

Voices of the Shadow: Malaysian Independent Film Goes Noir

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Film noir has always been known for its interest in venturing into the dark side of human psyche. The noir protagonist in the classical noir, for instance, is an anti-hero figure with world-weary awareness of the world that contributes to a noir sense of (moral) ambivalence. This kind of affinity with human's dark side, needless to say, is traceable within noir's progenitor, that is, the documentary genre - especially the one documenting the absurdity of the World Wars. By the same token, the Hollywood studio system that consigns film noir into the B-movie status due to its limited budget has directly helped in creating a unique series of films that stylises the voices of the shadow – the angst-ridden noir protagonists and transgressively voluptuous femmes fatales. These “routes” to film noir, I would argue, are shared by independent films in Malaysia – the affinity with human's dark side and the B-status that allow them to have independent voices. At the level of ideological symbolism, both noir and independent films are ineluctable critics of their contemporary societies. By juxtaposing the two film genres, this paper looks at three independently produced Malaysian films by Da Huang Pictures – *Before We Fall in Love*, *Flower in the Pocket* and *Love Conquers All* – arguing that they have provided an avenue for the voices of the shadow to be heard, hence, sharing the noir genre's socio-cultural critics of its contemporary society.

Changing Landscapes, Changing Lives: The Changing Cinemas of Asia

Edward Delos Santos Cabagnot

Abstract

Asian cinema continues to shine in the world spotlight. But instead of mainstream works, it's the small", personal efforts of its independent filmmakers that attract the attention of prestigious film festivals worldwide. The Asian indie sits at the hub of the changing cinemas of the region. Its growing success can be traced many factors, but its driving force seem to be the relentless advancement of digital technology. Wave upon wave of enhancements to digital technology continually configure, not just the way films are being made, but also how stories are being told and how it is being delivered and appreciated by global audiences. Since the dawn of the new century, regional indie productions have increased in leaps and bounds, and along with it the quality of its narrative and technical flair. Each year Asian indie titles not only make it to the leading filmfests, but consistently bag its major prizes. This has opened up new vistas for would-be filmmakers –the promise of wider exposure, the possibility of worldwide distribution, and, of course, awards. But alongside these opportunities, are new challenges. Topmost are issues related to alternative distribution and marketing; as well as is the rise of the so-called “festival film” –works tailored mainly for festivals and its attendant onus regarding cultural representation. This paper seeks to outline the Asian indies' inherent strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats that confront its makers. It shall also suggests strategies for its continuing success and sustainability.

Filmmaking by the uninformed: reconstructing lesbianism in Philippine independent cinema production
Libay Linsangan Cantor

With the advent of and advancements in digital filmmaking, the Philippine film scene burgeoned in the latter half of this decade. Thanks mostly to grant-giving institutions seeding independent feature-length digital film projects, the dying Filipino film industry was somehow revived with new films, spawning a new breed of independent digital filmmakers and film content, in the process inspiring mainstream film production companies to also “go digital.”

Previously marginalized voices and taboo topics in the mainstream were given new cinematic life in these spaces, especially in the independent filmmaking scene. This could be clearly seen in the slew of digital films with queer or gay content independently produced by first-time producers and directed by first-time filmmakers. However, only a handful of films tackled lesbianism in this independent film scene. And in these narratives, much leaves to be desired when it comes to proper or accurate representation of lesbianism. Is this the fault of the seemingly lesbophobic producers who go-signal the film proposals for the grants? Is this the fault of the heterosexual filmmakers who went on to represent a sector of society in their films without proper research? Or is this the fault of the lesbian filmmakers themselves who sacrificed their advocacies in order to “go with the flow” just to have their films made?

This paper aims to analyze the reconstruction of the Filipino lesbian by looking at several films with lesbian themes vis-à-vis analyzing the recent modes of independent film production practiced in the country. The independently-produced films to be analyzed include those made by heterosexual filmmakers (“Rome and Juliet” and “Trabaho”) and a short film made by a lesbian-identified filmmaker (“Babae”), with a brief discussion on the selection process of an independent grant-giving agency and how they analyzed a lesbian-themed digital film proposal (“Kalas-Kalas, Kabit-Kabit”). This paper will try to investigate whether woman-to-woman desire continues to be trivialized and whether the filmmakers and independent film gatekeepers are continuing to perpetrate prejudiced stereotypical notions concerning Filipino lesbians and lesbianism in general.

The Politics of Censoring The 'Indie'; According to Independent Filipino Filmmakers and Media Practitioners

Ana Karina Avellana Cosio

The power of the censors whether government institutional like the Movie Television Review Classification Board, or influential people of Christian teaching and morals Catholic Bishops Review have become a force to reckon with for the contemporary Filipino Independent Filmmaker. This struggle with the censors has a long history in Philippine Cinema, this is evident in the accounts of Filipino filmmakers like Lino Brocka, and film critics and scriptwriters Jose 'Pete' Lacaba during the time of Martial Law.

The Anti-Obscenity and Pornography Act of 2008 was created and signed by Senator Manuel Villar and other members of congress. The act is defined as prohibiting and penalizing the production, printing and publication, importation, sale and distribution of pornographic materials and the exhibition of live sexual acts. This act has struck criticism and is causing an angry uproar with visual arts and media creators, practitioners academic scholars and curators for its very nature of installing definitions on what is considered 'obscene' and 'pornographic'.

Drawing from the articles and accounts of s on censorship and Philippine Cinema written by Dr. Nicanor Tiongson, Jose 'Pete' Lacaba and Lino Brocka and the current transcripts from the group Free Expression Philippines and accounts of some of the Filipino Independent directors and independent media practitioners and contextualized in the nature, traditions and beliefs of Philippine film and culture, the paper shall assess what discourses and problems have been articulated; what contestations, solutions and consolidations have been made; and what assumptions have been criticized and questioned on the role and power of the 'censors' in the current milieu of Independent Philippine Cinema.

From Kidlat Tahimik to Kimmy Dora: Shifting Perceptions of Independence and Continuing Tradition of Resistance

Renei Dimla

In cinema, “independent” films assume the role of the Other. Going against the surfeit of mainstream productions or more aptly (considering the diminishing number of films over the last few years) mainstream sensibilities, the Pinoy “indie” presents an alternative viewing option for mass audiences saturated with Hollywood imports and locally made films with rehashed themes. However, soon enough, the mainstream catches up and penetrates the independent film industry, not long after producers, directors, actors and other creatives begin to jump on the independent bandwagon. What was once the Other turns into a new wonder.

It is not altogether a bad thing but it poses a disjuncture on the use of the term “independent” and leads to further questions about the validity of the term in the film industry. After all, cinema is, and will always be a collaborative effort, hence “independent film” may be deemed oxymoronic and purist to the point of impossibility.

This paper aims to trace back in film history the shifts in the perception of “independent” cinema from Kidlat Tahimik’s pioneering *Mababangong Bangungot* (1977), an independent work by all standards (produced, directed and marketed by Tahimik himself) but remains largely unfamiliar to the audience outside the academe to recent productions like *Kimmy Dora* (2009) that is backed up by the machinations of the mainstream system and has enjoyed considerable box-office take-ins.

Despite these shifts, this paper also intends to put forward the notion that despite the pervading influence of the mainstream through its financial support and wide distribution channels, and the varying success of numerous “indies”, Philippine “independent” cinema manages to continue the tradition of resistance that characterized Tahimik’s oeuvre if not through aesthetics, through profound sociological insight, or even both at the same time.

No cinema, no problem; Online independent video adventures in the Brunei underground
Mervin Espina

Accessible digital film technology, media piracy, the lack of alternative distribution channels and a non-existent film industry have resulted in a DIY, grassroots and tech-savvy Bruneian short film and music video scene which gained momentum in the past few years. Growing in tandem with the underground music scene, they present alternative narratives against government-regulated images of Brunei. And they are all online. They freely disseminate their projects in YouTube, Facebook, blogs and other social networking and media sharing platforms, effectively circumventing Brunei's media censorship and regulation while making them accessible to both local (Bruneian) and international audiences. Their works consciously and inadvertently address social issues and cultural attitudes (often otherwise taboo)—violent crime, aggressive male attitudes towards women, critiques and celebrations of material culture, etc. Constantly shifting between urban-rural topographies, or intentionally obscured (often night-time) spatial trajectories, these counter-images are all increasingly cosmopolitan and liberal though still inextricably Bruneian—but are these mere strategy to bypass easy policing or a symptom of something deeper?

This presentation will tackle the effects of policy and technology on the nascent independent digital film and video movement in Brunei, particularly in terms of production and distribution.

Fifth generation Malaysian filmmakers; are they revolutionists?

Raja Rodziah Bt Raja Zainal Hassan

Amir Muhammad and Fahmi Reza are familiar names in the Malaysian independent film scene. They are known as the fifth generation of Malaysian filmmakers; films that have been made from the beginning of the new millennium mainly are in digital format and filmmakers who are self-taught or graduated from art or film school. The nature of independent films in Malaysia, while is not strictly defined or confined, usually refers to cultural diversity, showcasing new works by filmmakers whose voices have been unheard or ignored in dominant culture. What is interesting about the two filmmakers are both belong to the major ethnic group in Malaysia, the *Malays* or *Bumiputra*, also known as the *son of the soil*. Being the *son of the soil*, the *Bumiputra* is ensured special rights and privileges in the country. However, despite their background, Amir Muhammad and Fahmi Reza have been showcasing the importance of equal rights for all Malaysians in their documentary films. Their films have attracted viewers from all races and background and have transcended racial boundaries. After 52 years of independence, Malaysia is still at infant stage in defining what it means to be *Malaysian*. This paper probes into the mind of these two filmmakers in order to understand their views on what it means to be *Malaysian* and how important their works in defining the national identity. Personal interviews with both filmmakers and reading of the films will be conducted to discuss the essence of their films and to understand their views on nation building. The research hopes to grasp the importance of documentary film in defining *Malaysian* identity.

**The Filipina Through the Indie Lens: A Preliminary Study of Women's Images
in Cinema One Originals**
Katrina Stuart Santiago

This paper seeks to analyze the Cinema One Originals (COOs) series of digital films, using as lens contemporary third world feminist and current Philippine cultural theories, towards coming up with a preliminary study of women's representations in the contemporary independent film.

The choice of Cinema One Originals is premised on a deceptively simple thing: the enterprise is owned by the media and cultural empire of the Lopezes, which cuts across various cultural productions (local and cable TV, mainstream and commercial film, magazines, radio) and basic services (water, telephone, electricity). This makes Cinema One Original movies distinct from the usual independent/digital film, as this means more "accessible" indie films by default. Cinema One after all, is the movie cable channel of the Lopezes, and movies that are chosen for COO are given airtime as part of their prize, other than a run in the cinemas. This also means the possibility/probability of press releases in magazines and advertisements on radio and television, as well as of having famous celebrities in the film.

This context of COO is crucial to this paper's goal of doing a preliminary study on women's representation(s) in the independent film. In recent years, many local feminist theorists and film critics have questioned the images of the woman in the Filipino independent films that have won awards internationally. But none of these films come from COO, and in fact the latter seems to pride itself in creating an audience for the indie film that is here and now, as different from the "usual" indie that's for an international audience.

In this sense, COO's audience is clearly in the Philippines, female and otherwise, and given the accessibility of these films, these representations' importance cannot be underestimated. In fact, because of its accessibility and the kind of audience it caters to, the images and representations of the Filipino woman in the films of COO are distinctly more dangerous. These are images that are not only easily accessible; these are also images that are repeated through re-runs in Cinema One itself as a cable channel. This also begs the question: how alternative are these images and representations of the Filipino woman in the Cinema One Originals? What are they an alternative to, and do these images succeed in actually being valid and just representations of the contemporary Pinay?

In the end the goal is to see whether or not there is much power to be gained in these images, and how exactly these question/re-assess/reconfigure the notions of the being a Filipino woman in the present. In this day and age after all, when masculinity studies are beginning to take root in the country and more and more women are fragmented instead of united by feminism, it is everything and crucial to take stock of these images that pervade our lives, both in the popular/commercial/mainstream, and the alternative/independent/digital, as well as everything in between.

Most importantly, given the continued oppression of the Filipino woman not just in terms of the images created of her in the cultural sphere, but in the real life that she lives, it is everything and *urgent* that these images be assessed based not just on their power, but on what they lack as well. Only then will the Filipino indie film, and this paper, contribute to the consistently growing and evolving body of research on culture and feminism, and the possibilities of liberation for the Filipino woman within these.

Quotidian Minutiae as (Sub)Alter-Narrative: Negotiations on History, Liberty, and Identity in Raya Martin's *Independencia*
Christian Tablazon

By constructing a narrative from nuances and tiny, mundane details that constitute the daily experience of characters existing outside the power structure, *Independencia* finds a way around 'elite' history to exorcise essentialist notions of identity and include the perspective of those who were never taken into account—individuals who did not 'participate' in so-called national moral obligations, and thought peace and emancipation could be found by retreating into the remote margins. Removed from the *cabecera*, the site of 'crisis' and the locus of 'action' and 'historical events,' the film chronicles, at a slow, rhythmic pace, details as trivial as the patterns on the surface of water, prolonged shots of rainfall, the motion of leaves and grass, activities of light and shade, repetitive household chores, sleep and waking, etc., assigning microscopic attention to the material practices, body cycles, and processes in the natural environment of peripheral figures who never really mattered to the nation project. The film observes the primacy of moment over event, thus privileging aforementioned episodes above myopic accounts of valor and action that make up the grand narrative of national history. In light of this, through its utilization of 'the enemy's language' (i.e., cinema as one of US' tools for colonial lure), *Independencia* concurrently refashions cinema into a means for subversion to offer alternative spaces that problematize Philippine cinema in its relation to the US, in an attempt to liberate Philippine cinema from Hollywood constraints and impositions. Assuming the medium of early American talkies from the 1930s (around the same period in which the film takes place), which pervaded Manila during the US occupation and largely influenced the development of Philippine movies, the film puts across a metatextual commentary on the relationships among colonization, independence, and cinema, which over the decades has become the core of an entertainment-oriented people's identity and consciousness. Just as how its characters refused victimization and attempted decolonization, *Independencia* with its re-vision not only exorcises Philippine history but cinema as well, demystifying and deconstructing action-packed and glossy Hollywood illusions (which serve parallel function to master narratives), seeking to weave its own language, purged of imperialist charms, ignorance, and propaganda.