

Imagining the Cinematic Nation: Fernando Poe Jr., Action Star and Presidential Candidate

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In the highly contested Philippine presidential election of May 2004, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo won only by a very small margin. Mrs. Arroyo had been president of the Philippines for three years, holds a PhD in Economics, has decades of corporate and political experience behind her. Her opponent had none of her qualifications. His credentials included more than 150 movies spanning five decades and hordes of loyal fans that cut across class and age. The fact that Mrs. Arroyo's opponent almost won the election (he believed he won it and was cheated; he contested election results) puzzles the logical mind.

Fernando Poe Jr. (FPJ) was a political conundrum. He had only two years of high school (Lo 123) and spent most of his life acting or directing. Joseph Estrada, former Philippine president, was also an actor and a dropout but he had years of political

experience as mayor, senator, and vice president before he became president. FPJ had absolutely no experience in governance. During the campaign when his non-acting persona was more intimately scrutinized, he often fell short of expectations. Except for a few interviews where he was obviously primed up by his handlers, FPJ often showed no alacrity at answering questions. When asked about the failing economy, for instance, his standard answers would be “No comment” or “I’ll think about it.” When asked what qualifies him for the presidency, he would look the interviewer in the eye and say “sincerity.” He was proud of his achievements as the owner of a movie outfit and thought this business experience would serve him well in national governance. One of his handlers allegedly offered him books on economics and history during the campaign, but he pushed them aside and said he did not need them.

But FPJ commanded a following that was impressive not only in terms of quantity but also in terms of variety and quality. Politicians often count on provincial bailiwicks for electoral victory but FPJ seemed to cut across regions. Even if he lost in some provinces, he still had enough followers in those provinces to merit attention. His followers were predominantly lower class, but there were cross-class elements in his retinue. If he had businessmen and politicians in his group who would expect economic booty after the election, he also had respectable intellectuals and credible national personages who really believed in his capacity to lead a nation. The latter were people who were not easily swayed by emotion or charmed by an actor’s smile. They were likely to be genuinely concerned and informed citizens who make intelligent choices. Why did they support FPJ?

It is not my desire to evaluate FPJ’s qualifications as a would-be president. Nor is this a sociological study of the Philippine electorate, no facts and figures here. I want to

read FPJ as a cultural and cinematic text who had galvanized the people into considering him for the highest office in the land when he is deemed the least qualified. My purpose in this study is to find an explanation for the FPJ phenomenon and from it glean lessons on nationhood and the Filipino's perception of it. How powerful is cinema that it can determine the leadership of a nation? What happens inside a movie house showing an FPJ film that translates into an electoral endorsement? Is an FPJ audience an inherent community that will inevitably produce similar desires of nation?

My hypothesis is that the FPJ film at any one time is a powerful experience of commonality and communality that suggests the performance of an imagined community. While Benedict Anderson attests to the efficacy of print capitalism in setting up the common and communal experience of a would-be nation, we can also attest to a similar efficacy performed by film and other technologized media. Film in the Philippines has both past antecedent and contemporized form. What makes the action film popular, according to Salazar, is that "it is a new epic tradition containing elements of folk culture" (11). At the same time, it is contemporary life made more vivid by digital technology. Film can be accessed faster than print material. In the Philippines, films are more patronized than books.

The film was once perceived as an entertainment vehicle, often mindless and innocuous both in intention and effect. But film scholarship has belied this perception, disputing film's reputation for being vacuous. The action film offers visceral pleasure but it is also didactic. The forces of good and evil, clearly delineated, are represented by social and political personages as well as institutions that are present in the quotidian lives of the audience. The action film draws from both historical and current events for its conflicts. The dramatizations make for remembrances or reminders of lessons learned from history—Spanish colonial abuses, Japanese

atrocities and their continuation in the present, corruption by government officials, dispossession of peasants. In a strong way, the action film functions as an allegory of nation that the audience cannot mistake. Beneath the dramatic stylization, idealistic depictions, even sex and violence, the plot of the action film is the narrative of nation, the struggle of the hero a national struggle, the hope of the film a national hope.

Nationalism can be described as an animus that builds and strengthens a nation, as well as “transforms structures” (Tolentino 89) to sustain it. Nationalism is also an anger that protects it. What is the animus that transforms an FPJ film into a vehicle of nationalism? How is this animus generated so that a movie experience translates into a political energy that transcends community and enters the domain of the state?

Two important factors stand out in the formation of nationalism in an FPJ film: The first is the action film itself, its conventions, depictions, renditions. The second is the audience—the type of audience that goes to FPJ films and the process of cinematic reception.

The Action Film

Zeus Salazar defines the Tagalog action film as a cinematic form or type where fighting (hitting, brawling, shooting a gun) is central to the narrative movement and sustains interest in the story (1). The action revolves around the conflicts between social forces within the family, the peer group, the gang or the town (3). Its conventions include the following: “a strict form of morality, the idealism of the honor code, the set attitudes, traditional values and folk thinking that are considered Filipino in character” (Sotto 3). It usually follows a formula that expects set responses and this can be changed only when there is a new public attitude.

Central to the didacticism of the action film is the action hero. The action hero is always a virtuous individual. The one common denominator underlying all action film heroes is his unwavering belief in the good. They are always shown as being forced to take the law into their own hands because the social institutions have been tainted with corruption. Violence is never a gratuitous act. [The action hero] provokes or shoots only when challenged.... The act of fighting is never undertaken for its own sake. The hero has an unusual reserve of patience. He never fights back except when women and children are threatened. The action hero is always protective of the weak ... [T]he poor have to be defended from the abuses of the powerful ... Blood money is never acceptable. The action hero is always a one-woman man. Because women are looked upon as prospective mothers and the foci of families, the action hero courts only one woman. (Sotto 8-9)

The formula of the action film finds the action hero unwittingly involved in a social or political conflict—usually a town or community resisting greedy landlords, corrupt officials and violent criminals. He inadvertently becomes the spokesperson and protector of the oppressed. He will be hurt physically, his loved ones also hurt or killed. Upon recovery, he will become an avenging angel, alone or supported by the people, out to destroy the evildoers, after which he will restore peace and order in the community. Sotto describes the Filipino action hero as “a victim of injustice, a champion of the masses, a Christ figure who willingly lays down his life for the good of the community” (1). In later years, he will become more human and less heroic (Lumbera, *Pelikula* 11) but he will remain the people’s defender.

FPJ ran into the mold of the action hero and the action movie formula, especially in the characters he portrayed. In person, he was described as “shy and unassuming, and sometimes aloof” but he would have “a warm smile and firm, even warmer handshake” for those he knew. Nick Joaquin, Filipino National Artist, saw him as “soft-spoken but relentlessly do-gooding but a loner, and distant with mystery” (Lo 121). There is very little the public knows about FPJ. Aside from an indiscretion his opponents managed to unearth, there is hardly anything that can be attributed to him, either in achievement (except in acting) or notoriety. Which leads me to suspect that the people who voted for him conflated the movie persona and the man, that behind the vote is the plethora of characters he has portrayed which the audience realizes have many similarities to FPJ the man.

People seemed to look upon him as a leader. He had a reputation for being generous, for helping people. “To the average Filipino, a leader is someone who looks after his people and helps in their time of need.... The fact that people turn to movie stars such as Poe instead of counting on their government underscores how distant and alien it is to the people it is supposed to serve” (Zafra).

His characters are the strong, silent type whose initial quiet acceptance of suffering highlights his Christ-like qualities but whose avenging mission later underscores the necessity for human justice as an antidote to oppression. In *Hindi Pa Tapos ang Laban* (The Fight is Not Yet Over), FPJ’s character, Carding Villamar, goes back to his hometown upon the death of his brother. His brother was a landowner but he led the local peasantry and died resisting the machinations of a congressman who wanted his land. The congressman’s henchmen rough up the hero who does not retaliate. Later, after he learns of the treacherous nature of his brother’s death, after the lives of his nephew and niece were threatened by an armed

attack, he takes on the villains single-handedly and defeats them.

I start with this film because Carding Villamar serves as a template of FPJ's heroic characters. He is virtuous, patient, family-oriented. He fights the scheming congressman who has co-opted the police chief and employs mercenaries to sow terror among the townspeople. The powerlessness of the people against the congressman is palpable. When the thugs beat up the hero in the market place, the hero's humiliation is the people's humiliation. The people hope he would stand up to the bullies; instead he is ignominiously pummeled. Only after his family is threatened does he retaliate, avenging his murdered brother and protecting his brother's children.

Daniel Bartolo ng Sapang Bato (Daniel Bartolo of Rocky Stream) searches for the abducted granddaughter of an old man who died in his arms. She becomes a victim of white slavery and Daniel rescues her. Before that, the villains also abduct the hero's wife and kill her. He goes after the villains one by one on a mission of retribution.

Eseng ng Tondo (Eseng of Tondo) is a Manila policeman who fights criminals in the streets of the city. He goes after a group of rich young men who kill women after raping them. His wife almost becomes a victim. He kills the nephew of a drug lord during a raid and becomes the target of a large manhunt. He defeats the drug lord's army, including a hired assassin.

Roman Rapido straddles two historical periods, World War II and post-war Philippines. The enemy is Japan in the first period but the more dangerous enemies turn out to be Filipino traitors who served the Japanese and bandits who take advantage of the war to pillage. These villains combine their forces in the post war period to become big time smugglers and

criminals. Roman Rapido, so named because of his rapid firing skill with the gun, is hunted down by his war time enemies. They kill his mother and son. When they finally attack him, he cannot defend himself because he had made a promise never to touch his guns again. But two children unearth his guns and he finally outguns his enemies.

The fifth film, *Anino ni Asedillo* (The Shadow of Asedillo) is not really FPJ's but his brother's. Conrad Poe stars as Simon Crisostomo who takes up the cause of the slain popular leader, Asedillo (played by FPJ in another film). Again the film traverses historical periods by establishing continuities between the social conditions during Asedillo's time (which is historical) and Simon Crisostomo's time (which is fictional). Simon Crisostomo replicates the cause (to seek justice), the trigger points (Simon becomes a criminal when he kills the factory supervisor who accidentally kills his girlfriend while trying to rape her), and the mission of solitary vengeance. Excerpts from the previous film *Asedillo* are shown intermittently, establishing parallelisms between past and present, and establishing the mythic presence of the FPJ hero.

These films are not FPJ's best but they are representative of the usual FPJ fare. The usual FPJ fare includes the following: First, the hero is located within a Filipino landscape. The films are grounded on Filipino terrain, geographically and emotionally. *Hindi Pa Tapos ang Laban* is set in the famous Spanish houses of Vigan; Tondo is the roughest section of Manila; Sapang Bato is rural Philippines with recognizable flora and fauna. An FPJ film would have a church, a municipal hall, a plantation, rice fields, jeepneys, slums, public markets, beer houses—locations that are imbued with everyday memories of struggle and survival.

Second, Jesse Ejercito, film director, remarked that "there is no other medium that reflects the character of a nation than

motion pictures" (cited in Infante 150). The FPJ hero reflects the national character. He is patient, like the peasant who waits for his rice to grow, or his beast, the water buffalo, who slowly guides the plough to break the hardened soil. But the Filipino has a ceiling of pain. "Kapag napuno na ang salop" (once the rice overflows) is a signal that further inaction would mean cowardice or indignity. The trigger points are the murder or death of a family member or a friend, the rape of a wife or a sister. Family is uppermost in the Filipino's scale of values. Injustice to oneself is bearable, but injustice to one's family requires redress.

The FPJ film utilizes the power of image to create shared cultural emotions. In *Eseng ng Tondo*, for instance, compassion is shown by the hero when he finds a young boy in the slums sniffing rugby, presumably to stave off hunger and escape reality. Instead of arresting the boy, the hero hugs him. Abjectness is an equally strong emotion for Filipinos. In *Hindi Pa Tapos ang Laban*, the hero is made to kiss the earth by the villains, a profound cultural symbol of defeat and public humiliation. In *Roman Rapido*, the hero is outnumbered, the women of his family hit by the goons, and he unable to protect them. Vengeance is the other half of abjectness. The semiotic shift from powerlessness to empowerment restores the spectators' faith in the hero and his cause. In *Hindi Pa Tapos ang Laban*, the hero also makes the villain kiss the earth. Shaking with fright and with none of the dignity with which the hero did it, the villain puts his face on the ground which happens to have cow dung. In *Roman Rapido*, the hero is given back his guns and all his enemies are dead in a flash.

The FPJ film also uses allusion to historical or literary characters familiar to the movie-going public. In *Roman Rapido*, a good but angry soldier-turned-outlaw is named Bonifacio, after the man who launched the Philippine revolution against Spain. *Anino ni Asedillo* names its main character Simon

Crisostomo, a conflation of the names of the two major characters of Jose Rizal's anti-Spanish novels. These are names that connote courage in the face of great odds, indirect reminders to the audience of their heritage of resistance.

Third, and this seems paramount to this study, the FPJ hero dramatizes Filipino social conditions. His circumstances are the circumstances of his audience. Most action films express public distrust of the state and the forms it takes in everyday life. The justice and political systems cannot be relied on (Salazar 6). In *Hindi Pa Tapos ang Laban*, for instance, the congressman wants the Villamar land so he can invite multinational companies to set up factories there, which in turn will dump waste in the nearby river. Econationalism and patrimony inform the hero's fight against the congressman.

This is significant if one wants to connect the FPJ film with the animus of nationalism. Almost half a century after independence, the Filipino continues to grapple with age-old problems of poverty, unequal distribution of wealth, dependence on foreign powers, lack of economic and educational opportunities, etc., creating a feeling of powerlessness that has manifested itself in crime, corruption, if not a lethargy or indifference that is detrimental to the survival of the nation. The action film reinforces the inutile presence of state institutions by making the hero ignore them or fight them. The hero thus personifies the righteous anger of the marginalized. The film releases through the hero a catharsis that contains years of public frustration and need. And perhaps in that cinematic moment of struggle and fulfilled vengeance, the hero and the audience become one.

The FPJ action film seems to privilege the individual who is undeterred by danger and institutional sanctions. FPJ's world is for heroes. The people, paralyzed by fear and lack of weapons, will not take up arms to defend themselves if there is

no hero to lead them. The site of nationalistic hope shifts from the people to the hero and the hero acquires the iconic substance of a savior or redeemer. The hero as redeemer becomes a looming image in the narrative that may translate politically in the audience's imagination. Consequently, even if the hero is fighting against wrongs done to him personally and not necessarily to the community, the people still regard him as fighting the good fight. The individual takes center stage while the people play a supporting role.

This may not bode well for a nationalistic reading of FPJ films. But as Gramsci has said, there is a common sense in any social situation. He describes the nature of this common sense as folkloric (Landry 28). The common sense found in an individualistic hero is his efficiency in generating change. The people understand that his reasons for fighting are personal. They, too, would probably be motivated thus. But the fact that he is a member of the community makes the personal also communal. In the process of avenging his loved ones, he avenges the community. The folk common sense arising from this set of circumstances dictates that the answer to oppression is not a popular uprising but a hero.

The Audience

Watching a film is a wondrous experience. The air-conditioned theater, the soft seats, the wide open space and the gigantic screen not only relaxes the body, it also gives an illusion of concentrated life. As the lights dim, the reality of hungry mouths, broken families and wounded hearts disappear; what looms large is the action hero and his adventures. The spectator lives another life where he is handsome and strong (studies show that men prefer action movies) and more importantly, he is not as powerless as he is in reality. Like the action hero, he can vanquish his enemies, right

a wrong, compensate losses, free the beloved country from invaders, and stop those who try to hurt her. There is justice, freedom, peace and prosperity in that universe and anyone who fights for them can claim them.

The magic of the action film lies in its ability to empower, even just briefly, those who are powerless outside. The empowerment is not singular. It is experienced communally and that communal moment creates a momentary community of empowered individuals who imagine an identical Filipino universe. The FPJ audience is an empowered one, sharing the fellowship of wonderful possibilities. This may be broken when the lights are turned on but its memory will be carried in the subconscious until a retrieval is called for.

Who are the FPJ audience? While admiration for FPJ cuts across class and age, a big bulk of his audience are males from the lower class. These are the “poor, who have limited choice when they seek entertainment and films are the cheapest and most accessible forms of diversion available to them” (“On Cinema” 222). In the rural areas, they would be the peasants and the fisherfolk; in the cities they would be the laborers, the rank and file government employees, migrants from the provinces, school dropouts, and possibly, a thief or a drug addict who takes time out to watch his idol deliver punches. The Philippines has a dynamic film culture and one of the largest movie attendances in the world (Sotto 2). The FPJ audience would form a formidable percentage of this movie attendance due largely to the regularity of FPJ films and loyalty to the actor.

As already explained, the audience sees a familiar narrative in each film. Perhaps the details are different but the content and context are paradigmatic. Because of the films’ didactic intent, the social conflicts are drawn simply and simplistically which makes it easy to take sides. The villain

represents reality, what is, while the hero stands for what should be (Salazar 10).

The fictionality of the film and idealization of the hero ought to be apparent to the audience but for some reason, the fictionality seems to be easily overcome and the hope essayed in the film seems to cross over from the screen to real life without difficulty. This phenomenon calls to mind a seminal study done by Filipino historian Reynaldo Ileto that explains a history and a nationalism erased from Philippine history textbooks because they are strange and irrational. In *Pasyon and Revolution*, Ileto describes the role of the *pasyon*, a chanted narration of the passion of Christ, in the generation of the revolutionary spirit among the Filipino masses. The *pasyon* is seen, on the one hand, as a colonial tool of subjugation whose emphasis on Christ's suffering encourages the masses to resign themselves to the prevailing condition and just concern themselves with morality and the afterlife. On the other hand, Ileto finds an unintentional function, which was to "provide lowland Philippine society with a language for articulating its own values, ideals, and even hopes of liberation" (16). He also examines how the folk religious groups have used the *pasyon* and the language of religion to articulate political ideals. They used images of redemption, a messiah, a second coming, to express their desire for liberation from the colonizers. The political is cloaked in the language of the spiritual since the political has been claimed by the elite and has excluded them. The animus comes from below, misunderstood and dismissed as the rantings of madmen, a denied element in the pages of mainstream historical narratives.

It may be hasty to link the animus found in these religious movements with that born during an FPJ film. But I cannot deny seeing parallelisms. The FPJ audience may be more varied but the majority of them belong to the inarticulate, silenced, powerless social classes. They, too, have lost faith in social and

political institutions which remain indifferent to their plight; they too see the folkloric logic of a supra legal means of redressing grievances. There are many similarities between the language of religion and the language of the action film. The folk religions used the mystical language of both the pre-colonial beliefs and Roman Catholicism, legible to the peasants but not to the colonizer or the educated. This is a language that conflates spirituality and revolution. The FPJ film uses the language of the everyday, of easily recognizable cultural significations, but in an art form that is fictional, perceived as entertainment and therefore lacking in profundity. This language conflates the cinematic and the electoral vote. Both see the hero or the leader as instrumental in the expression, if not the achievement, of aspirations. He is the guide, the example, the emulated. Most importantly, the discourse of the folk religions and the FPJ film centers on a fervent hope of deliverance that will come after a long time of suffering. The first hopes for an end to colonization, the second to the oppression of the weak.

It would require more study to link the complex process of the emergent nationalism of the *pasyon* with the viewing of an FPJ film but I would like to cite some obvious similarities especially in regard to audience reception. The folk religions are replete with mystical rituals and incantations that are repeated with regularity. The FPJ film uses cultural images and metaphors that are formulaic, making complications and endings not difficult to predict. Susan Jeffords suggests that the repetition and reworking of past plots, themes and spectacles is a form of self-production (346). The FPJ film, in a way, self-reproduces by perpetuating the same message in the other films. As Steven Ross explains it, "no one film was likely to alter a viewing vision of the world, but the repetition of the same images and political messages over and over again could change the way people thought..." (31). The regularity of

watching an FPJ film is a repeated ritual, and if I may say so, a kind of social sacrament between film and audience.

Rolando Tolentino mentions that there may be various embodiments of “nations” in cinema and spectators must be familiar with these embodiments in filmic codes to construct deeper “structures of feeling” (89). The recognition of repeated filmic codes by a receptive audience is incantatory in nature and the emotive aspect of the nationalistic moment in a film or ritual binds audience to the film/ritual. The emotive aspect is present in what Tolentino refers to as the political unconscious that would suggest that watching an FPJ film does not necessarily or directly translate into a vote. The irrational nature of the emotion relegates it to memory and not to decision-making. But once disturbed, touched, or recalled, the emotion may surface and influence the logic of decision-making. It is then that the emotion, the cinematic communion, the remembered hope becomes a name written on an electoral ballot.

The nationalism that emerges from an FPJ film is emotive, irrational, and probably unconscious. It is articulated by a fictitious action hero whose story is a recognizable pattern of injustice and vengeance. But a film is supposed to be merely a product of someone’s fantasy and has no bearing on the decisions we make in real life. Just as the folk religions’ idea of nationalism was described as the gibberish of the unhinged, an FPJ presidency was considered by many Filipinos as a political insanity only Filipinos are capable of. It does defy logic. But to the almost 50 percent of the Filipino electorate who imagined a nation led by FPJ, he was the nation’s last hope for salvation.

In December 2004, months after the election, Fernando Poe Jr. died of a stroke. His funeral was described as a “state occasion attended by hundreds of thousands of people” (Zafra). Local police sources conservatively estimate the crowd at 15,000

to 16,000 while BBC put the figures at 300,000. His funeral was compared to that of Ninoy Aquino whose death brought down a dictator. As in life and in the movies, he was mourned as a hero, a would-be president who may have changed Philippine politics.

To conclude, a Channel News Asia talk show referred to Joseph Estrada and the Philippines during a discussion on the candidacy of Arnold Schwarzenegger for the governorship of California. Surely, the host and guests concluded, the Americans are more mature and more intelligent voters (presumably compared to the Filipinos). A month later, Schwarzenegger became governor of California. Perhaps voting is not only a matter of maturity and intelligence; perhaps there are things that engage a voter's mind other than logic.

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