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The Road To Cinemalaya. Some Random Rants On Pinoy Indie Cinema

In November 2000, the Cultural Center of the Philippines organized a four-day festival of new works by up-and-coming independent filmmakers. The centerpieces of the event were six works –Jonjon Red’s *Still Lives*, JJ Duque’s *Journey*, Khavn de la Cruz’ *The Twelve*, JP Carpio’s *Girl of My Dreams*, Cris Pablo’s *Tatlong Ulit* (3 Times) and a triptych entitled *Motel* by Nonoy Dadvivas, Chuck Escasa and Ed Lejano. What’s remarkable about the event is that these titles were all beyond eighty minutes in running time, thus feature length. And that they were shot, not on film, but on V8 or D8, thus digital. The event was billed “The 1st Filipino Full-Length Feature Indie Festival.” The works played to full houses –the audience composed mostly of students from colleges and universities around Metro Manila, as well cineastes, artists, filmmakers, family and friends.

Appropriately, the venue was the center’s audio-visual room, better known as the Tanghalang Manuel Conde (TMC). Conde, the 120-seater’s namesake, is acknowledged by local film scholars to be the most independent-minded of directors from what was considered the Golden Age of Philippine Cinema. A maverick of sorts, he was able to work in and out of the studio system. A consummate auteur, Conde wrote, directed, produced and starred in a series of biting political satires in the early 60’s, the *Juan Tamad* films. But the feather in his cap is the 1950 period epic,

Genghis Khan. The film so impressed American writer James Agee that the novelist re-edited the work and added his own voice as the English commentary when it was screened at the 1952 Venice Film Festival. This makes *Genghis Khan* the first Filipino indie film to be acclaimed at an international film festival.

The TMC's also home to the CCP Sineklab, an informal society where would-be filmmakers and cinephiles from all walks of Manila life could overdose on the best of world and local flicks. Each Saturday this rabid bunch would congregate at the Conde around nine o'clock in the morning. The session would usually commence with some discussion on film appreciation –for example, the Eight Aspects of Cinema (from acting to directing), Visual Language, Plot/Character/Theme/Technique, How Critics Critique Film, and etcetera. Then it's movie marathon time –that's three to eight titles lovingly viewed and painstakingly scrutinized each weekend. Screenings run on monthly themes determined at the start of each year. Themes rotate regularly covering as much film ground as possible –from person-based (e.g. The Early Kubrick) to the site-specific (e.g. South African Docus) to genre (e.g. Horror Musicals) to topical (e.g. Women in Pinoy Cinema or The City in Film) and so on. More often than not, the movie-logged sineklabblers would proceed from the CCP to their favorite watering holes in nearby Malate (usually The Penguin Café, Remedios Street) and continue their filmic rants/raves till daybreak.

The CCP Sineklab was such a thick group that out of town sessions were also planned regularly. Summer 1998 found the *sineklabbers* in the mountains of Sagada, fourteen hours north of Manila. Then in late '99, it was the sun-kissed island of Boracay, with a record 36 members in tow.

The notion of a Sineklab began ten years hence when the CCP launched its first Independent Film & Video Outreach Tour. This was in line with the (then) new Cultural Center of the Philippines three-pronged thrusts of democratization, de-centralization and Filipinization –the three “-tions” as we used to call it. Remember that the CCP was created during the Marcos regime (1969) as the brain child of Imelda. She envisioned the Philippines as the center of the Asian arts and culture. Thus prior to the 1st EDSA People Power revolution (yes, we had two) in 1986, the CCP was the home of the “high arts”, where the likes Van Cliburn, Nureyev & Fonteyn performed for Manila's top 500. After the Marcoses' fled to Hawaii, the new CCP management set out to demolish the elitist image of the center.

From being a *konyo* (privileged) venue for theatre, dance and musical performances, the CCP transformed into a “coordinating center” for Philippine arts and culture. One of the more drastic changes was the addition of the “non-performing” arts to CCP’s organizational rostrum – Literature, the Visual Arts, Broadcast and, of course, Film.

The new Coordinating Center of Film inherited the structural pattern of the now-defunct Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP). ECP was created in 1982 by Ferdinand Marcos as the premiere government agency to overlook the country’s film-related programs and activities. No expense was spared in its birthing. The notorious Manila Film Center, a Parthenon-like structure that stood at the edge of reclaimed land, became its home. To many insiders, the ECP was Apo Ferdie’s attempt to ease relations between two ladies of his household: his glamorous wife Imelda and his rebel of a daughter Imee. One of Imelda’s pet projects in the early 80’s was the Manila International Film Festival (MIFF). She hoped the MIFF would make Manila the Cannes of the Far East. To that end, no expense was again spared. Not even life. In 17 November 1981 there was a mad rush to finish the Manila Film Center in time for the 1st MIFF slated for January ‘82. A scaffolding holding construction workers gave way, plunging them down into the quick drying cement of the Main Theatre floor. Urban legend goes that many workers perished during the tragedy – numbers range for thirty five to the hundreds. As expected, the incident was hushed up for fear of adversely affecting the upcoming cinema circus maxima.

Imelda’s MIFF became integrated into the ECP, as one of its main programs. And the ECP went into the hands of Imee Marcos, as its director-general.

Despite the drama and controversy surrounding it, many film folks believe that the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines was one of the government’s best efforts film-wise. Aside from MIFF, the ECP included an Alternative Cinema program, a Film Archives, a Film Education program, a Film Ratings Board and the Film Fund. It also produced four critically acclaimed – Peque Gallaga’s *Oro, Plata, Mata* (Gold, Silver and Death); Ishmael Bernal’s *Himala* (The Miracle), Abbo de la Cruz’ *Misteryo Sa Tuwa* (Joyful Mysteries) and Pio de Castro’s *Soltero* (The Bachelor).

One of the ECP's more successful programs was The ECP Independent Film & Video Competition. The competition, a brain child of Alternative Cinema chief, playwright and screenwright Bienvenido "Boy" Noriega, Jr., was created to give recognition to the best independent efforts of young Filipino filmmakers. Awards were given in four categories –short feature, experimental, documentary and animation –and in two divisions, film and video. Among the first awardees are some of the icons of present-day Pinoy independent filmmaking –Raymond Red, documentarist and film historian Nic Deocampo, animator Roxlee to name just a few.

After Edsa, the ECP closed shop but its short film festival got a reprieve. Thanks to the efforts of the CCP Film head, Augustin "Hammy" Sotto, it became the pattern for the Gawad CCP Para Sa Alternatibong Pelikula At Video (The CCP Independent Film & Video Competition). This year, the Gawad CCP celebrates its 20th edition, making it one of the longest running indie competitions this part of the planet.

The first indie film outreach of 1990 included both ECP and Gawad CCP awardees –Roxlee, Cesar Hernando, Jonjon Red (then Juan Pula) and Patrick Purugganan. The sites visited were the Visayan cities of Iloilo and Bacolod, as well as Butuan and Marawi in Mindanao. The plan was to introduce independent and alternative cinema to Filipino students in the regions by screening short films and letting them interact with their makers.

In each site, the audience response was phenomenal. Initially they were a bit put off when they realized we weren't showing the usual mindless mainstream mush. But after the lively forums that accompanied each session, they softened up. At the University of the Philippines, Iloilo screenings, Dean Dea Doromal of the College of Arts & Sciences tearfully proclaimed us as "Missionaries of Cinema."

The tag stuck with us until our last leg. This first outreach effort hit three birds with one stone. On the audience side: now they know there is something other than commercial film fare –something more informal, approachable and perhaps they could also attempt to do. On the filmmakers side: they see first-hand the impact of their works on audiences from differing milieus and social contexts. Sometimes they are challenged to defend their works – as in the case of Cesar Hernando. His experimental short *Kalawang* (Rust) got the ire of a predominantly Muslim

audience at the Mindano State University because it included a scene showing the male character's erection. Sometimes it's all praise. Both ways the filmmaker wins.

And for the CCP, at least for this writer, we knew we were on to something good. The tour made us realize there was a huge audience of Filipinos out there –hungry for different, creative and meaningful films. This realization was to have a huge impact on the design of our future program at the CCP Film.

Thus, in 1991 we initiated our first “*Paano Ba Talaga Manood Ng Pelikula?*” (How To Really Watch A Movie?) film appreciation workshop for faculty and staff of the Camarines National High School in Naga City, Bicol. This initial effort partnered basic film criticism with a teacher training course. The films we showed were all Filipino classics, as well as a sputtering of indie works. Eventually *Paano* would evolve into an intensive film app course that would include masterworks from all over the globe as well as highly visual lectures on how enjoy them. To date, it is the most toured outreach workshop of the CCP –presented more than eighty times in sixty areas locally as well as abroad.

Through a grant from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, the “*Lakbay Sine*” National Film Tour was born in December 1993. *Lakbay Sine* is nothing less than a *Cinema Paradiso* on wheels –we literally tour 35mm prints of Filipino classics from our vaults complete with rented portable 35mm projectors. We would descend into a town, set up the projectors and sound system at the public plaza, plug in the cables and screen the flicks the moment it becomes dark. Here the pleasure was seeing hundreds of local folks laughing, crying, jumping with excitement at the timeless treasures of Filipino cinema. Tour favorites include National Artist for Cinema Gerardo de Leon's 3-hour epic *Noli Me Tangere* (Touch Me Not, 1961), Manuel Silos' *Biyaya Ng Lupa* (Blessings of the Land, 1959), Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (We Were Like This Before, How Are You Today?, 1976), Bernal's *Himala* (1983), Gallaga's *Oro, Plata, Mata* (1983) among others.

In 1996, we won another NCCA grant, this time for the setting-up of Sineklabs throughout the nation. We chose three pilot sites –Baguio City in Luzon, Cebu City in the Visayas and Davao City in Mindanao. The project encouraged sites to put up film societies (sineklabs) locally. Once

set-up, the sineklab could be the locus of film-related activities in the area –alternative cinema screenings, film-related workshops, forums. From our experience, we learned the hard way that you can't force a site to push beyond its natural pace. The Baguio and Cebu sineklabs worked in fits and starts for differing. Our Baguio partners were creative artists that needed management skills. And Cebu was in the hands of a local arts council whose members were too busy with their individual business. The most successful pilot was Sineklab Davao. Our partner was the University of the Philippines, Davao City, specifically its Arts & Culture Office. It had a successful three-year run. We would send them VHS (no dvds yet!) copies of our films and they would organize bi-monthly screenings at the campus and even in nearby towns. Screenings were well attended by die-hard film buffs who re-echoed the workshops given them previously. Unfortunately, the campus had to move from the center of the city to the suburbs. The lack of accessibility finally caused its graceful end.

The Sineklab at the CCP was an after thought. After our series of attempts to start sineklabs around Metro Manila (e.g. the Filipinas Heritage Library in posh Makati and Oracafe in Quezon City) fell into the doldrums, we decided to start one at home in late 1998.

These were interesting times for Philippine cinema. The millennium year marked the rapid decent of Pinoy mainstream film production. From a high of 210 film productions in 1997, by the year end of 2000 it fell into the eighties. Each succeeding year was a growing cause for alarm. It was becoming clear that the industry was about to kick the proverbial *banga* (clay jar). Mainstream mavens blamed the decline to a host of ills –piracy, unequal competition from foreign (Hollywood) blockbusters, lack of incentives from government, to outright oppression in the form of inordinate taxation and arbitrary censorship laws.

But film scholars claim it was a clear case of business suicide. Since the mid-80's mainstream Filipino cinema has been going straight for audiences' jugulars vis-à-vis formulaic, same-old-same-old material. Unlike the era that preceded it, the so-called *nouvelle vague* of Philippine Cinema from the years 1974 to around 1986 when the likes of Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mike de Leon, Marilou Diaz Abaya, Laurice Guillen, Peque Gallaga and gang came out with surprising works that blended excellent story-telling with technical panache. Somehow, after '86 something got thrown out with along with the bath water. Producers

went full-steam into factory mode. And kamikaze as well.

By the middle of 2004, a picture was getting clear –except to producers. No matter how much tits-n-ass or exploding cars or *sampalans* (melodramatic slap-fests) they injected, Pinoy audiences weren't buying it.

Something had happened to the average Pinoy Joe (or Pepe). The former tactics of the production studios were missing their mark. Audiences were shifting shapes –blown by advancements in technology and changing media. Change came through tv cables, satellite dishes, the world wide web; as well as the onslaught of information from all sides – dvds, streaming video, downloads, legal or otherwise; add to that the increasing number of alternative film events that was invading our malls (e.g. Cine Europa, Cinemania, et al) and neighborhoods. Sineklabs of all shapes and sizes inclusive.

The year 2000 also saw the Sineklab evolving into its next stage -the Freefest, aka the Filipino Indie Full-Length Feature Festival (FIFFF). The shift is from film appreciation to production. The timing was particularly fortuitous. The mainstream was on the decline yet there was need for new, fresh material. Though it may never have the range of celluloid, digital was dangerously beginning to seem like it. Plus the technology – digital cameras, laptops/desktops, editing software, online networking – were now within the reach of an army of young, creative minds.

The Freefest was spawned to take full advantage of the time. As the its e-group banner proudly proclaims:

It's YEAR 9 for the FREEFEST online workshop for full-length feature video production. If you've had enough of bitching about how bad local flicks are, it's time to take matters into your hands. Grab your digicam/videocam and let's make that Great Pinoy Flick! No experience needed. Just guts AND a story to tell. As announced previously, we're creating a support group to handhold you along the way to Sundance or CINEMALAYA... The only rules are - the work should be a full-length (minimum of 75 minutes) feature (narrative fiction) in ordinary or digital video. (DOGME at your own discretion...)

(<http://movies.groups.yahoo.com/group/freefest/>)

Like the other CCP film-related programs, the Freefest was free of charge.

Despite that, participants made time for the two- to seven-month-long boot camp. Like the blurb says, it's a start from scratch workshop: from story development to pre-production to production to post and finally to alternative distribution. Usually commencing in February, sessions are on Saturdays and Sundays to give way to student and office workers. The first two months are the most intensive – the onus being on figuring out what you want to say and how you want to say it. The calendar is such that the final output should be ready by final quarter of the year, get tweaked via a series of internal previews and ready for a premiere by end of November.

That's the ideal. But indie filmmaking is full of surprises. The first Freefest produced only one full-length (Carpio's *Girl of My Dreams*) and about half a dozen works-in-progress. The second, none. However, subsequent Freefests fashioned names that got in the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festivals – Ron Bryant won two Cinemalaya grants for *Baryoke* and *Rotonda* (Circle); Lawrence Fajardo for his shorts *Kultado* (Overwrought), *Liwanag Sa Dilim* (Light in the Dark), as well as two Cinema One grants; and Noel Taylo's *Upas* (Stub) and *Kuwarto* (Room) to name a few.

And that brings us to Cinemalaya.

Suffice it to say that Cinemalaya was such a pleasant surprise for many reasons. For one, it proved that to get things going and going well, you need strong and clear-minded partners – Cinemalaya is a collaboration between government (CCP), the private sector (Econolink Inc.) and the academe (the University of the Philippines Film Institute, along with other schools and colleges nationwide). Second, now that we've got the resources to fund new works, we ask "what if the films all turn out to be turkeys?" – again, surprisingly the first batch of Cinemalaya full-lengths (along with the shorts) were stunners. Third, we've got okay films, what if nobody comes to watch it – and much to our amazement, the audience came. In droves. In fact, last year we upped the box-office results by over 40 percent! And finally, the cherry on the pie, some Cinemalaya titles have put us back on the world cinema map.

This year, programming Year 4 of the Cinemalaya festival is a cinch. My list of new full-length titles to include for the exhibition has hit the forty mark – and ten of those are world premieres. Last year we programmed 120 titles, mostly full-lengths, in about 209 screenings. The festival ran for

nine days at six venues at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Each year, the number of walk-in film programmers from prestigious international film festivals is increasing. Also, after the festival, the films and the grantees get another spin –this time all around the country during the Cinemalaya National Outreach Tour.

Aside from programming, I'm in the midst of creating a proposal for the ASEAN on the creation of a Digital Highway. It seeks to link the best independent cinema efforts of its member-countries. How? I haven't gotten to that yet –perhaps a through a series of screenings or a co-prod or a forum or all of the above.

The past seven and a half months I have been on the road doing research on Asian Cinema. And if there's anything I've learned interviewing the filmmakers of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, as well as seeing their oeuvres, it's that Asia's one of the hottest spots on the planet, independent cinema-wise.

As I craft the Asean Proposal and the Cinemalaya festival program, I remember a certain November night in 2000 at the Tanghalang Manuel Conde. Friends and family gather to celebrate the premieres of their new, full-length digital babies. The lights go dim. The screen comes alive. Filmmakers and audience hold their breaths...

Little did we know that we were all sitting on the crest of giant wave

By Edward CABAGNOT

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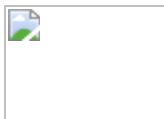


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