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Topos, Historia, Islas: Film Islands and Regional Cinemas

TOPOS

A line cuts across the screen between the green earthy mountains and the gray overcast skies. Three figures wearing ornate bright red garments—those of the lumad father Dawin and his children—dot the landscape. They are accosted on their way home from gathering food by camouflaged military men carrying firearms. One of the soldiers snatches Dawin’s cannikin, scatters his mung beans, and taunts him, saying, “Do you know how to pray the rosary? Pick them up one by one!”

The implication of this scene from *Tu pug imatuy* (*The Right to Kill*, Arbi Barbarona, 2017) is far-reaching if one recognizes it as a film from Mindanao, a regional island cluster in the Philippines inhabited by indigenous peoples, Moros, and Christian settlers. I watched it in horror not only because it foreshadowed the worst that was yet to come in the story but also because of where and when I saw it: in an auditorium of a private Catholic college in Compostela Valley (now Davao de Oro) in Mindanao in August 2017. Outside the auditorium, armed military men not unlike the ones in the film were on patrol, and I was anxious that at any moment, one of them would enter and watch with us a film that depicted the brutality of the military toward the lumadnon.

Mindanao, the southernmost part of the Philippines, had been placed under martial law months earlier amid widespread protests by activists who resisted any governmental move that resembled Marcosian rule.¹ Martial law

1 Antonio J. Montalvan II, “What Did Duterte’s Martial Law Achieve in Mindanao?,” Al Jazeera, December 30, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/duterte-martial-law-achieve-mindanao-191230054020719.html>. Ferdinand Marcos was the tenth president of the Philippines (1965–1986) who ruled as a dictator and kleptocrat; he put the nation under martial law from 1972 to 1981.

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was declared following sustained urban gunfights between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and radical Islamist groups, Maute and Abu Sayyaf, in the Islamic city of Marawi. This conflict went on for months, affecting the entire Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

When the soldier snatched Dawin's cannikin, the college students in the auditorium laughed nervously, not knowing how to react to a kind of film they have never seen before, a film about familiar indigenous peoples living in the Pantaron Mountain Range surrounding their own homeplace and oftentimes forced to evacuate to the lowlands due to escalating militarization. I presumed that the film resonated with them. *Tu pug imatuy*, which is based on real events that occurred in 2014, fictionalizes how the military abducted unarmed lumadnon, tortured and humiliated them, and then used them as guides through rugged terrains to locate rebels and further the government's counter-insurgency campaign. I was watching Barbarona's film with local students and visiting delegates as part of the ninth edition of Cinema Rehiyon, a roving film festival held annually in different provinces beyond the national capital city of Manila.²

Just the day before, on the festival delegates' journey to Compostela Valley from Davao City, our bus was halted at several checkpoints and boarded once by a suspicious soldier. He let us pass when he learned that we represented the film sector because, he said, he was a movie fan. Over seven thousand soldiers have been deployed in Mindanao since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed office in 2016, further militarizing the cities, towns, and indigenous ancestral domains, which are sought after by mining and logging corporations.³

The tense three-hour drive contrasted with the languid environment of the festival site in the municipality of Nabunturan (which translates as "surrounded by mountains"). At the time, Nabunturan boasted of a thriving filmmaking community despite the absence of movie theaters. Local residents watched films in the evenings with over one hundred filmmakers and cinephiles from different parts of the Philippines, alfresco-style in the plaza, with a setup akin to homey screenings held in Bali, Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, Yangon, and other places in Southeast Asia.

At that point, I had been serving as co-organizer of Cinema Rehiyon for five years and had been observing the remarkable growth of regional cinemas for over a decade. This essay, based on my field notes, looks into the emergence of regional filmmaking in the Philippines, taking Mindanao cinema as its paradigmatic example. Drawing upon concepts from nissology and geography and illustrating my arguments with brief discussions of Mindanao films, I reflect on the possibilities of remapping Philippine cinema with Mindanao as its center.

Being *in* Mindanao for Cinema Rehiyon while remaining acutely aware of not being *from* there, I had a keen sense of observing Philippine national

2 The festival was established in 2009 by the cinema committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, which continues to fund it and other regional film festivals.

3 Segundo J. E. Romero Jr., "Duterte's Rise to Power in the Philippines," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.boell.de/en/2016/09/26/dutertes-rise-power-philippines-domestic-and-regional-implications>.

cinema at a remove, recognizing how it is neither homogeneous nor singular. Watching *Tu pug imatuy* and apprehending the many layers of Mindanao's history on- and off-screen imbricated in one instance, I hit a moment of clarity: Philippine cinema is not a unitary and inert object but a complex subject composed of filmmakers and stakeholders who act with intentionality, imagined by other subjects—movers of other regional cinemas, including the one based in Manila—at particular points in history and geography.

In that room, I grasped quite viscerally what I had known intellectually: that Manila, my own location, was exceedingly “provincial,” where the norm had been to capture Philippine cinema as an object beheld from an aerial view, obscuring the details of its coordinates.⁴ For over one hundred years, cinema in the Philippines was centered and defined in the capital city. Consequently, filmmaking in the subnational regions tended to fall epistemologically and materially in the margins of an undifferentiated national cinema imaginary.

As an observer and participant in Cinema Rehiyon, I was afforded a vantage point from which to see how the emergence of cinematic subjects in regional digital media demands that we conceive of national cinemas *within* the nation-state as localized, polycentric, and networked.⁵ This way of thinking has at least two important consequences. First, the long-held view of a singular and self-referential Philippine cinema can now give way to perspectival counter-mapping efforts from the margins. Second, understanding regional cinematic formations through their historical and geographical experiences helps us interrogate states of exception and shed light on injustices that have produced and sustained “the national.”⁶

HISTORIA

There is no more illuminating place to begin decentering, reorienting, and interrogating Philippine (film) history than Mindanao. Because the stories of Mindanao subjects, especially those of the lumadnon and the Moros, have been marginalized in the larger drama of Philippine history, their narration in cinema, especially as it relates to the cultural, political, and economic struggles of various people groups beyond the screen, carries a burden of representation, to use the influential analytic by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam.⁷ Their historic disenfranchisement has rendered them ill-equipped to represent themselves not only in cinema but also in broader democratic processes for much of history. Contemporary Mindanao films thus signify the capacity of Mindanaons to articulate their subjectivities.

4 I owe this insight to Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

5 I adapt this notion of shifting geographical analysis from an aerial to a networked view from Kevin R. Cox, “Spaces of Dependence, Spaces of Engagement and the Politics of Scale, or: Looking for Local Politics,” *Political Geography* 17, no. 1 (1998): 1–23.

6 Achille Mbembe engages with this concept, which is akin to states of emergency that serve as pretext to declare martial law, in an essay that explores the state's wielding of the right to kill; see Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

7 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

Arriving in number and force only in the twenty-first century with the emergence of digital filmmaking, films by Mindanaons occupy a unique location in Philippine cinema. Because relatively few Mindanao films enjoy wide distribution, in key instances, they function as primary historical artifacts when they open up spaces for grassroots accounts of historical events.⁸ This was demonstrated with immediacy when the documentary *Forbidden Memory* (Gutierrez Mangansakan II, 2016) was released in Manila on the day of the burial of Ferdinand Marcos's remains in Hero's Cemetery on November 18, 2016. In a public speech, Duterte uttered a barefaced lie, saying, "Whether or not [Marcos] performed worse or better, there's no study, no movie about it, just the challenges and allegations of the other side."⁹

Forbidden Memory exposes Duterte's preposterous claims. The film contains firsthand accounts of Mindanaons who survived the horrors of any of a number of brutal "pacification" operations by military and paramilitary forces against Muslims during the Marcos years.¹⁰ Notably, the interviewees repeatedly address the filmmaker, claiming, "If it were not for you, I would not speak of this." In other words, the position of Mangansakan as a Moro Mindanaon is crucial in enabling the subjects to tell their own stories.

In this way, *Forbidden Memory* serves as a memorial for obscured events and facilitates the reorientation of the nation's collective and intergenerational memory. So do other Mindanao films that traffic in the past and its relationship with the troubled present, such as *Ang mga tigmo sa akong pagpauli* (*Riddles of My Homecoming*, Arnel Mardoquio, 2013), *War Is a Tender Thing* (Adjani Arumpac, 2013), and *Women of the Weeping River* (Sheron Dayoc, 2016), to name a few. Remapping Philippine cinema with Mindanao as its figural center foregrounds historical wrongs committed against marginalized subjects. Recognizing them, one can only hope, could lead to cultural literacy and a film practice that is sensitive to identity claims and, ultimately, oriented toward achieving social justice.

ISLAS

We can theorize a decentered Philippine cinema further if we take the islands of Mindanao as "a model, rather than simply a site" of cinema formations.¹¹ In this project of counter-mapping, we can re-present Mindanao's archipelagic identity and interaction with other islands in time and space.¹² By doing so, we can imagine them not as fixed territories but as a topolog-

8 The *Report of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission* (Makati, Philippines: Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission, 2016) mentions how the Moros and lumadnon have always felt that their stories are misrepresented and undermined in history books and the media (27–28).

9 Manuel Mogato and Karen Lema, "Philippine Dictator Marcos Buried at Heroes' Cemetery amid Protests," Reuters, November 17, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-marcos/philippine-dictator-marcos-buried-at-heroes-cemetery-amid-protests-idUSKBN13D0DQ>.

10 Cf. *Report of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission*, 30–43.

11 The quoted phrase is from Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, introduction to *Islands in History and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

12 The project of archipelagraphy, or counter-mapping archipelagos, was developed by Elizabeth DeLoughrey in *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

ically contracting and dilating region with shifting boundaries, heterogeneous time frames, and lines of connection beyond absolute spaces like the nation-state's. For instance, the themes, narratives, and images in Sheron Dayoc's *The Crescent Rising* (2015) and *Ways of the Sea* (2010), particular as they may be topically and aesthetically, can arguably be more productively clustered with seemingly unrelated films about multiethnic disharmony, religious intolerance, and human trafficking—such as the religious romance *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (*Verses of Love*, Hanung Bramantyo, 2008) from Indonesia and the action film *One Two Jaga* (Nam Ron, 2018) from Malaysia—than with movies from closed-in Manila.

The Crescent Rising, for instance, is a documentary on three Moros. Its contemporary stories of violence alert us to the long-active borders of Mindanao that result from historically rooted secessionist movements dating back to the Spanish and American colonization of the Philippine Islands (1565–1946) as well as from the radicalization of rebels oriented toward al-Qaeda. *Ways of the Sea*, however, alludes to how Sabahans and Mindanaons so easily awaken their affinities with each other on the ground level of community life. The film recalls how both islands were once part of a regional slave-raiding route animated by the tides of imperialism and the formation of a world economy until Mindanao was Filipinized by the north, its ties severed from its neighbors, and its economy subsumed under far-off Manila.¹³ At the center of *Ways of the Sea* are the Badjaos (orthography varies) that belong to the regional tribes of sea nomads whose lifeways are premised on archipelagic unboundedness but have long been threatened by environmental degradation and the geopolitical limitations of closed territories.

Where *Ways of the Sea* concerns itself with the question of human security, it is deeply connected to the ecological questions raised by *Laut Bercermin* (*The Mirror Never Lies*, Kamila Andini, 2011), an Indonesian film that exhibits the integrity of the Badjaos' oceanic sense-making. These and similar works in the region help us conceive of cinema formations with open borders and *film islands* existing alongside other film islands. And instead of the bounded territory pictured by national cinema, we conjure spaces of shared dwelling and are reminded that the “political responsibility for the pursuit of a ‘decent life’ [extends] beyond the borders of any particular state.”¹⁴

This logic of connection spans the gap not only between seafarers and coastal communities but also between lowlanders and highlanders, who have in many instances been pushed upward because of conflicts and resettlements. Today, the lumadnon, who have lived in mountains and forests and kept the integrity of their sustainable lifeways, are constantly under attack. Just as chains of islands and open seas are territorially disputed for the economic gains and military advantages they can yield, so have the ancestral lands of the first peoples become the last frontier of global capital everywhere. Their struggles are represented in Mindanao films like *Tu pug imatuy*,

13 James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State, 1768–1898* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981).

14 John Agnew, “Borders on the Mind: Re-Framing Border Thinking,” *Ethics and Global Politics* 1, no. 4 (2008): 176.

Huling balyan ng buhi (*The Woven Stories of the Other*, Sherad Anthony Sanchez, 2006), *Hunghong sa yuta* (*Earth's Whisper*, Arnel Mardoquio, 2008), and *Baboy halas* (*Wailing in the Forest*, Bagane Fiola, 2016).

Films about indigenous peoples provide viewers with entrance to zones of temporality that do not abide by the clocks of labor productivity and offer parables of sustained resistance to encroachers. Thus, while Mindanao filmmakers have been immersing in lumad cultures, learning from their ecological worldviews, and collaborating with them to co-create films that carry the burden of representation, they have also been contributing toward the formation of indigenous cinemas worldwide that advocate native self-determination.¹⁵

The goal of theorizing Mindanao cinema, as I have essayed here, is not to reproduce existing regional configurations. It is to offer an archipelagic model for pursuing emergent lines of solidarity across boundaries and educating latent transformative cinematic cartographies, whether on the national, subnational, or supranational level. Imagining Mindanao at the center of Philippine cinema reminds us that film islands, like consciousness, are neither insular nor enclosed and can therefore be realigned to form new subjectivities, explore alternative vistas, and pursue new horizons.

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15 I pursue this line of argument in “Small Film, Global Connections,” in *Art Archive 02* (Manila: Japan Foundation, 2019), 28–35, <https://jfmo.org.ph/events-and-courses/art-archive-02/>.