

FILM REVIEW

***Amigo*. (2010). Written and directed by John Sayles. Starring Chris Cooper, Garret Dillahunt, DJ Qualls, Lucas Neff, Yul Vazquez, Joel Torre, Bembol Roco, Pen Medina, Irma Adlawan, Rio Locsin. Produced by Maggie Renzi. United States.**

Brandon Reilly

The Philippine-American War is as forgotten by Americans today as it is commemorated by Filipinos. Former President Bush's recent adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq generated a renewed interest in the aging American empire, and for a time it seemed as if the significance of the Philippine precedent would be appreciated by an audience beyond the Filipinos who learn about it in schools, read about it in print, and speak about it in casual conversation. Yet while the War on Terror continues to be waged, albeit with less conspicuous bluster, its prehistory seems for now as distant and forgettable as it always had been—even, and perhaps especially for, 21st-century Americans. It is for that reason unexpected that an American filmmaker has produced what is definitely an authoritative movie about this war.

John Sayles' *Amigo* is a blockbuster film, though not in the conventional sense. A film about a war, it depicts few skirmishes, no large-scale battles and makes refreshingly sparing use of the special effects that have become synonymous with the genre. This is a reflection of both Sayles' relatively small budget (\$12 million USD) and, more significantly, his desire to portray the interactions of human subjectivities rather than the clanging sounds of their machines. The paucity of funds seems in no way to have been a stumbling block. Deft cinematography, a set design framed by the natural beauty of the rural Philippines, with set pieces built by capable hands, and quaint period costumes make the film visually sumptuous.

The plot is deceptively simple. In 1900, a band of invading American soldiers arrives in and is immediately ordered to occupy a rural Tagalog village. From there, events in the wider war propel the narrative forward chronologically in the village. Through this microcosm of Philippine-American encounter, we see how the lives of the villagers and the invaders co-evolve; how, given that no

party has sufficient power to completely impose its will, they learn to coexist with one another, however uneasily, throughout the course of a year. By portraying the war in this manner, rather than as a series of eventful battles, Sayles is able to provide us with a richly drawn portrait of everyday life in a society under foreign occupation.

The quality of the performances, of the actors themselves, and Sayles' surprisingly learned script is what makes the film a masterpiece. The anguish of Rafael (Joel Torre), the *cabeza de barangay*, over being pulled between the townspeople he leads, the American occupiers who hold his life in their hands, and the *insurrecto* brother he sympathizes with, is expressed in his facial contortions right down to the glimmer in his eye. Lt. Compton (Garrett Dillahunt) occasionally allows his confusion about how he is supposed to militarily subjugate and at the same time to win 'the hearts and minds'—to employ a phrase coined at the time—of the Filipinos to surface, even as he maintains his disciplined posture. Padre Hidalgo's (Yul Vazquez) palpable contemptuousness of *indio* customs and habits, concern for their spiritual welfare, avowed skepticism about American fitness for rule, willingness to help them govern, and unquestionable Spanish pride are communicated without conflict. The terms "hero" and "villain" are therefore not easily applicable. Indeed, the richly textured nuances of the characters, their very actions and words, make each one of them difficult to despise no matter where one's allegiances lie. This is because the characters are sympathetic and multifaceted people, who, regardless of nationality or narrative function (e.g. kill or be killed), are endowed with their humanity.

If there is any fault to be found with *Amigo*, it is precisely this: Sayles' aspiration of fealty to his historical subject. For over two hours, seemingly everyone involved in this part of the war—families of ordinary Tagalog farmers, their local leader and his family, a small group of locally drawn Filipino revolutionaries, Chinese merchants, a Spanish priest, an American colonel, a lieutenant, and a handful of soldiers—engage in a series of communicative transactions as they seek to understand one another, carry out their usually conflicting aims, and cope with the difficulties of their situation. Like a choral conductor, Sayles calls forth a series of voices who in their consonance neither make the film too Americentric (as they typically are in American war films) nor too Filipinocentric; the chorus speaks in a way that transcends such characterizations.

For contemporary moviegoers who are subjected to ever-increasing dosages of audiovisual overstimulation, this is potentially a recipe for utter boredom—this could be a historical film in the most drearily didactic way. Even those broadly interested in the subject matter might find Sayles' attempt

to treat Philippine society in a time of war as comprehensively as he has, to be overly ambitious and unsuccessful.

I had the opposite reaction. If one accepts that cinematic storytellers must make use of dramatic license (characters must express themselves almost solely through dialogue even if people never do, for instance), one will believe in these characters and the reality of the world they create, and not simply because they appear to be accurate according to history. Rafael, Lt. Compton, Padre Hidalgo, and everyone else's words are seamlessly woven throughout dialogues that are unremarkable, poignant, and even at times funny—precisely what one would expect them to be in any halfway decent fictionalization about war. It is historically accurate without the viewer ever realizing how much it has aspired to be so.

Films do not contain bibliographies, so one can only conjecture about what materials Sayles consulted prior to making the film. One important source, which supplies the film's title as well as much of its thematic content, seems to have been Rey Iletto's essay on "amigo warfare," "The Philippine-American War: Friendship and Forgetting" (2002). Apart from this essay, however, it is difficult to know with specificity which works on the Philippine-American War inform the film. (Those in search of such a bibliography would be best served by tracing the aspects of Filipino society the film brings into relief: the Philippine social system, stratification and kinship, religious practice and belief, the function of ethnicity under both Spain and America, the role of the Chinese in the Philippines, everyday life in the provinces, changes wrought by the colonial encounter with the Americans, and more.)

A surprising feat of storytelling is that Sayles is able to seamlessly narrate the sheer brutality of the war while at the same time providing a sympathetic portrayal of individual American soldiers, who were not as uniformly malevolent as the many polemics written about them, then and now, would have us believe. In this way, he does justice to both critiques of the war (see, e.g., Luzviminda Francisco's classic essay, "The First Vietnam: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902," [1999]) as well as to the perpetually appearing works of military history written by Americans (see, e.g., the works of Brian McAllister Linn). Detractors of the war and neocolonial apologists might thus find themselves surprisingly nodding in unison.

Clearly, Sayles has done his homework. While he is credited as being the sole author of the screenplay (as in many of the films he produced, such as *Honeydripper* [2007], *Lone Star* [1996], and *City of Hope* [1991] among others),

one can only speculate about what vast amounts of reading, consultation with historians, and fieldwork he had undertaken to be able to write something that so profoundly approximates such a complicated subject. If only the credits included endnotes! The signs of this research are subtle, and to the untrained eye, imperceptible. Even those with some acquaintance about the war's history are more likely to lose themselves in the story unfolding before them.

Much of the literature inspired by America's newest imperial phase will undoubtedly show its superficiality and ephemerality as time wears on. This body of work, like its century-old counterpart, which was inspired by and is constitutive of the Philippine-American War itself, will sooner or later recede into memory and be reduced to existing solely as a series of dusty books that people will no longer read in corners of the library they will no longer visit—or, perhaps, in digital repositories no one will click to enter. At that moment, *Amigo* will ascend to its position as one of the most significant works (of any media) to depict imperial wars. Its story of the domination of one people by another will continue to be relevant—for Filipinos, Americans, and everyone else—for as long as war itself persists.

References

- Francisco, L. (1999). 'The First Vietnam: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902', reprinted in Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen R. Shalom (eds.), *The Philippines Reader: A History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship, and Resistance*. Boston: South End Press, 1999], pp. 8-19.
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