



## COMMENTARY

# Expecting the Unexpected: Documenting Accidentology in the Philippines

BARBARA POLITSCH

*The Third World Studies Center (TWSC) of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman, in partnership with the Department of Political Science of the Université de Montréal (UdM), has been conducting a video documentary internship program since 2011. The internship project aims to foster cross-cultural understanding through a search for compelling narratives that resonate on both Filipino and Canadian public. Each year, the project brings together a team of UdM undergraduate students and TWSC interns to produce a short video documentary, usually not exceeding twenty minutes. The team of interns have four months to work on the documentary. The project follows a programmatic approach from immersion in Philippine culture (for the UdM students), an intensive workshop by experienced filmmakers with hands-on training on video documentary production, three weeks on the field for filming/production, and finally, editing/post-production. The internship project culminates in free public screenings of the completed documentaries.*

*The documentaries tell the stories of the lives and struggles of Filipinos at the unmarked margins of society. These are the precarious lives of people who struggle against institutional neglect in the midst of*

*uncertain, if not diminishing resources—the challenges of enabling food sovereignty in the Philippines (Choosing Food Sovereignty: Rethinking Agriculture in the Philippines, 2011), the perils Filipino women face in giving birth with almost no state support (In the Philippines, Giving Birth Kills: Maternal Mortality in the Philippines, 2011), the vulnerability of people in regions previously unaffected by extreme weather disturbances (A Tide of Change: Vulnerability in a Changing Climate, 2012), a community that lives on the back of an active volcano for want of a liveable space (Alas: Sitting on a Volcano, 2013), women mining the dregs of what was once a gold country (Minera: The Women Miners of Benguet, 2013), a worker living in a packed urban space and cycling through poverty and the deadly streets of a metropolis (Kadena [Chains], 2014), a tribal leader bequeathing to his son a future that is about to vanish (Naglalahong Pamana [Fading Heritage], 2015), of families whose life stories swirl and eddy with the sludge of the mines on a river (Sa Rio Tuba, 2015), an aging couple who have lived off the sea that is now being gobbled up by a town's hunger for land (Haw-as: Leaving the Sea, 2016), and the deft maneuvers by big landowners to convert vast tracts of land that are meant for distribution to its tenants into solar farms (Pag-baylo: Losing the Land to Solar Farms, 2017).*

*The commentary that follows tackles the first six documentaries, the majority of which were made under the program “Student for Development.” From 2015 up to 2017, production of TWSCUdM documentaries is an activity of the network called REINVENTERRA (Réseau d'études internationales sur la valorisation et l'exploitation de la nature, des terres et des ressources en Afrique, Asie et Amérique latine, or International Research Network on Exploitation and Usage of Nature, Land, and Resources in Africa, Asia and Latin America). The documentaries are available online at the TWSC's Youtube channel (<https://bit.ly/2tt5XsB>).*

The Third World Studies Center of the University of the Philippines and the Department of Political Science of the University of Montreal have been conducting documentary film projects since 2011, producing several documentaries intended for teaching and raising awareness. The set of documentaries discussed here focus on people mired in poverty left with no choice but to put themselves at risk while the solutions

implemented by the government bureaucracy fail to address their needs. The documentaries can be described as studies that come close to the not-yet-existing discipline of accidentology. As Virilio states,

Creation or collapse, the accident is an unconscious oeuvre, an invention in the sense of uncovering what was hidden, just waiting to happen . . . ‘There is no science of the accident,’ Aristotle cautioned a long time ago. Despite the existence of risk studies which assess risks, there is no accidentology, but only a process of fortuitous discovery, archaeotechnological invention. (2007, 9–10)

### **Alas-as: Sitting on a Volcano<sup>1</sup>**

*This is a story of how a community strategizes to provide education for their children amidst poverty and natural hazards, detailing what they are willing to compromise and sacrifice for their children to even just glimpse a future that they were not able to have for themselves. In the town of San Nicolas, in Taal Volcano Island, an elementary school was built by the fishing community of Barangay Alas-as for their children. The island has been officially classified as a high-risk area and a permanent danger zone, within reach of the second most active volcano in the Philippines. Despite many pleas for the residents to relocate somewhere safer, they have refused to leave the island—the only home they have ever known.<sup>2</sup>*

A community of volcano dwellers is the focus of *Alas-as: Sitting on a Volcano*. Well aware of the dangerous grounds they chose to reside on, the people of Barangay Alas-as have built a school on Taal Volcano—exposing not only themselves but also their children to a potential and probably lethal accident. Building the school in 2012 right in the danger zone, can be seen as willfully exposing these children to a potential catastrophe, turning on its head the threat of the unexpected. The documentary poses the ethical question as to whether awareness

- 
1. Pelletier, Marie-Charles, Raya Manalo, Etienne Grignou, and Tiago McNicoll Castro Lopes. 2013. *Alas-as: Sitting on a Volcano*. Quezon City, Philippines: Third World Studies Center; Montreal, Canada: University of Montreal. 20 min. and 6 sec. <https://youtu.be/iI8vqqW4J10>.
  2. Edited summary from the filmmakers.

of this danger and the willingness to expose oneself to it can be forced on minors who are not aware of the latent danger they would face daily.

The film examines the question of whether people should permanently reside in a designated danger zone. Ironically, the school makes living on the volcano more attractive for families to settle there. Like a broken mirror, straight-cut talking head interviews of experts and residents stating the known facts and issues and posing questions—for which no answers or solutions—are woven together with B-roll footage of idyllic images of the rural village. The documentary closes with images of children at the lake looking at the water—powerless in the face of the expected catastrophes.

### **A Tide of Change: Vulnerability in a Changing Climate<sup>3</sup>**

*The video documentary aims to highlight the increasing vulnerability of people in regions previously unaffected by extreme weather disturbances in the case of Cagayan De Oro (CDO), northern Mindanao through typhoon Sendong. It features the lives of Sendong victims in different resettlement communities in CDO, six months after Sendong's wake—from the best rehabilitation practices in Xavier Ecoville to the inherent problems in resettlement camps—to build on the pressing need to go beyond the reactionary frame of disaster risk reduction and management to that of preparedness. Otherwise, tent cities could soon become the norm.<sup>4</sup>*

*A Tide of Change* explores the connection between climate change and the increasing frequency of typhoons, as well as the mostly futile measures the government takes to relocate displaced typhoon victims, making them in the process heavily dependent on government aid. The opening sequence of a house being swallowed by a rampaging torrent of flood, showing the violent force of nature, hooks the viewer by its brutality. As many of the interviewees in the documentary explain, due to a lack of prospects to earn a living in the relocation sites, typhoon victims often move back into disaster zones. The Canadian and

---

3. Edited summary from the filmmakers.

4. Rimban, Allan, Claire Pantoja, Clemence Halle, Francis Maindl, Marc Jeandesboz, and Phoebe Saculsan. 2012. *A Tide of Change: Vulnerability in a Changing Climate*. Quezon City, Philippines: Third World Studies Center; Montreal, Canada: University of Montreal. 22 min. and 38 sec. <https://youtu.be/AIPz7Kj4aMs>.

Filipino team filmed for three weeks, interviewing victims of the typhoon, such as the Yanez family who lost their house and all their belongings. They are grateful for being relocated from a tent city to a permanent home, even though it is too small for the large family and has no electricity. Others are not as lucky and have to stay put in the transition center much longer than the initially projected three months.

The filmmakers reflect on how vulnerability could be reduced and document the corresponding attempts, but no solution was in sight yet in time for Yolanda, the deadliest storm on record in the Philippines—with a death toll of 6,300, four million displaced citizens, and USD 2 billion damages—that hit ashore in 2013, shortly after the film was completed. Even though high risk areas were declared as “no build” zones, many settled back into their old houses. Volunteer groups like Balsa Mindanao believe that those communities could be rebuilt, offering livelihood programs. Given the narrow timeframe in case of a typhoon, the preparedness system leaves much to be desired. There are no jobs in the permanent housing camps, making them dependent on aid. Economic dependence on government aid cannot be the answer to this cycle of catastrophes, nor can it be the acceptance of suffering and reliance on prayers alone. Through the documentary, we see clearly that the country needs to adapt to climate change.

### **Kadena (Chains)<sup>5</sup>**

*For years, Roger Sarsua has depended on his bicycle to go to his place of work in Metro Manila, and from there to safely pedal his way back home to his family in the outskirts of the city. This documentary chronicles how Roger moves along and lives through the monstrous sprawl that is Metro Manila—from the grunts of its monumental traffic jams to the glitzy hiss of its malls and skyscrapers. The documentary gives Roger’s perspective on how the city has changed before his eyes, on how the desperate have tried to turn it into a place of refuge and the poor aspired for resilience amid its unending squalor. Kadena is about two lives on the road chained to each other: that of the city and Roger’s.<sup>6</sup>*

5. Agsawa, Jeremy, Jesse Rey Baban, François Robert-Durand, and Alexandre Marcou. 2014. *Kadena (Chains)*. Quezon City, Philippines: Third World Studies Center; Montreal, Canada: University of Montreal. 18 min. and 48 sec. [https://youtu.be/wTg5InL\\_o8](https://youtu.be/wTg5InL_o8).

6. Edited summary from the filmmakers.

The presence of absence is a topic in art; it defines virtual spaces and is a current theme in urban planning. Spaces are not only created anew; they are also being reinterpreted. Empty spaces, objet trouvés, and leftovers used within a new context gain significance due to the new density of urban spaces. Each society creates spaces according to its cultural presuppositions. It is secondary to the material quality of the buildings themselves. From the present point of view, the absence of the intended function and meaning as well as the new encoding and mutation of space is of interest. Changes in our living conditions and the lack of options offered by the government force the individual to alter the ways in which spaces are used. The protagonist of the visually stunning *Kadena (Chains)* re-encodes one of the city's chronically congested multilane traffic arteries into a bike lane, pedaling to work amid swiveling jeepneys and buses, risking his life in his personal uproar against the nonfunctioning transport system and chaos of urban planning. With Metro Manila's current population of more than twelve million that swells to about fifteen million during daytime, the commuters of the metropolis are used to waiting out hours and hours in "carmagedon."

*Kadena's* opening stylistically follows Nichols's poetic documentary mode and pays homage to Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). In the poetic mode, the author delivers a message by attempting to evoke an emotion in the audience through the use of visual stimuli and editing. While the filmmaker's notion that our current society relies on the speed of capital-driven technology and speed to have a fully functional and economically vibrant society is of the essence, the treatment of the cinematic representation of time by accelerating it might be a juxtaposition to the real-time experience of a Metro Manila resident when faced with the problem of traffic. In a time-lapse shot, the chronically congested traffic arteries of Metro Manila still do not move noticeably. Roger Sarsua, the forty-three-year-old protagonist, has taken steps to overcome the traffic situation by cycling to work—a distance of about fifteen kilometers. He assigns new meaning to an existing space for his personal needs at the expense of his health, willingly exposing himself to the dangers of pollution and road accidents in order to free himself of the time-consuming and expensive chains of the system.

### **Minera: The Women Miners of Benguet<sup>7</sup>**

*In the province of Benguet in northern Philippines, small-scale gold mining has been an important source of livelihood for centuries for indigenous communities. Artisanal and labor intensive, most of Philippine gold is still extracted with the simplicity of picks, shovels, and water; sometimes just besides large mining corporations. Men are thought of as the usual prominent actors in these communities. This documentary corrects this misimpression. Women miners are as essential to small-scale mining as the male workers. This documentary is a story of the women miners of Itogon, Benguet who have moved mountains and have kept pushing on, how they have transcended the weariness of the body and the strictures of gender to live a life in their own terms and to unselfishly care for others.<sup>8</sup>*

In the absence of solutions provided by the state, Filipinos tend to make do with the given. *Minera* catapults us into the harsh reality of Filipina small-scale miners in the Cordillera mountains. The Philippines is one of the top gold producers of the world. For lack of infrastructure and other options to make a living in the rural area, even well-educated women opt to take on the hard and dangerous work of mining underground—seemingly an almost futuristic step toward gender equality in a traditional male-dominated line of work. They share the dangers of the remote site with their male counterparts, risking their health while playing a double role as heads of household and having to raise families. The filmmakers chose not to follow a main protagonist but portray various female miners, cutting between interviews that hardly scratch the surface. While the visual impressions of the life of these women looking for gold are captivating—we see footage of the mineras climbing down into the underground mines, revealing the physical and geographical dangers of the site—the film has no properly executed central question and lacks the filmmakers voice, especially as it tackles the gender aspect of these soldiers of fortune.

The documentary opens with the barangay (village) captain Eduardo Daniel giving a historical background about the village and its living conditions—agriculture and mining are the two main options to earn

---

7. Deslauriers, Veronique, Jean-Philippe Hughes, Enrico V. Gloria, and Farida Bianca P. Velicaria. 2013. *Minera: The Women Miners of Benguet*. Quezon City, Philippines: Third World Studies Center; Montreal, Canada: University of Montreal. 21 min. and 6 sec. <https://youtu.be/iD121W8wlqk>.

8. Edited summary from the filmmakers.

a livelihood. To open a film that focuses on women miners with an expository male voice appears somewhat patriarchal. The women miners' answers to questions about their experiences and aspirations remain generic, their motivation intangible. The adventurous women miners are given no proper voice, or, at least, we do not learn their viewpoints on the root causes of their conditions. It is only the male captain Daniel, from his position of authority, who explains that the lack of infrastructure offers no other career options, regardless of educational achievements, making it a choice to leave the area or content oneself with hard and dangerous labor and cutting back on one's expenditures.

### **Choosing Food Sovereignty: Rethinking Agriculture in the Philippines<sup>9</sup>**

*This documentary seeks to present the current agricultural situation and the challenges of enabling food sovereignty in the Philippines. It is an offshoot of a multi-sector workshop held in 2011 that sought to understand food sovereignty from a Southeast Asian perspective. The documentary gives the viewpoints of various persons involved in or otherwise related to agriculture in the Philippines—including farmers, fisherfolk, a crop scientist, a nutritionist, members of a community seeking to sustain a self-sufficient lifestyle, members of development-oriented nongovernmental organizations, and vendors of agricultural products—on agricultural production vis-à-vis the country's legal framework and state policies, which are at times detrimental to going beyond food sufficiency and bare-minimum nutrition provision in the Philippines.<sup>10</sup>*

Farming, another hard and traditionally male labor, in the provincial areas is examined in *Choosing Food Sovereignty* in a collage of the complex challenges the change toward food sovereignty entails. Reminiscent of a classic painting by National Artist Fernando Amorsolo, a farmer walks in the glistening sun next to his water buffalo, pulling a cart full of cut bamboo through a rice field. Men dominate farming, making it difficult for women to access and benefit from government programs related to agriculture. Since the Green Revolution under Marcos in the 1970s, scientists took over the production of patented seeds, and the

---

9. Arguelles-Caouette, Arca. 2011. *Choosing Food Sovereignty: Rethinking Agriculture in the Philippines*. Quezon City, Philippines: Third World Studies Center; Montreal, Canada: University of Montreal. 22 min. and 28 sec. <https://youtu.be/0mqMOEqZxAA>.

10. Summary from the filmmaker and the editors.



decision-making power of what to plant turned to the agri-business industry. The wide variety of more than 4,400 types of seeds was reduced to a dozen, taking control away from the farmers and pushing them toward greater vulnerability through exploitative practices, like monoculture or dynamite fishing, to make ends meet. Farmers were marginalized; land was brutally taken away in plots in utmost disregard of its indigenous owners. Violent conflicts arise when farmers in provincial areas attempt to democratize land distribution.

Various movements are in progress to shift the power away from corporations and back to farmers to create a sustainable, ecologically sound agriculture, turning farming into a work of hope. It is an ambitious endeavor. As Masanobu Fukuoka states in *The One-Straw Revolution*, “The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings” (1975, xiv). By giving rights to farmers to own, save, and improve seeds, the aspect of genetic uniformity could be mitigated. This fight of David against Goliath starts locally by organizing farmers, lobbying for local policies, supporting nearby production and sustainable agriculture. The organic market is a niche market—the supply is nevertheless smaller than the demand. Linking produce to the organic market is a step that is in progress. Good farmers contribute to the welfare of society in more ways than society usually acknowledges. The appeal of organic farming is boundless. The shift toward a system centered on farmers having access to seeds and input is a big leap.

### **In the Philippines, Giving Birth Kills: Maternal Mortality in the Philippines<sup>11</sup>**

*In the Philippines in 2008, for every 100,000 childbirths, 94–160 resulted in the death of the mother. Health experts argue that these are preventable maternal deaths. The documentary highlights the government’s indecisiveness in addressing this concern coupled with the prohibitive cost of securing medical care, leading expectant mothers to avail of services from a hilot, a traditional birth attendant. Hilots, however, are not trained to handle complicated childbirths. The*

---

11. Descroix, Nicolas, Barbie Jane L. Rosales, Cherry E. Sun, and Audrey-Maud Tardif. 2011. *In the Philippines, Giving Birth Kills: Maternal Mortality in the Philippines*. Quezon City, Philippines: Third World Studies Center; Montreal, Canada: University of Montreal. 28 min. and 52 sec. [https://youtu.be/5N\\_CMEbrG3s](https://youtu.be/5N_CMEbrG3s).

*documentary then shows a local initiative in Minalabac, Camarines Sur that may prove to be an effective example on how a community can come together to ensure that pregnant mothers are given timely medical assistance before, during, and after giving birth. The documentary ends by looking at a reproductive health legislation pending in Congress that may put an end to the grave risks that pregnant women had to face in giving birth.*<sup>12</sup>

Sheer hope instead of actual and accessible pregnancy programs is one of the factors that lead to the silent epidemic of maternal death. The high mortality rate during childbirth and pregnancy in the Philippines is caused by inaccessibility of existing medical services due to distance, and the belief in hilot, birth attendants who are self-trained or have observed others in the practice of giving birth. Each hilot has a different ancient healing method, mostly opposed to medical practices. In the film *In the Philippines, Giving Birth Kills*, interviews with health workers, government officials, hilot, and pregnant women are seen in mostly talking head interviews intercut by B-roll. Its expository, academic approach makes the viewer wish for a closer look into the world of one of these expectant mothers, to evoke emotional response and greater empathy for the affected persons. Delays in decision-making processes result in a high mortality rate of pregnant women, preventable if the mother could get prenatal care and risk pregnancies could get identified. Women wait to consult a medical doctor until a condition becomes irreversible. Regional attempts have been made to improve the lack of prenatal, birth, and postpartum care. Camarines Sur Mayor Leovigildo Basmayor's "Project Mama" offers a registration to a regional database for pregnant women, a medical consultation service accessible by cell phone, readily awaiting ambulances, and clinics and lying-in facilities supported by pharmaceutical giant Pfizer. Even though free clinics are offered in the area, 60 percent of the population still give birth in the house.

The health of a country's population is an indicator of how just and humane it is. Maternal health is a statement of women's worth in a society. Signed into law by President Benigno Aquino III in 2012, after over a decade of battling for its passage in Congress, the implementation of the Reproductive Health (RH) Act faced many hurdles: the Supreme Court struck down some of its provisions, and Congress cut its budget. Opponents of the RH law, mostly religious

---

12. Summary from the editors.

groups and pro-life advocates, questioned its constitutionality, and the Supreme Court issued a restraining order. The RH law's implementation is part of the Duterte administration's agenda. Rural-based doctors insist that the government has to issue not only an order but also the necessary funds so local administrations can implement it. They call for a reduction of overpopulation, as poverty goes hand in hand with lack of sexual education and large numbers of children. Women are dying because society has yet to make the decision that their life is worth saving.

Again, through these documentaries, we are reminded of what has been said by scholars about accidents and our perception of them. Virilio believes that

Daily life is becoming a kaleidoscope of incidents and accidents, catastrophes and cataclysms, in which we are endlessly running up against the unexpected, which occurs out of the blue, so to speak. In a shattered mirror, we must then learn to discern what is impending more and more often but above all more and more quickly, those events coming upon us inopportunely, if not indeed simultaneously. Faced with an accelerated temporality which affects mores and Art as much as it does international politics . . . surprise becomes a subject for research and major risks a subject for exposure and for exhibition, within the framework of instantaneous telecommunications. (Virilio 2005)

Meanwhile, according to Valéry, "The instrument has disappeared from our collective consciousness. Colloquially, we say that an operation has become automatic. The conclusion of this is that consciousness now exists only for accidents." (1989, author's translation). Finally, according to Aristotle, as per Virilio (2007, 10), "*the accident reveals the substance . . . because WHAT CROPS UP (accidens) is a sort of analysis, a technoanalysis of WHAT IS BENEATH (substare) any knowledge*" (emphasis in the original). Filipino society defies this statement by turning the catastrophe into the expected and making the threat as the norm. It does not attempt to improve the instrument or alter a condition, but develops a resilience by adapting to the substance, in exposing itself to the risk.

If global awareness is brought about only if a catastrophe occurs, obliviousness of accidents, as well as major disasters, would not only amount to lack of awareness but to madness—the madness of deliberate blindness to the fatal consequences of our actions and inventions. There is one particularly urgent necessity: to expose the Accident and turn around the threat of the Expected. The substance cannot be changed; it is our actions that have to adapt to finding solutions that do not amount to choosing to be sheer blindfolded. ❁

## REFERENCES

- Fukuoka, Masanobu. (1975) 2009. *The One-Straw Revolution*. Translated to English by Larry Korn, Chris Pearce, and Tsune Kurosawa, with an introduction by Frances Moore Lappe. New York: New York Review of Books.
- Valéry, Paul. 1989. *The Outlook for Intelligence*. Vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*. Translated by Jackson Matthews. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Virilio, Paul. 2005. "Accidents." Fondation Cartier Paris.
- . 2007. *The Original Accident*. Translated by Julie Rose. Cambridge: Polity Press.