

THE COLD WAR AND MARCOS-ERA CINEMA IN THE PHILIPPINES

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The Cold-War period provided the Philippines with a plethora of signs mainly originating in American political discourse. Anti-Communist witch-hunts, psy-war counter-insurgency tactics, glorification of patriarchal and militaristic principles, violent suppression of Othernesses – these were the underbelly of the short-lived period of economic prosperity and political stability that began with the granting of Philippine independence after World War II.¹ Yet the period most closely associated with the Cold War also marked the turning point in the country's economic development as well as with its so-called special relations with the US: the presidency and, later, dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. With the declaration of martial law in 1972, Marcos sought to replace traditional oligarchic domination with the semblance of socialist state control and/or ownership, but only wound up reversing the country's developmental trends through cronyist corruption and the misuse of billions of dollars of foreign loans.² In order to ensure the efficient expropriation and expatriation of wealth to offshore investments, the martial-law government instituted, among other measures, a wide-ranging and stringent censorship of local media.

Incongruously, the one area of media practice exempted by the Marcos couple from constant institutional repression was cinema. Using cultural policy principles, this paper will

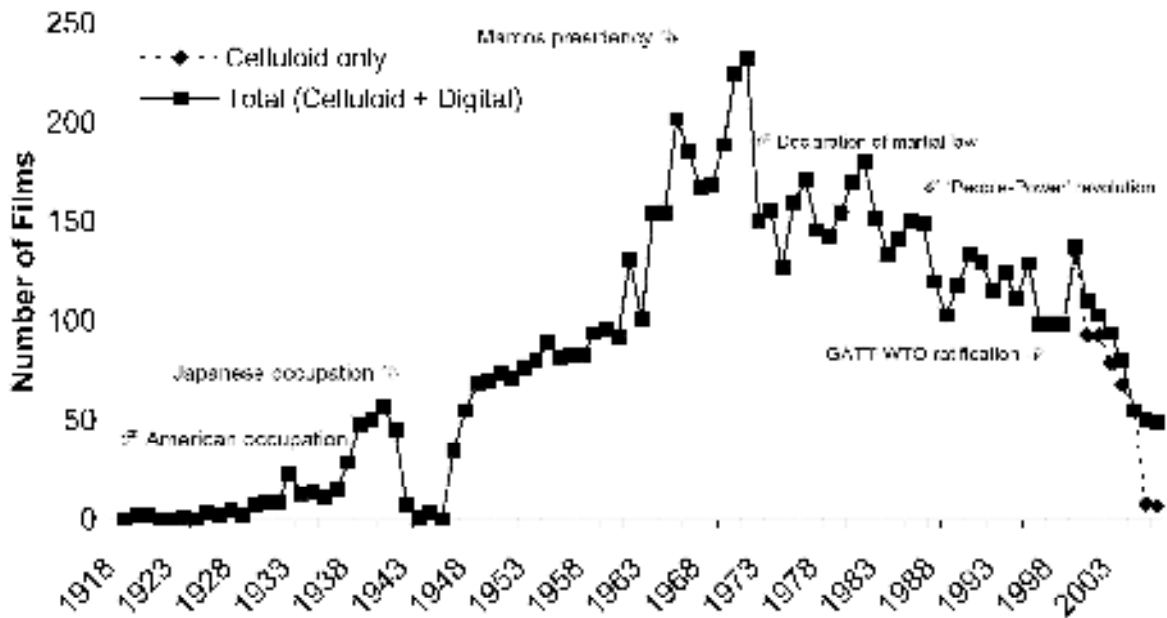
trace the history of Philippine cinema after World War II, through the Marcos presidential terms, ending with the most fascinating period for both Philippine film and the Marcos regime – that of the martial-law era. In a literal sense, the Cold War ended for the Philippines along with the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, after which pre-martial law democratic institutions were restored. This paper will therefore conclude by attempting to look at possible explanations for the favored status Marcos and his wife Imelda granted Philippine movies, and will inspect the dynamics of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP), the institution they set up to implement their vision for Philippine films. One final feature, however, is unavoidable and probably necessary: due to my firsthand involvement in the ECP, whose entire span of existence I had witnessed from within (as head writer of its Public Relations Division), there will be an increasing use of the pronouns *I* and *we* in the course of the paper. Another departure from convention would be the appearance of theorizing toward the end instead of the beginning. This is intended to serve two functions: to point up the primacy of historical events, and to indicate the provisional nature that theorizing necessarily serves in an open-ended account.

Unappreciated recoverability

One of the most impressive characteristics of the Philippine motion picture industry is its historical resilience. Ever since films were first introduced in 1897 (De Pedro, 1983, pp. 26-27; Sotto, 1992, p. 4), film production always managed to flourish ahead of all other forms of industrial activity during the several periods of nation-wide instability – i.e., the

Philippine wars against the Spanish occupation and American colonization during the turn of the previous century, World War II in mid-century, the imposition of a military dictatorship in the early 1970s, the so-called people-power revolution in the mid-1980s, and the onslaught of globalization during the turn of the current millennium. If we look at a chart of films released annually during this span of time (Table 1), we would see how production would dip and sometimes even disappear during the crises periods, but surge suddenly right afterward. Considering the country's Third-World status, such a performance is fairly phenomenal and would be deserving of scholarly attention, were it not for the fact that the industry's entertainment function would (and does) embarrass nationalists on the lookout for evidence of industrial development.³

Table 1. Annual Total of Films Produced in the Philippines, 1918-2006



Source: Joel David, 2007. Annual totals were calculated from filmographies available in M. C. A. Momblanco (1979), *Philippine motion pictures, 1908-1958: A checklist of the first fifty years*, thesis, 2 vols., University of the Philippines; and N. G. Tiongson (Ed.) (1983 and 2001), *The Urian anthology 1970-1979* and *The Urian anthology 1980-1989* (Quezon City and Manila: Morato and Tuviera resp.); cross-checked with the records of the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board and the University of the Philippines Film Institute's continuing filmography project.

The most recent upsurge in Philippine film production, as mentioned, occurred against the backdrop of the government's adoption of the World Trade Organization's globalization policies. A recent study of Philippine political economy (Bello et al., 2004) discovered that the government's ratification of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade effectively destabilized not just the few minor industries that were still attempting to struggle for survival, but the country's agricultural productivity as well. So now we are faced with an apparent contradiction: how could an industry recover in a situation where the

crisis is neither simply political nor external (and therefore always potentially resolvable), but one that strikes at the very heart of nationalist development?

Both sides are arguably valid. Philippine film production is flourishing once more, and yet the Philippine film industry has remained moribund, content to release less than a dozen movies a year and basking in a glorious past where the annual record approached and occasionally overshot 200 – a more active industry per capita than, say, India's. The key to explaining this discrepancy is technology: while celluloid production has become unbearably prohibitive, local theaters and video distributors fill the void by releasing digital features instead. The digital boom has grown both numerically and, more important, in prestige, so much so that in any foreseeable scenario, it will be Philippine digital film releases that will continue to dominate local film prizes, travel to international festivals, and get noticed by foreign observers (De Jesus, 2006, pp. 124-34; Lejano, 2006, n.p.).

Yet such a transition could not have happened on its own. Certainly celluloid film producers would have preferred to insist on recognizing only celluloid production, since the technology necessary for such activity is already in place. A few of the major companies have jumped on the digital bandwagon, but only after several independent producers first proved its profitability. What Philippine film specialists construe as the main factor for the resurgence of local film production is something that Filipino film practitioners had been clamoring for during the past several decades, namely institutional support. Apparently they had a model in mind: there had to be, among other things, a combination of conditions such

as exemption from taxes based on a film's qualitative achievements; competitions that recognized outstanding script proposals and that included seed money as the primary component of their prizes; venues for both local and foreign quality releases, with concomitant exemption from censorship for specialized venues; and support for the training of talents and education of viewers.⁴

Present is past

Such a model would be recognizable to anyone old enough to have lived through the latter part of the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. In fact the first (and, by now, standard) media-studies distinction to be made about the Marcoses' two-decade-plus regime hinges on the paradox of how Philippine cinema had managed to flourish, to the point where people were able to herald a second Golden Age (David, 1990a, pp. 1-17), in the face of the heavy-handed and occasionally bloody oppression that the heavily militarized government visited on all other media of expression. In one sense the Marcoses simply upheld a tradition they grew up with and eventually profited from. Imelda Romualdez was an aspiring model and starlet who had screen-tested for Sampaguita Pictures, the most star-studded of the studio monopolies during the vertically integrated first Golden Age of the 1950s, right before she had a summer vacation with then-Senator Ferdinand Marcos and wound up his wife in less than two weeks. Although as a result she could not anymore pursue her dream of stardom, the Sampaguita Pictures connection continued, with the outfit producing romanticized biographical dramas of the couple on the eves of Marcos' presidential election and re-election, and Sampaguita heiress Maria Azucena Victoria "Marichu" Vera-Perez Maceda

eventually becoming part of Imelda's high-society "Blue Ladies" circle.

Although it may be argued that Imelda Marcos was (and remains) a star-struck politician's wife (and now widow), the Marcos regime's support for cinema would not have squared with Ferdinand Marcos' pious declarations of moral reform in justifying his enactment of Presidential Decree 1081, imposing martial law, in 1972: a New Society, according to him, had to be raised up from the smoldering ashes of a Sick Society. Subsequent testimonies from insiders at Malacañang Palace, the presidential residence, suggest that he had engineered much of what he termed "sick" about pre-martial law Philippine society, including bomb attacks against the political opposition, assassination attempts against his own Cabinet officials, and possibly an extremely permissive film policy that enabled the *bomba*, the first descriptor in what has since become a recurrent trend of mainstream pornographic releases. His other, more direct encounter with film activity was even more traumatic. Although he had been associated with a number of young Philippine actresses,⁵ his affair with an American starlet, Dovey Beams, became fodder for opposition tabloids when the mistress, fearful of Imelda's wrath, called a press conference where she played tapes of her explicit lovemaking sessions with the President – whose identity could not be denied when he could be heard crooning "Pamulinawen,"⁶ his favorite native love ballad, to his then-paramour.

The accretion of public scandals that seeped all the way to the presidential bedroom may have been a retributive instance of Marcos' socially engineered turbulence, intended to

generate widespread economic, political, and moral panic that in turn would condition the populace to welcome the stability that martial law would enforce. This much was confirmed during the 1986 people-power revolt when Marcos' Defense Minister, Juan Ponce Enrile, outed his boss, so to speak, by admitting that he (Enrile) had agreed to be the target of a carefully planned assassination attempt that would serve as one of the major justifications for the declaration of martial law.⁷ And although no confirmation exists of Marcos' direct complicity in two periods of excessive permissiveness resulting in the exhibition of pornographic films in mainstream venues – the first during the build-up to martial rule, the second during the mounting protests occasioned by the assassination of oppositionist Benigno Aquino, Jr. – this form of tinkering with the mechanics of censorship, with all its attendant implications, would be the first definitive instance of the Philippine government's Cold War-inspired institutional involvement with the local film industry.

A complex of factors may have suggested to Marcos that film was the medium that could provide a high-profile recuperation of his intervention in Philippine history. As mentioned earlier, the industry recovered almost instantaneously after World War II, all its major talents having further honed their skills during the interregnum in theater and vaudeville. The ensuing period of stability lasted throughout the 1950s as essentially a monopoly of studios numbering three at any given time (David, 1990b, pp. 126-28), whose assurance of profit enabled the production of occasional Hollywood-style spectacles and neorealist-inspired dramas, earning for the period the distinction of being the first Golden Age of Philippine cinema (Garcia, 1983, pp. 39-54). The start of the 1960s saw the collapse

of the so-called studio system, via a government directive patterned after the US Supreme Court's monopoly-busting Paramount decision.

Although at present Filipino critics still maintain a nostalgia for the first Golden Age and consequently deride the local industry's performance during the '60s, this may have been the period that proved for Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos the potency and flexibility of the medium, marked as it was by a pioneering, taboo-breaking, politically charged vulgarity of a sort never seen before or since in the country, with most "Golden Age" filmmakers actually making their best (and some of their utterly worst) films during this period.⁸ Among the more notable innovations during this decade were: triple-digit annual production, transitions to color, regularity of regional production and international co-production (including links with US blood-island and blaxploitation practitioners), eager bandwagoning by politicians, metamorphoses of actor-producers into auteur-moguls, depictions of heretofore unseen images of graphic screen violence, musical-teen-idol unruliness, social turmoil, and sexual perversion (including queer pornography), plus the emergence of new talent who would turn into some of the leading figures of the second Golden Age: directors Ishmael Bernal and Lino Brocka, scriptwriter Ricardo Lee, and actress-producer Nora Aunor.⁹

Motives and motifs

A number of cultural critics have attributed the emergence of quality film production after the declaration of martial law to the creative subversion of censorship laws by determined

producers and artists,¹⁰ but this overlooks the Marcos regime's accomplishment, so to speak, in successfully wresting full control over all forms of local mass media, to the point where any form of opposition could only be expressed underground. A more workable though still strictly provisional explanation would take account of all these known factors without underestimating the regime's ravenous appetite for power and pelf. Thus, in the face of Imelda Marcos' fascination with celebrity, Ferdinand Marcos' preference for publicly desired women, the historically facilitated concentration of artistic talent in film, the then-existing artificial economic sanguinity that made production feasible to a wide sector of the local bourgeoisie, and the high popularity and profitability of exhibition, one may reasonably speculate that the Marcoses ultimately decided that, in answer mainly to foreign criticisms of martial rule's repressive policies, Philippine cinema would act as their showcase of cultural democracy.

The development, euphemistically speaking, that would clinch this argument would be their decision, more or less timed with the nominal lifting of martial law in 1981, to implement Executive Order 770, which set up a comprehensive government film-support agency that eventually became known as the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines. Cleverly pressing their eldest daughter, Imee, into service, they were initially able to acquire the assistance of even the most outspoken anti-Marcos film practitioners, most notably Lino Brocka. The ECP's name in itself was intended to echo that of the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*, although no observation or comment to this effect was made during its launching and short existence.¹¹ Its early projects saw the continued participation of several

progressive producers and artists, and enabled the emergence of a few more notable talents, in effect extending and amplifying the second Golden Age.

It seemed at that point that these individuals, though unaware of it, were heeding Tony Bennett's latter-day suggestion that "Cultural studies might envisage its role as consisting of the training of cultural technicians: that is, of intellectual workers less committed to cultural critique as an instrument for changing consciousness than to modifying the functioning of culture by means of technical adjustments to its governmental deployment" (1993, p. 83). Bennett of course was drawing from a number of assumptions that had transformed certain principles that may have been originally attributable to Marx. In terms of involvement in a field such as cinema, for example, Stuart Hall was already then writing that popular culture may be formulated in terms of "the people versus the power-bloc: this, rather than 'class-against-class,' is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarized" (1981, p. 238). Bennett's take on this formulation of the field of contestation for the cultural activist would have sounded strange to any Marxist engaged in political tasks then: cultural policy, he declared, would entail cooperating with ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) "rather than writing them off from the outset and then...criticizing them again when they seem to affirm one's direst functionalist predictions" (1992, p. 32).

Philippine politics under martial law would have been reconcilable with this perspective, but only through a roundabout process. Genuine opposition then (as contrasted

with the state's series of official opposition parties) was divided between the so-called national democrats or natdems (an alliance comprising the then-still-outlawed Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People's Army, and the National Democratic Front, a coalition of aboveground left-leaning organizations) and the considerably smaller circle of social democrats or socdems, identified with the also-then-outlawed Social Democratic Party. It would be possible to relate the agitation within the natdems to defy Maoist dogma by taking the revolution into the cities with the socdems' better-funded and more visible Light-a-Fire Movement – i.e., first attempts at what the Marcos regime declared were urban terrorist bombings. Natdem support was Third-World-based, if Mao-era China were to be taken on its claim to being part of the Third World, while the socdems, who were branded by the establishment press as steak commandos, were living in exile in the US. The natdem line on Marcos was that he was a US-supported fascist, while that of the socdem – in order to whip up Western support – was that he was a Communist. In retrospect, and with a little stretching, both were technically correct: Marcos was as much a reactionary authoritarian who sanctioned the brutal oppression of disenfranchised groups (though this was minor compared with his other abuses), while his quest for affluence and system of crony capitalism led him to use fail-safe legal justifications for the takeover by government of the most profitable economic institutions in the country, setting these up as monopolies.

Hence, if the Marcos regime were not Communist, as the socdems charged, but pseudo-socialist in terms of state control of capital, then would it not be possible for cultural activists to work out ways and means of furthering leftist ideals within, say, a receptive

government institution such as the ECP? As I had already related, this way of thinking could never have occurred to me, and my guess is that it might have sounded, to use Fredric Jameson's term in his reaction to Bennett, obscene to Bennett himself, had he found himself in such a context. This is not to dismiss however Bennett's inquisition into the thorny/muddy (the Philippines is tropical) realm of cultural policy. Closer to what most of us then involved in the ECP were sensing, and managed to confirm by our participation, was Bennett's oral response to a conference question thus:

Even where the government – in the sense of the party in power – is conservative, it does not follow that the bureaucracies that they [*sic*] superintend function like seamless webs and that there are no contradictions within them.... One of the most instructive aspects of the experience of working with government cultural agencies is to realize that – whilst Althusser says they function via the category of the subject – some of them just don't seem to function at all! There's a real lack of coordination between different branches of government and this makes many openings that can be utilized. (1992, p. 36)

Again, though, it would not be entirely accurate to say that Marcos's martial-law machinery was as inefficient as all that – after all, the man had held onto the presidency for over two decades during which he (in a manner of speaking) single-handedly made himself one of the richest men – and his wife the richest woman, per a 1980s *Fortune* edition – in the world at one point, while reversing an entire country's status from the fastest-developing to the least

developed in Southeast Asia. More to the point is the personalistic nature of Philippine social relations, traceable to the communal values of the country's rural and tribal communities; among the first things about Filipinos that foreigners notice, for example, are (traditionalist) Filipinos' unabashed tactility as well as embarrassment over the handling of wealth and private property – hence, to indulge the issue further, Marcos's renown for having or forcing his way with women and his infamous concealment of his financial and real holdings.

Potentials vs. actualities

As far as the ECP went, people were participating with ears attuned to the goings-on in Malacañang Palace. It was consistently observable that, at least during this period, Imee Marcos was as contemptuous of her mother as she was attached to her father. Imelda in turn was vocal about her desire to get some genuine European royalty interested in Imee; when the latter had an affair with a sportsman from an oppositionist family, who (to make matters worse) was married to a beauty queen who was widely speculated to have been one of Marcos's conquests, things started falling apart, or in another sense, into place. In a way, this foreshadowed the succession of hubris and stop-gap measures that characterized the assassination of socdem figure Benigno Aquino, Jr. (hubris) and the call, under international pressure, for snap presidential elections (stop-gap) which resulted in the so-called people-power revolution of February 1986.

What happened in 1982 was the kidnapping of Imee's lover, Tommy Manotoc, by the NPA, according to the military, though of course this was already getting recognized as a knee-jerk reaction on the part of the government (Aquino's assassin, also assassinated, was to be identified as a Communist gunman). Mysteriously, Imee got back both her man, in a crudely staged rescue mission, and the position of Director-General of the ECP – which everyone expected to be headed by Imelda or John J. Litton, her (and Jack Valenti's) supporter. Imee's fulfillment in her role as wife and mother-to-be was something which both cultural activists (aligned in Imee's camp) and Imelda's loyalists sought to take advantage of; so long as Imee held the top position, however, it was "our" camp that mostly won out in the end.

On two levels, then, we at the ECP had to contend with Hall's observation that "If the forms of provided commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative, then it is because, alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialization and short-circuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification, something approaching a recreation of recognizable experiences and attitudes, to which people are responding" (Hall, 1981, p. 233). Our admittedly not-conscious application of this principle had to do with both working within, through, or out of the range and breadth afforded by palace intrigues, at the same time providing at least a semblance of actual support for the ECP's constituencies whenever possible. This was not to denigrate the symbolic achievement in marshaling Imelda's MIFF, however. Despite Bennett's claim that "the programmatic, institutional, and governmental conditions in which cultural practices are inscribed...have a substantive priority over the

semiotic properties of such practices” (1992, p. 28), it might be possible to re-assess the expulsion by Imee of the MIFF from the ECP as resulting in comparable status for both institutions, and providing the ECP with less of the goodwill that the first MIFF had engendered, along with the notoriety of the Manila Film Center’s scaffolding collapsing on about 200 workers (Figure 1), many of whom had to be buried or killed in order for the construction to be completed on time.

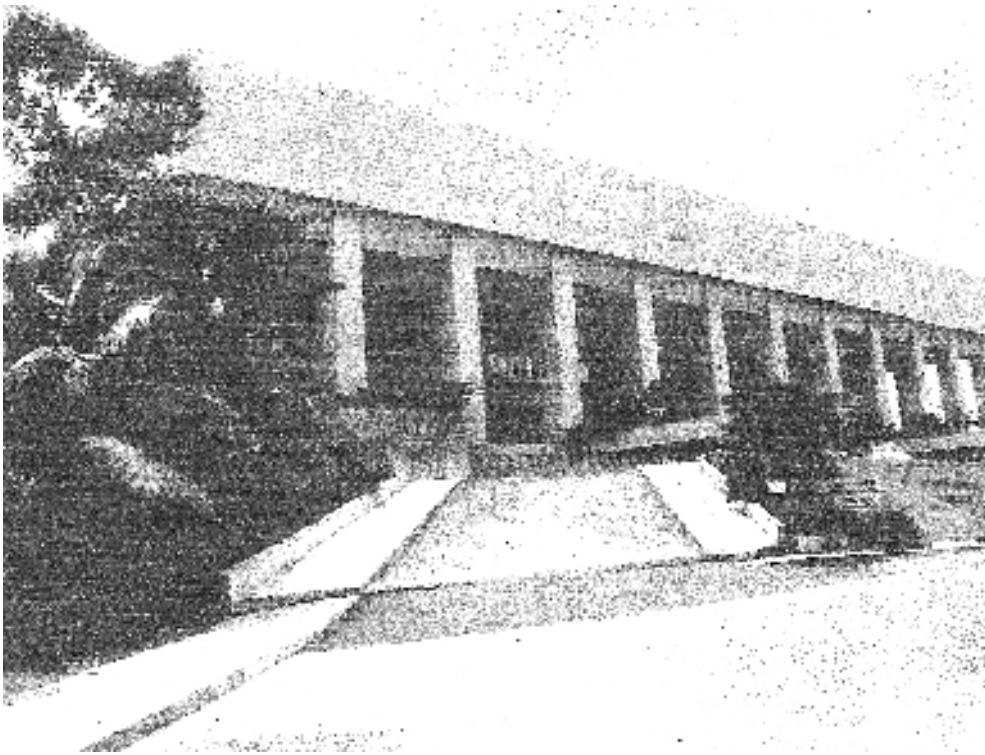


Figure 1. The Parthenon-inspired Manila Film Center, condemned as a structure for the last two decades, due to the instability of the land on which it rests; as part of Imelda Marcos’ envisioned City of Man, the site was originally reclaimed from Manila Bay and constructed upon before it had time to fully settle. Photo by Gil Nartea, *National Midweek* (1985).

In terms of the ECP’s camp (pun incidental) positions, then, the MIFF, as already mentioned, was Imelda territory, as were the Film Archives of the Philippines and the Film

Fund, which provided subsidies for mainstream film projects. The service groups – public relations, where I functioned, and theater management – were in good hands, as far as we were concerned – meaning these were controlled and staffed by people from Imee’s circles in theater or the University of the Philippines (where she and I were non-acquainted classmates before my activist years); more significant in terms of industry impact were the Film Ratings Board, which rebated the taxes of quality productions, and the Alternative Cinema Department, which produced full-length works by new directors and screened heretofore unavailable, censored, or banned foreign and local productions.¹² One consideration in evaluating the efforts expended in attempting to implement progressivity in these areas is Hall’s admonition to avoid thinking “of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly corrupt or wholly authentic. Whereas,... [in actual practice,] they play on contradictions” (Hall, 1981, p. 233). Accordingly, it would be possible to say that, for example, the trend in sex films initiated by the MIFF, while denounced by both the censors and the left (including the MPP and the CAP), also made it possible for a number of filmmakers to come up with critiques of contemporary Philippine society using frameworks of social decadence (*Scorpio nights* [Gallaga, 1985]), protofeminist consciousness (*Company of women* [Chionglo, 1985]), or neocolonialist critiques (*Boatman* [Aguiluz, 1984]); moreover, in order to prove that the libertarian spirit applied to more than just sexual themes, previously suppressed films (notably *Manila by night* [Bernal, 1980] and *Sakada* [Cervantes, 1976]) were granted permission to be exhibited at the Manila Film Center. On the other hand, the breaks provided new talents by the Alternative Cinema Department also proved to be a mixed blessing, but in the opposite direction; the newcomers turned out to be either

political reactionaries or incapable of surviving in the industry at large. A more rewarding activity was the same department's unofficial mobilization, along with the CAP, of film artists in a series of mass actions against censorship. The irony of one government institution agitating against another was not lost on the chief censor, the late Maria Kalaw-Katigbak, who promptly invoked the fact of her being a presidential appointee and therefore on the same bureaucratic level as Imee Marcos.¹³

Beyond this point, however, Imee was not the only member of her family who found herself defending a progressive political position, and one of the biggest tragedies of the Marcos saga is the fact that the family's radicalization occurred past the moment when their once-unassailable influence had irrevocably waned. Regarding Jaime Cardinal Sin's condemnation of the sex films being shown at the Manila Film Center, Imelda Marcos answered that, for one thing, Filipinos were mature enough to decide what they want to see and that, for another, sexual themes in films, as in literature, could occasion great art experiences. This was read by the now-vocally oppositionist media as an opportunistic defense of the sizeable profits the government was making from pornographic film screenings, yet the novelty of the dictator's spouse arguing for libertarian choices went unremarked. A later proposal, also by Imelda, to legalize divorce met with predictably Church-led opposition, thus relegating the Philippines to its unenviable current status of being one of only two countries in the world where divorce remains an unavailable option. Ferdinand Marcos' extreme disappointment with the US, the neocolonizing government that had once supported him and that subsequently effectively held him captive, could have been

the primary reason for his refusal to seek treatment while in exile for the condition that eventually caused his death. A legacy of confrontations with US courts and American interventionist policies continues to the present with the surviving members of his family.

Beginning of the end

The Aquino assassination led to a number of responses: the abandonment by Imee of her ECP responsibilities (supposedly to concentrate on her legislative assignments, although it became clear eventually that she was preparing to emigrate with her new family); the defection of a number of key personnel – some to opposition media, others (including myself) to the government's less high-profile media center; and, finally, the dissolution of ECP, to be reconstituted as the Film Development Foundation of the Philippines under Litton – an entity which set about screening quickie sex films without regard to their sources, and sending its officials to trips abroad to solicit support for an MIFF that was already announced as not forthcoming in the foreseeable future. One way – perhaps the easiest – of accounting for this ultimate instability in what has turned out to be the only largely positive contribution of the Filipino government to its film industry is to maintain that bigger political considerations overrode such smaller cultural concerns. This leads us to Jameson's dissent with Bennett's call for participation in ISAs, stemming from the former's view that culture

is not a “substance” or a phenomenon in its own right, it is an objective mirage that arises out of the relationship between at least two groups. This is to say that no group “has” a culture all by itself: culture is the nimbus perceived by one group when it comes into contact with and observes another one. It is the objectification of everything alien and strange about the contact group. (Jameson, 1993, p. 33)

From the preceding account we can discern that the “two groups” in Jameson’s stipulation did not, perhaps even could not, remain consistent over time: first were the us-and-them formation of the Imee-vs.-Imelda camps, which almost instinctively coalesced into the ECP vis-à-vis the higher government organ (constructible in this sense as the Office of the President of the republic) as a response to the Aquino assassination, leading in the end – of the Marcos dictatorship, that is – to a still-to-be-problematized government-vs.-the people/the opposition binary. This fluidity, in the delimited sense used here, somehow serves to confirm Ian Hunter’s critique of the implications of Hall’s concept of articulation:

The notion of a general struggle between contending classes or “rival hegemonic principles” over ideologies or cultural meanings becomes unintelligible. Instead of appealing to the ideological articulation (in either sense) of class interests, we must look to the differentiated array of organizational forms in which cultural interests and capacities are formulated, if we are to engage with the forms in which they are assessed and argued over. (Hunter, 1988, p. 118)

Hunter poses an even more difficult challenge in cultural practice, especially when such practice is ongoing, when he opines that “It is necessary to abandon the ethical posture and forms of cultural judgment invested in the concept of culture as complete development and true reflection” (1988, p. 115); in the ECP experience, this became manifest in the concurrence between the MPP and CAP on the one hand and the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures, which in turn called on a then-oppositionist Catholic Church to denounce the proliferation of sex-genre films at the Manila Film Center. The puritanism of the Philippine left has continued to play into the hands of media-control advocates consisting of both commercialist producers and always-interested conservative politicians, including members of the clergy. The absence of any form of support (apart from box-office responses) for sex films resulted in the marginalization of both their production and distribution after the February 1986 “revolution” – i.e., they continued to be produced, but only as B-items for exhibition in provincial circuits that could not be restrained by the censors (who wield police powers) because, as Corazon Aquino’s censors chief alleged, these circuits were military-operated. What may be necessary here is therefore an appreciation, on the part of responders, especially those in academe, of the “play on contradictions” mentioned by Hall (1981, p. 233) in the continuing popularity of the sex-film genre, beyond its strictly pornographic dimensions.

Past is present

A further direction – that of the spectator – is implied by Meaghan Morris in her consideration of colonialist interventions:

When the voice of that which academic discourses – including cultural studies – constitute *as* popular begins in turn to theorize its speech, then...that theorization may well go round by way of the procedures that Homi Bhabha has theorized as “colonial mimicry,” for example, but may also come around eventually in a different, and as yet utopian, mode of enunciative practice. However, I think that this can happen only if the complexity of social experience investing our “place” as intellectuals today – including the proliferation of different places in and between which we may learn and teach and write – becomes a presupposition of, and not an anecdotal adjunct to, our practice. (1990, p. 41)

What this in effect suggests is the creation of a divide, if necessary, between what Philippine academicians and the media (which are heavily influenced by representatives from academia) hold onto as moral even in their most radical political agenda, and what “the people,” properly problematized, believe anyway, as manifest in their insistence on such supposedly disreputable film fare as escapist fantasies, blood-and-guts violence, stops-out melodrama, and graphic sex outings. Simon Frith’s recuperatory reformulation of the high-low dichotomy might prove to be a more workable starting point, rather than the poststructural extreme of discarding all measures for excellence as implicated by their

formulators:

If one strand of the mass cultural critique was an indictment of low culture from the perspective of high art (as was obviously the case for Adorno, for example), then to assert the value of the popular is also, certainly, to query the superiority of high culture. Most populist writers, though, draw the wrong conclusion; what needs challenging is not the notion of the superior, but the claim that it is the exclusive property of the “high.” (1991, p. 105)

Of relevance here might be the concept of subcultures, so as not to fall into the trap of homogenizing the movie-going masses:

The study of subcultural style which seemed at the outset to draw us back towards the real world, to reunite us with “the people,” ends by merely confirming the distance between the reader and the “text,” between everyday life and the “mythologist” whom it surrounds, fascinates and finally excludes. It would seem that we are still, like Barthes, “condemned for some time yet to speak *excessively* about reality.” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 140)

While therefore it may be necessary to accept Jameson’s description of the intellectual’s necessary and constitutive distance from classes of origin and chosen affiliation, and from social groups as well (1993, p. 40), it would also be useful to consider the principles, rather

than the prescriptions, that underlie Bennett's pronouncements on cultural policy:

If we are to write an adequate history of culture in the modern period, it is to the changing contours of its instrumental refashioning in the context of new and developing cultural and governmental technologies that we must look. This is not to say that the changing coordinates of "culture's" semantic destinies are unimportant. However, it is to suggest that these derive their significance from their relations to culture's governmental and technological refashioning. (1993, p. 77)

How these tensions apply to a Third-World context characterized by a triple form of neocolonial (US) political, (US/Japanese) economic, and (Vatican-State) religious dependence is the vexed question that Filipino cultural activists will have to seek answers to.

Notes

- 1 Edward Geary Lansdale's account of his tours of duty in the Philippines and Vietnam, titled *In the midst of wars* (1972/1991), details a number of atrocities committed under his direct supervision by combined US and Philippine forces, in the spirit of suppressing a local Communist insurgency that Lansdale himself acknowledges as owing to widespread peasant unrest. Nationalist Filipino historians such as Hernando J. Abaya (notably in *Betrayal in the Philippines*) trace the origin of the rebellion to the US government's renegeing on its promise to compensate World War II guerrilla fighters against the Japanese (the Communist-led guerrillas were disarmed and their leaders imprisoned, in keeping with then-emerging Cold-War tensions), compounded by its accommodation of Filipino leaders who had collaborated with the Japanese, not to mention "Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers" Douglas MacArthur's much-challenged exoneration of the great majority of Japanese war leaders, up to and including Emperor Showa (Hirohito) (cf. Manchester, 1978, pp. 536-78 *passim*).

Curiously, although Lansdale complained in his book about the US' inaction on his request for resources and funding, and attributed such negligence to the priority then being given to the Korean War (then being fought by MacArthur), both he and MacArthur claimed that their motives, in so far as the Philippines was concerned, sprung from a feeling of great affection for the country – occasionally to a point that suggests erotic allure. "The languorous laze... the fun-loving men, the

moonbeam delicacy of its lovely women, fastened me with a grip that has never relaxed,” was the then-23-year-old MacArthur’s first impression (1964, p. 29).

Although the more reserved Lansdale merely states that “When my turn came [to go back to the US after World War II], I discovered I didn’t want to leave” (1991, p. 4),

Cecil B. Currey’s introduction describes him as “America’s latter-day T. E.

Lawrence of Southeast Asia, a title which he obviously never sought but which he

richly deserved,” and quotes Lansdale’s description of counterinsurgency as “[only]

another word for brotherly love” (Lansdale, 1991, pp. xvii-xix). Although

romanticizing the Lansdale-inspired character of Alden Pyle in his Vietnam-set

thriller *The quiet American* (1955), Graham Greene also effectively depicted the

well-intentioned yet inadvertent malevolence of this form of dogmatically inspired

New-World idealism.

- 2 A comparative study of the US’ then-developing client states in Asia, both under military dictatorships, was undertaken by David C. Kang in *Crony capitalism*.

Although both national systems observed Cold War-inspired repressions of

democratic institutions, Kang maintains that the Philippines failed to attain the level

of prosperity realized by its neighboring countries during the same period primarily

because of its uncritical accommodation of the US’ overseas economic interests

(2002, pp. 74-75). The situation becomes even more telling when we consider both

Asia and the Americas: all the countries marked, as it were, by US neocolonial

control (the Philippines in Asia and most of Latin America) have remained

economically underdeveloped, in contrast with most countries whose colonial

experiences were limited to domination by European nations and/or Japan.

- 3 The late Renato Constantino, considered the foremost Filipino nationalist historian by most foreign observers, mentioned Philippine movies only once (out of several dozen volumes of output), and even then disparagingly, in *Synthetic culture and development* (1985, p. 31).
- 4 The present-day counterparts of the ECP may be enumerated as follows: the CineManila International Film Festival, a privately funded annual event, avoids the reliance on foreign loans that made the Manila International Film Festival an excessive and short-lived spectacle (see Stein, 1983, pp. 48-55); Cinemalaya [which may be translated as “Free Film”] and Cinema One, sponsored by the government and by television respectively, hold scriptwriting contests and award seed money for the production of winning entries, after the manner of the ECP’s Film Production and Film Fund Departments; these and several other organizations sponsor festivals in censorship-exempt venues, reminiscent of the ECP Alternative Cinema Department’s exhibitions at the Manila Film Center; the government’s Cinema Evaluation Board declares tax rebates for film releases on the basis of quality, following the pattern of the ECP’s Film Ratings Board; and several educational institutions led by the University of the Philippines Film Institute provide instruction in film theory and production, improving on the basic workshop format of the ECP’s Film Education division. Several of the problems that plagued the ECP’s Film Archives of the Philippines, which eventually had to relinquish its holdings to various government and private collections, either no longer apply or have been

considerably alleviated by the transition from celluloid to digital.

- 5 Primitivo Mijares was the first Malacañang insider to break away from Marcos' martial-law regime and publish a book-length political exposé, *The conjugal dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos* (1976), banned in the country but nevertheless widely circulated, via extensive photocopying and mimeographing. Returning to the Philippines after a few years' absence, he mysteriously disappeared after last being sighted at the Manila International Airport; his pre-teen son was later found, mauled to death. A few years later the airport killing of another returnee, former Senator Benigno S. Aquino, Jr., would ignite the people-power revolt that would topple Marcos and install Aquino's widow, Corazon, in his stead.
- 6 "Pamulinawen" is a popular folk song from the Ilocos region in Northern Luzon, where Marcos hailed from. The title is the name of the woman being addressed in the lyrics, which in translation begin: "Pamulinawen, my love, please hearken to me,... [I] who am sighing,... enchanted by your graciousness" (Who, what, where is "Pamulinawen"?, n.d., n.p.). One source interprets the name as "Stone-Hearted Lady" (Rosario, n.d., n.p.), ostensibly derived from the word's original meaning, which is "flint." In announcing the eponymous Ilocos Norte festival, the Philippine government's Department of Tourism inaccurately states that "Pamulinawen means 'Ilocano maiden'" in the Ilocano language (Laoag, n.d., n.p.).

In any instance, the buxom blonde that Dovey Beams was could hardly be mistaken for the short, scrawny, burnt-brown native typical of Ilocos. Possibly as a result of the scandal, the spelling of Beams' first name has since been altered (cf.

Dovie Beams, n.d., database entry, n.p.; as well as the book title of Hermie Rotea's *Marcos' lovey Dovie* [1983]). A top-secret Memorandum of Conversation dated January 15, 1971 between President Nixon and the Philippines' then-US Ambassador Henry A. Byroade, where the latter reports Marcos' plan to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and declare martial law and Nixon responds that "Whatever happens, the Philippines is our baby" so "we would 'absolutely' back Marcos up, and 'to the hilt,'" eventually brings up the Dovey Beams (so-spelled) affair, with the text stating that "The only criticism of Marcos [presumably by Nixon and/or Byroade] appeared to be over the fact that he got caught out" (Lawler, 2007, pp. 497-98).

- 7 A number of references, starting with the several commemorations of the fall of the Marcos regime (see for example Mercado, 1986; and De Manila, 1986), detail the misdeeds of the ousted President, as a way of rationalizing the use of civil disobedience. In a number of instances the information presented by the authors had earlier already surfaced, so to speak, in the underground media, although a systematic study of the mainstreaming of originally marginal reports from then-outlawed sources still has to be accomplished.
- 8 The late critic-historian Agustin Sotto maintained that the 1960s "was also the period when the top directors shot their best works" (1994, n.p.).
- 9 The prodigiously gifted Nora Aunor, a genuine proletarian aspirant from the rural slums, emerged from seemingly out of nowhere during this period and, within a few years, had become what Filipino commentators generally agree was – and

still is – the country’s foremost and finest acting talent. Her primary supporters consisted of young working-class citizens, who at that singular point in the country’s history were earning enough disposable income for pop-culture consumption without having to work overseas, thus animating a fervent and mass-based fan culture. As a result of this historical window, Aunor remains the only dark-skinned Filipino woman of “superstar” status (for most of her career to the present, in fact, the term has been understood to refer exclusively to her triumph as a multi-media artist). The standard fan reference for Aunor, nicknamed Guy, is Jimenez (1983), while a recent, extensive, and internationally sourced compilation of fan testimonials is that of De Guzman (2005). Now US-based, Aunor recently further added to her long list of cultural exploits the overtly queer distinction of marrying her female manager.

10 Film and literary critic Bienvenido Lumbera describes the process thus:

The censors demanded to see a complete script before they could give a permit for shooting, so they could scrutinize film projects as early as the pre-production stage. Studios turned to journalists and creative writers in order to be able to impress the censors. Young filmmakers and writers saw here an opportunity to break into the industry and inject some seriousness in terms of content.... From that point on, the writers and directors who were able to get in already had a foothold. (Bienvenido Lumbera, interview with author, 1990, pp. 21-22)

11 In an informal interview with the author, then-Congresswoman Imee R. Marcos expressed her plan to popularize what she called “Marcos studies,” starting with a

publication of a book series assessing her father's presidency. She maintained that she would not mind having, as part of the series, a history of the ECP, "warts and all," but she nevertheless maintained confidence that the organization's achievements would outweigh its shortcomings. (Shortly thereafter the resurgence in Philippine film production, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, seemingly confirmed her assurance in the model set by the ECP.) When I asked, as an aside, whether the name "Experimental Cinema of the Philippines" was intended to resemble that of the Mussolini-era *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*, she replied that she had wanted to handle the naming of the organization half-jokingly, partly to provide an homage to a well-regarded institution founded during an earlier dictatorship (and thus, I surmised, teasing her parents in the process), and partly to see how many would be able to pick up on the reference (Marcos, 2002).

- 12 Information in this paper on official activities of the ECP was drawn from its annual reports, only two of which were completed, and only the first of which was published: *Year one* (1983) and *The second edition* (1984). Also cf. *Experimental Cinema of the Philippines* (1984, encyclopedia entry, pp. 244-45). For current counterparts of the various ECP functions, see note 4.
- 13 Upon her return to the Philippines after the people-power expulsion of the Marcos family in 1986, Imee R. Marcos resumed her political career by seeking an electoral position in the restored Philippine Congress' House of Representatives. While there she took the expected position of defending her father's legacy, but she also became outspoken in criticizing US intervention in Philippine affairs, often finding herself

on the same side as leftist-opposition lawmakers, a few of whom had been incarcerated during the Marcos era. (The contrast is even more remarkable when regarded vis-à-vis her father's friend and fellow dictator Park Chung-hee, whose daughter Park Geun-hye is also actively immersed in politics, though in this case as head of South Korea's conservative Grand National Party.)

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