

VAGINAL ECONOMY: Cinema and Globalization in the Post-Marcos Post-Brocka Era

■ **ROLANDO B. TOLENTINO**

Rolando B. Tolentino is the Dean of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication. He is the author of books on Philippine cinema, popular culture and literary studies. He is Fellow at the UP Institute of Creative Writing, faculty of the UP Film Institute, and Chair of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (Critics of Philippine Cinema) and the Congress of Teachers and Educators for Nationalism and Democracy (CONTEND-UP).

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the trope of the vaginal economy that is proliferated in the political economy and nature of Philippine migration. The vaginal economy is both receptacle and symptom of Philippine development. It represents the discourse through cinema, and historicizes the primal debate in the Marcos and Brocka contestation for image-building of the nation. Primarily through the sex-oriented (bomba) films and their permutations in the various political life of the contemporary nation, the vaginal economy is historicized even in the after-life of the post-Marcos and post-Brocka era.

Keywords: feminism, Philippine cinema, vaginal economy, post-Marcos, post-Brocka, bomba films

There seems to be three areas of concern in contemporary independent filmmaking in the Philippines—first, digital films as the newer direction for a democratized filmmaking; second, in terms of funding source, independent films or works done by non-mainstream producers; and third, in terms of form and content, these are alternative films, such as documentaries, experimental and short animation films. What is common in all three is the notion of empowerment of marginal voices or the ability to foreground oppressed identities and their condition of oppression.

What I am proposing is a fourth area that remains constant and sustainable in Philippine cinema, especially in times of crisis. Sex-oriented films, since its inception in the late 1960s in the Philippines, have remained a standard feature of contemporary Philippine cinema. By this, I mean to refer to their continuous production amidst conditions of economic and political turmoil, which, in retrospect, seems to actually signify the national character of the Philippines. The sex-oriented film genre becomes the semi-autonomous sphere that sustains Philippine national cinema. However, sex films are a misnomer because in mainstream cinema, what is only allowed is the proliferation of oftentimes quite tame sex scenes, the display of semi-naked and semi-nude bodies, or in the case of more recent frontal nudity, its split-second exposure on screen—all characteristics, at best, can be labeled as “soft porn.” There is a need to historicize the growth of sex-oriented films, mostly low-budget, hurriedly and independently produced and with the overriding logic of raking in huge profits, in order to contextualize the idea of the indie (independent) cinema movement in the country, whose rise since 2000 (with director Jon Red’s *Still Lives* considered as the opening film of this digital generation of filmmaking) comes in at a turning point where commercial cinema is declining and indie cinema is beginning to break path. With indie cinema’s rise to prominence, the heterosexual-dominant trope of sex-oriented films disappears, which is not to suggest an indexical causality between the two cinemas, but the necessity to reexamine the intimacies of desire and sexualities that foreground these developments.

There were only fifty-three Filipino movies shown commercially in 2004. This is low compared to the past where Philippine cinema had an annual output of some 200 films per year. The once robust national cinema is truly experiencing a decline. Though its demise has been predicted on and off in the past, the recent steadier slide may just mark the real “death of Philippine cinema.” The cause of the decline is economically-rooted. The Philippines has yet to fully recover from the global economic crisis that afflicted most especially the Southeast Asian region in 1997, further compounded by the even bigger global economic crisis beginning in 2007. Although other nations in the region have witnessed the growth of their national economies, the Philippine economy has only grown from 3.5 to 5 percent per annum in the post-crisis era. What sustains its economy is an open secret—the massive deployment of overseas contract workers (OCWs), mostly women. With seven million Filipino contract workers abroad, official annual remittance has already hit US \$8 billion, about half of the national budget.

This essay discusses the cultural discourse of the libidinal drive of Philippine national development in the film industry—the formation and sustenance of the “vaginal economy” that is both the symptom and receptacle of the larger transnational national development. My hypothesis is that the sexualization of its national development produces, among other things, the overt sexualization of Filipino films. Bomba or soft-porn films, since its appearance and domination of the film industry in the pre-martial law period of the Marcos dictatorship (pre-September 21, 1972), have permutated to various subcategories attuned to a range of historical sub-developments of the period. Such films were used as a basis for Ferdinand Marcos’ declaration of martial rule, equating these sex-oriented films—including the growing communist movement—to the moral decay of the times and thus the need for a clean administrative slate. Immediately after declaring martial law, Marcos banned these films, only for them to reappear in various strains in dialog with the allotted parameters of the period. To this day, the debates on morality still plague the sex-oriented films, many of which experienced being banned. My contention is that the continuing prevalence of sex-oriented films is attuned with the intensifying feminization of Philippine labor, one that has been instrumentalized to characterize the Philippine state as powered by the vaginal economy.

Vaginal economy refers to the intensifying feminized sexualization of Philippine labor that is mobilized in the national development program. This involves the dual transnationalization of Philippine labor—in the homeland, to service the labor needs of multinational capital, whether as factory, service sector or sex workers; and outside the homeland, with the continued reliance on OCW, especially in times of crisis. In this essay, I will posit a dialog on how the vaginal economy produces a Philippine cinema attuned to the national libidinal drive, and the politics involved in the production of images. If sexualized Philippine labor resuscitates the endless crisis of the national economy, then sex-oriented cinema saves the day for the Philippine movie industry, forestalling its periodically announced death.

I will first map out the Marcos and Brocka debates on the imaging of the nation. Central to the debates is the production of the Filipina in various permutations of the sex-oriented films that carries over even in the post-Marcos, post-Brocka era. I then expound on the context of the intensification of feminization of migrant work as the arena where the vaginal economy is made the libidinal drive of national development. I will then examine

the intensification of the vaginal economy—how the discourse is carried over in the post-investigation era. Lastly, I will examine more recent sex-oriented films that represent the turn and greater reliance on the vaginal economy, especially noticeable at a time where the economy and its cinema are experiencing their worst lull in the post-war era. This cinema and its cultural discourse represent the newer direction in the post-Marcos and post-Brocka era to dialog and contest the imageries of nation.

Contestation of the Image of the Nation in Marcos and Brocka

After the declaration of martial rule in 1972, then President Ferdinand Marcos established a novel republic called Bagong Lipunan (New Society), imagined as the wellspring of the modern Philippine nation. Together with his wife Imelda, Marcos designed a fascist rule and utilized edifice showcases like film to beautify the representation of the nation despite the mounting international criticism of his rule. Moreover, he institutionalized the circuiting of national laboring bodies to be in the service of international capital. Prior to the declaration of martial rule but during Marcos' second presidential term¹, Filipino professionals were migrating to the United States under liberalized working and immigration rules. This 1960s diaspora signaled the brain drain phenomenon or the outflux of professionals such as doctors, nurses, accountants, engineers, among others that serviced the needs of already developed nations; and thus, forfeiting the needs of their own nation. What Marcos also institutionalized after the declaration of martial rule was overseas contract work (OCW), initially involving male laborers in the oil-boom economies of Middle Eastern nations, then later, both men and women in more prosperous global sites. The remittance of foreign currency earnings of OCWs was required to prop up his administration, already saddled with corruption and overspending. Historically, OCWs sustained the nation, especially in times of economic and political crises. Multinational investments easily closed shop in the nation-space during economic downturns. This leaves the OCWs, deploying their massive accumulated earnings, to prop up the national economy.

The tragedy of the Marcos dictatorship was that it only propelled the megalomania of the already prominent presidential bodies and their cronies, leaving the nation in massive poverty. Added to this, the militarization of the nation furthered the disenfranchisement of national bodies, subjugated to serve the dictatorship and its foreign interest. Most of the legacies of

the Marcos period—the liberalization of the economy, factionalism of an already small ruling comprador class, pampering of the military, and the swelling of poverty—remains in place even to this day. What also remains in place in the nation-state is the semi-colonial and semi-feudal infrastructures that negate any turn for genuine social transformation.

Lino Brocka was considered as the foremost political filmmaker of the period. His films provided the counter-imagery to the Marcosian megalomania of nation-building. While Imelda Marcos in particular focused on an aesthetics of the “true, good and beautiful” as practised in state pageantries and edifices, Brocka proliferated images of poverty in film. In *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (*Weighed But Found Wanting*, 1974), he juxtaposed the desire of a leper and the town’s fool for a better, albeit isolated, life amidst the Catholic hypocrisy of the small town’s elite. In *Macho Dancer* (1989), he told the story of a young man caught in the underground of the sex industry. In *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (*My Country: Clutching the Knife’s Edge*, 1984), he allegorized the travails of a working class couple caught in a factory strike and the kidnapping of the owners. He would be recognized both nationally and internationally for the humanization of subaltern people’s experiences in the backdrop of state-sanctioned poverty and human rights abuses.

Brocka and Marcos would eventually usher in the “Second Golden Age” in Philippine cinema, a sustained production output of both aesthetically and politically attuned films. His films, *Maynila Sa Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Neon*, 1975) and *Orapronobis* (*Fight for Us*, 1989) would become bookend markers of the period. He openly protested against the Marcos’ policies, heading cultural organizations such as PETA (Philippine Educational and Theater Arts) and the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP). Marcos’ oppressive regime provided both the impetus to develop quality films as part of the dictatorship’s showcase and to regiment the production of imageries of nation with strict censorship rules. The Marcoses revived the Metro Manila Film Festival that blocked moviehouses solely for the exhibition of Filipino films during the peak Christmas holidays, funded quality film initiatives via the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, and launched the International Manila Film Festival at the height of their political crisis. They also built the infamous Film Palace whose floors collapsed and killed tens of workers in the mad dash to finish constructing the building in time for the opening of the international film festival. What became of the second golden age was the production of quality films characterized by

both artistic and political merit, the latter discussing the dehumanization of individuals, mostly subaltern figures, amidst the intensifying crisis surrounding them.

Sex-oriented movies, like their predecessors in the pre-martial law era, would not only sustain the film industry but would also be canonized as part of the second renaissance. Films like *Virgin Forest* (1981), *Scorpio Nights* (1985), *Isla (Isle, 1983)*, *Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa (Most Beautiful Woman on the Face of the Earth, 1975)*, *Burlesk Queen* (1977) and even Lino Brocka's *White Slavery* (1984) combined covert political commentary on the period with plentiful sex scenes. In the first two years of martial law, the bomba genre disappeared and horror films dominated the box-office. Gradually, the bomba made a comeback in moviehouses, permutating in various forms provided for by the political temper of the Marcos dictatorship. For example, the bold "wet film," known for its covert display of the female body using a wet *kamison*², emerged around 1974 to 1976. It is considered bold because of the daringness of the display amidst stringent censorship regulations. The spectacle of women's private parts is witnessed only when the heroine takes a bath or is raped along the river, and her *kamison* gets wet. The first generation of bold actresses were stars who typified the local notions of beauty (browned skinned, dusky, slim), such as Gloria Diaz, Elizabeth Oropesa and Daria Ramirez, mostly former beauty pageant winners, and attuned with Marcos' return to the heritage past in Bagong Lipunan. This is in stark contrast to the mestiza actresses of the pre-martial law period of the bomba genre, where whiteness was the privileged norm for display.

The second generation of actresses, however, was younger and thus, deemed bold for the period (1976 to 1983). Chanda Romero and Alma Moreno were the most famous *probinsyana*³ stars of this generation, and who shifted the standard from racial colors to youth. Marcos' emphasis on youth involved the formation of a youth brigade (Kabataang Baranggay), headed by his eldest daughter Imee, and the lowering of the voting age for plebiscites to 14 years. The empowering of youth was tied to the utilization of able bodies for a transnational national development. The third permutation of the bomba genre was known as the "FF" (fighting fish) film and the more raucous *penekula*.⁴ The launching of the Manila International Film Festival or MIFF brought a brief censorship-free period. Art films from abroad that depicted sex in overt ways were shown in theaters. At other times of the

year, local sex films or FF films were shown at the Film Palace, exempt from censorship rules. The *penekula*, however, referred to those sex films shown in third-run movie houses that inserted hard-core scenes to soft-porn movies. These insertions were either taken from foreign porn movies or were actually shot in local films but deleted in its regular run in first-class theaters and reinserted in its third-run theaters. The actresses of this generation of stars were younger, some of them Amerasians⁵ and bearing branded product names. A generation of them were known, for example, as “soft drink” beauties—Coca Nicolas, Sarsi Emmanuel and Pepsi Paloma.⁶

Like pre-martial rule, *bomba* films of this period (late 1960s to 1972) proliferated and were met with the blind eye of the censorship agency to hide the heightened political unrest. With the assassination of returning political opponent, Benigno Aquino in 1983, massive protests that drew hundreds of thousands catalyzed on the streets. After deposing the Marcoses in 1986, Aquino’s wife, Corazon took the helm of power. A devout Catholic and pacifist, Corazon Aquino promised to be the total opposite of Marcos in morality. However, this did not spell the end of sex films. Instead, sex films proliferated through the “ST” (sex-trip) films, involving young well-bred actresses performing sex on film at the proper place—the bedroom—and at the appropriate time—during a moment of love or upon marriage. Included in the line-up of actresses were Rita Avila and Gretchen Barreto, both *kolehiyalas*.⁷

The last permutation of the *bomba* film which began in 1992 is known as the “TT” (titillating film). Slowly, through the years, the overt display of the female, and sometimes male, body may lead to a split-second frontal nudity shot. It continued the generation of well-bred actresses like Alma Concepcion, Amanda Page, a Filipino American and was later followed by another expatriate, Joyce Jimenez, and the very loud Rossana Roces who worked as a “guest relations officer”⁸ in a nightclub. The particular characteristic of these women was not only the bearing of appropriate bodies but the bearing of articulate voices, enunciating women’s issues and liberal opinions on sex.

While the rest of Southeast Asia enjoyed massive economic booms from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, the Philippines would remain isolated from such robust regional developments. The nation was in several political and economic crises from 1983 to 1992, leading to the sustained systematic export

of Philippine labor as geopolitical sites of familial and national relief. The economic take-off in 1994 would be dragged down by the 1997 global crisis that affected the Southeast Asian region in particular. The economic crisis would also take another political toll in 2002 with the deposing of President Joseph Estrada, a former action star, via EDSA 2 or People Power 2 and its subplot, People Power 3, which manifested in the form of the rampage of the nearby area of the presidential palace by Estrada's supporters, mostly belonging to the lower economic class. Brocka's death would clearly mark the end of the second golden age. His construction of the imagery of a nation marked by excessive abuse of power and suffering in poverty provided the vital aura to comprehend the times. However, his emphasis on the political, and his death unwittingly cautioned the international film festival audience from understanding any other imagery of the Philippines. Thus, sex-oriented films became more prominent as a form of aesthetic and political articulation of the intensifying export of Philippine labor or the diasporization of female labor. The proliferation of overseas contract workers would financially sustain families and the national economy, providing, for example, money for leisure like moviegoing and other forms of entertainment.

Overseas contract work has sustained the nation in its crisis and brief take-off. However, the state does not look kindly on OCWs even when when its bureaucracy has institutionalized tags such as *Bagong Bayani* (new hero) into official discourse. With the execution of domestic worker, Flor Contemplacion in Singapore in 1995, the plight of OCWs under the apathy of the nation-state was politically forefronted as massive protests took place in the streets. This national event led to three biographical films about Contemplacion, with the one bearing her name becoming the undisputed box-office earner for the year. It also opened the way for the influx of OCW films until the novelty ended and certain sex-oriented films again returned to represent the more recent times. In general, the OCW geobody in film is not represented in OCW character-driven films. In the first-generation of OCW films that dealt with historical traumas of servitude, rape and death of high-profile OCW cases the sexual nature of OCW was highlighted, constructing female migrant sexuality as the very magnet that attracts violence. In the second-generation of OCW films, the melodramatic romance of migrant workers was now foregrounded, emphasizing sacrifice to reconstitute the domestic happiness of the heterosexual couple. What then develops is that the OCW figure has been desexualized and engendered towards female

sacrifice and male effete transformation. Instead, some of the strains of the Filipina laboring body are displaced onto sex films.

Vaginal Economy of Women's Migrant Work

The economics of overseas contract work needs to be examined in order to generate the material condition and reality of the growing vaginal economic dependence of the nation. Overseas contract work represents the politics of hope and its lingering effect in both the family and nation. This resounds with the ethos of bomba films, women becoming eroticized sacrificial lambs to redeem the family. Multinational work has brought forth women into the work area, generally underpaid and prone to sexual exploitation. Like the bomba queen, their bodies become magnets for modes of capital accumulation. The nation-state relies on remittance of OCWs to sustain itself. In 2004, the national budget is P864 billion.⁹ The estimated total annual remittances (bank, non-bank, and non-cash), however, of all Filipino OCWs is \$20 billion.¹⁰ OCW subsidizes the cost of running the government. While P875 million was contributed by OCWs to the Overseas Filipino Workers Administration in 2001, only P91 million was allocated by OWWA for OCW benefits in the same year.¹¹ The Philippines is not only transnationalized from without the nation-space, it is also transnationalized from within. On the one hand, multinational work provided by national bodies especially in the service sector inside the nation-space has contributed 45 percent of the gross domestic product.¹² In 1999, another estimate pegged the share to 52.9 percent. Multinational work in the nation-space is sexualized work because the criteria of nimble fingers, perfect eyesight, tedious menial work and healthy bodies—a category related to female domestic work—is engendered for factory work in the garment and electronic industries. Tourism, fastfood, retailing and entertainment rework the national body and personality to fit with globally competitive standards, albeit remaining lowly in the global and sexual division of labor. The national body is further engendered in subcontracting or flexible labor practices, reemphasizing the exploitative contractualization of overseas labor. Most direct of the sexualized trade is sex work which involves some 100,000 children and 600,000 adults, mostly women.¹³

On the other hand, women have eclipsed men in transnational overseas contract work. "By 1994, almost 60 percent of the 258,984 OCWs who left the country were female. In the first quarter of 1995 alone, there were more

women among the 114,566 newly hired OCWs. Of that total, 69,435 or 60 percent were female while only 45,131 were male."¹⁴ And in order for men to become competitive in the OCW trade, they take on feminized work as demand for menial manual labor has declined worldwide, especially with the lingering effects of the most recent wave of global crisis. OCW work is sexualized work as women take on home-related work abroad, such as care-giving, nursing, domestic work, hotel bedroom service, entertainment and sex work, and so on. Some 300,000 Filipina nurses practice their profession abroad.¹⁵ Ninety percent of medical school graduates work or reside abroad.¹⁶ The estimated number of Filipinas in entertainment work in Japan is 150,000.¹⁷ Some 2,670 Filipinos and Filipinas are leaving the nation to do overseas contract work.¹⁸ Men have also adapted to the global demand for feminized labor by reskilling themselves along these fields, including the service sector.

A columnist describes the "vaginal economy" as "how the otherwise legitimate deployment of Filipino women as entertainers has deteriorated into their massive trafficking into sex work."¹⁹ In this economy, laboring women and men are thought of as "vaginal commodities."²⁰ Thus, the columnist calls for the various sectors involved in the massive deployment of overseas contract work "to take [...] performing artists seriously and work determinedly against any further growth of the 'vaginal economy'."²¹ On the one hand, the columnist recognizes the organizing signifier of the recent national development drive—the feminization of Filipino and Filipina labor either in transnational contract work overseas or multinational work in various "special economic zones" inside the nation-space. After India and Mexico, the Philippines is the third largest exporter of overseas contract work. The female and the feminine become the nexus of national development drives. Women have overtaken the men in overseas contract work and men have opted to do traditional feminine and female work for the promise of social mobility.

On the other hand, the columnist makes a belated call for the cessation of imperative of this economy—the trafficking of women for sex work. This, of course, is the logical recourse to protect the contract worker abroad. Ethically, however, the recourse becomes entrenched in the bourgeois civil society that seeks out the various sectors to protect the unknowing body of the overseas contract worker. Yet the phenomenon of overseas contract work has been heightened especially in times of both national and global crises. National development has sustained the deployment of

women and men in overseas contract work. Filipinas and Filipinos have become sexualized objects in mostly First World sites that negate access to national citizenship for the possibility of becoming performing citizens in their homeland. Even in multinational work in the homeland, laboring bodies perform sexualized and gendered feminine and female work to become abled economic and political citizens. The vaginal economy heralds feminine and female work in diaspora, a process of becoming or coming to being.

The vaginal economy can also be thought of as the resultant affect of what is elaborated by Neferti Xina M. Tadiar as the “sexual economies” in the Asia-Pacific, where “in this fantasy, the economies and political relations of nations are libidinally configured, that is, they are grasped and effected in terms of sexuality.”²² The production of desire, for Tadiar, regulated by capitalism, gets retranslated in desire “for surplus wealth/pleasure, produced by and producing a fantasy of political-libidinal economies that regulate individual and national lives.”²³ That the “Asia Pacific” has been constructed as a wellspring of sexual economies is regurgitated in the historical experientiation of the “Philippine-American romance” that narrativizes the primal seduction in the economic and political relations, “a model Asian-Pacific family” that incorporates Japanese hegemony in the geopolitics, and the “sexual labor and commerce” and “imperial sons, national pimps” that integrates sex work in the country as the impetus for capitalist-militarist development of the region.²⁴ All these fragments of a historical narrative posits the continuous sliding of patriarchy in the Asia Pacific—one where Japan is displaced by the bigger phallic power of U.S. militarism, and where both Japan and the U.S. conjure the Philippines as their receptacle of the “feminization of developing labor” that consigns and condenses the Philippines as unenviable “ward, child, mistress, commodity.”²⁵

Thus, the vaginal economy produces a cultural analog and dialog that become symptomatic of and receptacle to the transnationalized national development drive. In the Marcos and Brocka era, the political economy (U.S. imperialism, Japanese overseas development assistance and multinational investment, Marcos’s fascism to quell people’s dissent) underwrote the libidinal economy that intensified the sexualization of national bodies, specifically the OCW geobody. The political economy that transpired in the post-Marcos and post-Brocka era, one that still heavily relied on U.S. patronage for the maintenance of national bureaucrat capitalism, sustained the libidinal economy of sex-oriented films, sex work, feminization of male

labor, and the double feminization of female labor, among others. This means that the vaginal economy provided the drive for women's labor and bodies to proliferate in sites of multinational work and in bomba films. It also implies, especially in recent times, the feminization of Philippine cinema, its decline of what used to be a vibrant national film industry as Hollywood's share of the market has continued to increase. Together with India and the Chinese-speaking nations, the Philippines has sustained its own film industry despite the increasing pressures from the globalized American film industry. Yet in the recent years, the pressures have taken their toll on the national film industry whose output pegged at 220 films in 1999, dropped to 97 in 2002, making the Philippines the 9th largest producer in 2002 when it used to be fourth from 1997 to 1999.²⁶ With declining film production and cheaper costs of distributing foreign films, the national film industry is struggling to survive. Although in the past, critics and friends of the national film industry have on-and-off announced the death of Philippine cinema, it has now become apparent that the prediction can become a foreseeable reality in terms of commercial cinema being challenged by indie filmmaking.

Discourse of Sex in Films and the Recent Nation

Sex has become a byword in recent definitions and operations of the nation. It remains a constant issue in popular discourse, especially as circumscribed by the massive apparatus of the Catholic church in the Philippines. This means that sexual issues have to rely more on popular modes of proliferation as controlled by the vested interest of the church, state and businesses. To another extent, hegemonic management of sexual moral panic becomes the mode of creating national safety. What becomes of the Philippines is a sexual nation in popular cultural imagination—finding bases in both work and in cultural representations—exuding excess sex derived from the material phenomenon that drives the transnationalized national development. In mainstream cinema, it has become one of two streams of independent filmmaking²⁷—one, overt sex-oriented films with artsy style, a recollection of the Marcos and Brocka aesthetic and commercial production; and two, the artsy attempt to produce not overtly political films but a humanized politics, such as *Magnifico* (2003), a reworking of the Marcos and Brocka paradigm that now shifts the terrain from social to identity politics. Both streams attempt to bring films into national and international prominence in the festival markets. *Magnifico* narrates the story of an innocent optimistic boy who perseveres to salvage the remnants of the family and the small town, even if it means sacrificing his own life. It is a humanistic telling of optimism

even in poverty and death, of innocence even in chaos and disintegration. In the last four years, there has been no major action film made because of the high costs of production vested mainly in special effects and the high salary of the action star. Other than the presence of the ever-reliable sex melodrama films, Philippine cinema is dominated by the prevalence of films about teenagers and juvenile adventures.

However, even in the pre- and during the martial law era, sex-oriented films provided a democratized access to filmmaking. Done at large by “fly by night” productions, sex-oriented films was the modality in which independent producers participate in commercial filmmaking. It may be possible to read sex films as a realm of another independent public sphere, where contentious issues are brought into the fore and experienced in popular modes. I will briefly examine three sex films, two produced by Regal Films, a mainstream studio, and one produced independently. What I think would be productive in this endeavor is to decipher the substantial development in the more recent independent film to the sex genre, now evolving into the metafilmic genre or self-reflexive film about filmmaking. These films on films and other media call into attention the complicit and critical nature of Philippine filmmaking, akin to what Jonathan Beller terms as the “visual economy,” the “demarcat[ion of] the historical transformations of visual attention into a socially productive activity (sensual labor) realized by and as shifts in visual cultural technologies.”²⁸ Beller analyzes *Curacha: Ang Babaeng Walang Pahinga* (Curacha: Woman Without Rest, Chito Rono, 1998) as a remapping of the “architectonics of the image” that makes possible the transformation of the Filipina into the city, nation and multinational capitalism, foregrounding the idea of “perception as production” or the capacity of cinema to codify labor in late capitalism and its postmodern aesthetics for individuated audience internationalization. Image unto image or film unto film reworks the operation of production and reception from simple business and industrial systems into the logos of affect that makes possible the domination of senses and sensibilities precisely for the greater penetration of late global capitalism into the nation-space and its interstices. Thus, films—especially metafilmic films that allow the artifice of production and reception to materialize in the text itself—map out the negotiation of desire within an economy of available affect in late capitalism in the Philippines. The negotiation of desire within the vaginal economy of sex-oriented images and films simultaneously foreground and foreclose reiterative, reaffirmative and subversive acts.

Metafilmic Sex-Oriented Films

Live Show (Jose Javier Reyes, 2001) caused a furor when it was commercially exhibited. It was caught in transition between the change of presidential appointees to the censorship board. It became the film that defined Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's relationship with the entertainment industry she tried to woo against another action film presidential hopeful, Fernando Poe, Jr. The film renarrativizes the tale of sex show performers, using the male lead character as talking head. *Private Show* (1986), an earlier film on the subject matter, gives the point of view, Fellini style, of a woman performer seeking her humanity in the corrupt trade. *Live Show* does the same but without the connection with reality—by then, the sex show trade had already ceased in the ways it was imagined in the film. The use of talking heads, however, attempts to undo its own fictionality—metafilmically trying to implicate the audience in the production and hypocrisy of the misery of the sex performer characters. Watching the film, we become the audience for the sex show. For the male lead character, life simply goes on after the interview. This undermines the cause of implicating the audience who will just retain their pre-screening position.

Tuhog (Skewered, Jeffrey Jetturian, 2001) also strives to metafilmically implicate the audience. The film narrates the story of a young woman raped by her father, the production of the film biography, and the reception by the woman and her family. Such heinous crime is common in the Philippines and has been the basis of the majority of sentencing of criminals to the death penalty. The film also uses the talking head style to embellish the metafilmic documentary quality. The final scene is especially interesting to draw attention to life going on but on a different level. It shows the family in the van, fresh from their viewing of the film and their disenchantment at how their real lives is mimicked differently in the film, the passenger van maneuvers a congested street, and the huge billboard of the film becomes the backdrop of their own congestion and struggle. The film improves on the aesthetics of *Live Show*—if *Live Show* relinquishes the questions it tries to raise, *Tuhog* throws the question back to the audience. If what the audience sees is the making and reception of a supposed to be examined experience with the real, then the congestion amidst the backdrop of the film billboard resurfaces the engagement with the real—the fictionality of the filmic reality. On the one hand, the film questions the romance with filmic reality based on a nostalgia for the real, and how the real becomes

the disorganizing presence in film. On the other hand, the film validates such romantic experience yet leaves the audience feeling queasy, just as the characters leaving the scene of the movie house are shown. The psychosomatic romance becomes indicative of both possibility and limits of engagement in film. In both the audience and characters of the film, the physical body departs as the lights are turned off and the movie begins only to resurface scarred after. What then transpires is daydreaming work of the audience as conditioned by film. The film becomes both the dream and dreaming machine of the audience.

In *Babae sa Breakwater* (Woman in the Breakwater, Mario O'Hara, 2003), the life and love saga of a subaltern couple is told in the backdrop of Manila's murky bay. It is about the struggle of a young man to earn for his family and his relationship with a young female sex worker. Produced independently, the film used unknown actors and familiar folk music, staged against the unattractiveness of the polluted waters of Manila Bay. The risk it takes is to present an unattractive theme in an unattractive background that actually causes psychosomatic disturbance to the middle-class audience. How can one actually live, eat, swim and die in Manila Bay, a place that has been turned into the sewer of the metropolis? The connection with the real represents such disturbance. In the closing credits, footage of the actors—both dead and alive in the film—vanishes from screen. It calls attention to the inevitability of the film's conclusion and the realities it presents to linger even after its own closure. Then a choreographed dance scene of two representational communities is also included in the closing credits—first, a ballroom dance choreography in a wedding reception done at the newly revitalized and gentrified Baywalk or what used to be portions of the boulevard's breakwater; then later, the mimicry of the subaltern community of their own brand of dancing. What ensues is a carnivalesque moment in which subaltern figures figuratively triumph over the powerful.

Babae sa Breakwater innovates on the metafilmic quality of the sex genre, downplaying the sex scenes by its bound failure in presenting sex as carnivalesque. There is a sex scene in the claustrophobic interiors of a pedicab (a small passenger cart pulled by a bicycle). Many of the subaltern figures are watching the sex act from the outside until the cart loses its brakes and slides to the main street where it is hit by a moving vehicle. This is a film that mimics the madness of subalternity, a conscious design to attribute middle-class angst, sentimentality and romance with the image. *Live Show* is

a middle-class appropriation of the subaltern consciousness of a sex worker whereas *Tuhog* provides a self-conscious look at its own attempt to deal with middle-class subalternized figures. What then transpires is a pacifist stand on self-referentiality of film. Primarily because it is an independent film, *Babae sa Breakwater* navigates the sex genre with the desire to tell a subaltern story, using a subaltern trope, thereby producing a quizzical film about the discomfort of the filmic text and the comfort of watching movies.

These films resonate with the intensified sexuality of the times. With dwindling film production, however, the heavy weight of sexualized development is metastasized to more accessible media. The discourse of feminized labor has carried over into other more popular cultural forms. A recent phenomenon is the domination of novelty songs with sexual double meanings in the tri-media (television, music and radio). Sex Bomb dancers, a backdrop of the lunchtime game show, *Eat Bulaga*²⁹ (a play on eating and surprise) was catapulted to their fifteen minutes of fame via the song and dance routine called "Spageti" (Spaghetti), now a quadruple platinum album. Similarly, with "Otso-otso" (Eightfold), comedian Bayani Agbayani of the rival noon-time television show, *Magandang Tanghali Bayan* (Good Afternoon, Nation!) became an instant singing sensation. The songs provide sexual innuendos, the up-and-down sex thrust in "Spageti" and the performance of regularized sex act in "Otso-otso." Both songs are matched with sexualized dance steps—gyrating beerhouse dancing in "Spageti," and the butt thrust in "Otso-otso."

What is especially interesting is how the singers are emplaced in the "sex in the afternoon" trade. The highlight of both lunchtime shows is the million peso game segment—choosing increasing amounts of money and the greater risk of losing it all. The emotionally charged segment is triggered by the sob story of actual poverty by the contestants. The backdrop for these segments is a cast of some fifteen similar looking young women in skimpy attire, gyrating to chants and beats. Poverty, hope and sex are daily intertwined in the lunch shows. The popularity of these shows and the configuration of a more wholesome variation of sex display on television further erodes the exclusivity of sex films, rated mostly "for adults".

Both adapted from children's rhymes and movements, the songs were reworked by Lito Camo who has become the new "minstrel of the masses."³⁰ He has also adapted children's nursery rhymes like "Bulaklak" (Flower) and

"Bakit Papa?" (Why, Love?) and "Pamela," providing sexual innuendos to innocent tunes. Thus, sex cuts not only through media divides but also through generational divides. With increasing accessibility to genuine and pirated DVDs and VCDs, Viva Films, another mainstream production company, has developed the *Viva Hot Babes* (2003) and *Viva Hot Men* (2004) series, a collection of steamy scenes of sexy and muscular actors and actor wannabes. These titles have been selling so well that more new ones are being planned for the series. In just two days of release, *Viva Hot Men* sold some 5,000 copies, a box-office success by Philippine standards; shortly after, it sold some 15,000 copies, outselling its female counterpart.³¹ Also, the growing interest in model and body searches has showcased feminized male and female bodies on display, including those willing to be displayed, in the pageantries of the sexual nation.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo even eyed "Otso-otso" to be her official jingle in her presidential campaign bid.³² Her rising ratings in the pre-election surveys sustained an admirable following, providing a mired hope of winning the election just as her strongest contender, Fernando Poe, Jr., an iconic action movie star, seemed to have reached the plateau from the initial euphoria. Unlike his friend, co-actor Joseph Estrada was a sure-fire win in the election even earlier on because of his strong film and political background. But despite having a strong film background, the action king lacked political experience and was unable to debate the president or to control his temper in the campaign routes. Poe ends up as the feminized body as Arroyo sustained her aggressive finance-driven presidential bid.

A film columnist wrote in October 2003 that only some 80 films were expected to be produced for that particular year. He further wrote, "The bad news is that something like 50 of those movies are sex flicks. The reason, of course, is that they're cheaper, quicker and easier to make. That does make sense, but it casts a dark, fetid pall over the Filipino movie industry."³³ The pejorative outlook on sex films remains even as this genre has sustained the industry in general, prolonging its last gasp of breath. It is this dominant outlook that the need to reevaluate sex films along its literal and figurative independent direction—albeit linked with socio-political and economic experiences—becomes necessary. Why, in the first place, are these films produced? How do audiences determine which sex films they will patronize? And how do they see their own sexualized lives and the sexual nation represented in these films?

ENDNOTES

¹Marcos' first presidential term was from 1965-1969. Before his second term ended, Marcos declared martial law in September 21, 1972 and establishes himself as virtual dictator via a new constitution in 1973.

²White camisole, a conservative undergarment for women.

³Provincial or from the province.

⁴Derived from the combination of two words—the word for penetration or sexual contact, and the local word for film, *pelikula*.

⁵Mixed race youth born and raised in U.S. military bases in the Philippines.

⁶Names were derivative of leading multinational cola drinks such as Coke and Pepsi, and the local Sarsi.

⁷Girls who come from convent schools.

⁸A female entertainer or an entertainer of male guests.

⁹Sol Jose Vanzi, "House Oks P864-B 2004 national budget," <http://www.newsflash.org/2003/05/hl/hl019483.htm>.

¹⁰"Startling Statistics," <http://www.acountryofourown.com/StartlingStatistics.html>.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²U.S. State Department, "Philippines: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2002," <http://www.state/gpve/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18261.htm>.

¹³United Nations estimate, quoted in "Startling Statistics," *ibid*.

¹⁴Luz Rimban, "Filipina Diaspora," *Her Stories: Investigative reports on Filipino Women in the 1990s*, ed. Ni Cecile C. A. Balgos (Quezon City: PCIJ, 1999), 128.

¹⁵Joselyn Santos, "DoH Also Exports Filipino Nurses Abroad," <http://www.bulatlat.com/news/2-38/2-38-nurses.html>. Other data on overseas contract work were also derived from this article.

¹⁶Grace Chang, "Importing nurses: a money-making venture," <http://www.cpa.org.au/garchves3/1026nse.html>.

¹⁷"Startling Statistics," *ibid*.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Rina Jimenez-David, "From 'vaginal' to 'phenomenal'," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 May 2002, A9.

²⁰Willie Espiritu, quoted in Jimenez-David, *ibid*.

²¹Ibid.

²²Neferti Xina M. Tadiar, "Sexual Economies in the Asia-Pacific Community," *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*, Arif Dirlik ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 183. Also see her *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization* (Durham: Duke U P, 2009).

²³Ibid, 184.

²⁴These are concepts used by Tadiar to historicize the central tropes of feminization of labor in the Philippines and the resultant representation of a feminized Philippines in the development and sustenance of sexual economies of the Asia Pacific.

²⁵Ibid, 202 and 203.

²⁶Screen Digest, quoted in "Number of feature films produced in Australia and other countries, 1997-2002," <http://afc.gov.au/GTP/pdfs/intcom.pdf>.

²⁷Independent filmmaking in the Philippines does not necessarily connote the western notion of films shot with an artistically independent spirit. The practice could refer to "fly by night" productions done outside of the major studios but with the same intent to generate profit. It could mean film trends outside both Hollywood and mainstream setting, and films that prioritize the moral integrity of the filmmaker and their craft. The negotiation of Philippine independent films becomes a transnational issue in two ways—one, the ethos is derived primarily from feminized OCW phenomenon, and two, filmmakers have to contend with both mainstream, Hollywood and art markets. Very little occurs along the lines of foreign funding of local films.

²⁸Jonathan Beller, "Third Cinema in a Global Frame: Curacha, Yahoo! And Manila by Night," *Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle and the World-Media System* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila U P, 2006), 168.

²⁹The title plays on eating and surprise.

³⁰Alya B. Honasan, "Minstrel of the Masses," http://www.inq7.net/mag/2004/jan/18/text/mag_2-1-p.htm.

³¹Mario E. Bautista, "Hot Men outsell Hot Babes," http://www.malaya.com.ph/jul28/ente_2.htm.

³²"Gloria eyes 'Otso-otso;' Mar bags 'Mr. Suave';" <http://www.malaya.com.ph.dec18/news5.htm>.

³³Nestor Torre, "Good news, bad news," http://www.inq7.net/ent/2003/oct/18/text/ent_20-1-p.htm.

WORKS CITED

- Bautista, Mario E. "Hot Men outsell Hot Babes." <http://www.malaya.com.ph/jul28/ente_2.htm>.
- Beller, Jonathan. "Third Cinema in a Global Frame: Curacha, Yahoo! And Manila by Night." *Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle and the World-Media System*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 2006.
- Chang, Grace. "Importing nurses: a money-making venture." <<http://www.cpa.org.au/garchves3/1026nse.html>>.
- Gloria eyes 'Otso-otso;' Mar bags 'Mr. Suave'." <<http://www.malaya.com.ph/dec18/news5.htm>>.
- Honasan, Alya B. "Minstrel of the Masses." <http://www.inq7.net/mag/2004/jan/18/text/mag_2-1-p.htm>.
- Jimenez-David, Rina. "From 'vaginal' to 'phenomenal'," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 May 2002: A9.
- Rimban, Luz. "Filipina Diaspora," *Her Stories: Investigative reports on Filipino Women in the 1990s*, ed. Cecile C. A. Balgos. Quezon City: PCIJ, 1999.
- Santos, Joselyn. "DoH Also Exports Filipino Nurses Abroad." <<http://www.bulatlat.com/news/2-38/2-38-nurses.html>>.
- "Startling Statistics." <<http://www.acountryofourown.com/StartlingStatistics.html>>. Accessed 1 January 2004.
- Screen Digest, in "Number of feature films produced in Australia and other countries, 1997-2002." <<http://afc.gov.au/GTP/pdfs/intcom.pdf>>.
- Tadiar, Neferti Xina M. "Sexual Economies in the Asia-Pacific Community," *What is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea*. Arif Dirlik, ed. Boulder: Westview Press. 1993.
- _____. *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2009.
- Torre, Nestor. "Good news, bad news." <http://www.inq7.net/ent/2003/oct/18/text/ent_20-1-p.htm>.
- U.S. State Department. "Philippines: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2002." <<http://www.state/gpve/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18261.htm>>.
- Vanzi, Sol Jose. "House Oks P864-B 2004 national budget." <<http://www.newsflash.org/2003/05/hl/hlo19483.htm>>.