

## FILM REVIEW

### Quotidian minutiae as (sub)alter-narrative: Negotiations on history in Raya Martin's *Independencia*

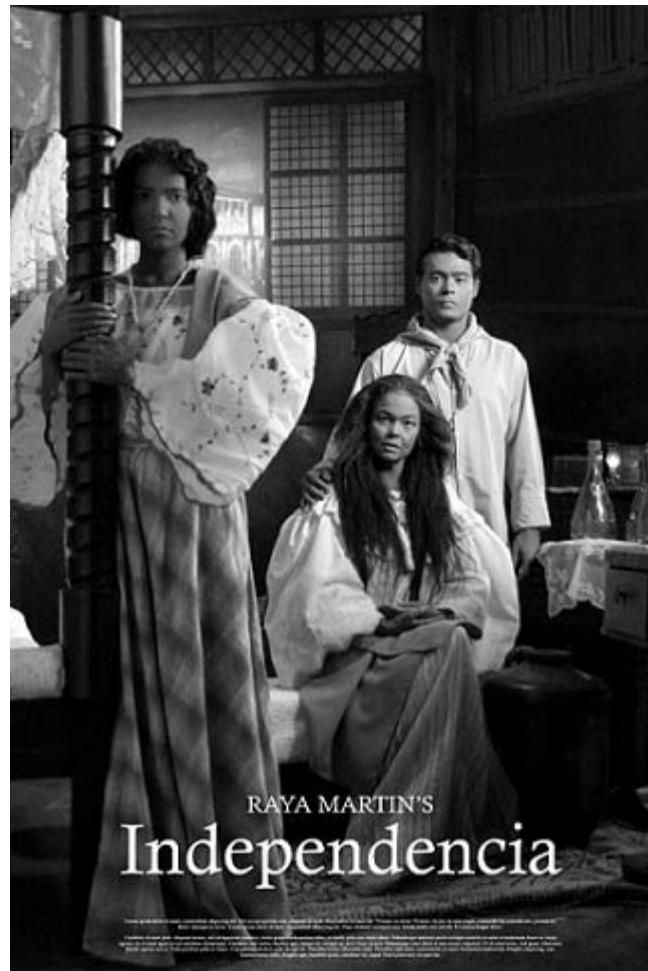
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“and the world thickens with texture instead of history”  
~ Jorie Graham, from “The Geese” (1997)

“[T]his lecture won't be of the reassuring,  
inspirational, praising-our-heroes variety.” ~ Reynaldo  
Ileto, from *Critical questions on nationalism: A  
historian's view* (1986, p. 12)

*Independencia*. (2009). 77 Mins. Black and White. Directed by Raya Martin. Written by Raya Martin & Ramon Sarmiento. Cinematography by Jeanne Lapoirie. Starring Sid Lucero as the Son, Alessandra de Rossi as The Stranger, Tetchie Agbayani as the Mother, and Mika Aguilos as the Child. Edited by Jay Halili. France, Germany, Netherlands, and the Philippines: Christophe Gougeon and Arleen Cuevas.

*Independencia* (2009) is a film where, to put it bluntly, nothing much happens. It opens with socialites and ilustrados chatting and flirting at an al fresco gathering at the Cabecera's downtown. A few moments later, a distant explosion is heard, disrupting this elite congregation. The explosion, the brief albeit consistently malevolent appearances of a handful of American soldiers finding their way through the forest, and the mock newsreel footage of an American soldier shooting a local boy for stealing fruit at the downtown market, are the only hints of an imminent war that becomes a hovering and crucial absent presence throughout the story.



Official film poster of *Independencia*.  
Image courtesy of producer Arleen Cuevas.  
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From here on, *Independencia* takes a drastic shift in plot focus and moves away from the Center (the locus of History and the site of action), abandons it entirely, and proceeds into the secluded fringes marked by apparent stasis—a stark contrast to what Iletto (1986) calls “the saga of nationalism and progress” (p. 15) taking place in the mainstream of Philippine society. Here we find Echevarría’s account (1990) of Carpentier’s novel consonant with the film’s premise:

After a painful journey away from the modern world, the protagonist of Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) reaches Santa Mónica de los Venados, the town founded by the Adelantado, one of his traveling companions. Santa Mónica is but a clearing in the South American jungle on which a few huts have been built. The nameless protagonist has arrived, or so he wishes to believe, at the Valley-Where-Time-Has-Stopped, a place outside the flow of history. (p. 1)

The characters' retreat into the forest's womb operates as a reworking of the concepts of political independence and liberation in their most natural or fundamental sense, the return to the Primal Scene, an attempt at finding their way back to the lost Imaginary to reenact pre-Oedipal wishes. Note: one, how the narrative is first and foremost a mother's and son's journey; two, the notable absence of the Father throughout this journey (the father's designation here is restricted to the Conquistador, and to Westernization and imperialism, and whose spatial figuration corresponds to the Cabecera [from which the mother and son need to escape]); and three, the presence of the sole adult male character (i.e., the Son) who happens to be 'incapable' of fathering and whose paternal role finds fulfillment only through the Stranger's (Alessandra de Rossi) rape by American soldiers, a re-inscription of the Father's malignant potency into the narrative. This can of course be problematic on two levels: first, its gendered typology, and second, its Romantic and nativist/puristic implications. The latter, however, is somehow tempered by the fact that despite their retreat and eventual excision from the mainstream of society or the locus of Power, these *indocumentados* were never able to un/consciously decolonize, or at least, de-Hispanicize themselves (although the boy's typification after his parents' death seems to approach the sign of the noble savage and the motif of the feral child).

Raya Martin's film configures the naturalistic grammars of *actualités*, cinema direct, and ethnographic film against the 'contrived' and artificial methods of early American talkies (e.g., scenes unabashedly shot in studio sets with painted backdrops) and the diorama. We are made aware of the genres or forms *Independencia* alludes to, and it is through our knowledge of the rules and conventions of these other structures that we comprehend the film's organic design. It evidently seeks to achieve realistic and natural cadences (e.g., the absence of music, the use of real time, the privileging of the mundane and the quotidian minutiae) while maintaining deliberate artifices (e.g., temporally stylized and consciously dated feel, openly staged *mise-en-scène* and picture format, crude animations and faux newsreels that occasionally interrupt and rip apart the film's diegesis) to showcase a period drama that is less a historical spectacle than a conscious historiographic and clearly mediated and museumized artifact.

Through the abovementioned strands, we discern how the film's parts work together to achieve this self-reflexive irony. In its critique of official history, *Independencia* resorts to fictional modes that do not actually claim an ineffable reality from the past ("This was what happened"<sup>1</sup>) but rather poses itself as an unpretentious construct—an authorial version, a mere prescription for conceiving and narrating the past (*the past can only be re-constructed and negotiated*). Hence, it does not try to pass as history (which it finds problematic to begin with) but rather as an alternative way of relating and making sense of history.

By constructing a narrative from nuances and tiny, mundane details that constitute the daily experience of characters existing outside the power structure, the film finds a way around elite history to exorcise essentialist notions of identity and include the 'perspective' of those who were never taken into account—individuals who did not 'participate' in so-called national moral obligations, and who thought peace and emancipation could be found by retreating into the remote margins. Removed from the Cabecera, the film is now left to chronicle—at a slow, rhythmic pace—details as trivial as the patterns on the surface of water, prolonged shots of rainfall, the motion of leaves and grass, activities of light and shade, repetitive household chores, sleep and waking, etc., assigning microscopic attention to the material practices, body cycles, and processes in the natural environment of peripheral figures who never really mattered to the nation project. The film observes the primacy of moment over event, thus privileging aforementioned episodes above myopic accounts of valor and action that make up the grand narrative of national history.<sup>2</sup>

Below are four deconstructive frames through which *Independencia*, as a meta-critique that utilizes the 'enemy's language,' departs from the achievements of several notable attempts in the past (in both criticism and in fiction) at re-writing History to re-inscribe the obliterated bodies and narratives of those existing outside the power structure:

1. *Independencia as ethnographic footage*<sup>3</sup> (the ethnography of the historically invisible, i.e., the indocumentados). Martin negotiates a version that—again, drawing upon Iletto (1986)—first, foregrounds "specimens, precisely, of what had to be trimmed off from history [; f]or [they] were outside the mainstream of developmental history; they were marginal, archaic, and undecidable in their orientation to progress and change" (p. 13); and second, "break[s] out of the ilustrado historical constructs which are presently dominant" (p. 8).

The extensive and intensive incorporation of clearly ethnographic strategies of documentation into this feature film makes possible a

storytelling alternative that circumvents the oblitative potential of historical master-texts while accounting for the slow rhythms of everyday life through a cinema of observation— information that is more or less psychological and anthropological rather than ‘historical’ (since History generally concerns itself with events rather than moments and other ephemera<sup>4</sup>). These naturalist ethnographic strategies unfold vis-à-vis blatantly artificial and dated cinematic strategies to sublimate the imperialist, epistemological project of traditional anthropology. Furthermore, this employment of a mock ethnographic stance to document the minutiae<sup>5</sup> (that constitute the spaces, experiences, and perspectives of bodies written out of official history) and collate them into a story to be negotiated for historiographic reexamination warrants the meditative and unrelenting attention to the characters’ bodies and body cycles, habitat, and activities and other movements of no apparent narrative import in the context of its overall causal and erotetic<sup>6</sup> structure.

2. *Independencia as diorama*. Trumpener (1995) states that “[i]n an epoch shaped by nationalist rhetoric, those peoples who do not claim a land and a written tradition for themselves, who cannot or do not claim a history, are relegated to nature, without a voice in any political process, represented only in the glass case of the diorama, the dehumanizing legend of the photograph, the tableaux of the open-air museum” (p. 379). Martin appropriates the diorama, a medium of spectacle, in an anti-spectacle film, in a “cinema [...] against the lure of images” (Reynaud, 2005). The audience will notice throughout the course of the film the pervasive emphasis on ‘constructed-ness’: the tableau shots and the awareness of the camera’s role and presence throughout the film, the stiff acting, and the artifice of sound, props, and studio sets, the self-conscious staged-ness of the film’s visual design and its replication of a particular milieu in time (*history* versus *historiography*). Its dioramic nature not only poses a meta-critique of imperialism, dominant history, and the special fate of the subaltern within the nation project, but also insinuates the inevitably ideological and propagandistic nature of historiography. This is where *Independencia* comes into play, occupying that gap or omission in the problematic notion of national history.
3. *Independencia and the early American talkies of the 1930s*. Through its utilization of ‘the enemy’s language’ (i.e., first, cinema as one of the tools used by the United States for colonial lure; second, imperialist

anthropological discourse manifest in early ethnographic spectacles; and third, Oriental dioramas), *Independencia* concurrently refashions these modes into a means for subversion to offer alternative spaces that problematize Philippine cinema in its relation to the United States, in an attempt to liberate Philippine cinema from Hollywood constraints and impositions. Assuming the medium of early American talkies from the 1930s (around the same period in which the film takes place) which pervaded Manila during the U.S. occupation and largely influenced the development of Philippine movies, the film puts across a metatextual commentary on the relationships among colonization, independence, and cinema, which over the decades has become the core of an entertainment-oriented people's identity and consciousness. Just as how its characters refused victimization and attempted decolonization, *Independencia* with its re-vision not only exorcises Philippine history but cinema as well, demystifying and deconstructing action-packed and glossy Hollywood illusions (which serve a parallel function to master narratives), seeking to weave its own language, purged of imperialist charms, romantic notions, and propaganda.

4. *Independencia as narratology of alterity and alternative historiography.* The employment of spatial and somatic modes of storytelling in *Independencia's* case problematizes our national history and the ilustrado-oriented policing of Filipino master narratives<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, the film proposes and negotiates ways of reading and writing our past (including notions of identity, heroism, resistance, liberty, etc.). "The movie camera," [Vertov] notes, 'was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account'" (as cited in Rabinowitz, 1994, p. 19).

Martin belongs to a generation of Filipinos who are 'seemingly without history' or at least without a firm anchorage to the past, having been born after the last monumental event in monolithic history that is Martial Law. History is dead in two senses: the Filipino subject either realizes that s/he belongs to a generation following the last event (i.e., the EDSA Revolution) worthy of inclusion in the nation's grand narrative (s/he is therefore excised from the Story), or is born to a society that—as a way to persist—opts to forget; and if s/he bothers to learn its history, s/he is confronted by propagandistic fabrications (the motif of collective amnesia in Philippine society conflated with the questionable integrity of dominant history). There is a need—as already

demonstrated by Martin—to collapse the historico-temporal orientation of conventional storytelling reminiscent of predominantly Western master-texts (which largely include Hollywood cinema) and inquire into the possibilities of human narratives in the absence of personalities, actions, and events to permit (in the face of historical indifference and deception) the narrative potential of stasis, spaces, and traces—modes of plotless storytelling, more discursive than ‘narrative’, that are metonymic, topographic (even possibly archipelagic), and material (as opposed to temporal) in nature.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>“wie es eigentlich geschehen [ist] or ‘how it really happened’” (Lerner 334 in Pison, 2005, p. 1).

<sup>2</sup>“The kind of history that students get in school and the mass media, the kind that orders the data of the past into a trajectory of emergence, growth, complexity and increasing rationality, the kind that celebrates great moments and individuals, the kind that mindlessly cites Rizal, Bonifacio or the ‘masses’ as if they were stable and fixed entities, should be seen in relation to power struggles in the field of knowledge” (Ileto, 1986, p. 15).

<sup>3</sup>whose prototypes include actuality films and whose influence has reached Direct Cinema.

<sup>4</sup>“Reading absences, traces, and supplements, the historian and documentarian become deconstructors, who take apart the lack of the historical record and in the process refashion new historical narratives” (Rabinowitz, 1994, p. 29).

<sup>5</sup>“the camera as an instrument of notation” (de Heusch, 1962, p. 19).

<sup>6</sup>In “what Noël Carroll calls ‘erotetic narrative’[,] ‘later scenes in the films are answering questions raised earlier, or at least providing information that will contribute to such answers’” (as cited in Moura, 2009, p. 8). “[B]y saliently posing questions and being able to sustain that interrogative mode throughout the film, erotetic sequences create expectation” (Ibid.).

<sup>7</sup>“Official or elite historical representations, especially monumental narratives of national formation, are saturated with melodrama. The melodramas take the form of threats to national continuity, inevitably involving scenarios of physical and spiritual struggle; of personal, familial, and group sacrifice; of patriotism; and of an intense and excessive concentration on belonging and exclusion” (Landy, 1996, 17).

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