before the digital indie boom what-have-you. The D.I.Y. filmmaker back then had neither the pop culture cachet nor the key cards to the mainstream—they were more circus freaks than rock stars, no ink in the dailies, no talk show walk-ons, no university lectures. And on purely logistical and economical terms, it wasn't easy and it wasn't cheap to churn out those films, under Third World conditions, and with such profusion.

Rox, of course, could've fallen back on his drawings. He multitasked with a fiendish glee, swinging wildly from comic strips to paintings, from short films to features, from animation to

live action, from celluloid to digital. But he was a keeper of an ethos, egged on by little more than an invested joy in the work. It's a joy that hooks into a fresh throb in the kinder, gentler *Green Rocking Chair*. His *13 Commandments* are instruction codes, sure, but we uphold him as one of the forefathers of the revolution because it's that unspoken 14th commandment he lives to the hilt more than any other, the one commandment that matters above all: *Thou shalt shut up and make films.*

Rox, incidentally, is shooting a new film this year. What's your excuse? (*Dodo Dayao*)

SHIFTING TO DIGITAL

There's a big difference. I started with 16mm with Super8 analog. Shifting with digital is very easy. It has live sound, it's a lot faster, and it's very liberating. Even in terms of crew, you can make a full-length movie even if you're alone. They're very light and easy to carry around. Even with lighting. I'm not very meticulous when it comes to lighting; if it's good enough to shoot, shoot it. But with digital—available light will do. That's what I did with the film for Rotterdam, *Green Rocking Chair*. Big help.

FILMMAKING IS MORE FULFILLING

I started out as a cartoonist, an illustrator. After a while I wanted movement. That's why I went into animation and eventually, live action. If I didn't become a filmmaker, I'd probably paint full time. Or still be a cartoonist. But, as we've seen, it's possible to do both at the same time. I paint, and I shoot films. Between the two, filmmaking is the more fulfilling, though. You can put more into it. There's the image and there's movement and there's sound, too, music. It's multimedia.

WHAT IS "INDIE"?

Independent means it's all you. You shoot it, you can act in it, and you can score it. Of course, it's easier if people help out as long as they understand you and what your film is about. But that's what independent means—digital filmmaking, independence from producers, from the need to be commercial.

IN PURSUIT OF PINOY

My films are very down to earth. Not necessarily showing poverty, but something more positive—the Filipino as a creative being.

CINEMA IS VISUAL

Cinema is pure visual. It can exist without sound. That's why I like silent cinema a lot. For me, that's the purest cinema.

BEGINNINGS

I started with illustration, drawings, and then filmmaking. Super8 inspired me. It can be compared to digital. It was very liberating. And there's a personal connection. I hold the film can, I put it in the camera, and I put in the batteries and start shooting.

ARCHITECT IN THE MAKING

I took up architecture because I like to draw. But also, I thought that kind of career would make me happy. The money is good, prestige too. But I doubt if it would have made me as happy as I am now.

ART CONSCIOUSNESS

I was in my late 30's when I started filmmaking; I grew up in the province. I came to Manila in the 80s. That was my first exposure. I started drawing for Jingle—a popular music magazine during the 70s and 80s, the local equivalent of Creem, now defunct. I was 33 or 35 when I shot my first film.

When I was younger, I dreamt a lot. I used to see my father painting using a brush for calligraphy. He's half-Chinese. I probably got my love of drawing from him. But everything else—the music, the performing—came out later after coming to Manila. If I stayed in the province, I might have become a businessman. It's the environment. It is very influential. The people I met here are very active in the scene. Erwin Romulo, Khavn, and our dear Alexis Tioseco are all very encouraging.

THE DEFINING MOMENT AS A FILMMAKER

The Great Smoke—my first animated work—was a little rough. That first film was done with Super8—pure line drawings. At first, I didn't like the way it was drawn, the movement is a little too fast, and I was a bit lazy then. The animation was a little rushed, but I just wanted to

experiment, try and see how it will look. But when I saw it move for the first time, I was inspired to do some more.

It was really just for play at the start but now I've become a lot more serious. *Green Rocking Chair (Juan Baybayin Story)* is probably my most serious work right now. I wanted to do a serious work that was very Pinoy and full-length, but made digitally. This is the kind of film I want to be doing from now on. As long as there's support, I'd like to make more.

THE MORE, THE MERRIER

There are more filmmakers today than before. That's because of the technology. Anybody can make a movie nowadays. All it takes is a camera and a computer. But it should be that the number one thing should be a good concept. You can't just go make a film for the sake of making a film or just because you can. That's what many filmmakers do these days. There are a lot of promising talents out there that have been freed by the technology. It's the same thing with animation. Now it's faster and it's easier. You can create animation even if you don't know how to draw. That also means there'll be more filmmakers, more animators in the future.

NO DVD

During my time, there were no DVDs so I wasn't really able to watch any of the classic films. I do get to watch, but only in embassies and very rarely. But now, there are so many classic films available on DVD. It's great. These foreign classics are very inspiring. Some Iranian filmmakers are very good. But I still salute our locals: Raymond Red, Cesar Hernandez, Kidlat, Ellen Ramos and other filmmakers.

I remember watching a lot of German short films—European, Canadian animation particularly. I was inspired by those a lot. And there's *Fitzcarraldo* by Herzog, with the scene where they were pulling the steamboat through the

forest. And also Fassbinder. I saw all these at the Goethe Institute then. Also, *Yojimbo* by Kurosawa. I saw that in Naga City when I was a kid. How did a Kurosawa film get shown in the Bicol region? That was in the 70s. I was in high school and when I saw it, it was unlike anything I've seen before. Black and white, with subtitles.

Jan Svankmajer was also an influence. I also only saw his films recently, but they were inspiring.

National Lampoon was also a big influence—the magazine. There used to be a lot of second hand books in Recto Avenue selling magazines and comics. *Heavy Metal*. Comic books were a big influence; I grew up on Nonoy Marcelo, Larry Alcalá.

I also like painters. I prefer Danny Dalena, Benjie Lontoc, Elmer Borlongan and some of the new guys like Louie Cordero, Jayson Oliveira and of course my brother, Romeo Lee.

ON WRITING

I like writers but I prefer Juaniyo Arcellana and Haruki Murakami, who is world-class now. That's what Pinoy should aim for, being world class. It also pays well. Writers don't get paid well here. Not even our students read our writers. The Department of Education isn't encouraging it enough. It's always foreign writers, foreign works, foreign this and that. It's the same with films. The audience is out there.

Look at the telenovelas (soap operas). They keep importing shows. The industry isn't growing. Of course, people are entertained so they keep importing the same things. Maybe it's cheaper to just import. That's why YouTube is also good. You can show your works without having to go through a TV station again and again. But we have a lot of good writers there. Why don't they let them write new shows?



Green Rocking Chair (Juan Baybayin Story)

DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES OF FILMMAKING

I think the Filipino audience is underdeveloped when it comes to film, the kind of films I make, alternative cinema. Maybe they're busy with other things. There's more audience outside the country.

JUST KEEP SHOOTING

I'd like to make a full-length animated film—animation, talk about starting from scratch. I just sit in the corner and draw and draw and draw then you just shoot and lay in sound. In one year, two, you're done. That's what I'd like to do.

SERIOUS COMEDY

My cast and crew are all okay, but I keep remembering Ramon Bautista. He was in *Green Rocking Chair*. That was supposed to be a serious film but then you see Ramon. I wanted it to be serious; but in a way, it became a comedy. First of all, his face is really for comedy. Ronnie Lazaro, also. He's one of the actors I do respect.

FAVORITE WORKS, POSSIBLE SEQUELS

Juan Gapang (Johnny Crawl)—I still want to make a sequel to that. *Juan Gapang International*. It already started in the Philippines, if I can crawl to Rotterdam or the Great Wall of China maybe, why not? I won't stop there. And it won't be just crawling anymore. You'll get flashbacks; why is he crawling? That's it, maybe, yeah. I'll keep that story going. Why is Juan crawling? It's about struggle—crawling through life but not stopping. I like that because it's positive. You just keep crawling, never giving up.

CESAR ASAR, COLLABORATING WITH MON LEE

My brother Mon and I collaborated on *Cesar Asar*. It started as a comic strip then we made it into a film. We shot it in 35mm. It would have been easier if it is in digital.

TECHNOLOGY IS THERE. USE IT.

I get asked a lot to say something to aspiring filmmakers. It's simple: just shoot. You're independent now, independent in a sense that the equipment is there, everything is there—so what are you waiting for? Just shoot.

I WILL CHANGE OUR RELIGIOSITY IF I COULD

If you can change something about the Filipino character, what would it be? That's a beauty contest question, you know, like, "If you were a flower, what kind of flower would you want to be?" I won't pick a flower. I think I'd like to be a fruit, an avocado—I like its color and if you cut it open, it's very beautiful inside and you just throw that seed after you've eaten the fruit and it will grow. Our religiosity. I think we have too much of it. It's alright to believe in something, in God, creation, the universe. But when it gets dogmatic, it's not practical anymore, it's pulling us down. That's the Spanish influence.

VALUES IN FILM

I think maturity helps. I'm not sure if the films I did before were all just goofs. They are comedies, satires, but with values maybe.

I think I've become too domesticated now. It's all about the kids. Diapers, milk. Hold art; take care of the kids first. Let them grow up a little first. I have two now. The *ZerZen*: *Zerox* and *Zentrum*. Of course Lot, my wife, is there, but sometimes, it can still be overwhelming. I don't get a lot of sleep, I got eye bags, I don't mind. It's a small price to pay. I think I have more of a sense of better purpose now, it's certainly more fulfilling. With film and art, this is the life. I'm happy.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1984** *The Great Smoke*
Tatlong 'A' (Three A's)
Tao At Kambing (Man And Goat)
- 1985** *Inserts*
Abcd
- 1987** *Lizard, Or How To Perform In Front Of A Reptile*
Ink
Juan Gapang (Johnny Krawl)
Prayle (Friars) (co-directed)
- 1989** *Pencil*
Spit/Optik
Moron's Hobbies
Moron's Monolog
- 1990** *Mix 1 & 2*
- 1993** *Tito's Wedding*
- 1999** *Cesar Asar*
- 2001** *Nose*
Tronong Ginto (Golden Throne)
- 2007** *Musikadong (Musicated)*
Green Rocking Chair (Juan Baybayin Story)

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

MABIE ALAGBATE (Co-Editor)

Mabie played a fearsome game of hopscotch as a child. Today, she works as an editor for an online gaming industry news website (despite knowing very little about game consoles), hammers away at her thesis whenever she is free, and indulges her love for film however way she can.

CHARD BOLISAY (Filmmaker Profiles)

Chard lives in constant fear of losing his mind. He helms a film site called Lilok Pelikula (<http://lilokpelikula.wordpress.com>) where he tries to exercise his right to be incoherent. Outside film, he manages a music blog called Hang The DJ (<http://fearphones.wordpress.com>)—his idea of hanging out with friends. He has not yet figured out what he wants to do in life.

BUCCINO (Filmmaker Photos)

Buccino takes pictures of the details you forget to notice. Camera in hand, he chases light, shadow, and movement, and captures the flow of objects and their relationship to each other within a frame. He is not defined by his moustache.

OGGS CRUZ (Filmmaker Profiles)

Oggs would love to write about film for a living, but he knows this is not possible. So, he litigates cases during the day, and spends the night watching, writing, and living. He contributes articles and reviews to print publications such as The Philippine Star and the Philippine Free Press. He writes about film and all things betwixt and between in his film blog, Lessons From The School Of Inattention (<http://oggsmoggs.blogspot.com>).

DODO DAYAO (Co-Editor, Filmmaker Profiles)

Dodo Dayao writes, films, paints, curates, and hopes to someday learn to breakdance. Cinema is his other girlfriend and you can read about their often stormy love affair at Piling Piling Pelikula (<http://pelikula.blogspot.com/>).

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Considered the father of Philippine digital filmmaking, **Khavn De La Cruz** has made twenty-five features and more than a hundred short films, most of which have received prizes, given retrospectives, and presented in international film festivals. He has served as a jury member in the Berlinale (Germany), Clermont-Ferrand (France), Copenhagen (Denmark), Jeonju (Korea), & Jihlava (Czech Republic) film festivals. He is the president of the independent film company Filmless Films and the festival director of MovFest, the first digital film festival in the Philippines.

Khavn has won for his poetry and fiction in the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, where he has also served in the jury. He has been invited as a Writing Resident in the Ventspils International Writers House (Latvia) and was twice a Writing Fellow in the National Writers Workshop. Khavn has received the Dean's Award for Literature from his alma mater, the Ateneo De Manila University, where he also has lectured. His books of poetry and fiction are published by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing, the University of the Philippines Press, and Instamatic Writings.

Khavn is an acclaimed composer, singer-songwriter, & pianist who has performed all over the world. Through his indie label Avant-Pop Music, he has produced several albums, including soundtracks for internationally-renowned films. He has written & composed several rock operas staged at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Ateneo, and Miriam College. Khavn garnered awards in the Yamaha Electone Festival and has also received citations from the Metropop Song Festival, the Ateneo Songwriting Fest, and the John Lennon Songwriting Contest (New Jersey). He is the bandleader of Vigo, The Brockas, and Fando&Lis, and has also been part of the jury of the Awit Awards.

Khavn owned and managed Oracafe, a cultural hub for Philippine writers, musicians, filmmakers, and other artists in the late 90s.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Noel Ferrer is known as a Kapamilya, Kabarkada, Kapuso, and Kapatid of the Philippine entertainment industry. He is a respected writer, critic, talent manager, and film, record, and television producer.

He has produced acclaimed and hit independent films like Daybreak, Imoral, Adela, Astig, Muli, and Magdamag.

He is a Philosophy graduate of the Ateneo de Manila University where he took MA units in Communication Arts. He lectures on literature and media studies at the Departments of English, Filipino and Communication Arts of the Ateneo de Manila University as well as at UP Diliman. He is involved in various print and broadcast writing projects.