Tagalog Movies and Identity: Portrayals of the Filipino Self

Filipino academics and critics often speak of the need to project Filipino values and culture in their popular media. They argue that it is the most popular of these media, television and the cinema, which have been most dominated by western produced programs and films and by locally produced imitations of these. However, in this post colonial climate most Filipinos' sense of a “truly” Filipino self remains dubious at best and many have found the task of self-discovery elusive. The problem may indeed be that after four hundred years of domination the cultural conceptions and values of their former colonizers have become inextricably enmeshed in the national psyche. In a sense Philippine recorded history and nationhood began with its colonizers. This is not to say that a Filipino self does not exist or will not emerge as a mature, independent entity in the future, but only that its representations in the film medium must be viewed in light of its colonial past.

The local film industry in the Philippines is sometimes referred to as “Tagalog movies.” Tagalog is the language of those Filipinos who live in central Luzon, particularly in and around Manila, and since Manila is the seat of Philippine power and finance it is only natural that Tagalog would be decreed the national language. Manila is also the filmmaking and television production capital of the Philippines. If films are not shot in the Manila area (and the vast majority are), they are still written, directed, acted and financed by people who live in Manila. Yet as well as the term “Tagalog movies” captures the specific vantage point from which movies in the Philippines are made, it does not reveal the historical influences on this very popular and influential medium.

Understanding the representations of the Filipino self in Philippine cinema requires first a knowledge of the cultural and social context from which it has sprung. The Philippines is unique in Asia because of its close historical ties with the United States. However, prior to the relatively brief American colonial period which began at the turn of the century the Philippines was a long time colony of Spain whose roots travel much deeper in the Filipino psyche. The Filipinos often refer to their long colonial subjugation as having been “350 years in the convent and 50 years in Hollywood.”

Hollywood

The reference to Hollywood is not a casual one. The American film industry has left a lasting impression on Philippine cinema motifs, mythology, storylines and characterizations. It has also influenced the way Filipinos see themselves portrayed on screens in darkened movie houses across the archipelago. The birth of Philippine cinema coincided with the American takeover. Although there were film showings during the last years of the Spanish period, it was not until the arrival of the Americans that actual local production began in earnest. In its crude beginnings the Philippine cinema was not
produced by Filipinos, but rather by Americans. By the 1920s Filipinos were producing films, many of which were adaptations of Philippine plays and literature.

During this period and up until the present day local film production has continued relatively uninterrupted. During its early development Philippine theater houses were saturated with Hollywood produced films, and to some extent this American domination of the Philippine market often threatened the viability of local productions. Although this domination has subsided in the last three decades, American films continue to be highly visible and very popular. Occasionally, they create a stir as was the case recently with *Schindler's List* (1994), in which President Fidel Ramos himself intervened to allow it to be seen uncut after American director Steven Spielberg threatened to take it out of distribution in the Philippines.

Their influence is also evident in Philippine produced films. Local filmmakers, many of whom have grown up watching American films, have been frequently criticized for slavishly imitating American genres, storylines and character types. Filipino movie stars have been referred to in advertising and movie reviews as the "Filipino James Bond" or the "Filipino Jerry Lewis" for examples. In some instances story ideas are derived from incidents found in American headlines. Recently, a controversy erupted at the FAMAS Awards, the "Philippine Oscars," over the switching of the names of the true winners for best actor and best actress with pretenders. The plot was discovered and the ensuing media coverage received worldwide attention. It is interesting to note that the pretenders, Ruffa Gutierrez and Gabby Concepcion, who were initially and falsely given the awards were nominated for starring in a local adaptation of the Lorena Bobbitt story, which had been depicted in American television movies.

This type of "adaptation" of American news items or film treatments is quite common. Since the 1930s when local films freely adapted the American film musical to Philippine settings, the industry has drawn heavily from American film genres. From war movies to westerns, from spy movies to action films the heroics in these films have proven particularly popular given the opportunities to display Filipino machismo. The problem with "adaptations" of this sort is that the product does not have the appearance of being indigenous to the culture. Numerous American style westerns were shot which have storylines and characters which look oddly out of place in their Philippine settings.

The Convent

Although American culture has had a lasting influence on Philippine culture and Hollywood undoubtedly has shaped the portrayals in local productions, beneath this American veneer one can see the pervasive and deeper influence of the "convent." In fact the previously mentioned storm which arose over the showing of *Schindler's List* illustrates the clash which sometimes occurs between American cultural products and a deeply ingrained Spanish catholic value system. Film censors felt that the brief nude scenes showing prisoners being herded into gas chambers would be offensive to Filipino audiences. After 350 years of often harsh Spanish colonial policy and the ubiquitous and controlling presence of the Spanish catholic church the Filipino's temperament and values often seem to more closely resemble the religious zealotry of 19th century Spain rather than the commercial utilitarianism of 20th century America.
In film many Philippine movie genres can be traced back to Spanish theater forms which were adapted to Philippine culture: sarsuwelas, komedyva, and the sinakulo. Sarsuwelas, for example, are love stories with song and dance, which were later adapted to the American musical comedy form. Komedyva plays are essentially religious action stories mostly about the struggles between the Christians and the Moors. The sinakulo, on the other hand, are more focused on religious suffering in their dramatizations of biblical stories from the creation up to the time of Christ. The latter two forms have undergone mutations on film, but with only incidental references to religion. Action films, both foreign and local, are among the largest box office draws in the Philippines. They are the direct descendants of the komedyva. Likewise, the popular melodramatic film's roots can be found in the suffering characters depicted in the sinakulo.

One film genre, the comedy, is indirectly descended from the American stage. Philippine comedy films are adaptations of bodabil which in turn was adapted from the vaudeville and burlesque performances of the early twentieth century. Like these stage cousins film comedy in the Philippines is grounded in slapstick or physical humor. Its tone is often earthy and vulgar with a healthy sprinkling of sexual and "toilet" humor. Physical deformity or unusual appearance as well as one's sexual orientation can also be a source of comic ridicule in these films.

Aside from the awkward comparisons to American film types, the characters found in Philippine films are most closely related to their theatrical ancestors. These often include strong heroes, mestiza heroines, snobbish rich women, modern females (i.e., flirts), mestizo playboys, cruel and tyrannical Spanish plantation owners, victimized Filipino workers, etc. Today's films are filled with plot devices and stereotypes found in early stage forms. In melodramas stories tend to revolve around family conflicts, particularly between husband and wife, and parent and child. The long suffering wife and mother has many biblical antecedents (as do many of the above-mentioned stereotypes) which were portrayed in these plays. In Philippine society the double standard of Spanish Catholic culture, in which the husband may have both a wife and a mistress, is widely tolerated. In such a cultural value system women are often seen as victims who must endure their philandering husbands and their cruel fathers. Like the sinakulo plays Philippine melodramatic films often focus on the hardships of their female characters and consequently are very popular with the female film audience.

Although the Spanish theatrical legacy lends an added dimension to Philippine film, critics have often complained that the Philippine cinema is limited by many of these same inherited stage conventions. Character types, as described above, often are confined to a two dimensional world lacking in the depth and complexity which we associate with real human beings. Likewise, the goal of most Philippine films is not the presentation of a realistic or even credible story but the evocation of an intense emotional response from the audience. Plots are filled with fantastic coincidences and deus ex machina endings. Story topics illustrate a soap operatic fascination with the catastrophes of modern living. Divorce, death, rape, suicide, adultery, accidents, sickness, and imprisonment are endlessly depicted and very often all within the same movie. Of course as a developing country, most Filipinos are mired in poverty and they have had more than their share of the social hardships brought on by economic deprivation. Both religion and melodrama offer familiar representations of this suffering
in sacred and mundane character types and in stories which are recognizable and comforting.

Stage conventions similarly influence the production techniques used in many Philippine films. Many are shot like stage plays in long shot with few close-ups. The camera frame comes to resemble the proscenium arch of the stage and the actors move about within that static frame of reference. Close-ups are used sparingly, such as to see the disapproving mother’s arched eyebrow. Although a lack of financial resources can and probably do affect such production decisions, this style of film staging seems appropriate given the acceptance of other melodramatic stage conventions such as a reliance on often repetitive dialogue to convey emotion and exposition, as well as on the two-dimensional character types and improbable storylines previously mentioned.

The Philippine Context

The audience for Tagalog movies has traditionally been the “bakya crowd,” a term coined by one local director who felt that his films were not appreciated by the lower classes. Although today all social classes will watch local productions, it is the lower classes who are almost exclusively devoted to these and they comprise nearly 70 percent of the population. The middle and upper classes tend to watch a mixture of local and foreign films with the upper classes still watching more foreign films. The latter are predominantly products of Hollywood and are, therefore, more accessible to those of higher education who have better English language skills.

Among the lower classes movies remain an affordable form of entertainment and a chance to see their favorite movie stars in predictable film vehicles. Many will go to the movies one to three times a week. Until recently it could be said that film and radio were the only true mass media in the Philippines because these were the only media that reached the vast majority of the people. In recent years television has also reached this status, particularly in Manila where television ownership now stands at about 85 percent. In the provinces it nears 50 percent but most people have access to a neighbor’s set and watch regularly. Film, however, remains a special medium for most Filipinos. Community is a very important aspect of the culture and film viewing is a group activity which in the Philippines is often participatory and interactive. In the provinces and to a lesser extent in Manila it is not unusual to see and hear audiences reacting with loud “oo’s” and “ah’s” as characters flirt with one another, cheering when the hero triumphs, crying during poignant or tragic scenes, or jeering the villain.

For provincial and lower class Filipinos this is all part of the entertainment. Movie stars are frequently seen on television in game shows, interview shows, and news programs and are featured in magazines and newspapers where their private lives are an endless source of fascination. Drama anthology and musical variety shows bearing the names of stars in the titles are also very popular. In the remote provincial capital of Negros Oriental, Dumaguete City, where I conducted film and television audience research and taught for five months in 1992, there are five movie theaters serving a population of 40,000. The main thoroughfare in the city is lined with vendors who sprawl mostly movie magazines all along the sidewalks where passers-by can be tantalized by the latest exploits of their favorite stars and for a few pesos can find out why Robin and Kris have broken up. Each of the small surrounding towns also has theaters and beyond these in more rural areas movies are shown on videotapes in small
Portrayals in a Mirror

Aside from the wide variety of foreign films distributed in the Philippines, cinema houses there depend almost entirely on three types of Tagalog movies: the action movie, the melodrama and the comedy. Most movie stars, and even directors and writers, will work exclusively within one of these genres since their public images are usually firmly built around one of these three pillars of the local movie industry.

Although most film-goers will attend all three types, there is a pronounced gender-related preference for either the action film or the melodrama. The action film, as might be expected, appeals mostly to a male audience although female audiences also enjoy watching larger-than-life macho males performing superhuman heroic deeds. These protagonists can take out an entire army, but usually only after being pushed to their limit first. Sometime during the film the handsome hero will sweep the beautiful mestiza heroine off her feet. The characters are definitely of the “white hat - black hat” variety with the “white hats” overcoming improbable odds to defeat the “black hats.” This simplistic structure is not unique to Philippine action films. It is evident in their western counterparts as well. However, these films tend to keep the black and white sides more clearly distinguishable without introducing any shades of gray. It can also be said that in comparison to the western action film what they lack in technical effects sophistication they make up for in explicitly gory and violent scenes.

In other words the Tagalog movies have adapted the Hollywood action film genre by making the necessary technical and cultural adjustments. The genre is a natural
vehicle for many male stars because it portrays the Filipino male as strong and virile, if not swaggering, posturing and womanizing. This Filipino machismo is reminiscent of the Spanish machismo of their former colonizers. In Philippine society males are often judged by their strength. Although hated and feared by many, former President Ferdinand Marcos was widely admired because he was a strong (albeit ruthless) leader. On a provincial level there are many smaller Marcos-like leaders throughout the Philippines who command small armies and who strike fear into the hearts of the local populations. Strength also takes center stage during the popular cock fights, in which roosters trained for combat fight to the death or until one is seriously injured while cheering spectators place their bets. Among the lower, less powerful classes the fighting cock is the prized possession of many Filipino men. They will spend hours grooming, feeding and generally preparing it for battle. This vicarious participation in cock fighting is perhaps not unlike watching an action film for many males.

One Filipino critic, however, took care to differentiate between the Spanish and the Filipino machismo (Guerrero 111–114). It is his opinion that the machismo displayed by the Filipino is an attempt to retrieve his lost manhood, stripped away by centuries of colonization and the imposition of Roman Catholicism. In fact, the attitude of the Filipino male toward the catholic church, of which over 80 percent of Filipinos are members, is very similar to males in Latin European countries as well as their former colonies. Like their Latin counterparts many are only occasional Catholics. They will appear at important ceremonies like baptisms and marriages, but in their minds religion is best left to the women. As we will see in the discussion that follows, religion is central to the lives of many Filipino women. For men such a preoccupation would be considered manly because for a true man actions speak louder than words or prayers. Like the stars of action films the Filipino male cannot rely on what cannot be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched. He must rely on his wits and his fists (or his automatic weapon as the situation demands) to survive.

Some male stars have made long careers reprising their heroics in film after film. Fernando Poe, Jr. has been a prominent star in action films since the late 1950s and despite his age he continues to attract loyal audiences today. Although the settings have changed from westerns to modern day barrios, the heroic unyielding persona he has portrayed has changed little over the years. Joseph Estrada, who was often portrayed as a crime buster in his action film vehicles, is currently playing the same role in real life as vice-president of the Philippines. In the media he portrays himself as President Ramos’ crime-busting deputy, a lone figure trying to bring law and order to what often looks like a lawless frontier. During the recent spree of kidnappings in Manila, he was seen almost nightly on television news parading suspects in front of the camera and boasting how he would break the back of these kidnapping gangs. To his fans he is known affectionately as “Erap,” which is pure spelled backwards. He has become known for his malapropisms, which some refer to as “erapisms” and he himself has published a book of his best known “erapisms.” Oddly this is not a source of embarrassment as it was with former U.S. Vice-President Dan Quayle but rather shows how he is one of the common people.

Movies and politics intermingle quite often in the Philippines where glamour and power are not easily separated. One person who is instantly associated with the second major genre, the melodrama, has exploited this connection to great advantage. Imelda Marcos has used the international and local media to display her frequent melodramatic
outbursts. Following her husband’s death she could often be seen being interviewed in luxurious settings complaining of her poverty while evoking well-timed tears. During her days in power in the Philippines she would recruit movie stars for her own and her husband’s political and social campaigns. She herself would use these opportunities to portray herself in the same light as the movie stars, singing traditional Philippine songs and Hollywood musical favorites. In fact she referred to herself as her “people’s little star.” One of her pet projects was establishing and promoting an international film festival in Manila. In this way she would be able to mingle with international stars as well on a much larger stage. To prepare this stage for important visitors she had Hollywood-type facades (i.e., the type used in movie sets) constructed along the road from the airport to hide the squalid residences of the poor.

On the other end of the political spectrum in the Philippines stands former President Cory Aquino whose husband, it is widely suspected, became a martyr at the hands of the Marcoses. She herself was known for her markedly unmelodramatic demeanor, particularly in the face of great suffering. Mrs. Aquino also used the media well although her manner was less flamboyant and her purpose was less self-serving. Like the Mother Mary in the sinakulo plays whose son (i.e., in this case husband) has been martyred by the materialistic and power hungry Romans (i.e., the Marcoses) she was able to transform tragedy into redemption (i.e., the “People Power revolution). Among the highly religious Filipinos this association touched a very deep chord in the national psyche. The suffering wife, mother, daughter has long been a central figure of the sinakulo plays as well as their successors, the melodramatic films of Philippine cinema. In the sinakulo the Mother Mary is the embodiment of the woman as martyr and suffering is seen as a virtue. Whereas Imelda Marcos presented a gaudy, materialistic version of this female archetype, Cory Aquino embodied the self-effacing, spiritual version. In Philippine mythology they are two sides of the same female image of the self.

It is not surprising then that the melodramatic film remains one of the most popular genres in the Philippines, especially among women. Filipino women have often found solace in religion and in melodrama which incorporates much of the same symbolism and character types. The films themselves tend to be sentimental and weepy with endless plot turns sprinkled with a good measure of hair pulling and slapping. For the uninitiated viewing can be a rather tiring experience. Instead of using building action the emotional pitch rises quickly to the top and either remains there or goes over the top with multiple climaxes.

The lines between these sexes are clearly drawn, as they are in action films. Women are victims, expected to be patient with their philandering husbands. A common conflict situation in many melodramas is the love triangle. It is not uncommon in this Spanish Catholic country, in which divorce is rare, for husbands to have mistresses and in many instances second wives and families. Movie stars enact this double standard both on screen and off. It has been widely known and discussed in the Philippine press that vice president Joseph Estrada has had such extramarital relationships since he was an action film star. The Philippine cinema’s most well known comedian, Dolphy, has been equally prolific. Even the current President Fidel Ramos, a staid and decidedly unflamboyant military man, is rumored to have a long-standing affair with a society matron with whom he is also said to have an illegitimate son. In life and in film the moral often is that if the woman suffers her husband’s infidelities, then he will eventually come back to her.
In both the action and melodrama genres, Tagalog movies serve at least in part as a type of release from the harsh lives of most Filipinos, who live under a system still dominated by a small but powerful elite. In action films, the male becomes a powerful figure who takes control and strikes back at the forces that victimize him. Women portrayed in melodramas are able to vent powerful pent-up emotions and be reassured that their suffering will be rewarded. However, it is in the comedy that Filipinos find an alternate, perhaps more liberating form of release. Generally speaking, comedy in the Philippines is very broad, physical and vulgar with little room for subtlety or nuance.

The characters are highly exaggerated caricatures of broad types. A frequently exploited storyline is that of a man forced to dress as a woman to hide his identity. This cross-dressing stereotype is, of course, the antithesis of the virile action hero. In Philippine society there is a long history of using the emasculated male as a source of humor. Effeminate gay men are also seen as comic figures. This is probably because their behavior contrasts so strongly with the Filipino macho male ideal. This can be seen as a form of parody, the object of which is the bloated male ego reduced to a high-pitched, flirting inversion of itself. The best known comic actor, Dolphy, became known for squealing roles such as these, particularly at the beginning of his career. Female characters, on the other hand, either parody the suffering woman character types of the melodrama by grossly exaggerating their weeping so that it becomes an obvious form of manipulation or they are portrayed as tougher than many of the males. The latter is again a type of gender reversal which is very humorous to Filipinos who live within the parameters of rigidly defined and tightly constrained gender roles. It should also be noted that comic characters often embody the exact opposite of Filipino standards of beauty. They can be too fat or too skinny, irregular features such as a big nose or prominent jaw or bulbous eyes, or they may just look more Malay with dark complexion. Again in a society where beauty contests are as frequent as rainstorms, appearance plays a very important role. Thus, comic characters who are grotesque caricatures of the mestiza ideal of beauty provide an outlet for satirizing the ideal itself. The resulting liberation of laughter then provides Filipinos with yet another opportunity to take control of the system as well as the images of the self that it generates.

Aside from being a form of control, Tagalog movies represent to their audiences a much needed form of escape into a world of action and glamour where suffering has meaning and injustices are righted. The film industry itself is considered by most fans as a fast track to shedding the burden of their poverty. In the past many movie stars were recruited from among the disadvantaged mestizos since the image of beauty in the Philippines is defined as western features with a fair complexion. However, in the 1960's a unique star emerged with a dark complexion and Filipino features. Nora Aunor was instantly accepted by audiences as “one of them.” Her story of rising from an impoverished background to the pinnacle of the entertainment industry was for most Filipinos a fairy tale with which they could easily identify. It is no accident that her ascent to superstar status corresponded with the popularity and rising box office receipts of Tagalog movies. As much as the mestizo continues to be a symbol of beauty in local films, it was clear that Philippine audiences craved stars who looked, spoke and suffered more like them. Many of the stars who followed Nora Aunor were also more likely to rise from humble beginnings than in previous decades. These stars are idolized by fans as much for the success which their star status symbolizes as for their
glamorous lifestyles. These stars could act out their fantasies in their screen roles and in real life with an abandon which few audience members will ever experience.

Yet the escape which Tagalog movies provide is temporary and the control is illusory. It is often said the Filipinos are a people in search of themselves. Spanish colonizers imposed foreign values and religious practices upon them which stripped them of their emerging identity as a people. In this century American colonizers brought with them a consumer culture which only dichotomized the national psyche. Today Philippine cinema reflects this cultural confusion. The self is portrayed as a hybrid of inherited values which Filipinos cannot yet call their own. It is not surprising then that their plot structures are often disjointed and episodic rather vehicles for coherently told stories. A new Philippine cinema has been struggling to emerge over the last two decades which presents a more realistic picture of Philippine society and in the process has begun the search for the lost self. Undoubtedly, Filipinos have a long road to travel to undo centuries of colonization. However, the cinema may yet play a role in reinventing a national identity.

Notes

1 Even during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II local film producers were turning out films although they were under tight censorship and often told what to produce by Japanese authorities.

2 Lorena Bobbitt was accused of severing her husband’s penis while he was asleep. She was later acquitted on the grounds that she was pushed to this act by the brutal beatings that she had received at the hands of her husband.

3 A mestiza refers to Filipinas of mixed heritage, usually either Spanish mestiza (i.e., having both Filipino and Spanish heritage) or Chinese mestiza (i.e., having both Filipino and Chinese heritage). In both cases their complexions are usually fairer than Filipinas of unmixed heritage (i.e., of Malay descent) and as in many former colonies of the West fairness of complexion is associated with beauty.

4 The male version of the above.

5 In the last four decades Philippine cinema has spawned directors of artistic talent, such as Lamberto Avellana, Gerry DeLeon, Lino Brocka, and Ishmael Bernal. However, they are noteworthy in that they are exceptions to the predominant trends which this paper examines.

6 Lamberto Avellana, the award-winning director of the postwar Philippine cinema.

7 The term bukya refers to the wooden sandals worn by the lower classes in the Philippines.

8 Prior to the 1970s only the lower classes would watch or admit to watching Filipino produced films.

9 In Manila movie theaters are often divided into two sections. The cheaper seats are those which are down below and closer to the screen. This is where the lower classes will sit. Theater owners are aware of the importance of this segment of the audience and are careful to keep prices within the range of their budgets.

10 Filipino film fans often refer to movie stars by their first names. This illustrates how close audiences feel to them. Robin is Robin Padilla, the “bad boy” of Philippine cinema, and Kris is Kris Aquino, the movie star daughter of former President Cory Aquino.

11 This comes from the word compatriots, which is a term reserved for close compatriots.

12 Many of those who form the elite ruling class have some western or Chinese blood in their lineage, but they would never have associated themselves with local cinema, particularly as actors, since this was considered a medium for the lower classes. Not all mestizos were wealthy as some were either illegitimate offspring themselves or the descendants of illegitimate offspring of their western colonizers.
Work Cited