



Cinemataya 2015: A Decade of Philippine Independent Cinema

Cinemataya Philippine Independent Film Festival. Manila, Philippines.
August 10-18, 2015

Festival review by Adam Szymanski

Since its inception in 2005, the Cinemataya Philippine Independent Film Festival has annually produced and showcased ten to fifteen original feature films, with special support for budding Filipino filmmakers.¹ These productions were financed by grants of PHP 500,000 (approximately \$10,000 U.S.) that were made available through two different funding portfolios. As part of its founding “New Breed” programming in 2005, Cinemataya produced ten films per year by first-time directors. Five years into its existence in 2010, Cinemataya began a “Director’s Showcase” programme which funded five established directors per year. Yet 2015 would mark a year of changes for the festival. Cinemataya recently faced the biggest crisis of its short history when business tycoon Antonio O. Cojuangco decided to pull the bulk of his financial support, leaving Cinemataya unable to fund the original feature films that Manila’s cinephile audiences had come to expect. To remedy the problem, this year’s festival organizers adopted a new three-pronged structure that included an “Asian Showcase” of significant art-house films yet to have a premiere in the Philippines, including Zhang Yimou’s *Coming Home*, Ju Anqi’s *Poet on a Business Trip* and Isao Takahata’s long-awaited return with *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*. Festival organizers recently announced that the Asian Showcase will be a permanent fixture of the festival going forward. The 2015 program also included a collection of ten in-competition short films (in lieu of the usual features), and a comprehensive retrospective of past years’ “Best Film” award winners from both its “New Breed” and “Director’s Showcase” portfolios.

¹ English subtitling is a mandatory requirement for all recipients of Cinemataya production grants, in order to make the festival as accommodating as possible to international spectators and jurors. The majority of the films’ dialogue is in Tagalog, though other Philippine languages are occasionally spoken when a film takes place outside of Manila.

My curiosity about Philippine independent cinema was piqued in 2009 when I was introduced to the work of queer Indigenous filmmaker Kanakan Balintagos (during the period when he was directing under the name of Aureus Solito). After *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, his Cinemataya breakthrough about the love story between a boy and a police officer set in a Manila slum, Balintagos found modest success on the international film festival circuit showing films about topics as diverse as gay teen sexuality (*Boy*) and the spiritual life of his ancestral people (*Palawan Fate*) at the Torino Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and the Cannes Director's Fortnight, respectively. For international audiences, he quickly became the flag bearer of contemporary Philippine cinema and the proliferation of minority perspectives that it has fostered. Nevertheless, the majority of Cinemataya titles have yet to be screened or distributed outside of the Philippines, so the 2015 retrospective was a truly rare opportunity to witness the artistic context in which Philippine independent cinema produced its new standout auteur—an opportunity that I couldn't pass up. Based on the crowds of people who filled the Cultural Center of the Philippines each day of the festival, it appears that local audiences found the programming just as compelling.

Cinemataya's popularity is worth highlighting, especially considering its shoestring budgets and clear focus on promoting young homegrown filmmakers. The international star factor is virtually nonexistent, as it's not the sort of "A-list" festival where non-Filipino films make their premieres. Cinemataya also prides itself on being a non-commercial antithesis to both Hollywood and the Philippine studio system. Yet audiences continue to grow, and the festival attracts involvement from national celebrities such as Piolo Pascual and Rhian Ramos, who were both in attendance for this year's closing film *Silong [Shelter]*, to the pleasure of screaming fans. Cinemataya has exponentially multiplied its attendance figures from 11,607 in its inaugural year in 2005 to an impressive 96,639 in 2013.² The demographic composition of the audience is equally noteworthy; the spectators are for the most part younger than the filmmakers, and as writer-director Clodualdo Del Mundo, Jr. notes, the filmmakers are considered

² Official festival attendance figures are compiled in *Making Waves: 10 Years of Cinemataya* (99).

old if in their thirties (7). In an age when home and online viewing are frequently cited as successors to the theatrical experience, it's a refreshing sight, especially given the on-screen subject matter.

In commenting on some of the festival's dominant themes, Lito B. Zulueta argues that "Cinemataya has given rise to a cinema of the marginal" (32). The creative freedom afforded by independent cinema and digital technology has resulted in a wealth of films that tell stories about the quotidian problems of Filipinos who must contend with life in a globalized economy that doesn't do them any favours. Unlike many upper-class romances produced by commercial studios, wherein a confusing love life is the biggest problem facing the pale-skinned characters,³ Cinemataya has repeatedly fostered filmmaking that is in touch with the diverse peoples who compose Filipino society. Dark-skinned Filipinos, Indigenous peoples, slum dwellers, gays, women, children and migrants show up on screen in prominent roles, thanks to Cinemataya's commitment to new minority filmmakers. For at least one commentator with decades of experience in the Philippine film industry, this shift in representational practices combined with the fact that independent films account for about half of the national Filipino annual film output (Cheah 41), constitutes "a sort of renaissance in the history of our national cinema" (Del Mundo, Jr. 5).⁴

The following sections account for some of the festival's most politically pressing minority perspectives that were articulated by the retrospective, including those of migrants, Indigenous peoples, and youth.

³ The Philippine star system is dominated almost exclusively by light-skinned (*maputi*) Filipinos. This phenomenon can be found elsewhere in East and South Asia, and is reflective of racist standards of beauty imported by colonial interests from the West.

⁴ Nestor Jardin provides a nearly comprehensive list of Cinemataya films that have gone on to receive awards at international festivals. This international recognition underscores the enthusiasm that local critics and film industry personnel have expressed for the festival. For details, see the chapter entitled "The Cinemataya Philippine Independent Film Festival" in *A Reader in Philippine Film: History and Criticism*.

Precarious Migration

Halaw [Ways of the Sea] (Sheron Dayoc, 2010) and *Transit* (Hannah Espia, 2013) both put the migrant Filipino experience on screen. The former follows a clandestine boat ride past the Malaysian border and the latter bears witness to the ruthless deportation of Filipino children born in Israel to parents who work illegally on expired visas as domestic help. In *Halaw*, a group of strangers all seeking work in Sabah (a Malaysian state) board a rickety ship that navigates rough waters and interpersonal tensions. This bleak film challenges the ideologically suspect narrative that hard work could actually improve their lives. In an opening scene that sets the tone for the rest of the film, a frustrated pimp tries to convince two pre-teen girls to board the ship with him so that he can sell their virginity to Malaysian businessmen and pay off his debts. He manages to bring one of them along for the harrowing voyage where the characters endure hunger and danger only to be shot at by border patrol as they cross into Malaysian waters and disperse into the night to evade capture. *Transit* also grounds its drama in the real-life difficulties that face some Filipino diasporic communities by telling the story of a family ripped apart by Israeli immigration policy. In a manner reminiscent of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, the film strings together vignettes about how the lives of different family members are affected by the constant threat of deportation.⁵ It makes for a deconstructed melodrama that doubles as a timely critique of the conditions of migration under global capital.

Indigenous Visions

Cinemalaya has helped to bring a number of groundbreaking Indigenous films into being, including *K'Na The Dreamweaver* (Ida del Mundo, 2014)⁶ and *Batad: Sa Paang*

⁵ For a historical analysis of the deportation of Filipino caregivers from Israel, see Claudia Liebelt's *Caring for the 'Holy Land': Filipina Domestic Workers in Israel*.

⁶ Ida Del Mundo, the director of *K'Na the Dreamweaver* is in fact a non-Indigenous Filipina-American who encountered the T'boli peoples in 2013 at the T'nalak Festival (t'nalak is the traditional cloth of the "dream weavers" and serves a number of important social functions, such as the transmission of myth and religion). Whether or not this film should in fact be considered a work of Fourth Cinema (and thus an "Indigenous film") depends on the framework applied. In "Celebrating Fourth Cinema," Barry Barclay expounded a set of criteria that would exclude this film from being considered a work of Fourth Cinema as it was not made entirely by and for an Indigenous peoples. Houston Wood takes a different approach in his book, *Native Features*, and argues that Indigenous filmmaking should be configured as a continuum with no defined

Palay (Benji Garci & Vic Acedillo Jr., 2006) which were both on display at this year's retrospective. *K'na The Dreamweaver* was shot in the ancestral homelands of the T'boli people in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato, and takes place in a mythic time. Lead character princess K'Na is torn between her duty to end an ancient conflict by marrying a man from an opposing clan and her desire to be with the local man who she truly loves. The dilemma plays out through lyrical images of intricate textile patterns made by the community dreamweavers – women who dream patterns with social and spiritual utility for the community. K'Na eventually chooses to weave a pattern that ends the violence between the warring clans, but it bonds her to a strange new man she must now learn to love. The pervasive sense of longing that colours her decision is evoked by the traditional T'boli songs that lift her story from personal drama to a tragedy of mythic proportions. The film echoes a number of other Fourth Cinema works such as *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2001) and *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, 2006) that take place prior to colonial contact in order to revive images of traditional Indigenous life.

Batad: Sa Paang Palay lightheartedly comments on the fissure between modern life in the Philippines and the traditional ways of the Batad people who cultivate the rice terraces of Ifugao (a majestic UNESCO World Heritage Site). It focuses on a teenage boy who loses interest in the agricultural work of his ancestors the more he interacts with urban Filipinos and foreign tourists. The shift in his cultural influences culminates in a fetishistic obsession with acquiring a pair of shoes. Drama and comedy ensue, as he must deal with his father's disapproval and a clunky pair of hiking boots that cause him to trip all over the rice fields that he used to navigate so effortlessly. By the end of the film, he decides to stay in Ifugao, cultivate rice in the manner of his ancestors, and pursue a local woman who has aroused his interest and quelled his passing obsession with modern Filipino life. Like *K'Na The Dreamweaver*, *Batad* is a film that stresses the

inclusion or exclusion criteria. I include the film under the "Indigenous Visions" heading here in order to signal how Cinemataya has represented the lives, traditions and lands of Indigenous peoples in the Philippines, even when the filmmaker in question is foreign to the cultural positions represented on screen.

importance of duty to culture and community in the face of the temptations posed by fleeting romance and disposable consumer goods.

Corruption

Filipinos are well acquainted with hearing about government corruption. A year before Erik Matti's crime thriller *On The Job* (2013) tossed the problem of rampant corruption into the limelight behind the star vehicle that is Piolo Pascual, Lawrence Fajardo's *Posas [Shackled]* (2012) impressed the Cinemataya jury with a gritty story on the very same topic of police officers who force prisoners to carry out extra-judicial killings for political gain. *Posas* opens with an act of petty criminality. Protagonist Jestoni Biag steals a high-end cellphone from a bourgeois Filipina. He is eventually "brought to justice," but winds up getting more than just some draconian jail time. In the film's penultimate scene, a corrupt police chief blackmails Jestoni into killing off a local gang lord that the police have bound and blindfolded. It makes for a poignant film that sympathizes with the thieves of Manila's slums who are offered little to no economic alternatives other than crime, and then must contend with further exploitation when eventually detained by law enforcement officials.

In contrast to this indie feature's intense violence, *Last Supper #3* (Veronica Velasco, 2009) broaches the problem of corruption with a dose of Kafkaesque black comedy. It tells the true story of a gay production assistant who must navigate the never-ending absurdities of the Filipino legal system after having misplaced a prop (a "last supper" decoration, which is common to find in Filipino dining rooms). His mild infraction results in a multi-year struggle to pay the decoration's owner, settle legal fees, and ultimately testify in front of a judge on criminal charges that, if upheld, would have had him thrown in jail. The absurdity of it all is registered by Joey Paras's witty performance as an honest man who tries to hold onto his decency despite being treated like a hardened criminal for a harmless mistake. Underneath all of the laughs lies a pointed critique of a bloated and nepotistic legal bureaucracy that can dehumanize the most upstanding of citizens.

Youth

Perhaps the most remarkable trend of Cinemataya's eleven-year history is the recurrent and self-reflexive focus on youth. Two notable award winners from the festival's inaugural year starred child protagonists: Nathan Lopez as Maxi, a gender-bending pre-teen who falls in love with a local cop in Auraeus Solito's indie hit *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros* (2005), and Elijah Castillo in Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.'s *Pepot Artista [Pepot Superstar]* (2005), as a kid who dreams of becoming a movie star and gets to act out his fantasies through musical numbers and vignettes that pay homage to the golden age of Philippine cinema. The cute factor certainly has something to do with these films' success, especially in the case of *Pepot Artista*, but there is something more profound that unites these two films and embodies a certain tendency within Cinemataya as a whole: an affirmative care for the Filipino future. *Maximo* ends with a broken heart and *Pepot Artista* with a dose of reality, but both films wholeheartedly sympathize with their protagonists' efforts to live the lives that they want to live, even when their desires clash with conservative societal expectations and dire economic situations. While some of the realist works cited above, like *Halaw*, *Transit*, and *Posas*, dwell on the injustices of society and end on very grim notes, they, like the more fun-loving films *Maximo* and *Pepot Artista*, have an unbounded sympathy for their characters who survive the most tumultuous circumstances. The sympathetic attitude embodied by the overwhelming majority of films included in the retrospective is an affective and political disposition that refuses to give in to the cutthroat, individualistic logic of the global economy that condemns so many Filipinos to a life of material poverty.

In spite of its strong focus on youth, 2015 may well mark the year that Cinemataya has come to maturity. It overcame the disappointment of not having produced any new features this year, secured new funding from the Cultural Center of the Philippines to produce ten feature films for next year's festival,⁷ and reflected on its accomplishments thus far through an extensive retrospective. In one of those telling moments when the movies echo the historical context of their production and distribution, this year's best

⁷ In 2016, the grants will be for PHP 750,000 (about \$15,000 U.S.) since the festival will only be funding ten films instead of the habitual fifteen.

picture award in the short film competition went to *Pusong Bato [Stone Heart]* (Martika Ramirez Escobar), a film about a retired actress who spends her days looking back on the highlights of her career. I'm sure the resonance with Cinemataya's own situation was not lost on the jurors.

With such a young and diverse pool of talent having matured at Cinemataya over the past decade, it is likely that the Philippines will continue to produce films that depict the people and appeal to the people in ways that distinguish the spirit of independent cinema from its less reflexive counterparts in evermore distinct and urgent ways. Cinemataya is now more than just a festival: it doubles as a platform for the expression and emergence of minority subjectivities that are otherwise absent from mainstream Filipino screens and their habitual blindness and apathy towards class and race-based systems of oppression. It also serves as a poignant reminder of how digital filmmaking technology can assume a political valency when paired with uncompromising artists and art institutions that are committed to narrating marginalized and underrepresented experiences that make commercial cinemas and their establishment values very uncomfortable. Philippine independent cinema has had to contend not only with Hollywood exports but also with a national film industry that has failed to confront the issues at Cinemataya's thematic core: poverty, racism, neocolonialism and corruption. Independent Philippine cinema is still marginal to the culture industry, yet armed with honesty and criticality, it is consistently winning over Filipino audiences who are finally starting to see the drama of their daily lives on screen.

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