The Little Brown Brother "Shoots" Back: Postcolonialism in Filipino Cinema at the Turn of the Century, 2000-2010

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Abstract

Throughout most of the 20th century, the dominance of Hollywood hindered the development of a distinct film identity and tradition within Philippine cinema. However, from this seemingly uninspiring state, a vibrant independent film community emerged and thrived during the first decade of the 21st century. This transformation was made possible by the introduction of more accessible digital video cameras in the 1990s. The digital medium provided independent filmmakers with the opportunity to explore various storytelling approaches centered around Philippine realities, which resonated with younger audiences.

This paper posits that Filipino independent, or "indie," cinema experienced a surge in creativity during the first decade of the 21st century and established what I refer to as a "postcolonial aesthetic" to counter the dominance of the Hollywood cinematic structure. I draw upon the ideas of Renato Constantino and Bienvenido Lumbera as my primary framework to trace the trajectory of independent and mainstream Filipino cinema during this period. Through an examination of two films from that era—one independent (*Ded na si Lolo* [Grandpa is Dead], 2009) and one mainstream (Baler, 2008)—I argue that Philippine cinema truly came into its own between 2000 and 2010, and its unique characteristics continue to influence the post-Covid era.

Keywords: Cultural imperialism, American hegemony, Philippine cinema, period movies, independent films

The movie industry is both a victim and an ally of American cultural aggression. It is a victim precisely because it is an ally of Hollywood, not by conscious design but by the conditioning effect of decades of exposure to Hollywood movies. At the same time, it is an ally in the sense that the Hollywood model is pervasively the frame of reference [...] Hence, the movie industry is a reflection of Philippine society for it is the clearest and simplest depiction of the neo-colonial situation.

~ Renato Constantino (1977, p. 131)

In just a few sentences, Renato Constantino was able to accurately describe the state of the Philippine movie industry of his time. American cultural imperialism has reduced the industry to a caricature of Hollywood. If Hollywood had Charlie Chaplin, we Filipinos had Canuplin, a vaudeville comedian whose appearance and gestures resembled Chaplin. If James Bond/Agent 007 is an international super spy (and unremitting ladies' man) of the British government, Filipino movies used to have Tony Falcon/Agent X44, also a super spy (sans the "international" label but an unremitting ladies' man nonetheless) with thick sideburns as his trademark. In the age of the Hollywood blockbusters in the 1980s as exemplified by *Ghostbusters, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and *Dune* (all released in 1984), Filipino comedy king Dolphy starred in a movie that referenced all three – *Goat Buster: Sa Templo ni Dunê* (Goat Buster: In the Temple of Dunê, 1985). Indeed, the specter of Hollywood movies since the beginning of the 20th century has stunted the development of a distinctly Filipino cinema, and the cinema that the Filipino movie industry conceived was a mere distortion or poor imitation of Hollywood. Lacking technological resources and skilled artisans, the movie industry simply did not have the means to be at par with the Hollywood films that it was trying to imitate; and in the absence of a clear artistic vision, movie producers simply resorted to doing mostly parodies and spoofs as film production was primarily regarded as a commercial venture intended to produce a quick profit. Therefore, despite the industry's considerable output from the 1950s up to the 90s and the fact that movies were once known as the country's "national pastime" (David 1990), only a handful of films today are hailed as cinematic gems. What we have in abundance are senseless flicks anywhere from *Sabi Barok Lab Ko Dabiana* (Barok Said I Love Dabiana, 1978) to *Wrong Rangers* (1984, a parody of the Lone Ranger film and television series) to movies with absolutely meaningless titles (e.g., Horsey-horsey Tigidig-tigidig, 1986; *Haba-baba-doo! Puti-puti-poo!*, 1998; *Tiktaktoys: My Kolokotoys*, 1999; *Isprikitik: Walastik Kung Pumitik*, 1999).

Likewise in the 1990s, advancements in film technologies (e.g., the introduction of CGIs or computer-generated images) combined with America's push for glo-

balization paved the way for the spectacle cinema of Hollywood to systematically dominate all modes of cinematic imagery, production, and reception, resulting in a standardized film culture not just for the Philippines but for most of the world. Unable to keep up, the movie industry's production declined. From an average of two hundred films annually in the 1970s and 80s, the output has gone down to an average of fifty per year since 2003 (Alberto, 2008, para. 3).

However, at the onset of the twenty-first century, the Philippines saw a surge of independent, or "indie" films produced by a new generation of filmmakers. This was made possible by the introduction of the high-resolution digital video camera in the 1990s. The changing of format from celluloid film to digital video freed the independent filmmaker from the high costs of mainstream filmmaking and the commercial demands of the studios. It gave them the liberty to tackle more unusual or controversial subject matters and present new modes of storytelling. By 2005, indie cinema took center stage when two film festivals exclusively devoted to digital indie films were established – the Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival and the Cinema One Originals. In its first year alone, the hugely popular festivals produced now-classic indie films such as Auraeus Solito's *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros), Doy del Mundo's *Pepot Artista* (Pepot Superstar), Mario Cornejo and Monster Jimenez's *Big Time*, and Jon Red's *Anak ng Tinapa* (A Kipper's Child). In 2009, indie filmmaking reached its peak when Brillante Mendoza became the first Filipino to win the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for his unapologetically brutal film *Kinatay* ("The Execution of P").

Inspired by independent films, mainstream studios began adapting the "indie approach," whether in terms of style, mode of production, or both. The result was more movies were made with better production values and more interesting narratives. The first decade of the twenty-first century also saw the establishment of new film companies whose output seems to appeal to both indie and mainstream audiences. For instance, newcomer Unitel Pictures was the studio behind Mark Meily's *Crying Ladies* (2003) and *La Visa Loca* (2005) and Peque Gallaga's *Pinoy Blonde* (2005); Seiko Films bankrolled Jeffrey Jeturian's two successful forays into comedy – *Bridal Shower* (2004) and *Bikini Open* (2005) – and Brillante Mendoza's award-winning *Foster Child* (2007); and, closing the decade, Star Cinema produced Chris Martinez's quirky comedy *Here Comes the Bride* (2010) and distributed Dondon Santos' socially relevant *Noy* (2010). *Here Comes the Bride* was also co-produced by Quantum Films, another newcomer in the industry at the time. Founded by lawyer-turned-producer/director Josabeth Alonso, Quantum Films is worth noting as the company will emerge as one of the major movie studios by the next decade, producing movies by premier directors such as Marlon Rivera's *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* (The Woman in the Septic Tank, 2011), Jeffrey Jeturian's Ekstra (The Bit Player, 2013), Jerrold Tarog's *Heneral Luna* (General Luna, 2015), and Jun Lana's *Ang Dalawang Mrs. Reyes* (The Two Mrs. Reyes, 2018) and *About Us But Not About Us* (2022). The movie industry's output

may have indeed declined over the years, but it encouraged studios to improve the quality of their films.

In this paper, I argue that the surge in creative energy in indie and mainstream filmmaking in the period between 2000 to 2010 led to the development of a Philippine national cinema; a cinema that neither defines nor measures itself using Western (i.e., Hollywood) standards. Drawing from the writings of Renato Constantino and Bienvenido L. Lumbera, I posit the idea that many independent films produced in that period manifested a postcolonial aesthetic that confronted issues of Filipino identity in opposition to a homogenous global culture and that these independent films exerted a considerable influence on mainstream cinema. In arguing this point, I will first discuss the nature of globalization and its effects on local art and culture. Then I will briefly examine the history of the Filipino movie industry to illustrate how American cultural imperialism that began in the early twentieth century thwarted the growth of national cinema. Finally, I will present my reading of two Filipino films from the period — one produced independently, Soxie Topacio's *Ded na si Lolo* (Grandpa is Dead, 2009, APT Entertainment), and one from a mainstream studio, Mark Meily's *Baler* (2008, Viva Films) — to demonstrate how the postcolonial aesthetic is manifested in audiovisual language.

Globalization and its Discontents

> *As the bloody twentieth century drew to a close, God's promise of peace on earth remains unfulfilled; it was now incumbent upon the United States, having ascended to the status of sole superpower, to complete God's work – or, as members of a largely secularized elite preferred it, to guide history towards its intended destination.*
>
> Andrew J. Bacevich (2002, p. 1)

Towards the last decade of the twentieth century, we Filipinos were introduced to a new word, or to be more precise, a new worldwide doctrine: Globalization. "Globalization" became the centerpiece program of then-President and West Point graduate Fidel V. Ramos, with not-so-subtle prodding from the White House and its allies at the IMF-World Bank. Ramos, a former military general and one of the architects of the 1986 failed *coup d'etat* which transformed into the historic People Power Revolution, believed that globalization would give the Philippines a chance to develop into what Western economists refer to as a "newly industrialized country." He began implementing economic reforms intended to open the once-closed national economy, extolling the virtue of foreign investments over local businesses and agricultural development. He subjected the country to foreign exchange deregulation, banking liberalization, tariff and market barrier reduction, and foreign entry

into the retail trade sector (Timberman, 2000, para. 3). In reality, all these simply translated to a hassle-free entry of American products and businesses into the Philippines. On the military front, we witnessed the return of U.S. military forces on Philippine sovereign soil, thanks to a colonial-oriented Senate's ratification of the Visiting Forces Agreement in 1998; barely seven years after the U.S. military bases in Clark and Subic closed.

But what exactly is globalization? The word seems to elicit a multitude of meanings. It touches on so many of the traditional disciplines that there seems to be no end in sight to the discourse provided by globalization — economists, political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, communication researchers, and artists all have a say on this phenomenon. First, the term "globalization" is not exactly a late twentieth-century concoction. We can even argue that European and U.S. imperialism in the eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries respectively are the earliest signs of globalization because these involve the entry of foreign goods into colonized countries. However, globalization as it is understood today is primarily the product of the end of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ended the long era of totalitarian domination, leaving the United States to become the sole superpower. This enabled the U.S. to dictate global trade policies which would allow American businesses to expand worldwide. It is for this reason that globalization today is typically defined in economic terms. Thus, globalization often denotes a "process of removing officially imposed constraints on movements of resources between countries in order to form an open and borderless world economy" (Scholte, 2005, p. 56). On this understanding, globalization occurs as governments reduce or abolish protective measures like trade barriers, foreign exchange restrictions, capital controls, and visa requirements. This phenomenon resulted in what George Ritzer (1995) refers to as "McDonaldization," an allusion to the global dominance of the McDonald's fast-food chain. The standardization of McDonald's food (e.g., the Big Mac) and its production and delivery (the "fast food" concept) resulted in massive economic efficiency gains, signaling a new phase in capitalist development. But the global success of McDonald's and other American companies should not be interpreted purely in economic terms for they also represent a cultural message. The Big Mac is not only consumed as an oversized hamburger but is consumed culturally as an image and icon. In other words, the Golden Arches (McDonald's famous symbol) is clearly American, and it stands, first and foremost, for the American way of life. Thus, according to the noted cultural critic Douglas Kellner (1999), globalization, stripped of its false promises, is nothing more than "Americanization" (p. 216).

The worldwide homogenization as exemplified by McDonald's has produced a culture that is identical in all parts of the globe. The influx of homogenous products allows for very little local variety, rendering local cultures to be rapidly

undermined by the constant flood of such imports (Redner, 2004). It is therefore important to not look at globalization simply in terms of trade liberalization or market barrier reduction but rather in its cultural element, the extent to which the social and cultural lives of individuals and societies are influenced by international and/or transnational phenomena. Hence, it is equally significant to investigate the globalization of culture that lies underneath the globalization of economies. This is where the culture industry such as the media makes its contribution; and nowhere is the dominance of American culture more seen or felt globally that in the production of its media.

America did not achieve its global dominance simply through economic exploitation or an interventionist foreign policy but, to borrow U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson's philosophy for the Vietnam War, by winning the "hearts and minds" of the rest of the world. Seen from this front, the American media is arguably the most effective advertising tool in America's arsenal. Technological advancements in the field of communication in the 1990s (e.g., the Internet and Cable TV) enabled the binding together of larger expanses of time-space not only on an intra-societal level but increasingly on an inter-societal and global level (Featherstone, 1995). Furthermore, these advancements have created a borderless world, making it easier for American cultural products such as pop music and television programs to penetrate even the most conservative nations.

For Hollywood, the 1990s was an era of successive mergers and acquisitions. The big movie studios, most of which were originally founded by Jewish businessmen in the early 1900s, are now owned by multinational corporations. Warner Bros. Pictures — the movie studio established in 1923 by brothers Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack Warner, immigrants from Poland — is now known as Time Warner, currently the world's largest media conglomerate. Time Warner is made up of three different companies: Warner Communications Inc. (the parent company of Warner Bros. Pictures) and Time Inc. (the largest magazine publisher in the U.S.) merged in 1990 and six years later acquired Turner Broadcasting System Inc. (a Cable TV network whose assets include CNN, HBO, and the Cartoon Network among others). Columbia Pictures, founded in 1919 by brothers Jack and Harry Cohn and Joe Brandt, was acquired by the Japanese electronics giant Sony in 1989. Universal Pictures — one of the oldest Hollywood movie studios established in 1912 by Carl Laemmle, a Jewish immigrant from Germany — has been taken over by Japan's Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. in 1990 and is currently owned by General Electric, an American multinational conglomerate. Because of these mergers, Hollywood studios were able to adopt synergistic marketing techniques giving them control over the exhibition and distribution of their films worldwide. Furthermore, these corporate synergies allowed studios to spend lavishly on advertising to bolster their high-budget spectacle films in theatrical and ancillary markets (e.g., video distribu-

tion, cable TV) and overwhelm smaller indigenous films that could not compete in such a high-stakes environment.

Because of Hollywood's dominance of the global film market in the 1990s, cinemas from other nations, with their images of cultural alterity, were marginalized to the somewhat obscure "other" film traditions. Hollywood assumed the masculine role of the master cinema, while the traditionally feminine role of the dominated was assigned to the "other" cinemas. Moreover, these other cinemas were subjected to the exoticizing gaze of Western audiences. To some extent, the marketing and promotion in the West of other cinemas such as those from Asia, Africa, and Latin America recontextualized the films as mere travelogues, further reinforcing their otherness. These are instances of what Graham Huggan (2001) calls the "postcolonial exotic," or the global commodification of cultural difference.

Even though a big part of Asia was (and continues to be) entangled in neo-colonial globalization, some Asian cinemas have already developed unique filmic traditions, thus giving birth to their own national cinemas (Eleftheriotis & Needham, 2006). On the other hand, our long history of subservience to colonial masters and dependence, for better or for worse, on America's economy has blurred the notion of a "Filipino identity." This loss of identity further marginalized Philippine cinema from the rest of the world. While American media products such as movies, television programs, video games, books, and pop music have penetrated the Philippine cultural landscape, America, and indeed the rest of the world, have received very little of our vast cultural production. The problem, according to Ella Shohat (2006), was not in the exchange but in the unequal terms on which the exchange took place (p. 42). But this disparity was not just economic as Shohat implied but also ideological. Indeed, how could the rest of the world appreciate Filipino films when most Filipinos had such low regard for them? To borrow from Isagani R. Cruz's (1996) view that Philippine literature has been greatly overlooked, Philippine cinema in the 1990s has also been consistently neglected and marginalized that our movies can actually be called the other "Other" cinema.

Hollywood and Its Little Brown Brother

> *I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance. And one late night it came to me this way… that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos and uplift and civilize and Christianize them… And then I went to bed and went to sleep and slept soundly."*
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> ~ U.S. President William McKinley (in Schirmer and Shalom, 1987, p. 22)

In 2019, we celebrated the centennial anniversary of the first Filipino film, Jose Nepomuceno's *Dalagang Bukid* (Country Maiden, 1919). *Dalagang Bukid* was

produced by Malayan Movies, the first Filipino-owned film company founded by Nepomuceno and his brother, Jesus. They boldly declared that Malayan Movies' primary goal is to adapt the production of films to the conditions and tastes of the Filipinos, *"a las condiciones y los gustos del pais"* (Pilar, 1983, p. 14). Their statement was meant to challenge the Hollywood film aesthetic which, as early as Nepomuceno's time, already had a pervasive influence on many Filipinos. *Dalagang Bukid* proved to be faithful to Malayan Movies' vision. The film was based on a popular *sarswela* (musical stage play) by Hermogenes Ilagan which made it readily familiar to audiences. It starred two of the most popular stage actors at the time, Honorata "Atang" de la Rama and Marcelino Ilagan. Filipinos responded enthusiastically to the film, equalling the financial success of its stage version (Pilar, 1983, p. 15).

Now, the question that one may be asking is — if Philippine cinema started with such nationalist aspirations, how did it evolve into a caricature of Hollywood?

First, it must be clear that filmmaking is not a native art form invented by Filipinos. The technology of motion pictures was brought to the Philippines by European entrepreneurs in 1897. It coincided with a pivotal chapter in Philippine history — the revolution against Spanish colonization which culminated in the declaration of Philippine independence on June 12, 1898. However, the celebration proved to be short-lived. Spain was also at war with the United States and Spain was on the verge of losing. Finally, on December 10, 1898, Spain and the United States signed the Treaty of Paris which officially ended the war. Included in the treaty was the U.S. offer to buy the Philippines from Spain for the sum of US$20 million. After three centuries of living under Spanish rule, the Philippines has a new colonial master.

The American colonization of the Philippines was not just a display of American military and economic might; this expansionist move was also the product of what historian Servando Halili (2006) referred to as America's "racialized ideology" (p. 18). The immense industrial and economic progress enjoyed by America at the turn of the 20th century convinced Anglo-Americans of their racial superiority. At the same time, they also felt the need to spread the American democratic way of life to countries they considered uncivilized. In emphasizing his belief that the Filipinos were unfit to govern themselves, William Howard Taft — the first American Governor-General in the Philippines (1901-1904) who also coined the term "little brown brother" — informed President William McKinley that their "little brown brothers would need fifty or one hundred years of close supervision to develop anything resembling Anglo-Saxon political principles and skills" (Miller, 1984, p. 134). Halili (2006) suggests that this conviction shared by U.S. officials was expressed in several ways, including "the concoction of hegemonies that not only avowed Anglo-American superiority but also justified oppressive and genocidal measures towards the so-called inferior races" (p. 18). Patterned after the European notion of the "White Man's Burden," Anglo-Americans assigned to themselves "the right, the duty, and the mission to carry the blessing of civilization to the far

reaches of the world… taking all the risks for imperial glory" (Weston, 1973, p. 35). Thus, by the end of the Filipino-American war (1899-1913), approximately 16,000 Filipino insurgents died and there were at least 200,000 civilian casualties (Ninkovich, 2001, p. 51).

In probably the first display of its pivotal role as an agent of the culture industry, Hollywood films were instrumental in pacifying the growing resistance against U.S. colonialism. As American colonization went on, more and more Hollywood films flowed into the Philippines; and because the Hollywood movie industry is obsequious to the U.S. government (DeBauche, 1997), Hollywood movies easily became an ideological apparatus used by the state in their implementation and articulation of foreign policy. Indeed, Hollywood films became so embedded in the minds of Filipinos that when several cash-rich Filipino families started forming their own movie companies in the 1930s, they instinctively scouted for Caucasian-looking actors because Filipino audiences had already adopted Anglocentric attitudes. The first generation of movie stars promoted by the studios in the 1940s were mostly Filipinos with either European or American blood: Fernando Poe, Sr., one of the first major Filipino movie stars and father of movie icon Fernando Poe, Jr., was half-Spanish; Paraluman, whose elegant beauty can be likened to Greta Garbo, was actually Sigrid Sophia Agatha von Giese in real life, a half-German movie fan who grew up in the quaint town of Tayabas, Quezon; Rogelio de la Rosa, one of the most popular matinee idols of his generation and the first actor to successfully parlay his fame into a substantial political career, was also half-Spanish; and there is the original queen of Philippine movies, the majestic half-American Gloria Romero, among others. Traditionally, these Caucasian-looking actors were given the lead roles while those with distinctly Filipino features (brown skin, flat nose) were usually cast as the villain or were more successful in comedic roles.

But for some scholars, Filipino movies are not entirely copycats of Hollywood. During the early days of the movie industry, there were attempts by producers and filmmakers to create a native identity for Philippine cinema. Nicanor Tiongson (1983) notes that the nature of Filipino films came from the traditions of a much older art form — Philippine theater. Prior to the arrival of motion pictures, the theater was the most popular form of entertainment among Filipinos, so it was not surprising that when filmmaking began in the Philippines, the approach used by the filmmakers descended from theatrical forms such as the *komedya, senakulo, sarswela*, and *moro-moro*. These theatrical forms, on the other hand, were local versions of the Spanish *comedia*, *cenakulo*, *zarzuela*, and *moro-moro* that Filipinos adopted over the centuries of Spanish presence in the Philippines.

Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr. (1998) takes a more political reading of Tiongson's essay by suggesting that this is a form of the native's response of resistance: "Political and armed resistance originate in the realm of culture. Philippine cinema during the American colonial period is one such site of resistance… While the *moro-moro*

and *sarswela* movies manifest native qualities… these movies also betray the influence of the colonial look" (p. 126). In other words, the cinema that was introduced by the colonizer was eventually used by the colonized in articulating their resistance to colonization. The *sarswela* and *moro-moro* movies were not just mere adaptations of popular theatrical forms; it was also a show of opposition to American culture. Finally, del Mundo (1998) concludes that the native resistance displayed by the early filmmakers was also the beginning of the "indigenization" of cinema in the Philippines.

On the contrary, Nick Deocampo (2003) notes that this "resistance" to American culture stems from the threatened Hispanized culture of the Filipino elite. It was the Hispanized *"ilustrado"* or upper class who had control over the production of local films and thus it was their sentiments that were reflected in these so-called "indigenized" films:

Indigenization is not the full expression of resistance. It is not the ultimate means by which we could liberate film and transform it into a satisfyingly national cultural expression… Seen in this light, indigenization can hardly be considered an act of resistance but merely a phase in cinema's development towards achieving it. Of course, as cinema matures, what started in indigenization may possibly result in nationalist expression on film. But this can only come in time. (p. 11)

Despite its differences, both del Mundo and Deocampo's writing of Philippine film history can be traced back to Nick Joaquin's (1988) earlier thesis that the idea of being "Filipino" is descended not from a pre-colonial native culture but from a mixture of cultures and blood that began as recently as the 16th century with the onset of Spanish colonization. To begin with, the "Philippines" or "Philippine Islands" ("Las Islas Filipinas") was named after the king of Spain, Philip II (Felipe II). Therefore, the Philippine islands were the property of the king. Vicente L. Rafael (2000) expounds on this notion further by stating that we Filipinos "live in the modern nation-state that not only bears his [Philip II] name but whose historical reality was initiated by that act of naming" (p. 17).

Joaquin (1988) also believes that the Filipino identity is still an identity in progress. Thus, del Mundo and Deocampo's views on the mapping of Philippine film history, however incongruent, suggest that the development of a national and cultural identity for Filipino movies has yet to reach its conclusion. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that both studies deal with the acculturation of the Filipinos when they came into contact with the colonizers. Therefore, in the pursuit of an identity, it is more appropriate to include the eventual modification of our culture under the hands of the colonizers instead of simply going back to a pre-colonial native culture that has ceased to exist.

Cinema and Nation

To wish class or nation away… is to play straight into the hands of the oppressor.

~ Terry Eagleton (1990, p. 23)

Within the discourse of "nation" and "identity," the dominant views have always underscored the ways in which national identity is textualized, mediated, and "imagined" (Anderson, 1983), just as the traditions perpetuated by nationalism are "invented" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Similarly, Ernest Gellner (1983) argues that nationalism invents nations where they do not exist and not the other way around. Both Anderson and Gellner believe that nations are ideological constructs creating abstract or imagined communities that we loosely refer to as "the nation" or the political construct known as "the nation-state." In contrast, traditions and culture are reified by nationalism to enable its subjects to talk about their culture as though it is constant and distinctive. Therefore, according to Thomas Erikson (1993), nationalism leads us to think in terms of bounded cultural objects; that is, "cultural artifacts are *made* to represent a nation, to function as evidence of the nation's distinctiveness" (p. 103). As a cultural artifact, one cannot deny the role of cinema in disseminating the concept of the "nation." Jesus Martin-Barbero (1993) surmises that film in many countries gave the people of the different regions and provinces their first taste of nation: "Cinema was the living, social mediation that constituted the new cultural experience, and cinema became the first language of the popular urban culture… Film formed [the people] into a national body; not in the sense of giving them a nationality but in the way they experienced being a single nation" (pp. 51-53).

Conversely, globalization has produced various permutations of the word "national" (e.g., internationalism, transnationalism, multinationalism, etc.), thus overshadowing the idea of the national as the "basic cornerstone of film studies" (Hjort & MacKenzie, 2000, p. 2). Furthermore, these provide no criteria for distinguishing exactly what is worth retaining in the "national tradition." However, Benjamin Barber (1995) claims that the "global" and the "national" are so inextricably linked that film scholars should be intent on refining its relationship and clearly defining its continued, albeit changing, pertinence for film studies. Andrew Higson (2000) was among those who addressed this issue when he considered the effects of transnationalism in the formation of national cinemas: "To argue for a national cinema is not necessarily the best way to either achieve cultural diversity or cultural specificity… The contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be local or transnational than national" (p. 73). For her part, Susan Hayward (2000) concludes that the cinema is not a pure product, that it is inherently a hybrid of many cultures: "The framing of national cinemas is one which

perceives cinema as a practice that should not conceal structures of power and knowledge, but which should function as a *mise-en-scène* of scattered and dissembling identities as well as fractured subjectivities and fragmented hegemonies" (p. 101). Similarly, Shohat (2006) tried to coalesce the global and the national by suggesting that global forces have compelled the concept of the "nation" to continually evolve and expand: "Any definition of nationality must see nationality as partly discursive in nature… seeing the 'nation' as an evolving, imaginary construct rather than an originary essence" (p. 43).

Yet, Constantino (1977) reminds us that "the task of a cultural struggle in the Philippines must be based on an intimate and concrete knowledge of Philippine reality. We cannot apply blindly the experiences of other nations" (p. 121). Therefore, it would be presumptuous to simply place these foreign concepts within the context of Philippine cinema without first considering the inherent features common in the production of Filipino movies. Indeed, it is true that the Philippines is home to a multitude of businesses owned and operated by multinational and transnational companies; however, the production of films (in purely financial terms), whether mainstream or independent, has remained relatively free from foreign capital. In other words, Filipino films, whether mainstream or independent, are generally financed by Filipino capitalists or Filipino-owned companies, while independent filmmakers sometimes receive state sponsorship or funding from private organizations. The problem, as Constantino noted, lies in the colonial mentality of the Filipinos who make movies.

Sources of Tradition

In the search for a native identity, the filmmaker's primary task is to identify the artistic tradition from which his/her films will be borne. According to Bienvenido L. Lumbera (2000), this ought to begin with "confronting the problem of the Filipino artist's alienation from the indigenous soil in which his/her art should sink roots" (p. 7). Thus, it is necessary for the filmmaker to examine the society where cultural production takes place, noting how social, economic, and political forces compete for hegemony within that society. This should translate to a formulation of aesthetic norms that are markedly "Filipino" and the formation of a new identity for Philippine cinema, one that confronts — as opposed to merely reflecting and propagating — the Filipinos' neo-colonial state.

If Lumbera recommends that artists should investigate the society where cultural production takes place, this should include a critical re-evaluation of history. Philippine history, especially the canonical texts taught in primary and secondary schools, is largely written by scholars who have marginalized the immense contribution of the inarticulate — the masses. Therefore, it is one arena in which we must struggle to decolonize their minds. It is now the task of the filmmaker to construct

within filmic spaces a people's history and evaluate it in terms of how they affected the people.

Lumbera (2000) also recognizes that while the artists' process of creation is intensely personal, their views are forever shaped by their environment. The concept of artistic freedom is relative for there may be spaces where artists can work freely but these spaces are clearly delineated by socio-political forces. The filmmaker must realize that the question of identity is not a personal quest but rather a national and political one. Therefore, the creation of art is inevitably political which means the struggle for cultural self-definition and political self-determination cannot be separated from one another.

When it comes to the question of *native identity*, Lumbera (2000) indicates that the problem with the Filipino artists' search for this elusive identity lies in the country's overtly Anglocentric system of education which means that the language in which the rudiments of art and its evaluation were conveyed to Filipino students was the language of imperialist masters (p. 7). For example, the study of film in most Philippine universities has marginalized the study of Filipino movies by focusing more on Western cinema, thus denying students the chance to watch and analyze local films. Even in film criticism, Filipino critics tend to measure Filipino films by Western standards. For example, Emmanuel Reyes (1989) points out four common flaws of Filipino movies that most Filipinos complain about: scene-oriented narratives, overt representation, circumlocutory dialogue, and stories that emphasized the centrality of the star. Using a seemingly nationalistic tone, Reyes asserts that the above-mentioned characteristics are actually "traits" rather than flaws (p. 14). However, a closer reading of Reyes' essay will reveal his condescending attitude. By using Western authors as references and discussing each trait in opposition to the Hollywood aesthetic, Reyes suggests that these traits are also the reason why Filipino movies fail to live up to the standards set by Hollywood. In concluding his essay, Reyes holds on to the dream that "even with limited resources, it is not impossible to go strictly by the norms of the classical Hollywood narrative and produce a marvelous Filipino film" (1989, pp. 25-26). Clearly, Reyes' Anglocentric education, as well as that of his peers, taught them to look at the Hollywood aesthetic as the criterion by which all other films will be measured. Such hasty comparisons, under the deceptive guise of American and European neo-universalism, serve to wrench Filipino cinema from its own cultural and economic particularities. They prove Constantino's view that the Hollywood model is the frame of reference, not just for Filipino filmmakers, but for Filipino critics and audiences as well.

Lumbera (2000) also suggests that artists use a set of criteria that will allow us to appreciate and validate all artistic expressions even as these are now marginalized by Western critics (p. 9). This means that filmmakers can make use of existing movie genres that are already familiar with the masses (e.g., melodrama, love story, comedy, fantasy, etc.) in the same way that the early filmmakers used the sarswela as

a form of "native resistance" (del Mundo, 1998) to American cultural imperialism. In other words, as the normative modes of storytelling are modified, they must be integrated with the old to create a feeling of a continuous development from the past; in stark contrast with the elitist attitude of some "indie" filmmakers who tend to disregard audience reception in favor of "personal expression." This egotistical illusion, I believe, is one of the main means by which artists are kept chained to the ideology of capitalism; if they adhere to the ruling class view that creative activity is metaphysical, subjective, and unrelated to class interests, they are permitted to cherish the pretense of 'freedom' to compensate for their impotence.

The Little Brown Brother "Shoots" Back

Soxie Topacio's *Ded na si Lolo* ("Grandpa is Dead," 2009) was produced by APT Entertainment, a relatively small film company founded by Antonio P. Tuviera in 2005. Inspired by the production grants being given by the Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival and Cinema One Originals to help aspiring new directors, Tuviera decided to spearhead the Sine Direk Series in 2008. The series' aim was to fund the works of six noteworthy veteran directors who have projects that the big studios could not finance because it was deemed commercially unpromising, regardless of their artistic aspirations. Out of the six, *Ded na si Lolo* proved to be the most successful, both commercially and artistically. The film was even chosen to be the official Philippine entry to the 2010 Oscar Awards.

When the patriarch of the family dies, his children — Isidro (Dick Israel), Dolores (Elizabeth Oropesa), Mameng (Gina Alajar), Charing (Manilyn Reynes), and Joonee (Roderick Paulate) — come together at their family home to mourn his passing. But the children all have a flair for the dramatic (each of them fainted when they heard of their father's death); and as they gather around at their father's wake, all their issues with each other come to the fore. The story that unfolds is a brilliant and comical exploration of Filipino culture with all its strange superstitions about death and the sometimes difficult but often heartwarming feeling of love for one's family.

Ded na si Lolo best exemplified Lumbera's (2005) postcolonial prescription that Filipino artists should not turn their backs on traditions that may be considered overused because these provide the artist with a set of aesthetics that are readily familiar to Filipino audiences. The trick was to reinvent these traditions to make them recognizable and at the same time fresh to audiences. Topacio's script excelled in its reinvention of what we Filipinos are used to seeing in local comedies. It even had all of the so-called "traits" that Reyes (1989) earlier pointed out:

1. Scene-oriented narratives — According to Reyes, "[I]n contemporary Filipino narratives, conflict is used as a basis for indulging in confrontation

scenes... Tension in a scene can give way either to an emotional outburst, a harsh verbal exchange, or physical combat" (1989, p. 16). Topacio's film is filled with such scenes, but his well-written and hilarious script makes every scene work. The scenes effortlessly change from comedy to drama and vice versa. Audiences laughed at the film's physicality and harsh verbal exchange and empathized with the characters' excessive emotional outbursts as these were all handled very skillfully by the talented cast.

2. Overt representation — Reyes notes that the "strategies employed by Filipino movies... include reaching for the obvious, using dichotomy, exaggeration, repetition and being graphic in depicting screen action... Subtlety and symbolism are downplayed to heighten the impact of literal excess" (1989, p. 17). If there was one thing, we can say about *Ded na si Lolo*, is that it lacked any form of subtlety. The scenes, dialogue, and performance were indeed exaggerated and repetitious. Each scene was like a verbal match between the characters. But isn't this the way we Filipinos are in real life? This was the brilliance of Topacio's film — his uncanny ability to capture this cultural uniqueness. In one scene, Bobet (BJ Forbes) asks his uncle Joonee (Roderick Paulate) why, after hearing of their father's death, each one of them fainted. Joonee answers, *"'Pang-telenovela kasi ang buhay natin"* ("Our life is good for a soap opera"). Isn't it true that we sometimes compare our existence to one big soap opera?

3. Circumlocutory dialogue — Reyes proudly agrees with the Western notion that "good dialogue, as American screenwriting manuals would put it, must seek the essential… Writers must learn to cut, condense, intensify, and tighten… In contrast, dialogue in [Filipino movies] is less circumscribed as it is used to expand a scene. Characters try to outclass one another by rattling off the most vehement statements often fat with wit" (1989, pp. 20-21). Topacio's script is abundant with dialogue that would be deemed unnecessarily wordy by Anglocentric critics such as Reyes. *Ded na si Lolo* even starts with a deafening monologue by Charing (Manilyn Reynes) when she wakes up very early in the morning and scolds the whole household for moving so slowly. Topacio is simply showing this side of ourselves because we Filipinos are indeed garrulous.

4. Stories that emphasized the centrality of the star — In Filipino movies, Reyes observes that the movie star "does not vanish to emerge as a character. But rather, the script character must conform to the star" (1989, p. 23). Thus, it is common for Filipino actors to be typecast to a certain role or persona. Since typecasting is an important marketing consideration in the Philippines, film stories are created to fit the image

of the star. Scenes are conceived to showcase the star's most sought-after quality (Reyes, 1989, p. 24). *Ded na si Lolo* featured an all-star veteran cast and each star was given a moment to display his/her thespian abilities: Roderick Paulate's "grand entrance" when his character arrives at the wake wearing a red gown; the confrontation and verbal combat between Gina Alajar and Elizabeth Oropesa was their time to shine; Manilyn Reynes, as I have mentioned, has her moment in the opening scene; the revelation about their father having another family is given to Dick Israel (the only actor cast against type); and even BJ Forbes was given his moment to cry on camera. Before the funeral, Joonee reminds Bobet to prepare lots of ammonia because the funeral is going to be a showdown of who will pass out in the most flamboyant and dramatic way.

Ded na si Lolo also pokes fun at the various superstitious practices we Filipinos do when someone dies — e.g., putting money in the hands of the deceased and getting it back before the funeral will supposedly bring good luck while cleaning the house during a wake will bring bad luck, etc. But these are exactly what being Filipino means and Topacio skillfully exposed us for who we really are, with all our wonderful imperfections and cultural peculiarity.

On the other hand, *Baler* (2008) was one of those unusual occasions when a mainstream studio threw its support for a project seldom seen in local films — a period movie. Prior to Baler, historical or "period" films were hardly ever produced because local studios were aware of the soaring production costs for such films. Furthermore, period movies offered very little promise in terms of audience patronage. Nevertheless, if done right, these movies can be a tool by which filmmakers and audiences alike can re-evaluate their once uncritical view of historical events (the best example being Jerrold Tarog's award-winning and commercially successful 2015 historical film *Heneral Luna*).

Produced by Viva Films under the direction of Mark Meily, Baler tells the story of Celso Resurrecion (Jericho Rosales), a half-Spanish half-Filipino soldier stationed in the far-flung town of Baler. There he meets and falls in love with a beautiful local lass, Feliza Reyes (Anne Curtis). Celso and Feliza are forced to keep their love affair a secret because Feliza's father, Daniel (Philip Salvador), is a member of the rebel movement. Their love story unfolds amidst the true events that happened in Baler, Aurora when, on June 27, 1898, a group of Filipino rebels attacked a Spanish military outpost. The Spanish soldiers were forced to hide inside the nearby church. Instead of blowing up the church with cannons, the rebels decided that the more humane approach is to wait for the soldiers to voluntarily surrender. Convinced that Spain will send reinforcements, the soldiers decide to remain inside the church. The standoff lasted for an unprecedented 340 days. The incident came to be known as the Siege of Baler.

One of the film's significant contributions was to bring to light a historical event that has been marginalized from the canons of Philippine history. It also deconstructed the traditional notion of a Filipino revolutionary fighter (e.g., the image of Andres Bonifacio wantonly attacking the Spanish forces with a bolo) and a Spanish military officer. In the film, there was surprisingly a lot of civility between the Filipino rebels and Spanish soldiers despite the occasional armed assault. The lines of communication were always open. If one side wants to communicate with the other, a flag of truce is hoisted in front of the church. The rebel leaders even took the more Christian approach of waiting for the outnumbered soldiers to voluntarily surrender to avoid further bloodshed. When Feliza's younger brother Gabriel (Carlo Aquino), a sacristan of the church, decides to stay inside the church so he can be of service to the Spanish friar Fr. Candido Gomez Carreno (Michael de Mesa), the Spanish officer Capt. Enrique Fossi de las Morenas (Baron Geisler) made it clear to all the soldiers that Gabriel is neither a prisoner nor a hostage and that he is free to leave anytime. Even the refusal of Lt. Saturnino Martin Cerezo (Ryan Eigenmann), the officer who replaced Capt. Enrique, to surrender is the result not of his hatred for the Filipinos but of his pride as a soldier of the Spanish military and his loyalty to the monarchy. Finally, when the time came for the soldiers to surrender, they were neither executed nor sent to jail; instead, they were simply sent home to Spain.

Although somewhat panned by several critics for its overly melodramatic tone, unrealistic production design, and problematic casting, I submit that Baler follows Lumbera's postcolonial approach to cultural production. Instead of looking to Hollywood for stories to copy, Meily and screenwriter Roy C. Iglesias went inward and uncovered a story that Filipinos can use to examine the production of their own history. Indeed, one might wonder why the Siege of Baler is a mere footnote in Philippine history and is seldom taught in schools. One probable reason for this oversight is that none of the major players in the revolution (e.g., Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Aguinaldo, Apolinario Mabini, etc.) were involved in the siege. Another would be because Baler is already too far from Manila and the adjacent provinces of Cavite and Laguna where much of the writing of the history of the revolution was focused. Whatever the reason, the film showed the wealth of home-grown stories that Filipino filmmakers have yet to discover. Therefore, despite its purported technical flaws, Baler was a step in the right direction as it eventually encouraged the production of more films with narratives set in other pivotal moments of our colorful history. These films are then used as a pretext to present a critical (or even revisionist) perspective on historical events – e.g., *Heneral Luna, Goyo: Ang Batang Heneral* (Goyo: The Boy General, 2018), *El Presidente* (2012), *Bonifacio: Ang Unang Pangulo* (Bonifacio: The First President, 2014), *Katips: The Movie* (2021), *Maid in Malacañang* (2022), *Ako si Ninoy* (I Am Ninoy, 2023), and *Oras de Peligro* (Hour of Danger, 2023).

Cinema as Catalyst

We are a nation suffering from the lingering effects of colonialism. With an identity that was at best blurred, we have become a people with a history manufactured by colonial education, a present dictated by the economics of globalization, and a future that seems deemed to repeat the mistakes of the past. We must turn to our cultural productions and utilize them as a site of negotiation and struggle in the search for our identity. Renato Constantino reminds us that the development of our national and cultural identity should come from studying the struggles of our people against oppression and colonialism for they are the clearest expressions of the beginnings of a nation — a nation that contraposed its being to that of the colonial power: "National culture should be seen as emanating from a people in action, in an unending fight for freedom and progress. Thus, the real base of Filipino culture must be sought in the continuing struggle of the people against colonial oppression" (1977, p. 105). Cinema is one such space where we can articulate our struggle to break free from American hegemony and carve an artistic identity that is truly reflective of our being Filipino. *Ded na si Lolo* and *Baler*, along with other noteworthy films, whether mainstream or independent, have shown that it was indeed possible. These filmmakers have proven that we can create a cinema that is made to serve, first and foremost, the Filipino masses; a cinema that makes the masses its true subject; a cinema that can transform the political idea of nationhood into the daily experience of nationhood. In the words of Philippine National Artist for Film Lino Brocka (1983): "The sincere Filipino filmmaker should get over his hang-up about making the Great Filipino Film; he should, instead, think seriously about developing the Great Filipino Audience" (p. 264).

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