

**A PEEK AT THE WINNERS OF *MOST GENDER- SENSITIVE FILM AWARD*  
OF THE METRO MANILA FILM FESTIVAL**

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Film has become a powerful medium with the influential creation of text and subtext for the masses. Although film is considered as the highest art form, it is also one of the cheapest forms of entertainment media. With its great access to all kinds of people from all walks of life, film depicts social realities, imaginative fantasies, and an artist's expression of his / her craft.

Anna Leah Sarabia narrates her depiction of Filipino film as

“The century's equivalent of the rituals, dances, songs and dramas that Spanish priests and rulers used to spread a foreign ideology to a captive audience, distort our balanced gender relations, and tear apart our economic self-sufficiency. We were not conquered simply by gunpowder and warfare. It was with constant propagandizing of *moro-moro* and sermons demonizing our ancient *Bathala* and *Babaylan* about women's sinfulness, and white men's god-given power to rule that the grieving Mater Dolorosa, asexual virgins and the innocent Santo Niño became our dearly favored icons. Film is a powerful endorser of social values and practices. The way the women and men deal with each other in movies could become the template upon which moviegoers' relationships are molded.” (from [Inq.net](#) January 2007)

The early cinema in the Philippines traces its roots to the *zarzuela* and *bodabil* theatrically staged to entertain the elite theater-goers. The Woman was stereotypically portrayed as a “*dalagang Pilipina*”—shy, virginal, conservative, with ‘wife material’ qualities, and definitely the weaker sex—in the likes of Norma Blancaflor (*Dalaga 1940*), Atang dela Rama (*Dalagang Bukid*), Carmen Rosales , etc. In contrast, the Man was

shown as macho, strong and powerful. We can see this image in *Bituing Marikit* (1937), and in the roles played by Fernando Poe Jr. in *Panday* and Joseph Estrada in *Asiong Salonga* (1961).

While the portrayals of the Man and Woman showed stereotypical gender roles, the portrayals of gays and lesbians were always associated with slapstick performance or shameful gay bashing in the likes of Dolphy's film *Fasifica Falayfay* in 1979. With the advent of technology, film evolved as a progressive medium especially during the war. It was in the 1970's when Filipino films started to attract the serious attention of the intelligentsia. That decade highlights as the phenomenal period in film history due to the widespread acceptance of Filipino Film as an art that deserves comment, analysis and reward. Then came the proliferation of different award groups such as the *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino* (Critics of the Filipino Film) and the Metro Manila Film Festival in 1975.

The Metro Manila Film Festival is an annual event which falls during the Christmas holiday season as part of promoting and patronizing Filipino films organized by the different municipality mayors of Metro Manila. For two weeks, only Filipino films are shown in movie houses as part of the festival policies and to encourage moviegoers to patronize Filipino films that everyone says is "dying" from different big production company such as Regal Films by Lily Monteverde, Star Cinema, GMA Films and many more.

In 2003, a special award was created as a tribute to the Philippine Cinema in the pursuit of Gender Equality and Empowerment—the award for the **Most Gender Sensitive Film**. The pioneer of the award was the Quezon City Gender and Development Resource and Coordinating Office, an institution that puts arts and culture in high regard, and believes that cinema is a powerful medium to transform values, roles, and images of Filipino men and women. As explained by the institution, it's the only award-giving body in the Philippines and in the world that projects the triumph in promoting gender sensitivity through cinema, indeed a very powerful and far-reaching medium for the transmission and transformation of social norms and values. The institution aims to promote gender-responsive governance as a basic development framework which involves equality and empowerment of men and women and their rendition in media, particularly in local cinema. The following are the criteria for the selection for the Most Gender Sensitive Film:

1. A balance between gender and development (GAD) advocacy issues and cinematic techniques, i.e. cinematography, production design, costume design, over-all direction through which these issues are articulated and resolved
2. Accurate and effective portrayal of Filipino men and women in various roles and depth and substance of characterization under realistic social, political and cultural contexts
3. Relevance of gender issues and their positive resolutions

The trophy for the Most Gender Sensitive Film Award was designed by feminist artist Sandra Torrijos. The design has four significant figures: the extension of the arms of the man and the woman in equal height symbolizes gender equality; the crown/fire on each head shows heightened awareness of gender and development issues; the colors red and blue on the faces represent the Philippine national flag; and the film strip held by the woman begins with scenes depicting aloneness and slowly moves down to the bottom as she is integrated into national development and unity as gender biases against her are resolved.

The institution selects each year's panel of jurors in choosing the Most Gender Sensitive films. For 2003, the jurors were Joy Belmonte, Chair of the QC Performing Arts Development Foundation, Inc., Atty. Claire Padilla, Human Rights lawyer, and Emy de Jesus, Secretary General of GABRIELA. On the following year, joining the ranks were Judge Teodoro Bay (QC RTC Branch 86, awarded as the most gender sensitive Judge), Ateneo Professor and Film Critic Jerry Respeto, UP College of Social Work and Community Development Dean and Commissioner of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women Dr. Amaryllis Torres, Women's Media Circle Chair Anna Leah Sarabia, and ProLesb President Lirio Topacio. For 2005, Dr. Torres was again invited with Dr. Carol Sobritchea of the UP Center for Women's Studies. Invited too were Ana Marie Navarro of the UP Film Center and Asst Sec. Austero Panadero from the Department of Interior and Local Government. In 2006 Dr. Torres judged for the third time, and it was also the second time for Anna Leah Sarabia. Judging with them were media writer and critic Joan Maglipon, director and actor Jerry O'Hara, and independent filmmaker Siegfred Barros-Sanchez.

For the recently-concluded MMFF of 2007, the jurors were writer/columnist Rina-Jimenez David, Dr. Sylvia Claudio-Estrada from the UP Department of Women and Development, director Mario J. Delos Reyes, independent filmmaker Lady Michelle Cering, and Jun Quintana as replacement for actress Harlene Bautista. To be a panelist, one must: (1) reside or work in Quezon City, (2) be known for his/her distinction, (3) have knowledge on gender issues or human/women's rights, (4) have an in-depth understanding and appreciation of film as art technique, and (5) have a scope of influence on NGO's , media, government, academe, business or film industry.

The struggle towards women's liberation dates back hundreds of years ago and it is indeed an achievement in mainstreaming gender advocacy especially in the mass media. To note, no award-giving body highlights gender sensitivity in a mass medium like film. As three-time panelist Dr. Amaryllis Torres narrates, she classifies films as gender sensitive if these are "*films that express gender issues, and that could look for solutions that are not stereotypical*". With this framework, the paper aims to re-read and conduct content analysis of the films awarded as Most Gender Sensitive in the Metro Manila Film Festival from 2003 until 2007. Interview and discussions with Dr. Amar Torres and radical feminist and media practitioner Anna Leah Sarabia serves as validation of the study conducted. These films are: *Homecoming* (2003) by Gil Portes, *Aishite Imasu (Mahal Kita) 1941* (2004) by Joel Lamangan, *Blue Moon* (2005) again by Joel Lamangan, *Kasal, Kasali, Kasalo*(2006) by Jose Javier Reyes and *Desperadas* (2007) by Joel Lamangan.



### **Homecoming ( 2003)**

#### **Synopsis:**

The film is about Abigail Edades's (Alessandra de Rossi) return to the Philippines after working for five years in Canada as a nurse. Upon her return, she is given a hero's welcome in her rural community, complete with a band, feast, and décor strewn about her family's home, which had been prepared by the whole town of San Isidro. She was warmly received by her former teacher, neighbors, as well as the parish priest of their small town. Despite the grandiose celebration, later on she learned about their family's worsening problems—the separation of her parents (played by Elizabeth Oropesa and Bembol Roco) and her brother Jepoy's (played by Lester Llansang) drug addiction. As the breadwinner, Abigail aims for nothing but the best for her family; however, certain circumstances made them fall apart. She found out that Jepoy has been hooked on prohibited drugs after witnessing the unfaithfulness of their mother while her father eventually left the house and started his new family. Her youngest brother Noel (Brian Homecillo) however remained loving to Abigail. Another reason for Abigail's homecoming was her preparation for her marriage to fiancé Melvin (played by James Blanco). However, fate has been powerful in changing their lives when Abigail turned out to be a SARS virus carrier.

Noel was the first one to exhibit the symptoms of the virus. It was found out that it had been Abigail, the OFW from Canada, who had brought the virus to the country. The warm welcome given to her suddenly turned cold when she and Noel were diagnosed

to be positive for SARS—her whole family was treated with disdain, and their friends turned them away. Abigail and Noel were confined at a hospital in Manila and it was forbidden for anyone—including their family—to visit them as a precautionary measure. It resulted also to having the whole community under quarantine and Melvin dumping Abigail. The Edades family, sharing the emotional turmoil, united again. It strengthened their ties amidst humiliation in the community. Noel later on died while Abigail was still recovering in the hospital. No one was allowed to attend the wake for fear of spreading and worsening the epidemic, and only the parish priest was present at the burial. After a week, the town was declared SARS-free, and the quarantine was lifted. Town life started going back to normal, and Abigail started a new life again with her family.

**Analysis:**

The film *Homecoming* is simplistic yet realistic in its portrayal of Philippine culture and values. The film depicts the Filipino Diaspora practiced especially in a small rural town like San Isidro. OFWs like Abigail are regarded highly, because they are depended on to take families out of poverty, to provide for a better life.

The film also summarizes some Filipino practices of hospitality, of being family-oriented, the importance of kinship, and the value of faith; however, there were also negative traits such as dependency, the tendency towards gossip, materialism, and some taboos on sex and religion. The film highlights the portrayal of women as breadwinner, the sole contributor of income for the family in Abigail's character. Their only ticket for poverty alleviation is her earnings in dollars as a nurse in exchange for absence in the family, being situated a different part of the world.

Abigail is young, smart, and family-oriented. She is living with high hopes for the family towards achieving a better life. However, when she became a SARS carrier, Melvin, her fiancé dumps her of fear having inflicted also with SARS. Abigail managed to be strong and continued her life even without Melvin. This attitude subverts the common notion that women are too needy and cannot live without men. When she became well again, Melvin tried to get back with her, but Abigail stood her ground and refused. The film also shows the 'more sensitive' side of men in Bembol Roco's portrayal as a father. Breaking the stereotype of the poor father figure in old films who is always drunk and a womanizer, in *Homecoming*, Bembol Roco's character showed affection for the family even without getting into fights and not being chauvinist. He is a low-profile father wanting the best for his children by being a calm and level-headed person, and he still worries the same as his estranged wife (Elizabeth Oropesa's character) with Abigail working in foreign country. Melvin (James Blanco) on the other hand showed weak traits of men such as being a mama's boy. It is in these aspects that it can be confirmed that the film deserves the Most Gender Sensitive Award.

*Homecoming* is the first film to be awarded as Gender Sensitive. Although I do not find any 'battle of the sexes' in my reading of the film, the interchanged biases in the film could simply mean that men could also be vulnerable as women and women could be economically productive as men. The film also recognizes the heroism of OFWs no matter what gender. Films such as *Crying Ladies* and *Mano Po* were also close to getting the award yet they boiled down to same old traditional portrayal of men and women in films according to Dr. Torres. Other films in the MMFF 2003 festival were *Filipinas*, *Captain Barbel*, *Fanstastic Man*, *Malikmata*, *Gagamboy* and *Bridal Shower*.

***Aishite Imasu (Mahal Kita) 1941*** (2004)**Synopsis:**

Best friends Edilberto (Raymart Santiago), Inya (Judy Ann Santos), and Ignacio (Dennis Trillo) found a place for love in the time of World War II in the Philippines. Since childhood, Edilbert and Inya have given each other fond affection. The feminine Ignacio on the other hand had always been beaten by his father, and Edilberto and Inya always came to the rescue. Eventually Inya's Tiya Melba (Jaclyn Jose) took him in as her own. Ignacio has a natural talent for singing; during a feast in their town of San Nicolas, Ignacio took the stage in a baro't saya. It was the time of the Japanese invasion of the country; and while Ignacio was singing, Japanese soldiers led by Captain Ichiro ( Jay Manalo) arrived and. The captain fell in love with Igancio believing he was a woman. Edilberto, a member of the guerilla force, asked Ignacio to serve as a spy for the Filipinos by continuously pretending as the woman lover of Captain Ichiro. Ignacio, using the name Inya, agreed in the name of love for Edilberto. Inya then became Vinyang (from her name Virginia) and became the wife of Edilberto, while Ignacio started to fall in love with Ichiro. While Edilberto and Vinyang started with their married life, Edilberto's parents were killed by the Japanese, fueling his need for revenge. As the war heats up, the couple struggles to have a family of their own.

Edilberto started to doubt Ignacio's loyalty to the country when Ignacio fell in love with Ichiro. He forbade Ignacio and Vinyang to see each other, and he started to doubt even his wife. This resulted in a bitter relationship between the two. Edilberto was killed in an encounter and Vinyang continued the fight. Ichiro eventually found out the

truth behind Inya, but in spite of it all he accepted the 'real' Ignacio. Vinyang's name became known for defending the town. She did her best to save Ignacio from the Japanese, and she worked towards the liberation of the whole town of San Nicolas.

### **Analysis:**

The film's setting is during the Japanese Occupation in the country. Although this is a period film, it did not transcend common stereotypes of men and women. Both men and women including gays in Ignacio / Inya's character have equal representation as the story progressed in achieving liberation from the Japanese. *Aishite Imasu* gave importance to the portrayal of the heroism of gays in film. This shows great contrast to the usual portrayal of gays as drag queens, salon stylists, and constantly laughed at, hurt or abused. Ignacio's homosexuality was accepted—more notably, respected—by the society in which they lived. Aside from gay heroism, Vinyang's great participation in war made her well-known for the Japanese. Such tokens/stories like these were not even highlighted in history books. However it did somewhat follow a common trend, in which the wife continued the fight upon the death of her husband (common example: Diego Silang and Gabriela Silang). In the film, Vinyang is characterized as an independent woman, a brave, principled leader with a mind of her own. These are also the reasons why Edilberto fell in love with her.

The film is not an ordinary story of love, friendship, and war; it bravely tackled the sensitive and oft-used theme of love, portraying it on three levels. First, love for country or nationalism. How far will you go to fight for the country? Is it necessary to disregard your family and friends in the name of nationalism? Second is the love among

friends or platonic love. The friendship each character shares is the only reason what binds them amidst different opinions and ideologies. No war could ever ruin a good friendship. And lastly, love between same sexes. It might be too sensitive to incorporate in a film about this matter, but the film was able to justify that even gays, bisexuals, lesbians and transgenders also have the right to love and to be loved. At any given era, love should spring from good, and good, from love. For example, revenge caused by too much love is not good, according to the film.

The film was well-made and well-written, from the flow of the narrative up to the dialogue. The language used was appropriate for the historical context of the story, and overall the film genuinely showed the dynamics of relationships among people.

Competing along with this film were *Mano Po 3: My Love, So Happy Together*, *Sigaw*, *Panagho sa Suba*, *Spirit of the Glass*, *Lastikman* and *Enteng Kabisote*.

### **Blue Moon (2005)**



#### **Synopsis:**

Blue Moon is a story of the quest of a man's unrequited love. When Manuel Pineda (Eddie Garcia/Mark Herras) finds out that he had only six months to live, he decides to look for what had been missing in his life for the longest time: his Corazon. He starts his search in Laoag. Here his son Rod (Christopher de Leon) and grandson Kyle (Dennis Trillo) start to worry, and decide to come along with him. Manuel narrates the two Corazons in his life: Azon (Pauleen Luna), his first love, and Cora (Jennylyn Mercado), the woman he

married. In Rod's telling of his youth, issues regarding their relationships as fathers surfaced. Because the three had undergone similar experiences in love, what they had gone through left bitter marks in their memories.

The quest for the two Corazons (Jennylyn Mercado and Pauline Luna/Boots Anson Roa) resolved the conflicts of the three in the long journey: Rod's yearning for his mother and his wife, and Kyle's lonesomeness when he is left by his wife Peggy. The events in their lives are seemingly interconnected and cyclical. The quest for Corazon takes them to Bicol and the Visayas until Manuel's indisposition takes them back to Manila. Meanwhile, Corazon, in the US, had also been searching for Manuel. It was fate that made them find each other, that brought them back together, and to mend the relationships of the three generations and their families.

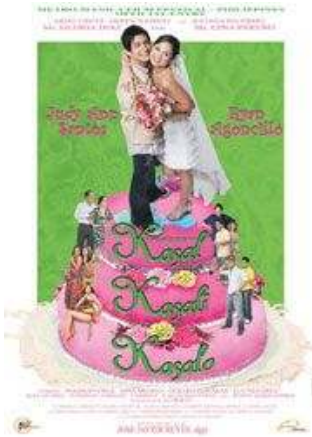
### **Analysis:**

Blue Moon is both a period film and a road movie. It uses flashback to narrate the past of young Manuel that connects also to the present time on their quest for Corazon. The method used was extremely powerful in showing the love story of Manuel and Corazon. The flow of the movie is good and well-paced; it was easy to comprehend the historical narrative. The viewer's attention is focused on the three men having the journey, the journey which eventually healed their relationships with each other until they finally found Corazon.

The long journey reveals parental misunderstandings and misgivings among themselves as Manuel being father to Rod; and Rod as father to Kyle and vice-versa. Their disappointments as fathers and sons continuously repeat until they were addressed. The film depicts the vulnerability of men and their “searching” which is commonly associated with women in plot-driven movies. The searching is now made by the men, projecting the femininity of men or the men’s ‘soft side’. This quality also contributed to their conflict resolution as fathers and sons.

As for the women’s roles in the film, it was another break from the usual—here, the women were the ‘leavers’ of the men. Corazon (Mercado) leaves Manuel when she finds out that he still had another Corazon (Luna) in his heart. Peggy leaves Kyle because she thinks he still had many things to fix in his life. Eventually the couples get back together, and they realize that their wives are really extraordinary. In the film the ‘traditional’ roles are switched; here the men are the hopeless romantics while the women became the answer to their misery. The longing/searching and great expression of love will not lessen a man’s masculinity: it takes a ‘real man’ dedication to search for a lost love, to realize that even if emotions are kept, it is still better to give in to and deal with what one is feeling. Indeed, being true to one’s self especially in love would not lessen one’s dignity, no matter the gender. The subversion of roles in the film led to a very poignant story. Blue Moon also bagged the Best Picture and Best Screenplay award in 2005 MMFF.

The film's close competition for the Most Gender Sensitive Film award was *Mulawin the Movie*, wherein Angel Locsin's character, *Alwina*, was the "chosen one" as the savior of the family of Mulawin, according to Dr. Torres.



### **Kasal, Kasali, Kasalo (2006)**

#### **Synopsis:**

#### **Kasal**

Two people who mostly disagreed about everything chose to wed. Jed (Ryan Agoncillo), from a wealthy family, is being forced to migrate to the US. Frantically, he looked for a reason to delay a reason to stay—and he decides to do the unthinkable: he proposes to Angie (Judy Ann Santos), a writer in a TV network, from a simple family from Cabanatuan. The two initially wanted a plain wedding but it seems that their families had their own ideas, and start to meddle in the wedding preparations. In Jed and Angie's desire to fulfill the wishes of their families, the wedding almost didn't push through.

#### **Kasali**

After their hasty wedding in which the only witnesses were a police officer and a metro aide, the two started life as husband and wife. They hurdled through the adjustment phase as a married couple. Because they were not really financially prepared, they lived with their families for the meantime. The challenges they had to go through

along this line were: making love, things they had been used to, home dynamics, and restroom policies, going through each other's things, and relations with housemates, among others, especially with the in-laws.

### **Kasalo**

Jed surprised Angie with a house they would move into. Angie was very glad for at last they would be by themselves. Another happy surprise came as Angie's pregnancy. Everything would have been happy-ever-after when Angie catches Jed having an affair. She quickly leaves him and goes back to her family. Jed tries to win Angie back until she gives birth. The coming of the baby signals hope and a fresh start for the married couple.

### **Analysis:**

The film depicts the modern story of two people starting their own family. It shows the factors that must be considered in preparation for married life, especially in a family-oriented Philippine culture. The strong desires of Jed's and Angie's families to take part in the wedding ceremony shows how close Filipino family ties are, both taken positively and negatively. The union of two people means the union of two different families; that's how Jed and Angie managed to appease all their in-laws and families.

The film showed the equality of husband and wife in a marriage in which none is subordinate to the other, unlike the 'traditional' image of the wife nodding along to the dictates of her husband. In the film, Jed and Angie openly talk and argue about their

relationship. The film also breaks the often-used idea that marriage is the highest achievement of a woman's desire and the end of a man's happiness as a bachelor.

The union between Jed and Angie is modern in a way that both are career-driven, sharing equal household responsibilities, and at the same time they consider each other's opinions and decisions in all aspects, however they may differ in many ways. Angie is independent, opinionated, and hardworking, who came from a middle class family. On the other hand, Jed has a laid-back kind of life, still has a fixation to toys, is indecisive at times and a mama's boy due to being raised by a well-off family. Amidst their difference the two manage to compromise with each other to have a harmonious married life. However, it came to a point wherein Jed had a fling with another woman at the height of Angie's pregnancy. It meant trouble and a possible end of their marriage. Both sides of the family gave their advice for the couple yet in the end, it's Jed's and Angie's decision that matters. Jed humbly recognized his mistake and asked Angie for forgiveness. The art of listening, raising different points that matters in a marriage were just some of the interesting points of the film to note.

In the film, as a breakaway from the common notion, the man is portrayed as 'weaker' than the woman. Another thing to note is the cooperation between the two lead characters and the diplomatic way in which they settled disagreements. There is consultation and openness in the characters to resolve the issues surrounding them. The film skillfully molds the characters, showing a balance between their strengths and weaknesses.

Competing along with this film were *ZsaZsa Zaturnah* which was also considered as a possible winner, but since it employed the conventional view that males are the saviors, it did not receive the award. Included in the festival for this year were *Enteng Kabisote*, *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, *Mano Po 5*, *Super Noypi*, *Matakot Ka Sa Karma* and *Tatlong Baraha*.



### **Desperadas (2007)**

#### **Synopsis:**

Desperada is a story of four half-sisters struggling with their own relationships. The local version of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, the film discussed significant issues of women in a comedic performance. The story revolved around the lives of four rich half-sisters, each successful in their own fields of interest, yet having their own marital/relationship problems. Patricia (Ruffa Mae Quinto) the eldest, is writer/sexologist yet her husband feels inferior to her because of her achievement. Stephanie (Iza Calzado) is a lawyer and the brainiest among the four, yet she's searching for a “spark” in her boring married life with her doctor husband. Isabella (Ruffa Gutierrez) on the other hand is the shopaholic and partygoer femme, a single mom who's afraid to commit in a relationship. And the youngest, Courtney (Marianne Rivera) is a swimsuit designer, a bubbly and aggressive woman whose fiancé suddenly converted into a Born Again Christian.

#### **Analysis:**

The film itself is undeniably a local counterpart of different women liberating

shows / series in America such as *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City*. The resemblance in character is very obvious, such as Patricia the writer inspired by Carrie in *Sex and the City*, Stephanie same as Miranda, the lawyer and Isabella as Samantha. Despite of it, it bravely tackled women's issues in the country – breast cancer, marital relationships, sex, and many more.

I am grateful that I had a similar reading of the five films that had been awarded as the Most Gender Sensitive Film. According to Dr. Torres, sometimes it also depends on the competing films, but for her, breaking the stereotypical perspectives on gender in film has become a revolutionary change for the advocacy on gender. It was also the aim of the Quezon City Gender and Development Coordinating Council that all award giving bodies for film will include the special award for Most Gender Sensitive Film. The pioneers of this advocacy would also like to influence people behind the film industry so that during the conceptualization and scriptwriting phase of a film, the gender lens would already be used. Several groups, NGOs, and feminists also conduct workshops to achieve this end.

All of these undertakings continue the advocacy for awareness on the issues of gender equality and human rights. Let us hope that this brave advocacy will flourish and develop for all.

Breaking the stereotypes and showing the softness of masculine character are considered significant indicators to consider a film as Gender Sensitive. However, films must not just be centered to those qualifications. As the advocacy and campaign of

gender equality progresses in the film industry, certain qualifications may also upgrade into a deeper level. Having a Gender Sensitive Award in an award giving body is only up to the awareness level for viewers and film practioners as well. Awareness on gender is only the first step in mainstreaming gender approaches in various fields such as cinema. A big leap in advocacy yet still considered small steps towards a just and gender fair society.

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