

## The Politics of the French Film Festival

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The Annual French film festival, first organized in 1996, a year after the birth of the World Trade Organization in 1995, is said to have 'become a much awaited rendezvous of cinephiles in Metro Manila.' It is actually three years older than a bigger French cultural event in the capital—"The French Spring in Manila." The 'French Spring,' which features a month long cultural activities that include Ballet, Orchestra, Painting, and film showing, was first launched in Hong-kong as the 'French May in Hong-kong.' This activity was then brought here by the French Ambassador Gilles Chouraqui. This activity, as M. Chouraqui would say, was 'launched' 'with encounter and renewal as its keynotes' (French Embassy, 2001).

Among the activities of the French Spring, however, is the French film festival that draws the largest crowd. The 6<sup>th</sup> French film festival, according to the estimates of the French Embassy (its prime organizer), is said to have already attracted around 18,200 viewers. It has also been a model for other foreign countries in showing their own films. In recent years, there seems to be a surge of foreign film festivals such as the British, the German, the Israeli, the Japanese, and the European Union Cine Europa. But so far, it is the French films that seem to have made noise. In fact, according to Martin Macalintal, Public Relations Officer for Cultural affairs of the French Embassy, a local distributor has already bought the rights to show '*Taxi*' (Pires, 1998) from its French distributor. Two other films, '*Salsa*' (Bunuel, 1999) and '*Asterix et Obelix contre Cesar*' (Zidi, 1999), are still being negotiated. The negotiations between the local importer and the French distributor, according to Macalintal, is mediated by the French Embassy which has reduced the price from an average of US\$ 50,000 to \$10,000 or P510,000. Although at this rate, the right to re-produce

copies of the film is excluded. These three films are expected to be shown at the Glorietta in Makati this December (Macalintal, 2001).

This partial success of the French film festival is one reason that forces any critic to look closer at this cultural activity. In other words, a more serious look is needed. This is also because film is not a floating cultural product. Film carries within itself political ideologies and somehow is rooted in the economic mode of production. It has been argued that the dominance of any cinema is symptomatic of the dominance of a certain mode of production. The lack of alternative to this mode of cinema may mean that 'alternatives to western economy are pronouncedly flawed, contradictory, failures or non-existent' (Jameson, 246). Moreover, looking back at Philippine history, film has played a primary role in the country's colonization. As Camila Griggers would put it: 'Rapid-firing guns, however, were not the only weapons mobilized in the war for the Philippines. Subjection through technical advances in the media (film) were as devastating as heavy-shelling- and had an even longer range than the latest artillery weapons' (Griggers, 296). In addition, the scholar Alfred McCoy would also cite film as the medium that transformed RAM from torturers to heroes, erasing the latter's role as the fist of martial rule (McCoy, 216). Indeed, film has not just been an entertainment product but a political machine too.

It is, then, the aim of this paper to examine five of the films shown during the festival last June at the Shangri-La Plaza in Mandaluyong city. These films are '*Taxi*' (Pires, 1998), '*Salsa*' (Bunuel, 1999), '*Asterix et Obelix contre Cesar*' (Zidi, 1999), '*Est-Ouest*,' which got 999 and 1,383 estimated audience, were chosen for their obvious historical re-presentations of French colonization and Russian socialism.

This paper uses a politico-ideological approach to the narratives of the five films. Politico-ideological approach here means trying to position the film narratives, not only in the politico-historical events, but in the history of modes of production itself. Moreover, the paper also attempts to evaluate the whole festival and relate it to the rising transnationalization and globalization. This is important because the event, aside from being organized by the French Embassy, is also supported by French multinational and transnational corporations.

A look at its yearly sponsors would reveal that the companies involved in the festival range from cosmetics and clothing to telecommunications and petroleum. Some of them are: Dior, Lancome, Allure, L'oreal, Lacoste, Yves Saint Laurent, for cosmetics and clothing. In pharmaceuticals, there are Paris-Manila Technology (PAMATEC) and Aventis. Air France represent the airline business. In the concrete, cement, and roofing industry, there is La farge which is 'present in 68 countries.' Other companies include Vivendi which 'recently acquired US filter,' and Alcatel and Motorola in telecommunications. 'Total Petroleum Phil.' And 'Supply Oilfield Services' are among the sponsors from the oil industry (French Embassy, 2000, 2001).

Before one discusses the connection between the French films and the transnationals or the relationship between the festival and globalization, it is appropriate first to scrutinize the narratives of the films.

### **Subversions and Co-optation in *Taxi***

'*Taxi*' (Pires, 1998) is a Hollywood movie with French content. It contains French actors, French language, and French setting. Indeed, everything but the narrative structure. The film, which was well-liked by the crowd, basically follows what David Bordwell calls 'double causal structures' or 'two plot lines' (Bordwell, 19). In the film, the protagonist Daniel has two interests-- one is to get back his license/ become a racer/ trap the robbers on one hand and make love to his girlfriend on the other. Like the usual Hollywood movies, these two plot lines are simultaneously complicated in the beginning and simultaneously resolved at the end of the narrative. Daniel, a former pizza delivery boy, first suspends the fulfillment of his desire for his girlfriend in favor of the 'job' (taxi-driving) that he has been waiting for. The complication of both plots comes when Daniel gets himself into trouble by breaking traffic rules. To make things worse, Emilien—a mediocre police officer who could not pass himself for a driver's license—catches Daniel and drags the latter into trapping the notorious German robbers—Mercedes Gang—in exchange for the latter's driver's license. Following this narrative line, the film ends with Daniel fulfilling his dream to become a racer, (beating the Germans in a car race and later representing the police in a legitimate car racing) and getting his sexual desires satisfied at the same time.

The film, aside from the fast-paced movement and literal car racing, is also characterized by the proliferation of jokes and humor. Jokes, for Freud, like dreams are roads to the unconscious. Thus, when the chief of police says 'operation Zen' and 'remember the Asians last time,' this gives the critic an idea of the former's unconscious. 'Operation Zen' as the replacement of the unsuccessful 'operation cobra' has a tinged of exoticization of the east or orient. There is no need to identify this as belonging to Said's 'Oriental discourse.' The reference to the 'Asians' by the police chief is also reminiscent of the 'homogenization' of the 'orient' and the 'other.' It does not only suggest that 'Asians' are different, outsiders, exotic, but also ignores the heterogeneity of Asians. It considers the people from the east as faceless. Their only identity is their second-class and cheap laborer status in the west. In addition, this eastern-as-circus theme is even reinforced by a scene wherein two men—identified only as 'Koreans'—drive a single taxi with the use of one license. This is done by keeping the other Korean at the baggage compartment of the car, while the other is driving. This can be done successfully since, it seems, the French is unable to determine the difference between the face on the ID photo and that of the driver. To him, all Koreans appear the same. This scene is viewed from another car, with the camera using the point of view of both Emilien and Daniel, so that the spectator identifies and laughs with the 'westerners.'

In this case, racism is pushed back to the western unconscious. Political struggle against it from the 60's to the present has chased racism. Yet, the latter has only retreated to the psychic depths of the western mind and did not wither at all. Thus, jokes often betray it. Racism has now disguised itself as a mere joke. This shows that the orientalist discourse has also been aestheticized.

However, aside from this aestheticized racism, the narrative also shows a possibility of subversion. Both the protagonist (Daniel) and the antagonists (the German robbers) are real threats to (Althusser's) the French 'Repressive state apparatus.'

Daniel—the pizza delivery boy turned taxi driver—is someone who always breaks traffic laws. He always sees to it that the speed of his automobile exceeds the speed limitations imposed by the French government. As one policeman would complain to Emilien, 'he did it again!'

He also enjoys insulting the traffic police by lifting a 'shit' sign to the latter. He has a negative opinion of the force. This is revealed, during his conversation with the police officer Emilien who pretends to be a computer analyst, when the policeman refers to the policemen as drunkards and mediocre. This statement causes the mediocre Emilien to defend the force. Emilien, in turn, attacks the drivers as lazy men. In anger, Daniel shows his subversiveness by saying 'I'm not really a taxi driver,' then letting the Taxi fly in unprecedented speed. Daniel shows that he is not the meek who follows the impositions of state apparatuses. He shows Emilien that he breaks laws.

The surprised Emilien, who admits later that the 'force takes anybody who could count 1 to 10,' feels challenged by Daniel's aggression. He eventually arrests Daniel and thereby performing the tasks given him by the repressive state apparatus. It is in this way that the possibility of subversion within Daniel is suppressed. The arrest of Daniel is also the arrest of subversion in the narrative. Daniel does not only stop his attacks and insults to the R.S.A. He joins the R.S.A. and becomes part of the 'repression' and 'containment' of other subversions in the narrative.

This is obvious in Daniel's participation in the chase for the 'Mercedes gang.' The German Mercedes gang is an outright threat not only to the French police, but to the stability of the Capitalist system. As robbers, the gang attacks the 'Bank' – the institution that houses capital. The 'Bank,' which has evolved during the industrial revolution, is the central institution of the capitalist economy. Through its credit system, the bank serves a primary role in the oppression of the human being in the capitalist system.

Confronted by such a threat, the repressive state apparatus/French police employs another subversive to pin down the Germans. Daniel, who is into sports racing, is assigned to track down the robbers. He knows the movements of 'German products' in the controlled French national economy. This is important since the Germans themselves depend on their own national production (Mercedes Benz). The German robbers are in constant need of 'German tires' for their continuous bank robberies. In explicit terms, their ability to steal capital is also determined by a capital supported material production. Of course, what is not shown in the film is how those spare parts are produced. In today's transnational production, one could only think of what some critics have called the 'global cars.'

This 'global car' refers to the 'breaking down of production steps by geographic areas, turning out large components and subsystems in plants scattered in key industrializing countries around the globe.' The production of the global car is symptomatic of the dominant 'subcontracting' or 'outward processing' operation. In this operation, there is 'fragmentation of the production process by contracting the most labor-intensive phases to lower-wage less developed countries' (Broad 55). Thus, what is not shown in the movie is the exploitation of cheap labor in the debt-gripped third world economies by transnationals, which of course include the German Mercedes Benz.

In the narrative, it is shown that there is a controlled inflow of German products into the French market. Daniel knows that in Mersailles, there is only one supplier of German manufactured automobile parts and the latter is himself a German. Thus, what bind the robbers and the supplier are two bonds. These bonds are National and Economic. There is a national bond since both the robbers and suppliers belong to a nation-state—Germany. This primary bond is strengthened by an economic relationship: the supplier-consumer relationship. Daniel's knowledge of the relationships enables him and Emilien to track down the robbers. This ultimately leads to the arrest of the robbers and the total eradication of all challenges to the economic and political superstructures within the narrative. The successful entrapment of the Germans signifies the dominant ideogeme of the narrative: the acquisition of capital through attacking the institution of private property and the banking system is a trap. The camera shots of the unfinished bridge shows the non-continuity and futility of such subversions.

Yet, what is more politically worse is the entrance of Daniel into the force. With his acceptance of the medal and the traditional 'felicitation,' his co-optation is legitimized. In the last scene of the movie, Daniel is no longer the police-hater that he used to be, but a sports racer representing the 'French police.' His only regret is that there is no other 'sponsor.' He complains: 'can't you get another sponsor?' For Daniel, the French police is not another sponsor. What is a natural sponsor is the transnational—BMW, Ferrari etc. The relationship between the transnationals and sponsorships is no longer seen as construction of late capitalism. The relationship has become natural as the rain.

Going back to Daniel, it must be pointed out that it is through him that the narrative 'sutures' the viewer. According to the critic Kaja Silverman, 'the classic cinematic organization depends upon the subject's willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to stand in for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. The operation of suture is successful at the moment that viewing subject says 'yes, that's me' or 'that's what I see' (Silverman 223).

In other words, Daniel is the 'fictional character' that 'stands in' for the viewer. It is with him that the viewer identifies. The viewer becomes Daniel during the movie's presentation. The former, by identifying with Daniel, subverts the superstructures and then joins it in the chase for the robbers. Thus, it is not only Daniel who is co-opted by the State Apparatuses, but also the viewer himself.

### **Locality Production in *Salsa***

Julia Kristeva, in her book *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), complains that it is in France where one could consciously feel his/her being a stranger. The notion of a 'stranger' is what the movie *Salsa* (Bunuel, 1999) explores. The movie's narrative does it by juxtaposing Cuba and France, Cubans and French. This can be more illuminated through using Claude Levi-Strauss' famous binary opposition. He argues that any society uses 'a whole system of reference which operates by means of a pair of contrasts: between general and particular on the one hand, and nature and culture on the other.' He adds that 'the logical purpose is always to be able to oppose terms' (Levi-Strauss, 95). In applying this principle to the study of film, one must consider the latter as a construction of the system of opposition -- i.e., the narratives of the film are actually made up of these binary oppositions. The meaning that is being created by the film, then, is actually a product of the difference between the two elements of the opposition.

In Joyce Bunuel's *Salsa*, this binary opposition is almost too obvious to be mentioned. Nevertheless, the narrative is made up of the following oppositions: 'French-Cuban,' 'classic-pop,' 'native-alien,' 'upper-middle class-laboring class,' 'white-black,' 'industrialized world-developing world.'

All these oppositions within the narrative are very apparent. Felipe, the black Cuban immigrant Salsa dancer, is opposed to his white, native,

French girlfriend. Chucho, the old black Cuban musician, is tied to his long-lost love—the white, French and old Letitia. The solemn 'conservatoire' is juxtaposed with the Cuban hang-out in Paris. Classical music is opposed to the popular Latin-Salsa music. The upper-class family of Nathalie and her fiancé is in opposition with the impoverished home of Chucho. However, these binary opposition are more intensely found in the character of Remi/Mongo.

Remi is the central character of the narrative. In the narrative's beginning, the cinematic apparatus brings the spectator, through a zoom in from the city images into the conservatory, where Remi is supposed to do his recital. This cinematic technique signifies the main opposition which is the 'insider' and 'outsider' opposition. Throughout the movie, the camera accompanies the spectator through the 'inside' and the 'outside' of Remi's subjectivity. The apparatus even takes the spectator to a 'transnational travel' when Nathalie decides, towards the end of the narrative, to follow Remi to Cuba. It is really through Remi's struggle for his subjectivity (a white who likes Cuban music) that the movie moves.

According to Pual Willeman, 'as individuals are born into a reality which not only pre-exists them, but which is also made up of pre-existing representations, it is by working on and in representation, in and on signification, that subjects come to be generated, produced, and assigned a place' (72). In the early part of the narrative, the subjectivity of Remi is determined by the conservatory—an 'educational institution' that marginalizes specific discourses, one the one hand, and privileges another discourse on the other. Here, Remi could not play his favorite Latin-American music since the apparatus imposes the classical/ Chopin. In fact, the apparatus gives privileges/scholarships to those who follow rules. Thus, one must consider Remi's shift from classical to Salsa during his recital, to the shock of his parents, mentor and the spectators (diegetic/extra-diegetic), as a protest and subversion of such imposition.

This primal subversion is in turn followed by several subversions—specifically class and race. Remi leaves the conservatory and his scholarship for the Cuban club. He leaves his middle class home for the lower class home of Chucho. He uses an accented French instead of his native tongue, a linguistic subversion. He assumes the second class position of the alien in exchange for his privileged position as a French citizen. Yet, the most



radical subversion presented in the narrative is Remi's transformation from a white male into a black male. Remi transforms into Mongo, after Felipe tells him that he could not play nor dance the Salsa since he is 'Blanche.'

How does one view this transformation from 'blanche Remi' into 'Noir Mongo'? Is this a kind of post-modern bodily free-play wherein color does not matter anymore or the politics of color is hidden and de-historicized? Can one consider Remi as a cultural Plastic(Bordo,1993)?

Indeed, some may interpret Remi's transformation from Blanche to Noir as post-modern yet, it is also an assumption of a political position. In his new personality as 'Mongo,' Remi does not free himself from the disciplinary discourses imposed on his body. In fact, he assumes, as it has been argued, a second-class position. His body literally suffers from this metamorphosis. In one scene, he needed the voodoo ritual of Chucho's housemate to heal his body. But I believe, the most strong representation of the state's disciplinary actions on the body of Mongo/Remi, is shown during his arrest. At the police station, he was forced to take off his clothes. And besides, he was taken in the first place for his color. Thus, his shift is not actually a de-historicization of color politics, but a way towards experiencing the disciplined subject position of the migrant laborer. Whether he be 'Remi' or 'Mongo', in this case, he is subject to state repression and control.

Moreover, Remi's transformation into 'Mongo' must also be seen as a drift into a new 'locality,' much different from his original place. The critic Arjun Appadurai defines 'locality' as a "phenomenological property of social life, a structure of feeling that is produced by particular forms of intentional activity and that yields particular sorts of material effects." Appadurai also relates 'locality' to 'neighborhood' which refer to the "actual settings in and through which social life is reproduced." Both 'locality' and 'neighborhood' undergo 'a moment of colonization,' involving the exercise of 'power over some sort of hostile or recalcitrant environment, which may take the form of another neighborhood' (Appadurai, 103).

Going back to the movie, there actually exists a production of locality and neighborhood. This is apparent in the camera's often panning shots and POV shots inside Chucho's house. Indeed, Chucho's house is transformed towards the middle of the narrative. Remi, Chucho, Felipe,

Nathalie, Letitia and the other Latin Americans were actually transforming Chucho's house into a locality and neighborhood. It is important to point out that 'Chucho' had planned to abandon the house when Remi came. The entrance of the latter changes the semi-abandoned house into an active locality where Cubans could gather. Thus, there is a re-colonizing of Chucho's house. To protect themselves from the hostile industrial environment of Paris, the main characters try to conquer the 'space' and transform it into a 'place.' With Mongo, the space becomes a dancing venue, where old ties between Chucho and Letitia are rediscovered, finally revealing Nathalie as hybrid. The music club becomes a place of refuge for the unemployed/displaced/uprooted Cubans.

But what led to this re-colonization of Chucho's house? In historicizing the locality production in the narrative, one must look into the determined relationship between industrialized countries/ France and the developing countries/Cuba. It is already known that in the age of transnationalization, where capital transcends national boundaries, the industrialized centers are continuously uprooting millions from the developing periphery. In this case, the periphery serves as a reserve for cheap labor.

Yet, this 'locality' and 'neighborhood' produced by the uprooted population is not undisturbed. As Arjun Appadurai says:

... The task of producing locality is increasingly a struggle. There are many dimensions to this struggle.. the steady increase in the efforts of the modern nation-state to define all neighborhood under the sign of its forms of allegiance and affiliation. (104).

In '*Salsa*' this reassertion of the nation-state on these localities is shown in the scene during a party in the House of Chucho-- the newly-conquered neighborhood--where the police look for illegal aliens. Mongo himself is taken and interrogated by the French police. At this instant, he confronts the institutions that he has subverted.

It is in the same 'locality' and 'neighborhood' that the oppositions are tried and resolved. The binary of 'citizen' and 'alien' is equalized with the resumption of the love between the old lovers--Chucho and Letitia. It is through them that the color oppositions are effaced. Their relationship

reconciles white and black. Nathalie's father transforms, likewise. Prior to his realization that he is Chucho's son and therefore black, he has been the most 'racist' in the family. He has held that the west is industrialized because 'governed by whites,' an illogical, un-historicized view which ignores 'colonization,' and, at times, reduced to 'all Frenchmen are con-artists.'

Moreover, the reconciliation of black-white, Cuban-French, citizen-alien oppositions may be viewed as a result of the mediation of the 'hybrid.' The 'hybrid', for Edward Said, is a 'cultural amphibian.' That means he/she has access to both cultures. In the case of Nathalie, who is the granddaughter of Chucho and Letitia, she is Cuban-French. She is both white and black. She is both citizen and alien. For this, she becomes the bridge between her grandmother 'Letitia' and 'Chucho.' But one must ask: what is the problem with such reconciliation? The problem with the reconciliation of the binary oppositions is that the reconciliation seems reactionary. Reactionary in the sense that there is nothing that has been resolved actually. What is its solution to transnational diaspora? None. The movie's narrative, in fact, leaves the individual narratives of the Cuban migrant laborers like Felipe hanging. In the end, even the French and white Remi himself becomes an exile or transnational laborer as he went to Cuba with the unemployed Cuban band. While Nathalie, who works for a 'tourist agency', becomes a transnational tourist herself after following Remi to Cuba. The narrative, then, does not only leave the transnational human labor flow unresolved. It reinforces and naturalizes the inflow and outflow of human bodies from the nation-state, a movement that parallels the uncontrolled inflow and outflow of transnational capital.

### **Imperialism in *'Asterix et Obelix contre Cesar'***

Laughter seems to be the gift of Claude Zidi's 1999 comedy *'Asterix et Obelix contre Cesar.'* Anyone familiar with Gerard Depardieu and Roberto Benigni's intrusion into hollywood is bound to expect a fun time. Yet, whatever the film's merits for causing anyone to smile and laugh, what lies at the center of its plot-- e.g., the imperialist project-- is not, at all, comic.

The narrative's major duo, Asterix and Obelix, is an intertext of the same characters of a comicbook with the same title. Yet, the fictionality of the narrative is problematized by the intrusion of a true historical character-

-the Roman imperialist Julius Ceasar, conqueror of Gaul, of Germany and of Britain. This pastiche of fictional and historical characters actually havethepolitical effect of lessening the historicity of imperialism. The clash between fiction and history de-historicizes both Roman imperialism and French imperialism. It means that this technique renders imperial desires as fictional.

This fictionality of imperialism is reinforced by reconciliation within the film narrative. The movie shows, at first, Asterix and Obelix as a counter force of Rome's imperial desire. The duo has always been in trouble with the Roman army positioned in Gaul. The duo has always defeated the latter in battle due to their 'magical strength.' However, with their village's refusal to pay the imperial tax to Claudius, Julius Ceasar himself attacks the village. During Caesar's impending attack, Claudius -with the help of Obelix and the magical potion- overthrows Caesar through a coup. But Asterix saves Obelix from Claudius' tricks and then sets free Caesar. In the end, the village of Asterix and Obelix aligns with Caesar against Claudius. Thus, the narrative ends with the reassumption of Caesar as conqueror and reconciles the contradictions between the imperial desire of Rome and the Gaul village.

When one positions this narrative in its 'post-colonial' production in the year 1999, he/she finds out that the film actually redefines the notion of post-coloniality. Here, Gaul/France-the second imperial power of the colonial era- is itself being colonized. It is actually in line with the post-colonial notion that 'colonial' and 'post-colonial' are also applicable not just to what is generally called third world but also to the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Aijaz Ahmad criticizes this notion when he says that 'colonialism thus becomes a transhistorical thing, always present and always in process of dissolution..so that everyone gets the privilege sooner or later, at one time or another, of being coloniser, colonised and post-colonial..the fundamental effect of constructing this globalized transhistoricity of colonialism is one of evacuating the very meaning of the word and dispersing that meaning so wide that we can no longer speak of determinate histories.' (Ahmad 286)

Indeed, with Gaul's position as being colonized, there seems to be an attempt to erase its imperial past by rewriting history. There seems to be an act to rewrite its imperial subjugation of North America, of Africa, of

Indochina and the South Pacific, leading to the post-structuralist decentering of the binary 'colonizer-colony,' which erases or deconstructs, if you will, the notion of a stable 'colonizer' or 'colonized.'

Moreover, the narrative's comic portrayal or re-presentation of imperial subjugation actually takes away the violence of colonization. The use of cinematic effects like the post-modern reproduction of Asterix and Obelix into several copies, wherein one could no longer identify the original from the copy; the throwing of a whole army into the air and then falling to the ground without blood contribute to the sanitization of colonialism. This is done through the mediation, of course, of the 'basic cinematic apparatus.' As Jean-Louis Baudry would argue: 'between objective reality and the camera, site of inscription, and between the inscription and the projection are situated certain operations, a work which has as its result a finished product. To the extent that it is cut off from the raw material (objective reality) this product does not allow me to see the transformation which has taken place' (Baudry 283). Thus, in the film, imperialism--a violent act--is transformed into a funny act. Imperialism here becomes a bloodless, nonviolent action. Something that can be viewed as entertainment. Something that does not disturb. Imperialism is transformed into something that you can laugh at. As a consequence, the imperialist is no longer someone who harms and takes away one's land. The imperialist is merely another comedian who in the end, as the film suggests, becomes the colonized people's 'friend.' In short, the movie is giving imperialism a human face.

Although France/Gaul's imperial desire is exposed, the point, however, is that there is some Freudian, Oedipalian complex at play in the relationship between 'Rome/Cesar' and 'France/Gaul village.'

In *'Asterix and Obelix contre Cesar,'* the duo and the villagers feel a unity with the subjugated mother/ Gaul. They first defend their village and refuse to pay imperial taxes. They even want the Romans out of Gaul. Through the insinuations of the undercover thieves, the village patriarch contemplates defeating Cesar/ father and thus inheriting Gaul/mother. However, with the advance of well-armed Roman forces, the village/child fears of defeat/castration. They even encounter a problem: the Druid who makes the magic-potion/phallus is lost. Thus, instead of a confrontation with Caesar/father, the village/child aligns and identifies with the former,

suspending first its imperial desire. In this process, the village/child hopes for the possibility to be in the position of the father/imperialist. This Oedipal complex, then, is resolved with the friendship between Cesar/father and the village/child.

If one views this as an allegory of the relationship between 'Imperial Rome' and 'Imperial France,' the former appears to represent the father with whom the latter identifies--Imperial Rome is the father of Imperial France. The film thus becomes a kind of an allegory of imperial heritage.

### France, La Mere in *'Indochine'*

The film critic Roland Tolentino, in his study of *'Los Ultimos de Filipinas'* (Roman, 1945), says that there are 'two operations' at 'work in the film's conflation of time and space.' These operations are 'an imperialist desire for the reconstitution of the lost empire, and a colonialist nostalgia for the utopian order in the colony' (Tolentino 87). The film, which was 'set in its former colony, the Philippines,' seems to parallel the 're-narrativization' done in the movie *'Indochine'* (Wargnier).

Like *'Los Ultimos de Filipinas,'* *'Indochine'* is also set in the former French colony—Vietnam—during the 1930's, a time of a rising nationalist/anti-colonial struggle led by the 'communists.' The film uses a narrative technique which Gerard Genette calls 'subsequent narration.' This kind of narration is characterized by a 'relative contemporaneity of storytime and narrating time' (Genette 172). In *'Indochine,'* Elliane, a French woman who adopts the orphaned but landed Vietnamese Camille, tells her story/experience in the colony to Camille's hybrid son, Ettiene, whom she adopted after Camille joined the Vietnamese armed struggle. She tells her story/memory/history to Ettiene after France surrendered in 'the worst defeat any western colonial power ever suffered on the battlefield at the hands of an Asian people' (Yahuda 36). Of course, the movie did not show this French defeat. Anyway, there are two levels of narration in the film, one is 'Story time' (past, colonial, Vietnam) and the 'narrative time' (present, postcolonial, France). These two narrative times converge towards the end of the movie and becomes 'simultaneous'—a 'narrative in the present contemporaneous with the action' (Genette). This was done through Elliane's attempt, after telling her experience in Vietnam, to let Ettiene meet his mother Camille, who's part of a Vietnamese delegation in Europe. It is through these shifts

in time (colonial to post-colonial), space (Vietnam to France), and narration (subsequent to simultaneous) that an 'imperialist desire for the reconstitution of lost empire and 'a colonialist nostalgia for the utopian order in the colony' are constructed.

Elliane's reminiscence of the colonial Vietnam shows a nostalgia for the feudal/colonial system. Images of the undisturbed feudal relations of production (colonizer/landlord—colonized/serf) are presented by the cinematic apparatus. In some of these images, Elliane teaches her serfs the process of cotton production and in one instance, she tries to revive the disturbed production after a sabotage. In addition, the film also shows the collaboration between the Mandarins, Vietnam's ruling class, and the French. This is exemplified by the relationship between Elliane and Than's mother. Than, a Mandarin and European educated, would become Camille's husband and would become part of the revolutionary struggle. At any rate, one must position this colonialist nostalgia in the film vis-a-vis France holding on to its last colonies in the early 90's.

France's political motivation is its attempt to maintain its 'independent nuclear capability which in turn is central to France's pretense to be a world power.' The psychological dimension is France's suffering from its position as a second-rate world power, for it 'has been forced to play second fiddle in global politics, first to Great Britain and then, after 1945, to the superpower,s' while its 'economic considerations' are based on 'nickel deposits of New Caledonia' (Bello, 10, 1992).

But aside from this 'imperialist desire and nostalgia,' the film, also shows images of colonial oppression. During Camille's search for the French Jean Baptiste, Ettiene's father, she encounters the face of poverty which she could not see from her limited upper-class position. Images of exploited Vietnamese workers, of drought and hunger, and of slavery are shown vividly, too. Even Camille's journey, though at first personal and sexual, can be considered progressive, in the sense that she is ultimately transformed into a revolutionary. It is astonishing to see Camille leave her ruling-class position, with all its privileges—for the revolution. Unlike her son, Ettiene, she chooses Vietnam over France. Of course, one must point out that her experience with a poor Vietnamese family, the slave trade, her separation from Jean-Baptiste and her own son, her own imprisonment all contributed to her revolutionary transformation.

From another point of view, it may also be helpful to read the movie as a 'National Allegory.' Fredric Jameson, in his study of third world literature, would say: 'all third world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call 'National Allegories... the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself (Ahmad 109).

*Indochine*, of course, is not a third world text. But it does not necessarily mean that it could not be a 'national allegory.' National allegories are not the monopoly of third world writers/directors. The story of Elliane's loss, which is told from her own viewpoint, of her feudal, colonial privileges, of Camille—her daughter—is not just a personal loss. The loss of Vietnam, which was caused by a revolutionary defeat, is not only the loss of Elliane. It is also the loss of France itself. In other words, it is a collective loss.

As Edward Said would put it: 'the Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other.. the orient has helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (Said).

Thus, for France as for Elliane, the colony is important. The colony helps them define themselves. The colony, as the 'other', serves as a 'contrasting image' of the colonizer. It is through this opposition that the colonizer constructs his subjectivity/meaning. The loss of the colony pushes the colonizer in a sort of crisis. How does the colonizer define himself without the 'other'? In facing this dilemma, the colonizer—after losing its colonies—uses his memory/history to understand himself. It is in this process that the colonizer 're-narrativizes' its past. In its remembering, the colonizer re-writes a national allegory.

Now, taking *Indochine* as a national allegory, Elliane is France who adopts the child Camille/Vietnam. Elliane/France takes care of the lands and wealth of the stepdaughter Camille/Vietnam. The former teaches the latter her language, her knowledge and her culture. The film would show Elliane and Camille dancing the Tango from the phonograph. This scene would recur in the film for a number of times. So, what is actually being



propagated here is the colonial logic/myth that the colony is a child who cannot handle herself without the guidance of the colonizer/adult.

The narrative of *Indochine*, then, moves to the eventual separation of the mother and the child. Camille, sacrificing her son/Ettiene and a brighter future in France, does not go with Elliane and instead, joins the Vietminh while Elliane takes Ettiene with her to Europe. This is an obvious parallelism of the separation between Vietnam and France. Yet, towards the film's ending, Ettiene fails to meet her mother Camille and instead tells Elliane/France: 'You are my mother.' Given this choice, which is political, one may get to the core of *Indochine*. The film seems to say that even the sons of the revolution will be adopted by the colonial mother. The hybrid and those who will become exiles from their mother/land due to transnationalization are actually still the adopted children of France. Thus, *Indochine* is not actually the story of Vietnam but the tale of heroism of France--Le Mere.

### **The Evil Empire in 'Est-Ouest'**

It is now widely known that the 90's has been celebrated as the triumph of 'Capitalist/liberal democracy' over 'Socialism.' The fall of Berlin, the fall of socialist republics in Eastern Europe, the reintegration of China and Vietnam and the break down of the Soviet Union itself were taken as 'the death of Marxism and Communism.' Francis Fukuyama, in his well known declaration, would say that 'Liberal-Democracy' is the 'End of History', while Jean Francois Lyotard proclaims the 'incredulity towards metanarratives' which include Marxism. It was the decade when 'the age of Marxism is over, the age of enjoyment of goods and services' is 'here.' As they would proclaim: 'the world was, in other words, bourgeois' (Ahmad, 70,1992).

Edel Garcellano observes that 'this overwhelming perception, as drumbeaten by Time and Newsweek, has overflowed into the sphere of literary production' (Garcellano,unpublished). One must add that this has also intruded into the production of films as this triumphalist 'Marxism is over' theme is what the film '*Est-Ouest*' (Wagnier,1999) obviously declares.

The narrative of the film follows the return of the Russian emigre Alexei, his French wife Marie, and their son, to Stalin's Soviet Union. They, along with hundreds of Russians, respond to Stalin's call to rebuild the mother country after a pyrrhic victory over Hitler's Fascist army during the second world war. However, most of these returnees were murdered by Stalin's KGB. The narrative, then, shows various images of policing and repressive actions by the socialist state. With the mediation of the camera, these are shown through the point of view of the French Marie. The immigrant Marie, after learning the fate of their fellow emigres and the disappearances of her neighbors, struggles to leave Russia for France. Marie first does this, not with the help of Alexei who fears for her life, but with an athlete who eventually reaches the 'Ouest.' Alexei, who gets involved with a fellow official, tries to cover this up for fear that the KGB might execute his whole family. In the end, however, Alexei gets the help of the French artist Gabrielle, a socialist sympathizer, to help his wife and son leave Russia.

The narrative is obviously nothing but the re-presentation of the Soviet Union as the stereotyped 'Evil Empire.' In this instance, Stalinism, socialism, and communism are homogenized as though all of them are the same things. This homogenization is, of course, a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the theoretical dimensions of the concepts. Stalinism is not communism and communism is not socialism. An equalization of the concepts results in the logic that the fall of Stalinism is also the fall of communism. Besides, this logic being propagated by the movie is not only illogical, it also ignores the historical effects of the revisionist policies of the USSR. One must remember that it was the 'revisionists' who discredited 'Stalinism.' Jose Maria Sison would defend 'Stalinism' this way: 'The modern revisionists were in the ruling communist parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They systematically revised the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism by denying the continuing existence of exploiting classes.. they masqueraded as communists even as they gave up Marxist-Leninist principles. They attacked Stalin in order to replace the principles of Lenin with the discredited fallacies of his social democratic opponents. Stalin's merits within his own period of leadership are principal and his demerits are secondary. He stood on the correct side and won all the great struggles to defend socialism such as those against the left opposition... the right...the rebellious rich peasants, the bourgeois nationalists, and the

forces of fascism headed by Hitler. After World War II, Soviet power was next only to the United States.' (Rocamora 113)

Aijaz Ahmad would support this thesis by saying: 'On its own terms, the economic performance of most of these countries was actually not bad. The Soviet Union did double its living standards in the quarter century after the war and made further gains...the number of people with more than secondary education rose from twelve million in 1960 to over forty million by 1998, and the number of trained scientists exceeded those in Western Europe and Japan together' (Ahmad 24).

These historical realities are ignored by *'Est-Ouest'* since what matters for the film is the central opposition of 'East-West.' This comparison or opposition is at closer look too biased. Why is East always compared to the West when the two do not have the same roads of development? This is the point that Aijaz Ahmad raises. He says, why is it that a Socialist Eastern country like Bulgaria is not compared to a capitalist neighbor like Turkey? Why not compare China and India? He says, 'it is the superior power of the material production of advanced capitalism that sets the terms of comparison' (Ahmad, 25, 1992). This comparison is unfair not only to Stalin but also to the socialist revolutions which have transformed backward feudal countries into industrial countries. As it has been argued, Stalin did this by transforming Russia from a backward European nation into a powerful-industrialized nation without following the western capitalist model of modernization.

This geographic opposition (Est-Ouest) actually brings the spectator to an ideological, political, and economic opposition. What is meant here is that the opposition is not merely geographical but also political. What *'Est-Ouest'* actually posits is the opposition of two politicoeconomic systems. It actually positions the 'socialist alternative' against 'the dominant capitalist system.' This is the reason why the movie can be considered a dangerous capitalist propaganda for the choice of Marie and Alexie is actually a political decision. Their choice to leave Russia is actually saying that the 'socialist alternative' does not work or is not really an alternative, but a greater beast. In other words, there is no alternative to the western capitalist model. The movie, therefore, reaffirms the superiority of the capitalist model. In this case, Marie, whose point of view is used by the cinematic apparatus to observe the KGB policing, does not only misrecognize the

difference between the elements of the opposition; she also leads the spectator, who identifies with her through the mediation of the camera, into her misrecognition. In a simple statement, Marie/spectator reads the 'Est' experiment according to the 'Ouest' standard. So that ultimately, both Marie and the spectator want to escape from the socialist state.

If one relates the recent impoverishment of the Russian economy under the capitalist-IMF system to the production of the movie *Est-Ouest* it will become obvious that the film, wittingly or unwittingly, serves as the capitalist propaganda machine. The film somehow relates the contemporary Russian economic debacle as a result and effect of the latter's socialist past. It hides the recent advance of IMF-led structural reforms which have deprived the Russians of food, education and other government services (Chossudovsky 226). Moreover, as a capitalist propaganda, the film ultimately poses a danger to other third world countries' national-democratic struggles. For given the successful escape of the French Marie and her son from the Soviet Union, the film's narrative allegorically puts the heroine's struggle as a biblical liberation from the socialist bondage/Egypt. Indeed, what the movie unconsciously says is that the Capitalist state/France is the promised land.

### Conservative Narratives

The examination of the five films reveals that the narratives are politically conservative, in the sense that a number of them reconcile conflicts within the narrative leading to the perpetuation and endurance of the state's apparatuses. On the other hand, it has also been shown that most of them actually support the transnationalization of the current capitalist system and even dismiss the alternative socialist system. In *Taxi*, for instance, one finds all subversions and challenges to the state apparatuses contained and co-optation is offered as the only road for the protagonist. In *Salsa*, contradiction of color is resolved without changing the root of the inequality which is the ownership of the means of production. It also gives no escape for the rising transnational pressure on human bodies since, as the narrative says, everybody- white or black- becomes a transnational body. Everybody now moves like capital itself which respects no boundaries. The funny *Asterix et Obelix contre Cesar* also reconciles the oppressor and the oppressed, the imperialist and the colonized. The imperialist becomes the 'friend' and 'ally', not the antagonist. This is very symptomatic of the

attempts of former colonial powers to transform themselves from a former oppressor into a cultural friend. *Indochine*, meanwhile, reinforces the myth and justification of colonization—one that views the colony as a child who needs the help of the colonial mother. The film is silent on the French defeat under the Vietminh. Finally, *Est-Ouest* is actually a reaffirmation of the capitalist system. The movie positions the capitalist system as superior to the socialist system. It follows, therefore, that there is no alternative to the dominant capitalist system that has so far impoverished billions from Latin America, Africa and Asia.

This support for the transnationalization and the reaffirmation of the contemporary mode of production is what links the films and the festival to the rising globalization.

### **Film, Globalization and the Philippines**

Before connecting this cultural event and globalization, it is appropriate first to understand the notion of 'Globalization.' The term 'Globalization', as it is used in this paper, refers to the new global economic order. In this order, the economics of the developing countries are forcibly integrated into the global capitalist system dominated by the industrialized countries whose surplus production can no longer be consumed by their domestic economies. The entrance of a developing economy into this global order is a kind of surrender. It surrenders its right to control its domestic market. For in 'globalization,' the laws of 'Free trade and Free market' rule. Meaning, no import tariffs, quota, etc..

This 'free market principle' is said to be a form of the 'state-assisted capitalism.' According to Walden Bello, 'the free market/free trade approach was institutionalized in World Bank and IMF-imposed structural adjustment programs (SAPs) which promoted radical deregulation, sweeping privatization, trade and investment liberalization, export-oriented trade and investment strategies, containment of wages, and cutting back of government expenditure.' This 'free market principle', in turn, is what is being pushed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) which 'systematically protects the trade and economic advantages of the rich countries.'

Walden Bello would tell the effect of the Philippine's integration into the WTO and its global/free market order: 'Five years after the accession into the WTO, the critics have been proved right. The WTO has been bad for the country, especially in agriculture, where it has had a devastating impact. The 300,000-person poultry industry is on its last legs, having been ravaged by cheap, subsidized US chicken-parts imports. Corn and vegetable farmers have also suffered irreparably from cheap imports' (Bello 256).

Thus, the primary effect of the Philippines' integration into this global order is the uncontrolled intrusion of foreign products into the domestic market. With the reduction of tariffs, import quotas, etc., these foreign products (surplus) are expected to outshine the local products since the former can be bought at a cheaper price. This scenario seems to be what the French capitalists and transnationals is preparing for. Although they are around now, they are still preparing for the big party when the country's import defenses would be taken away. They must not be caught unprepared for this development. They must start intruding into the domestic market now. They need a much-felt 'presence' today, so that in the future, they could embark on a grand scale attack on the Philippine market. This can best be done through a film festival.

The film festival, one must note, is positioned at the 'Shangri-La Plaza.' The latter is a mall which houses the commodities produced by the contemporary mode of production. It is also the site of commodity fetishization. In this process, the history of commodity production and even the history of the venue itself is erased or hidden.

Everyone in the mall is forced to focus, not on the production, but on the consumption of the commodity. The critic Roland Tolentino argues that there is a de-historicization process in the mall: 'Ang retro na damit na nakadisplay sa SM... nakikita natin and kulay, tabas... pero invisible rito and mga pwersa ng paggawa na lumikha ng damit. May pagpupursigi na iwaksi ang kaalaman at kamangmangang ito dahil inako ng komoditi ang hayag na kasiyihan sa pagtangkilik para maitago ang pasakit ng paglikha ng produkto... isipin din. .. ang mismong struktura ng mall. Ipinagbubunyi ang espasyo kung saan ang lahat ng produkto at serbisyo ay nasa iisang bubong. Pero ang hindi sinasabi ng imahen ay ang kalakhan ng lupaing pinagkatitirikan ng mall ay kamkam na lupa mula sa mga squatter na

nagsipagtayuan ng kanilang mga bahay sa mismong lupa ng mall' (Tolentino, 183).

Thus, the film festival is also part of the de-historicized commodities within the de-historicized mall space. Nevertheless, the Shangri-la Plaza' must also be closely examined. This mall, in contrast to Ever Gotesco-Commonwealth, is the haven of upper-class/middle class consumers. Its mere position within the most developed part of Mandaluyong City is already an indication of this. It faces three other malls—the SM Megamall, Star Mall, Robinsons Galleria. It is also directly connected to the Metro Rail Transit (MRT)—a middle class transportation. It is also surrounded by upperclass subdivisions like Corinthians and Valle Verde. Meralco, San Miguel and other big establishments are adjacent to it. Its position is indeed so different from the squatters that surround the Ever-Gotesco mall along Commonwealth avenue. Yet, the most obvious indication of its status is the presence of imported commodities in the mall. Shangri-La Plaza houses the commodities from Europe and U.S: Marks and Spencer, Anne Klein, Celine, Marlboro, Lacoste, Cerrutti, Lancel, Escada, St. John, Armani, Kenneth Cole, Liz Claiborne, Bosch shop, Ferramenta, J.F. Lazartigue, Calvin Klein among others. It is also adjacent to Rustans that sells foreign products like the French Allure, Lacoste, and Lancome.

In simple terms, the Shangri-la Plaza does not only hide the commodities' history and itself, it also secures the upper/middle class consumers and the Transnational products. Thus, a link between Shangri-la Plaza, the upper-class and the Transnationals is revealed. This link is no other than consumerism. But consumerism alone is not enough. This link is further strengthened by the upper-class' access to foreign culture which was developed by its education (as Pierre Bourdieu would argue) and of course, its economic capability.

One may ask what the connection is between the festival and the consumerism of the upper classes?

In answering this question, it must first be argued that the French film or any other film is a commodity. The French film is thus an imported commodity. Its place within the mall confirms and contributes to its commodification. One might even add that this commodity is primarily for the upper-class. Yes, the upper-class seems to be its target. Its venue

says it all. Otherwise, the films should have been shown at UP Diliman or at Ever-Gotesco. On the other hand, one must note that there is also a language barrier. It is only the French and English literate who could understand the movie, since the latter is subtitled. Who are the French and English literate anyway? It goes without saying that they are people from the upper-classes and middle-classes/intellegentsia. Given this audience/consumers, French films are elite commodities. The French films, thus, must be differentiated from the Hollywood films that have continuously flooded the local cinema. From a formalist point of view, Hollywood films' 'two plot lines' are much inferior to the artistically complicated narratives of *'Indochine'* or *'Code Inconnu'* (Haneke,2000). But one must note that Hollywood's two plot lines is one reason for its easy comprehension and thereby, acceptance. A complicated narrative that follows four or more characters—one characteristic of some of the French films—usually alienate the common spectator, though it may be appreciated by critics and the intellegentsia. Thus, this simplicity of narrative allows the uneducated lower-working class to comprehend and consume Hollywood films in spite of the fact that they could hardly follow the American language and accent.

The entrance of French films into the country, then, reinforces what Joel David calls "the Hollywood classical versus the European Art film dichotomy." In this opposition, critics and the intellegentsia often 'valorize the latter' 'without explaining how Philippine cinema functions as an alternative in itself (David 11).

Moreover, one must not underestimate the presence of the French films. For in urban places like Manila, where post-modernist aesthetics have already encroached, its acceptance is not far from possible. Culture, then, in this era is also marketed—sold and bought, manufactured and consumed. In consequence, French culture is also packaged in a film and introduced to a radically different cultural entity. As it is presented in a mall, the urban consumer is given the chance to watch a film in French, eat a Japanese dish at Tokyo-Tokyo, or shop for Liz Claiborne clothing. The consumer is transformed into a transnational being without uprooting him from his third-world reality, thus enabling him or her to freely absorb the foreign culture.



Unlike other commodities available at the mall, the French films are offered free. This free-entrance policy, unlike the British film festival where audiences pay 20 pesos, enlarges the target to include the middle class and the intelligentsia, who are looking for an alternative to Hollywood films. (But, as the examination of the films shows, there is actually no ideological difference between the two.) This free-entrance policy reaffirms the argument that the festival is in preparation for the capitalist project of globalization. The French films serve as promo materials, like those of a company that produces a new product.

Thus, the French film festival must be viewed as an advertisement. An advertisement not only of French films, but of other French products, from cosmetics to oil. Film, one must remember, is a commodity that carries other commodities. The movie *Taxi*, for instance, is a commodity that shows another commodity such as the Mercedes Benz. Film is offered to consumers both as product or commodity in itself and as advertisement carriers for other products marketed by the capitalist world.

But what is dangerous about this advertisement/festival is its ability, as the French Ambassador says, to renew. Meaning, its ability to change, to transform and to de-historicized. As argued earlier, the narratives of the five films examined here show that they are ideologically conservative: each supports capitalism and renarrativizes the history of French colonialism while, the festival, as a whole, positioned within a venue that makes history 'invisible,' also supports the renarrativizing of the history of France as a colonial power. Given these conditions, renewal is not far.

Indeed, the films and the festival contribute to the transformation of France from a colonial power, that has ravaged and exploited the lands and people of America, Africa, Indochina and the South Pacific, into a benevolent friend who gives free commodities. One must be wary of this post-modern kind of benevolence. For if one retraces Philippine history, a century ago, the Americans have also justified the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos for what they call 'Benevolent Assimilation.' It was this myth that hid the true face of the conqueror, for this notion of benevolence packaged America not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends. Thus, President McKinley would justify the colonization of the Philippines thus, "... there was nothing left for us to do but to take them

all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize them, as our fellowmen for whom Christ also died." (Constantino 223).

The spectator who attends the French film festival at the Shangri-La year after year must be vigilant as history will inadvertently forget or else remember France only within its declared frame of 'Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite.'

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