

***Surrexit... She Has Arisen:
The Rites of May and the Folk
Catholic Imaginary***

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Abstract

Although Mike de Leon's *The Rites of May* (1976) may be classified as a horror movie on the basis of its supernatural or uncanny elements, it would seem more fruitful to explicate the true source of its horror in more realistic terms. According to this alternative analysis, *The Rites of May* is horrific because it deals with the real horror of the objectification, oppression, silencing and liquidation of a woman by a male, flesh-and-blood monster-figure. The paper explores this idea through an examination of the representation of Filipino folk Catholicism and its iconography, at once definitively material and audaciously metaphysical.

Keywords: Filipino cinema, folk Catholicism, global cinema, MeToo Movement, religious studies, *The Rites of May*, sacramentality

The Rites of May (original Filipino title *Itim* or *Black*, 1976), the first feature-length work of Filipino film *auteur* Mike de Leon, is that kind of film that will linger in one's mind long after the viewing experience. De Leon's potent alchemy of image, music, and atmosphere conspire to vex the imagination—the long take of a placid pond and the secret that lies beneath its unsettled waters; the setting of an old, decaying house hosting dark secrets; the full orchestral score that is at once introspective and afflictive; and decidedly, the norms, rituals, chants, and images that constitute the poetry and iconography of a Filipino folk Catholic piety. While these and more form the scope of my interest, it is the latter that illuminates my interpretive encounter in this paper.

My starting point is a concise survey of *The Rites of May*, its basic storyline, stylistic qualities, and some of its audiovisual leitmotifs. My intention here is to give space for the film to speak on its own terms—film *qua* film—even as I enter into an interpretive engagement from a religious studies lens. I will then focus the discussion on the representation of material religion in the film, specifically Filipino folk Catholicism. Given the ubiquity of folk Catholicism in Filipino social reality, it is not surprising that it has, for decades, enjoyed great currency in local cinema. Here, folk Catholic iconography has been vividly portrayed as definitively material and yet audaciously metaphysical, holding both in a pendulous dialectic so that it is never a question of an either/or but a both/and. This holds true in representations across film genres—the socially-resonant masterpiece *Himala* (Ishmael Bernal, 1982), the religious melodrama *Santa-Santita* (Laurice Guillen, 2004), among many others.

“Sacramentality,” the belief that God's redemptive action is made manifest in outwardly perceptible form, is the hallmark of Roman Catholic spirituality; to a great extent, this explains the materiality and tactility of Catholic religious rites across cultures. Following a hermeneutic of suspicion, however, there is good reason to posit that a precolonial, Filipino “primal religion,” as expressed in folk Catholic piety, is the shadow referent that undergirds such a devotion, infusing it with a fervor flowing from indigenous roots that run deeper than the sixteenth-century intrusion of Spanish colonial Catholicism. In view of this, I

propose the folk Catholic imaginary as a lens to refract the homologies between cinematic representation and actual religious practice. Further, I widen the aperture with a comparative approach that brings *The Rites of May* into dialogue with cogent titles of Southeast Asian and global cinema. By way of conclusion, I offer some insights on how *The Rites of May* speaks anew to the current ferment in the global quest for a more authentic humanity for women.

Before doing the drill down on the film, a brief survey of Filipino primal religion and its apparent resurrection in what I term the folk Catholic imaginary would be an instructive prologue.

The Folk Catholic Imaginary

Comparable to the Spanish colonial incursions in Latin America, the sixteenth-century colonization of a loose federation of island “chiefdoms” that would come to be known as *Las Islas Filipinas* was an incongruous admixture of Christianization and conquest. The national belief in a divine mandate innervated the Spanish missions; the *conquistadores* saw themselves as God’s chosen people, liberators sent out to rescue the pagan peoples from the devil’s stronghold. This was the core belief that sacralized the colonizing enterprise and justified the iconoclastic zeal of the Christianizing missions. The indigenous people, naturally resilient from their cultural values based on deep kinship and radical hospitality, and informed by a long history of intercultural contact with its neighbors, were generally adaptable to the new ideas and customs of the imported religion. However, they also had the innate ability to absorb Christianity without sacrificing their own belief system, which had interwoven seamlessly to form a distinct Filipino expression of Christianity.

As it happened, the Filipinos endowed certain aspects of the new religion with a ceremonial and emotional content, a special Filipino flavor which made Catholicism in the archipelago in some respects a unique expression of that universal religion. In this process of “Philippinizing” Catholicism the major role

belonged to the Filipinos. They showed themselves remarkably selective in stressing and de-emphasizing certain features of Spanish Catholicism.¹

Underpinning this “ceremonial and emotional content” was an indigenous primal religion, which was not codified in the systematic, doctrinal language of organized religions, but nonetheless coherent. In this Filipino precolonial belief system, the sacred and the profane were not binary realities, they danced together in a fluid co-existence.

Filipino primal religion was based on the belief that the divine intervention of *Bathala*, the supreme godhead, had direct bearing on the fate of the human community. A host of nature spirits known as *diwata* inhabited the landscape and seascape so that the created world, including some of its flora and fauna, were believed to be enchanted; thus, the members of the indigenous community approached their natural home with a certain degree of fear and reverence. It would not be inaccurate to find, to a certain extent, resonances between the indigenous Filipino belief system with that of the fictional Na’vi people of the planet Pandora in James Cameron’s film *Avatar* (2009). Indigenous Filipinos also venerated the nature spirits in the form of carved images of wood and stone known as *anito*, which served the deities as a portal to and from the spirit world. In addition, the departed ancestors were believed to join the ranks of the *diwata* and were also included in the pantheon of *anitos*.

In the religious schema, the *diwata* served as *Bathala*’s conduits to the human sphere, and a second-level mediation consisted of women-shamans known as *babaylanes* (singular *babaylan*) whose spiritual leadership included the performance of ritual sacrifices and healing rites, and the fulfillment of the honorific roles of wisdom figure and custodian of the community’s customs and traditions.

Consequently, the Spanish mission endeavored to acculturate Roman Catholic rites and icons as analogues of the precolonial cultic practice. The connections were not difficult to configure: the mediatorship of Catholic saints were grafted onto the mediatorship of the *diwata*, the all-male ordained clergy took the place of the all-female *babaylanes*, and the Catholic icons, relics, and other religious articles replaced *anitos* and

anting-anting (indigenous religious objects and amulets).

On account of the resilience of the host culture that allowed for the enculturation of colonial religion with primal religion, Filipino Catholicism emerged as a double belonging. Official Catholicism, shepherded by the Catholic hierarchy in the Philippines, operates on one level; folk Catholicism, animated organically by the ghostlife of primal religion, operates semi-autonomously and simultaneously on another level.

Given the complex postcolonial character of contemporary Catholicism in the Philippines, I propose “the folk Catholic imaginary” as a relevant touchstone within which to examine the matter-affect dialectic in the Filipino veneration of religious images. As I discuss in another work, “[t]he folk Catholic imaginary is the way by which devout Filipino Catholics imagine and image their relationship with their immediate and extended community, with their religious institution, and with their God.”² The conception of “the social imaginary” as proposed by the analytic philosopher Charles Taylor helps shed light on this definition:

[It is] something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode... the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others... and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.³

The social imaginary, as opposed to “social theory,” pays attention to those constituent elements of culture that holds a wide sense of legitimacy—images, symbols, stories, myths—rather than appealing to the authority of theoretical conceptions and terms. That said, the folk Catholic imaginary offers a more inclusive interpretive framework from which to analyze folk Catholicism.

Filipino theologian Jose De Mesa draws the distinction between official Catholicism and Filipino folk Catholicism, describing the former as a “worldview,” and the latter as a “worldfeel.”⁴ A worldview, which finds its moorings in a Eurocentric framework, is largely rational-

cognitive; this is expressed in the language of creeds, doctrines, and commandments. A worldfeel, on the other hand, is more affective-intuitive, it does not eschew officially sanctioned Church teachings but interweaves them with a material, sensuous cognition based on touch. Thus, lived experience, not simply doctrinal instruction, is a valid source of religious-spiritual insight and direction. “Catholic devotion expressed as a material religion figures decisively in how a great number of Filipinos understand and live out their faith, and this finds expression not just in a strictly religious sphere but in quasi-religious spheres of life as well.”⁵

Situated and marked by folk Catholicism in both its narrative and stylistic options, and with potent religious images functioning as visual leitmotifs, *The Rites of May* itself, in a manner of speaking, lays down the bridge for the adoption of the folk Catholic imaginary as a hermeneutic approach.

The Rites of May

Going by the categorization proposed by Filipino film scholars, Mike de Leon belongs to the “Third Generation” of filmmakers whose artistic vision was informed by the socio-politically fertile period of Philippine history covering the 1970s until the early 1990s.⁶ De Leon, along with contemporaries Lino Brocka⁷ and Ishmael Bernal, among others, practiced his art within the prohibitive conditions of the 20-year dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos who, in 1972, declared martial law. Although noted for politically-charged films that directly or indirectly critiqued the Marcos regime—*Kisapmata* (1981), *Batch '81* (1982), and *Sister Stella L* (1984) come to mind—De Leon disclaims that *The Rites of May*, his directorial debut, was one of them.⁸

“Rosa is dead.” Thus pronounces the *espiritista* or medium following a séance participated by a circle of women. A novice at a Catholic convent for nuns, Rosa (Susan Valdez) had been missing for some time and her desperate mother has resorted to a more unearthly search in the hopes of finding clues to her whereabouts. When she asks to talk to her departed daughter through the medium, she is told to wait till Good Friday, the

most somber rite of the Christian Holy Week, which commemorates the passion and death of Jesus Christ. No sooner had the séance ended when Teresa (Charo Santos), Rosa's younger sister, becomes anxious and restless.

Meanwhile, a young man named Jun (Tommy Abuel) drives in from Manila to visit his mute and wheelchair-bound father Dr. Torres (Mario Montenegro). A photojournalist, Jun is on an assignment to cover traditional Catholic devotions during Holy Week. In one of the rites known as *Pasyon*, a sung-through prayer novena recalling the gospel account of Jesus' passion, Jun chances upon Teresa and takes photos of her; his camera captures her in a momentary trance-like state. The chance encounter would result in further contact between the two and consequently, Jun would find himself to be a key figure in finding the truth about Rosa's disappearance. Following the clues that emerge from a photographic image, Jun and Teresa are unwittingly drawn into an investigative crime trail where the material and the supernatural conspire to point to Dr. Torres, Jun's own father, as the perpetrator of a perfect murder.

Although *The Rites of May* is Mike de Leon's debut feature, the stylistic hallmarks of a Filipino filmmaker of the first order are already apparent in the film. The deft camerawork is self-assured and non-obtrusive; whether in wide-angle shots of natural landscape, restrained tracking shots within claustrophobic spaces, or close-ups that foreground the facial poetics of its lead characters, the cinematography is a tacit invitation to look beyond the surface of things. The editing is thoughtful and strategic; jump-cuts and diegetic inserts used to full effect, often to evoke mysticism and a foreboding atmosphere.

The real "star," however, is De Leon's *mise-en-scène*. For one, the Torres' ancestral mansion that serves as a setting for the film's pivotal scenes is a character in itself. The Freudian term "*unheimlich*" is of particular relevance here. German for "uncanny" or "un-homely," "*unheimlich*" refers to "the opposite of the familiar, but without the appeal to the unfamiliar, invoking instead secrecy, strangeness, the occult, the hidden, that which cannot be trusted."⁹ Shrouded in the perpetual chiaroscuro of the mansion's storied existence, to insist on living here is

to live, by default, on the edge of mystery and memory.

And then of course, the imagery drawn from folk Catholic practice—an old rural church, veiled women devotees, votive candles, life-size statues of saints, etc.—is indicative of the belief in a preternatural realm that holds no regard for the rules of space and time. In the film, mise-en-scène infuses the story world with an atmospheric threshold of the “here” and “not here,” otherwise referred to as the “liminal.” In her study *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, Bliss Cua Lim notes that *The Rites of May* “mobilizes this double temporal logic, embedding the quotidian events (a son visiting his father, a boy meeting a girl) in the otherworldly temporality of the Holy Week’s Pasyon rites.”¹⁰ Although not referring to this duality of time as liminal, Lim’s brief but insightful analysis of Holy Week and the visual leitmotif of clocks in the film, dovetail with the idea of a threshold moment, a bubble in time where normal spatiotemporal conceptions blur as though the doorway to the timeless beyond became partially opened. In *The Rites of May*, such a doorway is represented by the Catholic statues that inhabit the daily rhythms of the character’s lives.

Early on in the film, as Jun begins to immerse himself in the rites of Holy Week, he enters a house where a *Pabasa*, the uninterrupted chanting of the *Pasyon*, is in progress. De Leon’s cinematography approximates the cadence of the chanting through tracking shots that pan continuously around and across the room; noticeably, the *Pasyon* inner circle consists exclusively of women. Candle-lit and bathed in shadows, the foreboding *noir* atmosphere permeates the *Pasyon* sequence, as several other scenes in the film, contributing to that liminal space-time abstruseness that often blankets the precise turns when the religious images make an appearance. Here, we see life-size statues of traditional Catholic saints, each seated behind their respective archway frames, overlooking the inner circle of *Pabasa* prayer-women. Jun focuses his camera lens on the statues and takes a few shots of them. When he shifts the focus on the chanting women, he inadvertently catches a glimpse of the pensive Teresa and takes her picture. At this point, De Leon employs a subtle layer of visual meaning-making through dynamic editing—parallel intercuts of Jun’s father, Dr. Torres, who is shown in profile watching

a crime news report on TV, are suddenly introduced in the sequence. A “syntagm” in semiotic terms, De Leon strings together a series of signs in order to foreshadow the film’s dramatic arc. The clear equation: Camera + Catholic statues + Teresa + Dr. Torres. Like breadcrumb trails toward solving the mystery of Rosa’s disappearance, I will allow this syntagmatic ordering to lead my interpretive journey of *The Rites of May*.

Camera as Sight

Although not directly related to the folk Catholic imaginary, the camera—both Jun’s camera and an implied camera that took the found negatives—would be instrumental to the peeling away of inauthentic layers that cloud the truth about Rosa. There are a couple of dark room scenes where Jun, in the process of developing rolls of film and blowing-up photo negatives, incrementally pieces together the jigsaw pieces like a detective sorting through clues to solve a crime. In this regard, the film’s affinity with Michelangelo Antonioni’s influential 1966 mystery drama *Blow-Up* becomes apparent. De Leon himself speaks of *The Rites of May* as an offshoot of his earlier 16mm short film *Monologue* [*Monologo*] (1975), which was intended to be an homage to *Blow-Up*. In both Antonioni’s and De Leon’s films, the camera is not so much a mechanical light-capturing device as an analogue of the eye; thus, it is a way of seeing. I also noted the film’s parallels with Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s 2011 film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*; in one scene, the character of the dead Boonsong re-enters the material world as a Monkey-Spirit. When he appears at the family table, along with another ghost, the departed wife of the widower Boonmee, he recalls how he first came to see the Monkey-Spirit while developing photographs shot from



Figure 1. Searching for clues in the photographic image.
The Rites of May (“Itim” © 1976 Cinema Artists Philippines)

his Uncle Boonmee's Pentax camera. The film's darkroom sequence, which leads to the discovery of clues within the photographic image, is a near mirroring of like sequences in *Blow-Up* and *The Rites of May*. Functioning more like an organ of perception, indeed, of consciousness, the camera in *The Rites of May* is aware of the ghost of Dr. Torres' dark past and reveals the truth behind what his duplicity has obscured for years.

In its seeming omniscience, the camera can be likened to the ancient symbol of the all-seeing eye of God, which has implications for the moral conscience of the one who is seen. The conception of the Divine as "Sight" is a well-established image in religious history, evidenced by the rendition of God as "The Eye" in Christian art, and, specifically, in Filipino Folk Catholic articles such as *anting-anting* or talismans, which are holdovers from primal religion. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) speaks of this in his book *The God of Jesus Christ*:

God is an Eye, God is Sight. Under this image, we also rediscover a primitive feeling of human beings: they know they are recognized. They know that they are never totally under cover; that their lives are open and delineated in a Sight; and that this is the case everywhere, for there is no possibility of shielding themselves or of escaping scrutiny. Humans know that to live means to be seen.¹¹

As the dramatic arc would eventually reveal, Dr. Torres is guilt-ridden and tormented; in a sense, he knows he is seen.

The Moving Image

Among the religious statues that make an appearance in *The Rites of May*, two merit closer attention. First is the Blessed Virgin Mary as the *mater dolorosa*, the sorrowful mother, an image traditionally associated with the Good Friday image of the Crucified Jesus. The version we see here is a rather disturbing one, veiled in black, and cut from chest up as though decapitated. Teresa sees the image enthroned on an altar in the Torres



Figure 2. Jun before the statues of the Virgin Mary and the Twelve Apostles. *The Rites of May* (“Itim” © 1976 Cinema Artists Philippines)

mansion while Jun is giving her a tour; she is transfixed by it, as though drawn by some mystical link.

The second is the group of life-size saints seated in a row at the *Pabasa* scene referred to earlier. The significance of these Catholic images for the narrative becomes apparent when they both appear in the second of three dream sequences involving Jun. Drifting to a hazy dream state while resting in bed, we see surreal dissolves of Jun walking through a candle-lit church aisle, and then up the grand staircase of the Torres mansion, into a room where the seated male saints are symmetrically positioned facing each other in a half circle; on one end is the Virgin Mary bust, enthroned at the altar and surrounded by candles. Jun seats himself in the middle of the formation, directly facing the sorrowful mother image. There are twelve saints, six on each side; this leads one to associate the statues with the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. In fact, Mike de Leon himself would confirm this. When discussing *The Rites of May* in a series of director’s notes he posted online, De Leon mentions “the eerie 12 apostles that belonged to my relatives—the stuff of nightmares as a young boy.”¹² The theological meaning of the Twelve is a matter beyond the purview of this essay, suffice it to say that they were firsthand witnesses of Jesus’ earthly existence, the primary custodians

of his message, and the founding figures of the first Christian churches. De Leon's casting of the twelve apostles in this scene personifies the Christian moral compass; the judgment of what is right and what is wrong.

Interestingly, Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper* [*La Ultima Cena*], an acclaimed 1976 Cuban film from the canon of Third Cinema, not only references the twelve apostles, it also takes place during Holy Week. Set in Havana in the 18th century, the climactic scene is a symmetrical tableau reminiscent of Leonardo Da Vinci's iconic *Last Supper* fresco, but with severely maltreated Afro-Cuban slaves seated at table as the twelve apostles, while the abusive Master appropriates for himself the role of Jesus Christ. As in *The Rites of May*, the apostles stand for the Catholic moral compass, but in Alea's *The Last Supper*, this finds representation in sharp sociopolitical irony.

Returning to the dream sequence of *The Rites of May*, what happens next is as telling as it is haunting. The coming to life of the statues of the twelve apostles is not depicted as happening in actual space and time, but in that liminal dreamscape between waking and un-waking. Be that as it may, can we argue that the phenomenon, as represented in the film, never really occurred and is, as such, unreal? This question is extraneous from the lens of the folk Catholic imaginary, which privileges the affective-intuitive over the rational-cognitive. With roots in Filipino primal religion, the folk Catholic imaginary does not see the spiritual and the material as binaries; they dance in and out of each other according to need. Here, the mystical event evinces the involvement of the Divine in human affairs; Jun is being alerted to the truth about the disappearance of Rosa, and we, the audience, are suspensefully drawn to follow the pursuit. Yet again, this resonates with Apichatpong who has consistently depicted the porous universe of Thai folklore and Buddhist popular beliefs where, like the perception of the folk Catholic imaginary, the natural and the preternatural are caught up in a dance. Among others, his 2015 masterpiece *Cemetery of Splendor* comes to mind. Aside from the mystical connection between the intermittently narcoleptic soldiers lying immobile at the makeshift hospital and the ancient royal army that remains extant in the spirit world just beneath them,

the apparitions of the two departed princess-deities from Laos whose statues were previously seen in a shrine, meaningfully correlate with the animate apostle statues in *The Rites of May*. The difference is that the en fleshed Laotian goddesses in *Cemetery of Splendor* are separate entities from their statues, which remain unchanged as their conventional, symbolic representations. There is no such existential separation in *The Rites of May*; the saints come to life within the very materiality of their statue-forms. At least in this sense, a scene from the awarded 1995 Dutch film *Antonia's Line*, directed by Marleen Gorris, is a more adjacent comparative example. Set in a southern village in a still very Catholic, post-World War II Netherlands, a girl with a vivid imagination “sees” the statue of the crucified Jesus raising its head and coming to life during a funeral mass.

A more proximate point of comparison would be found in the 1978 Filipino movie *The Eyes of Angelita*, directed by Lauro Pacheco, which audaciously tosses together horror, action, comedy, fantasy, religion, and melodrama. A story thoroughly immersed in the Filipino folk Catholic imaginary, the statue of the Virgin Mary speaks to a saintly blind child, and then donates her eyes to her, not just in dreamscape, but in literal, real time. The eyes of the statue fly into the air and attach themselves into the child’s eye sockets. The film then takes the materiality of the mystical event a step further; a close-up shot reveals that the statue’s eyes are indeed missing.

From the relativizing viewpoint of the folk Catholic imaginary, the statues in the visual narrative of *The Rites of May* serve a dual mission of denunciation and vindication; this is brought to sharper relief in Jun’s second dream when they become animate. On one hand, they denounce Dr. Torres’ secret sins, thus far, hidden from human eyes but seen by God; on the other hand, they stand for a “preferential option” for Rosa, vindicating the *mulier victa*, the woman victim. The decapitated bust of the sorrowful mother had already served as an iconic signifier of the horrific fate inflicted upon Rosa, and in the film’s later séance, the muted and long suppressed truth breaks through the curtain that separates the living from the dead.

Surrexit

In the film's dramatic crescendo, the final séance sequence, the camera hovers in a circular motion, revealing the pensive faces of those seated with the *espiritista* at the ritual table—Teresa and her mother, and Jun and Dr. Torres, whom the former was able to coax to participate. Teresa had agreed beforehand to act as the medium for Rosa's spirit. The *espiritista* begins with a Trinitarian prayer, seeking divine guidance in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The séance scene has been a kind of genre *de rigueur* as seen, for instance, in a continuum of horror flicks such as Boris Karloff's *The Devil Commands* (1941), Peter Medak's *The Changeling* (1980), Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Seance [Kôrei]* (2001), Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2011), Mike Flanagan's *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016), and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018). Yet the séance in *The Rites of May* is unique in its claim to religious legitimacy; its appropriation of a prayer-formula from a major organized religion. It is worth noting that although the "communion of the saints," the belief that authentic relationships between people of faith continue beyond death, is a core belief in Catholic teaching, channeling the dead for the purpose of conversation is not. That said, the séance occupies a niche in folk Catholic practice, which does not take issue with religious syncretism.

No sooner had the rite begun when convulsions overtake Teresa as Rosa's spirit begins to manifest itself in her and speak through her. In a chilling, emotional account, Rosa speaks through Teresa and lets fly the truth: how she had given up everything—including her faith in life and her mother's trust—for the older Dr. Torres after he had confessed his love for her, only to be repudiated when she got pregnant. Refusing responsibility and fearing public shame, Dr. Torres schemes to hide Rosa from view, after which he does the unspeakable—he performs a forced abortion on the unconscious Rosa, and as if that were not enough, he takes her for dead and dumps her into the pond where she dies from drowning. This sequence, among others, showcases the fluency of Mike de Leon in the language and grammar of cinema. Like old photographs coming to life, the intercutting flashbacks rendered in diffuse black-and-white film represent the *memoria passionis* of Rosa—the dangerous memory of the wronged woman who suffered and died in the hands of

male domination and aggression. Rosa finally finds the voice to share her repressed narrative and in the process, metes out judgement on Dr. Torres in a scorching litany of his sins:

Is this how you reciprocate my love?
Your love grew cold!
You were ashamed of me!
You hid me from people's eyes!
You refused to stand up for what you've done!
You deceived me!
You ruined my life!
You schemed to hide your sin!
You hid my body!
You murdered my baby!
You have no shame!
You will pay!
Criminal!

De Leon's editing strategy in this climactic "judgment" scene is the work of an artistic brinkmanship. In seamless match-cuts, we see Teresa's vulnerable, tear-stained face transmogrified into the haunting and furious visage of Rosa.

In his essay "Nightmare and the Horror Film," film philosopher Noel Carroll notes how two significant symbolic structures are apparent in



Figure 3. The intercutting images of Teresa and Rosa. *The Rites of May* ("Itim" © 1976 Cinema Artists Philippines)

the composition of fantastic beings: the first is fusion, where conflicting themes are wedded in a singular temporally unified figure; the second is fission, where conflicting themes are heterogeneous or segregated between more than one figure.¹³ Although I would not call the Teresa/Rosa composite, strictly speaking, a “fantastic being,” I find Carroll’s categories reasonably applicable. On the visual level, we see both fusion and fission symbolically realized in the Teresaosa characters in the final séance sequence. As seen from the optic of the folk Catholic imaginary, Teresa’s role as a medium for the embodiment of Rosa’s spirit and for the channeling of her voice so that, within the zone of the séance, they are a unified figure, represents a fusion of the traditionally conflicting body/spirit, living/dead dualisms. On the other hand, the intercutting images of the sisters allow for the revelation of Rosa, the face of the *mulier victa* herself, who refuses to be defaced and silenced, and who must rise and speak the liberating truth. The autonomy of each of their personalities and identities is mapped distinctly as a kind of fission when we see both their faces intercut with each other, like paradoxical alter-egos. Creating both fusion and fission in one stroke, De Leon usurps the horror convention and creates his own filmic signature.

This leads to the question of genre, which is a slippery one in the case of *The Rites of May*. While there are, without question, elements of the gothic and paranormal in the film, they often take the form of internal hauntings. That is, they are not primarily designed to buy into the anticipation of the audience for a thrill ride but are instead symbolic compositions at the service of narrative, thematic, and character considerations. This quality is evident as well in Apichatpong’s genre-crossing *Uncle Boonmee*, which defies conventional horror expectations notwithstanding its protracted scenes of haunting. In *The Rites of May*, the supernatural elements are often sublimated in the outer rings of the concentric layers; the inner circle, like the prayer women gathered around the *Pasyon* rite, belongs to the core narrative: a woman’s mysterious disappearance and the quest for answers. In addition, the framework of the folk Catholic imaginary operative in the film relativizes the uncanny elements so that ultimately, they appeal more to a quasi-religious “cosmic fear,”¹⁴ a gripping admixture of dread and

awe, over a great power that cannot be domesticated. Said differently, it is an encounter with *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—mystery at once fearsome and fascinating—or in a word, “God.”¹⁵ In *The Rites of May*, the source-reality of the uncanny is the folk Catholic imaginary, which presupposes faith. In my purview, this distinguishes *The Rites of May* from similarly themed Asian films about the vengeful woman-ghost, such as Japan’s *Ring* [*Ringu*] (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and Thailand’s *Nang-Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), whose merits are not lost to me.

I am aware of the wide range of what can be classified as “horror” and I am not suggesting that *The Rites of May* cannot be categorized as such. But in view of the above argument that the film’s supernatural layers appeal more to cosmic fear rather than simply the fulfillment of audience expectations for a good scare typical of Hollywood horror films, I am led to ask the question “where lies the horror?” I contend that *The Rites of May* may be classified as a horror film, not so much on the basis of its supernatural or uncanny elements, but on the real “horror” of the narrative, which is the objectification, oppression, silencing, and liquidation of a woman by a male, flesh-and-blood monster-figure. In her book *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, feminist scholar Phyllis Trible examines the horrific misogynistic texts in the Bible and rephrases an oft-quoted verse from John 15:13, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Trible’s feminist reading runs, “Lesser power has no woman than this, that her life is laid down by a man.”¹⁶ The real horror in *The Rites of May* is that it speaks about the fate that befalls women across the globe to this very day. According to the United Nations statistics, “Women across the world are subjected to physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence, regardless of their income, age or education.” The report adds, “Experience of violence can lead to long term physical, mental and emotional health problems; in the most extreme cases, violence against women can lead to death.”¹⁷ In *The Rites of May*, “Lesser power has no woman than Rosa, whose personhood, motherhood, and life are laid down by a man.”¹⁸

True film art draws from life and flows back into life. As I mentioned in the prologue, I believe that Mike de Leon’s *The Rites of May* speaks

anew to the current ferment in the global quest for a more authentic humanity for women, which, of late, has found resonant expression in the #MeToo movement. But does it, really? Cua Lim notes that in *The Rites of May*, Rosa is not allowed to reach the “Resurrection” moment of the *Pasyon*:

By ending on Good Friday, the day of mortality, the plot’s temporal reach stops short of the promise of redemption signified by Easter Sunday. De Leon’s film closes on the darkness of death, remorse, named in its title.¹⁹

While there is credence in her interpretation considering the dark “Itim” ending of Dr. Torres’ death, there is an alternative conclusion when taken from the perspective of Rosa. Indeed, “Lesser power has no woman than Rosa, whose personhood, motherhood, and life are laid down by a man.” But in *The Rites of May*, which for me is the more operative title than *Itim*, it does not stop there. The folk Catholic imaginary simply will not allow it.²⁰ That would be a mockery of the Catholic moral compass and a desecration of the sacred images of the twelve apostles and the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Divine Maternal, whose honorific titles include *theotokos*, “the one who bears God.” Thus, in the film, the folk Catholic imaginary summons the full force of the communion of the saints to rend the curtain between the sacred and the profane, and then, midwifed largely by women—the *Pasyon* chanters, the *espiritista*, Rosa’s mother and sister Teresa—a coterie reminiscent of the mystical circle of the primal *babaylanes*, an allusion to an Easter resurrection enters historical visibility.

Surrexit... Rosa has arisen.²¹ She, who was wronged and vanquished, is ushered back into the land of the living, and in her blessed rage for justice, echoes the liberatory message loud and clear...“Me Too!”

Notes

¹ John Leddy Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses 1565-1700* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959), 72.

² Antonio D. Sison, “Afflictive Apparitions: The Folk Catholic Imaginary in

Philippine Cinema,” *Material Religion* 11, no 4 (2015): 427.

³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sison, “Afflictive Apparitions,” 428. For a study of the cinematic representation of folk Catholic syncretism in a postcolonial context, see Antonio D. Sison, “Postcolonial Religious Syncretism: Focus on the Philippines, Peru, and Mexico” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2006), 178-93.

⁶ The “First Generation” covers the period 1920s to 1940s, and the “Second Generation” covers the mid-1940s to the 1960s. The “Fourth Generation” refers to the period from the late 1990s to the present. See Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., “Philippines” in *The Films of ASEAN*, ed. Jose F. Lacaba (Pasig City: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 2000), 89-126.

⁷ Setting up his own production company Cinema Artists Philippines in 1974, De Leon produced Lino Brocka’s critically acclaimed social drama, *Manila... in the Claws of Light* [*Maynila... Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag*], a film he also helped conceive as a director of photography. Del Mundo, “Philippines,” 107.

⁸ In one of a series of director’s notes De Leon posted on May 8, 2017 on the official Facebook account of his latest film *Citizen Jake* (2018), he clarifies that there was nothing particularly political about *The Rites of May*. He did confirm a political incident that occurred during the Q&A for the film at the Los Angeles Film Festival when he mentioned that the only thing the government filmed was the activity of the Marcos couple. For this, the Philippine authorities confiscated his passport.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” quoted in *Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film: Essays on Belief, Spectacle, Rituals and Imagery*, ed. Regina Hansen (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2011), 3.

¹⁰ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Robert J. Cunningham (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979), 9.

¹² The quote is from de Leon’s retrospective director’s journal posted on the Facebook account of his latest film *Citizen Jake*. The Facebook account had been deleted, thus the absence of a reference.

¹³ Noel Carroll, “Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings,” in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years—A Selection*, eds. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 164-66.

¹⁴ Noel Carroll discusses H.P. Lovecraft’s *Supernatural Horror in Literature* where the conception of “cosmic fear” is presented at length. *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 161-64.

¹⁵ For fuller treatment, see Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 12-40.

¹⁶ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 80-81.

¹⁷ United Nations Statistics Division, *The World's Women 2015: Trends and Statistics*, accessed June 1, 2019, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/chapter6/chapter6.html>.

¹⁸ Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 80-81.

¹⁹ Cua Lim, *Translating Time*, 4.

²⁰ Does the folk Catholic imaginary allow for horror? Having emerged from the collective historical experience of colonial trauma, the folk Catholic imaginary holds light and darkness in a paradox. The horror already happened. Thus *The Rites of May* does not airbrush the horror, rather, it subjects it to Christian judgment.

²¹ This is, in no way, a literal “resurrection” in the sense of a Christic revivification; it is not *resurrexit* but *surrexit*. Rosa’s gruesome death cannot be undone. Thus, in the denouement of *The Rites of May*, Rosa does not come back to life to push Dr. Torres’ wheelchair down the staircase. The film is much more subtle than that. Dr. Torres recoils in the face of the truth, accidentally backs up and tumbles down the staircase, ultimately bringing tragedy upon himself.