

A Network of Multiplicities: Understanding Philippine Alternative Cinema

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Abstract

This essay explores the application of the rhizome concept in analyzing Philippine cinema, particularly its alternative and marginalized forms. Rooted in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome represents a decentralized, multiplicitous structure, contrasting with hierarchical models. In the context of cinema, alternative forms such as short narratives, documentaries, and TikTok videos embody this rhizomatic nature, diverging from mainstream commercial norms. Despite digital technology's democratization of film production and distribution, alternative cinema remains on the fringes due to the dominance of industrial capitalist structures. However, its resilience and diversity reflect a people's cinema, shaped by historical, theoretical, and cultural forces. As TikTok gains popularity, it echoes cinema's origins as short, accessible spectacles, challenging the dominance of feature-length films. This proliferation of alternative cinematic forms heralds an "Age of Alternative Cinema", symbolizing the triumph of the rhizome and reshaping cinematic culture.

Keywords: Philippine cinema, alternative cinema, Philippine film history, rhizome, digital transformation

Introduction

Introducing the concept of the rhizome in the study of Philippine cinema, this essay applies its significance to a marginalized cinema, the alternative cinema that has grown outside of the confines of the country's dominant commercial movie industry. A rhizome is one informed by multiplicity referring to an acentered body, say that of a ginger or a potato, which grows in nomadic fashion underground. This is unlike the arborescent body, which takes hierarchical growth with its assigned parts from roots and trunks to the leaves and flowers of trees. This concept of organization was developed by two French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, referring to a heterogeneous growth, opposing everything that signifies singularity as it is seen as controlling and totalitarian¹. Applied to cinema, the concept of the rhizome takes various cinematic forms that differ from popular full-length movies due to its diverse expressions. They come in the forms of short narrative films and videos, documentaries, experimental, animation, installation art, video art, TikTok, and many more. This cinema initially lived a subterranean life and took nomadic journeys in its early beginnings. Although it has presently become ubiquitous with the emergence of digital technology through popular short-duration videos seen on YouTube and TikTok, alternative cinematic forms have redefined their meanings by maintaining their position outside of what is considered as the traditional industrial cinema (i.e., the movie industry and its feature-length format). Despite their popularity, such as that offered by the short video format and enjoyed by countless users and viewers, it is by no means an assurance that alternative cinema has become mainstream. What remains to be mainstream are those more popular forms that are produced by a vast system of entertainment business complex that is supported by an industrial capitalist enterprise. This is composed of an infrastructure made up not only of producers (Hollywood and its national movie industry clones are examples) but also of the global chains of movie theaters, which assure economic stability by providing a viable market for films. Attached to this main industry are subsidiary markets, like television and print industries, advertising, online streaming platforms, fashion, cosmetics, and other ancillary sectors that provide jobs to sustain the gargantuan appetite for movie entertainment. None of these can be claimed even by the phenomenal TikTok platform as providing similar sustainable income-generating benefits. The dominant mainstream has an incalculable network of business enterprises that could hardly be matched by any other rivals, thus forcing them to remain on the fringes of the film landscape. However, what alternative cinema lacks in terms of mainstream dominance, it compensates by covering a wide swathe of cinematic practices, from newsreels in the celluloid past to short video formats in the digital present. The unique properties of these film forms embody the immanent nature of motion pictures as a form of multiplicity. This

principle has a significant implication on the conception of a Philippine national cinema.

In this essay, I take the occasion to promote alternative cinema as a form of a people's cinema. The history of this form of cinema bore its resiliency in the past, surviving through the crucibles of wars, technological obsolescence, economic collapse, political repression, public apathy, a pandemic, and other forms of disruptions. I cover the historical, theoretical, technological, and cultural issues surrounding the rise of these filmic forms. The epic sweep I discuss in my historical narrative captures the travails of a cinematic form emerging through a century of a troubled past. Alternative cinema's significance to Filipino culture is yet to be fully understood and appreciated. With TikTok as a popular form of moving pictures taking the attention of millions, one may want to think that cinema has surprisingly returned to where it first started: as short images that are as much a spectacle as when the first films were made by the Lumiere brothers in 1895. TikTok reminds us of how cinema first began. It reminds us that feature-length films are not the only forms of cinema and cannot dominate our cinematic culture. With many other alternative cinematic forms, mainstream cinema is challenged. Most notably in the digital age, cinema is reinvented anew. With the pervasive presence of alternative film forms whose numbers defy any inventory, one may think that what is happening now is the Age of Alternative Cinema, the triumph of Rhizome. This is the history that will be told.

The claim of a thousand cinemas to be found in alternative cinema is an audacious one. This goes against the prevalent notion of a monogamous, monolithic, mono-crop object called the Philippine cinema, conveniently referring to the Filipino commercial movie industry. Many times, it is the *only* cinema Filipinos know. Challenging this popular notion, what is suggested is a plural cinema born in multiplicity. It is a cinema that is not one but many, and because of its plurality, this form of cinema travels along nomadic paths. Banished from Eden—or that paradise called the movie industry—alternative films become vagabonds roaming the country's cinematic landscape but hardly finding a home of their own. A sanctuary is offered in schools where they can be densely found, but schools still need to form the necessary infrastructure to provide a permanent home for their growth. They still need to consciously build themselves into a home.

Despite their numbers, alternative film forms continue to remain in the hands of individual filmmakers, unable to (because they do not want to) turn their cinematic efforts into one humongous, centralized, methodized, and monogamized act of making moving pictures. To better comprehend the difference between the mainstream and the alternative, one may conjure two striking images. One is a tree; the other is a rhizome, best exemplified by the ginger, or *luya*. These images may well serve as visual paradigms for what will be discussed. The draconian movie

industry may be likened to a towering tree that has dominated our film culture with its monolithic stature as an industrial system whose sole aim is to entertain. For all its dominance, it has become the *only* way cinema has been popularly known. That such a cinema is feature-length, narrative, escapist, and everything an industrial cinema can massively evoke is a testament to its overpowering and enduring stature, its popularity, too. Its colonial past rooted in Hollywood assured its continuity when it was cloned by Tagalog moviemakers, serving as the foundation and providing the orientation for moviemaking in the country. The public, knowing no better, wildly embraced this singular concept of cinema. Alternative cinema, on the other hand, forms a horizontal growth, creeping underground in subterranean spaces as it continues to spread across generations of its repressed growth. Instead of a hierarchical development, it grows from different parts of the same body, a body without organs² as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have described in the rhizome. A model of an organ-less body, alternative cinema offers a path to cinema's continued emancipation. From it comes the flowering of cinema by a thousand-fold and in ways never before imagined.

When one talks about cinema as a multiplicity, one needs to see its foundational organization as motion pictures. There is no rule that motion pictures can only be industrial in nature, narrative in structure, and entertainment in use. It was the elite capture of the medium that made this possible through the hands of colonial pioneers and elite clones, growing in a capitalist economy with a politically dependent government that made its cultural and social life reliant on foreign models. As moving images, cinema is first a form of communication. It is composed of signs, visual and aural. The semiotics that wraps around its signs produce meanings that need not be restricted to storytelling alone. Starting as scientific experiments, motion pictures have a more distant root in knowledge and cognition, even scientific inquiry. Its reliance on visual images found ancestry in olden pictographs, ideograms, and hieroglyphs. It was only when businessmen, including the scientist-inventor Thomas Alva Edison, had a studio devoted to making fiction films. Edison had designs of monopolizing the early American film market with a thrust toward making films to serve an educational function³. Taking hold of the medium, he was instrumental in changing the course of cinema's early development from its scientific origins to becoming an entrepreneurial commodity⁴. The notion of cinema as an art form only came after. Cinema in the hands of commercial agents, aided by hired storytellers and an army of professional workers creating an empire of illusions, all partnered to devise a medium that would, in the twentieth century, not only build financial empires but also help create nations as well. They helped spread a country's language that equipped the natives to imagine themselves as one—through the dialogues they heard and even in the music they listened to. Capitalizing on the enormous power of motion pictures, financial moguls turned motion pictures into an organized industry,

casting deep influence of its products on any nation's social fabric, where it attaches itself. Represented visibly by Hollywood, motion pictures' success became so enormous that the movie industry became its defining idea of what cinema is. Everything else was marginal. This became the fate of alternative films.

Outside the elite capture of motion pictures by the movie industry lies a world of cinema's many other possibilities. Alternative cinema fulfills its rich potential by doing other acts that escapist cinemas cannot provide. These are to inform, teach, create art, persuade, animate, simulate, and preserve images far beyond what literary stories can tell. Within alternative cinema, films of varying lengths can be found that are not limited only to standard feature-length entertainment. They are made in different modes of production and are not only made by the capitalist studio system. They can be produced personally, collectively, or by other possible means. Alternative films come in various cinematic forms and aesthetics, from documentaries' social realism to experimental films' conceptual abstractions. Also, alternative films are products of political economies that are anathema to the capitalist structure supporting the movie industry. Finally, while alternative cinema does not have the same popular audience to support its products, it claims an audience that consists of the largest segment of the country's population: the young, because many of the films are made and watched by those who belong to academic communities.

Nature of Alternative Cinema

Alternative cinema explodes in filmic forms. Summarily, it differs from the dominant narrative cinema due to the following factors: *length*, *mode of production*, *political economy*, *cinematic form*, *aesthetics*, and *audience*. Short films consist of various film lengths that make a difference from the standardized feature-length films (running for approximately 60 to 120 minutes). Alternative cinema flourishes as short films, but longer-length films may also be considered an alternative to conventional feature-length movies. In other words, within alternative cinema, the range of films can be as short as a minute long, e.g., the archival footage of American newsreels such as *Advance of Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* (White, 1899) or a 647-minute (11 hours) movie like *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (Evolution of a Filipino family) (Diaz, 2004). Due to their peculiar lengths, both films are hardly screened in regular, commercial movie theaters, but this should not demean them as moving pictures. They have an alternative way of getting produced, and for this reason, they also have an alternative screening practice. The modes of production and exhibition of alternative films are tied to the political economies that govern this sector. They can be made individually, artisanally, communally (group), or collectively, financed independently by sources that are not dependent on commercial producers. The political economy that dictates a

homogenizing studio-type production prevailing in commercial filmmaking does not apply to the varied conditions of production that make alternative cinema possible. Independently produced, the circulation of films happens differently as it has no fixed market to rely on for its distribution. Different forces govern the consumption of alternative films that are more developmental (i.e., educational, cultural) than commercial (profit-oriented). This is due to the market that alternative cinema serves: students and the young population. If profits were made, they would barely sustain an industrial type of film practice.

For cinematic forms, there are plenty to choose from: documentary, experimental, animation, short fiction, educational, scientific, advocacy, propaganda, home movie, archival compilation, reportage, political, newsreel, or short-duration videos, to name a few. In mainstream cinema, you only have one standard type for the film to be in an entertainment format, using genres to diversify the interest. If documentary or experimental elements stray into these films, they all support the dramatic narrative, which rules supreme in the storytelling structure of feature-length movies. This is not so in alternative cinema. The integrity of form and consistency of style make each film form in alternative cinema what it is and merit its name. Diversity of filmic forms and expressions are options a filmmaker can choose from. Each form offers a totally different approach to filmmaking, for example, non-narrative abstraction in experimental films, observational approach in documentaries, pixelation in animation, and infographics in scientific films, among many others. For aesthetics, there are myriad styles to choose from: non-narrative, no dialogue (silent), mixed genres, documentary-type, conceptual and abstract, virtual, music video, montage-driven, diaristic, scientific, ethnographic, long-duration, without losing sight of the fictional and the narrative that get made but take on a less conventional style. The culture of alternative filmmaking, both in content and material organization, continues to defy the dictates of commercial cinema. With a history of a hundred years of struggle, it has become resilient and diverse as technology allows it to multiply its form.

Brief History of Alternative Filmmaking

A condensed history of alternative cinema shows its origins from the colonial era. The first motion pictures came at a time when the country was dominated by foreign filmmakers, all males. The foreign filmmakers who served as the colonial-era's founding fathers included the Spanish Francisco Pertierra and Antonio Ramos, who brought the first film projectors to the country, and the Americans James Henry White, E. Burton Holmes, C. Fred Ackerman, who shot the first films about the Philippines. Among the films they shot were short films like *Battle of Manila Bay* (Blackton, 1898), *Rout of Filipinos* (White, 1899), *The Escalata* (sic) (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1899), *Manila* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1900), and *Cockfighting in the Philippines* (Warwick Trading Company,

1901). Two more Americans pioneered making films locally, Albert Yearsley and Edward Meyer Gross, who laid the foundation of the country's movie industry. The white domination was broken when a local photographer, Jose Nepomuceno, embarked on making the first domestic film production. He first made a short newsreel in 1918 in Cebu⁵ before embarking on making the first Filipino-made feature-length film, *Dalagang Bukid* (Country maiden), in 1919 in Manila. There were no visible divisions between short and feature-length films during the early years of cinema until the end of World War II. One may even claim that short films dominated the early cinematic practice due to the technology that was available. Cameras and projectors could only contain and screen fifty-foot-long reels, although this length increased as years passed and technology improved.

In 1912, there was a bifurcation in movie production when, in Hollywood, producers took the feature-length format as their preferred film form. This was to stave off competitors, thus protecting their capitalist intent to monopolize the growing market. Hollywood producers had more capital, better equipment, and a surplus of talent to ward off their business rivals with less capital and resources. Their dominance was further assured when they contracted movie theaters to focus exclusively on showing feature-length films in the USA and wherever Hollywood movies are shown. Hollywood's worldwide spread picked up steam, especially after the end of the First World War⁶. Globally, foreign markets were penetrated by the American long-feature films. Home markets, dependent on films bought from abroad, could not but imitate the production and marketing models they saw in Hollywood. This included the preference for making long feature-length, dramatic movies that offered only escapist entertainment. Relegated to the side were short films and other film forms that had purposes to offer other than entertainment. Short films continued to be made, but they only grew parallel to what became a draconian mainstream cinema. This way, they became "alternative" in nature.

The division between industrial and alternative cinemas became palpable after World War II. But during the three-year war in the Philippines, the film formats used by the Japanese propaganda team, the Eiga Haikyusha (Japanese Film Import and Distribution Office), were mainly the short film newsreel and the documentary—identified closely with alternative cinema. These favored the propaganda intent that the Japanese filmmakers had in making movies. Due to the lack of film supply, only two full-length feature films were made: *Ano hatta o ute* (Dawn of freedom) (Abe & de Leon, 1944) and *Tatlong Maria* (Three Marias) (de Leon, 1944)⁷. Soon after the war ended, the division between the mainstream and the alternative became evident. This came about as the country was deluged with Hollywood movies, followed by the recovering homegrown studios' resurgence of the same entertainment format. When movie theaters opened, the format that naturally dominated was the feature-length format. Short films (mostly newsreels) served only as add-on features in between screenings.

After the war, there was the formal emergence of alternative cinema. As the domestic movie industry recovered, the production of non-mainstream films also accelerated as a separate film activity. With movie studios busy humming with film productions, the newly installed Philippine government, with technological and manpower support from the U.S., set up a government information office complete with film laboratories and production facilities. It even had projection facilities that roamed the country and showed government information films. As the post-war era was also a period of the Cold War, films supporting the United States and its allies were shown while the communist adversaries were demonized in the movies that were screened in communities and schools. In 1953, the government established its own production studio, the National Media Production Center (NMPC). It specialized mainly in producing documentaries and short films, thus contributing highly to non-commercial films' visibility. Adding to NMPC's prodigious production were mainstream film studios like LVN and Sampaguita, which occasionally produced short films and documentaries.

Since after the war, one may consider four alternative film movements to have happened⁸. The first movement occurred in the 1950s and 60s with the efforts made by the pioneering Benedicto Pinga. Pinga was a photographer in the Army Signal Corps during World War II. After the war, he studied filmmaking in New York. In 1956, Pinga returned to the Philippines and started to push for the recognition of short films and documentaries by organizing film festivals and workshops and participating in international film competitions. One illustrious documentary practitioner of that era was Lamberto Avellana, more known for his award-winning feature-length films that have become classics of Philippine cinema. Avellana's short films and documentaries, like *El Legado* (The legacy) (1959) and *La Campana de Baler* (The bell of Baler) (1961), brought recognition to the country with awards from international film festivals like those he won in Bilbao, Spain. Among the other filmmakers of the period were Ferde Grofe, Jr., Dik Trofeo, Bibsy Carballo and Romy Vitug, Henry Francia, and more. They brought honors to the country by winning and getting attention locally and abroad. They organized workshops and exhibitions. Celebrated works include short films like Rod Paras-Perez's *Conversation in Space* (1961), Grofe's *Soul of a Fortress* (1964), Henry Francia's *On My Way to India Consciousness, I Reached China* (1968), Carballo and Vitug's elegiac *Recuerdo of Two Sundays and Two Roads that Lead to the Sea* (1969) and *Plaza Miranda Bombing* (1971), and Trofeo's *Borobudur: The Cosmic Mountain* (1972). This post-war movement ushered in the first organized flourishing of Philippine short films and documentaries.



Figure 1. A scene from *On My Way to India Consciousness, I Reached China* (Francia, 1968).

The initial burst of post-war creativity was stifled when martial law was declared in 1972. Under the military regime, the government information center was turned into a propaganda machine to promote the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, Imelda. NMPC churned out films that built the larger-than-life portrayal of the first couple in the public imagination. Propaganda was also made about the military, as well as the foreign trips that Imelda made and her various pet projects like the lavish holding of the Miss Universe in 1974.

During the martial law period in the 1970s, the second alternative film movement formed. This was a radical generation of young filmmakers who reacted against the military dictatorship and rampant commercialism by making anti-establishment films in the margins of the mainstream film market. The medium that provided the platform for a counter-cinema movement was the short film. This movement was bred in schools, mainly at the University of the Philippines, where radicalized ways of producing films happened using experimental film and documentary genres. Similarly, three academic institutions were also at the forefront of advancing the short film, with the Super 8 film as the preferred format. These were the Ateneo de Manila University, De la Salle University, and the industry-affiliated MOWELFUND Film Institute (MFI). Together, they became

the seedbed for a new cinema, finding radical expression through alternative forms, taking on a variety of short fiction, experimental, animation, documentary, music video, video art, political films, and more. These socially engaged films spawned new cinematic styles and genres from many talented and committed filmmakers. The remarkable generation responsible for the films ushered in the golden age of alternative cinema in the country. Their commitment to cinema allowed them to document life under the dictatorship, and this served them well in the struggle for a new government leading up to the People Power Revolution in 1986.

It was during this era when alternative cinema clearly defined its cinematic forms. Known for being marginal, these peripheral films populated a parallel cinematic landscape installed using the amateur Super 8 film technology. The explosive styles and genres resulted in a rhizomatic organization that accounted for the multiplicity of forms available for filmmakers of the period. The short film provided many avenues of growth, transforming itself from documentary to experimental, music video to commercial advertisement, and into countless student films and home movies—all making the short film a versatile film form. As the “mother” of all cinemas, it resulted in many film forms that shaped the alternate film world starting in the 1970s and maturing into the 80s, even spilling over to the 90s when the celluloid medium finally met its end. A few of them are discussed below.

The second movement was defined mainly along two major genres: experimental filmmaking for its innovation, best exemplified by Raymond Red’s *Ang Magpakailanman* (Eternity) (1982), and documentary for its realism, like my own Super 8 trilogy, *Oliver* (1983), *Children of the Regime* (1985), and *Revolutions Happen Like Refrains in a Song* (1987). Outstanding works of the period also included Fruto Corre’s *Isang Araw sa Bangketa ng Kanto Katipunan* (A day on the sidewalk of Kanto Katipunan) (1985), Roxlee’s *Tronong Puti* (White throne) (1983), Joey Agbayani’s *The Eye in the Sky* (1984), Joey Clemente’s *Daluyong* (Waves) (1984), Nona Ocampo’s *Ka Satur* (1983), and a host of other noteworthy shorts. Films made in the aftermath of martial law included Communication Foundation for Asia’s *People’s Power Revolution* (1986), Emmanuel Dadivas’ *Junkzilla* (1995), Roxlee’s *Spit/Optik* (1989), Kidlat Tahimik’s *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (1987), and a plethora of other short works.



Figure 2. A scene from *Magpakailanman (Eternity)* (Red, 1982).



Figure 3. Reynaldo Villarama, a.k.a. Oliver, preparing for his infamous “Spiderman” act in *Oliver* (Deocampo, 1983).

Among the alternative works was the documentary format, which had much at stake for being made during the harsh military dictatorship. It came to prominence during the martial law era for the courage films of this type took in revealing the truth that was being suppressed by state censorship and strict media control. They were films that took up factual events and personages against a barrage of disinformation and media manipulation. Although marginalized, the production of documentaries increased each time the country was in a state of conflict, and the period of martial law had its handful of contributions to make. These included films about a peasant march against the dictatorship, Joey Clemente and Nil Buan's *Lakbayan* (Travel) (1984); human rights violations, Asia Vision's *No Time for Crying* (1986); street children, MFI and Goethe Institut Manila's *Masakit sa Mata* (Eyesore) (1991); indigenous communities, Jo Cuaresma and Freddie Espiritu's *Sabangan* (Shed) (1983); and many more. In times of war, as in times of peace, the documentary under martial law remained a powerful genre that sought out truth in cinema.

Experimental films are motion pictures that challenge the official narrative cinema because of their formalistic deviations and oftentimes nihilistic intentions in producing moving picture images. In a sense, films of this nature "destroy" the way cinema has been conceived as story-driven, popularly exemplified by Hollywood movies and their clones. Extreme experimental works hardly have a resemblance to traditional narrative films. Some contain purely abstract images, while others are stories that take absurd turns, breaking the highly rational and coherent traits one traditionally sees in commercial cinema. Two filmmakers from Germany were sent by Goethe Institut Manila to help define the experimental genre. They were Prof. Ingo Petzke and Christoph Janetzko, both instrumental in crafting a new film language never seen before on local screens. A few of the examples from the second movement extending to the aftermath of martial law in the 1990s included Roxlee's *Tronong Puti* (White throne) (1983), Regiben Romana's *Pilipinas; or What do you think of the Philippines, Mr. Janetzko?* (1989), Cesar Hernando's *Botika-Bituka* (1987), Kiri Dalena's *Red Saga* (2004), Vicky Donato's *Hubog* (Trained) (1989), Rune Layumas' *Malay Tao* (Conscious person) (1985), Mario de Guzman's *Dung-aw* (Look) (1989), Aureus Solito's *Si Suring at ang Kuk-ok* (Suring and the Kuk-ok) (1995), Tad Ermitaño's *Tributaries* (1995), and many others.

Animated shorts form another genre counted among marginalized films. It lacks adequate infrastructure to sustain its production while having a limited audience reach. Despite the Philippines being known as an outsourcing haven for talented animation artists, the sad reality of local animation shows only a small group of film artists producing animated works that delve into Filipino content. Philippine animation has yet to create its own distinct identity, but it could undeniably count on a pool of film artists with enormous talent: Roxlee



Figure 4. Banner promoting the 3rd Manila Short Film Festival (1983).



Figure 5. A scene from Kiri Dalena's experimental documentary film, *Red Saga* (2004).

with *The Great Smoke* (1985), Joey Agbayani with *The Eye in the Sky* (1984), Mike Alcazaren with *Huling Trip* (Last trip) (1983), Ellen Ramos with *Doon sa Kabila ng Bulkan* (There on the other side of the volcano) (1997), Christine Carlos with *I've Got Nine Lives* (1998), among a few others.

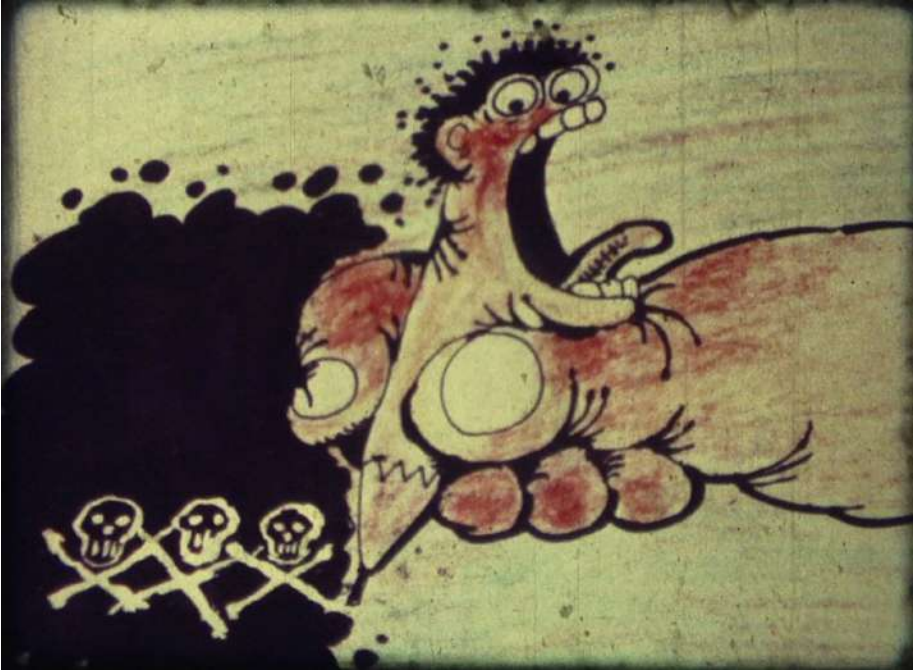


Figure 6. *The Great Smoke* (Lee, 1985)

Other popular films made then were music videos, which allowed for a visual interpretation of popular music, and short fiction films, which gave life to many young people's fantasies. Whether made as school requirements or were self-produced, the short films that surfaced during the second alternative film movement were produced by students. It turned academic institutions into a wellspring for alternative filmmaking in the same manner that movie studios became the source of mainstream movies. Despite the countless student films that were made, the history of this class of films has generally been left unwritten. Consequently, the films remain unpreserved. This is a lamentable situation as student films are significant not only because they are produced as part of an educational process. They also reveal the creativity and imagination of a young generation of filmmakers as they express their aspirations and discontents. This was particularly important for films made during the military repression period.

Despite all the success reaped by the second movement, it saw its end with the change in technology. The Super 8 film format that allowed amateur filmmakers to thrive and make their films independently ceased to be available when Kodak, the main film supplier, closed its office by the end of the 90s. What came after was a change from celluloid to video. The technological revolution that took place ushered in a new set of equipment, bringing with it new challenges and

opportunities. This led to a new generation of tech-savvy filmmakers taking over the alternative film scene.

Digital Era

As cinema technology moved into the digital age, the third movement emerged with digital cinema's emergence. The coming of the 21st century brought about the obsolescence of celluloid film, and a new age in alternative filmmaking took shape using video technology. There were two phases in the early growth of video: analog and digital. Video production and its market first found expression through analog formats like Betamax, U-matic, and VHS. Soon made obsolete, the digital revolution rampaged through the market and set the standard for video technology. The change has been profound, making chip-based, non-linear technology as the engine driving alternative production to become a ubiquitous film activity, both in the making and in viewing. Given its tentative nature, analog videos were produced but, like their celluloid counterparts, were hard to preserve. Worth recalling are works like Mike de Leon's *Bilanggo sa Dilim* (Prisoner in the dark) (1986) and those made by a team-up between SONY and Repertory Philippines. While they were full-length movies, their production using two-inch video provided a promising alternative to the celluloid movies that still dominated the exhibition circuit. Among the short films were Yam Laranas' *Death of a Butterfly* (1989), Larry Manda's *Ang Bulag sa Eskinita* (The blind man in the alley) (1984), and MOWELFUND's documentary *Beyond the Mainstream* (1986), capturing the era of the second alternative film movement with interviews of its filmmakers and excerpts from the films.

Not long after, around 2005, the digital format supplanted the analog format. Ready to capitalize on this change were filmmakers who took to their cell phones, computers, and laptops to produce moving images as never done before. The impetus offered by the new format caught like wildfire. With digital technology available in personal gadgets like smartphones, computers, and handy iPads, undertaking short productions has become so much easier than it was before. In the entire archipelago, as it was with the entire world, anyone could engage in moviemaking with none of the ties that filmmakers used to have with the industrial movie system to make and show movies. Working from school or home, freed from the pressures of commercial filmmaking, anyone could shoot a movie and show it through any of the available access that the digital platform could provide. However, while works were countless produced using accessible new media, many cinematic forms were mere reiterations of past styles and genres. More documentaries were made, but hardly any innovation was introduced in the genre. More experimental works were produced, but only those native to digital technology resulted in accomplishments that could not be seen as repetitions of past styles. One outstanding work is *Phone Memory* (2019) by David Corpuz, which



Figure 7. Poster for Mike de Leon's *Bilanggo sa Dilim* (*Prisoner in the dark*) (1985), the first Filipino feature-length film shot on video.

was made in the first digital experimental cinema workshop conducted by Prof. Ingo Petzke at the U.P. Film Institute in 2019. Its aesthetic simulates the sliding movement as one views and reviews images in a cellular phone, an aesthetic that is seen to be native to the digital medium. While more music videos, animations, and home videos were made, they hardly showed innovations of the alternative genre, as seen in the radical second movement. Outside of the academic circle looms large the figure of Khavn de la Cruz. He has mastered the experimental genre in digital format. He has won wide renown at international film festivals, where screenings of his works were accompanied by musical performances in Berlin, Rotterdam, Ji.hlava, and other venues.



Figure 8. *Khavn de la Cruz – one of the pioneers of digital filmmaking in the Philippines.*

On hand to catch the digital windfall were three festivals that positioned themselves as the new leaders of alternative cinema in the new millennium:

Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival and the Cinema One Originals—both catering mainly to feature-length movies in digital format but including sections for short fiction films (sadly excluding other genres such as documentaries and experimental films)—and the Cultural Center of the Philippines' *Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video* (CCP Alternative Film and Video Awards), which welcomes films of alternative nature in all categories. Since the introduction of digital technology, entries to these competitions remarkably increased in number. Significant to note during the early years of the digital era was that the films were physically shown inside movie theaters. One had to go to the screening venues, mostly in limited spaces like the Cultural Center of the Philippines or inside school auditoriums. This would change drastically with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.



Figure 9. Participants to the 2023 *Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video* (CCP Alternative Film and Video Awards) pose for a photo with pioneering alternative filmmakers Rick Y Orellana (center, left) and Raymond Red (center, right). The *Gawad CCP* began in 1988 and is now the longest-running event dedicated to alternative cinema in the Philippines.

The lockdown that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for a new way of using digital technology to produce and disseminate moving pictures. Forcing people to work from home, the online format has become a new source of creativity and market as videos find new expressions. There was no need to go and physically watch movies in cinema theaters or other venues; one could get as much film entertainment as possible on one's own phone or computer. Online delivery of movies, whether long or short, has brought a new dimension to the development of alternative cinema (as it has of mainstream cinema). Digital online media has personalized the cinematic experience, allowing people to watch movies individually through their own gadgets. Emerging as an addictive form

of visual entertainment are the short videos that have proliferated in TikTok and other online platforms. This allowed individuals without formal film production training to become instant filmmakers, using only their smartphones to shoot, edit, score, mix, and distribute their films by uploading them to online streaming platforms.

Alternative cinema has indeed found a new life in the digital platform, allowing it to reach its fourth movement. This happened in the 2020s when everyone thought that cinema was dead in its tracks when people could not go to movie houses anymore. The online streaming technology saved the harsh conditions and gave it a leash on life. This even resulted in a favorable situation for alternative cinema, giving rise to non-commercial forms of cinematic expression flooding online platforms. Short films were made and shown as they never had before. Everyone could post their videos, and anyone could watch them anywhere. Short videos have become a very popular medium that is enjoyed by everyone. Undoubtedly, the digital turn has brought about unprecedented growth in alternative cinema. Among the outstanding developments was the emergence of regional cinema, which made possible the widespread growth of cinema happening all over the archipelago. This can be seen in the explosive growth of regional film festivals, from the Abrenian Film Festival in the north to CineKasimanwa in Western Visayas, and the flourishing of film festivals in Mindanao. All over the country, alternative cinema sustains the lifeblood of this new cinema that has come to define the national cinema, a cinema in the hands of common people making films. What is happening today is the triumph of alternative cinema as the country's most popular and most avidly pursued cinematic experience—both by amateur filmmakers and hordes of audiences.

The other consequence of digital cinema is the emergence of gender-based filmmaking, seen through the rise of women filmmakers and those of other gender affiliations. Names like Sari and Kiri Dalena, Ramona Diaz, Jewel Maranan, Adjani Arumpac, Ditsi Carolino, Martika Escobar, Kara Magsanoc-Alikpala, Baby Ruth Villarama, and many more have made their marks in national and international film competitions. It is not only women who are becoming prominent but also those from the LGBTQ community. This sector is represented by filmmakers with uncompromising works celebrating alternative gender consciousness.

Alternative filmmakers brought Philippine cinema back to its origin in short films and its many other forms. They have expanded cinema's terrain beyond the limiting confines of commercialism and linear narrativity. Cinema has unleashed its rhizomatic nature. Alternative filmmakers made notable strides by arriving at new cinematic concepts, forms, styles, techniques, and consciousness. Its continued practice emancipates cinema to fulfill its mandate to create various moving pictures to enrich the country's film heritage. True cinema is happening in alternative works.

Endnotes

- 1 Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *Mille plateaux* [A thousand plateaus] (B. Massumi, trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1980).
- 2 "Body without organs" is how two French philosophers have defined the rhizome, meaning it refers to a body that "is continually dismantling the organism, causing signifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their "Introduction." *Mille plateaux* [A thousand plateaus], p. 4.
- 3 Read leading US film trade journals like *Leslie's Weekly*, which printed articles such as "How Edison Would Educate Children," written by W.H. Meadowcroft (described as an "assistant to Mr. Edison") appearing on September 19, 1912, p. 270. Other articles include Harry Irving Greene's "Ultimate Users of Motion Picture," *Motography*, November 23, 1912, p. 387, and "Motion Pictures and the Mind of the Child" by William H. Walker in *Motography*, January 18, 1913, p. 39.
- 4 Charles Musser. 1990. "Thomas Edison and the Amusement World," *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- 5 Jose Nepomuceno, in inaugurating moviemaking in the Philippines, first shot a short newsreel on the internment of Doña Estefania Lim Osmeña, first wife of Commonwealth Vice President Sergio Osmeña, Sr., in Cebu in 1918. This was followed a year later by his production of *Dalagang Bukid*, which he adapted from a popular "sarswela" or stage musical
- 6 American film scholar and Yale professor Charles Musser takes up the widespread establishment of a global Hollywood film system in his essay, "Nationalism, Contradiction, and Identity: or, A Reconsideration of Early Cinema in the Philippines," in Nick Deocampo (Ed.). 2017. *Early Cinema in Asia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 71-109.
- 7 The two feature-length films were directed by Yutaka Abe (*Ano hatta o ute!*/Dawn of freedom) and Gerardo de Leon, *Tatlong Maria* (Three Marias). Consult Nick Deocampo. 2016. *Eiga: Cinema in the Philippines during World War II*. Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, Inc.
- 8 Refer to Nick Deocampo. 2022. *Alternative Cinema: The Unchronicled History of Alternative Cinema in the Philippines*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press and Film Development Council of the Philippines.

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