

Feminine Foremothers and the Cinematic Construction of the Dalagang Filipina

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Abstract

The discourse on Philippine cinema has been predominantly shaped by a masculine perspective, with critical acclaim and scholarly focus primarily directed toward male filmmakers associated with Philippine cinema's so-called "Golden Ages." Such tendencies have overshadowed the contributions of women on and off-screen. This essay highlights a previously unacknowledged feminine film tradition in Philippine cinema. Using Luce Irigaray's concept of a "female imaginary and a female symbolic" as a framework, I focus on three influential female producers—Narcisa "Doña Sisang" de Leon, "Mother" Lily Monteverde, and Charo Santos—who significantly influenced the artistic development of mainstream Filipino cinema by dictating the kinds of movies their respective studios produce and shaping the representation of the "Dalagang Filipina" (Filipino Maiden) on screen that mirrored the gender politics of the time. By examining their contributions, I seek to establish a "maternal genealogy" within Philippine cinema, recognizing these women's impactful yet historically overlooked roles in fostering a feminine-oriented filmic tradition.

Keywords: Philippine cinema, gender dynamics, female representation, feminist theory, female imaginary

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Introduction: A Historical Elision

In her celebrated 1971 polemical essay, the distinguished art historian Linda Nochlin (2010) raised a provocative question: “Well, if women really are equal to men, why have there been no great women artists?” (p. 264). Nochlin’s ostensibly straightforward interrogation marked one of the initial articulations addressing the conspicuous dearth of women within the artistic canon. She contemplates whether this absence substantiates the pervasive belief in the universal inferiority of women’s art or serves as evidence that prevailing standards for evaluating artistic works were fundamentally devised by men for men. Nochlin’s essay brings to light the inner workings of canon formation, exposing the unconscious acceptance of the male viewpoint as the default, thereby establishing an overtly masculine aesthetic paradigm in art that resulted in the marginalization and trivialization of women’s and, more broadly, feminine artistic practices. Her question has led to the realization that women’s engagement in art is not an unfettered, autonomous endeavor. On the contrary, artistic creation unfolds within a social context and remains substantially mediated and influenced by specific male-dominated institutions.

Similarly, much of the discourse on cinema in the Philippines is informed by a masculine frame of reference. The corpus of scholarly literature on the history of Philippine cinema primarily concentrates on pivotal historical junctures, identified as “Golden Ages” (e.g., Lumbera, 1992, 2011; Sotto, 1992; Francia, 2002; J. David, 2018; Deocampo, 2023a). Each golden age is marked by a surge in artistic and creative works spearheaded by a cadre of predominantly male directors who emerged in each period. Lamberto Avellana and Gerardo de Leon are hailed as among the foremost auteurs of the First Golden Age in the 1950s. The Second Golden Age, from the mid-1970s to the 80s, is marked by the groundbreaking oeuvres of directors like Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal. Lastly, the rise of independent filmmakers such as Brillante Mendoza and Lav Diaz defined the Third Golden Age, which began in 2005 and lasted until the 2010s. This prevalence of a male-centric perspective can be attributed to the establishment of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (Critics of Philippine Cinema), the first and foremost film critics group in the country. Founded by a group of ten young men in 1976, the Manunuri has forged a framework for film assessment deeply rooted in Aristotelian realism, filtered through the lens of Soviet-era socialist realism and post-World War II Italian neorealism (see: Tiongson, 1983, 2001, 2010, 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Filipino film canon is brimming with realist dramas about the everyday struggles of the working class made by mostly male directors. Since it was established in 1976, the Manunuri releases at the end of each decade a list of ten films they acclaim as “Mga Natatanging Pelikula ng Dekada” (The Outstanding Films of the Decade). From the 1970s to the 2010s, there were only two female directors—Marilou Diaz-Abaya and newcomer Rae Red—whose films made the

list. Furthermore, more than half of the fifty films on the list are realist dramas that explore themes of poverty and social injustices. Today, this seemingly masculine-oriented approach to film evaluation is not only practiced by the members of the Manunuri but has become the standard by which Filipino films are appraised by critics and studied by scholars and academics (e.g., Chua et al., 2014; Tolentino, 2014, 2016; Campos, 2016; Deocampo, 2022; Capino, 2023).

The hegemony of realism and the masculine viewpoint has marginalized the study and critical examination of women both in front and behind the camera. Marilou Diaz-Abaya remains the only female filmmaker given serious attention by critics even though there has been a significant rise in the number of accomplished women directors in the past twenty years, e.g., Olivia Lamasan, Rory Quintos, Joyce Bernal, Cathy Garcia-Sampana, Antoinette Jadaone, and Irene Villamor¹. On the other hand, the study of women onscreen has been mostly limited to the character stereotypes in countless melodramas, such as the girl next door, the submissive wife, the suffering mother, or the object of male sexual desire (e.g., E. Reyes, 1989, pp. 43-49; Tolentino, 2000; Gutierrez, 2009; J. J. David, 2015; Sanchez, 2015; Deocampo, 2023b, 2023c). As such, there is an obvious lack of female figures for film scholars and artists to study, read, engage with, or regard as role models or innovators. It was Luce Irigaray (1993) who suggested that a “fully realized alterity” for womanhood and femininity can be achieved through the conceptualization of “a female imaginary and a female symbolic” including the recognition of a “maternal genealogy” (p. 71). This translates to a disengagement from the dominant discourse and the construction of a maternal genealogy, i.e., a matriline or “mother line” in Philippine cinema.

In this essay, I address Linda Nochlin’s question by shedding light on the existence of a feminine film tradition that has operated alongside and, in many ways, affected the dominant masculine narrative. Adopting Luce Irigaray’s philosophy as a framework, my essay aims to establish the groundwork for recognizing a “female imaginary and a female symbolic” within Philippine cinema. I focus on three powerful yet historically overlooked female figures within the movie industry – film producers Narcisa “Doña Sisang” de Leon, “Mother” Lily Monteverde, and Charo Santos. As the decision-makers in matters pertaining to the production of a film, these women contributed to the development of a hitherto unacknowledged feminine-oriented filmic tradition in Philippine cinema, especially in how they shaped the representation of Filipino women on screen, epitomized by the image of the “Dalagang Filipina” (Filipino Maiden), which reflected the prevailing gender dynamics of their respective eras. Furthermore, I chose these women because they were among the primary forces that brought forth each “Golden Age.” In the 1950s, LVN Pictures was one of the dominant and prolific film production companies. It was managed firsthand by its owner and co-founder, Doña Sisang. The 1970s and 80s saw the rise of Regal Films, the movie studio directly supervised by its sole

owner and founder, Mother Lily. Finally, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the actress-turned-movie and television executive Charo Santos, who was then the Executive Producer at Star Cinema and the President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of ABS-CBN, was the most influential figure not just in the movie industry but the whole Philippine entertainment landscape.

From Babaylan to Dalagang Filipina: Woman as Ideological Construct

Pre-colonial Philippine society was a society that believed in gender equality and where women played an equal and important role (Santiago, 2007). The central figure and religious leader in the community was a woman known as the babaylan. The babaylan was revered because she was believed to be the link between the physical and spiritual world. She was also an expert in literature, history, medicine, and the other sciences and thus wielded an enormous amount of influence in the community and shared the same social and political status as men (Villariba, 2006, p. 55). While being a babaylan was a societal function, gender was an important determinant because, historically, all babaylan were women. Men can be allowed to perform babaylan duties only if they are dressed as women (Salazar, 1999, pp. 29-30).

When Spanish colonization began in the 16th century, religion functioned as the most pervasive ideological apparatus in conquering and subjugating the natives. The babaylan proved to be a threat because they performed the same duties and held the same stature as the Spanish friars, who were forcefully positioning themselves as the undisputed authority in the community. In an effort to contain these women, all babaylan activities were banned while the friars branded them as “brujas” (witches) and “aswangs” (demonic creatures); and in an act reminiscent of the Spanish Inquisition, many of those who still refused were chopped to pieces and fed to the crocodiles while others were beheaded or burned at the stake (Melencio, 2013, para. 7). The friars likewise preached the Catholic feminine virtue of docility and submissiveness as the ideal traits for women. This was dogmatized not only on the pulpit but through popular literature as well. Catholic priest Modesto de Castro’s *Ang Pagsusulatan ng Magkapatid na si Urbana at Felisa* (The correspondence of the sisters Urbana and Felisa) (1864) is an example of a literary text that was intended to instill proper conduct—“urbanidad” or urbanity, hence the name Urbana—for young women. Although the girls are the main characters, the voice of the male priest/author resonates throughout the text. *Urbana at Felisa* was such an authoritative work that it was considered essential reading in schools, especially for girls, until the mid-twentieth century (S. Reyes, 2001, pp. 91-92). It was through this systematic discrediting of the babaylan, and women in general, that the notion of the “Dalagang Filipina” was born.

“Dalagang Filipina” is a common expression used to extol the Filipino maiden's ideal beauty and innate quality. Its entry into the national lexicon began with *Ang Dalagang Pilipina* (The Filipino maiden), a popular 1928 folk song by Jose G. Santos with lyrics from renowned poet Jose Corazon de Jesus (a.k.a. Huseng Batute). It underscores the Filipino maiden's physical and behavioral attributes as primary determinants of her value. In the song, she is compared to a morning star (“parang tala sa umaga”), her beauty is magnificent (“dakila”), and her aura is akin to that of a fragrant flower (“bulaklak... na ang bango ay humahalimuyak”). The song also celebrates the ideal feminine characteristics – modest (“mahinhin”), demure (“mabini”), and a pure heart (“malinis ang puso”). These physical and behavioral traits are best embodied by Maria Clara, the pious and submissive heroine in Jose Rizal's novel *Noli me Tangere* (Antonio et al., 2022, para. 1). The result of an illicit relationship between a Spanish friar and a native woman, Maria Clara is described by Rizal as a woman with “semi-European features” (2006, p. 42). She has “curly blond hair,” a nose that is “straight in profile,” “dimpled cheeks,” and “skin as white as cotton” (2006, p. 42).

For nearly a century, the image of the “Dalagang Filipina” as the feminine ideal has functioned as a pervasive ideological benchmark concerning the physical and behavioral attributes considered desirable in a woman. The preference for fair skin, gold-leaf hair, and a sharp nose reflects the Eurocentrism of the Filipinos (E. J. David, 2013, pp. 53-78). Women are also assumed to show humility, piety, and an exceptionally nurturing disposition towards their romantic partner, often subordinating their own needs (Valledor-Lukey, 2012, p. 17). The sanctity ascribed to a woman's virginity, framed as her “purity,” is intricately interwoven with these behavioral traits (Manalastas & C. David, 2018, pp. 23-48). This idealized image of the Filipino woman bears a close resemblance to that of the “eternal feminine,” a European/Christian male-constructed philosophical principle that valorizes an “immutable concept of woman” (Abraham, 2009, p. 207) and places her firmly within the “domestic sphere and therefore eternally homebound” (Kuersten, 2003, p. 16).

In cinema, however, the image of the “Dalagang Filipina” is never static and is always subject to constant change and adaptation over time. In the 1950s, Doña Sisang fought against the pervasive influence of American liberal attitudes by instituting a cinematic iconography of the “Dalagang Filipina” based on Maria Clara, creating what Behn Cervantes later called the “mestiza mystique” in Philippine cinema (2000, pp. 16-20). In the post-sexual revolution era of the 1970s, Mother Lily subverted the meek and passive figure of Doña Sisang's “Dalagang Filipina” by creating a more sensual and sexually liberated heroine. Alongside this shift, the woman's ideal physical guise has similarly changed as actresses with *morena* or *kayumanggi* (brown skin) complexion rose in popularity and challenged the mestiza standard. Lastly, inspired by the influx of Korean and Taiwanese soap operas,

Charo Santos reconfigured the image of the “Dalagang Filipina” for the twenty-first century, whose beauty is now derived from a mix of East Asian and Austronesian features. Thus, despite women’s marginal position within film discourse, the ever-evolving construction and representation of the “Dalagang Filipina” in movies is more reflective of gender discourses and women’s realities, thereby offering a lens through which societal shifts and changes in attitudes towards women can be observed. This continually changing characterization challenges the conventional image of the “Dalagang Filipina,” revealing a disjunction between the perceived ideal and the actual roles women assume and their actions.

Feminine Roots: *Dalagang Bukid*

Filmmaking in the Philippines began during the American colonial period. When the Americans bought the Philippines from Spain in 1898, part of their pacification campaign (which became known as the “policy of attraction”) was to share their language and culture with their “little brown brothers.” This included a steady influx of movies from Hollywood to keep Filipinos entertained and pacified. Cinema soon served a secondary function as an ideological apparatus meant to sell the “American Dream” to America’s Filipino subjects. However, as soon as Filipinos started making movies on their own, the cinema became a site where attitudes oscillating between welcoming and resisting American culture were articulated.

Jose Nepomuceno was the first Filipino to produce and direct a film. In 1917, he founded Malayan Movies with his brother Jesus. In what already seemed like a response to American cultural imperialism, the goal of Malayan Movies was 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). For his first production, Nepomuceno took inspiration from an older and more established form of entertainment, Philippine theater. The result was *Dalagang Bukid* (Countryside maiden) (Nepomuceno, 1919), an adaptation of a hugely popular *sarswela* (stage musical) by Hermogenes Ilagan and Leon Ignacio. *Dalagang Bukid* is a love story centered on a female protagonist, Angelita, a flower vendor who falls in love with a poor law student even though her parents have already arranged for her to marry a rich old man. To further boost the film’s commercial appeal, Nepomuceno cast the same lead star of the stage version, the famous teenage ingénue Honorata “Atang” de la Rama. *Dalagang Bukid* was released with English, Spanish, and Tagalog intertitles. During its theatrical run in Manila, de la Rama sang the songs live at every screening. The film equaled the success of its stage version and enabled Malayan Movies to produce more films, including its sequel (Pilar, 1983, p. 15).



Figure 1. Honorata “Atang” de la Rama. *de la Rama* was only fifteen years old when she starred in the 1917 stage version of *Dalagang Bukid*. Two years later, she essayed the same role in *Nepomuceno*’s film adaptation. *de la Rama* was proclaimed National Artist for Theater in 1987 by President Corazon C. Aquino.

By the end of the 1930s, filmmaking in the Philippines has become an industry. *Nepomuceno*’s *Malayan Movies* was joined by *Filippine Films*, a studio owned by American expatriates George Harris and Eddie Tait. Then came *Parlatone Hispano-Filipino*, *Excelsior* and *X’Otic* (del Mundo, 1998, p. 61). In 1937, Congressman Pedro Vera of Albay, together with some friends and members of the Vera family, formed *Sampaguita Pictures*. *LVN Pictures* opened a year later and was formed by three wealthy friends—Narcisa “Doña Sisang” Buencamino de Leon, Carmen Villongco, and Eleuterio Navoa—whose initials make up the name *LVN*. By the 1950s, *LVN* and *Sampaguita* were joined by *Premier Productions* and *Lebran International* to make up the so-called “Big Four” movie studios. *Premier* was founded in 1946 by Ciriaco A. Santiago, a medical doctor, while *Lebran* began operations in 1949 and was established by businessman Rafael Anton (Villano, 2019).

Like *Dalagang Bukid*, the first films produced by *Sampaguita*, *LVN*, and *Premier* are all centered on a female protagonist. *Sampaguita*’s first production was *Bituing Marikit* (Beautiful star) (Tolosa, 1937), a musical film starring Elsa Oria. For *LVN*, it was the musical *Giliw Ko* (My beloved) (Tolosa, 1939) with Mila del Sol. *Premier Productions*’ first release, *Probinsiyana* (Country girl) (de Guzman, 1946), was another musical starring Carmen Rosales. It is easy to argue that these studios chose a musical film as their first production simply to capitalize on the

popularity of Hollywood musicals. However, upon closer examination, it becomes more appropriate to contend that these films were thematically influenced by the conventions of the *sarswela*. It reveals that musical romances have always been a favorite among Filipinos precisely because of the popularity of the *sarswela* and not because of the Hollywood musicals that were being imported from America (del Mundo, 1998, pp. 91-124). Furthermore, many of the classic Hollywood musicals were told from the perspective of a male protagonist, such as *Top Hat* (Sandrich, 1935) starring Fred Astaire, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (Curtiz, 1942) featuring James Cagney, and *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, 1951) with Gene Kelly. In contrast, *sarswela*-inspired Filipino musicals typically focus on a female protagonist, thus highlighting a female perspective.



The first features of the three biggest movie studios of the First Golden Age of Philippine cinema: **Figure 2.** (left) *Bituing Marikit* (Beautiful star) (Tolosa, 1937). **Figure 3.** (center) *Giliw Ko* (My beloved) (Tolosa, 1939). **Figure 4.** (right) *Probinsiyana* (Country girl) (de Guzman, 1946).

The significant number of female-centered films that Sampaguita, LVN, and Premier produced in the 1950s could be attributed to the substantial involvement of women in the management of each of these studios. Dolores Honrado-Vera, affectionately known as “Mommy Vera,” involved herself in the day-to-day operations of Sampaguita Pictures alongside her husband and Sampaguita’s co-founder, Jose Vera. Similarly, Adela Hermosa-Santiago, addressed by industry workers and actors as “Doña Adela,” assumed a comparable position of authority at Premier Productions, founded by her spouse, Ciriaco Santiago (Orsal, 2007, p. 13). On the other hand, Doña Sisang bought out her partners and assumed full control and ownership of LVN Pictures. Her astute business acumen and discerning project selection placed LVN in a preeminent position, making her the foremost industry leader of her generation.

Doña Sisang: The Dalagang Filipina as Counter Narrative

Born on October 29, 1877, Doña Sisang was the daughter of Justo Buencamino, a poet and politician, and Atanacia Lim, a Filipino-Chinese. She came from a well-known family of politicians and sarswelistas (the Buencaminos of San Miguel, Bulacan) and was, therefore, more familiar with the theater and, according to her son Manuel, has not seen a movie prior to entering the film business (Torre, 1977, p. 10). Her uncle was Don Felipe Buencamino, a prominent political figure who served in President Emilio Aguinaldo's cabinet. In 1901, as he was about to be proclaimed by the Americans as San Miguel's town mayor, Doña Sisang's father was ambushed and killed by Filipino guerrillas.

In 1904, she married Jose de Leon, a powerful government official in San Miguel, with whom she would have five children. They went into the rice production business and were soon recognized as among the leading rice producers in Central Luzon. When her husband passed away in 1934, Doña Sisang moved her family to Manila and refocused her attention on real estate, a venture that brought her considerable wealth and prestige. This enabled her to have powerful friends, including the President of the Philippine Commonwealth, Manuel L. Quezon, whom she invited to be the guest of honor at the inauguration of LVN Pictures in 1938.

For Doña Sisang, LVN was simply her plaything, her “libangan” (source of entertainment), and her “pasa tiempo” (pastime). She had no background in film production and learned on the job by becoming involved in LVN's day-to-day operations. Displaying a deeply maternal approach to running the studio, she treated every actor, director, crew, and rank-and-file employee as part of a family and made sure that each worker was compensated properly. However, this also meant scolding them, like any caring mother would if they started behaving unprofessionally. Her stern yet motherly nature also inspired some actors to come to her for advice on personal and financial matters (Tirol, 1977, pp. 128-147).



Figure 5. *Narcisa “Doña Sisang” Buencamino de Leon.*

Doña Sisang's approach to filmmaking can be described as nativist, i.e., the indigenized Hispanic culture that evolved over three centuries of Spanish colonization. As American Hollywood movies began influencing Filipinos' attitudes, she focused on films that promoted traditional values and traditions. Thus, her fondness for stories set in rural places, stories that examine the clash between the simplicity of provincial life and the fast and loose nature of city life, and her insistence on the use of Tagalog as dialogue, *kundiman* as music, the *terno* or *traje de mestiza* for women and the *barong Tagalog* for men as costume can all be regarded as an attempt at creating counter-narratives. Furthermore, Doña Sisang's love for romantic stories meant that her films often centered on female characters. She crafted her leading ladies to embody her vision of the "Dalagang Filipina"—prim and proper like the girls in *Urbana at Felisa* and light-skinned with fine features like Maria Clara in *Noli Me Tangere*. In other words, she countered the liberal attitudes of twentieth-century Hollywood female characters by evoking nineteenth-century figures of women who are submissive and soft-spoken while also promoting Eurocentric beauty standards. This was already apparent in LVN's first production. *Giliw Ko* (My beloved) (Tolosa, 1939) tells the story of Guia (played by Mila del Sol), a beautiful and fair-complexioned country girl who sings American songs on the radio. After being infatuated with images of Hollywood and the attention lavished on her by the radio orchestra's bandleader, she moves to Manila and finds fame but is soon disillusioned by its superficiality. She returns to her province to sing traditional Tagalog songs and back into the arms of her childhood sweetheart.

The narrative of *Giliw Ko* also provides us with a view of Doña Sisang's conviction that Filipino audiences will always choose a good love story. Coming from a family of musical artists, she knew how much Filipinos loved the *sarswela*. Therefore, a love story is at the core of any LVN film—be it a melodrama, musical, comedy, or costume epic—and Doña Sisang made sure that the story is visually told in the most romantic way. For instance, the "suyuan sa ilalim ng puno" (courtship under the tree), a scene typical in many LVN films, was Doña Sisang's idea (Chaves, 1977, p. 21). This image has become a recurring motif in romantic films in the decades that followed and is also an example of the kind of feminine flair that she introduced to Filipino filmmaking. She also read scripts, decided on projects, supervised the casting, designed costumes, and viewed dailies to ensure that every movie conformed to the standards she herself has set, creating what came to be known as the "LVN style" (Torre, 1977, p. 14).



Figure 6. (left to right) Mila del Sol, Rogelio de la Rosa, and Lopita in *Sarungbanggi (One night)* (de Guzman, 1947).

Similarly, Doña Sisang's leading men symbolized the European construct of the ideal man as virile, brave, and, most importantly, loyal to his lady love, i.e., a knight in shining armor. Like LVN's female stars, they have fair skin and sharp noses. Doña Sisang's eye for talent resulted in the creation of some of the most memorable movie stars of the First Golden Age – Mila del Sol, Norma Blancaflor, Tessie Quintana, Rosa Rosal, Delia Razon, Charito Solis, Lilia Dizon, Nida Blanca, Marita Zobel, Lita Gutierrez, Rogelio de la Rosa, Jaime de la Rosa, Leopoldo Salcedo, Jose Padilla, Jr., Pancho Magalona, Mario Montenegro, Armando Goyena, Nestor de Villa, and Leroy Salvador.

To promote her stable of stars, Doña Sisang came up with the idea of an exclusive onscreen romantic pairing of her actors in what came to be known as the "love team." These include Delia Razon and Mario Montenegro, Tessie Quintana and Armando Goyena, and Nida Blanca and Nestor de Villa. These romantic pairings were so immensely effective and successful that the "love team" formula continues well into the twenty-first century with popular tandems of the past

twenty years, such as Bea Alonzo and John Lloyd Cruz, Nadine Lustre and James Reid, Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla, and more recently, Belle Mariano and Donny Pangilinan, and Alexa Ilacad and KD Estrada.

When LVN was forced to stop producing movies in 1961 due to cash problems, Doña Sisang redirected the studio's operations to post-production services and continued as a producer through Dalisay Pictures, an independent production company. The movie matriarch likewise attended to other family businesses and was active until her passing on February 6, 1966, at the age of 89.

Mother Lily: The Dalagang Filipina as Femme Fatale

The trend of powerful women producers continued with Lily Yu Monteverde, the founder and matriarch of Regal Films. Addressed by everyone as "Mother Lily," she was a key industry leader from the late 1970s until her retirement in the early 2000s. Like Doña Sisang, she ran her studio with her own unique and often eccentric style.

Mother Lily was born to a wealthy Filipino-Chinese family on August 19, 1938. Her father was the copra magnate Domingo Yu Chu, a Chinese immigrant from Fujian, China. The youngest of twelve children, Mother Lily was spoilt and headstrong and eventually grew up to be the family's rebellious black sheep. To instill some discipline, her parents sent her to conservative Catholic schools. However, the self-confessed movie lover frequently skipped classes and instead stood at the gates of Sampaguita Pictures to catch a glimpse of her favorite movie stars. This was the 1950s, the peak of the studio system. Decades later, Mother Lily would recall how she was once shoved aside by a studio security guard at the gate. Hurt, she vowed to return "not as an actress, because I don't have the looks, but as a movie producer" (Ang See, 2012, pp. 1380-1382). This unforgettable experience could explain why the original Regal Films office is located right next to the Sampaguita Pictures compound.

In 1960, Mother Lily dropped out of college and married Leonardo "Remy" Monteverde, a popular basketball varsity player from San Beda College who was also the basketball team captain of Mao Fa Company, the copra company owned by her father. Mother Lily's decision to marry Monteverde, who is only half-Chinese, did not sit well with her father, and she was denied her inheritance. She found work as a clerk in her father-in-law's Montemart Department Store, earning Php600 a month. When she could save enough money, she bought two popcorn machines, which she installed at Cherry Fooderama in Mandaluyong City and at the Podmon Theater in Sta. Cruz, Manila. The two machines eventually produced a hefty profit and allowed Mother Lily to finally pursue her dream of going into the film business. In 1962, she founded Regal Films, initially as a local distributor of foreign films, mostly Hollywood B-movies.



Figure 7. *"Mother" Lily Yu Monteverde.*

By 1974, Regal Films ventured into film production. The 1970s was a turbulent time marked by violent student protests and the imposition of martial law. Meanwhile, the sexual revolution and the women's liberation movement resulted in a loosening of the Filipinos' attitudes toward sex and romance and the questioning of women's secondary position in Philippine society. The decade was also a fertile period for the arts. In cinema, a new breed of socially conscious

filmmakers led by Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal depicted the social, political, and cultural maelstrom that the country was going through. It was against this backdrop that Mother Lily produced her first film – *Magsikap: Kayod sa Araw, Kayod sa Gabi* (Work hard day and night) (Carlos, 1976). The film was a big hit and demonstrated Mother Lily's talent for choosing projects with immense commercial appeal.

In envisioning the “Dalagang Filipina” of the 1970s, Mother Lily subverted the fair-skinned and subservient image that Doña Sisang nurtured. Instead, she chose to represent the modern woman—a product of the sexual revolution whose features align closely with the natural physical characteristics of Filipinos. Such was the case with Regal Films' first contract star, Alma Moreno. One of the most bankable stars of the 70s, Moreno belonged to a new breed of leading ladies whose physical attributes signified the evolving tastes of Filipino audiences. Moreno and her contemporaries (which included the likes of Elizabeth Oropesa, Daria Ramirez, Amy Austria, Beth Bautista, and Lorna Tolentino) represented a “Dalagang Filipina” that was intended to be perceived as being closer to the Filipina's natural physiognomy. Keenly aware of their physical allure and their effect on men, they have transformed into cinema's seductresses—the archetypal *femme fatales*.



Figure 8. The “Dalagang Filipina” as *femme fatale*. (left to right) Beth Bautista, Amy Austria, Elizabeth Oropesa, Lorna Tolentino, Alma Moreno, and Daria Ramirez.



Figure 9. Alma Moreno in Bomba Star (Gosiengfiao, 1978).

If Doña Sisang favored wholesome love stories, Mother Lily produced any movie she thought would sell, including soft-porn movies (known in the 70s as “bomba” films). Alma Moreno capitalized on her sexiness and femme fatale image in movies such as *Walang Karanasan* (Inexperienced) (Bautista, 1976), *Bomba Star* (Bold star) (Gosiengfiao, 1978), *Nympha* (Gosiengfiao, 1980), and *Diary of Cristina Gaston* (Gosiengfiao, 1982). Critics dismissed these types as nothing more than “bomba films” and regarded Moreno—as the title of one of her movies suggests—as the ultimate sex symbol, a true “bomba” star. As the 1970s gave way to the 80s, “bomba” films diverged into two distinct types. The first was the more hardcore erotic cinema targeted specifically at an adult audience. The graphic and extended sex scenes in Regal Films’ arthouse erotica *Scorpio Nights* (Gallaga, 1985) exemplify this genre. The second was a softer, though still sexually themed, variant aimed at a broader audience. This became a kind of “rite of passage” for young actors, signaling their transition to more mature roles while maintaining a wholesome image. This can be seen in the light and sexy melodrama *Under-age* (Gosiengfiao, 1980), where Mother Lily launched her first batch of teenage contract stars whom she branded as her “Regal Babies.”

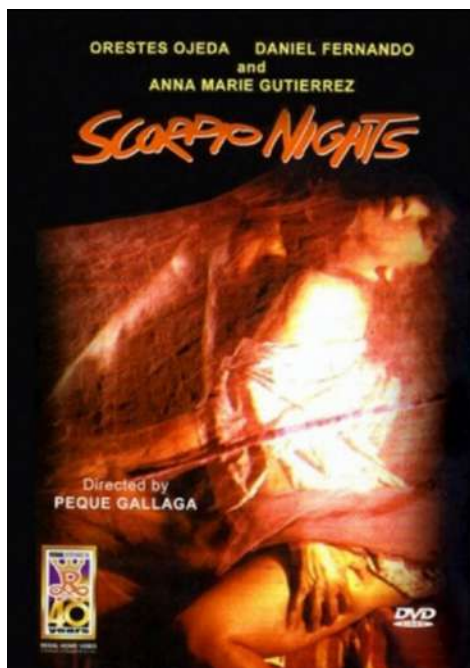


Figure 10. (left) The quintessential Filipino erotic film - *Scorpio Nights* (Gallaga, 1985).

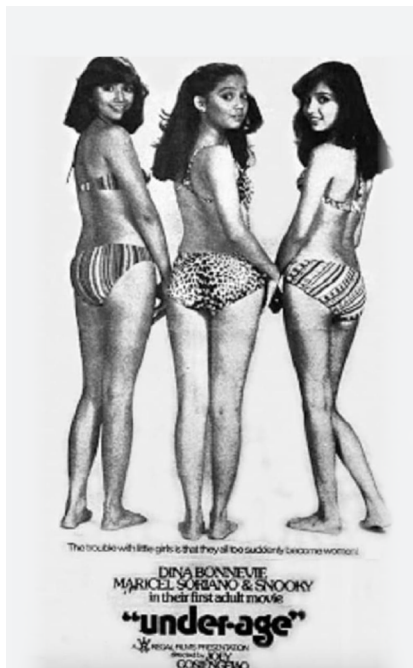


Figure 11. (right) The original Regal Babies: Dina Bonnevie, Maricel Soriano, and Snooky Serna in *Under-age* (Gosiengfiao, 1980).

Such films accurately reflect the changing gender politics of the 1970s and 80s as women began emancipating themselves from the restrictive and stifling image of the “Dalagang Filipina” of Doña Sisang’s time. Actresses no longer need to maintain a “virginal” image to appeal to moviegoers. They could take on more daring and sexy roles without damaging their appeal to a general audience. When viewed within the broader history of the “Dalagang Filipina” on screen, the femme fatale of the 1970s and 80s represents a transitional phase that paved the way for the twenty-first-century reinvention of the “Dalagang Filipina” as a woman who is more *desiring* than she is desirable.

Charo Santos: From Beauty Queen to Entertainment Mogul

By the onset of the twenty-first century, the four biggest media companies in the Philippines are all managed by women. Mother Lily retired as President of Regal Films and was replaced by daughter Roselle Monteverde-Teo, while the studio has since been renamed Regal Entertainment, Inc. Meanwhile, Viva Films, Regal’s biggest rival in the 1980s, has likewise expanded and is now known as Viva Communications, Inc., run by sisters Valerie and Veronique del Rosario together with their brother Vincent III, the children of the studio’s founder – Vicente del Rosario, Jr. Meanwhile, lawyer Anna Teresa “Annette” Gozon-Valdes, daughter of GMA Network Chairman and CEO Felipe Gozon, is president of the network’s movie outfit, GMA Films. Women have also conquered the world of independent filmmaking. Quantum Films, the production company of lawyer/producer/director Josabeth “Joji” Alonso, is behind some of the most successful independent films in recent years.

But it is Maria Rosario Navarro Santos, more popularly known by her screen name as Charo Santos, who was perhaps the most influential and most accomplished female movie industry figure in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, up until ABS-CBN was shut down in 2020 after earning the ire of then-President Rodrigo Duterte. As the network’s President and CEO from 2008 to 2016 and Executive Producer at Star Cinema since 1993, she has been behind many of the highest-grossing Filipino movies of all time. But compared to the eccentric nature of Doña Sisang and Mother Lily, Santos is relatively low-key and prefers to stay out of the limelight. Within the busy corridors of the studio, she is simply referred to by employees as “Ma’am Charo.”

Santos was born on October 27, 1955, to Dr. Winifredo R. Santos, a government doctor from Baliwag, Bulacan, and Nora C. Navarro, a native of Calapan, Oriental Mindoro. Santos’s route to show business was through joining beauty pageants. At the age of 14, she was crowned Ms. Calapan. Two years later, she won the 1971 Ms. Southern Tagalog Athletic Association (Acebuche, 2024, paras. 3-6). While

pursuing an AB Communication Arts degree at St. Paul's College Manila (now St. Paul University Manila), Santos cross-enrolled in film production classes at the nearby De La Salle University. There, she met professor Clodualdo "Doy" del Mundo, Jr., the screenwriter of *Maynila, Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (Manila, in the claws of light), the groundbreaking 1975 film by Lino Brocka which later became the subject of her college thesis. Santos took her internship at ABS-CBN, where her uncle, Jimmy Navarro, was the program director. She also had a short stint as a production assistant for *John en Marsha*, a popular weekly television sitcom at Radio Philippines Network (RPN) starring Dolphy and Nida Blanca (Ang, 2016, para. 10). In 1974, she gained national attention by winning the Ms. Green Race, a pageant promoting the Green Revolution project of First Lady Imelda Marcos. A year later, she was named one of Manila's Five Prettiest. Finally, in 1976, Santos graduated cum laude at St. Paul's College Manila and won the Baron Travel Girl pageant, a prestigious title that allowed her to travel to different countries (Castro, 2016, paras. 2-3). It was during this time that she was chosen for the lead role in the supernatural thriller *Itim* (The rites of May), the debut film of Doña Sisang's grandson, Miguel "Mike" de Leon, and co-written by her former professor, Doy del Mundo, Jr. *Itim* launched Santos' career as a major movie star, but her real goal was to work behind the camera. In 1981, she re-teamed with Mike de Leon to co-produce and star in the crime thriller *Kisapmata* (In the wink of an eye). The following year, she married Cesar Rafael M. Concio, Jr., a wealthy businessman 24 years her senior whom she met during her stint as a Baron Travel Girl.

Being a co-producer of a Mike de Leon film gave Santos the credibility to produce films for the short-lived Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP), a government-owned film company that was created to further the artistic development of Filipino movies. Concurrently, Santos also worked as a producer for Vanguard Films, an independent film company. In 1985, Santos began line producing for Regal Films. When ABS-CBN reopened a year later (after being shut down by President Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. at the onset of martial law), the network invited Santos to work as Production Manager. By 1992, she was promoted to Head of Programming and Production. When ABS-CBN launched its film subsidiary, ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc., or Star Cinema, Santos was tapped to be the Executive Producer. Under Santos' leadership, Star Cinema opened its doors to respected women directors such as Marilou Diaz-Abaya and Laurice Guillen and nurtured the next generation of female filmmakers led by Cathy Garcia-Sampana, Joyce Bernal, Rory Quintos, Mae Czarina Cruz, Antoinette Jadaone, and most especially Olivia Lamasan.



Figure 12. (left) Charo Santos in her debut film *Itim* (The rites of May) (de Leon, 1976).

Figure 13. (right) Thirty years later, as President and CEO of ABS-CBN.

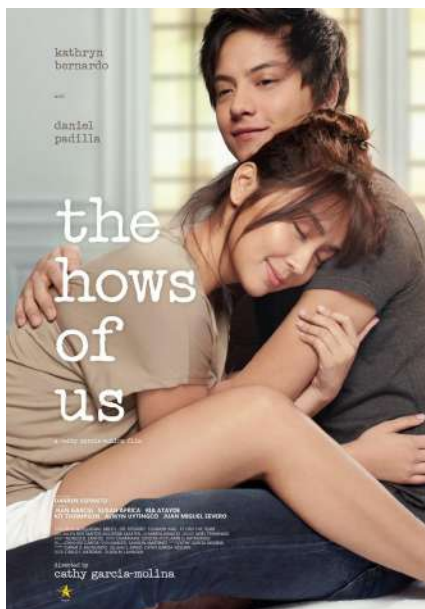
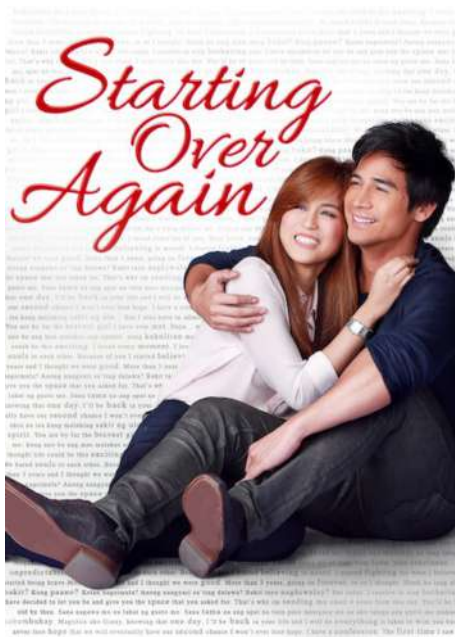
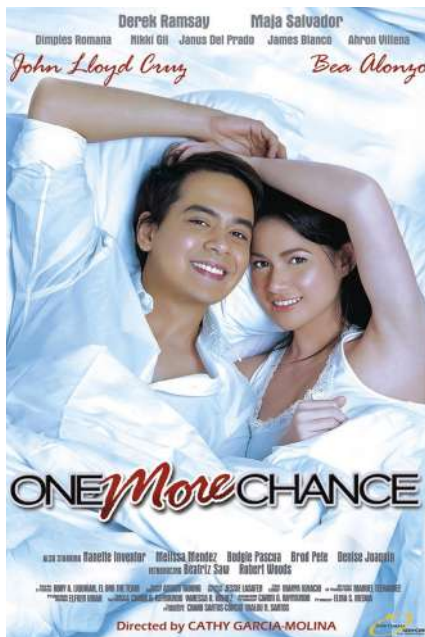
In 2003, ABS-CBN aired the Tagalog-dubbed version of *Meteor Garden* (Tsai, 2001), a Taiwanese romantic soap opera based on the Japanese shōjo manga *Hana Yori Dango* (Boys over flowers) by Yoko Kamio. Starring Barbie Hsu and the members of the popular Taiwanese boy group F4, *Meteor Garden* captured the hearts of Filipino viewers with its simple yet charming story. This marked the beginning of what became known as the “Asian invasion,” a surge of East Asian popular culture—including movies, music, fashion, and especially television—into the Philippines. Asian soap operas (or what Filipinos refer to as “Asianovelas”) are often romance-themed stories that feature an independent and strong-willed female protagonist (exemplified by the character of Shan Cai in *Meteor Garden*) who is not afraid to articulate her romantic desires. Such narratives resonated with Filipino audiences who rediscovered their fondness for melodramas and romance narratives, especially since action and sex-oriented dramas aimed exclusively at male audiences dominated the Philippine movie landscape in the 1990s. Recognizing this shift, Star Cinema released *My First Romance* (Cuaresma & Lazatin, 2003), a box-office hit that featured the first romantic pairing of Bea Alonzo and John Lloyd Cruz, arguably the most popular love team of the late 2000s and early 2010s. The film’s success was pivotal for the movie industry as local film production declined significantly in the first years of the 2000s. *My First Romance*

was followed by other equally profitable melodrama and romance movies such as *Milan* (Lamasan, 2004), *Can This Be Love?* (J.J. Reyes, 2005), *One More Chance* (Garcia-Sampana, 2007), and *A Very Special Love* (Garcia-Sampana, 2008). The success of these movies, often referred to as “chick flicks” due to their popularity with female audiences, encouraged Santos to redirect Star Cinema’s production slate in the 2010s almost exclusively to female-centered melodramas and romance films, e.g., *Miss You Like Crazy* (Garcia-Sampana, 2010), *The Mistress* (Lamasan, 2012), *Starting Over Again* (Lamasan, 2014), *The Breakup Playlist* (Villegas, 2015), *Everything About Her* (Bernal, 2016), *Love You to the Stars and Back* (Jadaone, 2017), *The Hows of Us* (Garcia-Sampana, 2018), and *Hello, Love, Goodbye* (Garcia-Sampana, 2019). With these movies, Santos helped configure a brand-new image of the “Dalagang Filipina.”

Star Cinema’s Dalagang Filipina: More Desiring Than Desirable

The twenty-first-century cinematic representation of the “Dalagang Filipina,” as seen in the movies of Star Cinema, embodies the influence of Asianovelas on Filipino beauty standards. The physical traits of many young female movie stars of the past twenty years reflect a blend of East Asian and Austronesian features. Notable examples include Heart Evangelista, Toni Gonzaga, Sarah Geronimo, Maja Salvador, Kim Chiu, and Kathryn Bernardo. A particularly striking example of this Asian influence is Sandara Park, a South Korean native who grew up in the Philippines and rose to fame after participating in the ABS-CBN talent show *Star Circle Quest* in 2004. Thus, the twenty-first-century filmic image of the “Dalagang Filipina” brings together the Filipinos’ appreciation for East Asian beauty with the “mestiza” aesthetic of the 1950s and the “kayumanggi/morena” movie stars of the 1970s.

In terms of character and disposition, the new “Dalagang Filipina” serves as a vehicle for expressing women’s innermost desires and fantasies. The female characters of the melodramas and romance movies of the past are often trapped within a phallogentric “saint/whore” dichotomy as they were portrayed as either soft-spoken and conservatively dressed or as femme fatales/male objects of desire. In the movies of Star Cinema, the female protagonist is envisioned as a woman with agency. She is a figure seemingly created for the female gaze, and her ability to express her interior thoughts and desires—whether romantic, erotic, or maternal—enables female spectators, especially those with similar yearnings, to live vicariously through her. On film, therefore, the “Dalagang Filipina” of the twenty-first century is more desiring than she is desirable.



More desiring than desirable. The “Dalagang Filipina” in Star Cinema’s movies. **Figure 14.** (top left) Bea Alonzo with John Lloyd Cruz in *One More Chance* (Garcia-Sampana, 2007). **Figure 15.** (top right) Toni Gonzaga with Piolo Pascual in *Starting Over Again* (Lamasan, 2014). **Figure 16.** (bottom left) Kathryn Bernardo with Daniel Padilla in *The Hows of Us* (Garcia-Sampana, 2018). **Figure 17.** (bottom right) Kathryn Bernardo with Alden Richards in *Hello, Love, Goodbye* (Garcia-Sampana, 2019).

Feminine Foremothers

Doña Sisang, Mother Lily, and Charo Santos. These women producers are a testament to the matricentrism that permeates the movie industry and, to a considerable extent, Philippine cinema. Each significant period in Philippine cinema's history has at its center a powerful and influential "mother" figure. The movies that Doña Sisang's LVN Pictures produced helped usher in the First Golden Age, while Mother Lily's Regal Films was at the forefront of the new wave cinema that defined the Second Golden Age. Lastly, Charo Santos, through Star Cinema, produced the much-needed box-office hits that helped revitalize the industry at a time when local productions were at an all-time low.

Having the ability to tap into the zeitgeist of their respective generations, they were able to envision a figure of the "Dalagang Filipina" on film that reflected the prevailing socio-cultural issues of the time; and because they championed the production of female-centered movies that cater to a female audience, they became instrumental in nurturing a feminine-oriented artistic tradition within Philippine cinema. On the other hand, these women producers fostered the careers not only of the movie stars of their respective generations but also of Philippine cinema's "great men" – revered directors such as Lamberto Avellana and Gregorio Fernandez in the 1950s, Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal in the 70s and 80s, and Joel Lamangan and Chito Roño in the 90s and 2000s. The honorific title (e.g., "Doña" and "Mother") that people in the movie industry have bestowed on these women is a testament to the respect that they command and to their perceived maternity. To dismiss them as nothing more than movie producers is to disregard their influence and impact on the artistic development of Philippine cinema, thus denying us a deeper understanding of the history and nature of the most popular form of mass entertainment of the last one hundred years.

Endnote

1 A recent example can be found in *Direk: Essays on Filipino Filmmakers* (DLSU Press, 2019). Of the fifteen essays covering prominent auteurs from Gerardo de Leon to Lav Diaz, Marilou Diaz-Abaya was the sole female director considered worthy of inclusion.

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