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## Nationalism in Scenes and Spaces of H. R. Ocampo

*Jonathan L. Beller*



Would that they'd understood that many chambered is my being. A  
pedestal in each chamber. A god in each pedestal

— H. R. Ocampo (1936, 13–14)

Hernando R. Ocampo, posthumously named National Artist in 1991—13 years after his death in 1978—was born in Santa Cruz, on the outskirts of Manila in 1911. He worked as a bootblack, a bus ticket vendor, a bar-tender, and a correspondence clerk for the Philippine Education company, before he became a short story writer, an assistant editor for the *Herald Mid-week Review*, editor of *This Week* for the *Manila Chronicle*, a screenwriter, a film and radio producer, an advertising consultant as well as, most famously, a painter. Jailed after World War II by the Philippine authorities on suspicion of being a collaborator with the Japanese,<sup>1</sup> Ocampo was a member of the Veronicans, the best known group of modernist writers before the war, as well as of the thirteen Moderns, a group of modernist painters consolidated after WW II, and of the Neo-Realist Group.<sup>2</sup> He was also reported to be a member of the communist movement Hukbalahap.<sup>3</sup> Ocampo was an early supporter of and contributor to the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) and the Philippine Art Gallery (PAG) the first art gallery in the Philippines, and also the founder and recognized leader of the Saturday group, an informal, fluid group of artists who until now meet every Saturday to sketch, argue and talk shop.<sup>4</sup>

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Unlike many of the best-known Philippine modernist painters, Ocampo never left the Philippines despite having been offered various fellowships. The abstract work, which Ocampo finally became best known for—visual symphonies, molten landscapes, cybernetic figures out of some mid-century sci-fi—is considered by contemporary critics and artists to be quintessentially if somewhat ineffably Filipino. Although it is usually conceded at the outset that his work was difficult at the time of its creation and remains so to this day, it is first the garish colors of his canvases (they are said to glare) and then their busy interlocking fullness (a *horror vacui* dubbed the Pinoy Baroque), which secure the stature of Ocampo's work as exhibit A of Philippine Modernism.<sup>5</sup>

My epigram for this essay, which I take to indicate a change in the structure of feeling not only of the writer but, very broadly speaking, of the modern Filipino subject, is borrowed from H. R. Ocampo's short story "Dark of Dawn," published in Manila in the *National Review* on 9 October 1936. These lines are part of what appears to be a vain attempt by a character identified in the story only as "He," to explain his marital infidelities first to himself and later to a potential mistress. Pondering his wife's possible opinions regarding his indiscretion, he thinks, "*Could she understand this? That here is no disloyalty, no faithlessness. That in me are many chambers, in each chamber a pedestal and for each pedestal there need be a god. That for any one god in me there can be no encroachment upon any other god*" ("Dark of Dawn," 14). What is interesting here, I would argue, is not so much the age-old narrative of heterosexual betrayal, as the innovative form utilized to express the dilemma—we are presented with a character fragmented in his interiority and composed of compartmentalized desires, absolute in their reality yet far from universal in their sway. It is as if different moments of the protagonist's being had different trajectories, different becomings. As the penultimate event of the story, that is, at the point of the highest intensity of the contradiction of the protagonist's desire—in what would classically be the story's climax—Ocampo writes, "*The atmosphere seems to swim about him as if he were liquid, as if he were drowning, smothering everything around him. He sees dark spots moving this way and that before his eyes*" ("Dark of Dawn," 14). The moral dilemma, rather than achieving some form of polarized resolution, results in something like an hallucinatory meltdown in which all particulate matter is suddenly in vertiginous flux.

Whether this vision—and it is a vision—is radical or reactionary is, in my opinion, too soon to pronounce. Politically speaking, the libidinal structure informing the creativity which will later be constructed in various ways as H.R. Ocampo's national(ist) artistry, is, in its relation to nationalism, at least as complex a question as nationalism itself. What is important to observe here is the changing form of the question of agency. The polarity of the ethical dilemma of "Dark of Dawn" is restated in the final exchange of the denouement:

I know I am doing you a great wrong. That I am inviting you to doom.

—Is there?

—Isn't there?

The parameters of the protagonist's moral disquietude, as the conceptual imbalance of the questions shows, remain in a state that is far from stable. Indeed, the "Is there?/Isn't there?" book-ends with which the story closes, escalate a crisis of personal integrity ("I am inviting you to moral doom") to questions about the temperament of the cosmos. My point here then is less about the merits or demerits of infidelity or about H.R. Ocampo's assertion of masculinity as a modernist undertaking of cosmic proportions—though this latter may well return as central. For the moment I want to establish that already in 1936, long before the periods in his painting known as "The Mutants Period" (1963–1968) or the "Visual Melody Period" (1968–1978), polarized conflict already results in a field of fragments. Contradiction for H.R. Ocampo effects a compartmentalization of self which implodes narrative form to achieve a molten state in the visual.<sup>6</sup>

The above observation concerning ruptures in H. R. Ocampo's early narratives and their consequent disruption of the visual field brings the following question: How do we get from H.R. Ocampo's "Proletarian Period" (1934–1945, the period during which most of his fiction writing was done) to his "Visual Melody Period," from *The Contrast* to *Genesis*, that is, from Social Realism to Neo-Realism, from figurative painting to abstraction. This question breaks down into two, one specific and the other more general. First, what happened to the clear articulation of social protest in the paintings by H.R. Ocampo done during his proletarian period (between the late thirties and mid-forties), in the later non-objectivist or neo-realist work.<sup>7</sup> That is, how does a clear-cut statement of social contradiction through the critical representation of inequality such as we can see in *The Contrast* (which shows a polar opposition between wealth and poverty)

become a symphony of bio-morphic fragments as in *Genesis*? Simply put, one might state the problem as follows: Where did the Marxism go? Is it enough to say, as has been suggested, that Ocampo's style changed because, as is known, he read a lot of American magazines on the one hand, and went from poverty to relative financial security on the other? Or might we read this development of Philippine art and of "The Artist as Filipino," as Angel De Jesus's book about him is subtitled, in a more socio-historical register rather than in a merely biographical one? To follow out the question of Marxism, does the transformation in Ocampo's plasticity have any relation to the antagonism between labor and capital itself changing form? Such a hypothesis might offer an account of the emergence of modernism in the Philippines as more than just the migration of an idea or a set of ideas and styles. Quite often art history imagines that a style can just be picked up at random and grafted on to an existing set of concerns. But is it possible, if only retroactively, to specify a set of necessary conditions for the emergence of particular aesthetic forms—in this case, Filipino Neo-Realism?

In 1968, the highly accomplished surrealist painter and then director of the National Museum of the Philippines, Galo B. Ocampo included the following statement in his account of the emergence of Philippine modernism before the second world war: "While representational art [Amorsolo et al.] in the Philippines was relatively stable, the entire society was on the verge of change. There was already a fragmentation of some sort, for Philippine society was even then in the process of shifting from the Spanish influence to the American. This state of affairs facilitated the introduction of modern art, for it is easier to introduce some new cultural trait in a society that is in the process of change, than to launch it in a static society."<sup>8</sup> Galo B. Ocampo's claim that Filipino society was in flux before the war and therefore the introduction of new aesthetic modes was possible stands, but we might make it more specific in order to increase its analytic use: How does U.S hegemony contribute to the fragmentation of Philippine life and experience and in what way might Philippine modernism be endemic to this historical transformation of the social fabric? In other words, what are the social conditions of possibility for the so-called syncretism that characterizes the imbrication of traditional Filipino social forms with Western ones in Philippine modernism and how or in what way are they related to (forced) modernization? While the influence of Cezanne, Picasso and Braque, as well as of Surrealism, Impressionism and the New York action

painters (Pollock) are widely acknowledged in the Philippines, can the emergence of a new visual idiom be seen as both the consequence and condition of a new order of Philippine-American relations? If so, then this aesthetic and cultural endeavor must logically appear as an essential component of this relationship, and therefore as a potentially transformative one, that is, as a site of struggle.

In 1942, two years after *The Contrast* was painted, Aurelio Alvero already perceived what appeared to be a divergent aspect in H.R. Ocampo's style:

Hernando's paintings may be divided into two: those of a social nature and those pieces of pure design. Those of a social nature are concerned with the presentation of the problems of labor in its struggle against capital. Most of them carry the stamp of a face that seems to have ingrained itself upon his brain: that of the socialist of Pampanga, Pedro Abad Santos. All his social content paintings represent faces which are thin and gaunt and hungry, but all of them bear a semblance of the socialist leader. On the other hand, his pieces of pure design portray genre with a treatment very unlike all other painting in the Philippines in their drawing and color. (*Pamana* 1992, 56)

What then is the relationship between those paintings and writings which *represent* social struggle and those which *effect* pure design? Why is it that the latter type of works, the so-called non-representational canvases, which receive their real development after 1950, are those which are considered by art historians to be *Pinoy na Pinoy*—the highest articulation of something like Filipinoness in art?

In a 1972 interview with Cid Reyes, H.R. Ocampo said two things worth noting here: "My paintings are my autobiography, and visual pleasure is the most important aspect of my work" (Reyes 1972, 23–28). Ocampo's emphasis on self and upon pleasure seems not to see the politics of artmaking anymore. Or perhaps, given his acknowledged debt to the Marcoses, he is seeing them too well. Nonetheless, what happened to the so-called social content of Ocampo's work, particularly his proletarian identifications and the visual engagement with social struggle? Would it be possible to see the movement away from representation and towards abstracted designs, that is designs abstracted from existing elements and given new forms by the artist, as the migration of some fundamental set of antagonisms?<sup>9</sup> Might we posit a situation in which representation itself no longer offers an adequate conceptualization of or intervention in social relations?

To attempt to answer this question, I raise another. What can Ocampo's early writings—those writings of the late thirties and early forties, tell us about the later paintings (50s, 60s and 70s)? I propose that these writings might be read on at least two levels which exceed the level of plot; first as aesthetic theory, and second as dream. Thus we might find in his literary work something like a conscious analysis of the terms of aesthetic production. Paul Valery is correct in saying that each epoch dreams the next, historical and biographical vectors which would impact his aesthetic production in ways that Ocampo himself might not have known.

### Scenes and Spaces

Although we could spend a lot of time on the poems and short stories, especially "Rice and Bullets," I'd like to turn to H.R. Ocampo's little known novel, *Scenes and Spaces*. This nearly forgotten work will be useful in order to specify certain relations between realism and abstraction in the work of H.R. Ocampo, and perhaps, to a lesser extent, in Philippine Art.

First a few words about the novel: It was issued serially in fifty-two installments over the course of fifty-eight weeks in *The Herald Midweek Magazine*, beginning 18 October 1939, with the last installment (that I have been able to track down) coming in 4 December 1940.<sup>10</sup> The novel is divided into three books entitled "Maypajo (16 Chapters), "Transition" (15 Chapters), and "Prism in the Sun" (21 Chapters). It is at once a coming of age story and a portrait of the artist as a young man. Much of it is autobiographical.

I begin my exploration of *Scenes and Spaces* by sharing its opening passages and then provide a summary of the key components of the plot. But one can discern even from the title, that the work will be characterized by a certain degree of fragmentation—that there will be scenes *and* spaces—and indeed the interludes become as important to the work as its inscribed events. In this novel, it is not only the elements of the plot that are important—the coming of age stories are shot-through with the American presence—but also what is unwritten and unrepresented: elements which are cut out from the story that can be told, and elements which fall in between or somehow exceed the representable. What has been said of the abstract painting *Genesis*, that, "In pictorial terms, the "negative" spaces (space between objects) can become "positive" and emerge as the objects

themselves," is already true of this predominantly realist novel of thirty years prior (*Portfolio* 1986, 173-76). The elisions, ruptures and spaces-in-between which appear as interruptions or absences in the narrative continuities become essential to understanding what is indeed written. In order to understand what is seen, one also had to understand what is unseen, beyond the horizon of the word.

Although readers might think of Ocampo's device of incorporating fragmentation as but a convenient concession to the serial format in which the novel appeared, or as an accommodation to the need to write in spurts for what was most likely a weekly check, for Ocampo the fragmentary character of his narrative production was not inconsistent with the fragmentary character of his experience and of his vision. Indeed this fragmentation is one of the themes of the novel, and it is directly linked to the penetration of Filipino society by American style capitalism. As Filipino publications bearing such English titles as *The National Review* and *The Herald Mid-Week* already imply, the very media of Filipino expression were being fused with American cultural and economic forms of expression, and what was occurring at the level of the individual periodical or article (the commodification of self-expression) also had its effects on the articulation of individuals and even of individual words (the commodification of self and the commodification of language).

It may well be that it is already a cliché that modernity is synonymous with commodification and fragmentation, that is, with the break up of traditional forms of life and the inversion or evaporation of traditional values, and to a lesser extent that modernism is the cultural complement of modernization, the registration of and indeed the software for the new temporalities, the new publics or markets, in short, for the entire array of emergent conditions of urban life characterized by industrial production and an intensified money economy. Nonetheless, it is a useful insight when thinking about the tendency towards abstraction and the severing of vision from narrative-life (the autonomization of vision), to recall that the logic of exchange-value which turns everyday things into commodities also imbues them with an abstract dimension. Exchangeability in the medium of money makes all things comparable to all other things and thus places them in gradients of flow which are abstract. This has the effect of prying things loose from their social embeddedness and setting them in motion, both conceptually and materially. Consider deforestation or agrarian migration to Manila. With deforestation the trees and whole forests actually move, and they are



thought and realized as money; with agrarian migration, whole towns are uprooted by an abstract logic with real effects. Thus the question: What particular circumstances and consequences of rupture inscribed by this Filipino writer, national-artist-to-be H.R. Ocampo during this particular period in Philippine history will help us illuminate some of the social factors bearing upon his aesthetic expression and possibly upon Filipino aesthetic expression generally? After all, if, as Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, with the processes of modernization, "All that is solid melts into air," what does this melting look like in the Philippines if not like an H. R. Ocampo painting?<sup>11</sup>

Like many of the novels of early modernism, *Scenes and Spaces* begins in a pedagogical vein. The first scene, we quickly find out, is set in a classroom where English is being taught to Filipino first graders:

Johnny get your gun  
get your gun-n-n  
get your gun-n-n  
Johnny get your hoe  
get your hoe-oe-oe  
get your hoe-oe-oe

and

over there  
over there  
in the world  
in the world-d-d

and

its a long way  
to Tipperary  
it's a long way  
to g-o-o

were the stray bits of songs that wafted from without into the stiff and correct schoolroom atmosphere. And the young teacher, Mrs. Morante, sitting on her elevated platform between the blackboards on the wall and the four rows of first grade (1-b) pupils, thought how noisy the neighborhood kids were, singing American songs one word of which they didn't even understand. Their parents ought to know better than let the children romp around aimlessly, singing, shouting, behaving like a bunch of scalawags (how she liked that word —scala-

wag— she liked the sound of it as the base of her tongue struck the roof of her mouth and rolled on to meet the back of her teeth before coming to the last syllable *wag* —scalawag; but she couldn't use it now or teach it to these innocent little darlings). Instead of sending them to school where they might learn something and be made into more vigorous and useful Filipino citizens these ignorant mothers just didn't care and allowed their children to go around doing mischief, listening to dirty stories told by poolroom bugs, prostitutes, taxi-dancers, matrons, and pimps to their colleagues—now that was a nice word—colleague—too nice and good to be used for such a lot of picking stray American songs from drunken American sailors and soldiers; instead of singing Jose Rizal was born on June 19; or Oh, children, obey your parents. (*Scenes and Spaces*, 1, 1; 9, *The Herald Mid-Week Magazine*, 18 Oct. 1939)

Ocampo begins the novel with fragments from American songs sung by Filipino children, and the teacher's, Mrs. Morante's, reflection that they do not even understand what they are saying. But as the structure of this first long paragraph will make clear, it is not only the children who do not understand the dynamics of the presence of English as the power language of imperialist America. As Ocampo shows by dwelling upon Mrs. Morante's savoring of the pronunciation of *scalawag*, the pleasures of American power are not merely rational, but visceral. Though welded here to a word, this pleasure is affective and corporeal. It exceeds the word's meaning, while being ironized by it.<sup>12</sup> The writer, which is what Mrs. Morante's young pupil, Teodoro, will become over the course of the novel, must be aware of just this aesthetic bind of colonization. Here, however, we are to notice precisely that there are aesthetic dimensions to power, and as the Futurists made clear, to domination and destruction as well.

Fittingly, the book begins in a traditional modernist writer's mode with a lesson about language.<sup>13</sup> To remark upon this didactic tendency is not in the least to trivialize it. In order to dramatize the imperialist transformations of language, Ocampo chooses to represent an institutional space designed to regulate the intersection between Tagalog and English. The depiction of the space of the classroom and of official pedagogy, of the space for officiating the mind, offers an excellent opportunity to explore the intimate exchanges between two cultures. Ocampo shows the classroom to be an improperly idealistic and idealizing space bent upon repressing the social conditions of its pedagogical aspirations.

Like Stephen Dedalus's brusque assertion to the school headmaster in James Joyce's *Ulysses* that God is a shout in the street, Ocampo's opening juxtaposes arbitrarily found fragments of human life—just voices out there—in a way that shows that these fragments from everyday life can be read as influential and meaningful in ways that may exceed common understanding. He is offering a reading lesson that would be unteachable in the classroom he depicts. Ocampo juxtaposes found fragments, and from these the artist produces a legible image of the world. These fragments assert in an American key a relation between militarization and agriculture (Johnny get your gun/hoe) unfolding in the context of the presence of "over there" and "the word" in the here and now of small town life, with the proviso that "its a long way to go-o-o-o" until the promises of modernization are achieved. Ocampo decodes the shards of America he finds in Philippine life. Far from inert elements, they are part of a general technology of imperialism and in the form of words, songs, machines, etc., combine, as it were, cybernetically, with Filipino bodies.

One could say, then, that already in these song fragments and the long opening paragraph which follows the novel's primary theme and its variations are put forth. There is an American presence in Philippine life that will impose itself in ways that are neither isolable, nor readily intelligible, nor to be regulated by individual will. Aspects of the world are being forced to operate according to a new logic. Mrs. Morante herself does not understand all aspects of what she is supposedly teaching, for, as in the novels of European Realism written from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, world-historical social forces transcend individual will and reason. Ocampo will examine this, the cultural logic of U.S imperialism in the Philippines, at length. His subject matter in *Scenes and Spaces* will be a survey of what momentarily appears as the tectonic collision of two cultural plates which will grind each other up and in the process produce a generation—and an artist.<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Morante's desires for a progressive national identity ("Jose Rizal was born on June 19," etc.) are ironized by her absurd pride and sense of superiority conferred by her knowledge of American English. She misses two important points which Ocampo's irony makes clear. First, that which she despises, the children's singing of American songs, is an index of precisely the conditions by which she has learnt English and maintains her superior airs; the precondition of her identity, or at least of her identifications, is U.S imperialism and military power. Second, the songs, the poolroom stories and

cabaret vignettes, are at once the very media of present day instruction and what she must repress to maintain her image both of herself and of the Philippines. The drunken sailors are part and parcel of the "correct schoolroom atmosphere" dictated by the American educational system that Mrs. Morante is a product of and disseminates, just as American protocols for national power (what should a nation look like?, how do you make citizens?, etc.) determine her understanding of a correct Filipino national identity. It is perhaps the supreme irony of this opening section that Mrs. Morante would exhort the children to obey their parents even though she derides their parents' ignorance, because it shows that she has a respect for the forms of authority while exercising only a limited ability in the critical analysis of authority. This colonial relation, called "veneration without understanding" by Renato Constantino, is, in part, how colonialism perpetuates itself (as long as it is backed up by military and economic force). Ocampo, however, is not interested only in the intellectual analysis of a "colonial mentality." He aspires to come to grips with what exceeds "mentality," how American power penetrates the fabric of Filipino lives, how it organizes lived experience, structures the libido and inflects the imagination.

Ocampo's ironies emphasize a principle tenet of Philippine modernism present in Manila after Victor Edades return to Manila in 1928—the rejection of idealistic and academic portrayals of reality. Formalizing his differences with the artists known as the Conservatives in a series of three articles written after the war Edades (in Paras-Perez 1995) wrote, "In most Academic artists, contemporary life inspires no independent action. They are held in bondage by the works of their predecessors and by accumulated art forms bearing little or no relation to their own experience. Their point of view is not creative but historical and archeological. In essence, the Academic represents the conventional as opposed to the original." Ocampo is here already interested in the realm of experience, in the quotidian, in the way in which life is positioned and structured by forces from outside, but nonetheless lived.<sup>15</sup> These dynamic forces are not easily accessible to rational thought formalized in other eras and places because rather than corresponding to ideals abstracted from earlier social formations, these forces pass through the very materiality of social life. Mrs. Morante in this first paragraph is located very precisely in space: "Mrs. Morante, sitting on her elevated platform between the blackboards on the wall and the four rows of first grade (1-b) pupils, thought . . ." (SS I: 1), as if the thought emerged out of that particular

space itself. *Scenes and Spaces* plies the following dialectic: that people are to a certain extent artifacts of the socio-historical scenes and spaces which they occupy, and that they simultaneously have intense volition. To rephrase Marx slightly, Ocampo shows that we are media of history, in the sense that it courses through us and overdetermines our possibilities, but also makers, in the sense that we create out of what we are thrown into what we will be.

The key thing to keep in mind with relation to the power of English and the authority it conveys in the Philippines, is that no matter how contradictory its logic, its pleasures and effects are real. These effects will at once transform Filipino narrative and, with H.R. Ocampo, exceed it. This excess, this beyond-narrative has everything to do with the viscosity of a power that is subtle, diffuse, unlocalizeable, and for these reasons, abstract while remaining material. Still in the first chapter, Ocampo deploys additional ironic representations of the socio-linguistic dynamics of American power, "Now children,' Mrs. Morante began in English, trying to inject authority—not harsh but kind authority—into her voice" SS I (1): 9), which represent power's complexity and corporeality: "And she concluded her sermon with the single word 'position.' This she said in English, and the pupils automatically stiffened their backs straight against their desks, and their hands (the fingers interlaced) they woodenly thrust forward on top of their writing boards" (SS I [1]: 9). These representations will ultimately show how the logic of a new form of power for which English is a cutting edge produces a kind of experience that is beyond representation. Though English here is a medium of instruction, the experiences it structures move beyond the linguistic into the corporeal and, as we shall see, the visual.

Before turning to the non-representational dimensions of *Scenes and Spaces*, that is, to the departure from Realism, let me offer two points by way of summary. First, English is shown to humiliate as it empowers, (implications for nationalism), because Filipino users of the imperial idiom refer themselves to the judgments and sensibilities of a world that exists apart from the Philippines as it is, or at least, as it was. This is clear also from Ocampo's parodies of Filipino school children's incorrect English usage. Though colonial subjects aspire to the stature of the colonizer, they are always undercut (at least in Ocampo's representation) by their incomplete assimilation of the American idiom. Ocampo's efforts to become a man of letters in English are undoubtedly bound up with an aspiration to transcend this imperial relation. Second, Mrs. Morante, in part because of the

power conferred upon her by her knowledge of the imperial language, is, within the narrative, an important if not the central object of desire for the male characters. The attraction to everything she embodies leads to the narrative complications. Despite her internally contradictory character she has a profoundly seductive presence which, in excess of all her intentions, indelibly marks the male characters in the narrative: her pupil Leonardo, his brother Teodoro and their father, whose name is the same as that of H. R. Ocampo's father, Don Emilio. Mrs. Morante's seductive appeal, which is linked to her authority as a school teacher and her values (values which allow her to dispatch with an inconvenient husband and pursue her course as an independent woman) depends upon the presence of American power, and also enables its diffusion.

### Realism on Scenes and Spaces

Lest anyone get the impression that *Scenes and Spaces* is some sort of modernist manifesto, full of found objects and hallucinatory prose, I should hasten to say that much of the novel remains quite conventional, constructing a desiring woman as a femme fatal who unwittingly mediates imperialism, and deploying by and large the flat reportage of realism. Book one narrates Leonardo's first forays into sexuality, including his intense attraction to Mrs. Morante, and books two and three relate the story of the younger Teodoro's coming into manhood, all of which takes place over the long decline of Don Emilio's fortunes. These intrigues are developed in a manner typical of the pulp of this period. Structurally, however, *Scenes and Spaces* is extremely innovative. The novel is most original where, as in "Dark of Dawn," the plot proceeds to its crisis points. For these result from a pressurization of the fragmentation already discussed.

Generally, the movement is as follows: the plot winds itself into a severe complication by frustrating a character's desires and cutting short his aspirations, and at the moment of subduction, the character has a vision. Here is the first one that overtakes a despondent Leonardo falling into a reverie while staring at the "dazzling pin points of the mid-day sun reflected by the street's sharp and craggy pebbles" (SS I (11): 11; 12/27/39):

And after a few minutes images began to form themselves inside the closed lids of his eyes. At the beginning it was something blurred and indistinct—something like the unnatural and unrecognizable sequence

of lights and shadows in a badly focused photographic negative plate. Later however, the indistinct lights and shadows shifted slowly but continuously until they united to form a pair of eyes—beautiful mischievous and knowing eyes. The pair of eyes slowly receded and the image locally included in its recession first the eyebrows and a well-shaped nose between them, then onto a pair of lovely lips, and so logically on and on, until finally the face of a woman was completed" (SS I [11]: 11).

This composition takes place before the eyes of Leonardo when the unfolding of his desire is blocked by the realist plot, that is, by the imposition of external, "objective" factors on his subjective fantasy. Leonardo's burgeoning manhood has at this point been doubly challenged, first because he was beaten-up by a pimp in front of Mrs. Morante in a scuffle over her attention, and later because of her treatment of him as a child during a moment of charged intimacy. "She had seen only that he had a body big enough to desire but not man enough to respect" (SS I (11): 11). Leonardo recovers from his daydream with a start and suddenly feels that he has made a blunder, "a stupid and unforgivable man-blunder." The vision shows him this. It is not reasoned out in language. Rather, the perception of a blunder arises from an interpretation of an image which is itself a condensation of the narrative tensions.

It is important to note that both challenges to Leonardo's manhood have their root causes in the American presence. It was American ex-servicemen who founded Maypajo's cabaret and subsequently transformed the character of the town with the ensuing nightlife, prostitution and requisite thugs, and it was the Americans who transformed the educational system, began the institutionalization of English, and in effect conjured the likes of Mrs. Morante. That Philippine-American relations somehow underlie the subjective and narrative determinations of the characters, makes Mrs. Morante's appearance to Leonardo as an image logically persuasive: whatever she is concretely, she is also an image of a process occurring behind or beyond her, and it is in part as an image that she attracts.

English/Americanization then is the condition of possibility for narrative here. Filipino life is depicted working itself out in the context of a transformed psycho-linguistic environment and undergoing certain crises which propel it out of Realism.<sup>16</sup> Just as the trauma of the American presence becomes the condition for narrative in these scenes and spaces of Filipino life, the interruptions in narrative

release a form of what might be called Filipino modernity which is heretofore non-existent. These imagistic disruptions, these perturbations in the imaginary which disrupt the functioning of the symbolic order, exist in place of narrative resolutions to particular tensions and conflicts. This historical situation generates particularly original forms. Even if many of the motivations depicted within the stories here are bound up with imperfect attempts to romance American forms, that is, even if myriad aspects of Filipino life (aspects which may include the writing of novels such as this one) are motivated by new orders of desire encoded by American values, the crisis that results in the imperfect realization of these desires (as well as from the counter impulses they arouse) produces something fundamentally new. This originality can be seen most clearly at the ruptures within the narrative—the moments when vision becomes semi-autonomous.<sup>17</sup> This peeling away of the visual from the signifier, that is, from language, also provides a thesis regarding the intensive use of images by the US both for purposes of imperialism and of domestic organization and control. More generally it specifies the entry point of image culture into subjectivity as the point where irreconcilable differences are negotiated. The photographic plate, which as a yet-to-be-written history of Philippine visuality might demonstrate, has been to culture as finance capital has been to economics, qualitatively transforming its range and significance. It inaugurates perceptual shifts which disrupt the psycho-linguistic field—in short those shifts first figured under the rubric of modernism. A technological implement, or more precisely process, provides the model for a new order of interiority, a new regime of perception.

Like Leonardo, Don Emilio, in his moment of crises, sees the molten image of the embodiment of seduction and power that has wrought the dissolution of his good fortune: Mrs. Morante. As a civic leader, it was Don Emilio who first wanted the school for the community, but it is also Mrs. Morante and the contradictory reaction to the morals of the cabaret that have led to Maypajo's hypocritical condemnation of his son, and will lead to his financial ruin.

Having just saved Mrs. Morante from being stoned by an angry mob, Don Emilio has a restless night full of dreams:

And across the vast semi-translucent cellophane-like screen that hovered dizzily back and forth, back and forth the visual entirety of Don Emilio's inner eyes came the face of Mrs. Morante. The face kept rippling and writhing like a mass of dough kneaded by a pair of play-



ful hands now contorting itself hideously into an ugly and painful complaint, now fashioning itself into a demoniacal and lunatic sneer. (SS: 9,11).

Again, veteran viewers of H.R. paintings will recognize an apt description of their visual effects in the rippling and writhing mass of dough. It is during this dream sequence, which begins with a composite face on the "vast semi-translucent cellophane-like screen" composed of Leonardo and Mrs. Morante and ends with a stone shedding her blood that we first suspect that Don Emilio has banished Leonardo in order to save face with the community. Again, the crucial act, Leonardo's banishment, is not written. It is a space among scenes, an unlanguage event whose place is held by a visual eruption—this time not exactly an image, but a becoming-image—a proto-image. As if an image which retained its placidity by being able to swing in and out of different states somehow expressed the vectors of force permeating material reality more organically than an image which resolved itself as representation.

Teodoro, Leonardo's younger brother, also has a series of visions which could well describe H.R. paintings to come twenty years later. He begins to cultivate them and they become increasingly abstract. For it is he, and not Leonardo whom Mrs. Morante used to ask to draw *for her* who will become the artist. His first vision comes after a long illness, an illness resulting from an un-narrated accident which occurred in the space between Book 1 and Book 2. The condition of possibility for Teodoro's fall from a horse was the "long vacation" in Nueva Ecija taken by Don Emilio and his family to avoid the scandal over the unconsummated incident involving Leonardo and Mrs. Morante. Again, it is in the midst of a complex series of interruptions in narrative flow, that is, interruptions in what might have been the natural course of the lives of the characters before the American presence, that the vision literally erupts from the trauma of discontinuity:

*NevermindNevermindNevermind*, steadily repeated itself within him for quite a long while in a sob-whisper that was softer than the softest voice-whisper and his eyes became wide and dreamy as he stared at the street in front of the house. (SS II [1]: 9).

Here, explicitly, as meaning and history become emotive, voice gives way to vision:

Then the big round eye began to float gently. Floating, floating, gently, gently upward and upward. One big round eye gently floating upward seeing white blinding light. White blinding light all over.

Now it had suddenly ceased floating upward and was now hanging unmoving in space. The darkness, dazzling and complete, all around for a brief one-millionth moment.

And then the big round eye slowly came back seeing everything and nothing in a whirling sphere of soft jelly-like mass of white and black, of red and green, of orange blue and violet.

*Everything and nothing. Everything and nothing.* (SS II [1]: 9)

At the height of the vision "everything and nothing" are "whirling. Whirling and whirling" (9) until "the one big round eye oblongated. And cell-like the oblongated body slowly divided itself into two rounded masses. . . . And the whirling masses of white and black, of red and green, of orange, blue and violet slowly faded into thin air." (14)

Teodoro's physical sensations returned and "his eyes saw the deserted street in front of the house, no longer bathed in the soft rays of the sun, for twilight had already descended and the street was now sadly quiet and reverently tranquil under the semi-darkness of approaching night" (14).

The vision, which is meant to be nothing less than a re-birth out of the collapse of familiar space and temporality, ends with a call from Teodoro's mother, "Teodoro, . . . Teodoro. Where are you Teodoro? his mother called again" (14).

And the twelve year old boy slowly walked toward their house without answering his mother. He did not want to frighten her with the strength of his voice and the tallness of his being (14).

Ocampo, who at this point in his life is both writer and painter, finds a rekindling of voice in visual experience. Not just a new vision, but a new order of vision, provides the distinctive quality of Ocampo's voice—it is an onto-genetic mutation in the making of an artist.

Already here, we have a complex proto-type for *Genesis*. Each flight into the visual in *Scenes and Spaces* represents a release from narrative. Here "everything and nothing," the mantra issuing from the lips of the awakening dreamer, is precisely the abstraction of scenes and spaces which then provides something (knowledge, fortitude, pleasure) to the visionary upon his return to the world of narratives.

In the second half of *Scenes and Spaces* Teodoro's visual experiences become somewhat of an obsession with him. As if to engage more directly in the fabric of existence he is always endeavoring to conduct visual experiments by concentrating his gaze for long periods, but the story constantly interrupts—he aspires to a new order of vision but cannot sustain it. His visions provide a libidinal plenitude not available to him in the narrative of his life. At one point, for example, his friends pull him away from staring at the dazzling light of the sun reflected upon water to see a man and a woman making love—exciting, but somehow an anti-climax. Teodoro's visual experiments are related to his powerful but blocked desire for Nena, a blond American girl, and are intensified by his inability to speak his love. What is actually never explicitly stated but what is made clear by the structure of *Scenes and Spaces* is that Leonardo's naive but devastating flirtation with the English teacher is the cause of Don Emilio's increasing poverty, which is in turn the cause of Teodoro's decrease in allowance and therefore the indirect cause of Teodoro's vision quest. Because of extreme poverty, he cannot properly court Nena, and must envision his satisfaction and his manhood another way. Teodoro's poverty, inexorably and multiply tied to an invisible American presence, is central to books II and III.

In the novel's climactic vision, an older Teodoro, plagued by guilt too complex to summarize here cuts up an American style suit he has just purchased with money he stole from his sister and flushes it down the toilet. While on a bus from the tailor shop he imagines cutting the suit, which was to be his entry ticket into an upper class social club, "with a sadistic and deliberate vehemence that actually sent electromagnetic fluids of pleasure and satisfaction through every layer of his flesh to the very marrow of his bones" (SS III: 12). He dreams of flushing the long and streaming ribbons swirling down the toilet, and when he goes home, he actualizes the dream. In short, he makes an H. R. Ocampo out of the suit.

Though on many previous occasions in the novel, characters had engaged in imaginative acts (Teodoro as a boy often imagines what he will say to girls only to say something idiotic when the time comes), this destruction of the American suit which was to clothe him in imperialist trappings and give him upward mobility is the first imaginative act in the novel to fully realize itself in practice. After this incident, Teodoro gives up the social club, hangs out in bars, has affairs and writes prize-winning short stories. The novel breaks off here, having done its work of producing an artist.

## Conclusion

To sum up, let me reask my original question, "How did we get from social realism to Filipino Neo-realism? The short answer is that a new period in U.S.-Philippine relations demands new terms for Filipino creativity and nationalist aspirations. Social contradiction, at least for some sectors of society achieved an intensive penetration and diffusion which rendered their resolution unimaginable in narrative and indeed in historical form. Revolution, that is a fully decolonized nationalism became unthinkable for many Filipinos despite their strong anti-American sentiments.<sup>18</sup> The revolution which did take place immediately after the post-war period was an aesthetic revolution, modernism to be blunt, with its most revolutionary dimension in the visual sphere.

For the moment, this account leaves out a clear-eyed political judgment of this turn of events, specifically the breaking off of vision from narrative and historical representation, as well as an adequate account of the relationship between Philippine nationalism and Filipino masculinity. It is clear that these latter two have been inseparable, and this is an urgent problem of history and for criticism. The characters in *Scenes and Spaces*, like H. R. himself, look for fulfillment both as men, in the feminist sense of that term, and as Filipinos. Their vision emerges as a consequence of blocked desires. As America feminizes, infantilizes and impoverishes the Philippines and its inhabitants, the assertion of a virile creativity (the very call of Philippine modernity) is an act of resistance and survival, even as it constitutes itself in relative conformity to patriarchy and bourgeois society.<sup>19</sup> This understanding of the simultaneity of nationalism and masculinity here may help to clarify H. R. Ocampo's absurdly macho statement in the seventies that "The act of painting is very sensually satisfying to me, almost as satisfying as making love to a woman. In short, I am painting for my own sensual satisfaction. . . ." Surely there is more to say here (Zafaralla 1991, C-1).

With respect to the visual, what *Scenes and Spaces* illustrates is that where narrative possibilities collapsed, that is, at moments of deep crisis for the novel's characters, a molten and hallucinatory visual world erupted for these characters, as if historical struggle, unable to be resolved narratively, that is, historically, underwent a migration into the visual. History's narratological contradictions result in a reconfiguration of the visual arena. Thus from Ocampo's writings, it is arguable that the shift in Ocampo's visual style as a painter

marks not just a personal change, or even just a change in the history of Philippine art, but a socio-historical reconfiguration of the role of the visual in history. Such a shift in the relation between language and image, a shift which marks nothing less than a qualitative transformation in the character of perception and the mediation of history, is indeed confirmed by the rise of image culture and the movement of capitalist expansion and control into the visual. If mass media (cinema, TV, computers) are understood as technologies for the organization of the imagination on a global scale, there is much that remains to be said about Ocampo's recognition of the primacy of vision and his effort to grasp it as a site of possibility, if not freedom.<sup>20</sup> If, as has been well documented, mass media itself functions to short-circuit the perception and languaging of social contradiction through the synchronization of imagination, desire, viscosity, etc., with the exigencies of capital (the belief that social problems may be solved through capitalist development and consumerism), what as yet unrealized potential might Ocampo's interventions in the composition of visibility have? Such questions are not asked in order to ignore or forget the adoption of his paintings and of abstraction generally by the Marcoses, or to argue that they were not made to function in consonance with their political and ideological program.<sup>21</sup> Rather they assert that the history of these works is alive and that their significance remains up for grabs in a struggle which is not just about the paintings, but about the relationship between aesthetics and politics, the character of the society in which we live, and the form of the society which we work to bring into being.

What has been established here by reading *Scenes and Spaces* as aesthetic theory is that Filipino Neo-realism at once 1) marks a qualitative transformation of the historical status of the visible and 2) strives not to represent static objects or stable identities but dynamics—it shows a multiplicity of logics playing out over the surface of the visible. The novel seems to assert that something happens to language which renders it fundamentally inadequate to the representation of experience. The non-narrative, non-representational, affective character of experience is ascendant. Vision and visibility exceed narrative and rationality. It is (here at least) vision, not narrative which partially breaks the stronghold of plots imposed by American forces because it can formalize if not conceptualize the abstract logics which hold objects in their sway. Neo-realism is non-representational because it represents the formal consequences of a cultural logic and not the objects themselves. In responding to the non-narrative, meta-

physical and visceral melt-downs of imperialism, it allows a viewer to create using the transformed, quasi-cybernetic, incorporating character of the existential terrain. The later paintings of H.R. Ocampo (such as *Genesis*) show dynamic elements that might become part of any number of visually logical arrays busily sought by a desiring eye. In an incredible suspension of objectification, which is the ultimate tendency of capital during this period, they restore the creative force to the eye as it pleasurably searches for some coalescence. These paintings then, are paintings seeking the liberation of vision through the dereification of the visible object; they are, I think, about suspending the process of the codification of the objective world of the imperialist Real. If objectivity and objectification are precisely the removal of agency from living beings, the formal decodification of the very process of objectification returns power to the viewer, allowing the eye to dance in a relatively free quest for new orders and meanings as it has a chance to create for itself outside of any narrative schema. But the extraordinary success of these canvases is perhaps small compensation for the incomplete realization of Filipino liberation.

### Notes

1. Ocampo worked in *Hodobu*, the propaganda section of the Japanese Imperial Army for intelligence purposes. For an example of one of his essays extolling the virtues of Japanese government see "The Tenno of Nippon," in *Philippine Review* (March 1943, 30-32).

2. The Veronicans consisted of Francisco Arcellana, Lazaro M. Espinosa, Cornelio S. Reyes, Ernesto C. Basa, Bienvenido T. Potenciano, Delfin Fresnosa, Estrella Alfon, N. V. M. Gonzales, Manuel A. Viray, Benjamin P. Alcantara, Angel De Jesus, Narciso G. Reyes, and H. R. Ocampo. "These thirteen young writers were the avant-garde of the short story writers during the early 1930s. Their writing was characterized by a break with tradition, an absence of bourgeois-moralistic taboos, and a realistic approach to life. To improve their writing, they read Erskine Caldwell, William Saroyan, Ernest Hemmingway, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner" (De Jesus 1979 22). Modernism is said to have its beginnings with the December 1928 one-man show of Victorio Edades in the Philippine Columbian Club in Ermita, Manila. In 1940 Edades assembled a list of thirteen modern painters which included himself, Galo. B. Ocampo, Carlos (Botong) Francisco, H.R. Ocampo, Vicente Manansala, Cesar Legaspi, Diosdado M. Lorenzo, Demetrio Diego, Jose Pardo, Bonifacio Cristobal, Arsenio Capili, Ricarte Purugunan, Anita Magsaysay-Ho. Later, the Neo-Realist Group was composed of H. R. Ocampo, Cesar Legaspi, Vicente Manansala, Romeo V. Tabuena, Victor Oteyza, Ramon Estella, Carlos (Botong) Francisco, and Victorio C. Edades and Nena Saguil.

3. Ocampo's involvement with Hukbalahap is doubted by or unknown to some of his descendents with whom I have spoken. Nonetheless, several contemporary paint-

ers who are or have been involved with the movement and continue to be influenced by his life and work affiliate him with the Huks. In support of this, early titles of his paintings include, *Laborers, Beggar, Freedom to Starve, Slum Dweller*, etc.

4. The AAP was founded by Purita Kalaw in 1948. The PAG was founded by Lydia Arguilla together with Erstrella Alfon, Flora Lansing, Trinidad Tarrasa-Subido and Consuelo Abaya.

5. "Pinoy Baroque: a festive spirit, love of image-clusters or that fear of emptiness (horror vacui) which compels the Pinoy to fill every space with busy detail, flattened perspective, and lush, curvilinear forms designed to reflect the grass-roots Pinoy's taste for the flamboyant and exuberant in his lifestyle, environment, and décor. . . . It is abstraction more at home with subject-matter—specifically the human figure—than without it. It also welcomes the decorative element found in folk, popular and indigenous arts and crafts (Torres, 24).

6. Ocampo's periods are ordinarily denoted as follows: 1929–1934—Aping Amorsolo Period, 1934–1945—Proletarian Period, 1945–1963—Transitional Period, 1963–1968—Mutant Period, 1968–1978—Visual Melody Period. It is with the beginning of the Proletarian Period in 1945 that Ocampo says he started to paint like H.R. Ocampo. See Angel G. De Jesus (1979, 60).

7. Ocampo's later paintings have been variously described as abstract, biomorphic, non-objective, and neo-realist. For reasons which I hope will become clear, I prefer the nomenclature Filipino Neo-Realism when referring to Ocampo's later work.

8. Perhaps Galo B. Ocampo's formulations in this pamphlet are somewhat tempered by the venue provided for his remarks: the American Embassy Ballroom. Without drawing it out, he invokes the forced modernization of the Philippines as a reason for the nation's lack of global influence in the arts: "A society that is in a state of continual change—where there is rapid change of status and shifting values in a compressed time period—could not possibly evolve a cultural trait stable enough to be developed to the fullest extent. Philippine society is the subject rather than the cause for changes. Not unless there is a reversal in this tempo of change could such a revolution in the Philippines occur" (16). However, could it be argued that vertiginous uneven development and the incredible contrasts brought about by third-worldification make the aesthetic production of countries like the Philippines the essential modernism of any global fantasy, at least as much as it constitutes both the necessarily excluded periphery for Western Modernity and, as importantly, a prediction of the new proximity of social contradictions everywhere?

9. As has been widely documented the inspiration for Ocampo's biomorphic forms was drawn from the shapes of things around his house in Caloocan: from leaves, to the designs on an elaborate Parole (Christmas decoration), to a urine stain on a wall.

10. My thanks to Odette Alcantara and to Nieves Epistola, for informing me of the existence of the novel, and especially to Lilia Quindoza Santiago, both for providing me with a copy of what exists of *Scenes and Spaces*, and for sharing her insights into the life and work of H. R.

11. See Berman (1982), for an excellent elaboration of some of the conditions associated with modernity.

12. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism would be very useful here. His effort in "Discourse in the Novel" to think the polyvocality of language thorough the framework of class struggle could prove quite useful in this colonial context.

13. It is not necessary to assert that Ocampo read James Joyce, who begins *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with a children's rhyme ("Little Johnny Tuco") and *Ulysses*

with Stephen Dedalus going off to teach his classes, to suggest that if an artist wants to write in a new idiom, that is, if the artist believes that reality expresses itself in a new mode, s/he has to teach his or her readers to read it.

14. Among the effects of the presence of imperialist power, is the othering of certain materials and events of daily life in such a way as a binary is constructed. This has the effect of positing the imperialist power and the "host nation" as monolithic forms. For example, the language in which H. R. Ocampo's National Artist Award is given states that Ocampo is to be awarded because "preeminent achievements that have enhanced the Filipino's cultural heritage deserve the recognition and acknowledgment of our Government in pursuit of its policy of preserving and developing Filipino culture and a national identity." This subsumes individual and regional variation under the category/concept of the nation-state, a form which is itself consolidated through the conceptualization of a monolithic Other. After I presented this paper at the Center for Cultural Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz, Jim Clifford challenged the simplifying and polarizing image of the collision of two cultural plates implying that the encounters being described were much more complex. Though I take his point—and indeed argue that Ocampo's later painting dramatizes the formal complexity of the interactive polyphonic character of history—it is important to recognize that there were many forces at work precisely to construct "The United States" and "The Philippines," forces including racism and nationalism, as distinct and relatively monolithic entities.

15. See for example H.R. Ocampo's poem, "You can never completely be" in Rod Paras-Perez (1991, 15). "You can never completely be here / Never completely there or there. . . . / For there are melodies, Darling—. . . / Disturbingly complete. . . . / And with their nostalgic melody / Parts of you shall be transported / Inexorably from one world to another. / Thus wherever you are, Darling / You can never completely be." The melody in the poem which re-organizes the fragments of thought and body might be imagined to foreshadow the visual melody period to come years later—as if other logics take over aspects of the figure. The visual melody paintings are mediations among multiple logics, hence their neo-realism, for the reality of social materiality is in the abstract vectors that pass through them and organize them. It is as if the later paintings are composed of systems of splines (vector summations of forces at a given point from a variety of stresses).

16. The cabaret, significantly, tells Leonardo the time each evening because of the regularity of the start of its music: 8PM. In addition to insisting upon a new tempo for life and along with that a new historical moment, the American presence as the presence of the English language (with all of the military and economic violence that makes its dissemination possible) deploys at many levels in the narrative new orders of power and seduction.

17. It should be noted for future reference that the escalation of contradiction leads here neither to Marxian notions of totality nor to postmodern sublimity. The revolution goes elsewhere.

18. HR on Japan, his arrest.

19. See, "Towards Virility in Art," Edades, the third in a series of Polemics written in support of modernism.

20. For more on the organization of social production by visual technologies see my essays, "Cinema, Capital of the Twentieth Century" (1994); "The Spectatorship of the Proletariat" (1995): 171–228; "Capital/Cinema" (in Kaufman and Heller 1998); "The Film of Money" [forthcoming 1999].



21. The cultivation and utilization of art for ideological and political ends is an old story. For a particularly interesting case, that of the dissemination of abstract expressionism as a pro-American vehical during the cold war, see *Pollock and After*, ed.

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