MYTH MUSEUM
Synchronicity and Simultaneity as Conflicting Paradigms in *TRESE*

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This paper[1] is part of a suite of essays on the *TRESE*[2] series, which I have tentatively dubbed "Alternative Epistemologies", primarily because I have been investigating the various, sometimes conflicting, ways of accessing knowledge in the text. The concern with ways of knowing is relevant in the context of genre and of cultural specificity: *TRESE* is detective fiction, and as such is all about coming to knowledge; but *TRESE* features Philippine lower mythology as well as Philippine city life. In short, *TRESE* can be called a Filipino text.

The concept of cultural simultaneity, as it is defined in Kumkum Sangari's "Politics of the Possible", has so far played a central role in my study. The episode, or case file, I analyze in this paper, however, has given me the opportunity to focus on the flipside of simultaneity: that is synchronicity, a term Sangari also employs.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented in the Moving Worlds Conference entitled "Transcultural Imaginaries: Making New, Making Strange" held from the 14th to the 17th of June 2013, at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

[2] The series title is typed entirely in upper case to avoid confusion with the titular character, Alexandra Trese, who is also better known by her family name.

TRESE is a comics series by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo. It follows the detective Alexandra Trese in her investigations of supernatural crime in the Philippine capital. This paper focuses on "Case 15: A Private Collection", which appears in *TRESE: Last Seen After Midnight* (published 2011). In this case, a wealthy, and arguably Westernized, man called Jay Gerson hunts local supernatural beings and collects their carcasses for his secret museum. These clandestine acquisitions unsettle the local tribes or, considering the urban context, gangs of supernatural beings, whose misplaced suspicions bring Metro Manila's underworld to the brink of a violent gang war.

The plot is fairly simple; nonetheless, it comes to support a particular understanding of Philippine urban culture as the location of heterogeneous, and indeed hybrid, paradigms. In "A Private Collection" we see the juxtaposition of the conflicting perceptions of, on one hand, myth as artefact, bolstered by the concept of the museum where all things become synchronous; and on the other hand, of myth as part of living culture that exists simultaneously with Metro Manila's urban, contemporary, human reality.

Sangari makes it clear that the synchronicity of postmodernism, an inheritance from high modernism, is not to be confused with the postcolonial notion of simultaneity. Synchronic time is described as instant availability, as a collage of fragments from, and here Sangari quotes Octavio Paz, "different times and different spaces [...] combined in a here and now that is everywhere at once" (Sangari 219). The products of the past are gathered into the present and made readily available for reuse, whether by modernism—which Sangari reminds us was a major act of self-definition by the West as it began to lose its colonies—or by postmodernism's obsession with new modes of "self-fracture", or by consumer culture's similar obsession with novelty. The “Third World” has served as modernism’s reservoir for cultural material, paralleling the exploitation of human and natural resources of these same colonies. In addition, Sangari points out how:

> …the freewheeling appropriations of modernism also coincide with and are dependent on the rigorous documentation, inventory, and reclassification of “Third World” cultural products by the museum/library archive. Modernism as it exists is inconceivable without the archive, and the archive as it exists is inconceivable without the political and economic relations of colonialism. (Sangari 241)

The ethnological collection reflects the conquest and colonization of exotic materials. On top of this it connotes a fossilization of a particular culture as belonging to another realm and to a time that is past, which thus needs to be reconstructed and preserved through artificial means.

James Clifford’s discussion “On Collecting Art and Culture” explores the fate of tribal artefacts as they are relocated into Western institutions, including museums. Clifford cites at least two ways of perceiving temporality and its relations to museum objects. One perspective is explored through a reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s memoirs in New York in 1941: there, heterogeneous culture is perceived as gradually coalescing towards a common homogeneous destiny. This notion, Clifford observes, is founded on the generally Western assumption that time is linear and irreversible, and in this context collecting comes to imply “a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss” wherein “[a]rtifacts and customs are saved out of time” (231). It is imagined that the act of collecting thus extends the existence of what is collected.

In "A Private Collection," Jay Gerson lures Alexandra Trese to visit his residence in Forbes—a residential community for the wealthy—where he houses a collection of trophies gathered from supernatural beings. At this point of the series, many of these creatures should be familiar to the reader. It includes a *duwende* preserved in jar, the skeleton of a *Tikbalang,* the skull of a *kapre,* and of course, *manananggal* wings.

What makes the museum macabre, more than its objects, is that none of these are ancient artefacts: Gerson has hunted, tortured, and killed living "mythological" creatures. The wings were, in fact, severed from the back of a *manananggal,* who was then tossed out of the penthouse of a high-rise building in one of Metro Manila's central business districts.

Boris Groys notes that modern texts have repeatedly described the museum "as a graveyard of art, and museum curators as gravediggers" (24). As a character, Jay Gerson takes it one step further: he is a poacher rather than a gravedigger. His collection of living—or rather his hunting and collecting—is the crime around which the text revolves.

It must be noted that Jay Gerson himself is Filipino—or at least calls Manila his home—although his foreign name signals a kind of hybridity. It is a play on Jaeger son, or hunter's son in German; although this connection made by the policeman in the story fails to consider the pronunciation of the letter J, the use of which is a chronic favorite when it comes to naming in the Philippines.

It so happens that Gerson has only recently come home from the wider world and has internalized the consciousness of the colonizer/collector, collecting native "oddities" to bolster his own sense of power. In the process of building his collection, he puts under erasure so many *others*, bunching them up as objects of exhibition rather than subjects of understanding.

Groys points out that it is the "small controllable space of the museum [that] allows the spectator to imagine the world outside the museum's walls as splendid, infinite, ecstatic" (30). This is true for Gerson, whose motivation for criminality is boredom and ennui, a characteristically modern sensibility. The end of the story makes it explicit that "Jay Gerson was neither an *aswang* assassin nor a hitman for the *enkanto*. He was just a man who rebelled against life's mundane routines. Everyday he'd wake up hoping something exciting would happen. Wishing it would happen soon" (48).

It is important to note that the narrative of ennui literally frames the episode. A similar caption opens the episode, in relation to an incidental character:

> This is Benjamin Chan. He has been going to the same call center, answering the same types of complaints for the past three years. If it's any consolation, he was able to buy this brand new car last week. But the new car smell is already wearing off and so is the excitement of driving to work, following the same route, seeing the same people, over and over again. He's hoping that something exciting will happen and he's wishing that it will happen soon. (27)

Gerson's experience is parallel to that of Benjamin Chan's: modern metropolitan life is generally experienced with what Georg Simmel calls a blasé attitude, which renders it grey and meaningless. Furthermore, Gerson is highly individualized; he is portrayed as a man without affiliations, a bachelor who comes and goes by himself, and who appears to be concerned only with his own business. When Trese confronts him about his connections to the underworld he simply answers: "I don't know those people. I just like to find to new playmates and play with them." Here, I must point out that most crimes in the series, when committed by humans against supernatural creatures, are crimes of passion: invested with immense personal significance. In comparison Gerson's motivation is shallow, insubstantial, and—in opposition to how the lives of other human characters are usually too intimately entwined with their mythical neighbors—entirely cold-blooded.

The term "playmates" reflects both Gerson's sadism and his desire for new stimulus. He longs for the restoration of the feeling that the world outside is indeed still "splendid, infinite, ecstatic": that there is more to discover, hunt, and collect beyond crocodiles and lions. Been there, done that. While the hunt is his source of excitement, the need to collect and display is symptomatic of the desire to possess. The collection allows him to claim a fetishistic ownership over a specimen of a species, providing an illusory feeling of being able to grasp—to conquer—what the object signifies in the outside world.

Leaving aside the criminal nature of Gerson's actions, his hunter's love for novelty is not unlike the obsessions of colonial nostalgia: the private collection denotes instant access to all sorts of supernatural creatures, taken out of their natural contexts and displayed for the pleasure of the conqueror/colonizer, a commemoration of his victory and his domination.

While western consciousness is represented by Gerson, the supernatural beings become representatives of the so called "enigmatic native" who is often only understood as alterity or *otherness*, and often misconstrued as a non-subjectivity.

In becoming museum objects, the creatures are displaced from their realities as living creatures and as members of society. Spatial displacement from the outside world into the museum, Groys claims, changes an object's context and thus the way it is perceived. In the case of "A Private Collection", the construction of creatures as objects rather than subjects is characterized by this displacement. The spatial displacement marks the change of status from the external "living" world of Metro Manila, to the internal "graveyard" that is the gallery.

This is not the only way that displacement into the museum changes the status of the captured creature. "A finite life expectancy is, in fact, the definition of ordinary life. So [changing] the life expectancy of an ordinary thing [changes] everything without, in a way, changing anything" (Groys 36). What becomes clear is that the change happens in terms of both space and time. At this point the supernatural creatures properly become things of the past at the same time that they are supposedly removed from "inevitable historical decay or loss" (Clifford 231). Of course, this is no "rescue", because these creatures are not, in the universe of the text, creatures from some long-forgotten past. Unlike, for example, dinosaur bones, the *tikbalang* skeleton has been harvested from the member of a thriving—if secretive—species. But I will return to this point later.

What I wish to emphasize now is that Gerson has replaced life with a false longevity: what Groys describes to be the artificial longevity of objects as displayed artefacts, which in itself makes questionable an object's authenticity, especially since the manner of preservation involves technical manipulation (Groys 38). In Gerson's collection, we see that the *tikbalang* skeleton is held up by wires and the duwende is suspended in some preserving liquid. These exposed, if underplayed, modes of preservation and presentation expose the artificial means of imitating life, underscoring the fact that the display is that of dead objects. The collection is a morbid reminder of lost vitality, and of collapsed differentiation between living things, victims, and collectibles.

Groys tells us that "[c]ollecting is an event in time par excellence—even while it is an attempt to escape time" (39). In the same way, Gerson's collection becomes the longstanding evidence of his crimes, of what he has done to escape having nothing left to do. Of course, the escalation of his criminal obsession continues, as he attempts to "collect" Trese, who, despite her unusual skills and training, is human.

Gerson's linearity of thought—his proceeding from one prey to another, his need to escalate—seems in keeping with a paradigm that thrives in the acquisition and cataloguing of objects, without giving importance to the original context from which they have been violently removed. Again, this reflects the appropriative tendencies of modernism and postmodernism, and manifests in the synchronous, decontextualized, time-space of the museum collection.

Cultural context, however, is what the *TRESE* series has been all about. What has made the series stand out is in its ability to portray specific Philippine contexts through fantasy narratives. Thus, the representation of Gerson's obsession functions as a foil to the values that the series actually comes to represent, one of which is simultaneity.

Sangari defines simultaneity as heterogeneous cultural materials and practices physically coexisting over time—alive, as it were, rather than as museum effigies or archival records that require revitalization. Within this paradigm, the continued existence of "older" belief systems does not imply that postcolonial cultures are stuck in a mythological or superstitious past. Simultaneity is not an absence of change or of continuity; rather, these older systems have continued to exist, and thus coexist, with newer more globalized modes.

The premise of *TRESE* is precisely that the supernatural has been and is ever-present, and more often than not, has undergone and continues to undergo 'natural' social evolution alongside humanity.

Not only do creatures of mythology like the *aswang* or the *manananggal* boast of their continued existence, they have also migrated from rural or even wild spaces—their burrows, jungles, and mountains—to the populous metropolis; alternately, their territories have been overtaken by the incessantly expanding city, and they find themselves adapting to urbanization. The latter is the case of the *nuno*, creatures of the earth whose residences have gained alternative openings in the form of sewer man-holes and bonsai plants.

Although the supernatural are often assimilated into the underworld—the criminal underworld and the black market—some sectors have decided to assimilate further. For the *aswang* (the generic flesh-eating ghoul) in the present episode, adaptation involves "going clean" by engaging only in legal business. This move confirms their membership to mainstream society as law-abiding citizens, bestowed with the right to make a living within the public sphere, and of course, the right to life itself.

To revisit Clifford's account of collected tribal artefacts in collections, there are alternative ways of viewing objects apart from the perspective represented by Levi-Strauss. Clifford gives focus to the perspective of the people whose cultures that have been the object of "collection", and whose specific "tribal" histories provide an alternative context for understanding particular objects. It is just that, in order to "tell these other stories, local histories of cultural survival and emergence, we need to resist deep-seated habits of mind and systems of authenticity" (Clifford 246). In this case, an object that has been appraised for its aesthetic properties or ritualistic functions may in fact be vessels of family history, communal memory, or what we call sentimental value.

Applying this to "A Private Collection", we may note that the *manananggal* wings are displayed prominently in Gerson's museum and in the episode's title page: it is rendered iconic—wholly separated from its original context, put on display, and made to signify the victory of the hunter as well as the visual motif signifying the crime central to the case. It is proof that the *manananggal* exists, proof that Gerson has captured and killed one, and evidence that he has committed a crime.

However, the encounter with the *manananggal* tribe identifies the victim as the sister of one of the other *manananggal*. That there are strong familial ties amongst these creatures is nothing surprising, as having such ties are common in Filipino culture, and in *TRESE* that culture pervades human and supernatural lives alike. In fact, cases in the *TRESE* series repeatedly emphasize the social or public consequences of individual actions or private experiences. Concepts of the family, tribe, clan, and community repeatedly surface despite the overarching modernity of the urban setting.[1]

By hunting living creatures, Gerson almost sparks a "gang war" between the *manananggal* and the *aswang,* tribes of individuals which are very much alive and just as protective of their people and their territory. Their existence is simultaneous with human life, and implicitly just as valuable, and this is what makes Gerson's actions criminal within the world of the narrative.

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[1] In the case after "A Private Collection", entitled "Wanted Bedspacer", even melancholia is turned into a communal problem, when a creature that feeds on it dissipates and contaminates the communal water supply of a dormitory building.

In "A Private Collection" we find synchronicity itself—or Western consciousness—in conflict with and ultimately subsumed within the simultaneity of a hybrid Postcolonial culture. That Gerson is a local becomes important in that, had he been a foreigner, the conflict would be more clearly a re-enactment of relation between the colonizer and the native: as it is, the location of the antagonist within the local culture marks him as a hybrid character, and marks his particular kind of hybridity as problematic. To internalize the worldview of the colonizer—usually identified as American or Spanish—is easily looked down upon within a Filipino nationalist paradigm. Nonetheless, the fact that many of us have assimilated aspects of these Western cultures cannot be denied. It is, in the end, one of the many tributaries to what we may refer to as contemporary Filipino culture.

Let me make clear that the narrative does not criminalize hybridity: the real point of crime is not that Gerson has created a private museum, it is that he has committed murder to do so. Nonetheless, his lack of respect for his newly discovered playmates stirs old colonial nightmares of being the object of collection and exhibition, and in this way, certainly his worldview is not privileged by the series, which generally espouses a coming to knowledge by ways not deemed rational, or even real, by typical Western thought.

Finally, *TRESE* is itself a kind of mythological archive or cultural museum. It collects and assembles not only folk legend and urban mythology, but also keeps a record of the concerns of contemporary society. Thus, the series is curated from a specific perspective: one that is "contemporary" and primarily cosmopolitan—with Metro Manila as its point of origin and center—and which is necessarily an adaptation. That is, to portray the myth of an entire nation/country/culture is always to take it out of a more particular context and to move it into the jurisdiction of the creators, their imagination and their milieu. Like Gerson's project, this transfer comes with risks: issues of misappropriation or misrepresentation, lack of accuracy or authenticity, can easily be levelled against such use of cultural material. Perhaps the main difference is that such fictionalization has respect, if not for the historical sources of its references, then at least for the dynamic nature of both myth and the culture that it represents. *TRESE,* particularly in the story above, acknowledges that myth and culture are alive—changeable, if not ever-changing—rather than ossified and immaculately preserved.

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