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Portraits of Youth in Philippine Films

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In classical literary theory, art was usually viewed as a mirror of reality. Modern literary theory has modified this classical view somewhat. It is today more customary to talk of art as a mirror in which people see themselves. Instead of merely passively reflecting reality, art is more often seen today as an active participant, or at least a catalyst, in the way people define themselves. In many ways, people behave according to the way art portrays them.

Such theorizing, of course, is almost always couched in the impractical jargon of literary theory, which is today caught in the fashions of deconstructive and post-structuralist thought. For researchers more interested in the practical applications of ideas rather than the ideas themselves, however, this theorizing leads to a workable process of analysis that looks at reality through its symbols, rather than the other way around. If we want to know how a particular group of people behave, in other words, we can always look at the way they portray themselves to be, or at other people's portrayals of themselves that they accept.

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I want to look at the lifestyles and values of young people in the Philippines, particularly their relationships with family and peer groups, through their portraits in Philippine film. Young people make up the bulk of the moviegoing public in the Philippines, and there is every reason to believe that their continued patronage of cinema is based on their acceptance of the way cinema portrays their values. In particular, I shall focus on the way young people are characterized in Philippine films in terms of literary treatment and visual images.

Linking cinema to society is not new to Philippine critical scholarship; earlier critical work has focused on various aspects of the interrelationships between film and society. Many of the articles in Tiongson (1983), for example, take these interrelationships as givens. Similarly, I shall assume this connection. Unlike earlier researchers, however, I shall not take an explicitly reflectionist view, i.e., the view that film exhibits a one-to-one correspondence with reality. Instead, I shall work on the assumption that the images or myths of self that are found in cinema are attempts at self-definition of those who create or, in this particular case, watch the films. In other words, the way youth are presented in films is the way real-life youth believe or wish themselves to be.

Because film archives are practically non-existent in the Philippines, despite the current proliferation of videotape rental outlets, it is not possible to do a random sampling of Philippine movies, since the samples chosen may not be existing even on videotape. I have, therefore, chosen award-winning films as my purposive sample. By award-winning films, I refer

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exclusively to films cited either in part or in whole by the country's only association of film critics, the Manunuring Pelikulang Pilipino [Filipino Film Critics Circle]. These films I have watched and can discuss from memory, despite the lack of existing film or videotape copies of them. Although the sample is convenient rather than random, a case can be made for the good or quality film (defined operationally as a film which has been cited or awarded either in part or in whole by established critics) being a good vehicle for social analysis. Genetic structuralist critic Lucien Goldmann, for one, prefers masterpieces when he looks for homologies of the world-views of particular sets of people.

Four perspectives on youth appear from a study of quality Filipino films. Filipino youth are alternatively, sometimes simultaneously, regarded as (a) victims, (b) villains, (c) heroes, and (d) anti-heroes.

Youth as Victims

The most common portrait of youth in Philippine movies shows ~~him or her~~ ^{them} as victims. In a common plot, rooted in a dramatic tradition that antedated the coming of film to the country (Tiongson 1983: 102-124), a probinsyano or probinsyana [country boy or girl] comes to the big city and becomes a rape victim, a prostitute, a criminal, or some other dehumanized Other. A variation of this plot changes the origin of the young person; he or she may come from a depressed area in the city

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itself.

In Eddie Garcia's Atsay (1978), for instance, a girl in a province is forced by poverty to seek her fortune in Manila as a domestic helper. She is raped by one of her employers. Her provincemate, another girl, becomes a prostitute in a cheap bar. These two avenues, both of which demand the surrender of their bodies either to superior force or to money, are the only two options open to single, poor girls from the province. Clearly, in the absence of family, a girl is expected to be defenseless in the face of lascivious males. This is also what happens in Mel Chionglo's Sinner or Saint (1984), a film about a girl who goes to Manila to study, but ends up as the bedmate of various males. Her stay in Manila literally destroys her, as she ends up shot to death by one of her lovers. The situation of the girl who becomes a prostitute applies as well to boys. In Tikoy Aguiluz's Boatman (1984), it is a country boy who is corrupted by the city, as he becomes a professional stud in a live sex act.

It is undeniable that the lifestyle of a prostitute or sex performer is not the lifestyle of huge numbers of young people in the Philippines. As a cinematic image, however, that of a female prostitute, bathed in red light and dressed in cheap clothes, is particularly powerful in terms of the values that it projects. A prostitute is a victim in the area of sex. Analogically, a young person is a victim in other areas. Just as the youthful prostitute is used by other people, invariably adults, the youth feel used by society, either by the small group of the family or the society at large. Youthful viewers of the image of the prostitute on screen imagine themselves as emotional

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or intellectual "prostitutes," forced to do the bidding of adults in their home or in their schools.

In films, the boy or girl actually does not even have to come from the province. The city is seen as exacting its toll even on its residents. In Lino Brocka's Insiang (1976), for example, a girl falls for a man who has earlier raped her. Her life in the slums of Manila makes her accept sexual exploitation as natural and unavoidable. In this film, even the presence of family, in this case her mother, is not enough to keep the girl from becoming a victim. The value being assumed in this film, found also in Atsaya, is that women accept or should accept that they exist solely for man's pleasure.

This value is explicit in the similar film Bona (1980), also by Brocka, where the young female protagonist abandons her family to become a slave to a movie actor. The role of a woman, particularly a young woman, is to serve males hand and foot. The patriarchal view of gender is implicit in Mel Chionglo's Playgirl (1981), where a mother who is a prostitute tries to keep her adolescent daughter from taking on her profession, but fails. Although the mother wants to give her daughter a better life, it is her example that prevails. In this sense, the family is shown to be the vehicle for negative values about the female body (e.g., that the female body is a tool for earning money).

In Ishmael Bernal's Manila by Night (1980), several girls fall victim to the patriarchal nature of the city. A young restaurant waitress falls for the sexual advances of a cab-driver, who is the lover of a young prostitute. A blind girl,

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hostage situation. In an earlier version of the same theme, Jaguar (1979), Lino Brocka shows how a boy is inevitably drawn to crime even if he is inherently good. The social dragnet is too strong for a young person. The value clearly propounded in these films is that of helplessness: young people cannot fight the corrupt system, but even if they do not fight it, they are destroyed by it. Even in the vaguely optimistic ending of Mario O'Hara's Bulaklak sa City Jail (1984), the invincibility of the system is implicit. A study of the way a girl copes with unexpected detention in a particularly vicious prison, the film shows the girl as a victim not only of injustice, since she is really innocent, but also of the brute forces that dominate prison life.

Dehumanization occurs to young people in the city at various levels. Whether the tragedy occurs in their own bodies, as in the case of rape victims or prostitutes, or through their destruction of other people's bodies, as in the case of the criminals, young people are helpless. In fact, even without these two major causes of dehumanization, young people are victims. The most dramatic example of total dehumanization that occurs even without sex or crime is found in Mike de Leon's Batch '81 (1982), where a group of high school boys lose all their humanity in the process of initiation into a vicious fraternity. Gradually but irreversibly, the initiates degenerate into animals, deprived of human dignity and incapable of human feeling. In the end, the boys engage in a wild killing frenzy fit only for the mindless or insane. Here the peer group is

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clearly shown as destructive of positive values. The only value shown as worthwhile is that of belonging. Everything else is secondary to being an obedient member of the group.

Less focused but equally powerful is the feminist Brutal (1980) by Marilou Diaz Abaya, which shows a young girl raped both physically and psychologically by her husband, whom she eventually kills. The killing is done without any emotion, showing that victims of extreme male chauvinism end up as catatonic vegetables. In her later, more subtle exploration of the feminist theme, Moral (1982), Abaya looks at the psychological costs of marriage; four young girls suffer variously from the manipulations of men. Without the usual stereotypes of prostitutes, criminals, or even long-suffering housewives, the film sympathetically portrays the girl-women, but at the same time realizes that the struggle is far from won.

The boy and girl in Mike de Leon's Kisapmata (1981) are pure victims, but not of society at large, but of their own family, specifically the crazed patriarch who literally rules them with a gun. Terrorizing them every minute, even when they physically leave his house, the father attempts to dictate their every move. In the end, unable to impose completely his will on them, the father kills his entire family. The boy and girl are victims of murder, but also of parental will. The thematic underpinning of this film is clear: family is bad, family is oppressive, family destroys youth.

Even comic films often portray the youth as victims. In Mike de Leon's wacky Kakabakaba Ka Ba? (1980), the four young friends are chased all over the country by Japanese and Chinese

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criminal syndicates. Unable to make sense of their situation, the two boys and two girls symbolize the lack of self-awareness that allows foreign, as well as adult, powers to manipulate them at will.

Even in situations which are not explicitly exploitative, such as a high school class, young persons are often portrayed as victims. In Maryo de los Reyes' High School Circa '65 (1979), the boys and girls in the class are merely non-persons who react, rather than act; the key figures in the film are the adults. Similarly, in the family situation of Maryo de los Reyes' Gabun (1979), the two boys merely repeat the conflicts that are generated by the two wives of the adult male; instead of charting their own futures, the boys follow the fortunes of their shared father.

The most explicit portrait of a dehumanized victim occurs in Laurice Guillen's Salome (1981), where the female protagonist becomes the victim of her physical and emotional sexual drives, even as she breaks down in the face of the physical and psychological attacks of the two males in her life. It is revealing that the victimization of Salome occurs outside the big city, in an isolated island. The portrait of youth that emerges from Filipino films is thus reinforced: boys and girls are victims. In another film set outside the city, Peque Gallaga's Unfaithful Wife (1986), a boy finds himself accused of a murder committed while he was sleeping with his best friend's wife. Preferring friendship to freedom, the boy refuses to reveal where he was during the fateful night, and suffers the

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inevitable consequences of being accused of murder in a small town. Friendship as a value more important than personal happiness is clearly projected in this film.

Youth are portrayed as victims in a large number of Filipino films. A major value can be inferred from the cinematic treatment of this theme. This is the lack of (and therefore, the perceived need for) self-determination on the part of youth, because of the enormous pressure exerted by family, peer group, or adult society at large. A particular instance of this lack of self-determination concerns the bodies of women. A girl is usually depicted as not even having the right to decide what to do with her own body. She is either physically forced to have sex with males she does not love or she sells her body for money. The girl as victim is a dramatic symbol of the youth as victim.

Youth as Villains

The youth, however, are not only victims, but sometimes themselves victimizers or villains. As villains, boys and girls are often portrayed as avengers.

A recurring theme involves a girl who is raped by a boy or boys and eventually kills her attacker or attackers. In Lino Brocka's Angela Markado (1980), for instance, the girl-victim tracks down her rapists one at a time. This situation is repeated in the recent Iagos ng Dugo (1987) by Maryo de los Reyes, though in this latter film, the girl kills any male indiscriminately instead of merely her rapist. The act of killing a person is dramatically justified in the context of the

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revenge plot, but it is also a way to sublimate the deep feelings of resentment that come with being a victim. By showing revenge on screen, real-life youth can be said to work out symbolically what they do not or cannot do in reality. Jacques Derrida's reading of Sigmund Freud might be helpful in this regard: the subconscious finds its fulfillment in works of art or, particularly in our case, in film.

It is significant that the rapists in Ishmael Bernal's Himala (1982) are teen-aged boys. The adulation, almost adoration, that the adults in the film heap upon the female religious leader is completely lost on the boys. Youthful innocence turns into dangerous ignorance in this film, when the boys violate the holy virgin. A comment on the role of religion in the lives of the young is made here: religious values have little place in the hearts of Filipino youth. This is even more explicit in Ishmael Bernal's Hinugot sa Langit (1985), where the principal character is no longer a victim, but a hero.

Youth as Heroes

The other side of being a villain is being a hero, and whether male or ^{fe}male, the protagonists in Filipino films sometimes strike back at the perpetrators of injustice. This is clearest in a recent film, Peque Gallaga's Kid Huwag Kang Susuko (1987), where the boy who is a karate expert whips the bad guy at the end. Action movies where the protagonist is a mere boy, of course, have the same good-guy-beats-bad-guy plot. Romy Suzara's

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Pepeng Shotgun (1981) is a good example of this. Throughout all the killings in this film, the boy's heart and motives remain clean -- a clear instance of the killer with the golden heart, now one of the stereotypes of American television series (such as the Equalizer, the A-Team, Miami Vice, Mike Hammer, and Lady Blue).

The heroism of the young girl in Bernal's Hinugot sa Langit (1985) occurs in a less visible dimension, that of moral choice. Faced with the prospect of having the baby of a married man, she decides to have an abortion despite religious restrictions. The decision transforms her into a young woman, mature beyond her years. Her defiance of her landlady, who serves as her surrogate mother, shows that youth, if they could, are inclined to choose self over family when it comes to decisions having to do with one's own body. This is definitely a new development in Filipino youth values. Choosing one's own future is one of the options the youth would like to have. Like the girls in Moral, the girl in Hinugot sa Langit charts her own life.

The most memorable hero in recent Filipino films is, of course, the young nun in Mike de Leon's Sister Stella L (1984). Turning her back on sedate convent activities, she involves herself day and night in a labor strike. Soon, she becomes a symbol of political and social activism even for the already-militant laborers. In choosing social rather than individual goals, the young nun shows the priority that political action now has in the minds of Filipino youth. That priority is also found in the boy who becomes a student activist in Eddie Romero's

Aguila (1980). Unwilling to protect the vested interests of his large family, the boy decides to take the side of the family's enemies. Social goals become the priority for the youth today even in defiance of familial goals.

As heroes, youth picture themselves as able to withstand the pressures of family and society, as able to chart their own lives, as able to defy the rules of tradition, religion, and law. It may be surmised from the emergence of the value of self-determination in some recent films that the youth are now articulating the alternative to being purely victims of the adult system.

Youth as Anti-Heroes

If the youthful protagonist is not a victim nor a villain nor a hero, he or she tends to be an anti-hero, someone who makes no difference in the world created by the film. Perhaps most familiar of the images along this line are those found in films explicitly meant for the youth market. In film after film, companies such as Viva Films and Regal Films put up stereotypes of happy youth, by which the two megacompanies mean unintelligent, unthinking boys and girls who dress well, speak badly, sing atrociously, and live in enormous houses where adults appear only at dinner tables. None of these films get cited or awarded by critics, and are not, therefore, within the limitations of this study, but they form a significant block of films that perpetuate an image of youth as irresponsible,

frivolous, mindless zombies.

In quality films, such images rarely occur. A glimpse of the same portrait can be found, however, in the sexually explicit Scorpio Nights (1985) of Peque Gallaga, where the girl finds mindless sex with the boy upstairs her only escape from the poverty (both financial and intellectual) of her married life.

By inserting real life ~~only~~ through the soundtrack of the film *even without any direct relationship with* ~~rather than through~~ its visual images, Gallaga says that escape through physical sex makes sense only in the context of the adult problems that society has spawned.

Values of Filipino Youth

What, then, are Filipino youth like, if we base our description only from the way youth are depicted in Filipino films?

Foremost among the values held by the youth, clearly, is the feeling of being a victim of large systems of oppression, created primarily by adults. Two of these systems are the family and the society. The young person is inevitably forced by his or her family to do things the family way, to protect the honor of the family, to do what is best for the family. This conservative tradition, nurtured by the adults who stand to lose from a dissolution of the family bonds, stifles the creativity of the youth. The youth then rebels, signalled on screen by a moving away from the family, as in the case of the province boy or girl moving alone to the big city and forgetting family ties. If the youth stay within the family, disaster strikes, as in the case of

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Kisapmata.

As oppressive as the family is adult society at large. Symbolized by the adult males in films concerned with girls who become rape victims or prostitutes, adult society is seen as manipulative and exploitative. No tenderness, care, or love is manifested by the men towards the girls; instead, everything is on the level of physical overpowering or financial negotiations. Inevitably, in films that feature boys or girls as victims, the victimizers are adult.

A measure of the intensity of the anti-adult feelings of youth is the occurrence of films in which young protagonists strike back at adult oppressors. This playing out of a power fantasy is a clue to the repression of real-life avenues for redress. Only an occasional film portrays the youth as evil for no excusable reason. Most films view youth's grievances as legitimate.

The value of peer acceptance is high among the youth, even to the extent of turning away from one's own humanity, as in Batch '81. Often, when faced with adult enemies, young protagonists turn to other young people for support. When the support is given, it is usually either neutral or positive, unlike the negative veneer of adult support. In the real-life situation of watching a film, in fact, the youth usually watch with their peer groups, rather than by themselves or with adults. Such real-life viewer-response situations clearly reflect the symbolic substructure of the films themselves.

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Conclusion

A typology of portraits of youth in Filipino films, then, reveals at least four aspects: youth are regarded in various films as victims, villains, heroes, anti-heroes, or a combination of these. If structuralists and even post-structuralists are correct that fictive images signify real-life situations, then these four aspects may very well define Filipino young people today. These aspects reinforce, if they do not actually create, the self-images that youth have of themselves.

Since this brief study, however, is merely exploratory, there is a need to do a more statistically rigorous, more critically intensive, and more sociologically direct study of all Filipino films, particularly box-office hits instead of, or in addition to, the critically-acclaimed films used in this study. Moreover, because many of the actors and actresses employed by the movie industry are young, the real-life conditions of work of youth in filmmaking should also be studied in order to obtain a fuller picture of how youth themselves help create the images by which they live.

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Bayan Ko, 1985, directed by Lino Brocka, written by Jose Lacaba, starring Phillip Salvador

Boatman, 1984, directed by Tikoy Aguiluz, written by Alfred Yuson, starring Sarsi Emmanuelle and Ronnie Lazaro

Bona, 1980, directed by Lino Brocka, written by Cenen Ramones, starring Nora Aunor and Phillip Salvador

Brutal, 1980, directed by Marilou Diaz Abaya, written by Ricardo Lee, starring Amy Austria, Jay Ilagan

Bulaklak sa City Jail, 1984, directed by Mario O'Hara, written by Lualhati Bautista, starring Nora Aunor.

Burlesk Queen, 1977, directed by Celso Ad. Castillo, written by Mauro Gia Samonte, starring Vilma Santos

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Amado Lacuesta, starring Maricel Soriano

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and Lamberto E. Antonio, starring Hilda Koronel

Kakabakaba Ka Ba?, 1980, directed by Mike de Leon, written by
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del Mundo, Jr., starring Vic Silayan, Charito Solis, Charo
Santos, Jay Ilagan

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starring Phillip Salvador

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Ishmael Bernal, starring Rio Locsin, Cherie Gil, Alma
Moreno, William Martinez

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Lee, starring Lorna Tolentino, Gina Alajar, Sandy Andolong,
Michael Sandico, Juan Rodrigo, Anna Marin, Ronald Bregendahl

Pepeng Shotgun, 1981, directed by Romy Suzara, written by Edgardo
Reyes, starring Rudy Fernandez

Playgirl, 1981, directed by Mel Chionglo, written by Ricardo Lee,
starring Gina Alajar, Charito Solis, Phillip Salvador

Salome, 1981, directed by Laurice Guillen, written by Ricardo
Lee, starring Gina Alajar, Johnny Delgado, Dennis Roldan

Scorpio Nights, 1985, directed by Peque Gallaga, starring Anna
Marie Gutierrez

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Ricardo Lee, starring Claudia Zobel

Sister Stella L, 1984, directed by Mike de Leon, written by Jose

Lacaba, Jose Almojuela, and Mike de Leon, starring Vilma

Santos, Jay Ilagan

Tagos ng Dugo, 1987, directed by Maryo de los Reyes, starring

Vilma Santos

Unfaithful Wife, 1986, directed by Peque Gallaga, written by

Rosauro de la Cruz, starring Joel Torre, Michael de Mesa,

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