

The Illusions of a Cinematic President

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This essay locates the emergence of President Joseph Estrada in the scheme of the centennial of watching movies in the Philippines. As a producer and actor of action movies for five decades, President Estrada tends to conflate a career in movies and a career in politics. This is fruitfully revealed in a discussion of Philippine cinema as social technology and President Estrada as agent of this structure.

IT SEEMS TO HAVE ALL BEGUN WITH LIGHT. THE EXHIBITION OF films in the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century, historical sources tell us, was made possible by the construction of the first electric power plant in the country in 1895. At a time when the fire of the revolution had spread across the fields of an emergent nation, we are also told, short films had unreeled themselves in Manila two days after Jose Rizal was executed in Bagumbayan. As the films of the Lumiere brothers shed their light, through a machine called cinematograph, on the fourth wall of a theater in Escolta, we could only surmise how Filipinos were gripped in multiple suspense over a potential illusion but nevertheless a possible future, indeed over a projection of certain phantoms.

Aestheticians of cinema regard this tension as the main motor of the art's achievement. Motion and the mechanism of illusion cohere with the peculiarity of film as persistence of vision, photographic image, and projection. They instill in audiences a curious predisposition to suspend disbelief, to consider cinema as happening and 'not' really happening, but at least always already taking place as reality, in whatever form it may assume. Antony Easthope (1993) in explaining the cinematic aesthetic contends:

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The more vividly present the cinematic image appears to make its object, the more it insists that the object is actually lacking, was once there but is there no more — “made present”, as [Christian] Metz says, “in the mode of absence”.

In this regard, much has been written about how cinema works as ideology and how it operates as a system of knowledge which conceals and reveals meaning. To a decisive extent, it becomes a technology, a practice of making sense, of transforming material into historical form through the devices of language and the negotiations which make it possible. It is, however, a peculiar machine in that its capacity to reproduce infinitely and film diverse locations allows it to touch the lives of imagined communities of audiences, ‘worldwide’. This is cinema’s so-called ‘scopic regime’, its bureaucracy of looking at the face of the earth.

We confront cinema as interplay of the multiple practices of making movies, watching movies, and talking about movies in determinate contexts. This process involves a system of transformation as film undergoes changes in historical space. We apprehend, however, a problem militating against a dialectical appraisal of the relationship between film and history arising from the conjunction ‘and’, which posits a natural gap between film/history. We strive to break this impasse by putting in place ‘film history’ as the dynamic around which notions of, let us say, movies and society are built and disseminated.

In taking up the vexing dilemma of film history, we refer to FE Sparshott’s concept that the history of cinema is the history of the invention of its means (Sparshott 1992). It is perhaps Stephen Heath who best clarifies the finer points of the problem. Heath (1981) discusses the ‘contexts’ of cinema and asserts:

The present of a film is always historical, just as history is always present — a fact of representation not a fact of the past, an elaboration of the presence of the past, a construction in the present, for today, where the present is then equally always already historical, itself the process of that construction, a terrain of determinations and places, itself a political reality.

For more than a hundred years now, Filipinos have been watching movies, and have become one of the most avid publics of cinema in the world. There is a growing suspicion that the suspension of disbelief among Filipino moviegoers had also become so cherished that the disbelief had been suspended for so long that the very force which had held it has been forgotten. But after a hundred years of fascination with the movies, there now seems to be an epiphany of sorts in the light of recent events. We now seem to be regaining the basis of the suspension and the politics of disbelieving. Very surely, movies are also about memory.

Two cases can be cited as the nexus binding this said force and the disbelief: the statements of a young Hollywood actress picturing the Philippines as unbelievably unliveable and the election of a president who lived a good part of his life as a star and producer of action movies.

When Claire Danes spoke of Manila as a 'ghastly and weird city' reeking of 'cockroaches, with rats all over and that there is no sewerage system and the people do not have anything — no arms, no legs, no eyes,' she must have told the truth, in her own fashion and through her own cinema. Two things strike us here. First, the theme of dismemberment which Danes avails of as a trope to signify the lack of the city and its incompleteness as a project of nation-building, modernity, or global capitalism. Second, the aesthetic of disbelief through which Danes makes sense of the sight in unknowable, because excessive, ways.

There is hysterical reaction to be sure: the shock is overinvested as it is underexplained. We are curious: Why express shock in the face of a profilmic location envisaged to serve as the artistic world of a film called *Brokendown Palace* which, we speculate, attempts to represent the kind of place of which Manila is supposed to be more than an adequate depiction?

The Danes report implicates how the Philippine film industry, which is one of the most prolific in the world, is inserted into the global market of movies and always tries to pretend as if it were an active player in its games. The discourse of nation as it relates to the emergence of cinema in the only American colony in Asia bears heavily on

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the discussion of how cinema becomes a contested site of reception, a space peopled by audiences who at once share common genealogical sentiments and subvert this seemingly unchanging 'shared destiny' through discrepant ethnic and ideological interests. Central to this encounter and engagement among competing and coalescing interests is the notion of identity as it is constituted by the politics of difference, and in this case, of the aesthetic of distinction, and therefore of discrimination, as enacted by Danes' fit of pique.

The idea of a national cinema has undergone rigorous renovation in terms of the logic it exercises in coordinating local culture in the context of a vigorous global cinematic circuit. Krishna Sen (1994), in a study of Indonesian cinema, reveals the almost antinomious mentality that governs theory on Asian cinema as:

the Asianist approach which ransacks cultural authenticity from what is viewed as tradition, on the one hand, and the Third World approach, on the other, which proceeding from Teshome Gabriel, tropes the history of national cinemas operating within and beyond the Euro-American axis as a series of turning points from Hollywood mimicry to Hollywood rejection and on to the critical appropriation of national culture.

The teleology of both Asianist and Third World frameworks points to nation, and their trajectory poaches on national identity.

On the other hand, Paul Willeman (1995) questions the premise that (trans)local cinema rises, matures, and decays on the fields of nation:

the more complicit it is with nationalism's homogenizing project the less it will be able to engage critically with the complex, multi-dimensional, and multidirectional tensions that characterize and shape a social formation's cultural configurations.

Willeman (1995) however argues that to recast this mold in order to finally market 'specificity' is to create a cinema in the image of Third World dependency:

a cinema positively yet critically seeking to engage with the multilayeredness of specific sociocultural formations is necessarily a marginal and a dependent cinema: a cinema dependent for its existence on the very dominant, export- and multinational-oriented cinema it seeks to criticize and displace.

The nationality of cinema, set against the globality which conscripts it, can be traced to such political-economic considerations as labor, capital, distribution systems, conduits of circulation, and ancillary markets from analogue and digital formats to makeshift neighborhood viewing venues and rental outlets for both legitimate and pirated copies. A capital-intensive industry like film also tends to nullify vernacular resemblances in radio, television, and print. The bustling domestic film market, for instance, is based in Manila and appropriates the Filipino language — the ‘mother’ tongue — as cinematic *lingua franca*. There used to be a busy local film industry in the Visayas, but it has long since collapsed; therefore, the current dissemination of Philippine cinema is facilitated by a metropolitan machinery which appeals to ‘national’, but never transethnic, reach and resonance.

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The Danes commentary comes at a most crucial time; the said ‘national’ cinema has in recent years expressed its ambition to penetrate the ‘international market’ of which Claire Danes and her kind are aspects of its discriminating and discriminatory labor. What is interesting, however, is the manner in which global media always beat us to the draw. Just as all the anti-Danes posturing goes on wantonly, CNN’s coverage of the aftermath of typhoon Loleng would show the Philippines in a state so miserable even for standards of calamity, and thus proving Danes right: that the Philippines she saw is the Philippines of her cinema. And always, when the Philippines serves as location for Hollywood’s films — as in *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Born on the Fourth of July* — it is war-torn, decrepit, and poor. Such is the global cinematic imagination of the islands.

The wish to gatecrash into the international scene is dubious and delusional. In the frenzy of acquiring showy technology like digital

editing and live-sound equipment — pandering to the tastes of international festival directors — and liberalizing policies concerning censorship and classification, the film establishment loses sight of the more compelling exigencies besieging a cinematic tradition outside of, yet complicit in, reproducing Hollywood. Worse yet, government is used to pull off this caper. State funds are earmarked to send films abroad, films usually made by those who appropriate these funds.

If studied more keenly, we will realize that there is, indeed, a market for Philippine films abroad. The diasporan networks of Filipino immigrants and migrant workers form a rich vein of distribution which could be tapped to create the proper conditions of supply and demand. *The Flor Contemplacion Story*, a film on the Filipina maid hanged in Singapore, is a specific case. It was screened commercially in Hong Kong, Vancouver, Toronto, Los Angeles, New York, Ohio, Fukuoka, Sienna, and Dublin. An eyewitness, a practicing film critic, recounts that when the film was shown in Hong Kong's Mandarin Theater (inside the second-class mall called Pinoy World), the reception of Filipino domestic workers to the event was tremendous. The film played for four weekends, two screenings a day, to an SRO audience. In a Hong Kong theater that could accommodate 1500-3000 people and with tickets priced at HK\$50, the film raked in large profits. Worldwide, the film grossed \$3.3 million. It was awarded the highest honors at the Cairo Film Festival.

ERAP IN THE CAREER OF MOVIES

WHAT has all this got to do with current filmmaking practice and with the disbelief that Estrada, fondly called Erap, has finally made it as president? Estrada was elected mayor of San Juan in 1969 and clung to the post until his political patrons, the Marcoses, were overthrown in 1986. He successfully ran for a senate seat in 1987. In 1992, he was elected vice-president of the Philippines and in 1997, became the president. Estrada's political victories could very well be attributed to his success as an action star who starred in movies portraying him as the champion of the dispossessed. National Artist Nick Joaquin in his time would leaven Estrada's *oeuvre* with the blessings of authenticity, hailing it as the 'closest we have come to true Philippine cinema — not

limp clique art like those beautiful flops the producers point to as reasons for not reforming, but alive and gutsy pop art as contemporary as a *kanto* boy's latest belch' (Sotto 1989). Joaquin probably imagined Estrada in the roles he played in such notorious films as *Markang Rehas* (Marks of Prison's Bars), *Asiong Salonga*, and *Geron Busabos* (Geron The Tramp).

Estrada was introduced to film audiences in 1954 by way of *Kandilang Bakal* (Iron Candle). In 1957, he had a creditable role in *Sampung Libong Pisong Pag-ibig* (One-Thousand-Peso Love). As Estrada matured, he forsook his repertoire of lumpen-proletariat characters to tackle more 'serious' roles, especially heroes of social movements like *Kumander Alibasbas* and *Pedring Taruc*. Among his more significant works are *Ito Ang Pilipino* (This is the Filipino), *Patria Adorada* (Beloved Country), *Bakya Mo Neneng* (Your Wooden Shoe, Neneng), *Bangkang Papel sa Dagat ng Apoy* (Paper Boat in a Sea of Fire), and *Sa Kuko ng Agila* (In the Claws of the Eagle). The latter is an anti-US Bases film which made manifest Erap's definitive stand, as senator, to abrogate the treaty which was then up for renewal. Estrada was also at the firing line of film workers' rights, having founded the Movie Workers Welfare Fund (MOWELFUND) in 1974 and was its leading light for the longest time.

Estrada's career in the movies straddled the conflicting tendencies of at least three historical periods: the Golden Age of the 1950s; the decadence of the 1960s marked by the collapse of the studio system and the proliferation of ersatz Hollywoodish trends; and the political dissent of the 1970s which bred the Philippine New Wave school, as well as the social realism of Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal. To a certain degree, Estrada labored under contested dispositions, pursuing the agenda of social change and justice inhering in but also contained by the action genre as well as posing as a hero of the industry. He was an actor turned politician who stayed close to his iconography and trade (a convergence of 'sex' and 'violence', crime and charm) lodged in the popular imagination and transcended the limitations of the action on

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screen by aspiring for higher 'office'. Estrada's admiration for Ronald Reagan is a symptom of his political psychology, which is largely informed by the project of not only proving that movie actors have the trust of the electorate and can make the vote, but also insisting on the possibility that a profession in cinema, denigrated as disreputable and corrupt by the elite, could be refunctioned as profession in public service. Like cinema which undergoes a rite of passage and a ritual of transubstantiation, from darkness to light (Tomas 1994), Estrada's light and shadow and his constituency in the dark are

accentuated by a symbolic exchange between the "living" and "dead" — the former virtually presented on screen as moving, talking, interacting figures, while the latter are reproduced in the order and rigidity (also a form of social rigor mortis) of an audience enveloped in a mausoleatory darkness.

Erap's transformation from moving image to social movement, from actor to someone acting as president crosses the divide set up by the proscenium between screen and society, between the hero and those who need to be saved: Erap does not so much bridge the gap as cross it.

Estrada's mode of identification with the masses, or the *masa* and the *mahirap*, is largely owed to the popular history of his career in the movies and the folklore underwriting the roles he performed. This observation is not far-fetched; recent ethnographies on film reception reveal everyday negotiations between cinematic narratives and audiences. While an exhaustive analysis of Erap's audiences situated in determinate settings is needed to deepen the premise of the thesis, such undertaking is not attempted here. It may be perhaps sufficient to cite at this point that studies in critical mass media research may illumine our investigations into Erap's charisma. Sara Dickey's extensive study on cinema and the urban poor in South India, for instance, speaks of how the fan clubs of an actor-turned-politician, MG Ramachandran (MGR), would form the nucleus of support and sustenance of his political pursuits. The uncanny affinity with President Estrada is most tellingly disclosed by a passage in the research:

In his many movies, MGR smashed tyrants and replaced them with his own populist rule, worshipped his mother, condemned the use

of alcohol, gave food and clothing to the poor. He played rickshaw pullers and revolutionary leaders, charming lovers and dutiful sons. His characterizations identified strongly with the lower class. Combined with a bewitching glamor and charm, it added up to a glittering championship of the poor. (Dickey 1993)

Erap's filmography and repertoire of heroes draw the connection.

Historian and ethnologist Zeus Salazar (1989) has also striven to make sense of the magic of action movies by probing the issues girding the debate on film and history. He stakes out the discursive arena between the action hero, which speaks on behalf of Philippine traditional culture, and the institutions of the state and the nation, which harbor western goods of cooptation. Salazar speaks of this implicit tension in light of the contradiction between the hero and the villain, a skirmish which reinscribes the said tension into the main conflict of the action genre. Yet what he neglects here is the system of differential relations which makes the scheme of encounter possible; in fact, he elides these differential relations when he states that the institutions do not touch base with the people, who in turn could not care less about them.

Salazar then proceeds to draw up a common genealogical pantheon embracing Philippine action movies and the Philippine epic tradition. In doing so, Philippine identity is accrued to the genre by virtue of a basically nativist framework which dismisses the exigencies of history in the construction of the conditions under which 'action' and 'heroism' are subjected to constraints and assume the subjectivity to overcome them. In an unfortunate twist in Salazar's view, a manichaeic binary insinuates itself into a mutation of a new metaphysical order: tradition and its other, a structure which does not reckon with human agents who live out social life as well as the traces and specters of struggles and reconversions. Here the politics of othering and otherness which transgresses the limits of difference is, moreover, sinisterly erased. It is as if tradition or archaic ancestry, whose metanarrative is mainly modernist anyway, were a given and a self-evident actuality only waiting to be recouped and reinvested with native affection.

Needless to say, the assumption of Estrada as president without relinquishing his role as action hero undermines Salazar's thesis: the dualism does not hold. As visual artist Jose Tence Ruiz (1998) puts it:

The cynic in us knows that a politician's primary work is to put up a front, to create, sustain, and project a not completely authentic yet convincing character, and, with a team of spin doctors, has a well-wrought script to go by. Erap has, in himself, effectively conflated these personae. He has unified the art of acting and governance and exposed the symbiotic link between the two. He has lifted the veil that other presidents pull aside only in their memoirs. We only hope that this will not be his last act of transparency.

MOVIES IN THE CAREER OF ERAP

It is interesting to scan the landscape of the local film output of the 1990s as the context against which the Estrada presidency has emerged. A glimpse of the better works of the period reveals the rise of new directors and the waning of the social realist aesthetic espoused by Brocka and Bernal. This is particularly significant in charting the itinerary of Erap's reinsertion into a specific cinematic milieu in the aftermath of the Marcos regime and the Aquino administration. It has been noted that while the Marcos period saw the heightening of the Philippine filmic aesthetic, the succeeding dispensation presided over its substantial debasement. The 'democratic space' of the post-

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Marcos era can be regarded as having constricted the latitude for creativity, breeding morbid symptoms of a disease exemplified by the presidential daughter whose lamentable forays into the movie scene have left in her wake incompetence and inertia.

In 1990, Nora Aunor's low-budget film *Andrea, Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina?* (Andrea, How is it to be a Mother?), directed by Gil Portes, set the stage for renewed vigor. Telling the story of a woman cadre who reclaims her daughter from her most trusted friend, the film reworks the melodramatic narrative as well as its Pieta-based iconography to make personal political involvement dramatically reasonable and therefore emotionally cogent.

Lino Brocka's *Sa Kabila ng Lahat* (In Spite of Everything, 1991) rounds out the director's treatise on the conjugal dictatorship which had taken a rather tedious and belated route from *Babangon Ako at Dudurugin Kita* (I'll Rise and Crush You), *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak* (Grovel in the Muck), and *Hahamakin Lahat* (Forsake Everything). Dwelling on corruption in politics and media, this film is highly esteemed for having captured Philippine democracy's state of disrepair in such a darkly pessimistic style and from a thoroughly cynical perspective that its redemptive resolution is rendered almost irrelevant. Before the decade of the 1980s came to a close, Brocka made his most politically daring film, *Orapronobis* (Pray for Us), which discredits the Aquino administration's centrist agenda and reaffirms underground struggle.

Carlitos Siguion-Reyna's *Ikaw Pa Lang ang Minahal* (I Have Loved Only You, 1992) delves into the intricate dynamics of social relations set in a semi-feudal, semi-capitalist social setting. This is most fruitfully intimated by the portrayal of the melodramatic heroine whose search for tomorrow in this world displaces her as a repressed rural lass and a hardened heiress aching under the predicament of manorial protocol and cosmopolitan etiquette. The heroine is a dull woman despised by her father and deceived by her paramour; but in the long haul she cleverly orchestrates a maneuver from passivity to active redemption.

Jose Javier Reyes' *Hindi Kita Malilimutan* (I'll Never Forget You, 1993) is a neorealist account of a young man's attempt to keep himself and his sister afloat after the death of their parents. The film is able to lay bare in a dramatically popular manner an underdeveloped metropolis and the lives it mangles. In the end, the film inevitably effects a feasible confluence between soap opera and social realism, with the seemingly contradictory tendencies of the two genres cancelling each other's excesses.

Joey Romero's *Vampira* (Vampire, 1994) chronicles a woman vampire's valiant search for redemption as she shifts her practice from the clandestine acts of bloodsucking to the assumption of the public role of woman. In the process, she appropriates strategies which, while these may excise the vampiric curse from her family, place her on new grounds of containment. Such a shift informs much of the ambivalence sustaining the destiny of a social subject who must cut across multiple

positions in private and public spheres: as vampire/woman, heroine/villainess. The lead character eventually finds her salvation, but only within the contentious dynamics of freedom and control, within the potentially subversive vampirism and the conventional domesticity of womanhood.

Ishmael Bernal's *Wating* (Street Character) which was shown in 1994 is the director's last work and an ode to the dated aesthetics of the 1970s. The film opens with a scene where a father violates his daughter and ends with lovers riding off into the sunset on board a pick-up truck driven by a Christ-like character. Beneath the film's surrealistic social realism and absurdist temper is a deeply spiritual sensibility that lunges at Manila's underbelly, specifically at the hypocrisy of its grotesque social face. The picture of a vagrant girl-woman who roams the gutter with her friend-mentor-lover is a startling image of innocence and violation: a streetsmart kid lost in the labyrinth of the very city which had reared her. This waif-heroine is raped by a politician in a room full of images of the Santo Niño, steals cars for a syndicate, and finally bails herself out of the hell she had woven.

Nena (1995), directed by Ike Jarlego Jr, emerges lucid and lucent as it nurtures the tragedy of a topless dancer in Manila's red-light district. Speaking in a spartan tone and register, the film finds the means to transform this sordid fate into a woman's re-emergence as a new subject in a field of conflicting relations. As the law finally passes judgement against her and exonerates the man who had forced her to commit the 'crime' of dancing in the nude, she decides to spurn the benevolence of her insensitive boyfriend, whose own sister is a *japayuki*, and her negligent father — and the film closes with a scene where she ambivalently dances the dance which had made her oppression and epiphany possible, and so finally returning the 'look'.

The *Flor Contemplacion Story* (1995) may have been crippled by its incapacity to inscribe in rigorous ways the personal lives of its characters in the broader contexts of the Philippine diaspora, yet it succeeds in configuring the sprawling domain of a story which speaks of an oppression so urgent and yet so age-old. In having composed the *mise-en-scene* of alienation and despair, violence, and longing through a lens starkly, the film creates dimensions and dynamics which might have

attended Flor Contemplacion's struggle in both strange and familiar places.

In *Mumbaki* (1996), directed by Jose Perez, a young and bright doctor who has a pending application at the Johns Hopkins University is suddenly recalled to his hometown in the Cordilleras on the death of his father, a shaman or *mumbaki* killed in inter-ethnic strife. The doctor leaves Manila and returns as a native. In this new locus of intersection between Manila and the Cordilleras, and the prefigured United States, a complex identity is forged. The doctor, as a matter of tradition, assumes the role of shaman and is compelled to do so not only because it is a task prescribed by ethnic culture but also because he, as a doctor reared in the logic of western biomedical practice, has to put an end to the epidemic caused by the community's failure to avenge his father's death. In the ensuing contradiction, the doctor sustains his oath to uphold life and prevent death by performing the functions of shaman and the rites of healing, which paradoxically force him to kill. The film ends with the doctor marrying a beautiful woman from his hometown, siring children and practicing medicine, which by now has been reorganized as social practice in the specific spaces of hybridity obtaining in the Cordillera hinterlands.

Bakit May Kahapon Pa? (Why is there a Past?, 1996), directed by Joel Lamangan, is aimed at the military technocracy of the post-Aquino era. Molded after the suspense genre, the film foregrounds as heroine the daughter of a couple victimized by militarization. She hounds her parents' tormentor, a military general, and proves that memory and trauma supplement the desire for justice through time and history. Surely, the central image and discursive motif of stalking can easily strike terror in the military heart. At the dark center of this mission is Nora Aunor, who stunningly embodies the worst fears of the Ramos military presidency and the whole fascist and fanatical infrastructure of Philippine political culture as she goes against the social claims codified by soldiers and priests. She kills the military general and dishonors her confessor by contravening his sacerdotal doctrine and counsel.

Batang PX (American Boy, 1997), directed by Jose Javier Reyes, can be credited for reconstructing melodrama into an allegory of the imperialist condition which pervades the relations of family and kin.

The film also shatters with irrevocable and poignant energy the nostalgic reckoning of family as a functioning and nuclear whole; it contends that the mother and her son are better off without a man in their lives. The boy's father, an American soldier, leaves the mother after the Philippine government has abrogated the US Bases Treaty and the mother, who used to be a singer, later lives with a boyfriend who turns out to be a corrupt businessman, an opportunist, and a wife-beater. The film lays bare discrepancies between the longing for the restoration of the familial order, and the asymmetrical power relations which make that order detrimental to the humanity of its members. This melodrama, therefore, assumes the dimensions of a political fable about people who look for love in the wrong places and find it on the run. The title role is played by a young actor, Patrick Garcia, who bears the full weight of his film's dilemmas, but never shows signs of weariness, only the strain of a kind of portrayal that acts, thinks, and makes sense of experience with the wish not so much to shift the burden of living with the imperialist trauma as to share it as part of the collective predicament. His character embodies the terms of his name *Amboy* or *Batang PX*, again allegorizing his nation as American commissary of duty-free labor.

This survey of films of the decade is necessary to frame the matrix of Philippine cinema at the turn of the millennium in relation to the ascendancy of an actor-president. This description of the decade locates Erap in the context of two issues: the political economy of the contemporary film industry and the three most significant filmic themes which render his presidency efficacious as a particular turn in the career of the movies and politics. These are the Marcosian inheritance, the anti-imperialist projection, and centennial heroism. Fleshing out the first two are *Bakit May Kahapon Pa?* and *Batang PX*. Referencing the third one is Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Jose Rizal* (1998), the multi-million, state-sponsored hagiography of Rizal which speaks of history without analyzing it and of heroism without humanizing it.

To a certain extent, in the tradition of contemporary mass media practice, Erap lays claim to history but elides its constitution; he appeals to heroism but represses the apparatus of myth making. As the film takes pains in portraying Rizal as folk hero and keeps silent on his *inquilino* origins, so does Erap, now that he is president, take pains in

hiding the hand of the elite in weaving the fiction of his populism. And so, while Erap the candidate succeeded in pursuing the script of social action and identification with the masses, his presidency undermines it. As days go by, the audience's suspension of disbelief is no longer able to hold water. Erap's pro-poor catchphrases no longer ring true if seen alongside policies which tend to favor new cronies. But still, as he follows the script of his action movie, which is finally institutionalized by his presidency, Erap continues to mobilize the aesthetic of 'action' which characterizes the reflex through which justice is usually dispensed in his movies. The Leo Echegaray case proves this point: that the president demands action, professes no mercy, and upholds the law no matter what. Such establishment energy collides with the anti-establishment prowess the action hero is known for and has the license to exercise. Erap is caught in an unnerving bind. The presidency will make or break his heroism, and so is not its logical conclusion or coterminous with its success.

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To explain that Erap did not walk into a barren scene in the 1990s, it is now instructive to point out certain traits of the cluster of films presented: the abandonment of the social realist aesthetic preponderant in the existentialist films of the 1970s; the rewriting of the melodramatic genre to accommodate the most urgent issues of the times like migrant labor and translocal identity; and the allure of the conglomerate look in film which mistakes glitter for quality. Erap's persona is entangled in this web of contradictions: the social realism and melodrama of his causes and the mediagenic flamboyance of his conquest as action hero-president. But the paradox it seems is this: Any potentially radical strain to be discerned in these products of popular cinema tends to be negated by a president who has always been seen to be riding on the crest of film's potential as mass medium of change, as the most democratic and collective of all the arts. What will do Erap in?

The conglomerate look is particularly significant in light of the hegemony of companies with transmedia interests (film, television, video, cable, and cyberspace) in a time of a more market-friendly Ramos-Erap

playing field. This ineluctably results in a situation in which the firm that controls films is the firm that controls water, electricity, and telecommunications. Also, the firm that makes the lowest-grade television program brings in the biggest blockbuster of all time, *Titanic*. But in spite of all these simulations of gloss, it is this same industrial set-up that spawned the degrading system of *pito-pito* (seven-seven) film production: seven days are set for principal photography and seven days for post-production processes, with a total cost of around two million pesos, a measly budget for films today. Mostly soft-core outings and debut films, *pito-pito* enterprises benefit the producers most, who recover their investment not only through the theater run, but also through accounts from television and video release.

The films of 1998, the year of the centennial, can only further confirm the pestilential landscape of Philippine contemporary cinema in the season of Erap's triumph as politician. Laced with *nouveau riche* production values, the celebrated films of the year failed to sustain the modest and middling legacy of the decade. Like a rearview mirror of a speeding car darting into a wasteland, these films collected for centennial audiences the horrors the industry is capable of and thrives in. *Jose Rizal* proves to be bogus through and through. Chito Roño's *Curacha* is supposed to be a film on the bloodiest coup d'état of the Aquino government, expressed in the musings of a sex worker-flaneur, but ends up rendering Corazon, the lead character, as the promiscuous animal that Cory's politics had become. Finally, *Ang Lalaki sa Buhay ni Selya* (The Man in Selya's Life, 1998) and *Tatlo Magkasalo* (Threesome, 1998), Carlitos Siguion-Reyna's investigations into gay issues, unmask a fundamental hatred toward his hapless subjects and a wicked restitution of the heterosexist and patriarchal system it putatively seeks to question. The rest, especially those sent abroad in the festivals, have all the flash and the flesh, but none of the substance we covet in these trying times.

In this context of film practice, President Estrada's mode of populism and grassroots heroism is reinforced but also gnawed away at its foundations, both by the aesthetic requirements of the new melodrama and new action genre (as exemplified by the hybrid massacre film of the mid-90s which proved to be a heady mix of blood, tears, thrill, tab-

loid sensationalism, and suspense; and by the refunctioned thriller and horror genres as demonstrated by the gains of *Bakit May Kahapon Pa?* and *Vampira*, respectively) and the opportunistic and oftentimes sensationalist designs of conglomerate media. These come in conflict: the popular predisposition to retool the genre apparatus for the elucidation of class and gender conflict and the tendency to exploit its capacity for excess and cooptation. Therefore, we can say, keeping in mind the survey of films of the 1990s and Erap's rule in government, that the career of movies and the career of Erap intersect at a conjuncture in which advocacy of social justice collects its gains at the altar of a popular and populist government, nipped in the bud as it were by an action's star political success through the decade. As melodramas spoke of grief as catalyst for solidarity and as the massacre film and the action genre in general slammed the justice system as inutile, we felt that critical consciousness was in the air or could in fact be in the offing. But this expectation would be dispelled by Erap's role in national governance: If the action hero were president, should he preserve the system of government against which his heroism waged its war for years? Or do we come to terms with the fact that our hero was only playing the part? This feeling of betrayal could, indeed, be Erap's undoing: a new melodrama of deception and treachery and a new action of vengeance have turned against him.

If the action hero were president should he preserve the system of government against which his heroism waged its war for years?

PRESIDENTIAL ACTION

DOES this intimation of failure in the movies speak of the president's destiny as well? Erap would pepper his speeches with action-star quotes. When he went to Singapore for his first state visit, it was declared a blockbuster hit and his performance was heralded in no less than triumphalist terms. He flaunts his obstinacy like a junkie and spews out punchlines like a court jester, all in the spirit of the industry's tried and tested formulae. Erap is still playing the role. But when will the pleasure of watching him last? Will the moribund norms of the mainstream industry, powerfully critiqued by Mario O'Hara's *Babae sa*

Bubungang Lata (The Woman on the Tin Roof, 1998), soon catch up with the native son, who has found a seemingly natural abode in politics as he has had in cinema? Will his presidency go the way of his industry, and vice-versa? These questions inflect our centennial and millennial musings with ironic rhetoric: as Erap was elected president, Philippine cinema was commemorating the centenary of watching movies in the country. It seems that there could be no better tribute to Erap and his audience than the presidency, the climax of the script of the nation's action movie. But what comes next? The denouement bears watching.

Both peril and potential of our story as a people, the movies in our mind, dwell in the popular predisposition which underlies President Estrada's careers as movie star and politician, the history of Philippine cinema, and even the project of remaking the 'nation' in this season of the centennial and under the uncertain weathers of the Asian economic crisis. Even as we speak, no compelling aesthetic could be discerned to concretize such a prospect, except perhaps what is hinted at by the film *Bata, Bata... Paano Ka Ginawa?* (Child, How Were You Made?, 1998), directed by Chito Roño, written by Lualhati Bautista, and produced by Star Cinema. Spare in terms of plastic prowess and austere for a big-studio enterprise, the film replays in active nostalgia mode the image of the 'liberated woman' and makes us all realize that the iconographic imagination of the 'sexual revolution' never really took place in real life. It is this posthumous and prefigurative doubletake of a certain promise of change and the mode which makes it happen in the movies that, in the long run, may be able to rescue President Estrada, Philippine cinema, and the Philippine nation from their illusions and suspended beliefs. Their deliverance may spark, as it did in the beginning, a new century's light.

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