

Rural Landscapes and the Formation of Philippine Cinema¹

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Abstract

Cinematic landscape became visible at the same time as the arrival of film technology just before the close of the nineteenth century. In *Landscape and Memory* (1995), Simon Schama asserts that “landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected.” It is with this assumption that I trace how Philippine cinema was fashioned by imaging and imagining a rural landscape with a distinctly national dimension. In this paper, I answer the following questions: What were the historical contexts out of which Philippine spaces were defined and distinguished? How have the rural spaces been rendered as landscapes, in both the literal and symbolic senses? What are the main currents in thematizing rural landscape in twentieth-century Philippine cinema that helped clear the space for the nation to occupy the screen?

Keywords: colonialism, landscape, narrative, national cinema, the Philippines, rural, *taga-bayan*, *taga-bukid* / *taga-bundok*, urban

Landscape, Empire, and Cinema

Cinematic landscape became visible at the same time as the arrival of film technology just before the close of the nineteenth century.² While landscape did not constitute a genre in itself, as it did in painting or photography, its spectacularization in myriad forms in motion pictures formed part of a new framework of seeing, which François Albera and Maria Tortajada referred to as “the 1900 episteme.”³ The landscape out there, the landscape in painting and photography, and the landscape in cinema are varied materialities, but the mechanization of movement and speed in cinema links the concreteness of the first and the conceptuality of the second in a manner that was unseeable prior to cinema’s inauguration.⁴ The pioneering films of Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers were, in this way, new materialities evoking the quotidian writ large, as well as the fascination for the foreign, in a way that had never been seen before. By the time narrative became an important organizing structure in early cinema, landscape likewise became crucial not just in specifying narrative setting but also in defining narrative genre.

In *Landscape and Memory* (1995), Simon Schama asserts that “landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected.”⁵ It is with this assumption that I trace how Philippine cinema was fashioned by imaging and imagining a rural landscape with a distinctly national dimension. In this paper, I answer the following questions: What were the historical contexts out of which Philippine spaces were defined and distinguished? How have the rural spaces been rendered as landscapes, in both the literal and symbolic senses? What are the main currents in thematizing rural landscape in twentieth-century Philippine cinema that helped clear the space for the nation to occupy the screen?

The early depictions of the Philippines in motion picture and the medium’s arrival in the islands together “constructed the colony and the colonial look,” as the pioneering work of Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr. in *Native Resistance* (1998) demonstrates.⁶ Nick Deocampo’s indispensable historiography, *Film: American Influences on Philippine Cinema* (2011), provides a more documented account of this colonial process.⁷ Both del Mundo and Deocampo offer abundant evidence that the early films

about the colony were the first exposure that the American public had to the Philippines, and one can deduce from their analyses that these films participated in the deepening of the 1900 episteme. In such films, landscapes played a crucial symbolic role in imagining distant islands as foreign and anachronistically pre-modern.

Three American pioneers were responsible for creating the first filmic images of Philippine spaces.⁸ In 1899, James Henry White produced staged “newsreels” for Edison’s company, depicting America’s war efforts in the colony. These films were *Filipinos Retreat from the Trenches* (1899), *U.S. Troops and Red Cross in the Trenches before Caloocan (P.I.)* (1899), *Capture of Trenches at Candaba* (1899), *Rout of the Filipinos* (1899), *The Early Morning Attack* (1899), and *Col. Funston Swimming the Bagbag River* (1899). Elias Burton Holmes, the first American cameraman to have shot on-location in the Philippines, used his footage for lectures, as well as to supply Hollywood companies with films for the educational-film market. Renowned for being “the man who photographed the world,” he produced 42 films about the Philippines, including images of the “beautiful Bontoc” in *Hiking Through Luzon* and *Cruising Through the Philippines* (ca. 1913-14). C. Fred Ackerman, a cameraman for Edison’s rival, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company (AM&B), filmed scenes from the Philippine-American War, including *The Battle of Mt. Arayat* (1900). This shows a group of American horse-riders charging at unseen enemies in a rice field, with the scene set against the majestic and later revolutionary stronghold, Mt. Arayat.

Deocampo argues that these depictions of the Philippines “may be seen in the context of conquest and possession that could only result from the military adventure that was being waged then. The early films did no less than provide surveillance and inventory of America’s newly acquired empire in the Pacific.”⁹ In short, the rise of American film landscape, with its pastorals and frontiers, was inseparable from the logic of national expansion, which annexed Philippine landscapes to Hollywood in the early years of cinema. This logic of imaging colonial space developed further in two directions into the 1920s. On the one hand, Philippine spaces were subjected to the science of ethnography, most notoriously in Dean C. Worcester’s *Native Life in the*

Philippines (1914), subdivided into “Head Hunters” and “From Savages to Civilization.” This exoticization of the local landscapes was also apparent in the productions of Clarence B. Miller (*Philippine Islands: Cebu, Mindanao, Luzon and Sulu; Philippine Negritos; Rice and Coconut in the Philippines*, ca. 1910s) and Roger Hilsman, Sr. (*The Eruption of Mt. Mayon, Leprosy, The Wild, and Mountain Tribes of Northern Luzon*, ca. 1920s). In contrast, in the incipient years of narrative film, the orientalist figure of the native appeared in G.W. Bitzer’s *The American Soldier in Love and War* (1903), an early adventure narrative that exhibited the attraction of the exotic tropical landscape as setting.

These representations of Philippine rural landscapes wrought spaces that could hardly have been inhabitable places for the Filipino. They provided contextual spaces within the visual fields of American film and anthropology, but their meanings as particular places of local activity and emotional connection were effectively effaced. So it is that in early cinema, Philippine landscapes, which debuted as provincial spaces (for even the urban spaces could only be differentially portrayed by empire as provincial), were first represented and thereafter framed as remote and marginal.

Clearing the Rural Space for National Cinema

The flowering of so-called Philippine “native” cinema is founded in part on the self-consciousness of place-situated identities or spatial distinctions. These are symptomatized by the names of some of the early production and distribution companies, like Malayan Movies, Philippine Films, Parlatone Hispano-Filipino, X’Otic Films, Silangan Movietone, Banahaw Pictures, and Sampaguita Pictures. They are also indicated by film titles which suggest familiar cultural or historical meanings associated with space, such as those by reputed nationalist directors and their films: Jose Nepomuceno, and his *Mary, I Love You (Or the Miracles of the Virgin of Antipolo)* (1926), *Moro Pirates* (1931), *La Mujer Filipina* (1939), and Julian Manansala, and his *Beloved Country [Patria Amore]* (1929), *Dimasalang* (1930), *The Muse of the Katipunan [Mutya ng Katipunan]* (1939), *The Call of the Country [Tawag ng Bayan]* (1940), to name just a few.¹⁰

Immediately decipherable in these names and titles are the Hispanic roots of early cinema and the way in which Filipino artists defined their work against, or in consonance with, Hispanized cultural forms during the period in which cinema was first introduced in the Philippines.¹¹

Many early films carried with them conventional spatial associations that needed little or no explanation for their local audiences, especially since the spaces and narratives in early screen materialities emanated from those pre-cinematic cultural productions that embraced, negotiated, appropriated, and/or subverted Spanish influences in Philippine culture.¹² Emerging during the period of revolution against Spain from 1896 to 1898 and arriving at some point of maturity under US colonial rule just before World War II, cinema in the Philippines developed into a hybrid mix of oral lore, Spanish theatrical form, and Hollywood-inspired spectacle. This mix is evident in film adaptations of particular *komedya* or folk narratives, set in provincial spaces, and made attractive by their appropriation of Hollywood swashbuckling techniques or fantastic *mise-en-scène*, like *Monster Baby* [*Ang Tianak*] (1933), *Florante at Laura* (1939), *Adarna Bird* [*Ibong Adarna*] (1941), *The Legend of the Black Pearl* [*Ang Alamat ng Perlas na Itim*] (1941), *Prince Paris* [*Prinsipe Paris*] (1949), *Siete Infantes de Lara* (1950), and *Dyesebel* (1953).¹³ A high point of this combination of folklore, Spanish dramatic values, and grand spectacle, situated in a rural landscape, is the *Panday* series (1980-1984), starring and directed by the “King of Philippine Movies,” Fernando Poe, Jr.¹⁴

Touted and eventually instituted as the first Filipino film, Jose Nepomuceno’s *Country Maiden* [*Dalagang Bukid*] (1919), adapted from Hermogenes Ilagan’s widely popular *sarswela* of the same title, is a work that crystallizes the conventional narrative signification of the rural space that was first popularized in theater and that eventually came to dominate cinema.¹⁵ *Dalagang Bukid* tells the story of the flower vendor, Angelita, and the law student, Cipriano, whose love relationship is hindered by Angelita’s parents who consider Cipriano as poor and uncultured. The elders prefer Angelita to marry the *hacendero* Don Silvestre, who signifies the wealth and culture of the Hispanized. There is a twist in the end, however. Angelita and Cipriano marry secretly; and it is revealed that Cipriano is in fact already a lawyer and hence not so

remote from the status of Don Silvestre.¹⁶

It is noteworthy that the first “native” film is a rural film. Along with many of its contemporaneous films, it exhibits reflexes associated with the spatial imaginary of the *taga-bayan* (of the *pueblo*) in contradistinction with the *taga-bukid/taga-bundok* (of the hinterland/of the mountain), an imaginary that was reified in cultural production during the centuries-long Spanish colonization of the Philippines.¹⁷ The former referred to a spatial formation that was within reach of the Church and State and signified economic advantage, while the latter referred to those who clung to their land and resisted colonial power and influence. The Hispanized *taga-bayan* was imagined as civilized, while the *taga-bukid/taga-bundok*, in the eyes of the urbane, remained a savage.¹⁸ The undercurrent of *Dalagang Bukid* is precisely this assumption, though the plot, as I have outlined it, already implies a degree of critique of the status quo.

With the conventional distinction between the *taga-bayan* and the *taga-bukid/taga-bundok* deeply entrenched in popular cultural production from the time of cinema’s inception, the rural space has been typically visualized for its exotic qualities and symbolic legibility. Hence, films of diverse genres across many decades, like Jose Nepomuceno’s *The Viscera Sucker* [*Ang Manananggal*] (1927), George P. Musser’s *The Vampire* [*Ang Aswang*] (1933), Ramon Estella’s *Paradise* [*Paraiso*] (1941), Fausto Gonzales’s *Son of Kulafu* [*Anak ni Kulafu*] (1947), Armando Garces’s *Swoop* [*Dumagit*] (1954), Luis Nepomuceno’s *Igorota* (1968), Celso Ad. Castillo’s *When the Raven Turns White and the Crane Turns Black* [*Pagputi ng Uwak, Pag-itim ng Tagak*] (1978), Elwood Perez’s *Daughters of Eve* [*Silip*] (1985), Carlitos Siguion-Reyna’s *Call Me Joy* [*Ligaya ang Itawag Mo sa Akin*] (1997), Rory Quintos’s *I Need You* [*Kailangan Kita*] (2002), and Richard Somes’s *The First Vampire* [*Corazon: Ang Unang Aswang*] (2012), converge in the generic and symbolic familiarity of the concrete and the conceptual dimensions of rural space.

The category of class has been visually tied down to preconceived spatial imaginaries that the *taga-bayan* and the *taga-bukid/taga-bundok* supposedly occupied, thereby building in through the years a pastoral dimension to rural films with predictable semantic elements and

recognizable syntactic variations.¹⁹ In this scheme, the rich are portrayed as cosmopolitan, fashionable, and mobile, while the poor are portrayed as provincial, old-fashioned, and constant. Nepomuceno's *Dalagang Bukid*, responding to the pulse of the masses, could be understood as the initial embodiment in cinema of this convention. The mass audience's reception of this narrative scheme encouraged Nepomuceno to produce a sequel in the same year.²⁰ The narrative of *Dalagang Bukid* is anchored on certain culturally acceptable images of the relationship between classes, but, at the same time, it harbors the desire to subvert the social order. This desire is expressed in the narrative's disdain for the figure of the landlord, who moves in and out of the rural space to disrupt it—or to irreversibly ruin or redeem its inhabitants, especially its young and beautiful maidens. It is telling that Nepomuceno did not stick to the conclusion of the original *sarswela*, in which the *hacendero* concedes to the commoner. In the film version, the landlord merely faints at the end—and then returns in the sequel, *The Vengeance of Don Silvestre* [*La Venganza de Don Silvestre*] (1919).

Thus, the founding fiction of Philippine cinema is a pastoral story in the guise of a musical. The pivot of *Dalagang Bukid* is centered on the clash between a corrupting and corruptible material value, spatially associated with the urban and the foreign, and an unchanging, spiritual, and purifying value, spatially associated with the rural and the native. In *Dalagang Bukid*, the presence of the *hacendero* threatens to vitiate the people who are easily lured by money around him. The government official is corrupt and out-of-touch with the true feeling of the folk. Angelita's greedy parents, who are plunged deep in gambling debt, are willing to sell their daughter in exchange for financial security. But Angelita has chosen to be true to herself, which is to say to the immaterial dimension of her identity. And so it is love, not wealth, that becomes her salvation, for in loving Cipriano, who is not defined by material things but by his authenticity, she saves herself from corruption and their love purifies her family.

The many-layered ambivalence of *Dalagang Bukid* prefigures those later films that partake of the ethical predisposition of the pastoral, the drive to picture the rural space as a counterpoint to colonial legacies,



Angelita and Cipriano in *Dalagang Bukid* (1919).

and the need to invest in the idea of the rural as a symbol of the nation. *Dalagang Bukid*, as the title itself suggests, is anchored on the moral connotations of the “countryside” and the virginal “maiden.” The manner of its storytelling is based on the localized Spanish form of the *zarzuela*, which was then more popularly received in the urban, rather than the rural, areas.²¹ Hence, urban-centered cinema capitalizes on ideas of the rural (as opposed to actual rural realities) for its sales, stories, and statements; this early cinematic spatial setup will remain the predominant order of affairs, with the film industry defined by the culture of, and situated nowhere else but in, the urban center. As such, rural films have been and continually remain paradoxically invested in the figure of the landscape as a space that spectators *move away from* in order to see. Nevertheless, *Dalagang Bukid*, in its envisaging of its mass-based public, was already manifesting, in spite of its compromised form, a critique of the feudal system installed by the Spanish colonizers and one still in place in the countryside. At the same time, by clinging to a dominant Fil-hispanic cultural form, the film was resisting, if only aesthetically, the onslaught of Americanization, even while the character in the story pitted against the landlord, Don Silvestre, is the American-suited and -educated Cipriano.²²

Variations of the semantic-syntactic configuration of the ambivalent pastoral film, as first embodied by *Dalagang Bukid*, were produced many times over in the years leading up to World War II. These films included *Love and Tears* [*Ang Anak sa Ligaw*] (1930), *The Song of a Fisherman* (1931), *Child of a Virgin* [*Anak ng Birhen*] (1935), *Song of Love* [*Awit ng Pag-ibig*] (1935), *Come with Me to the Heaven of Love* [*Tayo na sa Langit ng Pagiibigan*] (1937), *Slave of Destiny* [*Alipin ng Palad*] (1938), *Fallen Leaves* [*Dahong Lagas*] (1938), *The Maya* [*Ang Maya*] (1938), *A Maiden from the East* [*Dalagang Silangan*] (1938), *Arimunding Munding* (1939), *Betrayal* [*Kataksilan*] (1939), *Star of the Country* [*Tala sa Kabukiran*] (1940), *Farming is No Laughing Matter* [*Magtanim Hindi Biro*] (1940), *Lover's Plea* [*Pakiusap*] (1941), *On Your Lap* [*Sa Iyong Kandungan*] (1941), and *Rustic Serenade* [*Serenata sa Nayon*] (1941). One of only five surviving pre-war films, Carlos Vander Tolosa's *My Dear* [*Giliw Ko*] (1939), exemplifies anew the ambivalence of the *sarswela*-pastoral form first seen in *Dalagang Bukid*, twenty years earlier.²³ The film tells the story of the country maiden, Guia, who is smitten by the glamor of Hollywood and the luxury of city life. Her beautiful voice and the lavish attention of a bandleader, Antonio, the son of the landlord, make it possible for her to move to Manila and to become a famous radio-star, singing the American tunes popular at the time. But in Manila, she sees the superficiality of fame and fortune and begins to pine for her home in the country and the folk songs that she used to sing. Eventually she chooses to return to the rural space, where she becomes genuinely herself again without the makeup and fancy dresses, in the embrace of her peasant boyfriend, Jose.

In *Giliw Ko*, the contrast between the rural and the urban spaces is more pronounced, and the dramatic narrative is more pointedly aimed against the Americanization of Philippine culture, even while, ironically, the film itself as an imported medium and the ramifications of genre- and star-making in Philippine cinema remain inseparable from their American roots and influence.²⁴ This ambivalence is literally embodied in the character of the steadfast farmer, Jose, who, in the story, remains unattached to the Americanized city until the end. In the closing musical number, he not only dons an American-suit, like Cipriano in *Dalagang Bukid*, but he is actually played by a Filipino-American mestizo actor,

Fernando Poe. By this time the Americanization of Philippine cinema as an institution is already indelible, and the cinematic rural space will be inhabited by the *taga-bukid/taga-bundok* played by unlikely mestizos.

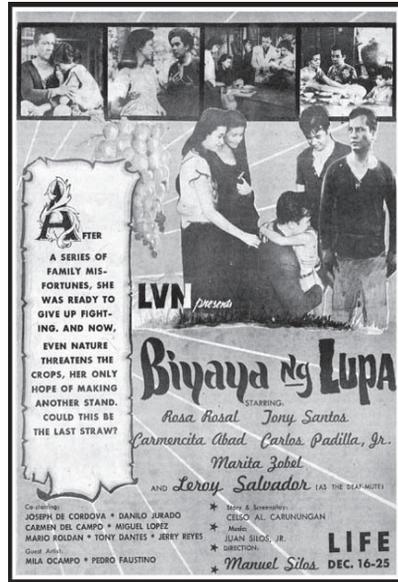
Twenty years after *Giliw Ko*, Manuel Silos's *Blessings of the Land* [*Biyaya ng Lupa*] (1959), markedly occludes the defining presence of the Americanized city in a rural film, by relegating it to a subplot. *Biyaya ng Lupa*, set on a *lanzones* farm, follows the travails of Jose and Maria's down-to-earth family. The main conflict, while involving the farmland and a maiden, takes place exclusively in the rural setting; and the main villain, Bruno, is neither a *hacendero* nor a man of the city. The conventional rural/Filipino-versus-urban/American binary is played out in the story of Arturo, one of Jose and Maria's sons, who despises farming and chooses what he thinks will be an easier life in Manila. At



The cast of *Giliw Ko* (1939) as they appear in the final musical number. Courtesy of Simon Santos.

the beginning, some of the country folk become envious of him, but he eventually returns home to his land and his family, disenchanted by the soulless materialism of the city. By situating the rural-versus-urban binary as only one of the many realities country folk may encounter, the film focuses on the rural land and its inhabitants rather than just the aspect of the rural space as landscape.

Paralleling the productivity of rural films like *Dalagang Bukid*, *Giliw Ko*, and *Biyaya ng Lupa* are a few films that intimate the need to recast the rural space in terms more socially attuned, while yet remaining bound by the semantic and syntactic conventions of the pastoral. Julian Manansala's *Terror of the Bandits* [*Ang Kilabot ng Mga Tulisan*] (1932) tells the story of the familiar figure of the bandit, disillusioned by an unjust social order, but humanized and rendered sympathetic when a country maiden falls in love with him. Agapito R. Conchu's *Father* [*Ama*] (1936), based on the serialized novel of the celebrated writer, Lazaro Francisco, is about a peasant who conflictedly pursues his love for the daughter of the *cacique* who had enslaved his father. Fernando Poe's *Child of Toil* [*Anak Parwis*] (1948) follows the saga of a farmer who fights for his love for the landlord's daughter at the same time that he fights for tenancy and farmers' rights and against banditry and social prejudices.



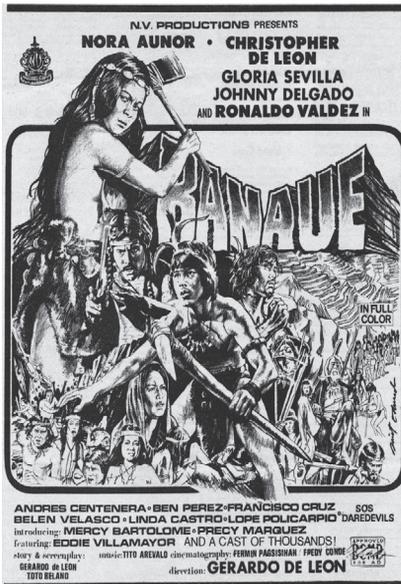
The movie poster of *Biyaya ng Lupa* (1959) provides a more varied picture of country life. Courtesy of Simon Santos.

The Formation of National Cinema

The illustrious cinema of Gerardo de Leon spans the many cinematic materializations of the rural space and symptomatizes the main currents of the rural film as national imaginary. His films include the familiar musical, *Nipa Hut* [*Bahay Kubo*] (1938), about a country girl who becomes an opera singer in the city; the historical biopic, *Diego Silang* (1951); the postwar drama, *New Day* [*Bagong Umaga*] (1952), that chronicles the hardships of sugar plantation workers and their establishment of a union; the spectacular dramatization of the lifeways of the Igorots and their violent encounter with American aggressors in *Ifugao* (1954); the dramatic study of how the feudal system turns peasants into outlaws in *To the End of the World* [*Hanggang sa Dulo ng Daigdig*] (1958); the American low-budget adaptation of H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) into *Terror is a Man* (1959); the cinematic re-imagination of Jose Rizal's San Diego in *Noli me tangere* (1961); the explosive social drama,

The World of the Oppressed [*Daigdig ng Mga Api*] (1965), which depicts agrarian unrest and peasant uprising; and *Banaue: Stairway to the Sky* (1975), where the drive to create a cinematic epic by visualizing the grandeur of the iconic landscape of the rice terraces is anchored on the gravity of the lead actor Nora Aunor's star power.

The cinema of Celso Ad. Castillo, in contrast, exemplifies the trajectory of imagining the rural space in genre filmmaking, from a point roughly and figuratively where de Leon's vision ends off. In films like *Nympha*



The movie poster of Gerardo de Leon's last film, *Banaue: Stairway to the Sky* (1975), an epic portrait of the rural landscape. Courtesy of Simon Santos.

(1971), *The Most Beautiful Animal in the World* [*Ang Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa*] (1974), and *Virgin People* (1984), Castillo pushed the boundaries of erotica, or what was then referred to as *bomba* (literally, bomb), by transgressing the conventional characterization of the country maiden as virtuous and virginal, while playing on the earthier dimensions of the forest and the uncultivated land. Castillo also reappropriates the idioms of the American Western in films like *Asedillo* (1971), *The Legend* [*Ang Alamat*] (1972), and *Esteban* (1972), all starring Fernando Poe, Jr. as a gun-wielding rebel-hero of the oppressed, and *The Legend of Julian the Patriot* [*Ang Alamat ni Julian Makabayan*] (1979) and *Pedro Tunasan* (1983), starring Christopher de Leon and Lito Lapid, respectively. These action films, popularly called *bakbakan*, allude or explicitly refer to historical figures that have passed on to become legendary idols. These films belonged to the genre cycle that featured folk heroes and glorified outlaws, most notably those films starring Ramon Revilla, such as *Nardong Putik* (1971) and *Pepeng Agimat* (1972), and Jun Aristorenas, with his recontextualized cowboy films, such as *Red Earth* [*Pulang Lupa*] (1971) and *Elias, Basilio, at Sisa* (1972).²⁵

De Leon's postwar rural films, and most especially, *Daigdig ng Mga Api*, may be seen as forerunners of the socially-conscious filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s. But even the genre films of the sort that Castillo made, the *bomba* and the *bakbakan*, have been read through nationalist lenses, alongside social movements that were erupting in the academe and the streets at the time of their production.²⁶ Interestingly, if, in the pastoral form, the ideal rural landscape signified a nostalgia for the golden age of a bygone era, what has been conceived by nationalist critics as the golden age of Philippine Cinema was partly defined by films that depicted the rural space as defiled, defamed, and defaced, even as the need to recover the space's symbolic purity remains the urgent rallying point for politicized filmmaking. In the important rural films of the period that exceed the semantic-syntactic configuration of the pastoral, the rural, just as much as the urban, is more closely associated with the national space.

The rural space is a spectral presence in landmark city films, like Lino Brocka's *Manila in the Claws of Neon Light* [*Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanags*]

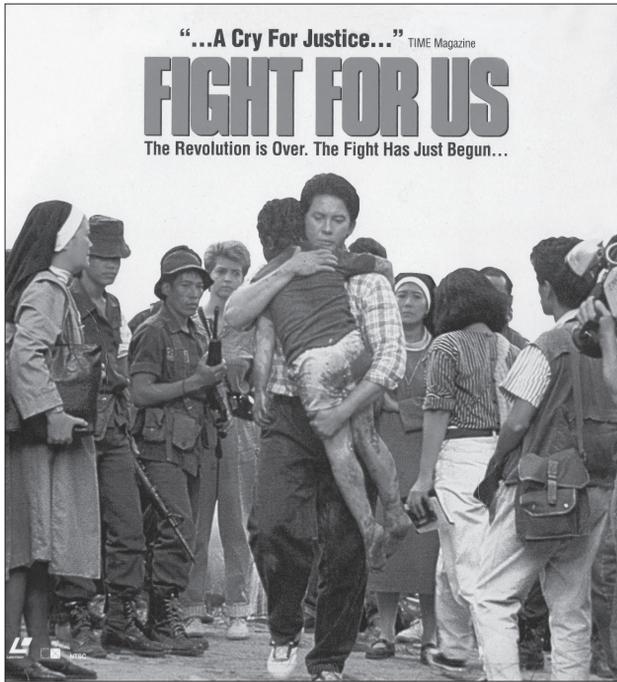
(1975) and Ishmael Bernal’s *Manila by Night* (1980), films in which the main characters hail from the provinces and dream of partaking in the prosperity and pleasures of Manila but are ultimately destroyed by that same city life. Meanwhile, in the rural films made during the so-called golden age, the rural space is portrayed as endangered and on the verge of decay because of its interaction with outsiders, in the figure of



The verses in the movie poster of *Sakada* (1976) may be roughly translated as follows. “the truth: the world of the peasants is one of violence / life is laboriously ordered around hopes and dreams / a game of chance tossed in the wind / by destiny and a landlord that is greedy”; “the film: the world of the peasants is painted / making alive a hope in truth / their pains, their joys, their struggles / are bared before the watching and thinking nation.” Courtesy of Simon Santos.

foreigners (*Once a Moth* [*Minsa'y Isang Gamu-gamo*], 1976; *Naked Forest* [*Hubad na Gubat*], 1983), city dwellers (*A Speck in the Lake* [*Nunal sa Tubig*], 1976; *Salome*, 1981), or locals who have returned to their home province after leaving for the city (*Miracle* [*Himala*], 1982). The countryside is no longer cleanly separable, both in terms of narrative and mise-en-scène, from that which is outside. The outsider now freely intrudes; the one who resides inside does not necessarily belong; and the structures outside define or rule in ways that the countryside cannot define or rule itself.

Films that resist nostalgia in favor of a pressing realist depiction of rural life stripped of romance include Behn Cervantes's *Sugar Plantation Peasants* [*Sakada*] (1976) and Brocka's *Fight For Us* [*Orapronobis*] (1989). *Sakada* is a multiple-character film that follows the politicization of peasants whose simple dream of comfort and desire to overcome their lives of penury are thwarted at every step by the feudal system. The series of frustrations that befall the family that is the nucleus of the narrative parallels the narrative motivations that drive the peasants to rise up against the *hacenderos*. Tragically, however, the uprising is quelled; and the peasants, decimated. In this way, *Sakada* is a clear progression from the old pastorals, even the best of them such as *Biyaya ng Lupa*; it is also a continuation of Gerardo de Leon's project of filming the stories of disenfranchised peasants and their plight. *Orapronobis*, on the other hand, tells the story of Jimmy Cordero, an ex-priest-turned-revolutionary, who was detained during the martial rule of Ferdinand Marcos and freed after the 1986 People Power uprising. Upon reincorporating himself "above ground" as a human rights advocate, he is slowly beckoned back to the rural town of Dolores, which was his former base of operation as a rebel soldier, because a death squad called the Orapronobis has been wreaking terror on the country folks and mercilessly killing anyone suspected of being an insurgent. Brocka's depiction of the wanton violence committed by the counter-insurgency vigilantes effectively disengages the imagery of the rural landscape from its pastoral dimension. In *Sakada* and *Orapronobis*, the oppressive, feudalistic system that sustains the pastoral-escapist form is unveiled and foregrounded. The representations of open spaces, fields, and horizons in



The movie poster of *Orapronobis* (1989) pictures a rural space ravaged by violence. The elements of the poster recall the main players in the EDSA uprising. The tagline reads: "The Revolution is Over. The Fight Has Just Begun...." Courtesy of Simon Santos.

both films signify the violent dispossession of the non-propertied classes, a signification which in its nakedness was not representable in city films as such. Both films resist commodification and were banned by the state.

Beside the dark rural films of the golden age and the singular films *Sakada* and *Orapronobis*, there persisted a continuing inclination to draw upon the symbolics of the rural space. Eddie Romero's *This Was How We Were, What Happens to You Now?* [*Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?*] (1976) and *Aguila* (1980), both epic films, explicitly relink the rural space with the national imaginary through a playing of the spatial logic of the pastoral. *Aguila* is set in the present time but is told through a series of flashbacks that span 80 years of the life of the patriarch, Daniel Aguila, played by Fernando Poe, Jr., recounting parallel developments

in Philippine history. Daniel is an orphan from a rural province who journeys around the Philippines, enlists as a soldier during the American occupation, succeeds in the city, and becomes a larger-than-life humanitarian hero. When the Philippines is liberated at the end of World War II, Daniel decides to give up all his worldly success and to walk away from the dirty politics of the capital. His son, Jose Mari, on the occasion of the 88th anniversary of Daniel's birth, sets out to search for his father, who has been missing for nearly a decade. By film's end, Jose Mari has found the patriarch settled with Agtas in the mountainside, freed from the greed for power and wealth and with no wish to return to the city. He has traded the instability of the city-center for the constancy of the countryside. *Aguila*, as such, is premised on the pastoral return to the rural space, where life is simple and people do not aspire for pleasures beyond their need or ability to toil. The indigenous Agtas, as Romero pictures them, are industrious but not industrial; they labor not in vain. Romero, therefore, portrays the rural space as a place where one can (re)enter the *loob* or the core of the interior of personhood to find meaning—a direct contrast to the *looban* (inner city), where corruption permeates both people and things, and the urban *center*, where every compromise is made in the name of wealth and power.

In Romero's earlier film, *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* the country hick, Nicolas Ocampo, nicknamed Kulas, moves from the rural province to the city. Kulas, whose humble nipa hut is burned at the beginning of the film, finds himself on an unexpected trip. His odyssey allows him to meet the various players that were actively influencing the historical transition from the Philippine revolution against Spain at the end of the nineteenth century to the Philippine-American war at the beginning of the twentieth. In the end, Kulas makes the necessary leap, imagining the rural and urban spaces not as separate enclaves but as one community. His journey, which ends in Manila, is a journey to discover what it means to become *Filipino*. In *Aguila*, it is in the province where Daniel rediscovers that comfort is found in the peace of simple living; it is here where he discovers the meaning of being *human*. Hence, the call of the two films, taken together, is to a kind of homecoming, an invitation to return to the rural landscape. The narrative that concludes with the

closing of a circle—from Kulas's and Daniel's movement from the rural space, initially identified as marginal, to the city, the center of nation-building, and finally to Daniel's return to the province, now no longer imagined as peripheral but central—is Romero's spatial configuration of being human *and* becoming Filipino. Romero's project to enunciate the nation through the films' symbolic narrative, archetypal characters, and iconographic *mise-en-scène*, is made possible by the nostalgia for purity that is endowed by years of pastoral-rural cinematic materialization.

A reinvention of the rural film that closes the twentieth century is Marilou Diaz-Abaya's nostalgic *In the Navel of the Sea* [*Sa Pusod ng Dagat*] (1998). The film this time disassociates the rural space from the figure of the virginal maiden and tells instead the unusual story of a male midwife. Set in a remote island after the war, Peping grows up with no choice but to learn the trade of his mother, Rosa, the only midwife in their fishing village. At first, the boy does not mind learning; but, as time goes by, he becomes increasingly aware of the social prejudice against him. In an attempt to escape his duty to the community and to reassert his compromised manhood, he pursues a country lass, Maya, who has moved to the town center. In the *pueblo*, however, both Maya and the more mature, Mrs. Santiago, with whom Peping eventually falls in love, cannot give him the love he believes will complete him as a man. After all of Peping's experiences with these women—his independent mother, Maya, the country maiden with city ambitions, and the mature Mrs. Santiago—he finally accepts the responsibility of being a midwife and becoming a nurturing mother-figure to the villagers until his ripe old age.

No matter their hybridity, these representations and appropriations of the rural in cinema helped clear a space for the materialization of a distinctly Philippine cinematic landscape, circumscribing a place from which the nation and a national cinema could be imagined. Evident in Abaya's film is the way in which the pastoral-rural space is shot through with diachronic temporality, visually and narratively reproduced in relation to those previously constructed and now-sedimented places that have acquired new mythic value, ripe for new visual-narrative reconfigurations. Up to the close of the twentieth century, the imaging of

the rural space as figurative landscape generally meant a distancing and an abstracting that did not always shed light on the dynamics of specific places. It is in the newer digital films, given their filmmakers' newfound freedom in the first decade of the twenty-first century, where the physical and social landscapes of particular places become preminent. But these new terrains represented in contemporary independent cinema have only been made possible after that long and arduous process of making Philippine rural landscapes visible that stretches from *Dalagang Bukid* to *Sa Pusod ng Dagat*.

Notes

¹ This research was supported by a grant from the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Development at the University of the Philippines Diliman.

² Martin Lefebvre, "Introduction," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2006), xi.

³ François Albera and Maria Tortajada, "The 1900 Episteme," in *Cinema Beyond Film: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era*, ed. François Albera and Maria Tortajada (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010). See also François Albera, "First Discourses on Film and the Construction of a 'Cinematic Episteme,'" in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

⁴ David B. Clarke and Marcus A. Doel, "From Flatland to Vernacular Relativity: The Genesis of Early English Screenscapes," in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 61; see also Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, "Spectacle and Text: Landscape Metaphors in Cultural Geography," in *Place/Culture/Representation*, ed. James Duncan and David Levy (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁶ Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., *Native Resistance: Philippine Cinema and Colonialism, 1898-1941* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1998), 9-68. The Introduction, as well as the first two chapters of del Mundo's book, gives an account of how the Philippines was visually archived in early American cinema, from 1898 through the first decades of the twentieth century.

⁷ Nick Deocampo, *Film: American Influences on Philippine Cinema* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2011). The next few paragraphs are based on the data made available in Deocampo's work.

⁸ The following historical information on early American filmmakers and film

producers are from Deocampo, *Film*, 65-160.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰ References to prewar films that are no longer extant are based on Maria Carmencita A. Momblanco, *Philippine Motion Pictures 1908-1958: A Checklist of the First Fifty Years* (master's thesis, University of the Philippines, 1979).

¹¹ See Wytan de la Peña, "‘Filipino’ vs. ‘Fil-hispanic’: The Politics of Appropriation and Assimilation in Philippine Cultural Identity Construction," in *Encuentro*, ed. Ma. Luisa T. Camagay (Manila: Spanish Program for Cultural Cooperation, 2008); see also Deocampo's *Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines* (Manila: Cinema Values Reorientation Program National, 2003).

¹² Deocampo, *Cine*, 203-39. The dynamics of what could be assumed as understood by and understandable to the public of early cinema in the Philippines are detectable in the specific film titles and the changing language used in these titles from 1897 to 1938; see Deocampo, *Cine*, 371-426. See also Nadi Tofighian, "José Nepomuceno and the Creation of a Filipino National Consciousness," *Film History* 20, no. 1 (2008); Joe Quirino, *Don José and the Early Philippine Cinema* (Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House Inc., 1983); and Vicente Salumbides, *Motion Pictures in the Philippines* (Manila: Vicente Salumbides, 1952).

¹³ Nicanor G. Tiongson, "From Stage to Screen: Philippine Dramatic Traditions and the Filipino Film," in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 84-85.

¹⁴ Alfonso B. Deza, *Mythopoeic Poe: Understanding the Masa as Audience Through the Films of Fernando Poe, Jr.* (Quezon City: Great Books Publishing, 2006), 145-55.

¹⁵ Eric S. Giron, "Nepomuceno's Transition from Zarzuela to the Talkies," in *Diamond Anniversary of Philippine Cinema (September 25, 1919 to September 24, 1994)*, ed. Lena Strait Pareja (Manila: Commemorative Brochure, 1994); and Deocampo, *Cine*, 105-48.

¹⁶ The synopsis is based on Rustica C. Carpio, *Hermogenes Ilagan: The Father of Tagalog Zarzuela* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2000), 120-35; and Nadi Tofighian, *The Role of Jose Nepomuceno in the Philippine Society: What Language Did His Silent Films Speak?* (master's thesis, Stockholm University, 2005), 23-24.

¹⁷ Bienvenido Lumbera and Cynthia Nograles Lumbera, *Philippine Literature: History and Anthology* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1997), 37-47; and Reynaldo C. Iletto, "Rural Life in a Time of Revolution," in *Filipinos and Their Revolution: Event, Discourse, and Historiography* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Bienvenido Lumbera and Cynthia Nograles Lumbera, *Philippine Literature*, 37.

¹⁹ Rafael Ma. Guerrero, "Tagalog Movies: A New Understanding," in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, 114-16.

²⁰ Tofighian, *The Role of Jose Nepomuceno*, 24.

²¹ Tiongson, "From Stage to Screen," 86; Deocampo, *Cine*, 105-48.

²² Deocampo, *Cine*, 14-22.

²³ del Mundo Jr., *Native Resistance*, 96-105.

²⁴ Deocampo, *Film*, 469-536.

²⁵ Francis A. Gealogo illuminates the figure of the *tulisan*/bandit and *taong labas*/outsider/outlaw in his historicized reading of the film, *Nardong Putik*. See "Nardong Putik in the Genealogy of Tagalog Folk Heroes," in *Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Cultures*, ed. Rolando B. Tolentino (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000). See also Reynaldo C. Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

²⁶ Bienvenido Lumbera, *Writing the Nation/Pag-Akda ng Bansa* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2000), 322-23; and Zeus A. Salazar, Prospero Covar, and Agustin Sotto, *Unang Pagtingin sa Pelikulang Babbakan: Tatlong Sanysay* (Manila: Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino, Sentro ng Pangkultura ng Pilipinas, 1989).