Ang Pansit ni Anita Linda: Some Representations of "Ulirang Ina" in Philippine Cinema

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ABSTRAK

Hindi lingid sa kaalaman ng lahat na ang pelikula ay isa sa mga pangunahing porma ng aliw para sa marami. May kapangyarihan ang mga pelikula na antigin tayo, ilagay ang ating mga sarili sa lugar ng mga bida, at makibahagi sa kanilang mga pagdurusa't tagumpay. Gayunpaman, maliban pa sa pagbibigay-aliw, ang mainstream cinema *ay natatanging* medium*—dulot ng napakalawak na saklaw nito—para sa pagpapalaganap ng mga pagpapahalaga (*values*), pagsulsol sa mga lihim na pagnanasa, at pagpapatuloy sa mga pananaw at ideyang nagpapanatili sa* status quo. *Makikita ito sa paggamit ng mga* stereotype *o* trope *na nagsisilbing kumpirmasyon sa kasalukuyang kaayusang panlipunan. Isa sa mga pinakakaraniwang* trope *sa pelikulang Pilipino ay ang "ulirang ina." Hindi ito nakapagtataka sa isang lipunan kung saan ang maagang sosyalisasyon ng mga bata at pagsasalin ng mga pagpapahalaga ay tinitingnan bilang pangunahin sa mga tungkuling maternal. Ayon nga sa isang lumang awit hinggil sa pangkasariang hati ng tungkulin sa tahanan: "Tatay ang haligi ng ating tahanan/ Nanay ang liwanag pagka't siyang ilaw." Gayunpaman, ang pampelikulang representasyon ng ina bilang puso/tanglaw ng tahanan ay nagkaroon ng malawak na pagbabago mula sa dati na pawang isteryotipikal at sekundaryong tauhan lamang. Samantalang sa* Wanted Perfect Mother (1970), *ang ina ay halos walang pinagkaiba sa madaling-palitang alalay ng ama na may monopolyo sa kapangyarihan, ang ina naman sa* Anak (2000) *ay mag-isang bumubuno sa lahat ng responsibilidad ng pagiging magulang, kakatwa sa pamamagitan ng pag-alaga sa mga anak ng iba bilang* overseas foreign worker *(OFW). Kapansin-pansin din ang ebolusyon ni Anita Linda*

mula sa pasibong mater dolorosa sa Bitayin si… Baby Ama! (1976) *hanggang sa kanyang pagganap sa* Lola (2000)*, dimatinag na sumasalubong sa kawalang-katarungan para sa kanyang apo. Sa kasalukuyang tendensya ng pelikula tungo sa realidad, naglilitawan ang mas marami at mas masalimuot pang kwento. Tinatalikuran ang mga* stereotype*, may mga pelikulang nagpapakita sa "ulirang ina" bilang bida na hinuhubog ng lipunang pumawi na sa mga tradisyonal na gampanin. Kinuhang halimbawa ang ilang pelikulang pumapaksa sa mga ina at/o pagiging ina, layunin ng papel na ito na ipakita ang pagbabago ng representasyon sa mga nakaraang dekada.*

*That film is a major source of popular entertainment is understood. Movies have the ability to move us, enable us to identify with the protagonists, and vicariously take part in their triumphs and tribulations. Beyond entertainment, however, mainstream cinema is also the ideal medium – given its wide reach – to propagate values, play to our hidden desires, and perpetuate ideas that preserve the status quo. This preservation is most obviously demonstrated by the use of stereotypes or tropes which serve to confirm the existing social order. A recurring trope in Philippine cinema is the "*ulirang ina*" or exemplary mother. This is unsurprising in a society where early socialization and the transmission of values are viewed as primarily maternal tasks. As an old song on gender roles within the family goes: "*Nanay ang liwanag pagka't siyang ilaw." *The cinematic construction of the mother as the heart/hearth of the home, however, has undergone vast changes from its stereotypical and ancillary beginnings. Whereas in* Wanted: Perfect Mother (1970)*, the mother is not much more than a replaceable sidekick to the father who holds the monopoly on agency, in* Anak (2000)*, the mother bears the whole burden of parenthood, ironically, by caring for other people's children as an overseas foreign worker. Most dramatically, Anita Linda's passive mater dolorosa in* Bitayin si… Baby Ama! (1976) *is a far cry from the eponymous* Lola (2009) *who soldiers on stolidly facing the slings and arrows of absurd injustice. With the independent and realistic trend in filmmaking, a wider variety of stories are now being told and with more complexity. Casting off stereotypes, recent films have portrayed the* "ulirang ina" *as protagonists transformed by social stressors that have undermined traditional roles. Taking as examples certain films which deal with mothers and*

or motherhood, this paper aims to show how the representation of the maternal has evolved through the decades.

Ang pansit, nagdadala ng malas. Uuwi ang bida na may dalang pansit para sa kanyang nanay na si Anita Linda. Tatawagin ng bida ang mga bata para kumain at kukumustahin niya ang pag-aaral ng mga bata habang kumakain sila. Biglang may titigil na sasakyan sa harap ng bahay at pauulanan ng bala ang pamilya. Mamamatay si Anita Linda at sisigaw ang bida ng, "Inaaayyyy!!!" at mangangakong ipaghihiganti ito.
—"Top 20 Signs of a Pinoy Flick"[1]

Keywords: Philippine cinema, motherhood, feminism, tropes, pelikulang Filipino, peminismo, "ulirang ina"

So goes the chopsuey of cinematic clichés—shortened to "Ang pansit ni Anita Linda"—which serves as the last straw for the much-put-upon good guy, pushing him to finally take matters into his own hands. The portentous pancit scene with Anita Linda comes from *Bitayin si… Baby Ama!* directed by Jun Gallardo (1976), starring Rudy Fernandez. A "Tondo boy" like Asiong Salonga, the real-life Marcial "Baby" Ama led the largest riot in the history of New Bilibid Prison in 1958. His biography has also resulted in several films under the "bad boy" action subgenre. In Baby Ama, Linda plays a battered housewife and "*ulirang ina*" (exemplary mother) who, as the credits roll, is identified only as "Mother of Marcial." The film features songs providing the mood for key scenes – the last being the 1946 hit "Mama", which serves as the background to Baby Ama's pensive last hours before his execution by electric chair, intercut with a scene where his mother embraces his framed photograph and dies. In this portrayal, the convicted killer's moral redemption lies in his being, at heart, a mama's boy.

How Anita Linda came to serve as the prototype of the "*ulirang ina*" dates back to her starring role in Gerardo de Leon's *Sisa* (1951), for which she won the Best Actress trophy at the Maria Clara Awards (precursor to the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences [FAMAS] Awards). Elaborating on the *Noli Me Tangere* character, the "Sisa" archetype is imprinted in our national consciousness as the devoted mother who lives and dies tragically for the love of her children.[2] During the 1950s, however, the *mater dolorosa* par excellence and "Queen of Tearjerkers" was Rosa Mia, whose default role almost from the start of her career was the long-suffering mother. From the poor woman who goes to jail for the sins of her wayward son and husband

in *Batas ng Daigdig* (Marquez 1951) and *Mga Anghel sa Lansangan* (Torres 1959) to the upper-class matriarch whose complacency is disturbed in *Sino ang Maysala?* (Garces 1957) and *Ikaw ang Aking Buhay (1958)*, Rosa Mia played mother to countless young leads – among whom were Tessie Agana, Susan Roces, and Christopher de Leon. In terms of representation, the 1950s was a time of mannered poise, even in melodrama, and Rosa Mia was the exemplar of the self-effacing progenitrix who took center stage only under great duress.

By definition, the "*ulirang ina*" is characterized by her devotedness to her children. Traditionally, the role is an ancillary one whose domain is the home. Here, I use the adjective "ancillary" literally, being derived from "*Ecce ancilla Domini*" ("Behold the handmaid of the Lord") from The Annunciation. It is no accident that, in many Filipino films, one of the *"ulirang ina*'s" attributes is piety, symbolized by the family altar that she will turn to at some point in the narrative. The objective correlative that is the family altar in Filipino films is typically Catholic, whose central icon is the Virgin Mary holding the Infant Jesus. Thus the prototype of the mother is established. As supporting/passive characters, they are the ones who keep the home fires burning for the return of the principal/active characters. Fortunately, the role of women in society has expanded since Sisa and new variations of the "*ulirang ina*" have evolved with the times.

Tunay na Ina (Octavio Silos 1939) and *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (Lino Brocka 1970)

A major source from which the *"ulirang ina"* stock character is derived is the biblical judgment of Solomon trope. Sacrifice is understood to be a key maternal virtue that places the child's interests above the mother's – a dilemma that is at the heart of countless melodramas. Worth mentioning here is one of only four pre-WWII films extant, *Tunay na Ina* directed by Octavio Silos (1939). In this film, the tellingly-named Señorita Magdalena (Rosario Moreno) is prevailed upon to give away her child so as not to lose her chance of being respectably married. Released the same year as Hollywood's *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming 1939), *Tunay na Ina* (1939) offers us a glimpse into the cinematic mode of the time. The *mise-en-scène* is still stagey, with formal dialogue, and the characters are given to soliloquy and bursting into song (most touchingly, by child star Tita Duran) – all of which are relics of the *sarswela*. The inconvenient child is given away, to be raised by a poor woman who

Figure 1: Promotional movie poster from *Video 48*

has none of Señorita Magdalena's upper class considerations. It is blackmail and the threat of her husband being informed of her past disgrace that force a reunion. The conflict is resolved—after some plot convolutions—by the child and her surrogate mother both being "adopted" by Magdalena and her husband. In the end, Tita rejoices in having two mothers.

In this black-and-white film, visual cues deal primarily with age and class. Señorita Magdalena and her husband sport modern Western-style clothes for daily wear as befit young leads. The *baro't saya* is reserved for older characters, the lower class, and formal occasions. The upper-class couple lives in a mansion that boasts of what seems to be a ten-foot Christmas tree, while the poor live in nipa huts. It is a sign of class distinction that, even after being welcomed into the mansion, the poor mother still wears traditional clothes. At a time when films still harked back to the *sarswela* and theatrical modes of representation, such broad strokes sufficed.

Thirty-one years later, Lino Brocka's directorial debut *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (1970) displays a similar theatricality, under the influence of *The Sound of Music* (Wise 1965). In this upper-class family, a saintly and perfectly-coiffed mother Elsa (Liza Lorena) manages her four children with help from a nanny and a governess. In this guise, the role of "*ulirang ina*" is distributed among three people: the mother to play Lady Bountiful and source of love and affection, the nanny to be disciplinarian and manager of the mundane, and the governess to teach. The father Dante (Dante Rivero) exists primarily to finance the domestic establishment. After the old and heavy-handed governess is fired and replaced by one as young and beautiful as the mother, complications arise. The new governess Carla (Boots Anson-Roa) develops feelings for the father, and he likewise for her. After being confronted by Elsa, she honorably resigns and betakes herself and her guitar to Canada. It does not take long until the mother dies in a car accident *deus ex machina*-wise and this, as the title implies, is where the story really begins. After finding it impossible to deal with his inconsolable 4-year-old daughter (Snooky Serna) and convincing his young brood that a home needs a mother to give light "just as electricity" does (further: "*Ang ama ay nilikha ng Diyos para maghanapbuhay para sa kanyang pamilya. Ang ina ay nilikha para mag-alaga sa kanyang mga anak, sa tahanan*."), he gets his children's permission to find a new wife. His children's attempts to get him to marry their nanny Lucia (Caridad Sanchez) are the source of much Schadenfreudian[3] humor. To the father, she is out of the running grounds of class; to the innocent

children, it is due to her looks, plain and simple. After an extreme make-over, the nanny (who sincerely cares for the children's welfare) is rudely disabused of any ambition to officially "mother" the children and is put firmly in her place as "*utusan*." Another attempt by the children to pair him with an overweight and overly jovial teacher results in what would now be called cruelty of the lookist[4] kind. At this point, it is obvious that, despite the father's pretence at democracy and caring for his children's opinion, his heart is already set on their former governess. In the end, he gets what he wants and Carla eventually wins the children over with a song. (In 1996, *Wanted: Perfect Mother* was remade into a Regine Velasquez-starring vehicle, steering it towards the rags-to-riches Cinderella trope where romance is synonymous with upward mobility. The father, played by Christopher de Leon, is a shipping magnate who owns a Bencab while the "*sobrang sosi*" *kontrabida* applicant for the role of stepmother is a culture vulture who tries but fails to impress the children with her museum tours.)

Tunay na Ina (1939) and *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (1996) are fantasy productions and escapist fare. Despite the films' matrocentric titles, the encrustations of class make it difficult to see how the mothers represented could be considered as particularly "*tunay*" or "perfect" especially since their practice of motherhood is shown as ultimately dependent on the father's solvency. Thus, Magdalena, Elsa, and Carla are more wives than mothers, more "*butihing maybahay*" than "*ulirang ina*." More complex and realistic representations follow.

Andrea, Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina? (Gil Portes 1990)

The eponymous Andrea (Nora Aunor) is an unconventional *"ulirang ina,"* even as she, too, confronts the Solomonic dilemma. A former schoolteacher, Andrea is a member of the New People's Army who temporarily leaves the hills and her rebel husband in order to give birth at the house of her best friend, Joyce (Gina Alajar). Their friendship had been forged in college, where they both went to the University of the Philippines in Diliman. In Filipino films, being a UP student is almost a required attribute for the stereotypical activist or, at least, progressive thinker. (See Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Moral* 1982) Some scenes were also shot in the Diliman campus, which sets the milieu and venue for hushed conversations and secret rendezvous. It is a running gag between Andrea and Joyce that they will always argue over politics yet remain true friends despite their class differences. These class differences are compounded by Joyce's

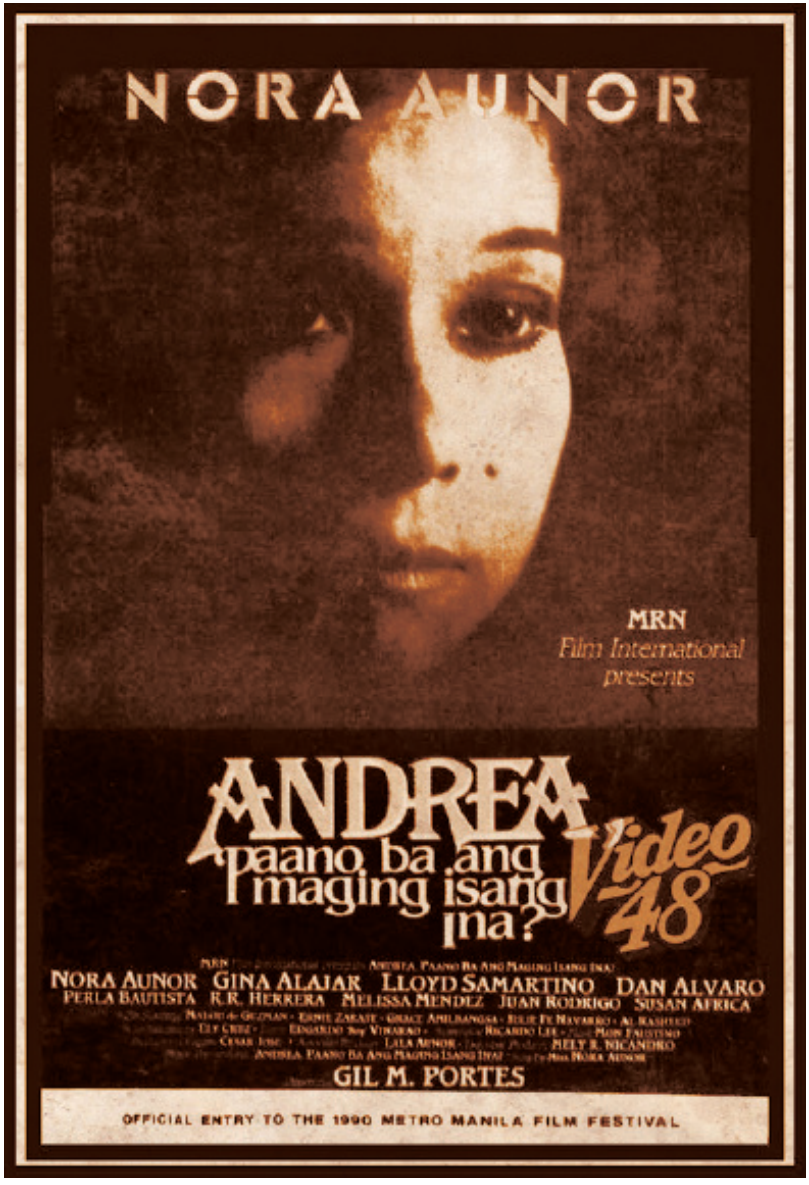

Figure 2: Promotional movie poster from *Video 48*

husband Emil's (played by Lloyd Samartino) disapproval of their friendship. Being unable to have a child of their own is particularly galling to the upper-class Emil, who labors under false imputations of impotence.

Andrea gives birth (at Joyce's home, for security reasons) to a baby boy whom she names Gabriel. While enjoying her new motherhood, she remains politically steadfast and sings the baby to sleep with a well-known activist lullaby that foreshadowingly goes: *"Tulog na, bunso. / Ang iyong ama ay / nasa malayong bayan. / Ang gawain niya / ay 'di maiwan / para sa sambayanan. / 'Pag malaki ka na / may isip na / ikaw ay susunod na rin ba?"* The mother-and-newborn idyll is interrupted when she receives word that her husband, Ka Momoy, had been captured in an encounter, tortured, and killed. She leaves Gabriel with Joyce in order to attend the funeral and to deal with other matters made complicated by security risks. While at a safehouse, planning her return to the countryside with Gabriel, she and her comrades are surrounded by the military. Later, her comrades' bodies were found (one in Fairview, notorious as a dumping ground for "salvage" victims during the 80s) but Andrea's remained missing.

Joyce and Emil willingly take over parenting duties even as the former does her best to find her lost friend. At this point, Joyce has many opportunities to take a more politically active stance. At the school where she teaches, she abstains when a call to strike is voted upon; some of her colleagues are also connected to Andrea's underground network. Visits to human rights NGOs and a mass burial ground do not result in her radicalization. When the search proves fruitless, Joyce is forced to accept both Andrea's presumptive death and the role of mother to the orphan Gabriel. Emil has also grown attached to the child, seizing upon him as his own. Soon enough, Emil's discontent with the state of the nation and a desire for a fresh start result in the family's migrating to the US, with Gabriel now renamed Raymond, after Emil's own father.

Andrea still lives. After suffering prolonged incarceration and torture, she escapes her captors when she is taken for medical treatment. Her anger at what she believes to be her friend's betrayal knows no bounds and, here, Nora Aunor shows her mastery at expressing slow-burning emotion. As a rebel and escapee, however, she has no legal recourse and she returns to the countryside to resume the struggle.

Six years later, Joyce, Emil, and Gabriel/Raymond come back to spend Christmas in the Philippines. Gabriel/Raymond (who speaks with no hint of American twang and has been kept in ignorance of his true parentage) is now a kind-hearted second-grader who gives food to the poor kids in the street. News of their return immediately reaches Andrea, who descends from the hills ready to take back her child. Her first glimpse of Gabriel/Raymond is through the French windows of Emil's house where a party is being held. As a signifier of affluence, a baby grand piano sits in the high-ceilinged and corniced living room where well-heeled guests mingle. The contrast between the world through the window and hers is stark and, to her, staggering. At this moment, her resolve is swayed. With Gabriel/Raymond calling Joyce "Mommy," a Solomonic judgment is inevitable and Andrea decides to concede all her maternal rights to Joyce in order to save the child from hardship. At their last meeting in an out-of-the-way eatery before she heads back for the hills, Andrea shows Gabriel/Raymond a picture of his dead father and gives him a parting hug. As soon as Gabriel/Raymond and Joyce get into the car, there is the sound of gunfire and the running Andrea stumbles over the hood where, in full view of her child, she is shot through the head. Only then, with the child – in shock – saying that Andrea must have been a bad person to reach such a fate, is he told his true name and parentage.

Andrea, Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina? (1990) is a noteworthy film in that its central character comes from an underrepresented sector. Nora Aunor hits just the right notes in her portrayal of a communist and member of the NPA, yet the story's resolution ultimately hews to the melodramatic formula where the *"ulirang ina"* is forced to sacrifice her maternal feelings in order to give her child a chance at a better life.[5]

Anak (Rory Quintos 2000)

"Bakit ganun? Ang lalaki kapag binigyan niya ang pamilya niya ng pagkain, damit, sasabihin ng mga tao aba, mahusay siyang ama! Pero kapag babae ka at ibinigay mo lahat ng gusto nila, kasama pati puso mo't kaluluwa…" These lines uttered by Josie (Vilma Santos) in the melodrama *Anak* sums up her anguish at the unappreciated sacrifices mothers make. The grief in those words are ironic, considering the film's opening scenes showing a glowing Josie coming home to the Philippines after six straight years of working as a domestic helper in Hong Kong. With her savings and *balikbayan* boxes full of *pasalubong*, she is welcomed by her three children –

Figure 3: Promotional movie poster from *Wikipediang Tagalog*

not ecstatically, as she hoped and deserved, but stand-offishly, as a stranger. In a reversal of the biblical parable, Josie becomes the prodigal mother who has to regain her place in the hearts of her children, who are not so easily won over by the "fatted calf" she herself brings in the form of material goods.

Amy's relationship with her eldest daughter Carla (Claudine Barretto) is problematic, to say the least. During her mother's six-year absence, Carla had apparently developed a particularly virulent strain of abandonment neurosis, driving her to undisguised expressions of loathing towards her mother and to self-destructive behavior. The death of their devoted father (more on him later) some years prior to the screen-events renders him an idealized and unchallengeable "good guy" to Josie's "bad guy." The film makes use of flashbacks and we, the audience, know that Josie's inability to come home for the funeral or to even learn of the events in time was due to her Chinese employers' locking her up in the apartment while they go on holiday. It is the conflict between mother and daughter that drives the film, makes *Anak* (2000) the tearjerker that it is, and explains the title as based on the movie's theme song, Freddie Aguilar's classic "*Anak*" (1978). In the song, which most Filipinos are familiar with, a child goes wayward – drug addiction featuring most prominently – despite doting parents. Barretto's stony portrayal of Carla is chilling, and anyone with the faintest knowledge of child psychology would recognize how much energy goes into the self-destructiveness rooted in the sense of being unloved. It is a battle which Josie nearly loses.

In another flashback, we learn that it was the father who was originally meant to work abroad, in Saudi Arabia, as an OFW. However, he becomes homesick (a certain spinelessness in his character is frequently hinted at) and returns after a week. It, therefore, falls on Josie's shoulders to support her family by finding work overseas. Here, the audience is assured that relinquishing her "natural" maternal role as her own children's caregiver was due to her husband's overriding weakness. The "*ulirang ina*" is defined by sacrifice, which is why—at least in film—the issue of social class comes into play and her travails usually stem from disturbances in the traditional order with its gendered roles. Besides the familial conflict, Josie also has to deal with being the sole breadwinner. After her son loses his half-scholarship (requiring her to fork out the full tuition fee) and her taxi venture fails, her savings dwindle, with no visible means of replenishment. Even as Carla taunts her into leaving again, this is what Josie does after the requisite

reconciliations come as something of a surprise and the film closes with her reading a letter from Carla on voice-over while on a Hong Kong bus. With all memory of her former employers' cruelty and the general hardship of being a domestic helper abroad seemingly erased, Josie merges into a sea of migrant workers lauded as "*bagong bayani*", repeating her sacrifice now – not just for her children but, implicitly, also for country. In this version of the judgment of Solomon trope, the "*ulirang ina*" is torn between the roles of nurturer (traditional mothering) and provider (traditional fathering). Josie's individualistic striving to maintain her children in bourgeois comfort assumes a social character in that she is just one of countless OFWs who keep the Philippine economy afloat.

The feminization of overseas contract work has been the subject of many studies and, in *Anak* (2000), Josie and her fellow ex-OFWs form a kind of sorority made strong by the bonds of common experience. While a happy ending with the family staying together through thick and thin might be more poetic than plausible, the upbeat treatment of Josie's return to Hong Kong rings false. Too many serious issues have been raised and one cannot ignore the reality of Flor Contemplacion, who had been the subject of several films just five years earlier (1995) – one of them starring Vilma Santos' undisputed peer, Nora Aunor (See Guillermo and Tadiar in Tolentino 2000).

Three years later, Josie's rhetorical question ("*Bakit ganun*…") makes a cameo appearance in the blockbuster comedy *Ang Tanging Ina* (Wenn Deramas 2003), uttered with feeling by Ai-ai delas Alas and Eugene Domingo, ending with both of them shrieking "*Aaay! Ang galing ni Ate Vi!*" and a resounding "*apir*" (high-five). It seems that melodrama, like history, becomes farce the second time around.

Andrea… and *Anak* place the theme of maternal self-sacrifice center stage in typically dramatic fashion. Both mothers' arenas of struggle, however, necessarily reference extradiegetic[6] worlds that are all too real, if not familiar, to most viewers. Andrea and Josie's practices of motherhood – both shaped perforce by social conditions – are rewarded differently. Josie sees no alternative to working as a domestic helper abroad and accepts her "fate" with a far-away look in her eyes. This wins her state approbation and the title of "*bagong bayani*". Andrea, on the other hand, takes the revolutionary road – that of "*mababuting anak ng bayan*" (to borrow the Katipunan epithet) – and gets a bullet in the head, courtesy of state agents. It is a shock ending that leaves one with a sense of

outrage long after the credits have finished rolling. And, perhaps, that was the point of the abruptness. What seems to be directorial awkwardness may also be effective strategy. Real-life story arcs are rarely neat or readily apparent; their cinematic resolutions (even happy endings) raise questions that extend outside the work's world and into the viewer's.

The films discussed above employ the "classical narrative" mode of *mise-en-scène* and dialogue, which owe much to theater. New sensibilities and technologies (the highly portable digital camera foremost), however, have given rise to a more dynamic realism – one might say, a new idiom with its own representational possibilities. On the subject of sensibility, the more recent films are less obviously structured around the traditional three-act model (where the audience is drawn into a narrative arc with a build-up to a resolution that provides closure). The next films to be discussed exemplify the new sensibility: they are more informally structured and less dependent on the audience's suspension of disbelief.

Kubrador (Jeffrey Jeturian 2006)

It would be difficult to find a protagonist more unglamorous than a *jueteng* bet-collector, especially as played by 70s sexy starlet Gina Pareño as Amy. The events of *Kubrador* (2006) take place over three days, culminating on an All Saints' Day trip to the cemetery. Prior to the action, a series of title cards situate the narrative within its recent historical setting:

> (1) "*Jueteng* is a numbers game in the Philippines. Though illegal, it is popular especially among the poor. Millions of people depend on *jueteng* for their livelihood."
> (2) "It is so lucrative that the big *jueteng* operators are said to wield undue influence over politicians, the military, the police, and even the church."
> (3) "In the year 2000, the President of the Philippines [Joseph Estrada] was charged with accepting pay-offs from *jueteng*, and was subsequently deposed. More recently, the current president [Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo], her husband and son, were also accused of having links to *jueteng*."

This is succeeded by an establishing shot following a man in one long continuous take as he strolls through the neighborhood on his way to the venue of a *jueteng* draw. The draw is interrupted by a police raid and the handheld camera follows the man anew

Figure 4: Promotional movie poster from *Wikipedia*

in a chase scene through the alleyways and up the ramshackle GI sheet roofs of the congested urban poor community – cut to Amy at the family altar praying the morning *Hail Mary*, adding to the end: "*Sana po hindi po ako mahuli ngayon*." Throughout the film, family altars are ubiquitous and the aid of the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus invoked at every opportunity. This makes philosophical sense in a world ruled by a game of chance, where good luck is the hoped-for reward for faith.

Amy is the sole breadwinner. While her husband, who is addicted to the noontime game show *Pera o Bayong*, tends their small sari-sari store. As a *kubrador* (bet collector), her daily routine is to walk through the neighborhood and solicit bets. Despite her unprepossessing appearance, Amy is a semiotically-charged figure. The *Good Morning* towel around her neck identifies her as working class, while an ever-present umbrella signals her preparedness for whatever the skies may bring. She has a troublesome cough, but this doesn't stop her cigarette-smoking. In film and television, smoking marks a character as either louche or nervous – but Amy is neither. Statistics show that cigarette-smoking is highest in so-called developing countries and, in Amy's representation, it may well be a signifier for fatalistic defiance.

On our first day on the street with Amy (the illusion that we are walking with her is reinforced by the use of a handheld camera), she encounters a send-off for a girl and her American fiancé. Amy's greeting is typical: "*Jackpot ka diyan! Puti!*" She then proceeds to the house of the kindly *kabo* (the manager under whom she operates as *kubrador*) to deliver the bets; her commission amounts to P57.75. Back on the street, she is nabbed and taken to the police station. The desk officer is amenable to negotiation for her immediate release and places a secret bet. Later that night, while Amy lies in bed, ill and feverish, a young man in Army uniform appears and massages her forehead. The young man is her son, Eric (Ran del Rosario), who was killed in Mindanao. (Of her two other children, one is an OFW in Hong Kong while the other is a pregnant young mother whose partner is irregularly employed.) Eric frequently appears to us, the viewers, although Amy never sees him. On the second day, Amy is accosted by the parish priest who takes her to the wake of a young man, a victim of a hit-and-run accident while on his way home from celebrating the nursing board exam results. Amy is overcome by grief as this reminds her of her son. Nevertheless, she helps out with setting up the gambling tables for the wake as well as collecting donations for the bereaved. Later, on her way to the *kabo*, she finds

herself lost in a labyrinth of alleyways and dead-ends, and it is only after Eric appears (that is to say, becomes visible to us but not to Amy) that she finds her way out. Her last errand is to the house of Mang Poldo, the *kahero* (cashier)—where men are shoveling money into sacks—to ask for funeral donations. The expansive Mang Poldo complains about the greed of local politicians and the network he has to pay off regularly while, at his elbow, an assistant stuffs money into envelopes labeled "JV", "Fr.", and "Bossing". Upon reaching home, Amy finds that her husband had forgotten to hand over a bet left earlier that day. To her dismay, the number combination is the one that had just won the jackpot. To renege is out of the question and Amy sets out once more into the dark to find the money by whatever means necessary.

The third and last day, All Saints' Day, Amy and her family make their way to Eric's grave at the Manila North Cemetery. After a brief prayer, Amy leaves and goes out on the street, where she sits pensively, smoking and coughing. Suddenly, a fight erupts nearby between a jeepney driver and a car driver, and a crowd quickly gathers. A gunshot is heard and, in the stampede, Amy falls to the ground against a young man who has been fatally wounded. As she cradles his body Pieta-like, she cries for help. Only after a vehicle arrives to take the body away does Amy notice that the fatal bullet had grazed her shoulder. As the camera lingers on her haggard face, we see Eric behind her. The closing shot of the film is of a crowd of kibitzers, their backs turned toward us.

Despite having no pretensions of being a grand narrative, *Kubrador (2006)* is a powerful film, with its metaphor for life as a game of chance. This would be a defeatist position if we did not know it to have a ring of truth, given the social context. Amy is a strong woman who, with shades of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), struggles doggedly against injustice that is (mis)taken for fate. In a hardscrabble existence ruled by the luck of the draw, Amy and her milieu exercise their agency the best they can. The whole neighborhood is, in fact, one big support system, with the streets serving as a living room for all.

Despite the film's grittiness, it is actually a sophisticated production harking back to the quiet desperation of Italian neo-realism exemplified by Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves 1948) as well as more recent films such as Fernando Meirelles' *Cidade de Deus* (City of God 2002), which take full advantage of the digital camera's portability. Eric's interacting with

and comforting his mother from another plane is a nod to Wim Wender's *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire* 1987). Unlike the films discussed earlier (*Andrea…* and *Anak*), *Kubrador* (2006) does not have a "high drama" speech or histrionic confrontation scene. Amy keeps her own counsel and explains herself to nobody. This makes the film less theatrical yet more visual. The subtle screenplay by Ralston Jover also bears the stamp of script adviser, Armando "Bing" Lao, whose trademark device is a short narrative timeframe revolving around or culminating in a special occasion.[7]

Lola (Brillante Ma. Mendoza 2009)

Whereas, in *Kubrador*, the affects intensify on All Saints' Day, in *Lola* (2009), the weather serves as pathetic fallacy for its elderly female protagonists. The film begins at Quiapo Church, where Lola Sepa (Anita Linda, *"ulirang ina" par excellence)* and a little boy buy a candle, which they light and set up, despite a howling wind, at Jones' Bridge. It is soon revealed that the candle is for her grandson who was killed at that same spot during a cellphone robbery just the day before. Their extremely limited means are underscored when they get on a jeepney where, although there is still room, the little boy sits on Lola Sepa's lap and she insists on her "senior" fare. They then proceed to a funeral parlor to canvass for the cheapest coffin. Later, while leaving the police station, Lola Sepa just misses the arrival of another old woman, Lola Puring (Rustica Carpio), the grandmother of her own grandson's murderer. Both unable to afford a lawyer, they are advised to reach an amicable settlement out of court. As the story progresses, the two old women parallel each other's travails. Lola Sepa avails herself of all means at her disposal (including pawning her pension card) in order to give her grandson a decent burial, while vegetable vendor Lola Puring resorts to pawning their television set as well as performing venial tricks – such as shortchanging her customers – in order to raise the fifty thousand pesos needed to buy her grandson's freedom.

A common backdrop to their striving is the wind and rain, a glowering sky, and a never-receding flood. (One of the most striking images in the film is that of the fluvial funeral procession.) Government offices also make humble supplicants of them both. While Lola Sepa lives in the middle of floodwaters with a granddaughter and several great-grandchildren, Lola Puring lives with her disabled son, whom she literally has to spoonfeed, and another grandson who helps her sell vegetables. In the latter's house (as in Amy's of *Kubrador*), the television set, tuned more often

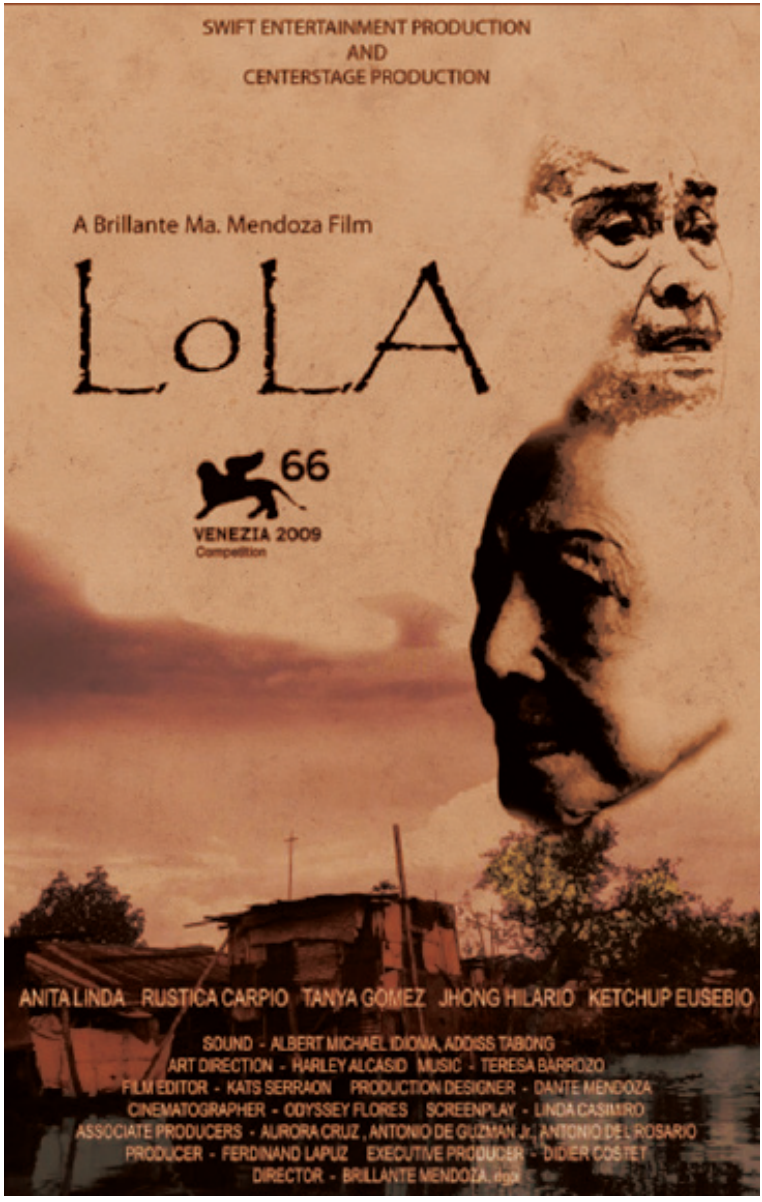

Figure 5: Promotional movie poster from *WikiPilipinas*

than not to a game show, is the only source of entertainment. Taken altogether, their diegetic world is an all-too-familiar one: it is kind to nobody and cruel to the old. The penultimate scene has the two grandmothers meeting at a food court-cum-bingo parlor. After an understandably awkward exchange dealing mostly with geriatric rheumatism and dietary restrictions, the payoff is made. This then cuts to the courtroom where justice (or, rather, what passes for it) is finally served.

That *Lola* (2009) is a bleak film is agreed upon by many reviewers, local and foreign.[8] Along with other recent films bearing titles such as *Serbis* (Mendoza 2008), *Kinatay* (Mendoza 2009), and *Imburnal* (Sanchez 2008), it has occasionally been lumped under the informal classification of "poverty porn," a term which gained currency after the surprise commercial success of *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2009.[9] The slums of Mumbai and its miserable denizens, particularly the child beggars, acquire an exotic and orientalizing sheen in this film by the British Danny Boyle, which rakes in eight Oscar Awards (including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Cinematography). Never before has a film been so rewarded by Hollywood for making subhuman living conditions cinematic and, therefore, palatable to all but the most finicky. Accusations of "poverty porn" were the immediate backlash of this success. Questions arose as to the ethics of profiting from the wretchedness of huge swathes of society, not to mention the "there-but-for-the-grace-of-god-go-I" self-congratulation underlying any aesthetic contemplation. Nevertheless, the trend was such that it became almost de rigueur for ambitious filmmakers to leave their comfort zones and venture into the underbelly of society with an eye to the international awards circuit and dilettantes of despair.[10] Yet to dismiss all films depicting harsh reality as "poverty porn" is to internalize our Otherness vis-à-vis our imagined First World; simply put, it is to take the point of view of the tourist — in which case all art would have to be approved by the Department of Tourism. Whatever the intention and reception, the sublimation into art of any aspect of life, no matter how dreary or mundane, endows it with the intensity and instructive potential of fable. "Poverty porn", however one judges it, is a change from the usual escapist fare offered by mainstream cinema.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the "*ulirang ina*" as a character in Philippine film has grown in complexity over the decades. In the first two

films discussed, *Tunay na Ina* (1939) and *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (1970), the fantasy upper-class premise detracts/distracts from the stated matrocentric theme, with the fathers being ample providers able to hire nannies and governesses while the mothers' role not going much beyond providing sentimental affection and keeping an eye on the help. In this idealized set-up, the man of the house "fathers" everyone – wife and help included. That this is a bourgeois patriarchal projection that cannot hold its own against actual experience is shown in more realistic portrayals of family life.

Traditionally, the "*ulirang ina*" is a passive character, a mater dolorosa whose heart bleeds for her children. In gangster films such as *Asiong Salonga* (Santiago 1961) and *Bitayin si… Baby Ama!* (1976), she is necessary to the narrative only in so far as motherly love is the antihero's saving grace, redeeming him somewhat in the eyes of the viewer. Her suffering is often presented as the last straw of injustice, a personal affront to the male protagonist. In *Baby Ama*, the nameless mother is collateral damage. It is possible that the action genre is the last bastion of the passive female character, here as in Hollywood.

Recent decades, however, have given us more well-rounded representations of *"ulirang ina"* and its attendant sacrifice within the judgment of Solomon trope. No longer ancillary, she now takes center stage. The year 1990 brought us *Andrea Pano ba Maging Isang Ina* (1990), where the mother is also a guerrilla fighter. Her gut-wrenching decision to give up her son in order to spare him the hardships of the life she has chosen for herself is punctuated by her violent death in full view of the child. In *Anak* (2000), the OFW mother is also the sole provider for her children. The irony here is that her role as provider depends on her looking after other people's offspring. In the end, the only way to go on being a mother is by leaving them once more. *Andrea Pano ba Maging Isang Ina* (1990) and *Anak* (2000) place the *"ulirang ina"* within a social context where traditional roles have been swept away by the tide of social unrest and unemployment. In these two melodramas, the women are exceptionally strong characters whose moral compass – within their respective struggles – serves them in good stead. The mise-en-scène and technological limitations of the time, however, imbue these films with the sensibility that the unsatisfactory world is something still outside of them.

In *Kubrador* (2006) and *Lola* (2009), poverty has seemingly permeated the women's very pores. In these two more recent

films, the *"ulirang ina"* is firmly embedded in a larger, more densely populated milieu where social dysfunction is the norm. Amy's *"ulirang ina"* – despite her lumpen occupation and all-too-human frailty – is just as devoted as the earlier exemplars. The difference is that, in a world where corruption rules, principles are luxuries and values are relative. This is the world of *Lola* (2009), where the role of "*ulirang ina*" has fallen on the grandmothers' frail shoulders: one the grandmother of a killer and the other of the victim, they will stop at nothing for the children's sake. Already stooped, they stoop even lower for a semblance of justice. In this version of the judgment of Solomon, the sacrifice is of personal dignity. What more is left to give?

In *Bitayin si Baby Ama* (1976), Anita Linda's character embraces her doomed son's photograph and dies. In *Lola* (2009), she goes through bureaucratic hell and (literal) high water for her murdered grandson. With thirty-three years between them, much has changed in representations of the "*ulirang ina*." With traditional gender roles grown obsolete in a world order that ruthlessly exploits the labor of both women and men, the incarnations of the *"ulirang ina"* of film are no longer limited to helplessly weeping and praying at home. Whether it be weeping and praying or marching forward with grim determination, the devotion remains the same.

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[1]"Top 20 Signs of a Pinoy Flick" went viral online in 2009. The full list comes from entertainment writer Ricky Lo's column (Philstar Entertainment 2009).

[2]Despite Sisa's example, rare is the cinematic mother, devoted or otherwise, who actually descends into madness. Notable exceptions—all from Lino Brocka's oeuvre—include Kuala of *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (1974) who is reduced to an infantile state after a brutal abortion; Tonya of *Insiang* (1976) who murders her lover in an act of jealous rage over her daughter; and the tormenting Nyora Atang of *"Bukas, Madilim, Bukas"* (the third episode of *Tatlo, Dalawa, Isa* 1974) and her tormented daughter Rosenda who, between the two of them, make up a Miss Havisham. In Philippine melodrama, it is a razor-thin line that separates love from madness.

[3]Schadenfreudian – from "schadenfreude: satisfaction or pleasure felt at someone else's misfortune." *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (Random House, Inc. 2018).

[4]Lookist – from "lookism: discrimination or prejudice based on a person's physical appearance." *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (Random House, Inc. 2018).

[5]Dolphy's character, Tiya Coring/Dioscuro, in *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay* (Brocka 1978) also undergoes a similar dilemma as an unconventional parent. After his ward and love interest leaves his infant son in his care, Tiya Coring's desire to raise the child (Nonoy, played with incredible precocity by Niño Muhlach) with some semblance of normalcy leads him to sacrifice his flamboyant nature – which earns him, along

with the preexistent ridicule of homophobes, the threat of disenfranchisement from the "sisterhood." Their family unit is shattered when Nonoy's biological mother – a former prostitute and, now, prosperous widow – reclaims the child. Dolphy gives a heart-rending performance as he prepares to give Nonoy up. Like Andrea, Tiya Coring has been dealt a weak hand in the comfort and stability stakes. The biological mother, however, seems to have been driven only by covetousness and succeeds in short shrift by making Nonoy feel unwanted. The last move is made by Nonoy, who finds his way back to Tiya Coring, his one and only true parent. *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay* (1978) is a gem and Dolphy's Tiya Coring deserves recognition as honorary "*ulirang ina*".

[6]Extradiegetic – "An extradiegetic narrator is one who narrates a story from outside the fictional universe of a particular text. This narrator communicates the primary narrative to an audience equally removed from the storyworld; this audience, then, is the extradiegetic narratee. Extradiegetic narrators may be characters in their narratives, but at the moment of narration they are operating from without its storyworld." *The Extradiegetic Narrative Level* (Narrative Theory and the Early Novel 2018).

[7]Award-winning screenwriter Armando "Bing" Lao (writer of films *Dukit* directed by himself in 2013; *La Vida Rosa* directed by Chito *Roño* 2001; *Pila-Balde* directed by Jeffrey *Jeturian* 1999) was the lecturer on screenwriting at the 2004 MOWELFUND Filmmaking Workshop attended by the author. He was gracious enough to share with us detailed outlines of his work.

[8]The International Movie Database page for *Lola* links to 48 reviews, mostly favorable and almost unanimous in the film's bleakness.

[9]"Poverty porn" first came into use in the context of charity campaigns during the 1980s with their reliance on images of starving children. It resurfaced in a critique is written soon after the release of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008): "What is 'poverty porn' and why does it matter for development?" (Aidthoughts 2009).

[10]A well-received comedic critique of this trend was *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* (Rivera 2011).

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