

***Bunso (The Youngest)*. Directed by Ditsi Carolino. Philippines: Consuelo Foundation and the United Nations Children's Fund, 2004. 63 minutes, Cebuano with English subtitles, color.**

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The power of form and visual images as captured in documentary films is manifested more strongly when used as a tool for popularizing social and political issues. Documentary films are therefore used as means to mobilize support needed in addressing critical yet often taken for granted issues that call for urgent and passionate response from the public. More importantly, they bring the audience face to face with these vexing, often vile realities. Beyond providing the audience an accurate picture, films of this genre succeed in evoking the appropriate sentiments to rally commitment behind certain advocacy objectives. They lay bare both the latent complexities and tragic elements of the issue and generate condemnation against the inaction of those who should be held accountable. Then they throw back to the viewers the same indictment, thus drawing from them a sense of self-denunciation for their own indifference.

Ditsi Carolino's *Bunso* undoubtedly accomplishes this feat. By far the best among local documentary filmmakers, Carolino employs the same thoughtfulness, honesty, straightforward and down-to-earth treatment of her subject combined with the technical fluency that made two of her earlier films, *Minsan Lang Sila Bata* (Children Only Once) and *Riles* (Life on the Tracks), effective rallying points for such issues as child labor and urban poverty. This time, she succeeds in giving faces and voices to the thousands of child prisoners in the country by exposing the gripping plight of juvenile offenders who are detained together with male adult inmates in the same prison cell. The film likewise makes a sharp visual statement of how the dire consequences of poverty intensify juvenile delinquency and violation of children's rights. Filmed in Cebuano and subtitled in English, the 63-minute documentary allows the audience to penetrate the walls of a provincial jail and enter the day-to-day lives of both young and adult male inmates. In the process, it allows the harsh experiences of children who are mixed with adult inmates, to become part of the viewers' very own reality.

The film succeeds in using the image of the prison space as a means to exteriorize juvenile injustice. In exposing the real threats that this kind of environment brings to the lives of the young detainees, the film puts this prison space on trial by critically interrogating the regressive effects of an adult detention center on child offenders. More specifically, it records how this space becomes an arena of struggle where the children who are less strong end up getting overpowered, hence suffering immensely far more than what they actually deserve or are capable of enduring. In so doing, the film provides a glimpse of the spatial politics involving the jail. This politics can be gleaned between the inmates and prison authorities, and among inmates belonging to two generally different age brackets (on the one hand, the adults, and on the other hand, the children/minors). The same spatial politics ushers the viewers to some general insights about the inherent tension between children in poverty and the various adult-imposed and dominated, albeit equally dysfunctional structures which they find themselves contending with: prison, their family, the state and society in general. In the process of deconstructing the prison space, it implicitly builds up moral arguments about the issue. It therefore ultimately incriminates the state and critically questions its failure to thwart and rectify the practice.

*Bunso* (a name usually given to the youngest in jail) draws power mainly from the three endearing characters that were responsible for weaving the harrowing tale of a life inside a jail for “adult criminals”: the boys Tisoy (also called Bunso by fellow inmates), Anthony and Diosel. For the first few minutes of the film, they amuse us. They strike most of the viewers as funny, innocently frank and bereft of any pretensions, until the film develops to unfold the intricacy behind the images of the youth characters. Slowly, the relief that the viewers felt at the start gets to be replaced by gasps that alternately build into an introspective and indicting silence. It is through these natural characters that the film delivers the message in its strongest and most lucid form. Their personal narration of the circumstances surrounding their imprisonment informs us how social dysfunctions brought about by poverty ultimately victimize the most powerless among the powerless. The mixture of submission, resentment and innocence through which they view their daily ordeal enables us to capture their reality exactly the way they perceive it. Ultimately, the real fatalities, as portrayed by the film, are the children. Prisoners or not, they are victimized by a society that care less for them.

Together, the child prisoners take the viewers to a trip inside their cramped, humid, noisy and squalid world where they show us how their little bodies get overpowered by stronger adult male inmates (and even by fellow minors who are bigger than they are) as they wait in line for the day's often inadequate supply of food and water. The same bodies itch because of scabies and shiver as the rains drench their sleeping quarters for hours where all 159 of them vie for space. Here we see the child prisoners lazing time away, unnoticed as they mingle with the others. The director captures poignant images of the minors as they stare hazily at a blank distance. These images usher us into the raw authenticity of their jail life where, in the company of adult strangers, they have found their new home. In this space, they have learned to make an uncle, *kuya* (elder brother) and father out of fellow inmates. This odd mixture of strangers and adopted family members look after them, alternately overpowering and encouraging them, understanding while heckling them, influencing, counseling, trivializing, even competing with them, perhaps also hurting them both unconsciously and deliberately in the process. Here we find them sitting on the floor seeking refuge from the drudgery of jail life in front of a communal television, or before some sacred image to lift up sincere, often garbled prayers, or whatever they could muster. It is also here where they both grow and regress as they wait for their loved ones to visit them in the company of strangers who have ironically become their new family.

The spirited and charismatic Tisoy used to beg for food in the malls until hunger taught him to steal and sniff rugby. He eventually found his way to jail, where fellow inmates learned to take fancy of his spontaneity, gullibility and wit. Like ordinary kids who impatiently wait for Christmas day to come, Tisoy eagerly waits for the day of his release, looking forward to the slightest news from his visiting mother. His wide-eyed vigil for the awaited day was soon replaced by frustration. His candid faith that he will one day step out of this adult-imposed rat hole faded, as it became clear to him that his own mother could not take any significant action to hasten his release. Constrained in resources, and believing that the jail is the best place where her son could be taught the right sort of discipline to mend his bad habits, she visits Tisoy as the latter's stay gets dragged on for months. Of the three, Anthony appears to be the most self-possessed. Having been jailed several times, he has learned to cope with the ways inside though visibly sharing in the anguish of his fellow child prisoners. At 13, he has the

propensity to talk about his and his fellow inmates' experience in a relatively detached manner compared to the other two characters. Like Tisoy, he sniffed rugby and claims to steal only from the rich. He narrates their ordeal in a simple and straightforward manner yet also invites the viewers to look more closely so they can see for themselves that his tale is true, his pain profoundly stinging. With a drunkard mother and a father who always beats him, he still manages to dream of providing for his family and longed for his mother to visit him. Hungry from a day of empty begging, Diosel decided to steal money from a store, got caught and was sent to jail. He narrates how the storeowner was so much willing to let him go but his father insisted that he be sent to jail. Diosel begged from cars passing by, singing to passengers in exchange for some coins. At the start, Diosel appears to be the most fragile compared to the other two boys, until one realizes his inner strength and forbearance. The film's postscript states that Tisoy finally got released and moved to the city with his mother where he died of a vehicular accident while Anthony eventually died due to heart enlargement brought about by drug abuse

The stark image of the prison as a space where the child prisoners struggle to survive, make sense of their detention and weave meaning about their youthful existence conjures up urgency and a lurking sense of danger. Vivid shots on the various areas of the prison cell (specifically the toilet area, the often wet and crowded sleeping quarters); the details of the occupants' daily routine (a queue of bodies often squabbling for meager provisions) all contribute to graphically illustrate the true intents of the filmmakers. Certain poignant scenes, however, are worth noting. These include Diosel in tears as he was made to bear his stomach pain for there was no medicine available in the cell clinic; the same kid sits at one corner of the cell, naked, rain-soaked and shaking for he had ran out of dry shirt to wear; the images of young and old inmates joyfully bathing under the rain.

While the film highlights the negative impact, threats and risks involved in putting child offenders in an adult prison, it also provides a glimpse of how the prison experience makes an adult of every child. In many ways, it successfully articulates the things which the thousands of Tisoys, Anthonys and Diosels in the country want to belt out in fury to their adult guardians, and to society in general. In one potent scene, Tisoy did lash it out at his mother. Visibly irked and losing hope that he could still get out, he tells his mother that it is she who must be jailed for beating him and for not taking care of him well enough. With

the spontaneity and confidence bred by long wait and frustration, he tells his mother that he should not have been put to prison, had she been a good parent. In another scene, Tisoy faces the camera and talks to the “judge,” telling authorities how they would thoroughly regret it in the future if they don’t act to release children like him from prison soon enough.

Though undeniably persuasive, *Bunso*, like any documentary film, still suffers from a few minor pitfalls. As it struggles to be both strongly convincing yet to a certain degree also palatable, it undoubtedly leaves off the other related issues and scenes for the audience to imagine and decipher. As an emotive and informative instrument, it succeeds only insofar as the feelings and thoughts generated could be sustained long enough to draw commitment from the viewers, hence accomplishing the objectives behind its production.

In the final analysis, *Bunso* actually accomplishes more than what it initially envisioned to accomplish. In visually revealing the risks which “children in conflict with the law” are exposed to, it likewise draws attention to the generally dehumanizing condition of the jail system in the country. In this sense, both children and adult prisoners are victimized. Far from just throwing blame, however, the film engages the state, implicating its power and challenging it to use the same power to ensure the protection of rights of people in jail, especially that of the child offenders. Fundamentally, it leads the viewers to appeal to some sense of ethically grounded commitment and response insofar as these rights are concerned. ❀

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