

## BOMBA QUEENS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A GENEALOGY OF THE FILIPINA CINEMATIC BODY

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### ABSTRACT

*The bomba film is a specific genre that capitalizes on women's bodies as a source of libidinal pleasure and subversion of mainstream ethical standards. How the cinematic body of the Filipina is exploited is examined against the backdrop of national development strategies under three different rule: pre-martial law (1970-1972), martial law (1972-1986 and post-martial law (1986-1998).*

In the early 1970s, prior to the declaration of martial rule, *bomba* (nudity and sex; “soft-porn”) films proliferated bodies of sensuous and sexual women and men. Shown in mainstream moviehouses, the bomba film does not have the usual direct sexual penetration in hardcore pornographic films. An aberration to the bomba film is the *pene* (penetration) or *penekula* (a play on Filipino words: from *penetration* and *pelikula*, meaning movies), which can be considered as the X-rated or hardcore version. I will trace the genealogy of the Filipina cinematic body through the trope of the bomba genre. Bomba films have become the precursor to other films whose libidinal economy is invested on display and excess, prohibition and lack of young women’s

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body. The genre can be categorized and periodized as follows: the bomba film (1970–Sept. 1972); bold film, wet look stage (1974–1976); bold film, daring stage (1976 to 1982); FF (fighting fish) films and pene films (1983–1986); ST or sex-trip film (1986–1992); and the TT or TF (titillating) films (1992–present). Bienvenido Lumbera has recommended for a reconsideration of the premartial law bomba film as “a subversive genre in which the narrative pretends to uphold establishment values when it is actually intent on undermining audience support for corrupt and outmoded institutions.”<sup>1</sup> His suggestion can be used to examine even martial law, postmartial law, and post-Marcos translations of the bomba film.

The analysis of the “quasi-forbidden” body of the woman in the bomba genre presents aspects of critique and complicity to the unattainable model of the presidential and First Lady’s body. Focusing on the genealogy of the Filipina cinematic body presents issues on the reworking of the couple’s excess and display. Furthermore, this cinematic body provides another trope to foreground issues of the Filipina multinational worker, the emergent metropolitan body in the Philippines. Forced to perform menial yet crucial function in the new global division of labor, the Filipina multinational worker is in dialogue with notions of lack and prohibition of the cinematic and imeldific bodies.

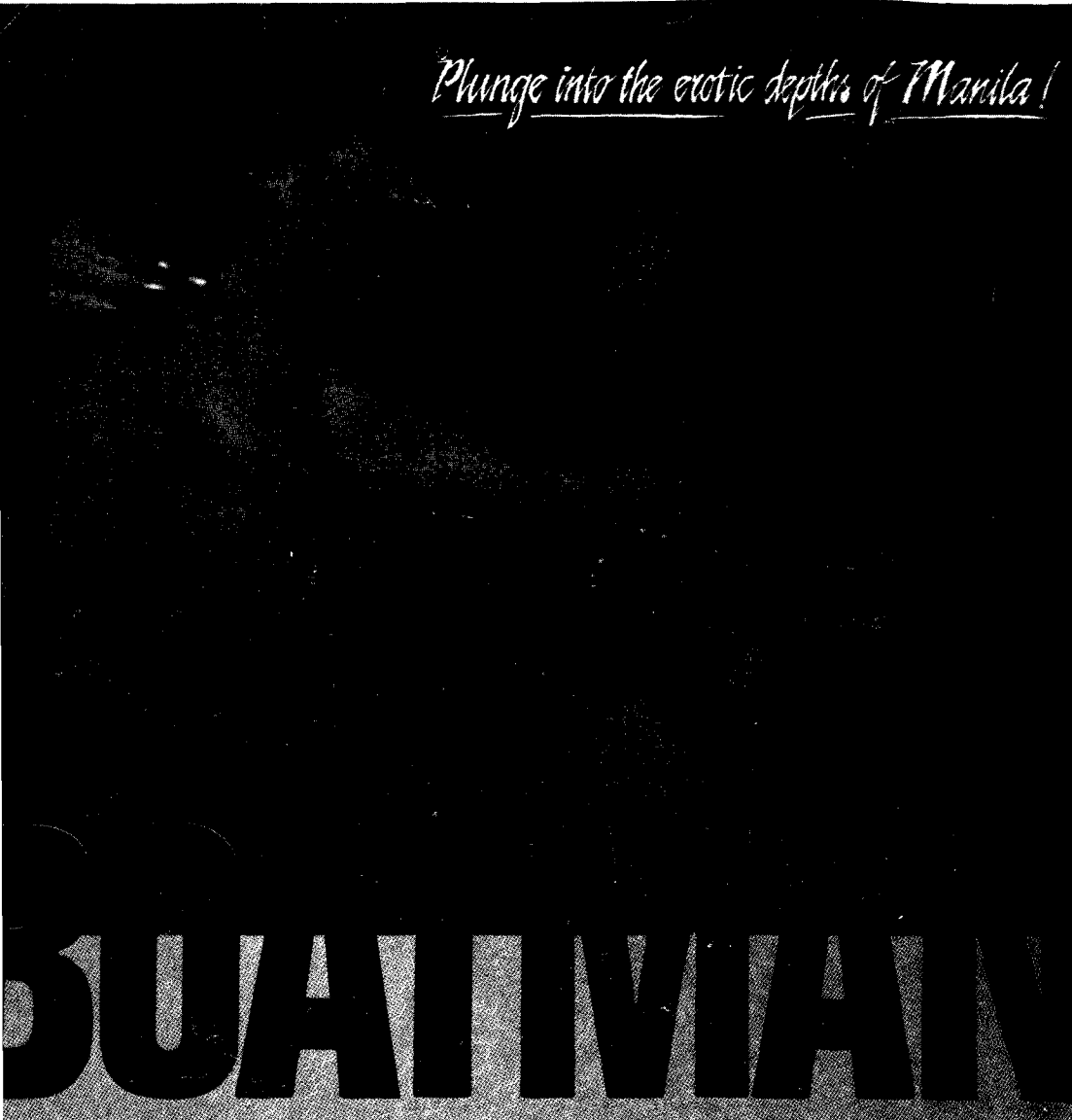
A Merle Fernandez starrer, *Uhaw* (Thirst) in 1970 “ushered in the first bomba trend.”<sup>2</sup> It showed the star in a long shot, running in the nude. Marra Lanot contends that the film “resuscitated the local movie industry because of the movie’s (and others of its kind’s) wide appeal to both AB and CD crowds.”<sup>3</sup> The bomba film allowed the commercial appropriation of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, but limited in its heterosexual focus. The additional crossing to the prohibition were the efforts to

combine artistry and socially relevant topics. *Nympha* (1971) tackled abortion and was also artistically crafted by director Celso Ad. Castillo, who emerged as one of the leading filmmakers of the “new Philippine cinema.”

The first generation of bomba stars embodies the mestiza qualities of fair skin, sharp nose and voluptuous body. Aside from Fernandez, the others are Divina Valencia, Rosanna Ortiz, Stella Suarez, Yvonne and Alona Alegre. Though there are no frontal nudities, what the bomba film did was to suggest and titillate through the semi-visibility of naked and visibility of semi-naked mestiza bodies. What can be gleaned from this is a simultaneous feeling of xenophilia and xenophobia over the indigenized white body. The actors performing lead roles in the bomba film resignify whiteness as the privileged cultural marker. The Caucasian woman becomes the ultimate object of conquest. On the other hand, the mestiza features also evokes the bastardization of the pure Filipina woman. The titles of the films characterize both sexually active and deprived women: *Gutom* (Hungry), *Sabik* (Eager), *Laman sa Laman* (Flesh to Flesh), *Hayok* (Starved). Sexual activity and promiscuity are attributed to whiteness.

The bomba film had a literal “subversive” quality. Lanot writes that “the declaration of martial rule clamped down on all bomba films as well as political movies critical of the administration.”<sup>4</sup> What then thrived are horror and fantasy hits. The bomba film’s abrupt disappearance was necessary for the clean moral slate Marcos was attempting to establish through the New Society. The moral order was staked on the sudden invisibility of sexualized mestiza bodies; the exorcising of sexuality represented its undesirability to the Marcos’ order that frowns on national bodies in a static state.

What initially took off from the bomba genre during martial rule are so-called bold films. These films presented less overt display



Still shots (239, 246) from a poster of the film "Boatman"  
Courtesy of the UP Film Center

of women's bodies, as strict enforcement of censorship rules prevented any form of nudity. Spectatorial pleasure comes from the tease, of seeing prohibited bodily parts in implicit fashion. The bold films came in two stages, one characterized by the emblematic "wet" look, the other by their "daring" quality. The "wet" look showed "female stars swimming in their underwear, taking a bath in their *camison* (white underdress), or being chased and raped in a river, sea, or under a waterfall."<sup>5</sup> The later "daring" films showed "as much as their predecessors in the industry but enough or too much for their age."<sup>6</sup>

The first stage saw more mature women embodying less of the mestiza features—Gloria Diaz, Elizabeth Oropesa, Alma Moreno, Daria Ramirez and Chanda Romero. Gloria Diaz, a Miss Universe title holder, embodied the idealized Filipina features—brown skin, long straight hair, slender, oval face. The second stage figures "fresh faces" and tackled more socially relevant issues. In the first stage, there was a clear shift in the sexualized body, from the mestiza to what is perceived as the ideal Filipina body. In so doing, there was also an engagement being made with the regime's idealized asexual working body and film's sexual body. Though set in provincial locales, outside the immediate reach of martial rule, the films tackle sexuality in ways that explore, contain and explode the issue further.

The second stage however backgrounded the mestiza criterion in the selection of actors. What becomes crucial is age. Sexuality is attributed to *menor de edad* (underage) women. The maneuver successfully wooed young adults and women audiences into the moviehouses.

The declaration of martial rule saw the visibility of working women as epitomized by Imelda. As they began multinational work, women even with small income would still go to the movies as a form of national pastime. To some extent, such "daring" films regularized their moviegoing. The casting of very young

actors was also targetted to bring young adults into the movie-houses. Constituting the biggest market then, the young adults patronized these films even as most of these were rated “for adults only.” Marcos also emphasized the responsibility of the youth for nation-building. He formed a youth brigade, headed by eldest daughter, Imee. He also lowered the voting age for plebiscites to everyone at least fourteen years old.

In the emergence of the bold film, the issue of sexuality is racially and generationally transferred. What happens in Marcos’ martial rule and in the networking of national space for multinational business is the growing emphasis on women’s national bodies. The regular and young bodies of women are integral to the 1970s encroachment of multinational capital that circuits the national for multinational work. Six days after Marcos declared martial rule, the American Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines sent a congratulatory telegram to the president, “wish[ing] you every success in your endeavors to restore peace and order, business confidence, economic growth and the well being of the Filipino people and nation.” They also assured him of their “confidence and cooperation”; furthermore, they were “communicating these feelings to [their] associates and affiliates in the United States.”<sup>7</sup> Marcos’ groundclearing efforts involved the projection of activized working bodies ready in the service of multinational corporations. In a 1974 *New York Times* advertisement, the Philippine government cites among others the two reasons for investing in the Philippines:

We like multinationals. Manila’s natural charms as a regional business center have been enhanced by a special incentive package. The multinational company setting up its regional or area headquarters in the Philippines is now “exempt from all forms of local licenses, fees, dues, imposts or any other local taxes or burdens.”

In Manila your expatriate-managers will enjoy Asia's lowest living costs among the most outgoing people in the Pacific. Many bungalows in the Makati area have swimming pools as standard equipment. A cook starts at \$28; a maid at \$14, and a first-class chauffeur at \$52. A quick entry-and-exit clearances; income taxes limited to 15 percent of gross.

. . . Local staff? Clerks with a college education start at \$35, a fourth of what they cost in Singapore. Accountants come for \$67, executive secretaries for \$148. Move your Asian headquarters to Manila and make your cost accountants happy.

Our labor force speaks your language. Whether you're talking electronic components, garments or car manufacturing. National literacy was placed at 83.4 percent in 1973 (English is the medium of instruction), which brings the Philippines closest to the Japanese standard among all Asian countries . . . .

Recent Presidential decrees have simplified conciliation and arbitration of labor disputes (both strikes and lockouts are prohibited), lifted work restrictions on Sundays and holidays, *liberalized the employment of women and children* (my emphasis), and expanded the scope of the apprenticeship program.

Labor costs for the foreign company setting up plant in Manila could work out from 35 to 50 percent lower than they would be in either Hong Kong or Singapore.<sup>8</sup>

Inexpensive national bodies, though not yet fully abled and exposed, are deemed as attraction to multinational business. In being "unexposed" and "not yet fully abled" for multinational work, women's bodies are positioned as virginal resources awaiting multinational conquest and truncation. Like the cinematic body in the bold film, these bodies do tease, calling attention to themselves and their conquests. The shift to idealized national standards of body and sexuality in the bold film are somehow attuned to the Marcos' circuiting of the national space for foreign capital.

An instrumental industry Marcos developed early on with the declaration of martial law is tourism, further institutionalizing the rudiments of gazing, display and excess, prohibition and

lack. Jose Aspiras, Marcos' appointed head of the Ministry of Tourism since 1973, took charge of the expansion of the industry that generated one million visitors in 1980, compared to 150,000 in 1971. Among the national attraction to the largely male tourists are the bodies of young adults and children. Some 150,000 women work in the prostitution trade; 5,000 children in Manila are involved in child prostitution; and an undisclosed number work as male prostitutes. For both Marcos and multinational business, the over display of bodies for sexual work in the tourism and entertainment industries only further serves the national drive. Like poverty and slums, bodies doing sexual work were considered a blemish to the moral uprightness of the New Society and therefore, had to be positioned in its underbelly. Bodies in sexual work, however, exist in busied layers of businesses. The bodies focus rather than interrogate their daily survival. These bodies have helped institutionalized the "underground economy," allowing their own circulation as vital to the sphere's growing importance even to the formal economy. These bodies, therefore, remain integral in the joint venture between Marcos and multinational business toward modernization and transnationalism.

The display of excess bodies reconstitute the prohibition of lacking bodies. Two aberrant types of bomba films direct to this point. While the FF films are done with government support, pene films are done under the surveillance of the government. The FF films are composed of artsy sexually overt movies shown uncensored at the Film Center. FF ("fighting fish") plays on the last two letters of Imelda's dismal MIFF (Manila International Film Festival). Suffering from overspending, the Film Center under the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, a government agency designed to encourage the production of quality films, was transformed as the exhibition venue of FF films. Some of the



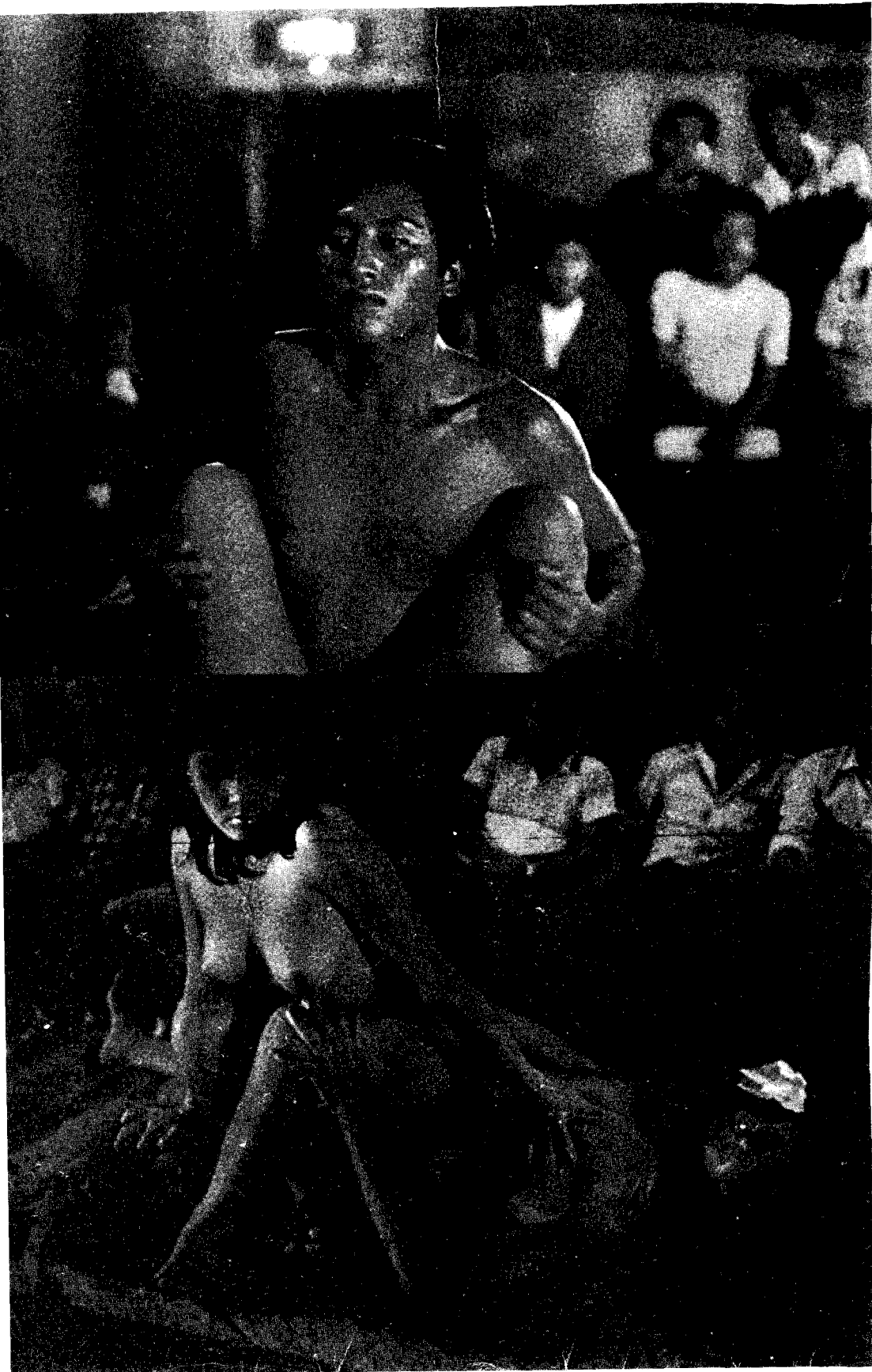
notable films are *Isla* (Island, 1984), *Scorpio Nights* (1985), and *Boatman* (1985), and starred by Ana Marie Gutierrez and Isabel Lopez, both new actresses.

A reserved army of willing bodies provided a steady supply of pene-film actresses. In a pervert move by managers that call into question the bourgeoisie-comprador operation, some of the actors were named after soft drink brands (Pepsi Paloma, Coca Nicolas, Sarsi Emmanuel) and rich business families (Claudia Zobel being the most famous of this batch). Some of the stars were Amerasian children, fathered by American soldiers and mothered by Filipina sex workers. Together with other young and unknown performers, these second group of actors would also be featured in the pene (from penetration) films. These involved actual penetration sequences inserted or reinserted for runs in "third-class" movie houses in Manila and the provinces. Whether the penetration sequences were actually performed by these actors or other unknown ones was not the draw. What attracted people to the pene films was the promise of "inserted" sequence of more overt sexual play. The disruption is obvious, as the inserted sequence may or may not have been actually shot specific for the film shown. While pleasure from FF films comes from a sanctioned space, pleasure from pene films comes from transgression of sanctions.

The body and sexuality are both legitimated and delegitimated by the dialectics of sanction and pleasure that has also implicated critical film practice. The mature woman's body is privileged in the FF films accepted into the canons of Philippine cinema, as the three films have also received critical acclaim. Here then is an interesting position of critical film practice in refurbishing FF films as quality film, doubly sanctioning films sanctioned by government mismanagement of priorities. What has remained as the scapegoat in critical film practice is the

commercialized penekula that privileges the “exploitation” of young sexual female bodies. These films assert legitimacy by being a “regular” narrative film but with more graphic sexual play. This means that films have the regular markers of commercial movies, as most of these films have also been exhibited as bold films in mainstream moviehouses. They assume a pene quality after their first run, when inserted sequences are emplaced. Because the insertions may or may not have been done for the same film—it is also prevalent to use sex footage from foreign films—the spectator may then be watching at least two movies. While the subversive quality of the FF film lies only within the film text, the pene film has a double subversion, a “double penetration” so to speak. The “pene” sequence in the film text is explicit in its display of the doubly prohibited—graphic sex involving actual penetration. Furthermore, film practice is also called into attention for providing a public sphere where sexual promiscuity, prostitution, gay and youth subcultures run contrary to Marcos’ moral order. Like the geosphere of the sex worker, however, the opening only serves to reaffirm the larger Marcos juncture with multinational business. For in the end of this period, only death which pervades this cinema of bodies becomes the recourse for emancipation. Paloma committed suicide, Emmanuel attempted to take her own life, Zobel died in a car crash. All three have also done drugs.

With Aquino’s ascent to power, these films were considered antithetical to her administration’s reclaiming of the moral good. What surfaced thereafter in the bomba genre is called ST (sex trip) film whose etymology Lanot states “is influenced by the drug culture—power trip, ego trip, food trip, etc.”<sup>9</sup> The young actors like Gretchen Barreto and Rita Avila come from higher middle to upper class backgrounds and have had access to good education. “The female stars project the ‘classy’ image of the



well-bred *colegialas* or university coeds from well-to-do families seeking thrills.”<sup>10</sup> Both Sharon Cuneta and ST films evoke the official view of Marcos’ nation. While in Cuneta’s films perseverance and hard work are requirements to social mobility and moral aptitude, the ST star transgression is immediately contained by moral forces. The ST film is premised on a dual contrary transgression of class and moral bounds. Moral bounds, however, have been fixated on the containment of the efforts of the women characters to transgress their sexual confines. As such the ST films also reaffirm Aquino’s asexual and morally upright national body, whose sexual talk is only performed in private.

What transformed in sex oriented films during the Ramos’ administration are called TT films (“*titillating*”; whose pronunciation also refers to the Tagalog word for penis). While more overtly sexually promiscuous, these films remain covert of the performing sexual parts. The active sexual parts and the breasts remain hidden from actual view. Stars included Alma Concepcion, later banned from enrolling at the oldest catholic university for her roles in TT films, and Amanda Page, a young Amerasian Filipina. The discourse of women’s participation in sex oriented movies are invoked by an elite view of sex in film as art (Concepcion) and as box-office draw (Page). Speaking through highly articulate women, the bifurcated discourse is nevertheless one of positioning and location of female roles, one of continuous clarification of their function, performance, relationship with each other and their male partners on and off screen. Women speak but only in terms of an already emplaced sphere of “women talk” that sets the limits of productive engagement on the spectacularization of their quasi-hidden and exposed bodies in these films. Like the coinage of the TT films, women’s bodies titillate for the pleasure of a male dominated libidinal economy.

What a genealogy of the Filipina cinematic body has presented are several configurations of national development, national bodies, display and excess. Rafael presents one point: "Imelda provoked attention because—as the bomba stars—she exposed herself in novel situations and made her body available for all to see; but while the bodies of bomba stars bore the signs of the marketplace, Imelda's body figured the vanishing point (in the double sense of the term, as focus and disappearance) of the history of patronage in the midst of the marketplace."<sup>11</sup> The touristic gaze works divergently for Imelda and the subordinated women's bodies. While both bodies attract attention to themselves, Imelda's body claims an asexual dominance while other women's bodies are made available for sexualized conquest and pleasure. With the exception of constant escort George Hamilton, and suspicions of a lesbian relationship with socialite Christina Ford, Imelda's representations have always been an asexual power body, a body transfixed in non-stop work for the national culture produced in conjunction with Marcos' project of nation-building. This analysis of women's bodies on screen has opened some issues on how sexuality has been mobilized as a national category or how the issue of gender and sexuality crucially figure in the notions of censorship and national development.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Bienvenido Lumbera, 1991. "Pelikula: An essay on Philippine film," in *Tuklas sining: Essays on the Philippine Arts*, ed. Nicanor Tiongson (Manila: CCP, 1991), 216.

<sup>2</sup>Marra Lanot, 1992. "Bomba Film," *Encyclopedia of Philippine Arts and Culture Volume on Film*, manuscript (1992), 1. Another useful source is Joel David, "Sexual Libertarianism" and "Fleshmongering," *Fields of Vision Critical Applications in Recent Philippine Cinema*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila UP, 1995, 26-27 and 112-114, respectively.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>American Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines, "Telegram to President Marcos," *The Philippines Reader A History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship and Resistance*, ed. Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen Rosskamm Shalom. Quezon City: Ken, 1987, 229-230.

<sup>8</sup>Philippine Government, "Seven Good Reasons Why You Should Be looking to the Philippines. Now." *New York Times*. Jul. 28, 1974, 5F.

<sup>9</sup>Lanot, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* For a further discussion of ST films and the shifting reemphasis on the male actor, see David, "Demachofication, a review of *Kristobal*," 77-80.

<sup>11</sup>Vicente Rafael, "Patronage and Pornography: Ideology and Spectatorship in the Early Marcos Years," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32:2. Apr. 1990, 301.

