

Urban Anxieties in Davao Horror Short Films

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines how horror short films produced by independent filmmakers based in Davao City in southern Philippines function as imaginative mediations of urban anxieties in the region. Discussing first existing scholarship on Philippine horror cinema, the essay then maps the emergence of regional filmmaking in contemporary independent cinema before briefly touching on the ways Filipino mainstream and independent films construct urban spaces. As the analysis shows, the horror short films articulate people's anxieties over socio-economic and political realities experienced in Davao, such as extrajudicial killings, enactment of a pioneering anti-discrimination ordinance, urban diaspora, and cosmopolitanism. In addition, they reveal people's complex views and attitudes towards urbanization and modernity against the specter of rurality in Davao City. The paper argues that these films imagine, not just the uneasy position of a regional city in the national topography shaped by the socio-economic operations of globalization, but also the anxiety of a Third World formation hounded by the specter of uneven development.

Keywords: Regional cinema, horror films, short films, Davao City

Since its emergence in 1927 with the release of Jose Nepomuceno's *Ang Manananggal* (The Viscera Sucker), horror has endured as one of the most popular film genres in the Philippines. As in the movie industries of Asian countries like Thailand, South Korea, and Japan, Philippine horror films continue to enjoy box office success. Commercial producers continue to invest in their production despite the general decline in film industry outputs starting in the late 1990s.¹ In fact, the longest-running and most successful film franchise in the country – the 15-film *Shake, Rattle and Roll* series – belongs to the horror genre, and is almost a constant presence in the previous Metro Manila Film Festival held annually in December. Unfortunately, the commercial success of horror films creates an unsettling

tendency to dismiss these cultural products as low-brow entertainment that has very little value beyond the profit-driven imperatives of commercial cinema.

While this view could somehow account for the relative dearth in Philippine horror film scholarship, some critical works have focused on the socio-historical value of commercial horror cinema. These interventions highlight the persistent grip of mainstream horror films on the popular imagination as they function as imaginative articulations of, and on, the historical experiences of Filipinos.

The indigenous, folkloric imagination in Philippine horror films has been problematized in scholarly works on the genre. For instance, Tilman Baumgärtel analyzes Chito Roño's horror film *Feng Shui* (2004) in his essay "Asian Ghost Film vs. Western Horror Movie: Feng Shui," arguing that this local blockbuster film is "an interesting hybrid of...two different cinematic approaches towards the uncanny" (12). These approaches relate, on the one hand, to the Southeast Asian portraying the horrific other and, on the other hand, to the western, which approaches horror allegorically as a fictional means to metaphorize contemporary social conditions.

Laurence Marvin Castillo has analyzed *Feng Shui* as well, along with Roño's two other horror films *Sukob* (2006) and *T2* (2009), focusing on how this trilogy constructs the 'horrific abject.' Using Julia Kristeva's notion of 'abject,' Castillo argues that Roño's horror trilogy produces the Oriental in *Feng Shui*, the primitive in *Sukob*, and the indigenous in *T2* as "the abject source of terror" (107). He maintains that in so doing, these films reinforce western meaning systems inscribed in the symbolic order that demonize local knowledge and beliefs. This results in their disavowal of, and disengagement in, the project of cultural decolonization, and the inculcation in the viewers of alienation and terror towards their own indigenous culture (108).

Also exploring horror films in relation to indigenous culture, Alvin Yapan examines films about demonic and spiritual possessions. He introduces an understanding of 'sapi' (similar with western narratives of spirits possessing an individual) through the lens of folk knowledge ('kaalamang-bayan') instead of the usual moral discourse espoused by the Catholic Church. Yapan contends that in the context of folk knowledge, 'sapi' is viewed as a way to educate the possessed individual into the collective dynamics of the society she enters into. He then, relates this reading of 'sapi' to the country's epic tradition, which teaches members how their community views the world (and the other world) and how humans relate to such a view. This is significantly different from the Catholic notion that professes 'sapi' as a battle between good and evil (122-123).

Taking a distinct postcolonial direction by interrogating western conceptions of homogenous time, Bliss Cua Lim discusses how Asian horror and fantastic cinemas, specifically Filipino ghost and *aswang* films, evoke “immiscible times” – plural temporalities that cannot be incorporated into the homogenous structure of modern time (12).² In *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, the first book-length study that largely focuses on Filipino horror films, she analyzes Mike De Leon’s *Itim* (Rites of May, 1976), Antonio Jose Perez’s *Haplos* (Caress, 1982), and Peque Gallaga’s and Lore Reyes’ *Aswang* (1992) and argues that horror and fantastic cinemas disrupt the universalized and universalizing temporality of the modern episteme through their fantastic narratives and spectral times. Thus, these films perform a critique of the epistemic order that the western colonial project imposed upon non-western territories like the Philippines.

A recent notable scholarly intervention in the study of Filipino horror films relates them to the project of nation-formation. Rolando Tolentino analyzes the highly successful *Shake, Rattle and Roll* franchise against the historical processes that have shaped Philippine body politic from the Marcos dictatorship to the post-authoritarian neoliberal order. He demonstrates how horror cinema registers the national anxieties of the viewing Filipino public. He contends that the horror film “provides a cultural trope for the imagination of the nation, akin to a specter in the understanding of nation-formation,” as the anxieties felt by the movie audiences evoke the “anxious state and affect in nation-formation” (“Shake, Rattle and Roll” 139-140). For Tolentino, this affective register does not simply work through the dialectical constitution of audiences as both film viewers and citizens, but through the emplacement of horror narratives within the plane of history as well. The essay is particularly instructive in demonstrating how the viewing public’s affective response to onscreen terror serves as a negotiated reaction to the realities they encounter as national subjects.

These scholarly works highlight that the popular appeal of horror cinema must be understood as a function of its aesthetic (re)construction and mediation of the viewing public’s historical experiences. In effect, cinematic horror enacts and actualizes the horrific possibilities that hound everyday existence and arouses the subdued anxieties of the people. As Jonathan Crane remarks, “[o]nly the contemporary horror film comes close to the terror of everyday life” (8).

If scholarly work on mainstream horror films is still relatively few, almost none exists on independent or ‘indie’ horror cinema, which mainly operates outside the

film industry's commercial logic and institutional spheres. As a contribution to these largely unexplored areas in Philippine film scholarship, the present essay reads regional horror short films by filmmakers in Davao City—the largest city in the country in terms of landmass located on Mindanao island in southern Philippines—as imaginative mediations of urban anxieties in the region. We first map the emergence of, as well as scholarly writings on, regional films and short films. Then we discuss briefly the various ways in which urban spaces are constructed in mainstream and indie films, before reading Davao horror shorts as spatial practices that articulate experiences in a regional city.

CINEMA BEYOND MANILA

The rise of local independent cinema in mid-2000s was shaped in large part by the increase in film production of filmmakers based outside Manila. Known as 'regional films' shot in various regions outside the capital, they foreground regional concerns and sensibilities in a manner distinct from, and even critical of, the thematic preoccupations and stylistic conventions of their Manila-based counterparts both in commercial and independent filmmaking.

While the vigorous production of regional cinema constitutes a fairly recent development in contemporary 'indie' film movement, as early as 1987, Filipino film archivist and programmer Teddy Co already wrote about the need to encourage filmmaking practices outside the dominant, Manila-centric film establishment in what is perhaps the earliest essay on regional cinema, "In Search of Philippine Regional Cinema." Turning to Baguio, Iloilo and Cebu, he proposes that "if Philippine cinema is to become a dynamic social force, it can only do so by diversifying the films that it produces" (Co 20). He says that one way to do this "is to move away from the congested city and look to the provinces in search of fresh images" (20).

The recent steady increase in regional film productions can be attributed to a number of reasons. One is the widened access to digital technology and software for post-production that have allowed aspiring filmmakers to make their own films without big capital investments in sophisticated technological requirements and intensive labor they require. Another is the emergence of schools that offer courses in filmmaking or video production. Short workshops in filmmaking also create platforms for aspirants to venture in filmmaking (Gutierrez 54). One such long-running film workshop is the Negros Summer Workshop, founded in 1991 in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental. Peque Gallaga, director of Filipino classics *Oro, Plata, Mata*

(*Gold, Silver, Death*, 1982), *Scorpio Nights* (1985), and *Shake, Rattle and Roll* in the 1990s, established this regional film workshop and ran it with some of its alumni and other Bacolod-based filmmakers (Tan 146). Film production grants from competitive national film festivals have benefited independent filmmaking in the regions as well. For instance, in 2010, Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival funded two films made in Mindanao—Sheron Dayoc's *Halaw* (Ways of the Sea) and Gutierrez Mangansakan II's *Limbunan* (The Bridal Quarter)—while Cinema One Originals funded two more—Remton Zuasola's landmark film, *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (The Dream of Eleuteria) and Jason Paul Laxamana's *Astro Mayabang*. All four films were debut features of their directors. These grants are given out by private media companies, government agencies, and local government units, such as in Quezon City, whose local film development council runs the QCinema International Film Festival.

In terms of audience development, the regional cinema movement has cultivated awareness of local culture through screenings in, among other places, local film festival venues, schools, and occasionally, in malls in regional urban centers. In some instances, various institutions fund these screenings, but often the latter are independent initiatives of regional filmmakers and other cultural workers. More significant for audience development is the establishment in 2009 of Cinema Rehiyon (CR), which the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) funds.³ Being the national festival of regional films, CR serves as an important avenue for exhibition and discussion of regional cinema.

The burgeoning of regional cinema and, in general, independent cinema in the Philippines is likewise characterized by the vigorous production of short films, the low-budget alternative for many independent filmmakers. Unfortunately, short films in the Philippines have likewise not been given due scholarly attention. So far, the most notable academic undertaking on the subject is Nick Deocampo's *Short Film: Emergence of a New Philippine Cinema* published more than 30 years ago. This landmark book traces short film's history and development in the Philippines as a mode of alternative filmmaking.

While regional filmmakers have made a number of feature films, most outputs of regional cinema are short films financed out of filmmakers' own pocket and with help from their friends. Composed of students, amateurs and some professionals, these filmmakers can make short films for as low as P1,000 to P5,000 (USD20 to USD100), with a few spending up to P60,000 (around USD 1,300). In an online

interview, Davao-based director, Bagane Fiola, said that the horror short films he makes can cost between P50,000 and P60,000 (\$1,000 to \$1,300) “on a very tight budget.” He further mentions that he was able to raise this money by asking friends to contribute any amount to his production. This DIY low-budget filmmaking, which is similarly practiced in independent filmmaking in Manila, characterizes short film production in the regions.

Notably, some of these low-budget shorts received positive critical feedback, as in the case of *Wawa* (Anj Macalanda, 2015), which depicts a burial that takes place in a river. Set in Rizal province, the film is a visual poetry whose rhythm matches that of the river’s flow. *Wawa* won the Best Short Film award at the 39th Gawad Urian, which is handed out by the critics’ group Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (MPP, Filipino Film Critics Group). Prior to this, the film bagged the NETPAC Award and the Jury Prize at the 2015 Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival. It also brought home the Jury Prize at the 2015 Exground Film Festival, a festival of short films in Wiesbaden, Germany. These accolades and the fact that competitive film festivals in the country are now funding short film productions affirm that this form is considered equally worthy of critical attention.

PRESENCING REGIONAL CULTURES

Regional films, particularly in their independent short film form, veer away from previous emplacement of regional spaces in mainstream films as mere set locations. They articulate place-based concerns and discourses through narratives told by filmmakers who hail from, and are themselves immersed in, the regions. An important element in this articulation is the *presencing* of regional cultures. One manifestation of this presencing is the use of vernacular language or dialect, which “serves to explore the potential of cinematic realism” (Yang 3) and provides a counterpoint to the predominant use of Tagalog in commercial films. More broadly, the amplification of previously silenced and marginalized local sensibilities and experiences in regional films interrogates Manila-centric discourses that tend to subsume the regional to the conventional homogenizing construal of the Tagalog, the lowland and the urban as the national. Regional cinema thus propels a revised, expanded understanding of the national as constituted by the regional.

Unfortunately, only few scholars have produced critical writings on regional cinema. Scholarly efforts focus on Cebuano cinema, particularly its earlier years. A landmark work on the subject is Deocampo’s monograph, “Films from a ‘Lost’ Cinema: A Brief

History of Cebuano Cinema,” published in 2005 for *Sine ug Katilingban* (Pelikula at Lipunan). Building upon the critical interventions of Resil Mojares on Cebuano cinema, Deocampo’s monograph is perhaps the first historiographic account of a regional cinema that developed outside Manila-based film establishment. Two decades after Deocampo’s monograph, Paul Grant and Misha Anissimov published an illustrated historiography of early Cebuano cinema. The remarkable *Lilas: An Illustrated History of the Golden Ages of Cebuano Cinema* argues that early Cebuano cinema had two productive periods or ‘Golden Ages’—the 1950s and the 1970s—that actually coincide with that of Tagalog cinema in Manila (6). Grant and Anissimov’s scholarly work significantly contributes not only to Cebuano and, more broadly, to regional cinema; it enriches our understanding of Philippine cinematic history.

In recent years, Cebuano cinema has attracted both local and foreign film critics and scholars. In between the publication of the two works mentioned above, a special section on this cinema was published in *Film International* in 2013. The collection includes Grant’s introductory essay, “Ang Pelikulang Binisaya: Cebuano Film and the Search for a Regional Cinematic Heritage,” critical reviews of early and contemporary Cebuano films, and an interview with Cebuano filmmaker Keith Deligero. As the first of its kind in international film scholarship, this collection is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on Cebuano cinema.

Using the frame of critical heritage studies, Katrina Ross Tan’s essay examines the emergence of filmmaking in various regions in the country. She argues that this cinema is constitutive of the filmic and linguistic heritage of the country (160). As such, it forms a national film culture that “articulates cultural differences... and, at the same time, considers these varied articulations necessary in the making of a more inclusive Philippine national filmic [and linguistic] heritage” (160). She adds that in this process the role of filmmakers, festival organizers, programmers, and other agents working in various regional cinemas is crucial (160).

Several works that focus on Philippine independent cinema have generally included discussions of regional cinema (Hernandez; Tiongson and MPP; Campos). One noteworthy example is Patrick Campos’s analysis of how regional films have produced rural spatial imaginaries. In his book, *The End of National Cinema: Filipino Films at the Turn of The Century*, he examines a number of independent films, including regional ones like Mes De Guzman’s *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong* (The Road to Kalimugtong 2005) and *Balikbayan Box* (2007), Brillante Mendoza’s *Manoro* (The Aeta Teacher, 2006), Tara Illenberger’s *Brutus: Ang Paglalakbay* (Brutus:

The Journey, 2008), and Sherad Anthony Sanchez's *Huling Balyan ng Buhi: O Ang Sinalirap Nga Asoy Nila* (The Priestess of Buhi: or The Woven Stories of the Other, 2006). He contends that these films articulate the remoteness of rural landscapes as symbolic of "the cultural and psychological need to rely on an ideal and primal idea of becoming Filipino and becoming human" (408). Further, he argues that these films symbolize as well the core of Filipino moral innocence that is threatened by the attacks of external forces of modernity and urbanization. They convey a political sense of indignation towards the continuing disenfranchisement of people in the nation's peripheries (408-409).

A remarkable critical intervention in conceptualizing the highly charged notion of 'regional cinema' is Grant's "Cinema Becoming Regional, Unbecoming Cinema." For him, regional cinema "invokes hopes of a local, sometimes minor, conception of cinema that challenges the aesthetics, fetishized production values and corporatism of dominant national cinemas" (n.p.). But this optimistic disposition is tempered by his skepticism in discussing problems that hound the definition of the region/al and the identification of what constitutes a region's cultural production. The essay briefly deals with the contradiction between the heterogenizing and homogenizing impulses in regional cinema, offering the view, albeit unsubstantiated, that "while regional approach offers a more heterogenous and hybrid expression of what makes up a nation...it still maintains...constitutive parameters that tend towards a potential homogenization" (n.p.).

Similarly, Vicente Groyon considers the 'regional' category as "problematic" despite recognizing "something that can be called a 'regional identity'" (195) among films made outside Manila. He bases his latter claim on the films he saw in CR's maiden edition in 2009. He argues that the category is "fraught with the circumlocutions and cul-de-sacs of identity politics" (195). Moreover, Groyon notes that the category 'regional' does not account for "authorial matters," such as those relating to filmmakers' artistic preferences, mobility, and migration. This view of 'regional' led him to suggest an eventual dissolution of the category "[i]f and when 'Philippine cinema' finally includes cinema from the 'other Philippines'" (195), i.e. regional cinemas.

Although the present study is not directly concerned with conceptual challenges related to 'regional cinema,' we acknowledge that indeed the 'region' is a contested notion. For purposes of this study, however, we use 'regional cinema' to denote the horror short films made in Davao City by independent filmmakers based there that tell of familiar stories shared in the place.

What is so far established is the need for further critical discussions, as well as archival work, on regional cinema. The present essay is a modest attempt to add to the developing conversations on the subject by closely reading selected regional short films, with a particular focus on their articulation of regional concerns. At this point, we turn to the cinematic production of space as an important analytic category upon which this critical reading is premised.

CINEMATIC PRODUCTION OF URBAN SPACE

In his theory on the production of space, Henri Lefebvre introduces a conceptual triad of space: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces (33). Spatial practices, according to him, are practices that produce society's space and can be "revealed through a deciphering of its space" (38). They are closely tied to perceived space. People's perceptions of a society's space thus direct them on how to use and navigate space in their daily routine. Lefebvre's second spatial concept is representations of space or the 'conceptualized space'. It is society's dominant space structured by technocrats and bureaucrats who conflate the lived and perceived spaces with what is conceived (38). They are "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations" (33). Lefebvre says these representations of space are always conceived and abstract but find their 'objective expression' in monuments, towers, factories, and edifices (qtd. in Merrifield 523). The last of his conceptual triad, representational space, pertains to the lived space of everyday life that conceived space continuously attempt to dominate (Lefebvre qtd. in Merrifield 523). Yet this is a space of actual practices that embody inhabitants' images and symbols, "a space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre 39).

In this paper, we consider the cinematic production of space as a form of spatial practice—the perceived space that intervenes between the lived and conceived spaces of society. As much as this spatial practice is influenced by lived and conceived spaces, it offers possibilities to alter both spaces by shaping the ways by which we view how our social relations and historical experiences. This may include those that generate anxieties, fears, tensions and other affective modalities of living, that produce, and are produced in, space. The function of cinema as a form of spatial practice can be gleaned in the medium's production of city imaginaries.

From its inception, cinema has had a complex relation with the city and the imageries it produces (Barber 7). Louis Le Prince's early moving pictures made in 1888 depict the city of Leeds in the United Kingdom in a period of rapid industrialization (15). Similarly, one of the films of Auguste and Louis Lumiere show workers leaving a factory in the industrial city of Lyon in France. In Philippine cinema, spatial imaginaries of Manila typically function as symbolic representations of the nation. This apparently essentialist allegorization of the capital city somehow obscures the fact that its formation as the country's economic, political and cultural center is built upon a violent history of centralization.

The urban capital is edified and sustained through installing centers of colonial and neocolonial administrations, as well as spheres of economic activity and international trade. In addition, preserving the backward state of agriculture in the countryside that causes massive urban migration among the reserve army of labor from poverty-stricken rural areas contributes to Manila's premiere status as an urban center. Thus, the urban-rural dialectic materializes through the processes of uneven development, but it is somehow elided over in cinematic figurations. As such, in Philippine film history, "the rural space has been typically visualized for its exotic qualities and symbolic legibility" (Campos 352). The countryside is produced variously as the romantic, idyllic pastoral space in Nepomuceno's *Dalagang Bukid* (Country Maiden, 1919) (353), the spectral hometown of dehumanized protagonists in iconic city films during the Martial Law period (359), the landscape of seduction in bomba films, and the site of peasant unrest and feudal violence in rebel-bandit action films.

Manila's representations in commercial city films as the spatial metaphor for the diseased national body politic are predicated upon the noticeable abstraction and even occlusion of spaces outside this city. This approach is analogous to how Manila has built its urban capital status by way of exploitation of the countryside. Lino Brocka's *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (Manila in the Claws of Light, 1975), regarded as one of the finest examples of urban realism in Philippine cinema, exemplifies this treatment of rurality in its production of the romanticized coastal hometown of the tragic characters as an antithetical imaginary to the filthy, violent titular city. The image of the ruthless city is reproduced in another landmark city film, Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), in which Manila is rendered as the space of transgressive subcultures that foreground the limits of the official metropolitan order that the Marcos dictatorship forced upon the urban center (Tolentino "Marcos, Brocka, Bernal" 124-125). Interestingly, recent representations

of Manila in independent films – for instance, Jeffrey Jeturian’s *Kubrador* (The Bet Collector, 2006), Mendoza’s *Tirador* (Slingshot, 2007) and Erik Matti’s *On the Job* (2013)– are contemporary reworkings of the urban realist mode exemplified by Bernal and Brocka, with the city once again depicted as a dehumanizing space plagued with corruption, poverty and violence.

At this point, in order to examine how representations of a regional city in regional independent films intervene in the historical experiences of the people in urban spaces outside Manila, we turn to a discussion of the country’s largest city, Davao City, and thereafter, of its construction in regional horror short films.

POST-EDSA DAVAO

The successful candidacy of former Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 presidential election has foregrounded Davao in national political discourse. Duterte served as mayor of this regional center for more than two decades. Expectedly, he built his electoral campaign upon the projection of Davao City as the living illustration of national aspirations – a city of progress, peace and order. His presidential victory somehow affirms that this city’s representation as the urban ideal, against which Metro Manila, along with the rest of the country, is measured and found terribly wanting, immensely appealed to popular imagination.

Duterte’s political reputation rests upon the transformation of Davao City under his leadership from a chaotic and crime-ridden area to the bustling regional center frequently regarded as one of the safest cities in the country and in the world (Hegina). During the early 1980s, killings were an ordinary sight in Davao, as the area was the setting of various criminal activities and bloody encounters between military forces and communist guerillas. Agdao, one of the city’s villages, earned the nickname “Nicar Agdao” after the strife-torn Latin American country of Nicaragua. In the mid-1980’s, an anti-communist vigilante group called *Alsa Masa* (Masses Arise) waged violent attacks on communists who were then testing their urban operations in Davao.⁴ Then President Corazon Aquino, together with military and ogvernment leaders, endorsed the vigilante group for its counterinsurgency operations (Mydans). However, she later ordered it to disband after local and international human rights groups criticized its punitive and lawless measures.

Duterte was first elected as Davao City Mayor in 1988. In his various capacities as mayor, vice-mayor and congressman for over two decades, he focused on the eradication of criminality in the city, implementing measures like curfews and liquor bans, and institutionalized drug rehabilitation and local emergency response plan. A controversial aspect of Duterte's governance as one of the longest-serving mayors in Philippine political history is his alleged ties with the active vigilante group called "Sulugon sa Katawhan" (Servants of the People), more commonly known as the Davao Death Squad (DDS), which allegedly carries out extrajudicial killings of criminal suspects in the city. Formed in the mid-1990s during Duterte's second term as city mayor, the group is said to be responsible for more than a thousand deaths and disappearances as of 2015.⁵ It has been the subject of condemnation from local and international human rights groups. Duterte's public proclamations of his approval and even endorsement of extrajudicial killing as a crime-control procedure have further fueled allegations of his involvement with the group.

Nevertheless, the transformation of Davao's image from being the country's murder capital to one of its safest cities is built upon a combination of legislative measures and violent extra-legal means. It has successfully been packaged as an ideal hub for economic activity in southern Philippines, attracting foreign capital and migrants from other parts of war-torn Mindanao. With a population of more than 1.63 million in 2015, Davao is one of the most populous metropolitan areas in the country (Bersales). As the highly-urbanized city plays host to various local and multinational industries ranging from information and communication technology (ICT) to real estate, it has become a prime growth area in the Asia-Pacific region.

THE HORRIFIC DAVAO CITY

In the short horror films under study—the ngilngig films—the construction of Davao as site of horror offers creative interventions that exemplify how local filmmakers perceived their lived experiences in an urbanized city outside the national center.⁶ Here, regional cinema takes the form of spatial practice that expresses anxieties emanating from lived experiences in the conceived space shaped by capitalist structuring in the region. This means that the politico-economic changes of, and in, space generate and shape the ways in which people experience and relate to space. As the foregoing analyses demonstrate, these anxieties function as experiential mediations shaped simultaneously by processes of urbanization and

the complicating dynamics of rurality that underpin and haunt such processes. Davao City's position as a regional urban center is illustrative of the confluences between rurality and urbanity; remaining in the national periphery entails that while pockets of the city's spaces have been encroached upon by developmentalist or urbanizing activities, several barangays are still officially categorized by the Philippine Statistics Authority as rural.⁷ The uneven development within Davao City, and between Davao and the rest of its neighboring communities, presents conditions for the anxieties registered in the filmic texts analyzed.

Ngilngig shorts, first showcased in 2010 to "immortalize Philippine town tales and superstitious beliefs in its unique form through [horror] cinema" ("About Ngilngig"), depart from the typical tendency in mainstream horror cinema to reduce rural space to alterity as the "geography of horror" – the "figurative spatialization of the notion that what horrifies is that which lies outside cultural categories and is, perforce, unknown" (Carroll 57). A sizeable number of mainstream horror films, from several episodes in *Shake, Rattle, and Roll* (1984-2014) to the most recent *Haunted Forest* (2017), construct this essentialist horrific figuration of the rural as the space of non-modern ways of living and modes of knowing that are deemed to deviate from the universalizing dicta of urban rationality. In the ngilngig shorts, however, rurality and urbanity are understood to refer, not to separate dichotomized categories, but to confluent historical dynamics and interpenetrating social formations that are constitutive and interruptive of the regional city's state of being and becoming.

Davao's image as one of the safest cities in the country is problematized in Bagane Fiola's *Achup Boulevard* (2015). In this short film that runs less than six minutes, a young female student searching for a book in a library hears about a slasher on the loose. She falls asleep while reading Yasunari Kawabata's short story, *One Arm* and dreams about one of the gay characters running wildly as the slasher chases him. A young man wakes her up and tells her that the library will close soon, but he mysteriously disappears after offering to accompany her. He tells her to take care of the book as it can protect her from the slasher. She enters the gate of the compound where she lives, and a guard warns her again about the slasher. The latter mysteriously disappears after locking the compound gate. A bolo-wielding slasher suddenly attacks the young woman and mutilates one of her arms. She angrily stabs him with the sharp bone sticking out of her mutilated arm. The film ends with the death of the slasher, who is revealed to be the young man who warns her earlier in the library.

Achup Boulevard appropriates the narrative conventions of serial killer films in what can be interpreted as an effort to negate the widely disseminated image of Davao as a safe city. This negation is further pronounced in the notable absence in the film of police and, by extension, government intervention to apprehend the slasher and end the killings. Depicted as a small-time, bolo-wielding criminal, the terrorizing villain is a spectral-familiar presence; he appears as the topic of conversations, in the spectral realm of dreams, and as a friendly stranger who offers warning before disappearing. The ontological instability of the criminal-as-specter as an unseen circulating threat who single-handedly inspires fear in a city known for its rigid crime-control measures and strong police force highlights how crime, even in a well-organized urban landscape, can exceed the regulatory capacity of local government's anti-crime efforts and its policing power.

As the sense of anxiety is evoked from the filmic conjuring of Davao as an urban space held hostage by a petty criminal capable of evading government forces, the film prescribes the diffusion of police power among the citizenry. In the final confrontation, the female protagonist is forced by the violent circumstance she finds herself in to take the law literally into her own (mutilated) hand. Such act seems to illustrate Duterte's well-circulated dictum on the subjectification of Davao citizens into civil enforcers of "justice" – that the people can enforce the law when they see crime or violation being committed.⁸ Thus, at the limits of the government's regulatory capacity lies the indispensable figure of the citizen police. The sense of anxiety evoked by the narrative is allayed when the female protagonist-turned-citizen police finally eliminates the terrorizing element. The film thus renders clear its view of "citizen justice" – with vigilantism as its extreme expression – as an uncomfortable yet inevitable complement to the limits of government intervention in ensuring peace and security.

An interesting scene in *Achup Boulevard* opens to another discursive trajectory that traces one significant aspect of Davao's urbanization – the gendering of the cityscape. In the scene at the library, the female protagonist overhears a group of gays gossiping about the terrorizing slasher in gayspeak or gay lingo. This scene inserts the presence of male homosexuals within the imaginary community of Davao. Such inclusionary mode is made more meaningful in light of the ratification of the "Anti-Discrimination Ordinance of Davao City" in 2012, which punishes acts that discriminate an individual based on sex, gender, race, religion, age, etc. At that time, Duterte was the Vice Mayor and presiding officer of the city council that passed the ordinance. While Davao is projected as a masculine and masculinized city, owing in large part to

Duterte's iron-fisted political image, as well as to the uncompromising efforts enacted in the city to address criminality, the presence of contrarian gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations complicates this macho imaginary.

Gender discourse in Davao is further explored in another short film by Fiola titled, *Kaon Durian Aron Managhan* (Eat Durian and Multiply). The film opens with a shot of a young woman inside a room, sitting on her heels in a child's pose on her bed. The next few shots show her doing seemingly mundane things: watching the clock's hands move, looking out in the window, walking around her room. In the next scene, we see her walking silently with another young woman in downtown Davao at night. The latter embraces her and, for a moment, she allowed this intimate gesture. After a few seconds, however, she gets out of the embrace and walks out of the frame. At this point, we get a sense that the two young women are in a romantic relationship. The next shot shows the couple sitting in a local durian shop, a durian sitting on a table in front of them. The two play a waiting game on who would take the first bite. Finally, one of them reaches out to open the fruit, the other one helping out. The succeeding close-up shots of the characters' fingers as they slide and scoop a portion of durian and of their faces while eating, together with a sultry music in the background, set the sensual tone of the scene. The couple then go back to an apartment and make love. After they had sex, the young woman in the opening scene takes a shower and asks her for a towel. An arm, presumably her partner's, is shown handing her the towel. The moment of horror arrives when she is handed a towel repeatedly, arousing her anxiety. She steps out of the bathroom and, to her surprise, she finds her partner in deep sleep on the bed. She turns to the bathroom and the mysterious arm throws another towel at her.

The film's foregrounding of the lesbian protagonist as the horrified subject gestures towards the articulation of anxieties experienced by homosexuals in a city that prides itself for a pioneering anti-discrimination ordinance. The durian, which, as the title suggests, causes the mysterious 'multiplication' of the protagonist's partner, is emblematic of the city that provides a welcoming space for homosexuals to 'thrive' and 'multiply' without fear. The city's gender-friendly image is part of the cosmopolitan imperatives of urbanization that Davao has to respond to. The recognition of LGBT rights, after all, ushers in a reconfiguration of social formations in accordance with liberal, modern discourses on identity politics, as well as a way for the city to enhance its reputation in the global market. However, the sense of anxiety ensues, as this modernized image collides with the still powerful vestiges of feudal, patriarchal culture that maintains its hegemonic formation in the rural context. Here it is represented in the durian's magical attributes as both aphrodisiac

and cursed fruit that threatens the limited sense of security that the anti-discrimination ordinance has supposedly created for LGBT in the city, specifically in terms of access to employment, services, and leisure facilities.

Fiola's other two horror short films, *Patentero* (2010) and *Garbage Bag* (2011), center on the experiences of migrants in Davao City. The protagonists in these two films both decide to move to Davao because of the opportunities for socio-economic mobility that the city offers to those who live in the rural peripheries of southern Philippines. In *Garbage Bag*, Irene, a woman in her 20s from Cagayan de Oro, a city in northern Mindanao, goes to Davao for employment. In *Patentero*, the female protagonist comes from Iloilo, a province in the island of Panay in Visayas region, and comes to Davao to pursue tertiary education.

The problem of alienation is offered an absurd resolution in *Garbage Bag*. Irene settles in Davao in an apartment that she shares with another woman. The woman calls to inform her that she is out of town and requests her to take the garbage to the dump. Irene does as she is told, and she finds a young woman who is about the same age as hers, naked inside a garbage bag. What might have been a horrific experience neither frightened nor terrified Irene; in fact, she feels relieved that she now has company in the apartment. Horror is evoked when, notwithstanding the uncertainties that welcoming a stranger in the apartment carries, she initiates a connection with the naked stranger, cleans her up, and gives her clothes and food. To allay her anxiety as a newcomer in Davao City, Irene holds on to this human relationship. This can be interpreted as an act of both surrogacy, as the stranger can supplement the absence of her companion, and identification, as Irene's alienation is akin to being naked in the suffocating confines of the city.

In *Patentero*, the female protagonists are haunted by the ghostly presence of a mysterious old woman who passes by a group of girls playing the traditional game *patentero*, asking them about her lost lover and her rum. One of the female protagonists – a student – encounters the old woman on her way home. When the student comes home, she is disturbed by a series of knocks on the glass door. Unwilling to spend the night at home alone, she frantically tries to contact her mother and her friend, imploring them to accompany her in the house. The film ends on a shocking note, with the protagonist eventually becoming possessed by the angry spirit of the mysterious old woman.

To borrow from Pattana Kitiarsa, "ghosts and their ghostly presence are the products of modern social marginalization, made in and through the modernization process" (qtd. in Chutikamoltham 36). The short film draws the contrast between the sociality

embedded in a traditional childhood game and the subsequent solitude that the protagonist experiences upon going home. The possession scene in the finale establishes that the identity of the spectral old woman – herself victimized by the solitude of the city – is the same as that of the protagonist. The spectral woman serves as the horrific figuration of the alienation and the anxiety she felt. Her yearning for companionship is frustrated by the order of the city, where human behavior and interaction are organized according to the urbanizing modalities of capitalist modernity.

The impact of modernity on human relationship and behavior is further examined in the short films *Pakbet* (Dir. Xana Patal, 2015) and *OT* (Dir. Chris Herald Duco, 2015). In the first film, the ramifications of the graveyard shift in domestic relationships are explored as it tells a tale of a woman who finds herself haunted by a ghost of a little girl. Alone in a condominium unit which she rents with her husband, the ghost follows her as she performs her domestic duties. While she is cooking the local vegetable dish pakbet, the ghost appears to her. She runs towards the corridor where a man, presumably her husband, sees her and embraces her. In the film's penultimate scene, she receives a phone call while she is already lying in bed with her husband. At the other end of the line she hears her husband's voice, asking her to open the door. He has just arrived from working overtime, and he asked her if there is still left-over pakbet. Horrified, she turns and stares at the blanket-covered figure beside her. In a moment reminiscent of the horrific scene of the Japanese cult horror film *Ju-On* (Takashi Shimizu, 2002), the film ends with the ghost of a young woman sneaking up to her under the blanket and opening her bleeding mouth.

The wife's anxiety over her husband's absence invites the ghostly presence into her home. Taking on various guises as a little girl, the husband, and a young woman, the ghost accompanies the solitary, childless wife to occupy the space vacated by the absent, overworked husband. At the same time, it serves as the horrific figuration of the disruptive operations of urban work temporality in the space of home. The ghost is thus a function of the resignification of domesticity and family relations in the face of urbanized modernity and its attendant economic activities that the people participate in in the city.

In *OT*, an employee working alone in the office at night finds himself suddenly transported to a thickly forested area where he encounters the slow march of zombie-like creatures. The moment of shock arrives when he recognizes himself in one of these creatures. After this nightmarish excursion, he finds himself back in

the dark silence of his office.

The image of the zombie is a recurring trope in horror films set in urban areas. It has been interpreted as an embodiment of dehumanization in the contemporary globalized order, associated with “the factory worker’s mechanistic performance, the brain-dead, ideology-fed servant of industry, and the ever-yawning mouth of the nation-state” (Lauro and Embry 92). Set in an office that does not bear any spatial references to Davao City, the film conflates the city with the interior of a business process outsourcing (BPO) hub, one of the Philippines’ hallmark industries as part of transnationalizing the service economy. Against Davao’s status as a leading ICT hub in Mindanao that is continuously primed to attract various BPO companies, the film situates the zombification of the employee – here implied as the product of the regulation of local working bodies in the contemporary service economy to synchronize with “global” time in response to the demands of foreign clients – within a spectrally conjured thickly forested space of rurality. The specter of the rural here signifies an attempt to contextualize the globalized and ironically decontextualized temporal rhythms of the human body within the city in the national periphery. It presents a global city that is still entangled with the feudal processes and realities in the region that implicitly direct, regulate, and shape the flow of working bodies to and from its cosmopolitan hubs.

CONCLUSION

The horrific construction of Davao City in these regional short films exemplifies how regional filmmaking has braided local concerns with politico-economic developments in the national and global levels. It does this by foregrounding how processes of modernity, particularly the intrusion of global capitalism in the local sphere, and the attendant establishment of zones of economic activity in national peripheries enable the urbanizing dynamics of a regional city. In examining these short films, the essay delves through the anxieties concomitant to Davao’s urbanization that is shaped by capitalist dynamics. That these anxieties are rendered within the generic conventions of horror cinema amplifies a complex disposition that views capitalist modernity as the source of both socio-economic opportunities and the ‘terror of everyday life’ in the regional city. Interestingly, these anxieties are mediated through middle-class characters whose engagement with processes of cosmopolitan urbanization is principally shaped by fantasies of social mobility.

The issues foregrounded in the Davao horror short films analyzed locate the

figuration of the 'terror of everyday life' in the lived experiences of the characters who are caught in a highly-urbanized regional city. The films take the issues of criminality, homosexuality, urban migration and intrusive temporality of transnational economy in Davao in order to emphasize how cosmopolitan modernity has disrupted long-held discourses on gender, domesticity, and interpersonal relationships associated with 'rurality'. In articulating the terror generated by this dynamic encounter of remnants of feudal order and urbanizing impulse in the city, the films communicate anxieties that can be harnessed to formulate critical reflections on urbanization within the regions that cut through the local/regional/national/global nexus. These reflections highlight the uneasy position of a regional city in the national topography shaped by the socio-economic operations of globalization and the anxiety of a Third World formation, which in itself is haunted by the specter of uneven development within the nation.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Several reasons account for this decline, including the unabated flow of foreign films, particularly from Hollywood, the effect of Asian Financial Crisis seeping through businesses like the film industry (Lim "Gambling"282), high production cost and taxes resulting in rise in movie ticket cost (Hernandez 1), and the shift of viewers' preference to television (Rapatan cited in Hernandez 18).
- ² *Aswang* is a general term that refers to various types of predatory supernatural creatures in the Philippines that are commonly associated with the evil and the demonic. See Maximo Ramos's "The Aswang Synchasy in Philippine Folklore."
- ³ Additionally, NCCA partially funds several other regional film festivals in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao under its Cinemas in the Regions program.
- ⁴ Philippine newspapers report that Agdao barangay captain Wilfredo "Baby" Aquino established Alsa Masa in 1984 (Bueza; Inquirer Research). After Aquino's death in 1985, Alsa Masa was reorganized in 1986 though it remains unclear who did it. Inquirer Research reports that Lt. Col. Franco M. Calida, then chief of the Davao Metro District Command, revived it in April 1986, while Rappler's Michael Bueza identifies Rolando "Boy Ponsa" Cagay, allegedly a former New People's Army member, as the one that reorganized the vigilante group in 1986.

- ⁵ For comprehensive reports on the DDS and Duterte's alleged involvement, see Human Rights Watch's "You Can Die Anytime," and Gavilan's article "Timeline: Probing into the Davao Death Squad."
- ⁶ According to Davao Ngilngig Films' website, "'Ngilngig,' or its derivative 'ngiga' (from ngilngiga) has been more commonly used (especially among Cebuanos) to refer to something that is 'kuyaw' (awesome). But the word originally refers to something that elicits horror or ghastliness, something that alludes to the macabre" ("About Ngilngig").
- ⁷ See the data for the City of Davao as of 11 January 2019 at <https://psa.gov.ph/classification/psgc/?q=psgc/barangays/112402000>.
- ⁸ Duterte has repeatedly said publicly that the citizens have the right to go after "criminals." See, for instance, McKirdy's article "Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte: Public 'can kill' criminals."

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