Space, Time, Narrativity: A Conversation with Myra Beltran and Sherad Sanchez

Introduction by Ruth Jordana L. Pison

When Myra Beltran began her career as an independent contemporary choreographer, dancer, and teacher in the Philippines in the late 1990s, she was searching for a form and aesthetics attuned to her own body and sensibility. She was attuning as well to the prevailing socio-political and cultural context of that particular period. Before attending Indiana University as a dance major, she received training in classical ballet from Vella Damian, Eric Cruz, and William Morgan. In the 1970s and 1980s, she pursued a dance career in the US, moved to Eastern Europe—in Germany and Yugoslavia—and then returned to the Philippines where she performed with Ballet Philippines and The Lab-Projekt-Philippines.

The Dance Forum company she established in 1997 provided other independent artists with an alternative space where they exchanged ideas and discussed a wide range of issues on dance, performance, and practice. It created a climate for partnerships between Beltran and theater directors Anton Juan, Alex Cortez, and Ricardo Abad, and musicians Alfonso Bolipato, the Pundaquit Chamber Players, and musicologist Christine Muyco. That unique company witnessed a gathering of a community of artists from different fields doing collaborative works.

Although Beltran was initially known for her intimate aesthetic style manifested in her early productions including *Women Waiting* (1994), *Dances of Dreamweavers* (1995); *Folds of Midnight* (1999); *Song* (1999); *Choreographic. discourse. Moment in desire* (2000); *Trace of a Trace* (2002-3); *The Romeo and Juliet Project* (2001); and *The Spell of Myrtha* (2006), she later produced works with other choreographers, dance companies, and artists. Among these

artists and companies include five women visual artists (*Fragile Circle*, 1998), Enrico Labayen (*Damas con Furia*, 2002-2003), Dancing Wounded (*Truth con Furia*, 2004), Paul Morales and Sharon Brendia (*Order For Masks*, 2005), and Airdance, (*Betrayed by Martha*, 2008).

From the very first time I took classes with Beltran, coupled with my watching her productions and occasional discussions with her about the trajectory of her choreographies, it was quite apparent that she had been generally working with narratives and concepts that served as scaffoldings of her works. These works—even her most intimate ones—have always been multilayered unraveling of ideas and stories. Deliberately or not, Beltran's works render the dynamic interplay of time and space, especially in her pieces that deconstruct history.

Although one finds in Myra's understanding of time and space, the ideas of poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, narratologist Jeanne Genette, and dancer Chandalekha, it is her very own experience and the process of discovering her body and politics that constitute her knowledge of time, space, and movement. It is this knowledge framing her works that interweave film and dance. One of her earlier excursions into film was with director Sari Lluch Dalena, in the 1996 short film *White Funeral* (*Puting Paalam)* about the Philippine nation set against the background of a deserted lahar landscape.

Working closely with known filmmaker Carlos Siguion-Reyna, Beltran produced *Payatas Point Counterpoint* in 2001, a one-hour choreography about the Payatas tragedy where a garbage landslide buried the inhabitants of the community. In her solo *Scarred Is Beautiful* (2004) where she performs with an exposed scarred breast, a video of scars serves as a background.

For *Pandanggo* (2006), a film about Obando, Bulacan's fertility rite, Beltran worked with filmmakers Wildred Galila for episode 1 and Ruelo Lozendo for episode 3. Lozendo once again provided the background video—an archival footage and animated painting of Frida Kahlo—of Beltran's *Frida en el Espejo* (2007), exploring Kahlo's painting as a writing of the body, similar to how dance is a writing of the body.

Lozendo's videos also serve as background of two nine-minute solos by Beltran—the 2008 *Prelude for Unaccompanied Dancer* where she performs against a backdrop of turning wheels and rotors as she spirals into herself and *Also has Nine Lives* where a dancer climbs a roof and like a cat with nine lives, is also continually born.

Her first work with Sherad Anthony Sanchez is the 2009 *Tra-ver-sing* where dance and video cross paths in interpreting Muyco's compositions which drew inspiration from the syllabication and syntax of a Philippine indigenous language.

In the 2009 *Itim Asu: 1719–2009* (https://youtu.be/GwKn67Z1900), one of Beltran's most discursive pieces on history and narrativity, Sanchez's visual score reinforces the work's play within a play frame and reading of history as *longue duree*. Taking off from Virginia Moreno's play *The Onyx Wolf / Itim Asu,* Beltran's choreography traverses a present recalling of a past through images in the visual score.

Still on memory and history but tying both to childhood, the 2012 iteration of the popular ballet *The Nutcracker*, Beltran's *Nutcracker Swit* is set in regional Philippines. Sanchez's background video shows the "sweets" of the 1930's–1940's era, the labels reminiscent of childhood and innocence in a poverty-stricken Philippines.

After her many collaborative works with filmmakers, Beltran finally tries filmmaking herself in 2013 by directing *Daddy*, a dancefilm or "docu-dance." She is currently completing her short film *A Strange Loop,* with musical score by known violinist Alfonso "Coke" Bolipata.

Considering the artistic and critical language that inform the works of Beltran, it is not surprising that she has continued to converse with filmmaker Sanchez whose very own films likewise experiment with narrativity. He started exploring filmmaking during his college days when he made the short films *Apple* (2005), about a professional mourner in a town along the Bangkerohan river in Davao and the feature film *Huling Balyan ng Buhi: O ang Sinalirap Nga Asay Nil* (Huling Balyan ng Buhi: Or The Woven Stories of the Other) on the life of a Southern Philippines indigenous

community caught amidst the encounter between communist insurgents and the military. His penchant for the anti-narrative structure is seen in the controversial film *Imburnal* (2009).

Sanchez teams up with Lozendo as director of the feature film *Kolorote* which Sanchez wrote and produced under his Salida Productions in 2008. The film won the Special Jury Prize of Cinema One Originals. In 2010, Sanchez co-directed *Balangay* with Swedish Robin Fardig. Although a number of Sanchez's films have been controversial for their bold and raw depiction of Philippine realities, most of them have been recognized and awarded in both European and Asian film festivals.

The following conversation reveals a fleshing out of the compositional concerns of Beltran and Sanchez whose collaborative works have spanned almost a decade. As they dialogue, their assumptions regarding their art forms are placed within constellations of socio-political and cultural dimensions. The exchange of ideas shows the process by which they clarify their positions on particular notions crucial to their craft and politics. What surfaces in the conversation is the creation process necessary to both their conceptualization and execution of works. While certain differences between their art forms appear occasionally, their contrapuntal lines converge most of the time in a complex and multi-layered fashion.

Sanchez and Beltran, whose critical language on dance and film intersect in the discourses of narrativity, movement, and image-making, also engage with my discipline—literary studies. While Beltran explains the migration of dance into film, Sanchez prods her to elaborate on the aesthetic experience afforded by his medium. Ultimately, the reader finds in the rich meanderings and crisscrossing of ideas, three bodies of knowledge that converse—dance, film, and literature.

RLP: Myra, ever since I have known you, space has been a critical part of your discourse and practice. And I know Sherad agrees with my observation. Maybe we can start this conversation with space as groundwork and yoke this to narrativity, time, film, and dance.

SAS: Myra, your pieces like *I Thought* embody your concerns as a dancer regarding space, for example. That's what you would always tell me—that you have an issue with space, the politics of space. But what kind of space is cinema for you? Or what space do you find in cinema?

RLP: Could you first explain what you mean by the space of dance in film? By the space Myra finds in cinema?

SAS: Because as a dancer, Myra negotiates with space all the time. But because she transposes her body to film, she is dealing with elements new to her.

You [Myra] have your literal space, the angle of the lens or your eye, then you have space subject to time, which is a different space altogether. Therefore, you will have a different set of negotiations and concept of space.

MB: I think you are referring to my incorporating of dance into film. So, you are asking what kind of space is cinema for me.

Film, I feel, is the entire sense of one's space. And perhaps, this is how one makes art anyway—defining space *to* and *for* oneself and what space one wants to occupy. That's the aspect of cinema that I can relate to.

SAS: Does the space in film give you a kind of freedom that doesn't come easy to you as a contemporary dancer here in the Philippines?

MB: It [film] gives the public the sense of being located. When I choreograph—and I think it is inevitable—or when one conceptualizes a choreography, one's images are located. How else can one imagine but for a concrete experience with the world? I think any choreography conjures a site, but onstage one can't totally re-create that actual site altogether. You can conjure the site through a good visual/ production design, and it helps in making the dance more legible.

RLP: Legible?

MB: Dance is more abstract as an art form I think, and placing dance in film not only locates the dance, but also makes part of the choreographic process more apparent to the audience. I think that is partly the reason dance is esoteric to some, making it not legible [understandable]. It may also seem apolitical, but it is not. A lot of choreographic thinking is not revealed to the audience and the politics of choices in choreographing are not that apparent. Audiences may be placed under the spell of dance and not see the groundedness of dance, what went before and what transpired in between the choice of images. I have this notion that placing dance in film could make this process, this knowledge of things, more visible. I also believe that by making that choreographic process or choreographic choices more apparent, dance can be seen at par with the more "serious" arts—visual arts, writing, film—since at this point, I think dance is still relegated to the margins because it is "only" of the body, and not ever, of the mind.

RLP: It seems that the ideas you express about dance and impulse run counter to some of your lamentations over dance not being taken seriously because it is not considered cerebral.

MB: Yes, I will contradict myself here—I still do think that the power of dance is that its very core is intuited by the audience, its true nature is invisible. In rehearsals, I never tell my dancers what the core of my piece is. I always describe around the core, never naming it. Each rehearsal is a new description, or a new point of view into the core but the core is never mentioned. And then one day, boom! It's there. The dancers get it and embody that which I refused to speak about.

Thus, this same power is what I get or sense in films that I like. I love it when I sense a kind of space outside the film that is the sense of *body* of the filmmaker. Or maybe another way of putting it is, I love it when I sense the dance which the filmmaker is dancing.

But I know it takes craft for a filmmaker to capture this feeling, these sensings.

RLP: You have been talking about space and body which are very important in understanding dance and film. And though dance is sensed to be abstract by many, most of your works have a "story" at the core. There seems to be a narrative *in* and *behind* every work. But the narrative is not necessarily linear. Does film help you in narrativizing dance?

MB: When I start to choreograph, I don't know the narrative a priori. All I have in the beginning is a feeling, a sensation for dance, a feeling for a certain way of moving, a feeling about the body that will be moving. I do start out with a concept about the body. In fact, in the beginning of my career, this was part of the feminist reclaiming of one's body, of not letting patriarchy define one's feeling and concept of the body. So actually, this became part of my choreographic process. I start out with a concept of the body and this, more than anything else, guides me along the way. As I progress in the choreographic process, I realize the narrative that I actually want to say. That's my whole choreographic process which I presume is not the same process in film where it seems one has to be more deliberate because of the mobilization of resources.

SAS: No, no, no! Not necessarily.

MB: That's precisely the point—when you say that film is not necessarily always deliberate and can be spontaneous. That's precisely what I haven't figured out for film—or dance in film. How can you become spontaneous as, let's say, I am spontaneous in the studio? In film there are logistical concerns, unlike in dance where we come together in a studio or any space and with our bodies, can be spontaneous. Or am I missing something in what you are saying?

RLP: Oh yes, in film, one cannot be too spontaneous and create on the spot.

SAS: Again, not necessarily!

RLP: Really?

SAS: It depends on the process. For example, in making studio and expensive narratives, you really have to prepare; you really have to be deliberate. It involves a lot of people, logistics, and money. But for example, some filmmakers like Lav Diaz and John Torres start with a bare script or even just a vague idea of a narrative. In some cases, none at all. But when one goes into a location, sees the elements together, and then feels them—it is when everything is brought together—a new narrative idea could come up or the narrative in mind could be redirected. That's what most filmmakers refer to as an organic process—you have to move organically, you react, you respond, you make a film! There's a process like that, but the more money or budget involved, the more pressure there is to be deliberate.

RLP: The more budget an artist is given, the more conscious s/he becomes of planning everything, perhaps. There is so much accounting and accountability involved.

SAS: But it is possible and this is where many filmmakers come from—exploring a process that can be both organic and deliberate. This is why I am drawn to dance.

RLP: You mean a combination of spontaneity and deliberateness could happen in creating film?

SAS: Yes, and I was drawn to dance because of a similar process involved in its choreography. On my way here, I was trying to figure out why Myra and I get along. Perhaps because of our process of creation. There is a process we both understand in different ways.

RLP: Same process in different forms.

SAS: Before, I was so academic in my approach as a filmmaker. I was obsessed with the literary world that I approached film in the same vein. But I saw another truth in the process of filmmaking. Something that spoke to me.

RLP: In what sense?

SAS: In my undergraduate years, I attended Masteral classes in Pilipino literature and became close to Ma'am Benilda Santos. Then I became locked in a theoretical world—a world of frameworks and theoretical approaches, and that was really fun. But at the same time, theory was shaping me to think in a particular way that was not necessarily conducive to my art form. When you confine a form in theories, you lose certain "truths," nuances, and freedom. There is a sense of tension as you negotiate the theory you know with the reality because sometimes what you read is different from reality and how you read is different from how you practice your art. I saw the freedom and a sense of truth in the organic filmmaking process, and for some strange reason, I saw the same in dance.

RLP: Since in your undergraduate years you moved among writers and teachers of literature, are some of your works then based on literary texts? Or have you ever drawn inspiration from literature?

SAS: There is always a literary text in mind, whether it is in the form of a reference, an inspiration, or a script constructed with literary intent. But my filmmaking process effaces the literary text.

RLP: Myra's case, I think, is different. Quite a number of her works take off from literary texts, poems in particular.

MB: Poems are different from narrative or dramatic literary works. I find it difficult to render a straight narrative in dance. I always revert to what's poetic about the narrative or story itself.

RLP: That is the first time I've heard you articulate this idea—"what's poetic about the narrative." I think this explains why your choreographies are always multi-layered and never linear.

MB: I think among all the narrative forms in literature, the play is closest to dance or the most accessible to translating to dance because the playwright takes into account a visual aspect. It's particularly true

for Virginia Moreno's *Itim Asu* which I rendered as dance. I think dance is more poetry, or maybe I look at dance more as poetry. I cannot think of movement that will convey a story in a linear sense.

I feel that poems can be rendered as postdramatic theatre, wordless, composed of gestures and other media, of gestures not just of the individual actor but the gestures of the other media—visual, lighting, production design, video, sound—to create the entire event that is called postdramatic theatre—the "post" here signifies that it is not the word, the dialogue that is privileged in this kind of theatre, but rather the entire event, performance is the theatre.

RLP: I am so glad you mentioned "postdramatic" because I remember struggling with your reading of *Itim Asu* in your MA thesis. Your analysis dealt with the multiple layers of production design, video, and sound and you kept mentioning the term postdramatic to me. That reading was quite intense because *Itim Asu,* to begin with, is already a complex text. Rendering it as performance added several layers of significations.

SAS: Since you take inspiration from a literary text, and you get an impulse of the same energy from some of the films you like, can you identify this particular impulse?

MB: Impulse?

SAS: Yes. Impulse. For example, in the films that you like or the texts from which your choreographies take off, what is there in dance that shares their impulse? I don't want to use "core narrative" and would rather say the "impulse" that drives your works.

MB: I sense it. For instance, in Lucrecia Martel's *La Cienaga,* the way it is rendered as film, the first shots are of pouring drinks, food, and the characters just lazing around the swimming pool. I sense the impulse at the very beginning of the film, in the same manner that I am familiar with the impulse to movement when I start choreographing, although I do not necessarily know the complete

narrative yet. I have faith that that which you want to label as impulse here, will eventually take me to some sort of narrative. But as I said earlier, I don't know that narrative a priori.

SAS: Sometimes there is something poetic in discovering the impulse. But it's not poetic in the literary sense; it's poetic in a ... perhaps we hesitate to say it, but I know you [Myra] know what this is all about.

RLP: In a kinesthetic sense?

SAS: Yes, it has kinesthetic energy. That kinesthetic energy is poetic in itself but a more poetic aspect comes out in how you sculpt and form the energy.

MB: It *breathes*! You sense the breath. The work of art has kinesthetic energy.

SAS: But at the same time, the construction of thought involved or evoked in a particular kind of flow of energy or kinesthesis is also poetic in a way. I see this in your works. My question is how did you find the process of capturing this energy in film?

RLP: Are you referring to Daddy or her latest film which is still being edited?

SAS: Both—to "Daddy" and "A Strange Loop."

MB: I am still waiting for Coke's [Bolipata] music for "A Strange Loop."

SAS: It would be interesting to know the process you followed in both films.

RLP: I assume the processes for the two films are similar?

MB: Different and similar at the same time. And this is because my original intention of going into film was also to reveal to myself what kind of knowledge I have acquired after all these years. What kind of knowledge is choreography and dancing? Is it applicable to anything else? Does it have practical use?

So I started out making a film experimenting precisely if my choreographic process could be put to use in making a dancefilm.

RLP: I know you already said that the process of creation is organic but are there certain "steps" that guide you?

MB: As I said earlier, when I choreograph, I start out with a concept of the body. I ask myself what kind of body will be dancing, and mind you, there is a certain politics that comes with the choice of what kind of body will be dancing. In choreography, the concept of the body you decide on will result in choreographic choices that are physical. For instance, how will this body carry her/his weight, how does this body transfer weight from one foot to the other, what is the neutral position of this body—a neutral position with feet standing in parallel position or in the balletic 5th position of the feet. I ask where the impetus of the movement comes from, what is the initiator in the body. Is it the chest? Which seems to be typical of Myra Beltran? Others start with a pulse, a rhythm, with the movements per se. I don't know how to do that! Or I can't seem to create through that process though I appreciate very much the choreographers who do take that process. I am not that way I guess. I start with a concept of the body.

SAS: Beginning with the body ... this seems to be the springboard of "Daddy."

MB: There is a certain politics behind my choice in using an immobile body and juxtaposing it with my body, a dancerly body. And yet, in that film I wanted to show that this immobile body was in fact, the dancer, because dance is spirited, forward-looking. Here I was, tired, static, not feeling much life despite being the dancer, despite being the one more mobile. I conveyed him as the dancer in the dancefilm by calibrating the film as movement.

For instance, you could see him just breathing, then there is a small tremor in one hand, then in both hands, then he starts to do

exercises with his arms, then his feet. Then he is assisted to finally walk. He did so bravely and with conviction. In contrast, I as a dancer, who plays the character in the dancefilm, am static beside a ballet barre, gliding my hand on it, standing in front of it. Then I get up, walk and venture outside of the space into an outdoor space, and eventually start running. I face a barrier because of the rain, but finally find my way to my dad's room. There is cadence in the film that is choreographic. Only a choreographer would convey the topic in such a manner.

RLP: Did you begin "A Strange Loop" with the same assumptions on the body?

MB: Oh, I was also conscious of what kind of movement looked good on film. The film had three characters played by the same dancer/actor, so you can take them as different personas of one individual.

First I wanted to show the "micro-choreographic," the eyes darting back and forth like a referee in a ping pong match. That body was fairly static, but the eyes were "dancing" and there were small gestures of the hands. This was the first character. Then the next character was in a confined space—like a mental asylum—but was more locomotive within that space. The last one was more dancerly, also because that character was dancing in an actual stage. The movements were gestures but the flow was dancerly.

In placing dance in film, I also try to calibrate the kind of movement that's sensitive to the camera. In musicals for instance, you see a character who all of a sudden bursts into song, and sometimes it is an uncomfortable moment. I want to achieve this blurring from what is ordinary and what is dancerly which I think is important to dancefilm.

RLP: So film captures this dancerly attitude or what is dancerly? The medium is capable of doing this, I suppose.

MB: Looking at my footage, what I learned in my first film, is that a mere outbreath is a clear movement in film, the camera catches it. So performing in film is a more subtle thing for a dancer because outbreaths are usually moments for us to take off to bigger movements onstage or whatever performing space. As movement, an outbreath is invisible to the audience. But the camera reads it finely, just to relax is a movement on camera. I realized then that the camera is capable of capturing the intimate sensations of the body, the sensations of the body that I haven't conveyed in choreography. The camera is able to capture that sensation one feels onstage when everything is black and all you have is the feeling of being alive and breathing.

That was the process of capturing energy in film.

RLP: Then there must be something in film that enables it to do this. I want to return to what Sherad asked you earlier. How do you know when it [impetus/impulse] is captured in film? What is in film that captures your feeling?

SAS: I asked what is the impulse that you see in film which is also present in dance?

RLP: And why do you resort to film if that impulse is in dance anyway?

MB: To answer Ruth's question as to why I need to resort to film if the impulse is in dance anyway.

Film enables me to continue working in a choreographic manner without the limitations of working with current dancers. I do not have a regular group of dancers working with me, unlike before (with my students Donna Miranda and Katherine Sanchez), and there are not many dancers today who know my vocabulary or my sensation. Their training is different from how I trained dancers before, those who knew when to breathe and take off within my vocabulary. It is a commitment not everyone wants to make,

because generally, kids these days are rushing, and are unwilling to subject themselves to a certain process, to go on a certain journey, an everyday discovery of what is possible or what the body is saying. That takes time and resources actually, which I don't have much of either.

So, working with dancers for a dancefilm is a shortcut—here, I am able to convey the deeper sensation and feeling for movement of my body without having to train dancers for a long time. The camera will capture those sensations as long as I frame and choreograph them intelligently. The dancefilm allows me to retain my choreographic integrity.

SAS: So it seems that because film allows you to maintain your artistic integrity, then there could be something—impulse?—in common between dance and film.

MB: In film, I see the impulse of the filmmaker to move—the capacity to move in space. It is the same when I watch a dance performed, I see the choreographer's impulse to move. So the impulse to move is present in both, and perhaps that is a choreographic way of looking at film.

SAS: That is a nice way of putting it—"a choreographic way of looking at film." May I now push the question and link what Myra said to issues on space?

RLP: Yes, please so we could expand the intersections of dance and film.

SAS: For example, there is politics of space in the Philippine dance scene. There are spaces provided by institutions for traditional dances or ballet, there are spaces for mainstream contemporary dance shows, and there are privately-funded spaces. And then you have your space, also defined by something political like certain choreographic notions. Then you have film. What do you see in film that resonates your issues on space? Or what freedom in

terms of space does film give you? More questions to pursue the intersections: How do you see this space in film and how do you use it? What is your journey in discovering that space?

MB: The space that film affords me is one of a greater intimacy, which as I go along in my choreographic career, I wish to get deeper into my body, to convey those sensations as choreography. Those are the things I want to talk about in dance at this point.

RLP: Freedom. What about freedom? Is there more freedom in film to articulate your thoughts and render your sensations?

SAS: Yes, what kind of freedom do you get from film in relation to space? We will return to "impulse" later.

RLP: Oh, I remember getting that spatial sense of intimacy when I saw the Youtube "I Thought (An Answer and in Protest to Senate Bill 2679) designating a National Ballet Company." Could you describe this work from a filmmaker's point of view?

SAS: "I Thought" is like a discourse on space—mainstream spaces, alternative spaces, and small spaces. It is about how politics inform the relationship between alternative spaces and mainstream spaces.

MB: And marginal spaces, spaces that are getting smaller.

SAS: Yes, marginal. For the longest time, Myra has been fighting for marginal spaces. Then all of a sudden Myra went into film.

MB: Yes, it seems to me that the space in which to exist or move in as a dance artist, no matter how you fight tooth and nail for it, has become smaller and smaller. One just wants to escape or find a way out of this confinement.

SAS: This is weird. Actually, for over a decade now, the discourse on film especially here in the Philippines has been about alternate spaces. This is why filmmakers like me use magic realism. There are always two kinds of spaces—the metaphysical and the physical. It's non-physical but this is not quite an "alternate space" *for* and *in*

Southeast Asia because we actually believe that the world is both physical and non-physical.

RLP: You mentioned magic realism—in literature, we prefer to use marvelous realism to point out that there is another kind of realism which is not "magical" as the West would perceive it. In your field, is alternate space not the same as alternative space? What is your sense of alternate space? Like alternate notions of reality?

SAS: Yes, in terms of film, a reality is presented. Then there is a sense of metaphysicality. So for filmmakers like me, Vim Yapan[1] or Jet Leyco,[2] there's always a discourse about two worlds. Film is an alternative space, but at the same time, it offers another space within it. This is an alternate space in contrast to a real space.

RLP: Okay, there is alternate, not alternative.

SAS: I read Myra's move to film as one from alternative spaces, to alternate spaces.

MB: Alternate, that is correct.

SAS: Given that journey, what is that sense of discovery in this new alternate space? And how has your understanding of space changed in film?

MB: One question at a time please! What did I discover in going to film? In the first place, I wanted to go to film to begin to know what kind of knowledge I possess. I wanted to affirm to myself, that indeed, I have acquired a form of knowledge all these years. I couldn't accept the prospect that the knowledge I gained as a dancer, choreographer, and independent artist through that hard work was in fact, useless. I had been feeling increasingly marginal and thinking that the world, or Philippine society, didn't care about the knowledge I had as a dance artist. I began to doubt if my knowledge had practical application. True, I had to accept that the knowledge I have might not enable me to create something of concrete use, like bridges, or anything of that sort, but I wanted

to affirm to myself that the knowledge that I have is a knowledge shared by other disciplines. Thus, the venture into film which is still an art form—I was testing my knowledge in another form (which might also be "useless") that is accepted by the general populace. Testing my knowledge in another art form might give me a sense that, in fact, the knowledge I have can be appreciated. Does that make sense?

And while I agree with what others say that being in art is still working from a privileged position, and probably won't alter the state of things too much in the way that the work of civil society and NGOs can, testing my knowledge in film was a way of affirming myself. That the dance artist has possession of something that is of value to society. That while society might not think of art highly, work with the body is in fact, a form of knowledge because it is a knowledge that can be applied to something else.

I believe that work in dance shares the same principles with the other arts; they all involve the same sort of intuition.

SAS: May I simplify what you are saying? But tell me if I am being too simplistic. That you see film, the space of film as a space of mirrors. Film projects to you a certain sense of your knowledge, your body. In other words, film is a world of space.

MB: One's perception, expression... and intentionality... it seems, are more seen in film.

RLP: What makes them more seen in film? I am moving from the common notion that dance is ephemeral. And if film captures the choreographer's perception or intentionality, film then extends the life of the choreographer's mind. Do you think dance is more ephemeral than film?

MB: No. Dance has the live performance where you sense the body as present and immanent—the compelling presence onstage is the one primarily perceived. In a way, the body is intermediate to the

perception, expression, and intentionality of the choreographic mind. On the other hand, I have this notion that while there is a body in film, the live body is of course, not present; hence, one senses the choreographic mind behind it more.

In the live performance, the choreographic mind is responsible for making the experience of dance and making it memorable. Audiences usually attribute the power of affect more to the dancer, and not to the choreographic mind behind the dance. Audiences just know that the dancers feel alive and energize but fail to attribute such "success" to the very astute choreographic choices made. As dance artists, we are not recognized as intellectuals because our medium is the body. This contributes to our marginality as artists in comparison to artists of other disciplines. In the Philippines, I haven't heard of choreographers being asked about the philosophical basis of their practice or particular works. The public just assumes the capacity of a choreographer to move audiences. I think that in film, audiences sense more the directorial mind behind the work.

RLP: Is this because directors are more recognized than choreographers in general?

MB: Or ... When perhaps you watch a film, you intuit the mind, the perception, the expression, the intentionality of the filmmaker more readily. It seems to me that audiences attribute the film to the creator, the creator's sense, and sensibility more readily. This is not the same with dance.

SAS: But filmmakers see it differently.

MB: Really?

SAS: Actually, filmmakers see that dance is more direct or immediate to the viewer because it involves the body.

MB: But they [viewers] don't see the process of creation. You just sense my body, my feeling for space.

SAS: But the body carries the energy *for* and *of* the process.

RLP: And we assume as viewers that there's a choreographic mind behind that body. In film, it is more dissimulated. When we watch a film, we get engrossed in the narrative.

SAS: On the contrary, though, I think the viewer knows a film is a creation after creation. Or at least the viewer gets a sense of it. There is that creation—the performance, production design, narrative—filtered by a camera, its angles or its lenses. And then these images or the scenes are edited, and on the final stage, projected. The creation doesn't involve one process, but a series of processes that follow one another. And each of these processes has an artist dealing with energies—either with the material itself, or within themselves.

MB: I don't really know what the audience sees when they see dance. Maybe I've been a performer for so long [that] ... I don't see it ... I don't know ...

RLP: That is true. I am trying to think what I see when I watch a dance performed. I think I do recognize the choreographic mind, its structuring of the work.

SAS: But maybe I'm also a filmmaker that's why I have a different view. That's why I find dancers awesome. It's really the process carried through their creation. It's a process performed.

RLP: Dancers know well how such processes could be excruciating.

MB: And so it is in film. I guess that's what I find... I feel... [the process].

RLP: Or perhaps you are more analytical that the regular viewer who simply ingests film as film.

MB: In dance the deliberate process of creation is not seen. People say dance is all instinct ... that it is only the body involved anyway. It seems to me that filmmakers are generally assumed to be creating from some source of intelligence; they are more intelligent than dancers to say the least. Literary people are also deemed to be intellectuals, [they] are seen as more articulate. And dancers? I

haven't heard the public mention intelligence when they talk about choreographers or dancers. Ironically, in rehearsals or among choreographers, we always talk about intelligent choices onstage and in choreography.

RLP: Let's return to your notion of intuition. If this is what propels creation, do you think this then constitutes knowledge?

MB: I want to declare that it is precisely that intuition that is physical knowledge ...

Yes, of course it is knowledge! As dance artists, we do know something, we understand the world in a unique way. But we can't seem to elevate our status as dance artists, as dance makers.

RLP: I want to relate this to what a poet friend of mine said about dance. That dancers appreciate the process of creation more than some of his students in writing classes. While dancers always go through a process—regular classes [routine exercises] and intensive rehearsals—some of the students in poetry have neither patience nor appreciation for the process necessitated by creative writing.

SAS: This is the same with film. I hate filmmakers who are unwilling to undergo a process of creation.

RLP: Perhaps this is where there is a meeting of minds between the two of you. It is the value you give to process.

SAS: So now I return to the question. What is that impulse that you see film and dance share? Or what in dance is film able to record?

MB: I've seen that my choreographic process is possible in the making of film—that's what I see. Now how do I explain my choreographic process? Is that what you're asking me? That is very difficult to answer.

SAS: I sense that you know it.

RLP: Could it be that your choreographic process is propelled by intuition? It is something that you can't quite capture and articulate?

SAS: Propelled by intuition and energy ...

MB: You see the intuition, you see ... the decision making process that's brave, that's borne of intuition, something that is spontaneous, that's not deliberate, that's not so thought of, that's not manipulative, that's pure—maybe that is the aspect of my choreographic process that I relate to or I know is possible in film. I have the idea that the entire process of making film has the potential to be as pure as how I strive to be pure in my choreographic process.

SAS: But actually that's also true to other art forms—the intuition, the process.

RLP: True, in poetry, for example, I am reminded of Edith Tiempo's intuition-intellection-intuition. One begins with "raw intuition" which s/he "intellects." One always ends with intuition that has been "intellected."

MB: Well, yes, but among all the other art forms, film is closest to me because of its moving image.

SAS: Film with all its elements—characters, design, scenario—is a body in itself.

MB: It's closer to me who works with the body. Besides, crossing over to film is also part of an overall strategy.

For a long time, dancers have insisted on being "offline" all the time because of the nature of their art work. But one cannot afford to be that insular. The world is changing and virtuality has taken over, something that runs counter to the live performance. But I want to take this world on. I refuse to be pushed into being relegated as a museum-piece, I want to wrestle with that world that wants to obliterate my art form—I want to rage against the dying of the light, so to speak.

Come to think of it, there is some sort of comfort or safety, or even false pride in declaring membership in an art form that

seems headed for extinction because of technology. I don't want to practice an art form which is a rarity in a virtual world; I refuse to be a foil to that virtuality. I want to engage the world that seems to want to obliterate the live performance, and us artists.

RLP: I see your point and the move is a brave one considering how many of us in the dance world have argued for the primacy of live performance.

MB: I am not necessarily abandoning live performance by taking on film, although you could say there is inevitably a trade-off. What I am interested in is learning a certain language that will help us not only to be relevant and needed in the 21st century, but also grow as dance artists. I want to raise the bar of what is possible as a dance artist. Work on transforming the knowledge I have already started—I have brought local and international artists together so they could converse on dancefilm.

So, moving to film is a political move. I am no longer afraid of technology. Many dancers seem to have veered away from film because of the traditional American Indian notion that film captures your soul.

SAS: But actually, film has taken your soul. But this is a compliment. As a filmmaker, I appreciate what you're contributing onscreen. You are really baring your consciousness and finding it a different body or medium—film. It's really reconstructing your consciousness and using film as a body. Even though there is a body performing in a film—and probably performance is what you call choreographic knowledge or knowledge of your body—when you construct or transpose it on film, the latter becomes a body in itself. Film becomes a body with your consciousness, or it performs your consciousness. So, when you construct the film as a body, you create time because film is still experienced as beginning, middle, and end. It is pictures over time. It is motion picture.

RLP: So crossing over film creates a new experience of time. How do you [Myra] see time in a different art form? I mean, time in relation to space and narrativity.

MB: Is it [time] separate from space?

SAS: Sorry for the way I conflate my knowledge on dance and film. For film, it is space and time. But in your case, when you make a film, it's space and time creating a 'body'—separate from the body that performs in the film. Filmmakers have many perspectives on time and these reflect their different approaches to narrativity—their ideas on causality over time and creating a beginning, middle, and end. Whereas you [Myra] have created a literal body with film—the entire film is dancing, I am curious. Now that the film has become your body, how do you see time, and therefore explore a sense of narrativity?

MB: Maybe I don't isolate time, which is why I was enamored with your lecture[3] where you were able to discuss time as a separate entity. In dancing, time is created simultaneously with space.

SAS: That's why dance is interesting because in film, there's much awareness of time as a separate element.

RLP: In literary theory, there have been numerous works on time as space, on time-space continuum, both unravelling at the same time. Are the two—time and space—more distinct in film?

SAS: What I'm talking about is filmic time, the time or narrativity in which space is rendered. Filmic time—as opposed to actual time—is how scenes and events are arranged in film. Time creates a space, and is tangent with and a consequence of space. They are inseparable, but because of editing and financial constraints, Filipino filmmakers are more conscious of its manipulations and presentation.

RLP: What do you mean by manipulations? Could you give examples of filmmakers whose works display conscious workings *on* and *of* time or narrativity?

SAS: For example, Brillante Mendoza[4] made "real time" popular in Philippine Cinema where he presents time in short time frames (ex. a two-hour film tells a story of two hours in reality, or a film happening in a day or two) to simulate a close relationship with how time unfolds on screen and in the real world. It is very linear. And to make this simulation effective, he shoots the film documentary style to make the time feel real and to make the reality of time a visceral experience on screen. Real time feels organic and real. Lav Diaz[5] on the other hand, has films with an average running time of 10 hours. His latest works are shorter, but still runs four to five hours. His discourse always relates to feudalism and to put it succinctly, the space or land he is deprived of, he gets in terms of screen time. He makes us feel that time is space. That's why in creating time, he has long shots of wide vistas to allow you to feel both time and space. So you get a 10-minute shot of a horizon for example. Then there is Raya Martin,[6] son of Perfecto Martin, a known writer and historian. Raya is very conscious about referencing history but at the same time rendering it as something personal. And some of his films sometimes feel surreal when he renders present consciousness with postcolonial concepts. So either his films are treated the way films are made during the period they are set, or a film is interrupted with archival footage—a consciousness interrupted by history. And this interruption or collapsed references, offers a specific narrativity. And then in my films, I always make references to the ghosts of time and space—the mythical and the spiritual collapse with reality. I employ various ways of arranging or mounting events to embody these two realities or how they meld.

RLP: This is another way of looking at a collapsed sense of space and time.

SAS: Maybe it's an illusion that time can be isolated from space. But because there are multiple editing processes in film, the arrangement of time is isolated. We are made aware of it as an element. Of course time creates space and the audience will always experience both together. But the perspective on time, or an approach to narrativity will greatly affect the creation of a film.

I want to know if your [Myra's] perspective on or approach to time changes when you deal with film.

MB: Hmmm ... I don't know if I have a particular perspective but I approach time in film the way I approach time as a choreographer, and that is either the beginning or the end of time ... I have this idea that when intuition, when that impetus we were talking about earlier happens, it is either the beginning or the end of time—time, as we know it unfolding linearly. I want to bring people to the experience of breath, which is both the beginning of time ... or the end of time—more is beyond time. Breath is consciousness and I am not sure that consciousness is solely contained *by* or *in* time. Consciousness must go beyond time. So breath is all we have left.

So it's either being or time. It's curious when we talk about space because space is actual and located, but that very "locatedness" gives me the freedom to talk about something beyond time.

RLP: Beginning and end of time. Isn't this the concept behind one of your works?

MB: Yes. I did a work set to Olivier Messaien's *Quartet for the End of Time,* and I loved it because it took me to this kind of space, where one hears one's first breath. So, even as time runs linearly in film, I sense those moments when there seems to be an energy that flows through. This is similar to my experience as a choreographer when I

have the feeling that something has just come out of me—something that I never knew was in me, something that flows out. When this happens, I feel like I'm not here, I'm not there, or that this is the end of me, something like that. I feel I am not myself, I am just a vehicle for energy.

The experience is like I have received something. That's the kind of magic that I like ... It is similar to moments in the performance or in the process of making dances that are special, because they don't happen often even in performance. Film has the potential to intuit a moment such as when you can see the decision making of a dancer in a split second—a moment of decision, a moment of a flow of energy that is from beyond.

So that's my answer for now [regarding time in film]—either the beginning or the end of time. That particular space where one's body is almost zero, a zero body because there is only breath and consciousness. Such that you might be constructing a body, you are yearning for a zero body—like the Japanese label for it.

SAS: In film, it's a body but it's also a non-body. A film presents a body where elements of time and space exist. But since what we see is only a projection of this body, it is non-body at the same time. Unlike painting and sculpture, film is not purely physical but is a projection of it.

RLP: You say body but a non-body—could it be that the intersection of dance and film is also in terms of the notion of "body"? Not as a physical body but—

SAS: Film is a body. It is a body in which time, space, and all its elements instruct film how to move. Motion Picture. So technically, film is a body. But it is a non-body because it's also a projection of these celluloid onto screen. Therefore, it's non-physical. It is a projection of a body-performing-over-time in front of you. The film is like a ghost that passes by.

MB: The film just passes through the consciousness.

SAS: Still, film is peculiar because you can rewind it.

RLP: You notice my silence in this exchange of ideas. I understand Myra's notion of beginning or end of time and the space that enables this. These I know, having danced with her and having experienced similar moments in class. These moments are what I also value most in dance ... the impenetrable space that it affords me ... those moments that are neither here nor there. But regarding film ... I'm still trying to grasp its time-space-body dynamics.

SAS: That is why film is a body but a non-body!

MB: Something like a zero body.

SAS: Yes.

SAS: Myra transfers her consciousness to film but she is still a dancer with a body. Film becomes her new body as it mirrors her consciousness and she consciously makes it a mirror. That's why I find how you [Myra] as a dancer, approach film, fascinating.

RLP: What is the nature of such body and non-body in both your art forms?

SAS: Dance and film have physicality in them. But because they are performed–either with a dancer on stage or the film projected on screen over a set time—they lose their materiality when the performance or projection stops.

RLP: You say your art forms are more material but I think your works and ideas are actually more metaphysical.

SAS: Perhaps. But our forms are not totally different from other art forms. For example, I also see dance in poetry—

RLP: Yes, I agree, of course. There could be dance in poetry.

SAS: And writing too is performative, right?

RLP: Oh well, the backlash of this idea of performativity is that everything has become performative, and this does not sit well with some artists, let alone choreographers.

MB: And those who readily claim everything as performative without doing the work do not have the craft. Maybe there are instances when the idea of performativity has been used as an excuse not to do the hard work necessary to create art?

RLP: Yes ... I agree. Even the act of sitting down has become performative with various ideological implications. Well, this could be true to a certain extent but I think some claims to performativity have become careless. Is performative in your sense more deliberate?

MB: Performativity for me is performance.

SAS: Your performance of you performing that energy is always in relation to what you know—confined within and in relation to the constructs of your knowledge. There is a difference between performing an impulse or energy just as is, and performing a dialogue with that energy or using that energy as an impulse for performance. The dialogue happens for example, when you have this energy you capture in your performance. Such energy will not be performed purely but will be carried through a reaction, a confirmation, or in conflict with your perspective on politics, culture, arts and so on. This becomes your performance. So it's like dancing that energy, but you make decisions on how to craft and render it.

RLP: I'm following your ideas on performativity or performance, which I think relates to Myra's ideas.

SAS: Among filmmakers, that is what might be called a process of intellectualization. But for me, that is still part of the performance because two energies meet—the energy constructed by your knowledge, and the energy that you get from impulse, from

feeling. When these two energies encounter, you shape them into something—that is craft.

RLP: Yes, that is how you shape the material. That is craft. Again, this reminds me of Tiempo's notion—moving form impulse or intuition to something more deliberate.

SAS: With filmmakers, you cannot just capture energy. Your poetics crafts it into an experience—you craft energy with certain bias for taste and filmic language, with interpretations of light and movement, and with concepts of design. You cannot just have an energy. Energy is not an end all and be all in the making of films.

RLP: What really surprised me was your earlier comment that every project of yours has a sense of narrativity. So, are you always conscious of narrativity in your fims?

SAS: Oh yes.

MB: What I was saying is that in choreography, you have to be clear about relationships. What is the relationship of the movement to the music?

What is your relationship as a choreographer to the body of which you speak? And when you add visual imagery to the work, what is the relationship of this image to the body that is dancing? That's what I learned from Sherad—to be careful of how I use the images juxtaposed with a dancing body and I realized that this is the reason why he asked me to "graph" [*Itim Asu*]. Before this, I thought visual imagery served just as a background, but then I discovered that there is another relationship I had to grapple with. That is what happened. This is how how Sherad and I had a meeting point.

I graphed the entire work, figuring out which point of view I was speaking from because in fact, Virginia Moreno's play is a play within a play. There is a blurring of fiction and reality in the play. In order for that "blurring" to be apparent in my rendering of it, I had to be clear—to lay out the frames, to be clear who is speaking

in every part. But my rendering of the play, following the thesis of Moreno's play of a continuing, recurring history, includes my present. I thus acknowledge—from the point of view of the present—that the document La Loba Negra on which Moreno based her play, was deemed to be a forgery. I shift to my present in the work, and say "this is me, this is Myra's view."

RLP: What is exactly achieved by graphing?

MB: We gained a certain clarity in the work, precisely by asking what relationships the various media involved in the work had with each other because at that point, my choreography had certain meanings for me. If an image was proposed, this would elicit another meaning.

So how were we supposed to navigate this multiplicity of meanings while at the same time, convey our own reading and the politics of our work? I had to be careful so that the choreography could meet the language of the image of Sherad.

The thing is, a description of choreographic imagery can sound esoteric to a filmmaker who works with actual images and who reads the politics of these images. So, when Sherad forced me to graph the work and write a screenplay of the choreography, we then had clarity and were thus, together able to evolve a language of our own.

RLP: In other words, the language you are referring to is the language of the artwork. And it appears that by looking at concepts of narrativity—like those of Genette—you arrive at the language of the artwork.

SAS: Yes. We needed something as a springboard or a common ground to understand each other.

MB: Had we not found a common ground from which to speak to each other—the parts when Sherad would contradict my point of view, or agree with my politics, when he did intervene or dispute the politics put forth by my reading of the play, or Virginia Moreno's

reading of history, or my reading of Moreno's reading of history—and this Sherad did with images, the complexity of the politics and the complexity of the reading of history would not have been conveyed. The nuances of the readings would not have registered in our work had we not been clear about what each element /media was doing at specific points in the choreography. The work was composed of various languages, which needed to speak together in *a* language.

SAS: It was like a collaboration. We needed to know what we meant, the flow, the story ...

MB: I gave Sherad space by being clear through a written screenplay of the choreography. So, in fact, I didn't really have to see all the images in the process. I trusted him because I knew he understood my concept.

RLP: At least you are on the same page. And I guess it was critical that you trusted Sherad—that you knew he understood your aesthetics and vision.

MB: In fact, we did not start as collaborators for *Itim Asu*. It was supposed to be Ruelo [Lozendo]. But as I kept on sharing my ideas with Sherad ...

RLP: It was as if you told him "You do it since you already know what I want."

MB: Yes. I remember he was suggesting someone else. I think that artist (the late Francis Pasion) was leaving for somewhere. But as I kept on talking about *Itim Asu*—in the guise of consultations—he [Sherad] was already creating an image. Yup, I was like telling him "You do it [visual scoring]." I guess it was a sly way of convincing him to finally take on the work as my collaborator.

SAS: No. No. That is not what happened.

MB: Oh ... it was still Ruelo who was supposed to do the visual scoring.

SAS: Remember I was in Paris or Denmark at that time? You called me, I think. Or I received a message from you telling me to look at the newspaper. Was it the *Philippine Daily Inquirer?*

It was about *Itim Asu* choreographed by Myra in collaboration with Sherad Sanchez. I thought, geez, how could you do this to me Myra! … Am I supposed to do the visual scoring?

RLP: It was Myra's scheme so you won't have a choice.

MB: Because we already had several extensive conversations!

SAS: The problem was I was going to arrive a week before the performance because I had a European tour at that time.

RP: Exactly what did you do for *Itim Asu*? What exactly was the visual scoring for *Itim Asu*?

SAS: I provided the visual, a film at the back. The production is a text within a text. I had several acts of rebellion in providing the visual score. Actually, Myra must have felt bad.

MB: Oh no. I ignored them [acts of rebellion].

SAS: Oh no, you reacted when I presented my concepts. For example, we agreed on a discourse for your solo. I wanted to subject you to some sort of photocopying machine and you would be dancing with minimal light. You reacted to this.

Myra: Did I?

SAS: Yes, you reacted at first. I deliberately wanted the scene to be dark. Your performance would only be seen when a 'photocopying' light passes your figure. I was thinking of a photocopying machine whose light pans the dark stage, so most of the time, your piece is left in the dark, barely seen.

RLP: Myra, did you feel that he was just playing around with the scoring?

MB: Not at all.

RLP: So you felt that the scoring was all part of the art form, of film?

SAS: To clarify—although I was teasing Myra to a certain extent, knowing that she would react to how dark the stage would be for her solo, my visual scoring complemented the discourse [on history] of *Itim Asu*. However, while I was working with Myra during the production, my participation in and attitude towards the discourse evolved. There was a sense of irreverence in my work. Imagine, I shot the visuals on a Sunday and *Itim Asu* opened on a Thursday. It was a two-hour musically-timed piece. There were a lot of editing and effects involved apart from shooting the actual film, and I only knew that I was the one going to make the visual score a week before opening. So, my decisions were partly shaped by my rebellion against Myra. But I still worked within the discourse Myra and I had set beforehand.

RLP: Could you elaborate a bit on these effects?

SAS: Because there were music and dance, the cutting should rhythmically match. So there were a lot of editing involved. I also had to match the flow of the discourse with my visuals and then complement my visual composition with Myra's composition on stage. But I knew the idea, I knew where we were headed because I knew Myra's vision, our vision. So, I approached the visual scoring like a dancer—I went to Intramuros and not really knowing what to do, just went into a coffee shop and pretended to have coffee. After taking a shot of something just to start it off, I figured out how to proceed with the narrative [of the screenplay] and the discourse in mind.

MB: I only saw the video during the premiere night.

SAS: While I was editing, Myra sent me a video of the entire piece [dance] which helped me determine the layering of the video. I was able to complement the choreography with the composition of my frames so they would not overshadow her or the dancers. For example, she could be on the bottom layer and my visuals on

top. Or sometimes, when I saw it fit, I would have the visuals clash or react to what's happening on stage.

RLP: Considering the process of creating the video and effects—although Sherad always had *Itim's* discourse in mind—was there ever a time when you felt the scoring was off or did not dovetail with your concept or narrative?

MB: Oh, there was this part in Sherad's visual score at the beginning of the piece. This is where I had more or less laid out that the storytellers are the youth, the dancers conversing with history. I started the entire piece with "A la Juventud Filipino," rendered as a journey—the dancers were in a kind of "lakaran" (in Rey Ileto's sense) and the visuals were of Intramuros. This should render to the audience a journey back in time—the tempo of this part was slow, but with a shift in music, the dancing then got frenetic.

At a certain point before the frenzy, Sherad's camera bobbed up and down—the feeling was like riding in a *calesa,* which was actually in the image. As a choreographer, I found that kind of movement on screen attention-stealing and sort of irritating. Watching it for the first time with the dance, I kept thinking, will this irritating, bobbing up and down end? My choreography was going to a fast section and this camera movement could just endlessly go on, I said to myself. Then that movement on screen stopped at the same instant the dancer burst [into a fast pace] into the first movement. Thank God! For me, it was brilliant, it was playful, it showed the audience that the images were deliberate and were saying something. It was perfect.

RLP/SAS: [laughs]

MB: And you know, it [*Itim Asu]* set a trend. Others followed suit—the use of scanner as background, blood drips/splatters on screen. In short, *Itim* set a "standard" for a certain language or introduced an aesthetic, a renewed sense of what the visual image can do vis-à-vis

dance. Obviously, it was effective and choreographers saw how such a palette contributes to and not detracts from the dance, which is what choreographers recoil from when collaborating with film makers.

RLP: So this is your process. You talk about how to position yourself in terms of the narrative of the dance.

MB: Yes. The process forced me to be articulate about the narrative.

RLP: *Itim Asu* was one collaborative project. Is there any other project you did together?

MB: Yes, the *Nutcracker Swit*.[7] That was difficult because when Sherad saw the dance, he attempted to force me to change the initial plan. We wanted a mockup set shot on film, with a hand manipulating the elements on the set which contained my mom's paper dolls. But when Sherad saw the choreography, he wanted something simpler, more whimsical, as he described it. A simpler image with broad strokes of drawings meant though, a more complex two-projector setup which was too difficult for me because it [image] needed to be in certain positions on the screen.

We stuck to the original plan.

Sherad being the artist that he is, trying to work with the given parameters but inserting his own ideas, created a finely layered video with animation that's why the video took a long time to render. Unfortunately, I only saw the video months after the show. I had talked to Sherad about other options and instead, we presented the wall papers of his video as a palette [background] to the work. There was no video but the wallpaper made of product labels signified the consumerist postcolonial era of the 1940s-1950s.

RLP: Many of your collaborative works were full-length productions. Was the experience very different when you worked on the Youtube video "I Thought (An Answer and in Protest to Senate Bill 2679)" designating a National Ballet Company? I could still recall the way

you [Myra] would update me about the discussions on this Bill. You were really disappointed at the turn of events.

MB: "I Thought" was my response to the Senate Bill. I wanted to do a work that precisely ran counter to the declarations in that bill. My work attempted to claim that a dance, even if created with very mininal resources in alternative spaces, and whose only material is the lone solo dancer, can still move people. I wanted to declare through the work that independent dance exists; decentralization of the art had already happened, and that the ballet bill would erase the history from which independent dance arose and prospered. I felt so alone in this battle because even those—or especially those—who benefitted from the gains of independent dance were not astute enough to realize the politics of their non-involvement; that their passivity [towards the issue] endangered their existence as artists. This saddened me a lot.

SAS: In that video, there was minimal interference on my part because it was an intimate piece talking about her space. My job was to show the space: to provide the awareness of the space and her interactions and relationship to it. I maintained an intimate focus on her since what was important was her emotions. I wanted it simple and direct, like how she danced and articulated her thoughts [the audience hears Myra reciting "I thought"].

RLP: How many minutes was the video?

MB: Around nine or 10.

RLP: Are there any other points you wish to raise regarding the role of narrativity in your works?

SAS: Oh, I have a more personal question. Actually, I was surprised about something Myra said earlier in our discussion. You [Myra] mentioned you work with your sensations or feelings. But I wonder about this because when we are not collaborating and talking about our projects, you seem to be very particular about ... structure ...

the form of narrativity. This is what we discuss when we share ideas about our individual projects. We ask each other questions like "What is your approach in this work?" "How will you tell the story?" and "How will you present this?"

MB: I decide on everything so when I get to the studio, I'm ready.

SAS: But even if you have decided on the structure or narrative, you still change it anyway and this is what I'm really fond of—change. There are few people who are ready to make spontaneous changes in their plans.

RLP: You mean many artists could be very set in their ideas?

SAS: Yes, when they are settled with their idea, it is difficult for them to change this. Myra and I are always ready to change ...

MB: Do you mean I change the whole structure?

SAS: No, not really the structure but your perception of the structure or the narrative. Then you ask more questions.

RLP: Does Myra adjust some parts or scenes after creating them?

SAS: No, no. I mean she changes her perception on narrativity.

RLP: Within the work?

SAS: Actually, in the work after. She approaches every new piece with a new perspective.

RLP: Are you saying that every work of hers articulates one aspect of narrativity?

SAS: I think they do. She articulates a new one, or explores something else.

MB: Don't I change my structure or narrative depending on your advice?

SAS: Not really. The questions I ask you [which could lead to changes] as we work are also based on what you say or do. The process is organic.

RLP: In the questions you raise and in what happens after, do you think Myra then consciously sets a structure or narrative?

MB: Well, I am always concerned with relationships as I said earlier, because I am a choreographer.

RLP: Are these relationships integral to the work?

MB: When you have a topic, how do you approach it, how does the topic hit you in the gut? One has to determine all these relationships—body, time, space.

SAS: Can you say these relationships are the sources of your story?

MB: Yes, because in fact, what we actually have are universal stories. But it is our specific approaches to these stories that will make the difference.

SAS: I have asked you this question several times and I remember your answers would change every time. Why are you so concerned with relationships? With the relationship of the body to others?

RLP: Sounds like a loaded question. My turn to ask you [Sherad]. Is there anything that is not concerned with relationships? Myra said relationships are inherent in her choreography. Is it the same *in* and *with* film?

SAS: I am trying to catch what she really means by "relationship." We might just be able to fine-tune her idea.

RLP: Like aspects of relationships?

SAS: I am trying to see how Myra sees the world, how she relates to the world and what issues spark her vision of and relationship to the world. For example, most of my works are tied to the narrative of my sexuality. Or at least the narrative of my attempts to have sex.

RLP: You mean at the core of all your works and films is this narrative?

SAS: Yes, it is me navigating the terrain of sex and relationships. I have never had both—or I have always failed in having either. So whether

I talk about them explicitly or dwell on them (by using parallelism, transposition, or disguise) by way of culture, mythology, or politics like the EJK[8] or something about the Left, they all boil down to sexuality.

RLP: This is so Freudian.

SAS: And I admit it. It is like, how do I see the world? How do I relate to it and what idea do I derive from the world? What is my "hugot"[9]—The volition which moves me to explore and understand the world. The entry point of sexuality adds a certain form of queerness in my works. And the explorations I do here and there open up a universe. Politics, culture, or my perspective on art parallels my issues on sexuality.

RLP: So there is a thread or a core narrative that is carried out.

SAS: It is a microcosm of an idea. I have a joke about this [the core idea of my work]. I call it an "urgent intention" ...

RLP: To have a relationship?

SAS: Yes! And the macrocosm is my work exploring other issues such as morality, politics, and culture. All are tied.

MB: My take on relationships is different and it is broader than the human relationships Sherad seems to imply. When I started out performing in alternative spaces, I had to shift my entire concept of movement in space. There was no other way. The training in ballet was to conquer space, to defy gravity like how the otherworldly characters—wilis, sylphs, fairies—of the traditional ballets like *Giselle* do. The spaces I was performing in were small and intimate. The old concept of space (in ballet) would not work in alternative spaces. For example, ballet relies on the proscenium stage where, for instance, the other worldly creatures disappear in the wings. There is no theatre machinery to create "magic" in alternative spaces; the unfolding of the event is the "magic." The people. The bareness of bodies and intention. No tricks, no illusions. Then I

read Chandralekha's[10] concept of space. She said that space is the encounter between a moment and a relationship. That stayed with me.

I was in Beijing at the NGO Conference for Women, and the audience were so close [to the performance area]. It seemed absurd to think about pointing my feet. When you are that close [to the audience], it is you, your breath, your being that is more important. The notion "Space is the encounter between a moment and a relationship" means it is all about tenderness. You are alone, but with space. Mary Wigman[11] said, "No ecstasy, no dance." You are alone and space is your partner, is what I think she meant. And yes, maybe in that sense, dance is sexual—it brings the dancer to ecstasy. It is a relationship. That's why I have a fluid way of dancing and relating. If Sherad thinks about sexuality, I think about being gentle. I like being gentle. Though of course, dance is inherently sexual by its sheer physicality.

So when I do ballet, I do not tense up. I relax on the floor. They call this release technique nowadays—just letting go. It is important to know my relationship to my body and space. I discovered that when the performance space is small and intimate, I tend to choreograph folding into myself, spiraling into my own axis [axial]. My technique is spiral or centrifugal. Not particularly locomotor and linearly progressing.

SAS: No wonder we are both interested in phenomenology.

MB: I am reminded of T. S. Eliot's "At a still point in the turning world./ Neither flesh nor fleshness;/Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is."

There time stops, at that still point, *there the dance is*. When people watch, when they arrest movement just as it is unfolding, when it is coming to be but not yet, when motion has begun but is yet to finish and you have suspended it in the process of its becoming,

that is the still point—when time stops for them, it is the end of time and the beginning of time. And that moment is ...

SAS: That sounds like a Ms. Universe Catriona Gray answer [laughs].

MB: Really. Those are the moments I live for, both as a dancer and as a choreographer, and as an audience. That moment seems forever. People would say "That performance lasts forever." Just those very little moments are important. When you find those moments, it feels like teaching the audience something at that point. It is a way of teaching the audience that they can be transcendental just by stopping time—they can always arrest my moments, right? I never pose. My musicality is, as you [Ruth] would say "paleng."

SAS: What do you mean by "paleng"?

RLP: Off.

MB: It sounds off because I let the first note down and then I go. So that the "in between" is where I'm moving. And I realize that about myself, about how I let that moment go. Our dancers generally go with the music from the beginning till end. I find there is less of a dialogue in such cases. There is no space for the audience to be a part of that conversation. A relationship to music is a relationship to time. That's also what narrativity is, a relationship to time.

RLP: That is true. With Myra, the music has already started but her steps have yet to follow. My first few classes with her were difficult because I just couldn't get her beat. I guess it's my ballet background that has made my rhythm more regular.

SAS: It is similar to modeling. If you go with the beat [of the music], that is ugly. You should be a bit off.

MB: At first, it [the movement] seems incomprehensible as dance, because it seems "off" the music. But it also depends on the kind of music you choose. That's why I like Baroque music which has so much counterpoint—you can choose to go on the downbeat or on

the beat of the counterpoint or on the in-between to sort of "catch up." This paves the way for more dialogue.

MB: In short, in terms of the physicality of movement, what is privileged is the liminal, that which comes in-between, always in arrest. That moment of arrest is a space where there is an encounter between a moment and a relationship. In that moment of arrest, traces of what came before it are present at the same time that it is becoming something. There is potential, a possibility in that very space of encounter.

RLP: Is that captured in film?

SAS: Yes. In many, many ways.

MB: I think it is possible. I sense that it's possible, although I personally don't know how to do it.

SAS: I did it one time, big time. Didn't I popularize dead space?

MB: That's right.

RLP: What is dead space?

SAS: In the middle of my film, there is a 10-minute black out. There is just music. Just that. I was trying to capture that.

RLP: That sounds crazy.

SAS: The film [*Imburnal* (Sewage)] is three hours and thirty minutes so what's ten minutes?

RLP: Where was it shown?

SAS: It was censored here, but was successful in its own terms abroad.

MB: I do believe film becomes memorable when the images stay with you, when images and memory meet.

SAS: Yes, these moments are the ones that challenge the ephemerality of things.

MB: Like T.S. Eliot's poem—"at the still point of the turning world is the beginning and the end of time."

SAS: It's fun you know, how we can all tie our practices, in film, in movement, just to capture the magic of stillness.

RLP: "To capture the magic of stillness." This is a wonderful idea to end our conversation. In Marjorie Evasco's "Heron Woman," which was one of the texts Myra read while conceptualizing "Bird Woman" the persona narrates: "At twilight I glide to shore/Fold my body into/ The sheath of solitude/... And I/Am still/Once/More."

—END—

Notes

1. Vim Yapan is known as Alvin Yapan in the literary circle. Some of his popular works are *Ang Panggagahasa Kay Fe* (2009), *Gayuma* (2011), and *Debosyon* (2013).
2. Director of *Ex Press* (2011), *Bukas Na Lang Sapagkat Gabi Na* (2013), and *Matangtubig* (2015).
3. In his "FILIPINO TIME: Perspective of Time in Philippine Cinema," Sanchez surveys the different approaches to time by different filmmakers.
4. Director of *Serbis* (2008), *Kinatay* (2009), *Lola* (2009), and *Ma' Rosa* (2016).
5. Director of *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004), *Melancholia* (2008), *Norte: The End Of History* (2013), and *Ang Babaeng Humayo* (2016).
6. Director of *Autohystoria* (2007) and *Independencia* (2009).
7. A contemporary dance version of the two-act ballet *Nutcracker Suite*, originally choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. Beltran's story is from the point of view of a poor, uneducated schoolboy and the plot of the dance piece is traversed by history—Pampanga in the 1930s and the 1940s, including the lahar that had come to be identified with Pampanga. The narrative of poverty in the Philippines is embedded in the story. Whereas the original retains the distinction between reality and fantasy, Beltran's version does not; all the desires and dreams of the

boy come true. The trajectory of her narrative dovetails with her interest in the blurring of history, fiction/narrative and reality.

8. Extra Judicial Killing.
9. Idea or concept with deep emotional undertone.
10. Chandralekha Prabhudas Patel, was an Indian dancer and choreographer. She is known for fusing Bharatanatyam, yoga, and elements of martial and performing arts.
11. German dancer and choreographer known for ushering in expressionist dance. She is an important figure in modern dance.