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III. Tagalog Films

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wherever it is made to stand for some time; ours, which has not learned to develop roots, can profit little from transplantation.

I feel that what our Theatre really lacks at the moment is the ability to surprise. I mean, to surprise its spectator with what it can do with what it has to make-do.

It can no longer content itself with the vocation of mirroring life. Like painting, its original ambitions are, here and now, being better served by other instruments of culture. It can no longer tell stories merely, nor display amid ornaments attractive personalities. Fiction and the variety show have taken over those careers which, granted, were once its own.

If the Theatre is to stay healthy, it must find for itself an objective which no other craft or art is able to fulfill. These are the materials of which theatre consists: the human actor, the words of the playwright, the scenery, the costume and the music. I think that it is precisely by re-composing these materials together in perpetually changing and perpetually engaging designs—as in a kaleidoscope—that the Theatre can still surprise and—like the juggler—entertain. I am, perhaps, asking for a Theatre which does not regard itself as an illusion of reality, though it may allude to people and events from our world of real things; hence, a Theatre which is, to put it crudely, preoccupied with being clever, completely irresponsible about its bonds to nature, concerned only with its own internal intricacies. But I think that this is, in our age which is patently that of the Cinema, the sort of enterprise which can still hold our attention precisely because we are asked to concentrate upon it in relation to nothing else.

ROLANDO TINIO

III. THE TAGALOG FILM AND THE LOGIC OF IRONY

The Tagalog film, among the performing arts in the Philippines, stands apart as a scorned stepsister. The so-

called "intelligentsia", the set that patronizes plays and art exhibits, regards it with such disdain that even the current dirty phrase, "colonial mentality", fails to make the stepsister any more acceptable. The disdain is understandable. The usual Tagalog film is born of a wedding of illiteracies—the illiteracy of the audience, of the producer and of the director. Of the three the audience has been the most abused, as though the failure of a creative work were the fault of its audience. To be sure, the intelligence of the audience may set the standards for an art-work; however, it is the technical and esthetic equipment of the creator that determines its validity as art.

The director, in so far as we can pick out an individual as a creator in the cinematic art, is the artist of the film. His raw materials are the talents of his script-writer, actors and technicians. The economics of movie-making may subject him to a producer, but it is upon him that the artistry of the film ultimately depends. When a director blames the inanities of his work either on the producer or the audience, he simply demonstrates his failure to take on the responsibility of every artist to solve during the process of creation the problems presented by his medium. This responsibility entails an understanding of the logic of irony without which the creative work loses integrity.

By irony, I mean that double-awareness which detaches the creator from his material and allows him to discover a pattern in the incongruities of experience. Its logic, therefore, would be inimical to the naive, the romantic and the sentimental, qualities that indicate the creator's inability to comprehend in its totality the experience he aims to translate into art. The frequent breakdown of the logic of irony in our directors accounts for the clichés, the anachronisms, the lapses of taste, the pointlessness and the complacency in many Philippine films.

If there is any art-medium that touches upon the entire realm of our national experience, it is the film which gives us the broadest, if not the deepest, view of life in the Philippines. It is true that most often the breadth of its scope

is extended for no other end than that of sensationalism. However, the tasteless exploitation of popular interests and prejudices need not blind us to the potential value of the Tagalog film as a mirror of national culture.

Unfortunately, the extensiveness with which the movies have portrayed our history, traditions and aspirations has not always been accompanied by an intensive exploration of such familiar themes as war, social conflict, the Filipino family, and political amorality. Again, the absence may be attributed to the scarcity of directors who have integrity enough to sustain an ironic vision of their materials. Irony, by its refusal to commit the mind to anything the mind has not analyzed, is a frightening tool to wield. It often turns up the horror and the boredom of experience, and seldom the glory. Thus a creator who believes that his mission is to comfort would rather put it away.

Such is the case with Cesar Gallardo in the film *I Believe*. The story of an innocent girl duped by a unscrupulous father into believing that she has been gifted with the divine power of healing, Gallardo's version of the comic-strip serial could have been a disturbing study of violated faith. When the girl discovers that she has been used to defraud believers of their money and faith, one expects from her a reaction more complex than grief, and from the people a reaction more violent than stupefaction. A girl's pristine sensibility glimpses evil beneath the holy mask. A crowd of fanatics find their saint unmasked as a front for swindlers. Irony demands that the girl and the crowd behave according to the stress of their separate revulsions. Instead, Gallardo, in an anti-climactic scene, allows the girl to perform a real miracle. The miracle solves the problem the screenplay has painstakingly set up, and the complacency of the audience is left intact.

Cirio H. Santiago's *Nagbabagang Lupa*, in spite of its initial promise as a departure from the cliché of the brutal Japanese officer, suffers from a similar avoidance of the logic of irony. The film relates a war story whose main characters are human beings rather than cardboard heroes. Santiago's

Japanese tank commander is an individual caught up in the war, a soldier with his own cause to defend but who happens to be on the other side of the frontline. The Filipino soldiers and their charges—a senator and his daughter being escorted to a plane that will take them out of the Philippines—are all individuals grappling with personal problems even as they flee from the enemy. But humankind, so T. S. Eliot says, cannot bear very much reality. The temptation to escape into sentimentality is too great. In one scene, the inhabitants of a barrio, their homes threatened with destruction by the Japanese if the armored car bearing the government official does not surrender, decide to force the Filipino soldiers to give up. These are desperate men who have chosen self-preservation over patriotism. But the politician talks to them about love of country. The mob is quickly appeased and, without hesitation, the men agree that the loss of their homes and property is preferable to tacit cooperation with the enemy. Certainly, their change of heart is edifying. It is unfortunate, however, that the nobility of sentiment here quite undoes the logic of irony.

The complacency and sentimentality of the films mentioned above are understandable flaws, but not the naivete of *Dugo sa Aking Kamay*. Armando Garces' straight-faced dramatization of a long-discredited theory of criminal psychology—that criminality is hereditary—nullifies its claim to serious attention because the director starts with a naive assumption about human conduct. With a sense of irony, Garces might have turned out an interesting case study about a young man's propensity for wickedness. As it is, *Dugo sa Aking Kamay* tells a grim story motivated by errant psychology sensationalistically and in dead earnest. Less outrageously naive, though equally dubious, is the child psychology of Octavio Silos' *Roberta*. The heroine of the movie is a little girl from the slums. Filmed on location on a limited budget, *Roberta*, when it wanders away from the overblown melodrama about the travails of a penniless family, occasionally stumbles upon insights into poverty as found in an extravagant city. However, Silos lacks sufficient detachment from his pathetic child-heroine. As a consequence, he

fails to see the incongruity of allowing her the psychological improbability of speaking lines that are embarrassingly mature and platitudinous.

The works of the three outstanding directors in the Philippines today provide examples of Tagalog films worked out, more or less consistently, according to the logic of irony. The praises of Lamberto V. Avellana's *Anak Dalita* have been sung in many local film publications. Its slightly slicked-up neo-realism has been duly noted by our film critics and its artistic merits have been recognized by the Asian film festival. The work is characteristic of Avellana at his best and at his worst. Its pacing and camera-work bespeak the technical proficiency of a veteran director who understands his medium and is thus able to charge his scenes with vibrancy and power. The confrontation scene between the Korean war veteran and his sweetheart, whose night life is not entirely innocent, packs into the little room of the *Intramuros barong-barong* all the pignancy of life as lived in love and pain amid the ruins of war. The situation is a commonplace in Philippine movies. What makes Avellana's scene memorable is the honesty with which the director focuses on the clumsiness of the recriminations and the protestations of love. The impact of the film is diminished, however, by the entertainer in Avellana. He cannot seem to resist giving the audience the moral and emotional clichés that comfort them. *Anak Dalita*, in its concluding moments, develops into a chase movie, with evil getting its comeuppance and the evicted squatters leaving the church ruins for what is presumably a better corner of the city. The upbeat ending recalls the conclusion of Vittorio de Sica's *Miracle in Milan* when the homeless poor fly away to the skies on brooms. The difference is revealing: de Sica's scene is the final sardonic twist to his tongue-in-cheek fairy tale whereas Avellana's is a last-minute concession to the comforts of sentimentality.

Like Avellana, Gerardo de Leon is an entertainer in the sense that he knows how to gratify the public taste. At his best, however, he displays a firm hand indicative of a superbly ironic temper. *Huwag Mo Akong Limutin*, whose failure at

the recent Asian film festival is no doubt another one of the commercial secrets of the annual gathering of Asian movie producers, has all the lurid ingredients of a sex melodrama in its story of the lusts of a decadent middle-class family. De Leon, however, never allows the improbabilities of his scripts to overwhelm his sense of irony. The wild fantasies of *Ang Sawa sa Lumang Simboryo* could have become comical in less capable hands. Under de Leon's direction, the film solves the problem by framing the story within a ballad, thus rendering the supernatural interventions in the plot logical and acceptable. In *Huwag Mo Akong Limutin*, he steers the chance-driven plot in such a way that the coincidences in the encounters of the principal characters fall into a pattern that comments on the intertwining tragedies of people trapped in a society corroded by lust and money. Characterization is always logical and so skillfully turned that the six principal figures come off as rounded characters without unnecessarily complicating the plot. The moody photography captures the sense of guilt and doom that overhangs the dimly-lit interiors, and makes Baguio a functional setting for once. Indeed, in no other Tagalog film does one find every cinematic effect so calculated by a director's artistic vision.

Huwag Mo Akong Limutin is de Leon's finest film to date although it will be for *Noli Me Tangere* perhaps that he will be long remembered. The latter film has the double appeal of being a dramatization of a literary work consecrated by the nationalists and of being a movie abounding in affectingly lyrical moments and movingly dramatic vignettes. But even such a deliberate artist as de Leon lapses into naivete. His fondness for religious imagery often betrays him since he is obviously unfamiliar with Catholic ritual. Such scenes as the procession in San Diego in *Noli Me Tangere* and the montage sequence that superimposes the Christ-image upon the figure of the suffering Moises Padilla (through the use of scenes taken from the Mass) in *The Moises Padilla Story* show inaccuracies that serve to emphasize the rigors of the discipline of irony whose logic can be sustained only by the most meticulously careful creator.

Cesar Gallardo has been mentioned earlier in connection with the failure of *I Believe*. A Gallardo film made before that sentimental fiasco gives fairer evidence of this young director's use of irony. *Kadenang Putik* takes the modern Filipino family for its theme and, with painful honesty, analyzes the various faces of love—wedded, filial, adulterous and carnal. In spite of the technical flaws in the narration, the movie bears promise that its director will eventually rank alongside of Avellana and de Leon as one of the most mature film artists in the country. The ironic temper of *Kadenang Putik* refuses to prettify the adulterous affair at the center of the plot; it also refrains from simplifying the consequences of the affair. At the conclusion, the human complications raised by a man's indiscretion are not tidied up by the multiple reconciliation occasioned by the death of the erring husband. The final scene is in fact but an insight, bitter and anguished, into the frailty of the flesh that breaks up homes and lives. No other Filipino director active today, not even de Leon or Avellana, delivers a greater cumulative impact than Gallardo at his best. While he may lack the lyricism of de Leon and the narrative facility of Avellana, Gallardo comprehends a wide range of contemporary Filipino experience which he interprets with a vision that can equal that of the other two directors in intensity.

If one wishes to trace the naivete of most Tagalog film directors to an external influence, he can find its root in the only school of film-making available to local artists—Hollywood. The exigencies of history have limited our contact with foreign films almost exclusively to those coming from the United States. There is no doubt that Filipino directors can still learn a lot about their craft from their American counterparts. However, they need to turn elsewhere for vitality in approach to and treatment of film materials. The works of Elia Kazan, George Stevens, Fred Zinneman, or Billy Wilder are, after all, only refreshing exceptions to the standard Hollywood products as even American students of the film admit.

The European film industry can offer a lot to local directors. The Italian neo-realist films, for instance, are ex-

cellent models for Filipino film-makers who are working with limited facilities and budgets. Neo-realism in Italy has produced films whose candor and significance as documentations of the human condition make their technical crudities seem less important. Philippine movies should look to the example of the Italians for an esthetic solution to its technical and budgetary handicaps. Our own war experience is very close to that portrayed so tellingly in such films as Roberto Rosellini's *Paisan* or Vittorio de Sica's *Two Women*. The humor and humiliation of life in post-liberation Manila are echoed in de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*, an ironic treatment of Italian city life after the Second World War. From non-European countries, there are Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* and Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*, both dealing with subjects very much in our midst. The first is a study of poverty in India which is harshly objective and yet harrowingly moving. The other is an unflinchingly realistic look into juvenile delinquency in Mexico, a country closely bound to ours in customs and temperament. The technical competence which went into the making of these significant films is probably lower than that found in even the most insipid Hollywood products. Nevertheless, the honesty of their vision and the earnestness with which they communicate that vision make them precious texts in the study of film art.

There is no reason why the Tagalog film should long remain a neglected sister to the arts in the Philippines. We have quite a number of directors possessing the technical virtuosity and creative imagination which can raise the film to respectability as an art-form. What these directors need to cultivate is a consistent respect for the logic of irony. Once this logic has become habitual with them, the Tagalog film will have dignified itself and the so-called "intelligentsia" that patronize plays and art exhibits will, perhaps, who knows, also patronize Philippine films.

BIENVENIDO LUMBERA