

## **The Other “Other” Cinema: The Revisionist Impulse of Filipino Alternative Films**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper argues that independent films can be used as an “alternative” to counter the global hegemonic dominance of Hollywood. It adopts as its primary framework the post-colonial theories of Filipino critics Renato Constantino and Bienvenido L. Lumera. The essay proposes two questions that can serve as a guide for Filipino filmmakers: (a) Cinema for whom? (b) How can cinema serve the Filipino masses? It further suggests that Filipino filmmakers can make use of movie genres already embraced by the masses, subtly subverting and re-inventing its form in order to address the Filipinos’ “colonial mentality” brought about by decades of U.S. cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism. In other words, filmmakers can foster counter-hegemonic ideas under the guise of the popular melodrama, comedy or fantasy genre; hence creating a uniquely Filipino alternative cinema.

**Key Words:** independent films, alternative films, Filipino filmmakers  
Decolonization must begin with de-Americanization. It must go on to evolve a nationalist consciousness; that is, a counter-consciousness to combat colonial consciousness... Only the decolonized Filipino is a real Filipino.

— Renato Constantino (1977: 120)

Towards the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we Filipinos were introduced to a new word, or, to be more precise, a new doctrine— Globalization. “Globalization” became the centerpiece program of then-President and West Point graduate Fidel V. Ramos, with orders from the White House and its allies at the IMF-World Bank. With its promise of free and fair trade, globalization gave Third World nations such as the Philippines a chance to develop into what Western economists refer to as a “newly-industrialized country.” But what happened was exactly the opposite — the Philippines together with the rest of the Third World nations turned into mere dumping grounds for American-made products, revealing America’s true imperialist-expansionist intention.

But when it comes to persuading the world to consume America’s products, Hollywood movies are arguably the most effective advertising tool in America’s arsenal. By allowing us to take a glimpse of America through the magic of celluloid, Hollywood movies — far from being a mere escapist fare — functioned as an effective culture

industry which serves to sell a glamorized and illusory version of the “American Dream.” Hollywood has succeeded in maintaining its hegemonic influence in large part by imagining the global audience as a world of sensation-starved children (Ezra and Rowden 2006: 2). This unfounded belief is but a reflection of how the U.S. government and its cronies in Europe view the rest of the world, paving the way for military domination, cultural displacement and economic exploitation. Thus, according to Douglas Kellner, globalization, stripped of its false promises, is nothing more than “Americanization” (1999: 216).

The spectacle cinema produced by Hollywood has systematically dominated all modes of cinematic imagery, production and reception resulting in a standardized film culture or, as Jigna Desai puts it, a “tasty, easily swallowed, apolitical global cultural morsels” (2004: 90). Cinemas from other nations, with their images of cultural alterity, have been marginalized to the somewhat obscure “other” film traditions. Moreover, these other cinemas have been subjected to the exoticizing gaze of Western audiences. To some extent, the marketing and promotion of other cinemas such as those from Asia, Africa and Latin America recontextualize the films as mere travelogues, further reinforcing their otherness. Thus, Hollywood assumed the masculine role of the master cinema, while the traditionally feminine role of the dominated was assigned to the “other” cinemas. In the Philippines, the big-budget and technically-polished Hollywood spectacles are also one of the factors — together with piracy and unfairly high taxes imposed by local government — that led to the drastic decrease of films produced by the movie industry. According to reports, from over 100 films annually in the 1970s and 80s, the number of local movies has gone down further to an average of 50 from 2004 to 2008 (inquirer.net). Filipino movies, once referred to as the country’s “national pastime” (David 1990), have now been overtaken by foreign media products such as Hollywood movies, video games, cable TV and the two local giant television networks, ABS-CBN and GMA.

Globalization has also compelled Third World nations to dispense with its native identity, perceiving it as disposable cultural baggage to be exchanged for economic progress. Indeed, the hegemonic dominance of Hollywood in the Philippines has problematized the formation of a cinematic culture that is distinctly Filipino. The presence of Hollywood films since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century — when the Philippines was still a U.S. colony — has turned it into a model by which Filipino movies were made and appraised. The Filipino mind has been wrought by Hollywood into thinking that Hollywood is the “center” while the Filipino movie industry is a marginal “other” that simply through its existence confirms Hollywood’s centrality and superiority. Thus, the Filipino movie industry became a caricature of Hollywood. As Renato

Constantino rightfully observed, “the movie industry is both a victim and an ally of American cultural aggression. It is a victim precisely because it is an ally of Hollywood, not by conscious design but by the conditioning effect of decades of exposure to Hollywood movies. At the same time, it is an ally in the sense that the Hollywood model is pervasively the frame of reference of Filipino producers, directors, actors and moviegoers” (1977: 131). Hence, the movie industry is a “reflection of Philippine society for it is the clearest and simplest depiction of the neo-colonial situation” (ibid.).

There have been a number of enlightened independent filmmakers who, as early as the 1970s and 80s, tried to produce films that challenge the lingering effects of American colonization<sup>1</sup>. However, the historical thread of U.S. cultural imperialism remains a powerful presence in the Philippines. Despite the fact that a big part of Asia remains entangled in neo-colonial globalization, some Asian cinemas have developed unique filmic traditions, thus giving birth to their own national cinemas (see Eleftheriotis and Needham 2006). On the other hand, our long history of subservience to colonial masters and our current dependence, for better or for worse, on America’s economy has blurred the notion of a “Filipino identity.” This loss of identity has further marginalized Philippine cinema from the rest of the world. While American media products such as movies, television programs, books and pop music have penetrated our cultural landscape, America, and indeed the rest of the First World countries and even our own Asian neighbors, have received very little of our vast cultural production. The problem, according to Ella Shohat, lies not in the exchange but in the unequal terms on which the exchange takes place (2006: 42). But this disparity is not just economic as Shohat implied but also ideological. Indeed, how can the rest of the world appreciate Filipino films when a majority of educated Filipino cineastes and critics have such low regard for it? To borrow from Isagani R. Cruz’s observation of Philippine literature vis a vis world literature (1989: 129-141), Philippine cinema has become so marginalized from the rest of the world that it can be called the “other ‘Other’” cinema. This is due to how the movie industry has traditionally used the medium of film. In the Philippines, film as an artistic medium is only secondary to its primary function as an ideological instrument of the ruling class. Its entertainment value is meant to pacify or suppress any feelings of resentment the working class might have against those in power, whether political or economic. Film in the Philippines is, according to Cruz, an instrument of oppression (2003: 267).

However, in the last ten years — while the movie industry has drastically reduced its output and television has overtaken the movies as the primary source of entertainment for the masses — the Philippines

has seen a surge of independent, or “indie,” films produced by a new generation of young, educated (some have even studied in the U.S. or Europe) and mostly upper and middle-class filmmakers. Working on the periphery of the industry, these artists have positioned their films as the “alternative” to the commercial and formulaic nature of mainstream filmmaking. They have found their audience in the same young, educated (some have even studied in the U.S. or Europe) and mostly upper and middle-class denizens of the metropolis who have traditionally viewed mainstream Filipino movies as inferior to Hollywood and those so-called foreign “art films.”

This new-found energy in independent filmmaking was inspired by the advent of digital technology in the mid-1990s. The changing of format from celluloid to the more accessible digital video freed the independent filmmaker from the high costs of mainstream filmmaking; and because production is free from studio control, artists can tackle more unusual or controversial subject matters and present new modes of storytelling. Filmmaker Khavn De La Cruz, one of the first to promote digital filmmaking (or what he calls “Filmless Films”) in the country, posted a declaration of principles on his website entitled *Digital Dekalogo: A Manifesto for a Filmless Philippines*. Part of the manifesto reads:

Film is dead. It is dead as long as the economy is dead, when public taste and creativity are dead, when the imagination of multi-national movie companies is dead... But technology has freed us. Digital film, with its qualities of mobility, flexibility, intimacy, and accessibility, is the apt medium for a Third World country like the Philippines. Ironically, the digital revolution has reduced the emphasis on technology and has reasserted the centrality of the filmmaker, the importance of the human condition over visual junk food (<http://www.kamiasroad.com>).

Unfortunately, these independent/digital films have yet to duplicate its success on the Filipino masses because independent filmmakers and producers have yet to establish a distribution system that will allow their films to be more accessible to a wider audience. As a result, the masses are left with the same smorgasbord of standardized genre movies produced by the mainstream. Independent filmmakers have instead sought the international film festival circuit, gaining more recognition from foreign audiences and critics. A fine example is Aureaus Solito’s *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (*The*

*Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, 2005), a coming-of-age story about a pre-teen gay boy who develops a crush on a handsome young policeman. The film was a moderate success during its limited screening in the Philippines; however, it had a more rewarding run when it was shown in numerous film festivals overseas.

Amidst the outpouring of digital films, a new trend has developed — films were being made specifically for an international, mostly Western, audience. Indeed nowadays the usual route taken by a majority of independent/digital filmmakers is for their films to have a limited screening in Manila and other metropolitan cities (completely disregarding the rest of the country) before going on the more lucrative worldwide tour of different film festivals with the hopes of selling the film's distribution rights and to get funding for future projects. With this in mind, filmmakers have to create films that can satisfy Western expectations. Judging by the performance of Filipino films in international film festivals in the past, it has become clear that a good number of movies patronized by Western audiences belong to the erotic/sex drama genre (both heterosexual and homosexual)<sup>ii</sup>. These films redundantly explore (though seldom giving any new insights) the world of poverty and prostitution and use it as an excuse to objectify male and female bodies for the pleasure of Western audiences. Scenes of squatter colonies in Manila, of rivers filled with garbage and human excrement, of streets filled with beggars and homeless children and of young Filipino men and women selling their bodies for money are enjoyed by Western audiences because these reinforce their belief in their economic, physical and intellectual superiority while at the same time exoticizing the Filipinos' "otherness."

Juxtaposing these "givens" against the search for an identity for Philippine cinema, it is imperative to first ask the following questions: Have the Filipino independent filmmakers developed a tendency to forego making films for Filipino audiences in exchange for perfunctory appreciation from First World audiences? Have they objectified and exoticized their own Filipino subjects in order to cater to the West's proclivity for Third World images of eroticism? Does "independent filmmaking" in the Philippines merely translate to making digital films outside of the mainstream, experimenting with different styles of storytelling? If such is the case, then independent films are no different from the mainstream in the sense that they are both tied to Western modes of filmmaking. Furthermore, both are the same because mainstream films reflect and reinforce Western ideologies while independent films are made to satisfy Western appetites for the raw, the untamed, and the exotic. Filmmaker and scholar Clodualdo del Mundo,

Jr. once wrote that “the development of a truly Philippine national cinema has a greater probability of happening outside the mainstream” (2002: 45). Following del Mundo’s assertion I will posit the idea that for independent films to be truly meaningful it should transform itself into an “alternative cinema” — not only in the traditional formalist sense but as an alternative to the dominant cinema of Hollywood, to the clones produced by the Philippine movie industry and to Filipino independent filmmakers who remain enslaved by colonial mentality. Drawing from Filipino nationalist critic Bienvenido L. Lumbera, I will establish a series of conceptual guidelines that independent filmmakers can take into consideration as they search for a national and cultural identity for alternative films. I will also look back on the history of Philippine cinema so that we can come to understand what it means to be “alternative” within the context of our colonial past and neo-colonial present.

### *Post-Colonial Perspectives*

Although all cultural practices are on one level products of specific national contexts, Third World filmmakers have been forced to engage in the question of the “national” precisely because they lack the taken-for-granted power available to First World filmmakers (Shohat 2006: 43). Edward Said was among the first to argue that the emergence of America as the major imperial power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century owes much to their control of the global media:

This twinning of power and legitimacy, one force obtaining in the world of direct domination, the other in the cultural sphere, is a characteristic of classical imperial hegemony. Where it differs in the American century is the quantum leap in the reach of cultural authority, thanks in large measure to the unprecedented growth in the apparatus for the diffusion and control of information... Whereas a century ago, European culture was associated with a white man’s presence, indeed with his directly domineering physical presence, we now have in addition an international media presence that

insinuates itself, frequently at a level below consciousness, over a fantastically wide range. (1994: 352)

I believe that a re-evaluation and re-thinking of independent filmmaking in the Philippines from a post-colonial perspective are necessary in order for cinema to actively engage America's hold on almost all facets of Philippine life. According to Homi K. Bhabha, "post-colonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, north and south... They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the 'rationalizations' of modernity" (1992: 438). In other words, post-colonialism engages and contests colonialism's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies. It also exposes the effects of colonialism on a nation's varied cultural landscape including language, education, religion, artistic sensibilities and popular culture. Inevitably, post-colonialism "addresses *reactions to* colonialism in a context that is not necessarily determined by temporal constraints: cultural productions [such as the cinema] then become textual/cultural expressions of resistance to colonization" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 2). Finally, Filipino critic Priscelina Patajo-Legasto provides the most incisive (and most apt as far as this essay is concerned) articulation of post-colonialism. According to her:

Post-colonialism signifies a *position*. It is a position produced by being constructed or represented as Europe or America's 'ontological Other.' From this deterritorialized (i.e. political, economic, cultural dislocations) subject-location, the 'others' (now plural) are attempting to make whole their fractured/deformed identities in order to create new identities and modes of existence outside universalizing/homogenizing Eurocentric perspectives. (2004: 8)

As a victim of Hollywood's domination over markets and normative standards, post-colonial theory and criticism can be a suitable tool in re-mapping the identity of Filipino independent/alternative films in "national" terms.

### *The Dialectics of the Nation*

To wish class or nation away... is to play straight into the hands of the oppressor. Terry Eagleton (1990: 23)

Before I elaborate further the role of alternative films in the formation of a national cinema, let me first explore the various discourses related to the concept of the "nation" and "national identity." Recent views have underscored the ways in which national identity is textualized, mediated, "imagined" (Anderson 1983), just as the traditions perpetuated by nationalism are "invented" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Similarly, Ernest Gellner argues that nationalism invents nations where they do not exist and not the other way around (1983: 55-56). Both Anderson and Gellner believe that nations are ideological constructs creating abstract or imagined communities that we loosely refer to as "the nation" or the political construct known as "the nation-state." In contrast, traditions and culture are reified by nationalism to enable its subjects to talk about their culture as though it is constant and distinctive. Therefore, according to Thomas Erikson, nationalism leads us to think in terms of bounded cultural objects; that is, cultural artifacts are *made* to represent a nation, to function as evidence of the nation's distinctiveness (1993: 103). As a cultural artifact, one cannot deny the role of cinema in disseminating the concept of the "nation." This led Jesus Martin-Barbero to surmise that film in many countries gave the people of the different regions and provinces their first taste of nation: "Cinema was the living, social mediation that constituted the new cultural experience, and cinema became the first language of the popular urban culture... Film formed [the people] into a national body; not in the sense of giving them a nationality but in the way they experienced being a single nation (1993: 51-53).

Conversely, globalization has produced various permutations of the word "national" (i.e. internationalism, transnationalism, multinationalism, etc.) thus overshadowing the idea of the national as the "basic cornerstone of film studies" (Hjort and MacKenzie 2000: 2). Furthermore, these provide no criteria for distinguishing exactly what is worth retaining in the "national tradition." However, Benjamin Barber (1995) claims that the "global" and the "national" are so inextricably linked that film scholars should be intent on refining its relationship and clearly defining its continued, albeit changing, pertinence for film

studies. Andrew Higson was among those who addressed this issue when he considered the effects of transnationalism in the formation of national cinemas: “To argue for a national cinema is not necessarily the best way to either achieve cultural diversity or cultural specificity... The contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be local or transnational than national” (2000: 73). For her part, Susan Hayward concludes that the cinema is not a pure product, that it is inherently a hybrid of many cultures: “The framing of national cinemas is one which perceives cinema as a practice that should not conceal structures of power and knowledge but which should function as a *mise-en-scène* of scattered and dissembling identities as well as fractures subjectivities and fragmented hegemonies” (2000: 101). Similarly, Shohat tried to coalesce the global and the national by suggesting that global forces have compelled the concept of the “nation” to continually evolve and expand: “Any definition of nationality must see nationality as partly discursive in nature... seeing the ‘nation’ as an evolving, imaginary construct rather than an originary essence” (2006: 43).

Yet, Constantino reminds us that “the task of a cultural struggle in the Philippines must be based on an intimate and concrete knowledge of Philippine reality. We cannot apply blindly the experiences of other nations” (ibid.: 121). Therefore, it would be presumptuous to simply place these foreign concepts within the context of Philippine cinema without first considering the inherent features common in the production of Filipino movies. Indeed it is true that the Philippines is surrounded by a multitude of businesses owned and operated by multinational and transnational companies, however, the production of films (in purely economic terms), whether mainstream or independent, has remained relatively free from foreign capital. In other words, Filipino films, whether mainstream or independent, are generally financed by Filipino capitalists or Filipino-owned companies; with the filmmakers sometimes receiving state sponsorship through the National Commission on Culture and the Arts or the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The problem, as I have mentioned, lies in the colonial mentality of the Filipinos who write, direct, produce, finance, act in and watch movies. Thus, constructing the “Filipino nation” within filmic spaces requires a counter-consciousness. I go back to Constantino:

The ideology of the anti-colonial struggle is Filipino nationalism. It cannot be but assertive. However, to be assertive, this

nationalism must be based on a clear concept of nationhood and of the national interests that define the collective good... National awareness, however, does not connote merely the consciousness of collective existence; it dramatically announces a feeling of *separation*; it is a revolt against domination, a proclamation of independence. But this separatist consciousness must be based not on racial differentiation; it must be a recognition of the fact that our interests are not identical with those of foreign powers, it may even be opposed to theirs (ibid: 114, emphasis added).

### ***Sources of Tradition***

Let me now discuss a few theoretical assumptions made by Filipino critics concerning the nature of alternative films. It is from them that I derive my definition of a post-colonial Filipino alternative cinema. Benilda S. Santos was the first to indicate that the goal of Filipino alternative films is to deviate from the market-driven system of “conceptualization, production, and distribution” that pervade the mainstream movie industry (1996: 28). Independent filmmaker and film scholar Nick Deocampo saw that the realization of Santos’ idea has so far happened in the marginalized world of short films. For Deocampo, the tendency of the short film to experiment has liberated the filmmaker from the trappings of mainstream filmmaking: “The short films eventually led to a pluralization of filmic articulation; in other words, film learned to speak in different tongues. No longer was film expressing only a narrative mode of articulation; the film material now expressed, as well, non-narrative, abstract, cinematic forms” (1997: 2). With Santos’ concept of the “alternative,” she merely asks that the filmmaker deviate from commercial practices. In contrast, while Deocampo was the first to propose the idea of a “counter-consciousness” against Hollywood norms (ibid.: 6), he envisioned it happening only within the relatively inaccessible — as far as the masses are concerned — world of short films. It is clear that Santos’ and Deocampo’s conceptual definitions, albeit crucial in setting the path towards an alternative cinema, only focused on the formalist aspects of filmmaking, be they short or feature films.

Lumbera proved to be more discerning when he recognized that while the artists’ process of creation is intensely personal, their views

are forever shaped by their environment. Thus the concept of “artistic freedom” is relative for there may be spaces that artists can work freely but these spaces are clearly delineated by socio-political forces (2000: 280). Art, therefore, is inevitably political which means the struggle for cultural self-definition and political self-determination cannot be separated from one another.

Lumbera also confronted the issue of “identity.” He indicated that the problem with the Filipino artists’ search for identity lies in our country’s overtly Eurocentric system of education (2005: 50-51) which means that the language in which the rudiments of art and its evaluation were conveyed to Filipino students was, of course, the language of imperialist masters (2000: 7). For example, the study of film in most Philippine universities have marginalized the study of Filipino movies by focusing more on American and European films, thus denying students the chance to analyze and evaluate Filipino movies. Even in the area of film criticism, a good number of Filipino critics still measure Filipino films by Western standards. Such hasty comparisons, under the deceptive guise of American and European neo-universalism, serve to wrench the Filipino film from its own cultural and economic particularities.

Drawing from Lumbera, we can propose two questions that can serve as a guide to the independent filmmaker: (a) Cinema for whom? (b) How can cinema serve the Filipino masses? In searching for an answer to these questions, the filmmaker’s first task is to identify the artistic tradition from which his/her films will be borne. According to Lumbera, this ought to begin with “confronting the problem of the Filipino artist’s alienation from the indigenous soil in which his/her art should sink roots” (2000: 7). Thus, it is necessary for the filmmaker to examine the society where cultural production takes place, noting how social, economic and political forces compete for hegemony within that society. For Lumbera, this should translate to a formulation of aesthetic norms that are markedly “Filipino”; in other words, a set of criteria that will allow Filipino audiences to appreciate and validate all artistic expression even as these are now marginalized by Western standards (ibid.: 9). This will result in the formation of a new identity for Philippine cinema, a true “alternative” that confronts — as opposed to merely reflect and propagate — our neo-colonial state. Only then will the independent filmmaker realize that the question of “identity” is not a personal quest but rather a national and political one.

### *Contesting American Hegemonies*

I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance. And one late night it came to me this way... that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos and uplift and civilize and Christianize them... And then I went to bed, and went to sleep, and slept soundly.

— U.S. President William McKinley (in justifying the need to colonize the Philippines; quoted in Schirmer and Shalom 1987: 22)

First of all, it must be clear that filmmaking is not a native art form inherent among Filipino artists. The cinema was brought to our shores by European entrepreneurs during the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It coincided with a pivotal chapter in Philippine history — the victory of Filipino revolutionaries against Spanish colonization. However, the celebration proved to be short lived. In 1898, just a few months after Philippine independence was declared, Spain sold the Philippines to the United States for the sum of \$20 million.

The American colonization of the Philippines is not just a display of American military and economic might; this expansionist move is also a product of what historian Servando Halili refers to as America's "racialized ideology" (2006: 18). The economic progress experienced by America at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century convinced Anglo-Americans of their racial superiority. At the same time, they also felt the need to spread — by military force if necessary — the "American way of life" to their "little brown brothers" in the Philippines. According to Halili, "these phenomena were expressed in several ways, including the concoction of hegemonies that not only avowed Anglo-American superiority but also justified oppressive and genocidal measures towards the so-called inferior races" (ibid.: 18). Patterned after the European notion of the "White Man's Burden," Anglo-Americans assigned to themselves "the right, the duty and the mission to carry the blessing of civilization to the far reaches of the world... taking all the risks for imperial glory" (Weston 1973: 35). At the same time, the country's natural resources were being exploited and American businessmen took the opportunity to expand their market to the Philippines. This was realized through the introduction of the American style of education and the American concept of culture.

In probably the first display of its dual role as an agent of the culture industry, Hollywood films were instrumental in pacifying the growing resistance against U.S. colonialism and cultural imperialism. As more and more films flowed into the country, Filipinos were enthralled at this new and exciting form of entertainment; and because

the Hollywood movie industry is obsequious to the state, Hollywood movies easily became an ideological apparatus used by the imperialists in their implementation and articulation of foreign policy.

Hollywood films became so pervasive that when several cash-rich Filipino families started forming their own movie companies in the 1930s, they instinctively scouted for Caucasian-looking actors because Filipino audiences have already adopted Anglocentric attitudes. The attempt to imitate Hollywood became so conspicuous that some went as far as creating Filipino clones of Hollywood movie stars<sup>iii</sup>. Even the top three studios (Sampaguita Pictures, LVN Studios, and Premier Productions) in the most productive period of the movie industry in the 1950s functioned as a clone of the big studios in Hollywood. Indeed, the Philippines' long history of colonization coupled with the dominance of one of the most ideologically effective cultural forms produced by America has "ingrained subservience in the Filipino psyche [and] left a dirty imprint on his mind, and his cultural growth and understanding of himself became stunted" (Quito 1990: 762).

But one cannot easily remove the Filipinos' innate tendency to subvert what they consider as threats to their identity and freedom. Even during the early years of cinema in the Philippines, Filipino artists saw the potential of the medium in showing and celebrating the splendor of Filipino culture or what del Mundo (1998) sees as a form of the native's response of resistance. The so-called "indigenization" of the cinema happened when the early filmmakers adopted the popular theatrical forms (i.e. the Filipino or indigenized version of the Spanish zarzuela [*sarswela*], comedia [*komedya*] and moro-moro) into filmic narratives. According to del Mundo, "Political and armed resistance originate in the realm of culture. Philippine cinema during the American colonial period is one such site of resistance... While the moro-moro and sarswela movies manifest native qualities... these movies also betray the influence of the colonial look" (ibid.: 126). In other words, the cinema that was introduced by the colonizer was eventually used by the colonized as a form of resistance to colonization.

On the contrary, Deocampo notes that this "resistance" to the dominance of Hollywood actually stems from the threatened Hispanic culture of the elite (2003: 10). It was the Hispanized elite who had control over the production of local films and thus it was their sentiments — spanning more than three centuries living under Spanish rule — that were reflected in these so-called "indigenized" films. For Deocampo:

Indigenization is not the full expression of resistance. It is not the ultimate means by which we could liberate film and transform

it into a satisfyingly national cultural expression... Seen in this light, indigenization can hardly be considered an act of resistance but merely a phase in cinema's development towards achieving it. Of course, as cinema matures, what started in indigenization may possibly result in nationalist expression on film. But this can only come in time. (2003: 11)

These incongruent views on the mapping of Philippine film history further suggest that the development of a national and cultural identity in Filipino movies have yet to reach its conclusion. But what is interesting to note is that both studies deal with the acculturation of the Filipinos when they came into contact with the colonizers. Therefore, in the pursuit of an identity, it is more appropriate to include the eventual modification of the Filipino culture under the hands of the colonizers instead of simply going back to a pre-colonial native culture that has ceased to exist.

### ***Alternative Cinema: Decolonizing the Filipino Mind***

The sincere Filipino filmmaker should get over his hang-up about making the Great Filipino Film; he should, instead, think seriously about developing the Great Filipino Audience.

— Lino Brocka, Philippine National Artist for Film (1983: 25-26)

We are a nation suffering from the lingering effects of colonialism. In the absence of a true Filipino identity we have become a people with a history manufactured by colonial education, a present dictated by the forces of globalization, imperialism and neo-colonialism and a future that seems deemed to repeat the mistakes of the past. We must turn to our cultural productions and utilize it as a site of negotiation and struggle in the search for our identity. It is for this reason that nationalist independent filmmakers must use the cinema as an alternative to counter the hegemonic influences of American cultural imperialism.

Therefore, I submit that a revisionist post-colonial concept of Filipino independent films must have three essential characteristics: (a) it should be free from commercial imperatives pertaining to conceptualization, production, and distribution; (b) the content of the

film, no matter how diverse, controversial or experimental, should possess an “emancipatory ideology”; (c) most importantly, Filipino independent films must function as an instrument of “decolonization.” These characteristics will transform Filipino independent films into an “alternative cinema”; a cinema that is made to serve, first and foremost, the Filipino masses; a cinema that makes the masses its true subject. Hence, in the words of Jesus Martin-Barbero, cinema can transform the political idea of nationhood into the daily experience of nationhood (1993: 51).

If alternative cinema is meant to decolonize the Filipino masses, how can it successfully communicate the idea of decolonization and emancipation? Lumbera has already implied that artists should investigate the society where cultural production takes place. This should include a critical re-evaluation of our colonial history. Our history is written by the Westernized ruling class who have marginalized the immense contribution of the inarticulate — the masses. Therefore it is one arena in which we must struggle to decolonize our minds so that we may at last act in our best interests. It is now the task of the alternative filmmaker to construct within filmic spaces a people’s history and evaluate it in terms of how they affected the people. An example is Mike de Leon’s *Bayaning 3<sup>rd</sup> World* (*3<sup>rd</sup> World Hero*, 1999), a satirical and highly irreverent look at the life of the Philippine national hero, Jose Rizal. By modifying the comedy-satire genre, de Leon allows us to investigate our traditional perception regarding Rizal’s heroism; a perception brought about by our uncritical evaluation of historical events. Raymond Red’s *Sakay* (1993) examines the life of little known Filipino hero Macario Sakay. Sakay was one of the guerilla fighters who led the revolt against American imperialists from 1899 to 1906 and was among the last to surrender. History has initially painted Sakay as nothing more than a bandit; but several efforts by later historians together with Red’s film have brought Sakay’s life in the proper perspective.

Alternative filmmakers can also recreate recent historical events or use it as a backdrop for a story. There are literally a hundred stories one can tell from the people who had suffered and lived through the dark days of Ferdinand Marcos’ dictatorship or our eventual return to feudalism and oligarchic rule when Corazon Aquino assumed the presidency after Marcos. These and other topical events can make for an engaging story which can remind audiences of the continuing struggle of the masses against the injustices perpetuated by corrupt government officials, wealthy landowners and foreign capitalists.

Another outlook that needs to be challenged is the Westernized Filipino elite’s traditional view of Filipino movies as being inferior to Hollywood. This inferiority, according to film critic Emmanuel Reyes,

is brought about by the Filipino movie's fondness for scene-oriented narratives, overt representation, circumlocutory dialogue, and stories that emphasized on the centrality of the star (1989: 15). In spite of this, alternative films, in order to be truly alternative, should consciously go against the oppressive formalist standards used by elitist Filipino critics who remain chained to the inanity of American and European neo-universalism. In fact, Lumbera suggests that artists use a set of criteria that will allow Filipino audiences to appreciate and validate all artistic expression even as these are now marginalized by Western standards (2000: 9). This means that filmmakers can make use of existing movie genres that are already familiar among the masses (i.e. the melodrama, love story, comedy or fantasy); subverting and re-inventing its traditional narrative modes with subtle depictions of globalization and American neo-imperialism. Furthermore, if movie stars are needed in order to attract the masses to watch alternative films, they will not be hard to find since most movie stars are more than willing to lend their support to worthwhile independent productions. Some have even slashed their usual talent fees for the chance at playing different and off-beat roles. In other words, as the normative modes of storytelling are modified it must be integrated with the old in order to create a feeling of a continuous development from the past; in stark contrast to the elitist avant-garde and experimental nature of other indie filmmakers who have a tendency to disregard audience reaction in favor of "personal expression." This egotistical illusion, according to John Howard Lawson, "is one of the main means by which the artist is kept chained to the ideology of capitalism; as long as the artist adheres to the ruling class view that creative activity is metaphysical, subjective and unrelated to class interests, he is permitted to cherish the pretense of 'freedom' to compensate for his impotence" (1953: 117). Thus, the objective of alternative cinema is not simply to entertain — it must, above all, strive to "Filipinize" the Filipino masses.

A good example of what I have just outlined is Jade Castro's digital film *Endo (Love on a Budget, 2007)*. While the film might be viewed as your usual bittersweet love story, it is interestingly set in the little known world of contractual workers, those displaced individuals who wander from job to job after their short-term contract working in various shopping malls and fast food chains has expired. *Endo*, starring popular television actor Jason Abalos, best illustrates how an enlightened independent filmmaker with the help of a popular mainstream actor can make use of a well-loved genre in order to expose the unfair labor practices perpetuated by globalization.

Finally, alternative filmmakers must find ways to make their films more accessible to the masses. The old neighborhood movie theaters are gone and are now replaced by Cineplexes found in giant

shopping malls all over the metropolis — a testament to American consumerism that we Filipinos have adopted. Going to the movies have now become a predominantly middle and upper class activity. While I am not suggesting that alternative filmmakers forego the of screening their films in shopping malls, they should also consider alternative forms of distribution in order to reach the Filipino masses. Digital format allows their films to be easily reproduced and disseminated. This can be achieved through a grassroots approach to screening and selling of the films. Alternative films can be shown (and/or sold) in schools and universities wherein a dialogue between the filmmaker and the students can be done after the screening. As for provincial screenings, filmmakers can resort to makeshift venues (by simply bringing a multimedia projector, DVD player and sound system) in town plazas and basketball courts where the public can watch. The Internet can also serve as an alternative — and cheaper — avenue for promoting films (take for example the immense popularity of You Tube).

Renato Constantino reminds us that the development of our national and cultural identity should come from studying the struggles of our people against oppression and colonialism for they are the clearest expressions of the beginnings of a nation — a nation that contraposed its being to that of the colonial power: “National culture should be seen as emanating from a people in action, in an unending fight for freedom and progress. Thus, the real base of Filipino culture must be sought in the continuing struggle of the people against colonial oppression” (1977: 105). These are the issues, dated as they may be in the age of globalization, which we must first resolve before we can even begin engaging in global and transnational discourse. As the Filipino movie industry stagnates, more and more young filmmakers are taking the independent path. It is my hope that the kind of independent/alternative filmmaking that I am proposing can, in the near future, help Philippine cinema in its search for a truly Filipino identity amidst the market-driven nature of the movie industry and the hegemonic dominance of Hollywood.

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> The most radical Filipino independent filmmaker to come out in the 1970s was Eric de Guia, otherwise known as Kidlat Tahimik (Quiet Lightning). His 1977 audaciously nationalistic film *Mababangong Bangungot* (*Perfumed Nightmare*), produced on a shoestring budget, is a scathing attack on American cultural imperialism. German director Werner Herzog and Francis Ford Coppola’s Zoetrope Studios were instrumental in getting the film released internationally. By the 1980s, another independent film gained international recognition. Nick Deocampo’s 8mm documentary film *Oliver* (1983),

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about a gay nightclub impersonator, symbolized the poverty and oppression the Filipinos suffered under the hands of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Unfortunately, majority of Filipino audiences have not even heard of these two films.

<sup>ii</sup> Sex dramas such as Jose Javier Reyes' *Toro* (*Live Show*, 2001), set amidst the world of live sex shows, were enthusiastically received at the Berlin Film Festival; the same goes for Brillante Mendoza's erotic gay drama *Masahista* (*The Masseur*, 2005) when it won the Golden Leopard Award for Video at the 2005 Locarno International Film Festival. Mendoza's subsequent film is *Serbis* (*Service*, 2008), a film about a poor family living in an old dilapidated movie theater. Issues of bigamy, unwanted pregnancy, possible incest and, of course, prostitution are explored through the day to day experiences of the different family members. The film's crowning glory is when it received the Palm d'Or nomination at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival. However, one must remember that the recognition received by Filipino erotic films from international audiences go as far back as Peque Gallaga's somewhat pornographic yet stylishly executed *Scorpio Nights* (1985) and Tikoy Aguiluz's *Boatman* (1984), the precursor to Reyes' *Toro*. We can also add to the list Lino Brocka's *Macho Dancer* (1988) and Mel Chionglo's *Sibak* (*Midnight Dancers*, 1994). Acclaimed by Western audiences, both films deal with the subject of poverty and male prostitution.

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<sup>iii</sup> Here are two examples: vaudeville comedian Canuto Francia became the "Charlie Chaplin of the Philippines" and was given the derivative screen name of Canuplin while actor/singer Eddie Mesa was known as the "Elvis Presley of the Philippines."

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