

Film Review

Poverty for Sale

Ataul for Rent

Philippine release date: November 2007

Running time: 94 mins.

Cast: Joel Torre, Raul Lazaro, Pen Medina, Noni Buencamino, Irma Adlawan

Director: Neal Tan

Producer: Anthony Gedang

Screenplay: Neal Tan

Writer: Anthony Gedang

Cinematography: Renato de Vera

Music: Nonong Buencamino

Philippine distributor: Artiste Entertainment Works International

International English Title: Casket for Hire

by Skilty Labastilla

Most artists believe that their work is a reflection of the times. Indeed, artistic work can only mean something if it speaks of or comments on the world that the artists inhabit. Artists who depict poverty and squalor and corruption and dirty politics are often praised for having “neorealistic” sensitivity. Filmmakers who are not afraid to show the “stark reality” are lauded, as they should be. But in the age of globalization, even distorted versions of “the stark reality” can now claim a stake in the global cinema, appreciated by film enthusiasts who do not know any better, thereby fueling the misunderstanding of cultures and sociopolitical realities in the world.

A case in point is the film *Ataul for Rent*. This film, released in November 2007, tells the story of the lives of several characters living in a slum area called *Kalyehong Walang Lagusan* (Dead-End Alley). The main character, Guido (Joel Torre), owns a small-time funeral parlor that rents out four coffins of different sizes – “large,” “medium,” “small,” and “extra small.” People in this slum community are so poor that they cannot afford to buy caskets for their dearly departed. Guido is also the embalmer while his live-in partner, Pining (Jaclyn Jose), whom he has increasingly brutal nightly

squabbles with, does the makeup. Their neighbors (played by Philippine independent film veterans and rising stars such as Pen Medina, Noni Buencamino, Irma Adlawan, etc.) are gossips, gamblers, drunkards, drug addicts, ex-convicts, prostitutes, and snatchers. In fact, as Neal Tan writes in his director's notes, the only one who is "pure and innocent-hearted" in the community is Batul (Ronnie Lazaro), the *taong grasa* ('greasy man') living among rats who quietly and wisely observes the denizens of the slum.

Over the course of the story, three of these neighbors die one after the other. Guido, of course, is happy. Only the "extra small" coffin remains unrented. The remaining live neighbors convene every night outside Guido's place to gamble and drink, as done in most Filipino wakes. Their nightly sessions, though, come to an abrupt end when the barangay chairman decides to demolish the slum. The film climaxes in a dramatic, bloody confrontation between the local government demolition team and the slum dwellers, "ending the aberrant activities and injustices of people towards other people" (N. Tan, Director's notes, n.d.). At the end of the film, a new church, *Bagong Pag-asa* (New Hope), rises from the ashes of the former slum.

The film was well-received by film critics in the Philippines. Even the government, through the Cinema Evaluation Board (CEB), gave it an "A" rating, entitling it to a 100-percent tax rebate. Members of the CEB called the film "bleak, black, and beautiful." They also stated that the film "reflected a powerful depiction of life on the other side of the fence." They cited the film's "realistic dialogue," as well as its "fluid and engaging" cinematography and editing. One board member said, "(t)he squalor, poverty and lack of peace and order and all the other details in the production design make the film an excellent work of art." The film was invited to screen at film festivals in Cairo, Kerala, Chennai, and Montreal.

With all the acclaim that the film is getting here and abroad, as Filipinos, we should be proud about it, right? Wrong. Before I tell you why, I'll just provide a brief context.

For Filipinos during the Martial Law period, life in the country became increasingly harder. It was during this period that the Philippine film industry was churning out excellent neorealist films courtesy of filmmaking greats Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal. *Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag*, *City After Dark*, and *Insiang* are just some of the films now considered classics for their realistic portrayal of the lives of the poor and the oppressed.

As the new millennium approached, the Philippine movie industry began slowly declining due to three related factors. One: movie ticket prices began to rise as movie theaters improved their facilities and equipment. Two: the disparity between the Hollywood blockbuster films and local films in terms of viewer satisfaction widened. Moviegoers know that they will enjoy watching *Spiderman* over, let's say, *Gagamboy*. Three: the network "war" between the two leading TV stations forced a vast improvement of their TV programming that virtually transformed the Filipino living room into a home theater. Why would you pay P80 to watch *Desperadas* if you could watch the Filipino remake of *Marimar* right in your living room for free?

Globalization has not only brought about the digitization of technology, it has led to a democratization of information. Although Philippine independent filmmakers have been around for several decades, with the availability of cheaper digital cameras, anybody with a good idea for a movie and some basic filmmaking skills can now direct a film at a cheaper cost. Independent movie producers do not expect to earn money locally. Only very few "indie" films make money at the tills. (*Ataul for Rent*, for one, barely made any money during its one-week run in Metro Manila theaters.) Instead, independent movie producers expect to recoup their costs through possible acquisition deals with foreign companies that attend these various film festivals. The Internet has made communication between film festival organizers and budding filmmakers easier as well.

In the past few years alone, such films as *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros*, *Kubrador*, *Foster Child*, and *Tribu*, have been screened at international filmfests. These films all have a common theme – poverty. In fact, it is poverty that makes these films look "gritty" and "realistic" and "artsy." And for films like *Ataul for Rent*, it is clear that the intended market is the international one.

This is dangerous since it could promote misconceptions of the real situation in our country. Yes, there are hundreds and thousands of urban poor in the Philippines. And yes, some of them are drunkards and gamblers and sex workers. But these social "misfits" do not entirely represent the urban poor. Even in my young career as an urban anthropologist, living in Payatas for several months and talking with urban poor people in various slum areas in the metropolis to learn about their problems, aspirations, and their lives in general, I have never encountered such an exaggerated "reality" as the one shown in the film. The film is nothing more than a mishmash of various stereotypes of the urban poor. I know that it is supposed to be a satire but the representation of "poverty" is in fact unreal and done in bad taste.

It is obvious that Neal Tan, the writer and director of the film, has not mingled with the urban poor for any length of time. Throughout the film, you get a sense that he is demonizing the poor, portraying them as soulless rats and society's bane. The film adheres to the misconception that there is a "culture of poverty" and the only way to get out of that culture is through a major social intervention. This concept of the "culture of poverty," first introduced by anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the 1960s, posits that poor people have developed a cultural and behavioral pattern that would make it difficult for them to get out of poverty (Lewis, 1966). Some of the characteristics of the 'culture of poverty' include fear and suspicion of the non-poor, disinclination to join organizations, a rapid and unhappy childhood, early initiation to sex, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority. Although Lewis clarified that not all poor people develop the culture of poverty since the larger socioeconomic context can play a role in the cultural development of the poor, his concept was later on criticized for blaming the poor themselves for perpetuating their poverty (Goode, 2002).

Changes in the sociopolitical context of the Philippines since the EDSA Revolution (in particular the growth of civil society and the availability of more economic options in an increasingly globalized economy) have greatly transformed the stereotypical urban poor person from a weak, helpless, happy-go-lucky individual to that of an empowered person who is more often than not a member of a community organization and integrated into the larger society. Though poverty still exists, poor people now have more voice. There is virtually no informal slum community in the country today that has no community organization.

One laughable scene in the movie is a climactic one where the government demolition team literally surprises the slum dwellers by violently hacking their way into the community. The Urban Development Housing Act which protects informal settlers from being evicted without proper consultation has been in place since 1992 so that scene very rarely happens in real life and was obviously just put there to add drama to the already over-dramatic movie.

The film, in short, derives its appeal from the shock tactics that the writer employs. For instance, the sponge that Pining uses to put makeup on the dead is the same one that she uses to prettify living girls in the slum. All the characters who ended up dead died "interestingly." The old woman overdosed on *shabu* (methamphetamine), the thief was killed by a policeman friend, the callboy was killed by a druglord, and the prostitute was raped

and left for dead at a garbage dump. The last fatality is actually a major character, whose death is too grisly to recount. Let me just say that it involved the last remaining coffin.

The use of religious metaphors in the film – the atheist calling out the name of God on his deathbed and the church rising from the former slum colony – are evidence of the moral high ground that the filmmakers think they are on. The film is basically saying that poor people are immoral and it would take a religious intervention for them to see the light.

F. Landa Jocano (1975), wrote in his now-classic work *Slum as a Way of Life*:

We condemn the slum less on the basis of what we know about it but more on our pre-conceived notions that slum life is pernicious to our middle-class values; slum behavior is threatening to the comforts of the well-off in society... To describe slum life differently from the established stereotype is to remove the comfortable feeling that we are champions of the poor, patrons of the so-called culturally-deprived. (p.197)

By taking their own “more interesting” version of reality and marketing it overseas, the filmmakers are perpetuating this traditional image of the Filipino urban poor.

Filmmakers nowadays, in the age of globalization, should realize that their films are not just forms of entertainment but are taken as cultural artifacts. Moviegoers watching the film in Kerala or Montreal or Cairo will never realize that the film does not show the real situation of our urban poor. That is why our filmmakers should exercise responsibility in choosing their subjects and must do research about them. Local critics and members of government film-evaluation bodies should also be more aware of the true realities in society.

References

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