

INSIGHTS > Imelda

BY KERRINE GOH
30 SEP 2009

Imelda

And as one views the resulting material, how does one spot the 'objective truth' that should be used? These are all editorial decisions. They are inextricably bound up with film art's need to compress what in life is lengthy and diffuse into a brief and meaningful essence.

Quite simply, filmmaking is a series of highly significant choices of what to shoot, how to shoot, what to use, and how most effectively to use it. If your film is to be perceived as fair, balanced, and objective, you will need a broad factual grasp of your subject, material that is persuasive and self-evidently reliable, and the courage and insight to make interpretive judgments about its use. Almost every decision involves ethical choices, many of them disquieting and involving sleepless nights. Whatever your intentions, the medium itself plays a very big part in the message. You will be showing to your audience not the events themselves, but not an artful representation, a construct having its own inherent logic, dynamics, and emphases."

- Michael Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary*, 3rd Edition, pg.7

Ramona Diaz first met Imelda Marcos, (first lady of the Philippines for 21 years, the last 15 of which were under martial law), in 1993 while working on the documentary 'Spirits Rising', her film about the role of women in the People Power Revolution. As Diaz tells it, was scheduled to be a short fifteen minute interview ended up being six hours.

It was during this their initial meeting that Diaz, experiencing a paradox of feelings, proposed to Imelda the idea of doing the documentary on her. "I

wanted to examine this duality of attraction and repulsion” Diaz said in an interview with Newsbreak published July 5, 2004. The attraction stemming from Imelda's extraordinary charisma, the repulsion, obviously, from the knowledge of the unspeakable wounds she and her husband's regime (and I term it 'she and her husband' deliberately) inflicted on the Philippines.

Imelda agreed almost immediately.

Several years later Diaz returned to Manila, funding in tow, to begin photography on her profile of Imelda. Diaz and her crew were given access to Imelda unprecedented to anyone else with the possible exception of filmmaker Tikoy Aguiluz (Boatman, Bagong Bayani). (Aguiluz had been working on a documentary on Mrs. Marcos for several years before shelving the project indefinitely. I can't help but wonder what Aguiluz's film would have been like, in what manner he would have handled the subject, and how different from Diaz's work his would be, especially given the nature of his filmography and experimentations).

Many have claimed that the film to be balanced, and have used the word “objective” in relation to it. This can be difficult.

Imelda is likely to be the most entertaining film I will see this year. I admittedly laughed harder and at more instances than some of the best comedies I have seen in my lifetime. There are two main reasons for this. The first is Imelda herself —exposing her wildly imaginative and utterly incomprehensible philosophies, insatiable need for attention, and utter delusion (or denial, take your pick). The second is Diaz and her editor's deft and witty cutting of the film, often juxtaposing the words of Imelda with images that serve as evidence directly refuting them, or interviews with relevant figures from the period (Jose Lacaba, Behn Cervantes, Fr. Reuter, to name a few) contradicting her, often playing to hilarious effect. An example is when the topic of political prisoners is brought up in the film. In interview, Imelda, with an innocent look on her face, insists that there were no political prisoners during her husband's time in office. Diaz then cuts swiftly to an adamant Fr. James Reuter, activist and prominent media personality who spoke out against martial law, expressively telling us that she's a loon, and that he used to visit the political prisoners and say mass for them.

When I reviewed the on the morning television program 'The Breakfast Show', one of the hosts of the show, Ryan Agoncillo, a young man in his mid-20's, defended the film against my critical though not altogether negative assessment, saying that, for someone such as him that does not know much about the period that the film covers, it can be educational. He brings up an interesting point, and is not the only one in the media to have offhandedly made that claim. *Imelda* can be educational, with this I agree, but not that statement can not be made without asking two very important questions. The first is for whom will the film be educational? And the second, and perhaps more important question, what is it teaching them?

Imelda has something to teach the age group of those who are either too young to remember that specific period in Philippine history or were not born yet. For the generations that lived through and remember the era, the bulk of the information presented in the film will be things that they know and have experienced, for many even witnessed first hand. For these generations, the film will have little educational value, and will simply be an artistic rendering of what is already public knowledge. Or better put—a two hour excuse to be captivated and amused by the delusion and denial of a woman who represents a regime we once scorned. This statement directs us to the second question, and the main problem that I have with *Imelda*. With its succinct and abridged handling of martial law in the context of its character study, *Imelda* does have a few tidbits and facts to impart, and can therefore teach the uninformed, however, one can not ignore that these are just drops of grey in an otherwise vibrant painting; and are there only to serve as backdrop of a film whose purpose is to highlight, appreciate, and mock, the colorful personality of its subject. I cringe at the thought of *Imelda* being referred to as an educational tool, or worse still, being utilized in classrooms (where, given its pop-culture popularity, the limited number of documentaries on the period, and the need of teachers to relate and hold the attention of their students, there is a good chance it will end up).

This is why there is reason for Philippine audiences to be cautious in regard to a film such as this. For foreign audiences, who have limited information, limited knowledge, and perhaps even limited interest in the Philippines and its history, *Imelda* will be a delightful film that gives them access to a woman they barely know beyond the stories of her grand collection of shoes. For the people of the Philippines, however, who know

more intimately the subject, lived through the period of martial law, and who, as the text printed on black screen that closes the film reminds us, have still not received their justice, the film is not, or perhaps rather, should not, be as amusing.

As a character study, the film fails, as it is not able to dig past the surface of its subjects psyche. What is fascinating about the film, for me, is how both what appears in the how film, and how it was received by local audiences, speaks volumes about the Philippines and our culture. We feel blessed and fascinated by the presence of, and knowledge learned about, celebrity. We remember more names and a face than we do history; and this film is a testament to that. What is shown in the film-- the reception that Imelda received after returning to the Philippines from exile, the female guard watching Imelda's shoe collection who tells in secret, with an expression of pure delight, that she sometimes tries on her shoes, that her children ran and won seats in public office (with Imelda herself shown spearheading the campaign in the film), to the reaction of local audiences to it-- long lines of people waiting to see the film, a number paying 250 pesos (\$5), or twice the price of a regular movie ticket, to attend a "premiere" of the film (two days before its regular release), is all proof positive that we are a nation enamored and under the spell of celebrity.

Diaz has often said in interviews that she did not want the film to be propaganda, but neither for it to be a hit piece. Many critics in Manila have lauded the work agreeing it to be successful based on the terms of its directors publicized intentions, some calling it a balanced and fair portrait of its subject, and others still going as far as to call Diaz's handling of Imelda "objective".

Rabiger's quote that began this review provides an excellent starting point for discussion of this topic. We must remember, and Rabiger points this out, is that despite the film wearing the label 'documentary' that what appears on screen is what the director has deliberately chosen to show us.

Diaz gives heavy doses of screen time with people who are enamored by Mrs. Marcos. At several times in the film Diaz allows her shots, both of Imelda or other interviewees, to linger past the point of understanding and into the awkward silence of the moment where the subject does not know what to do or say next (such as is the case with the American juror that was involved in the trial acquitting Imelda, seen holding in his lap and

admiring a framed photo of Mrs. Marcos).

It is deliberate decisions such as these that sometimes begin to give one a reading of what Diaz's intentions might have been with the film she created—first to show how crazy Imelda is, second to show how crazy we are for being charmed by her, and third, to laugh at the whole thing and forget about it tomorrow.

Diaz says she doesn't know if her film has any answers, but simply hopes it asks the right questions; a very safe statement regarding a delicate subject matter. Imelda has left audiences asking questions. Sadly, they are more about the director's intentions in making the film than about the subject itself.

The writer thanks Cecile Dominguez for her invaluable input.

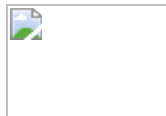
Read the NY Times review of this film

An interview with Ramona Diaz [here](#)

SIMILAR CONTENT

BY KERRINE GOH
22 SEP 2009

Lav Diaz And The Insane Struggle For Evolution



BY NAIMA MORELLI
13 JUN 2018

Kartika Affandi: 9 Ways of Seeing | Interview with videomaker Christopher Basile



INSIGHTS
ASIA INDONESIA

BY **KERRINE GOH**
03 JUN 2005

Focus on Asia



BY **KERRINE GOH**
12 FEB 2012

An Interview with Brillante Mendoza, Part 2



BY **KERRINE GOH**
30 NOV 2011

An Interview with Brillante Mendoza, Part 1



FEATURES
ASIA EUROPE PHILIPPINES

BY **MEDEA SANTONOCITO**
09 NOV 2022

Cutting Edge Theatre: Making Performing Arts Accessible



INTERVIEWS
UNITED KINGDOM

COUNTRY
PHILIPPINES

DISCIPLINE
FILM

ABOUT ASEF CULTURE360

culture360.asef.org brings Asia and Europe closer by providing information, facilitating dialogue and stimulating reflection on the arts and culture of the two regions.

MORE ABOUT ASEF CULTURE360 | [FAQ](#) | [f](#) [X](#) [@](#)

This website was created and maintained with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



About us
Team
Partners
FAQ
Brand guidelines
How to partner with us
Contact us
#ASEFCulture