

# The “King” of Philippine Comedy: Some Notes on Dolphy and the Functions of Philippine Cinematic Humor as Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

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*This paper aims to come up with a valuation of Dolphy’s role as a comic artist, in terms of his function in the creation of Philippine film comedy, positing that Dolphy’s popularity as “king” of Philippine comedy is symbiotic with the inscription of comedy in terms of the functions it plays within Philippine society. While Dolphy’s iconic popularity has largely been appended to the roles or characterizations he has played over the years, and has been mainly, if not stereotypically, attributed to his personal exploits, this paper explores how this comic image, superimposed on the media hype that surrounds Dolphy’s own colorful life, moves beyond his career’s longevity or the controversies therein. Dolphy’s long and significant comic history in Philippine cinema has become a virtual template of what succeeds by way of the comic in Philippine popular visual media. While the predictability of his comedy petrifies him and ultimately limits the possible transformative value of his comedy, and while his reign as “king of Philippine comedy” is an appellation that may have begun as media hype, Dolphy can still be rightly valorized as “king” for the moment, for opening comic spaces for transgression/aggression in Philippine life.*

Keywords: *humor, incongruity, transgression, Philippine cinematic history, Dolphy*

## SITUATING FILM COMEDY IN PHILIPPINE DAILY LIFE

A casual observation of Philippine contemporary comedy yields its association with *komiks*, daily comic strips, and more visibly,

and perhaps more viably, comedy in film and on television. Valerio Nofuente cites the popularity of television in the Philippines, “because of [its] relative low cost”, its portability and accessibility, and its provision of programs “at the click of a switch” (129). Recent socioeconomic classification rules of Philippine households, where A and B are deemed to be high-income households (over PhP 30,000) and E households with the lowest income, employ the ownership of a television set [as household appliance], together with income, educational attainment of the household head, construction materials used, among others, as a condition for categorization. Indeed, classifications of A, B, C households assign points to the possession of radio, TV, refrigerator, and vehicle (Tabunda and de Jesus 48), and a D or E household is one which satisfies at least one of these conditions: the house structure is largely makeshift or made from salvaged materials, and it has no appliances. Even if it does, the appliance will most likely be either a radio or radio cassette, or a television set (8). A relevant notation is made about the latter condition by Ana Maria Tabunda and Gerardo de Jesus, who spearheaded this research study:

The decision to classify as E households that owned only a radio or only a television was prompted *by observations made during the ocular inspection of certain slum areas in the Metro Manila area. It was noted that quite a number of houses in these areas had TV antennas.* Thus, the original classification rule was trying to capture the incidence of the urban poor, and not necessarily that of the poorest in the metropolitan area (8; *my italics*).

Such a reckoning underscores the prevalence of media access primarily by way of television or radio in the Philippines, and the way it permeates almost all socioeconomic classes. We have to note that while Tabunda and de Jesus explain the ramifications of E [and, subsequently, F] households, as portraying the conditions of the urban poor, which may be misconstrued as figuring mainly, and only in, Metro Manila, we have to note Arsenio Balisacan’s contention that Metro Manila accounts for 28 percent of the total urban population but contributes only about 15 percent of the urban poor and 10 percent of the total poverty deficits of the urban population. The region’s head count poverty is the lowest in the country; the average income deficit of Metro Manila’s poor is also the lowest among the

regions, even after accounting for cost-of-living differences. The popularly held view that urban poverty is a “Metro Manila phenomenon” is thus not quite correct (32).

Balisacan adds that poverty is most common among families whose heads have had no education or very little education of which to speak, which he explains is due to the fact that the poor are dependent on labor as their only asset. He states that in the urban areas of the Philippines, more than half of the heads of households have completed or attended only elementary education, and most [70 to 80 percent] have not finished high school (35, 39). Collas-Monsod and Monsod cite the same factor, remarking that

primary school dropouts are prime candidates for poverty... In 72 percent of all poor households, the highest educational attainment was a primary school education... A quarter of those who enter high school drop out, generally after the first year... The bottom line is that if this continues, 55 percent of those entering the labor force will have at most up to a first-year high school education... (64-65).

The intertwining of the conditions of poverty in the Philippines and the way media and media forms are accessed across the classes, and the mediation of class portrayals itself will have particular resonances in the way Dolphy, the Philippines’ foremost comic actor in film and television, and the characters he portrays, are perceived and understood.

The current inherent symbiotic dependence of media forms—of cinema, free and cable television, radio, advertising, and even the print media—dictate too this unceasing popularity. Philippine comedy engendered by theatrical and literary forms does exist, and are as valid a basis of study, but the unfortunate reality of comedy in these genres is that they are not much remembered because economic dictates bar access to these forms. Books and theater tickets do not only cost more—the average Filipino viewer would much rather go to the movies to catch the latest comic feature, both Western and Filipino. Instead of books, he would most likely access comic forms by way of the daily strips, or the komiks. With the waning of the komiks as a national pastime, the same strips are made available via

certain websites on the internet. And though cinema tickets are getting more prohibitively-priced, television and VCD/DVD reproductions have become a necessary adjunct to film-watching, at a cost which is a fraction of what would perhaps be paid by going to the movies.

When we think of cinematic/television comedy in the Philippines, Dolphy is the comic artist at the forefront of these media forms. However, we note that given the factors we mentioned earlier that explain the background of Philippine comic forms, the irony with which we also have to contend is that Philippine film comedy has not been studied with as much depth as other, more serious, or other more wide-ranging, genres. Film comedy is still seen as a more expendably frivolous genre. Therefore, while Dolphy is the most significant comic artist of the last forty years in Philippine cinema, existing bibliography about him feature only a character/celebrity-based valuation, which actually says very little about the nature of comedy in the Philippines.

This paper aims to come up with a valuation of Dolphy's role as a comic artist, in terms of his function in the creation of Philippine film comedy. We posit here that Dolphy's popularity as "king" of Philippine comedy is symbiotic with the inscription of comedy in terms of the functions it plays within Philippine society. Asking why Dolphy has remained popular has generally been appended to the roles or characterizations he has played over the years, and has been mainly, if not stereotypically, been attributed to his personal exploits, his comic image superimposed on the media hype that surrounds his own colorful life. More than being the cause of Dolphy's "longevity", we see this media "reading" as the effect of how Dolphy has been fixed as meaning and meaning-maker by an industry that profits from it/ from him. The promotion of Dolphy's status as the country's premier comic focuses too on reasons which perpetuate the popularity of these characterizations, or how such portrayals of what is deemed comic in the Philippines modify, or worse, ultimately petrify comedy in the Philippines. This reading has particular reverberations when we look at comedy portrayed in the works of other film and television comics in the Philippines – those who came before Dolphy, such as Pugo and Togo, Dely Atay-Atayan and Andoy Balun-balunan, Patsy and Lopito, or Pablo Vertuso, those who were Dolphy's contemporaries, Panchito, Babalu, Chiquito, Ading Fernando, and

later comics such as Tito, Vic and Joey, Rene Requiestas, Willie Revillame, Bayani Agbayani, or very recently, Vhong Navarro. While the works of these Philippine comic actors bear examination, and in the case of the younger and more recent comic artists, bear examination because of their box-office success, Dolphy's long and significant comic history in Philippine cinema has become a virtual template of what succeeds by way of the comic in Philippine popular media. This paper's reading posits too, that Dolphy's reign as "king of Philippine comedy" is an appellation that may have begun as media hype, but which we can now take as iconic valuation when seen in the light of the value of the characterizations Dolphy himself was heir, too, or which newer comics have imitated so extensively from formulas Dolphy's film and television work have popularized.

## **DOLPHY AND PHILIPPINE FILM HISTORY**

To understand Dolphy's place in the continuity of comedy as a film or television genre, we have to acknowledge the institution of this genre within the Philippine context. Agustin Sotto chronicles the development of the Philippine film industry, and he states that "movies [in the Philippines] did not prosper until 1909. Except for a brief period in 1905, the screenings were too few and far between. If any new films arrived, these were usually shown as these *entr'actes* in vaudeville shows or as carnival sideshows" (4). He notes further on that among the first films produced and shown in the country was the comic zarzuela *Walang Sugat* in 1912. Its success, and the success of other films that were produced alongside it, took advantage of the

nationalism... running at fever pitch during this period, events of the previous decade such as the expulsion of the Spaniards, the ratification of the Malolos Constitution, the Philippine-American War and the massacres of Filipinos were still fresh in the people's mind. The *filmmakers despite being Americans cashed in on the prevailing sentiments of the native population...* (8- 9; my italics).

We can contextualize these early attempts at filmmaking in the Philippines by noting Kristine Karnick's assertion that the study of film comedy, in general, is integrated with the understanding of classical

Hollywood cinema, which, “as a mode of film practice... survived almost unchanged from 1917 to 1960, and which made the American film industry the most powerful in the world, in terms both of its economic reach and its cultural/ social influence” (9-10). Karnick cites the repetition of generic formulas as part of this industrialized process as employed by the studio system of the American film industry, which enabled producers to ensure the flow of film as a cultural product to the market, whereby comedies, horror films, musicals, melodramas, swashbucklers – its stars, directors, screenwriters and production personnel – are all engaged to produce films “at a predictable cost with a predictable audience” (10). This is where we situate the development of Philippine cinematic production, a copy of the same vertical integration with which American filmmaking was begun, and with which it would be characterized.

Sotto points to the Eddie Tait- George Harris production tandem as the beginning of the studio system in the Philippines in 1933. Filipino businessmen competed with the Harris-Tait film business, Jose Nepomuceno attempting to rival this by his organization of the Parlatone Hispano-Filipino in 1935, formerly the Malayan Pictures Corporation. This was short-lived, though, and Sampaguita Pictures, which will form part of the Big Three – the most successful film companies of the period – will emerge as the country’s oldest film studio, formed in 1937 by Pedro Vera. Ramon Araneta founded Excelsior Pictures in 1938, and LVN was formed in 1939 as a venture by three friends – Doña Narcisa de Leon, Carmen Villongco and Eleuterio Navoa (21-22, 31). In much the same way that the Hollywood studio system became particularly successful, moviemaking in the Philippines itself became “a lucrative investment for cash-rich Filipinos”, and as Filipino films gained more popularity with the public, investments into the industry poured in from the moneyed class (31-33). More significantly, by the 1950’s, “three studios emerged as the country’s top filmmakers and starbuilders: Sampaguita, LVN, and Premiere” (37). Sotto’s description is eerily similar to Karnick’s depiction of the Hollywood studio system. The Philippine studios “had their own stable of stars, directors, scriptwriters and technicians... studio bosses... publicists” (37).

Each studio became identified with a particular genre – Sampaguita with its “women pictures and *komiks* adaptations”, LVN

with “screwball comedies and swordplay”, Premiere and its action movies. (37). The star system was firmly in place as early as the thirties: as movie stars consolidated their drawing power, “they became major players in the industry... commanding not only their studios’ solicitousness but also the public’s adulation and patronage” (33). This, together with the proliferation of genre films – action films adapted mainly from folk tales and the *awit* and *korido* tradition, set in Europe or in faraway islands (37); musicals depicting the gap between the rich and the poor, set within a love affair “overcoming familial and societal prejudices” (41); fantasy films utilizing special effects, but whose themes revolved around the “frustrations and heartbreaks of living in an oppressive environment” featuring characters who are physically deformed and who are then treated as outcasts by a cruel society, saved only by supernatural entities, such as mermaids, angels, and superheroes copied from mainly American characters (41). Melodramas showcase the “passions of the heart” within tension-filled and violent characterizations (43). Comedy as a genre “offers relief from the problems of the day”, and may elicit laughter by way of poking fun at deformities and abnormalities, degenerating into “out and out toilet humor” (45-47).

Again, Karnick avers the fact that generic formulas make possible a steady and profitable market for films, the predictability of these ensure “continuous employment for all contracted personnel” (10). She cites Mary Beth Harolovich who states that “genre films sell themselves to audiences not on the basis of their meaning as particular films but because they meet audience expectations generated by their genre conventions” (10). The industrial-economic conventions of genre film production within a studio system are integral to our task of situating Dolphy as part of this system, but we also note that these genre specializations exhibited and underscored the “dominant aesthetic norms which shaped all Hollywood production” (11), now being used as a primary cultural source by Philippine cinema, with little regard for the alien norms these let seep into Philippine culture. We shall see this more intricately exhibited by Dolphy’s own filmography, as he has straddled these multi-genre traditions in order not only to succeed as the country’s most eminent film comic, but also to enter a system that would allow such success, and such a definition of Philippine film comedy later on.

Gerald Mast gives us a definition of the comic film as a genre: “A comic film is either (a) one with a comic plot and comic climate or (b) one with a not necessarily comic plot but a pervasive enough comic climate so that the overall effect is comic” (12). Dolphy’s films largely rely on the first definition, although his more significant films, such as *Ang Nanay Kong Tatay* (1978), or even the later *Markova* (2000), could be seen in the light of the latter. Dolphy’s ascension as a comic artist can be seen against the backdrop of the history of Philippine film comedy in general. Bienvenido Lumbera writes in 1992 that

comedy in the past two decades is best represented by Dolphy and Niño Muhlach... The first was an elderly actor who made his reputation playing an array of gay roles... Dolphy rose to fame as a parody of the quintessential Filipino faggot achieving legendary status as a box-office star who invariably won over the movie-going crowd with his repertoire of semi-improvised comic antics and his near infallible sense of timing as a comic actor” (18).

It is ten years hence, the child actor Muhlach has all but disappeared from films, but Dolphy still appears to be at the forefront of this genre.

## **DOLPHY 'PORTRAYALS' WITHIN FILIPINO CULTURE**

To the question of what makes possible a Dolphy within Filipino culture, we have to note Dolphy’s own history. Born Rodolfo Vera Quizon in Tondo, Manila, on July 26, 1928, Dolphy’s comic roots could be traced back to his dancing prowess, which led to jobs on the vaudeville stage in 1947. Discovered by Benny Mack, Bayani Casimiro and comedians Togo and Pugo, he quickly rose to supporting parts in the movies, first for Fernando Poe, Sr.’s own Royal Productions, to Sampaguita Pictures later on (Ramos 65). Dolphy spent his youth helping to earn money to help his family out, and this meant working at odd jobs such as shining shoes and being a *cochero* (Mallo n.p.). Because of his desire to earn more money for his family, he ventured into stage shows in the early 1940’s. But he



began first as a chorus boy, dancing the “boogie-woogie, the tango... the mambo” (Mallo n.p.), and then began appearing in skits where he popularized a Chinese vendor-character, Go Lay, who spoke Tagalog with a funny accent, an act that was so funny the audience enjoyed it immensely. He abandoned the character, though, when he shifted to radio, because he was advised by a colleague that it could be detrimental to his career, especially as many of the radio show sponsors then were Chinese (Mallo n.p.). Dolphy, however, says that the Go Lay role “was a riot, *naging kwela*. That’s the start of show business for me, *nung naging* comedian *na ako* [It was a riot, a hit. That’s the start of show business for me, when I became a comedian] (Montreal 8; my translation). Dolphy was first cast as a soldier in a movie entitled “They Died To Live”—“he shot for many days but when the movie was shown, ‘*Dulo lang ng ripple ko ang nakita*’ “ [Only the tip of the rifle I was carrying appeared onscreen] (Mallo n.p.; my translation). In *Dugo ng Bayan*, he reprised his Chinese vendor role “to pinch-hit for Pugo who could not make the set” (De Veyra 31). He used the appellation Dopee, until he was given his present name by Doctor Perez of Sampaguita. De Veyra recounts that Dolphy’s first Sampaguita film was a Tita Duran vehicle, *Sa Isang Subyap Mo Tita*, but it was the 1954 LVN film *Jack and Jill* with Lolita Rodriguez and Rogelio dela Rosa that “heralded [his] arrival as a major star” (Ramos 65), playing a stock character he would be associated with for most of his career (cf. De Veyra 31, Ramos 65).

A significant transition through which Dolphy goes, and one which impinges on his comedy, is the change in his status from being “sidekick to the likes of Rogelio dela Rosa and Pancho Magalona” to go on to “literally, outlive these screen heroes” (Lopez 31), his most enduring and well known screen partner will be Panchito Alba, and Dolphy owns that “it takes years to polish one’s teamwork with [one’s] co-stars... *kami ni Panch isang tinginan lang namin, alam na namin kung saan kami papasok at saan tatahimik*... [Panch and I understand each other with just a glance. We know when to be part of the scene, and when to keep quiet] (Bautista n.p.; my translation).. And while their partnership was not a unique one—it was based literally and figuratively on the Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello Hollywood formula, and was used too by earlier Filipino screen comedians, Pugo and Togo being the most well-known—it will prove not only to be a

box-office hit ingredient, it would yield gags that would be copied by many other comic duos through the years.

Much of what is remembered about Dolphy's comic career tended to center around certain characterizations, and a rough chronology of Dolphy's films are helpful guideposts to the longevity of these roles, which though these prove to mark Dolphy's career, result, for good or for ill, in the way Philippine comedy is accessed and inscribed within Philippine popular culture. We have earlier noted his entry into films by way of his affiliation with the big studios of the decade—Sampaguita and LVN. The Dolphy–Panchito tandem was showcased in a number of films, but they began in the screen adaptation of Larry Alcala's popular comics strip *Kalabog and Boyo*. Other films of the late 1950's and early 1960's were *Teresa*, *Silveria*, *Kulang sa Pito*, *The Big Broadcast*, *Dolpinger*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Genghis Bond*, *Love Pinoy Style*, *Florante at Laura*, *Anthony at Cleopatra*, *Pinokyo and Little Snow White*, *Si Romeo at Julieta*, *Mr. Melody*, *Mambo Jambo*, *Hootsie Kootsie*, *Itik-Itik*, *Da Beatniks*, *King and Queen for a Day*, *Rodolfo Valentino*, *Tayo'y Mag-up-up and Away*, *Darna Kuno*, *Barilan sa Baboy Kural*, *Mekeni's Gold*, *Tara-dying Potpot*, *Facundo Alitafaf*, which are but a few of his films. De Veyra underscores the fact that “the complete videography is so extensive not even the man himself or the local film archives had been able to keep track” (31-32). We see, however, from this early filmography the trend that his films will take in the course of his career – comedies that are an amalgam of other genres: fantasy, romance, action and adventure, musicals.

In examining the roles that he portrays in these films, we have first to reckon with the general function of comedy, and again, Gerald Mast's discussion of the clown tradition leads us to this character-based delineation. Mast states that one tradition of sound comedy revolves “around the physical, facial, and verbal assets of the central comic performer or performers... a hybrid form, combining elements of radio, vaudeville, the nightclub, and later, television” (280). This, Mast calls the “clown tradition” and this is where Dolphy's comedy is situated, as he is the “central clown” in these “comic films of personality” (25). Dolphy's comedy is a hybrid one, for while he belongs rightly to a film tradition where sound is a given, he does not quite relinquish the physical comedy where physical personality, dependent on bodily deftness, or ineptness, is the point of vitality.

(25) Indeed, Dolphy's idolization of Charlie Chaplin is proof of this emulation, and thus of this "cross-breeding" : "[Dolphy] thinks Chaplin has provided comedians of the world the perfect pattern to follow..." (Lopez 31). Dolphy himself says: "Without uttering a word [Chaplin] could make the whole world laugh, *kaya nga sinabing* moving picture, *mas marami dapat ang galaw. Kabit mata lang maari nang sabihin ang ibig sabihin*" [... that is why is called a moving picture, there must be more movement. With the use of the eyes alone, one should be able to say what one means] (Montreal 9; my translation). Dolphy's adherence to this personal and professional dictum places him in a role that straddles the traditions of sound and silent comedy.

Sound comedy's characterizations based on physical and facial manipulations and verbal glibness are evident in the roles with which Dolphy is most identified. The most remarkable of all of Dolphy's roles is perhaps his portrayal of fags, or the "*binabae*". His first foray into stardom was with this role in *Jack and Jill*, and his acting chronology is dotted with permutations, if not repetitions, of these. Most famous among his gay portrayals are *Facifica Falayfay* and *Fefita Fofonggay*, and the gay beautician in *Ang Nanay Kong Tatay*, but we certainly find rehashes of the outrageous gay in films like *Stariray*, *Sarhento Falayfay*, and even in the "Mrs. Doubtfire-inspired" *Wanted: Perfect Father* and *Markova* in his later years. Ramos affirms these role reprisals, saying that these would be done "under different names and in assorted drag costumes, but always to immense box-office success" (65). The drag queen roles are repositories of deformity and nonconformity. Dolphy's portrayal of the societal outcast, especially because of his quirky parody of gender acceptability, is eased by his double transgression. In these films, he starts off as the object of ridicule because of the liminal role he plays – he is neither male nor female. In a parody of genderedness, he presents himself as neither. He is not a male, and in his evocation of the female appearance, he only succeeds in presenting what, for society, is deemed an abnormal and grotesque parody of femininity, as he uses, very obviously, the outside trappings of this gender – fans, parasols, bags, wigs, frilly dresses, hats, flowers. This overt effeminacy is underscored by his speech, twangy and grating, itself a mockery of female speech. The films' conflicts usually lie in his need to conceal the reality of his effeminacy and its parodic impulses, as in *Jack and Jill*, or in his encounter with a

woman, necessitating the abandonment of this lifestyle, as in the *Fofonggay* and *Falayfay* or *Alitaftaf* series; or in his need to overcome this effeminate nature in order to win a struggle against more vital foe, such as poverty or danger posed to the other characters. Within the film, Dolphy as the overt queen inevitably faces mockery and disparagement, but he flaunts his gayness, and presents the self not as an entity of oppression, but as one which triumphs precisely because of this liminality. This is particularly true of *Ang Nanay Kong Tatay*, where Dolphy plays an aging beautician whose ends up taking care of his lover's son, and he struggles to face the difficulties of not only parenting, but parenting the child as a single, gay man. This becomes a serio-comic portrayal, one that is invested with less "flights of fancy" about gayness. The same is true of *Markova*, as it portrays the wartime experience of homosexual rape inflicted on Markova, a transvestite performer, during the Japanese period. These films have tried to move away from shallow depictions of exterior and physical outrageousness that ultimately becomes the only way gayness is portrayed in the Dolphy movies. We have to note, nevertheless, that the success of this characterization lies primarily with the attempt by the gay character to rope the audience to share in its marginalization.

The evocation of laughter, which has Dolphy's drag queens as its locus, is a way towards the inclusion of the Filipino audience, who are themselves marginalized by poverty and oppression, within a site that defuses the sting of this removal to the periphery. Dolphy's gay characters exhibit a kind of bravado that empowers them amid their life struggles. Ramos, though, continues to say that "the effeminate act is another Dolphy paradox: While his drag queens have been the greatest hits in the wide array of comic parts he has played in his long career as the most successful comedian in Philippine cinema, he also has the reputation of being 'the greatest Filipino lover of all time'"(65). This becomes another complement, or perhaps counterpoint, to the unreality afforded by the mockery engendered by these gay roles. We will find that the intertextual constructions of the gay role/real-life heterosexual lover makes for the continued outré figurations of this comic role, and is perhaps, one of the strongest reasons why Dolphy can continue to mine the comedy in such a role. In addition, the patriarchal-"machismo" orientation of Philippine society allows the continuation of such a role. The audience who subscribes to this

dominantly male orientation is rendered “safe” in appreciating the grotesqueness of Dolphy’s gay portrayals, and in laughing at the absurdity of Dolphy’s role reversals, or gender parodies, thinks itself free to construe these absurdities as just another reason for its embrace of Dolphy as a fellow Filipino oppressed by his inherent situation, who, in the course of his [cinematic] life, is able to transcend, even transform, this almost impossible position which merits him denigration and alienation from society.

Another trend of Dolphy’s roles rests on spoofs, and indeed rip-offs, of Hollywood roles. Throughout Dolphy’s career, we find him playing a variety of characterizations that are literally lifted from Hollywood movies that have met with great success at the box-office. Creating roles based on these ensures a lucrative share in these formulaic successes. Dolphy films based on hugely accepted James Bond movies, with titles like *Dolpinger*, a parody of *Goldfinger*, or based on the cult following of *The Omen*, a horror film of the 1970’s, which yielded *Omeng Satanasia*. When “everybody was crazy about disco [and] about Jacky Chan” [Dolphy] put the two elements together in one picture”, “a simple formula [that] went into the making of the blockbuster, *Dancing Master*” (Nepales 11). These are very few examples out of a veritable list of films based on Hollywood commercial hits. Dolphy’s films mainly based on Hollywood films, which have been successful globally, have ranged from musicals such as *The Big Broadcast*, cowboy films such as *Mekeni’s Gold*, fantasy-adventure films such as *Darna Kuno* and *Captain Barbell*. These illustrate John Ellis’ assertion about the dominance of the Hollywood film. He states that “the Hollywood film proposes a text that is comprehensible in principle to everyone: it is mass entertainment form in this sense, rather than in the sense that it assumes that everyone will want to see the same film” (194). Its power lies in its proposition of “conditions under which these films can be consumed...”, assuming “particular organizations of production of those films...” (194). Ellis’s discussion of the forms of power that characterize the American moviemaking industry, which explains its global dominance, echoes our earlier exposition of the development of the genre films, and of the way Philippine cinema utilized the American film industry’s processes of film production, investment, exhibition as a template for its own operations. We have seen how this translated into profit

in terms of the development of the Philippine studios of which Dolphy has been part, but this Philippine system becomes even more culturally imitative and dependent on the Western cinema when whole images, cinematic techniques, narratives are lifted. Part of this duplication results in what Lumbera thinks is the malaise of comedy in Philippine cinema:

Filipino comedies suffer from the clichés perpetuated by scripts that have depended heavily for laughs on the lead actor... and his ability to improvise, adlib, and quip. This is a carry-over from the comedy skit in *bodabil* shows of the popular tradition. The result has been hit-and-run comedies in which the number of punchlines and visual comic effects is determined by the richness of imagination and inspiration of the lead at any given moment. What ought to have been the task of the gag writer and the film editor has been entrusted to performers who might be enormously talented, but whose creative juices are normally limited by variable working conditions and personal quirks (27).

Spoofs of characters, or roles dependent on the knowledge and recognition of the audience of the film on which these characters have been wrested certainly forms part of the intertextual fabric that activates the humor in these films. A large part of the humor in the Dolphy movies lies in the immediate incongruity between Dolphy's physicality and the foreign character, now "Filipinized", he is emulating, but whom he obviously renders comical by way of this imitation. Another aspect of this humor could be seen in the literal translation of the cultural specificities within the Hollywood film – locale, costumes, mannerisms, effects – to Philippine circumstances. Many times these "translations" have been "transplantations", making of Dolphy the image of the Filipino version of the cowboy, the Filipino version of James Bond, the Filipino version of the superhero, resulting in an incongruous ersatz version of the original. Such diminution and mockery of the original deploys the comic, but this also redounds to the fact that any attempt to approximate the West is a laughable, and ultimately futile, act. Dolphy as comic artist is pulled both ways here – on the one hand, the burden of making such comedy work is mainly dependent on his acting skill, to make comic situations work

by way of his quick and precise grasp of the exchange of punchlines and gags, relying on his effort to maintain the reference to, or the parody of, the original. But because many of the situations here are already taken from the original film and manipulated to suit local tastes and sensibilities, or are a passing acknowledgement of its original cinematic provenance, Dolphy's comedy, as Lumbera puts it, becomes necessarily limited by its own dependence on what it imitates, and always faces the danger of repetitiveness.

We have to note, though, that an aspect of Dolphy's humor and career, is the duplication of the comic duo formula. The Dolphy-Panchito tandem, much like the Jerry Lewis- Dean Martin partnership, was one which featured a suave partner and the sidekick. In Dolphy and Panchito, it was the latter who evolved as the sidekick, and Dolphy who became the "lead character". The tandem played with the stereotypical role assignment, whereby the plump Panchito approximated the bumbling Lewis, and the lean Dolphy the lead Martin. In other circumstances they emulate the Laurel and Hardy act, where Panchito plays the sane, logical Oliver Hardy, and Dolphy is Stan Laurel who keeps on getting into trouble, but who ends up being the partner most cheered by the audience. The Dolphy-Panchito duo's contribution to Philippine cinematic humor lies primarily in the language gags in which they engage, which works by way of transliterating phrases or idioms in English to Filipino. The gag starts with Panchito and Dolphy engaged in song, and as part of their repartee, Panchito begins either to greet their audience or to indulge in a monologue, which Dolphy proceeds to translate. What he does though, is either to stick to the literal translation of the phrases, and obviously, the resultant translation is incorrect and nonsensical, and very far from the meaning intended by Panchito. This play of words engages humor by way of discrepancy, moving meaning to the unexpected, and therefore, siting humor within the gap that adumbrates normalcy and expectation.

Moreover, the sidekick formula that Dolphy employs in many of his films, whether overtly – such as his partnerships with Panchito or Babalu – or indirectly, whereby supporting actors become the natural "sidekick" within the context of the film's narrative, is able to activate situational humor because it plays with motifs of superiority and inferiority. Mast offers a reason for this, saying that

inevitably, the comic film “says” something about the relation of man to society. The comedy either (a) upholds the values and assumptions of society, urging the comic character to reform his ways and conform to the societal expectations; or (b) maintains that the antisocial behavior of the comic character is superior to society’s norms” (20).

It is perhaps with ease that we identify the second impulse as that which Dolphy illustrates in his films, and later on, in his television sitcoms. In the comic duo mode, Dolphy most often gets to berate, or most times, get to assault the sidekick/partner in the guise of play. Though he sometimes receives a whack in the head from Panchito, as the lead comic, he ends up getting the upper hand, and a large part of this humor rests on Dolphy’s “natural” superiority over the sidekick, investing him with more power within the context of the gag. No matter how physical the gag is, such as cuffs on the upside of the head, or in many cases, the employment of verbal abuse, such as insults that focus on physical flaw or deformity [in Panchito’s case, slights that mention his prominent nose, or in Babalu’s case, his chin], this “antisocial behavior” serves to ally the audience with the underdog who had to endure the same prior to the reversal of roles that end up empowering him.

We note though that what Mast says about the comedy which upholds the values and assumptions of society, cannot be as easily dismissed, as the language and sight gags which are part of Dolphy’s repertoire echo the hierarchization so palpable in Philippine society. The language gags, which were most fully utilized in the Dolphy-Panchito television show *Buhay Artista* in the 1960’s, exhibit more than the gaps of language and meaning that we have earlier cited. At the background of these exchanges is the portrayal too of the abnormality of quasi-education, and the valorization of a class-engendering necessity. The failure of Dolphy to translate Panchito’s English statements is comical, but it points rather savagely to the reality that one’s ineptness in using English underscores the equation of this ineptness with dumbness. Panchito throws the statements in Filipino, but as he gets to correct Dolphy’s translation, or to react to it in disbelief at Dolphy’s mangling of such a simple statement, he is invested here with the possession of the norm. The comic who fails



to show that he knows English, or who ends up mangling that language ironically evokes more laughter, first due to his creation of nonsensical language, but also due to his lack of sophistication. The person who knows English is therefore superior because of the assumption that he is schooled – “*may pinag-aralan*” – vis-à-vis the comic who “destroys” the language, doing so presumably because he is a fool, and therefore “*walang-pinag-aralan*”. As this is an issue that confronts the majority of Dolphy’s audience, and one that lies at the heart of Filipino class hierarchization because it is interwoven with issues of economic independence, and life-values held by Filipinos, the language humor so successfully utilized by Dolphy and Panchito, and consequently, by other Philippine film comedians, end up allying the audience with Dolphy, who see in him the uneducated dolt who rises to beat the oppressor at his own game; however, they also end up passively watching their own lack of education and opportunities being replayed for their own enjoyment, with no real or practicable solution being offered to alleviate these.

The sight gags that we began to mention earlier take on many forms in the Dolphy films. Morton Gurevitch delineates the humor employed here as farcical, which he avers is capable of annihilating taboos. Its function, Gurevitch adds, is largely emancipatory, and is “culture- destructive”. Moreover, it “[rejects] the emasculating forces of propriety and conformity... purg[ing] the impacted cravings and poisonous resentments that debilitate the psyche” doing so by “unleash[ing] the happy beasts of sexuality, aggression, scatology, cynicism, nonsense, and madness... help[ing] man abjure social discipline” (127, 130). Farce is realized in the Dolphy films by way of the look of surprise that Dolphy uses to acknowledge the inanity of a character or of a situation, a gesture or expression which appears to be *the* comic response employed by almost all Philippine comedians. There is a preponderance of laughter aimed at ridiculing the physical deformities and mental instability of others. There is, too, a portrayal of these physical challenges – blindness, deafness, muteness, lameness and aberrations such as stuttering, madness, speech defects, facial tics, epileptic seizures. Farce also makes possible the carnivalesque challenge to authority and propriety, especially in terms of the presentation of the grotesque body, made evident in food fight scenes, a classic example of which is in *Kalabog and Bosyo*. Kalabog [Dolphy]

and Bosyo [Panchito] are detectives on the trail of a mad scientist, Dr. Cagaw. In one scene, they attempt to make an antidote to the narcotic the evil scientist had been using to subdue beautiful women, and while they were seriously concocting this in a laboratory, complete with gowns and gloves, Kalabog ends up making mayonnaise, which he flings off his hands, catching Bosyo in the face. Bosyo very calmly gets a gob of mayonnaise on his hands and wipes this on Kalabog's face, at which point, Kalabog also very calmly takes Bosyo's eyeglasses, dips them into the stuff, and puts them back on Bosyo's face, ensuring that the mayonnaise-slathered spectacles fit right on Bosyo's face.

Numerous scenes in different Dolphy movies also hint at excreta—an almost literal toilet humor, illustrated, for instance, by Dolphy's falling into the water closet while showering. Reproduction and copulation, seen in sexual innuendoes and euphemisms are also employed, the most classically euphemistic is Dolphy's teasing query to Nida Blanca as they play the couple John and Marsha: "*Marsha, wala ang mga bata...*" [Marsha, the kids aren't home...] to signal the possibility of marital relations between them. The sitcom being a family-oriented one nevertheless resorted to a hint at this aspect of marriage, despite the workaday chaos it depicted, which evokes the humor of this taboo. We also have scenes that feature the vagaries of digestion, scenes where human fluids such as urine, phlegm, saliva, sweat, are made part of the comic action.

Alison Ross tracks why we find these scatological instances humorous by citing Howard Jacobson, who states that the beginnings of laughter lie "in the ancient roots of civilization, when we were closer to our animal nature", and therefore, we laugh now at slapstick comedy because the water flung at another or the pies slapped on someone's face are reminders of urine and feces (66). Jerry Palmer assents to this when he explains that "the basic indignities of farce" are in its contradiction of

some commonplace expectation held by society for which farce is produced; in our culture such an expectation would be closely related to the traditional belief that the human body is the locus of dignity, the dignity ...immanent to the human species, and that it ought to be treated in a way that is consistent with that sense of dignity (45).

Again, we note here that this notion of the “dignified body” is, in Filipino culture, promoted by number of influential factors. The “debauchery” offered by the taboo runs counter to a largely religious, mainly Catholic conception of the body as a temple of God, which redounds to a moral view of it. In fact, “the price of civilization is intolerably high, especially in a Christianized culture where the obligations of ideal benignity intensify the usual stringencies of civilization” (Gurewitch 130). This dictates too that because the body is inherently dignified, and indeed, sacred, universal benevolence should be the defense against the aggression we have towards others (130). The culturally acceptable therefore is equated with the demands of the moral and the theological. The moral view of the dignified body seems to be aligned here with propriety and cultural refinement, and this attributed to the educated and educable, which is almost always linked to economic standing, or at least to economic mobility, in contrast to the way this is flouted by the ignorant and the crude, who are so because they do not know any better and have no *means* of knowing any better. The prevailing notions of beauty and perfection, which in the Philippines, is predominantly based on appearance that is mestizo, or Caucasian-looking, reinforce this authoritarian gaze.

Therefore, in these comedies, it becomes permissible to use laughter to ridicule anyone who falls short of this standard, and characteristics that prefigure the native-brown or dark skin, thick lips, a non-aquiline nose, short stature-will almost necessarily elicit guffaws. Dolphy’s characters as the perennial underdog take on superiority in all of his films, because his antagonists are chosen to embody these almost grotesque, almost primitive features, and though Dolphy himself is not classically handsome, he has enough mestizo features to be able to insult and make fun of them. Because of this, Dolphy’s characters, though oppressed by foes, win over them in this aspect, to the delight and approbation of the audience, who, unwittingly, privilege this colonial belief to their own disadvantage.

A most powerful comic portrayal that Dolphy turns in is in his depiction of the Filipino Everyman, most particularly as the Filipino family man. For this he is indebted to the development of his career in television. In the early 1960’s, when he left Sampaguita, “his career went into a slump, but television opened its doors to him”, which would be a trend in his professional life. Every time his career reached

a low point, it would be television work that would revive his fame (Mallo n.p.). He began with *Buhay Artista*, which ran for nine years, and then *John and Marsha* came along, which ran for seventeen years (Umerez E4), and which spawned three films. He had a short-lived sitcom after this, entitled *Plaza 1899*, which was the most experimental in terms of format. *Home Along da Riles* began in 1992, and was aired until 2004. The last three focus on his “most admired screen persona”, his portrayal of “the eternally struggling but fiercely proud breadwinner-cum-neighborhood philosopher whose robust sense of humor is his armor in the daily battle for survival” (Ramos 66).

The 1970’s and the 1980’s were the *John and Marsha* years, where Dolphy portrayed a father and a husband, whose major struggles were against poverty, and against a mother-in-law who happened to be rich, a veritable *doña*, who was so wealthy, one only had to sweep under her furniture to get money, and who had a maid who was able to lend her employer money in a pinch, and who was richer even than the main character, John Puruntong, who, in turn was so poor that he had to sleep on top of tables, on chairs, on the floor, because his house was so small the beds could only accommodate his wife and two children. He played a widower with two children in *Plaza 1899* in the late 1980’s, but John Puruntong mutated into Kevin Cosme of *Home Along da Riles*, where he again played a widower trying to raise teenaged children, with the [unwanted] help of his dead wife’s twin, who happens to have been his erstwhile girlfriend, and who still carries the torch for him. Through the years, we see the lot of the Puruntongs and the Cosmes changing, but the basic premises of these shows and of Dolphy’s characters remain the same.

This formula is itself integral to the many roles Dolphy plays on the cinema screen, and accounts for the popularity of these characters, and for that matter, of Dolphy himself. We note that the formula of the “wise fool” seeps into both Dolphy’s film and television performances, and while the characters may be named differently, the core characteristics of these are a formula that has buoyed Dolphy for the past fifty years. As Ramos earlier stated, Puruntong and Cosme, as well as a host of other characters Dolphy has played, are community philosophers, who derive their inherent knowledge of human nature by way of their daily struggles to make a living, and in the course of which, face the travails of life comically

depicted in these family comedies. As “wise fools”, these characters “speak with authority on subjects that concern the ordinary citizen... despite poor education and low social status...” (Veron 63).

What is the nature of Dolphy’s Filipino Everyman? First, this is a character who belongs to the lower classes, usually a manual worker such as Kevin Cosme, who, at the beginning of the sitcom’s run, was a janitor, or, like John Puruntong, is a daily wage earner, who has dabbled in many kinds of jobs. A running gag in the early episodes is his waiting on tables, which he bungles. Cosme in *Home Along* had to resort to being a party mascot – a fly – in order to give his daughter a party for her birthday. The Filipino Everyman is also portrayed as having little education, and therefore works to send his children to school, to feed his family, and to keep a roof over his head, many times literally. Cosme is so poor his house by the railroad tracks literally shakes with the passing of the trains. John’s ceilings are so riddled with holes that he ends up holding as many containers as he can to catch the drips, situations encountered by many in the audience who belong to the same class. While he is uneducated, he survives because of his “street smarts”, and because of his intrinsic respect for people. He expectedly occupies an inferior position in society because of this economic lack, and is therefore subject to insults because he is low on the totem pole. John gets this from his mother-in-law, who keeps on accusing him of laziness and lack of ambition, admonishing him with irritating regularity [at the end of every show]: *John, magsumikap ka...* [John, do your best...]. Cosme gets his constant scolding and denigration from his gay office supervisor, from his sister-in-law, from the mother of his daughter-in-law, who also happens to be rich. He is also portrayed as a bumbling fool, who commits errors that provide the humor, and sometimes the pathos, within the episode, albeit unwittingly or accidentally, but which is resolved within the confines of the episode. For example, he may be depicted as making mistakes on the job that would cost him his own, or he may lose things entrusted to him. He may, through his bumbling, end up subduing thugs and thieves without his knowledge, thus saving his loved ones, or his superiors. He is also saved from his daily struggles by his possession of certain traits deemed fundamental to his attempt to live an upright life amid hardships. He is generous, he possesses integrity, he loves his family, and values

loyalty and *pakikisama*, he is diligent despite his superiors' accusations, and he survives because of his belief that God will help him, or give him a better life in the future.

This formula predicates the triumph of the Dolphy character on these traits so necessary to alleviate the stings of poverty and class oppression. It also functions as a palliative against the continual economic, moral, and cultural repression experienced by this character by continuously substituting real ignominy suffered by the lower classes by their taking on an identification with Dolphy in these characters. Ultimately, the episodic nature of the television series reinforces the value of family togetherness – “*Basta magkakasama*” [as long as we are together...] – over wealth and comfort, the value of honesty and integrity over the possession of “easy money”, which the villain usually responds to with greed, and which is poked fun at in the story because of the parallelism between the villain’s ugly mug and his equally rotten character, and who with certainty, is vanquished at the episode’s conclusion. Every episodic resolution, whether ordinary or fantastic, is the triumph of Dolphy’s ordinary man who has very little but who gets the incentive to continue living his life by way of the values by which he lives. We shall see, though, that living by this dictum is a triumph not only for John or Kevin, or other Dolphy characters, but is the triumph of Dolphy as well, which blurs the demarcations between him and his characters. The resolution is usually victory over the oppressor, or the authority figure who maligns Dolphy’s character or who insults and disparages him because of his poverty and menial status, or it may be a victory over immorality, whereby the evildoer – smugglers, swindlers, kidnappers, thieves, for instance, are subdued by way of a comic rescue or a comic plan, and are made to face their comeuppance. This resolution may be complicitous with other triumph tropes, whereby the vanquishment of the evildoer/s is allied with the banishment of poverty, as in the literal recovery of riches or treasure, or in the form of a reward given Dolphy’s character for his courage. This may even coincide with the gain of other rewards, such as getting the romantic aspect of the episode in train. For example, John gets Marsha to admire him despite what Doña Delilah says to the contrary, or in a comic case of reversal, Kevin may end up pleasing Azon, his sister-in-law, who shows him her love, of which he will have none. These resolutions work with the sense of implausibility in

that these acts and cases of triumph happen absurdly easily to Dolphy's characters, and are rewarded with such implausible, if not unexpected ease in its turn. These therefore foreground the funniness of these situations, given that the reality is farthest from these: in subduing thieves, for instance, one is most likely to get killed, the authorities will most probably not respond in time, and in such serried order, nor will the lowly character be given any credit, much less be given the money. Neither will he be given attribution, nor is he likely to get the romantic interest of any woman just as a result of these acts. This use of excessive implausibility, or what Palmer refers to as *peripeteia*, activates the absurdity of Cosme's or Puruntong's situations, and therefore unleashes the humor of these episodes (135).

Dolphy's portrayal of the comic roles we earlier noted "reveal a structuring conflict between eccentricity and conformity", a conflict that "is foregrounded through set-piece gag sequences in which the comedian *disrupts a formalizing, rule-bound process* concerned with work, sexual behavior, communication or even other forms of performance" (Krutnik 25; my italics). The comedian functions as a spanner in the works, thrown into the conventional operations of narrative, communication, or "bodily decorum" (26), and while we have examined this in the context of Philippine realities that inscribe Dolphy as much as it does his audience, we cannot help but go back to the continued indebtedness of Dolphy's comedy to the Hollywood formula of the "comedian comedy", comparable to what Gerald Mast cited earlier as "sound comedy". Frank Krutnik characterizes this as "a highly specialized form of star-centered film", and while all star vehicles depict tension between the specific requirements of the fictional role and the signifying effects of the star image... the prime rationale of comedian comedy is to showcase the comic performance" (25). This is why it becomes particularly easy – and almost inevitable – for Dolphy to depict characters patterned after roles in commercially successful foreign films, or why his depictions of gay "*mujeristas*" or benevolent patriarchs become repeatably lucrative.

Much of what is exhibited in these performances is Dolphy himself – he disrupts the bounds of his characterizations, wittingly or unwittingly, as his presence is forged by way of his own definition of his comic identities, as much as this presence is also fashioned by

the infiltration of the meanings given his own media stature. These translate, then, to the very point we have raised earlier regarding the blurring of the lines which separate the comic performance of the roles attributed to Dolphy, and the transposition of the qualities inherent in these fictional framework to Dolphy's own life, which impacts on the functions of the polyseme that becomes Dolphy – in terms of the roles for which he is remembered, as celebrity, as “star performer”.

Looking through the permutations of Dolphy's most well known comic characterization, we read the humor in Dolphy's characters as functioning in several ways. First, much of what we noted in terms of Dolphy's comic turns is that these ultimately encourage oblivion, the effacement of misery by the character, and the audience, who suffer from the scourge of difference, and the impossibility of entry into the acceptable. This is aided [abetted] precisely by the nature of the sitcom, which is “serial rather than linear” (Ellis qtd. in Feuer 102). Ellis states that the television series, such as the situation comedy,

provides a means of generating many segments from the basic narrative or expository techniques, and from basic thematic material... characterized by a constant repetition of basic narrative situations and characters: a family, a business enterprise, a hospital, etc. each week the characters encounter a new situation which has no permanent effect upon them: the following week they will be in the same relation to another. The repetitions are very marked, to the extent of some series.... Ending their weekly narrative with a kind of coda in which the basic relations between characters are reaffirmed outside of the narrative context... The formula, the basic situation, receives a final statement in a segment that tends to echo the title sequence. This has the effect of reaffirming the stasis from which the next episode will depart... (PFCT 43-44).

David Grote underscores this by saying that the sitcom “resists not only the change of the traditional comic plot but *all* change of any kind... The sitcom carries its repetition compulsion to such an extreme



that it has all but rejected the concept of plot as a process of change from an old equilibrium to a new [one]" (Feuer 108). While this is integral to oblivion engendered by the constant reinforcement of the values that support the forgetting, or the diminution, of real problems to the embrace of the humor of the comic situations in which Dolphy's characters find themselves, we have to note here that Dolphy's cinematic comic portrayals are equally potent in terms of engendering this oblivion, for two reasons. First, while the television sitcom employs a different imaginary than does a cinematic piece, cinema viewing is constituted by the imitation of the conditions of dreaming, which "are certainly close to the partial suspension of the judging function of the ego necessary for the activities of day-dreaming and the construction of fantasies" (Ellis 42). Daydreaming and fantasizing create cinematic identification not so much in terms of the spectator identifying wholly with the hero or the heroine, but is an identification of the self with a variety of positions occupied by those involved in the fictional narrative, the hero's, the heroine's, the villain's, the bit-part player's, or the passive character's. What is identified with is "a sense of seeing the constituent parts paraded before her or him; a sense also of experiencing desire for the perfected images of individuals *over and above their particular fantasy roles*" (43; my italics). Michael Roehmer also posits that

film comes closer than any other medium to giving us the illusion of a *primary* experience... that dark theater, the bright hypnotic screen, the continuous flow of images and sounds, and the large anonymous audience in which we are submerged all contribute to a suspension of self-awareness and a total immersion in the events on the screen. Beyond this... the medium itself encourages an illusion of primary participation...not limited to...sensory detail...[but] extends to the realm of movement (264-265).

Therefore, the Filipino audience that watches a Dolphy film or a Dolphy sitcom is entertained not by the possibility of becoming Dolphy, but, like him, of overcoming the difficulties presented by poverty, or by seeing in Dolphy, and in his characters, a way of identifying with the abnormal, agreeing to be coopted by it by way of laughter, and in so doing finding a way to remove oneself from

that milieu. Also, a more ironic cause of this oblivion lies not in the intrinsic workings of cinema as a genre, but in the fact that many of the comic films in which Dolphy plays his characters are, if not literally, extensions of the television sitcom narratives, employing very similar narrative and expository developments, utilizing similar characters involved in situations that are neatly resolved at the film's end, in much the same way that situation comedy, "offhandedly *uses* narrative" with "no deep and meaningful enigma and little mystery or suspense... Comparison and expectation of pleasurable performance, the workings of the comic and humor, rather narrative suspense are [the] currencies of audience exchange" (Mellencamp 334). To return to the nature of the sitcom that makes possible this forgetting is to emphasize, too, the "familialized" grounding of television. Not only is the apparatus itself a constant presence in the Filipino home,

to be perversely literal-minded... the television screen *does* reflect the body of the family, if we turn the images off. This is perhaps a metaphorical way of arguing that the representational content of television proposes a reflection, however distorted, of the body of the familialized viewing subject" (Feuer 103).

More than this, the sitcom, as an episodic series, is dependent upon "a continual re-integration of the family" (105), no matter what form this family takes. In Dolphy's sitcoms, the family is a typically Filipino one—with the parents and children living together, the parents, especially the father, being the figure of authority – and is also an extended one, encroached upon by relatives, friends, neighbors, who are all extensions of this family, where Dolphy, whether as John Puruntong or as Kevin Cosme, becomes the acknowledged center. Even in cinematic portrayals, the same ideological notion prevails, with an emphasis on the unity of the family despite troubles, usually financial or social, that may threaten to assail it, or in spite of the strange circumstances in which it may be put. Even in nonconformist narratives like *Ang Nanay Kong Tatay* where Dolphy the gay beautician is made to parent a young boy who is not his own, creating a most abnormal family situation, the narrative still foregrounds the function of the family as the breeding ground for good values and an emphasis on belonging as the result of family life.

Dolphy's comic characterizations also function as a presentation of victory, making possible the triumph of the Filipino Everyman, more specifically of the Filipino lower class. Dolphy's characters appear to perpetuate Filipino beliefs that reinforce perceptions of reality, but as Nofuente puts it, may be views or portrayals of life that may not be "reality per se" (129). Nofuente notes certain trends in Philippine television and radio shows that he says "dull the perceptions of reality of the people instead of clarifying them" (130), which we can still apply to the Dolphy sitcoms and to Dolphy's film portrayals. Nofuente's views are echoed by the concern of the MacBride Commission report of the UNESCO in 1980, when "it warned that the introduction of new media in traditional societies has seldom failed to shake centuries-old customs, time-honored cultural practices and simple lifestyles." Moreover, while it acknowledged the benefits of modern communications, the MacBride Report indicated that some traces of the past can be "inimical to accepted present-day social philosophy and practice", and must be transformed in order for human progress to be effected (Braid and Tuazon 56-57).

Nofuente states that one belief that is woven into Filipino television shows portrayal of Philippine life is that which looks at the possibility of changing destiny by way of faith, as current suffering can only be faced with courage, and could be alleviated by the faith and the possession of good values. As much as destiny or fate is inexplicable, it also could be counted on to mete out justice or reward as is necessary, thus removing people's incentive, creativity, or desire to change their lot in life, making them content to wait for destiny to smile upon them (130-131). While Dolphy's characters are portrayed as hard-working, fate, in the form of God's blessings, or in the form of luck, is given much more credit in changing one's life. For instance, John Puruntong wins a game show by dint of having remembered his Social Security Number. Kevin Cosme lands a job for which he previously applied and was not considered, by being at the scene when the company's boss was being robbed, thereby making it possible to rescue her.

Another pervasive Filipino view is that poor people are or can be happy, and that while the Everyman characters Dolphy plays

are poor, they are blessed because there is love in their family, and they are able to surpass the troubles that come their way precisely because of this love and unity. While their family life may be confronted with problems, these problems are speedily solved, such that every conflict is resolved at the end of the program, which reverts the family, or the characters to a state of happiness with the end of every show, or at the beginning of every episode. Moreover, though poor, Dolphy's characters, or the TV family he has, are portrayed as being more blessed compared to the rich characters who almost always are plagued with moral or familial problems (131-132). Nofuente notes therefore that such presentation of the lot of poor people prevents them from trying to, or even wanting to improve their lot, when their state is glorified in such a manner (132). Linked to this glorification of poverty is the view that "the oppressed are blessed" (132), and even while their environment leaves a lot to be desired, life should be faced with constant hope and optimism, as "the unfaithful husband will come back; the delinquent child will repent; the culprit shall be punished; the innocent will receive material and spiritual reward" (133). All these were derived by Nofuente from Philippine radio and television melodramas, but we find that these are just as applicable to Philippine film and TV comedy.

However, comedy makes possible another aspect that uses humor subversively, which is by way of using the comic to relay aggression. Instead of countering trouble or difficulty brought about by poverty or alienation, with tears or self-pity, or by resorting to violence or to verbal assaults, Dolphy uses comic articulations such as the pithy sarcasm, physical gestures, sight gags, as a way of subversively attacking what in reality could not be assailed. A good example of this is when Dolphy insults the antagonist under his breath, which then prompts the antihero to ask questions, who then receives another more flattering answer from Dolphy, which we then laugh at because we, the audience are privy to the insult, and we, as well as the Dolphy character, have the satisfaction of seeing the flattery on the antihero's face, knowing that Dolphy has strung him along. Another example of this is Dolphy is able to swing at the antihero "accidentally", and though he makes profuse apologies afterwards, the laughter is evoked by way of this subtle aggression. Another kind of aggressive, tendentious comic action is when Dolphy, as a reaction to inanity or

stupidity by another comic character, usually a supporting one, hits them on the back of the head, or swats them on the head with a rolled newspaper. When Dolphy eats, and he finds his breakfast disappearing bit by bit every time he rises to attend to a chore, only to find that the food is being swiped by his plump son, we find another instance of rebellion by way of the comic.

Freud posits that tendentious jokes – jokes that are aimed at somebody – “are so highly suitable for *attacks on the great, the dignified and the mighty*, who are protected by internal inhibitions and external circumstances from direct disparagement” (105; my italics). The gags we have mentioned earlier are examples of the rebellion against entities which are portrayed to possess what Dolphy does not have, usually wealth or attractive appearances. By getting back at them, however subtly, Dolphy’s characters are liberated from these villains’ literal oppression of them. By using physical gags on inferior characters, Dolphy himself is able to achieve a sense of superiority within this narrative context, which he would otherwise not be able to get, and with which he is invested to preserve his position as the center of these narratives. We have to emphasize here, though, that in this particular case, the joke works only if the recipient of the physical hits are themselves engaged in the comic play; this is the license that empowers Dolphy to exercise his superiority. A more abstract force with which the Dolphy characters battle is poverty, or social unacceptability due to economic powerlessness. And this Dolphy is shown to overcome by presenting a comic figuration that entails an even more strange portrayal of his situation. For example, he not only lives in a cramped shanty, he lives in one which requires him to sleep on anything but a bed, as we have earlier noted in *John and Marsha*. He is not only surrounded by undesirable elements, such as the drunkards in *Home Along da Riles*, these drunkards, the *Sunog-bagas*, all ironically defer to him.

Dolphy’s characters’ triumph over adversity by putting down, however implausibly or ridiculously, all barriers and oppressions in their path, engenders identification on the part of the Filipino viewer. This identification rests not only on being *like* Dolphy, but more importantly, on being able to laugh at Dolphy’s “foes” – material and real. The viewer is able to “hit back” at perhaps the very same evils by which he feels oppressed or in which he feels imprisoned in

real life, which removes and withholds power away from him. Dolphy, in his characterizations, forges this identification by creating a “personal world”, “a meeting place of familiar people”, where such a familiarity engenders the audience with what they feel is uniqueness, given the manner by which his problems and daily concerns are addressed, where he feels he is seen and known as a whole person, and where, as a participant, the relationships and life experiences through which he goes are expressed as “*part of the identity of the other*” (Wright 326-327; my italics). This is antithetical to the “urban world” in which he is deemed irrelevant, given the fact that in such a world, he is seen as part of an enacted category, and not as a total person, where he experiences himself as “an *object* which can be manipulated in certain social situations... with the real self held in abeyance...” (318). While such a fracture may cut across class lines and may be felt by audience who are themselves products of a modern society, this breakage, and the helplessness it creates, is more keenly suffered by those who have very little or no access to power.

Laughter becomes a very powerful, subversive tool, which helps him/her recoup this power, however briefly or temporarily, making it possible for a viewer to tolerate a similar ridiculousness or ludicrousness in himself as well as in the Dolphy character, without succumbing to self-hatred or self-pity. It may even make him/her as the viewer/gazer more powerful than the Dolphy character as s/he is imbued with more control, because “comedy unravels the voyeuristic eye, showing that such persons miss what is obvious to others, while they spend their time looking at things that either don’t matter, or do matter, but in ways that the voyeur does not understand” (Denzin 65). With a gaze that takes in the Dolphy gestures or the comic gags that make a comic scene, the viewer is made to focus on the pleasure that is afforded him/her in seeing an almost instant response to physical and social oppression, making him more aware of the import of Dolphy’s comic articulations. But while “comedy reflexively attacks, mocks, satirizes the somber conventions... that organize serious voyeuristic texts, in particular... norms stressing truth, rationality, objectivity, compassion, violence...” (66), a double laughter is activated by the situational incongruity in the sitcom or in the film – “the audience laughs at what the protagonist does not see, while laughing at what is seen, which may be quite painful, or frightening”

(66). This voyeuristic gaze of the viewer may even support a superior position for the viewer when this is allied to the adherence to what are deemed Filipino values of humility, fear of God, generosity, *pakikisama* and consideration for others. All in all, these become ways to achieve prevalence over diminution. The characters that Dolphy plays become polysemes as ludicrousness makes it possible for the Filipino viewer to tolerate, even applaud Dolphy's characters as fools, but are able to view these extensively and repeatedly because the end of these characters is triumph over destiny, especially one which deals out poverty or powerlessness. The viewer, in identification with Dolphy the comedian, is given the freedom to ridicule the rules and procedures that sustain the world of propriety and authority (cf. Krutnik 26). We must add, however, that while Dolphy's characters do not espouse specific views about religion or politics as part of the comic arsenal, these are not non-existent, but rather, is assumed as being part of the mainstream code that affects the characters' lives.

### **"THE EXASPERATING FOOLISHNESS OF THE WISE"**

To continue the question what makes possible a Dolphy within Filipino culture is to note the irony adumbrated by the success of these characters: that Dolphy himself has been sucked into such character-fixing. The characters' identities and comic figures intertextually live on Dolphy's image as he himself is inscribed within an industry that thrives on the star system. By defying social forms and assumptions by way of humor, the comedian becomes an iconoclastic rebel, and though Dolphy is "a product of a commercial system that depend[s] on the support of mass audiences [who are] composed of anything but iconoclasts", the success of Dolphy's portrayals lie in the reality that such "comic iconoclasm" gave the audience an opportunity for "emotional release, an opportunity to indulge their own antisocial urges without damaging the social fabric..." (Mast 21). Mast posits that the greatest film comedians are antisocial, but that in being so, this merely succeeds in investing them with "a higher morality" (21). This is certainly true of Dolphy, who, in manifesting a life of sacrifice both within his comedy, and in his real life, attains heroic status while playing the clown or the fool. A palpable part of Dolphy's longevity is in his depiction of characters

who display a prodigious capacity for sacrifice, hence the willing identification of those who view his films, who accede to the code by which he lives. This capacity for sacrifice is what generates charisma. The power of the charismatic hero lies not “in a legitimated social role, but in his extraordinary qualities as a person, the ‘gift of grace’ and the capacity to constantly subject it to demonstration and test” (Featherstone 169). What elevates Dolphy’s humor and Dolphy’s stature as the country’s premier film and television comedian, though this shares many similarities with the run of Philippine film and television comedy, is Dolphy’s consistent representation of a life whose humorous instances are a response to this sacrificial order, and is a reaction to “conventional modes of social approval and institutional authority” (170). In television or on film, the humor provided by the characters Dolphy plays and the instances of humor that happen to these characters function superficially as chaotic fragmentations within a social fabric which can be threatened by it only in a fictional guise, and even then, only briefly; in reality, such chaos cannot be confronted by the viewer, who desires only to enter the domain of the accepted.

On the one hand, the Dolphy roles, and Dolphy himself, as media creation, are necessarily locked into characterization whose triumph by way of incongruity is assured. This becomes the formula he, and in turn, other film and television comic artists in the Philippines, has followed, a formula that functions to palliate despair, and is fed upon by an industry that earns money by encouraging the myth of “conquest by values”. Dolphy, in Bergsonian terms succeeds in exposing a society that has become mechanical and petrified, because he, ironically, is a flawed character (Mast 21), and this comic flaw allows him to supplant the deadening dictates of modern society. This becomes particularly marked in Dolphy’s cinematic depictions, whereby the “tussle” between the sense of the ordinary life and the heroic life becomes so subverted by the creation of the mold of the comic hero. The domain of the comic hero is the domestic, and the everyday life, marked by an advocacy of

a reversal of the process of differentiation and a greater awareness of the equal validity, and in some cases even superior wisdom, of everyday knowledge and practices. Hence... popular cultures are celebrated and the ordinary person’s mundane life, the life of the ‘man without qualities’ heroicized (Featherstone 163).



This parallels Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, "a cultural framework wherein and whereby the habitual aspects of everyday social thought and action operate", shaping people's perceptions, ideas, tastes, which are mediated in action and learned by way of experience (Baldwin et. al. 110). In Bourdieu's framework, the arbiters of the acceptable everyday practices are the dominant institutions and classes who ascertain that their cultural habitus is chosen over others, the problematization therefore lies in which groups in society make distinct their identities, how these values are expressed and how boundaries are created between one group and another (111). And while we link this to the creation of the comic hero whose area of influence becomes increasingly local, we realize that though the ordinary individual is valorized, the domain of the ordinary in terms of Philippine values and practices do not preclude the fact that this has been shaped by forces and entities that hold economic and social power, who allot and appoint the hierarchical positions the popular takes.

The focus of the comic formula that is at bottom a moral one becomes even more influential when allied to the "real" moral code Dolphy holds, that echoes, even strengthens the subverted didacticism of his comic portrayals. Primary among his beliefs is that his success rests on his triumph over his personal circumstances, even over his own physical deficiencies. His shyness and childhood asthmatic condition made him "[un]comfortable being in the company of other people fearing that he might be discriminated against, or be the butt of jokes among his peers" (Mallo n.p.), but luck, which he holds to be integral to his success, made him into a popular comic actor. Like a lot of other people who were born without means, he worked as a horse buggy driver, as a shoeshine boy, as a janitor, all menial jobs until he got a job as a dancer in a stage show. His belief in luck ensures his belief in being unchanged by success, and in humility. He emphasizes this by saying that

so far, *buenas din ako*. In this business, *kung wala kang luck, wala rin*. *Napakaraming may talent dito pero bibira lang yong sinusuverte*. *Siguro kaya ko rin narating ito ngayon dahil marunong rin naman akong makipag-kapwa tao* [So far, I have been lucky. In this business, if one has no luck, one gets nowhere. There are a lot of people with talent in this

business, but very few are given the luck. Perhaps I am where I am at because I also know how to treat people well] (Asoy 37; my translation).

Another interview furthers this “good treatment” of others to mean not stepping on anyone to achieve success (Umerez E4). Dolphy equates success with the need for humility – “*pagka naging successful ka, lalo kang dapat magpakumbaba*” [the more successful you are, the humbler you must be] (Nepales 11; my translation), a theme he repeats with every interview, as in his view, this affects the kind of career one has:

*Ang mga Pinoy tinitingnan din ang pagkatao mo, kung ikaw ay salbabe, suplado o mayabang. Nakakabawas iyan o baka mamaya mawala pa ang mga tagahanga. Sinusubaybayan ng fans kung okey ka at walang atraso at napapalapit lalo ang puso nila sa iyo. Kanya-kanyang panabon ang pag-aartista kaya humag silang mainip. You cannot change destiny. Baka ang destined diyan ay yung hindi natin inaakala*’ [Filipinos look at your person, if you are wicked, unapproachable, or proud. That lessens your standing with those who admire you, and may even lose you your fans. They see if you are okay, if you don’t owe anybody anything, and if you don’t they end up giving you their hearts. Being an actor is a matter of timing, so it pays not to weary of waiting... It may be that those who are destined for it [stardom] are those whom we don’t expect would make it] (Umerez E4; my translation).

For Dolphy, experience has held him in good stead despite his lack of formal education. It is experience that taught him how to deal with people and how to adapt situations to comedy (Asoy 36). However, he has also underscored the importance of education for his children (cf. Lo 35), a belief he depicts as the pater familia in film and in real life. Parallel to his persona in his sitcoms, Dolphy is well known for his charity and generosity. Enrico Santos recounts how “Dolphy never forgets his less-lucky colleagues, and would move heaven and earth to set them up for life... [and] charitable to a fault, still has that charity line every taping day. Hard-up relatives, friends, ex-vaudevillians’ grandchildren can still queue for hundreds of pesos (60). Again, Dolphy himself says:

Basta ito ang patakaran ko sa buhay... Ikaw gumawa ka ng pabor, huwag ka nang tumanaw na gagantihan ka ng pabor dahil madi-*disappoint ka pa. Babala na kung tanawin ninyong utang na loob. Kung hindi naman, okay lang. Nalalaman sa itaas 'yan* [This is my life's dictum... If you grant a favor, do not expect any returns for it, or you will be disappointed. If they show you that they acknowledge their indebtedness, fine. If they don't, it's okay. Heaven sees everything] (de Leon 18;my translation).

This trust in God prompts Dolphy to refer to the “One above” [nasa Itaas], as the source of his blessings (Montreal 9). Such biographical correspondence obviously glosses over more personal, and perhaps more reprehensible, circumstances, but these which we find Dolphy articulating over countless interviews carry literal echoes of Filipino beliefs that pepper the Filipino television series, which, while these are supportive of the possibility of individual luck changing for the better, do leave the forging of this change to abstract notions of timeliness, destiny, and goodness, that ultimately fix social well-being as an adjunct of a moral life.

### **"MADE TO MAKE PEOPLE LAUGH"**

The perennial question of why Dolphy remains “king” of Philippine comedy may be answered by citing the value of his comedy as enjoyable pastime, using humor as a way to forget the misery, literally. More significantly, though, comedy is seen to vanquish misery, figuratively, where misery is binarily opposed to mirth, by creating comic heroes who triumph within ordinary by subscribing to an ideology that underscores domestic values. Filipino humor in the Dolphy comedies therefore superscribe the ultimate coherence/cohesiveness of the individual within the community, even though such an individual starts off as an absurd, ridiculous, unacceptable entity, which is the source of these comedies. That the comic heroes which Dolphy portrays triumph by propounding accepted Filipino values guaranteed to smooth over difficulties brought about by inequality, oppression, diminution and powerlessness, is the core of these characters and their inscription within the context of Philippine society and culture.

What Dolphy has achieved by way of his characters, his gags, and his nonconformity to narrative logic is the creation of liberative spaces for his characters and for the viewers who identify with him using humor as aggression and as subversion, so that while eliciting laughter against the individual and institutional bodies of authority, he showcases himself, too, as possible success over the marginalization he experiences due to these. His comic characters also create disruptive gaps, making it possible for the viewer to be lifted away from his miserable status. This is a disruption of the “real” ordinary by a mode of possibility. Like John Puruntong or Kevin Cosme, it is possible to either be like them or share in their apparently affable environment, or be for a moment superior over such characters who are bumbling and ridiculous, or share in their triumph vicariously, at the end of every episode. A double disruption occurs when the viewer is taken with the gag in which the Dolphy characters are engaged. Gags “unlike other narrative details, are never invisible, never function quietly, but always demand our attention, even at the expense of other aspects of narrative comprehension” thus “disturb[ing] the film and ‘corrupt[ing]’ plot... thereby exposing multiple meanings which are hidden in normal or realistic discourse”, and ultimately succeeding in subverting narrative logic (Karnick and Jenkins 83,85). Watching the episode/series itself is a visual stop sign, because the disruption of “real” life is anticipated, and there is a willing cooptation by sitting down and watching the episode [or the film] and ultimately identifying with, or feeling superior over, the Dolphy characters.

While these are valid contributions of the Dolphy comedies, the disturbing note here is that while these spaces are created by the roles Dolphy plays, and while for the most part there is a subscription to these roles, made evident by the long chronology of his successes, their liberative, disruptive potentials are themselves diminished and are muted by the way these potentials are displaced by humorous pleasure. Freud observes that “the person who is the victim of pain and injury... might obtain *humorous* pleasure, while the unconcerned person laughs from *comic* pleasure” (Mellencamp 336). Because humorous pleasure is derived from “an economy in expenditure upon feeling”, it “saves’ feeling because the reality of the situation is too painful”, in contrast to the supposed function of jokes to liberate. The Dolphy characters, and the viewers of Dolphy’s comedies, shuttle between comic pleasure, whereby they laugh at the comic gestures

and dialogues as part of the film's or TV program's narrative logic, or perhaps illogic, and humorous pleasure, which is more difficult to negotiate for the character or the viewer because to do so is to admit one's real containment within a situation that, while superficially comic, is grounded in the reality of almost inescapable victimization. The subscription to a Filipino moral code, as we have noted Dolphy characters, Dolphy himself, and subsequently the viewers of these comedies, doing, transmutes the aggression and the potential anger within these comic articulations into pleasure, the double bind being that the oppressed characters/ spectators "[are] split between comic and humorous pleasure, between denial of emotion by humor" – which helps them experience the pleasure of watching the comedy, which makes them watch this repeatedly – "and the sheer pleasure of laughter provided by the comic movement and situation" – which has the effect of removing them from the milieu of the victim, in which case they are unable to identify with these characters in the first place (337-338). This is a complex matter, as is the matter of containment and simulated liberation, and anger or aggression degenerating into mere pleasure obviates the possible role of humor as subversion. Resistance, then, becomes true only momentarily and only as a concealed ideal, and this is an ideal that focuses on the need to contain threatening forces, especially to the family, a strategy of containment that proposes a momentary, neat solution to problems confronting the Dolphy characters and that centers a blissful domestic imaginary. In Filipino terms, a domestic imaginary is born of affluence and social standing. Mellencamp coins the term "*domiculture*" to refer to this strategy of domestic containment, one which is ideologically deceptive and one which merges identification with annexation (cf. Mellencamp 314, also Feuer 113-114). Containment here may also be seen in terms of fixing characters, making of them essentially stereotypical ones in order to woo success in a genre that stresses integration and closure (112). The sitcom, most especially, defeats this disruptive, liberative possibility because of its resistance to change, hence perpetuating the formula of the mythic Filipino Everyman, a role most consolidated by Dolphy and his TV characters. Finally, *domiculture* is juxtaposed here with a culture of acquisition that plays at its periphery, if not alongside it. Dolphy's triumphs earn him moral ascendancy, but these also come with his economic repositioning. [A very clear example here is how he gets to articulate his "words of

wisdom” as the most special portion of an ABS-CBN Christmas special, which certainly is hinged as an adjunct of his being the most bankable, and the most senior member of this studio’s stable of stars.] This may not be as clearly seen in the characters he plays; he may well continue to be the neighborhood wise man, ensuring his social standing, but his characters do not as easily gain economic mobility. This is particularly illustrative of what Barry King cites as the privileging not so much of “the ability to play a particular character”, which he refers to as “impersonation”, as of “the capacity for personification – the ability to construct a continuing personal and individual mark in each film role”, which King sees as the celebrity’s persona being complicit in the apparatuses and the economies of film production. The star’s contribution in personifying characters “contain[s] competition amongst the tele-film cartel companies by representing [this] contribution as resting on his or her private properties as a person...” (qtd. in Marshall 234).

In “The Culture Industry”, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer state that:

Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything... Under monopoly, all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through... Interested parties explain the culture industry in technological terms. It is alleged that because millions participate in it, certain reproduction processes are necessary that inevitably require identical needs in innumerable places to be satisfied with identical goods... Furthermore, it is claimed that standards were based in the first place on consumers’ needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance. The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger. No mention is made of the fact that that the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose hold over society is greatest (30-31).

What Adorno and Horkheimer assert about the culture industry is, to my mind, still particularly utile because the cultural impetus for the writing of their essay in the mid-1940’s is replicated by the conditions

of Philippine filmmaking. Adorno and Horkheimer accuse culture industries of repression, where “pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to help forget” (40). They add to this their view that culture industries can offer only *pseudo-individuality*,

the only reason why the culture industry can deal so successfully with individuality is that the latter has always reproduced the fragility of society. On the faces of individuals and movie heroes put together... vanishes a pretence in which no one now believes; the popularity of hero models comes partly from a secret satisfaction that the effort to achieve individuation has at last been replaced by the effort to imitate, which is admittedly more breathless (42).

This approximates our earlier caveat in noting the dangers inherent in the delineation of Dolphy’s characters and the way his comedies’ spectators form part of, and may be betrayed by, this interpretive economy.

We note that the situation of Dolphy in the Philippine media market (film, television, advertising) lays down the problematic of the sustenance of the present order, and while Dolphy can still be rightly valorized as “king” for opening comic spaces for transgression/aggression, his predictability petrifies him and ultimately limits the possible transformative value of his comedy. Dolphy himself addresses this limitation. While he says,

“Moral values – *may mga pelikulang para diyán. Yung mga pelikula ko, inaamin ko, pang-commercial yan. Made to entertain, to make people laugh. Huwag na dapat nila akong binabangyan ng magandang istorya. Hanapin na lang nila yon kay Lino Brocka, kay Ishmael Bernal... But so far wala naman akong complaint dahil kumikita naman ang films ko*” [There are films made to portray moral values. I admit that my films are for commercial viewing... they should not be watching my films for quality stories. They should look for these in the films by ... Brocka...Bernal... But I haven’t any complaints because my films still make money] (Montreal 9; my translation),

we have already belied what he deems is the flat dichotomy of Filipino films – those that are made by the acknowledged directors, and those that are “merely” produced for commercial consumption. We add to this what Lumbera states is the industry’s failure

to cultivate the virtuosity of filmmakers through systematic tradition-building. The touch-and-go efforts at effective comedy are a consequence of the absence of long-term production planning... ad-hoc planning by companies in a hurry to make a profit has only resulted in content-less slapsticks. [And] in such comedies, the all too-frequent reflex of resorting to toilet humor is traceable to an unimaginative dependence on a popular stage tradition best abandoned in film (27).

Also, we have already seen how Dolphy’s own comic figurations within his films and television portrayals ultimately advance an ideology of conformity to extant Filipino cultural beliefs that aim to efface the sting of economic and social de-integration. The problem of the Filipino who laughs at Dolphy’s characters is that he actively consumes these cinematic texts in order to free himself momentarily from the reality of a difficult life by way of entertainment, and when he laughs he is doubly freed, first via spectatorship, and secondly via the possibility of aggressive/transgressive laughter. But this active consumption itself encourages an adherence to traditional views, which are undergirded by resignation to, and acceptance of, the difficulty and impossibility of moving into spheres of power in Filipino life. Laughter as resistance is itself orchestrated and pursued by the culture industry within which Dolphy moves, and which invests him with “kingship.”

The “king” is subject to the same complexity his audience faces, his negotiation of the problematic aspects of the laughter he evokes within Philippine cinema is subject fraught with questions, his status as meaning-maker made tenuous by his complicity with the machinery that created his popularity. The project of this paper is to negotiate the discourse of Dolphy as comic artist and [not just] as media icon, and while we have tracked the potentials and the dangers of his contribution to cinematic humor in the Philippine context, we end with the acknowledgment that no one in recent Philippine



cinema/media history can approximate his career chronology, his comic contributions, or can approach the extent of his body of work enough for this to be studied at length.

For the moment, then, Dolphy still reigns.

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