

Film Review

Focus on the Philippines: Films from the Margins

Bingat (Sherds). Directed by Choy Pangilinan, Qubry Quesada, Abet Umil, and Joolia Demigillo, 2015, 112 minutes, color. Distributed by University of the Philippines Film Institute, btquesada@upd.edu.ph

Yield. Directed by Toshihiko Uriu and Victor Delotavo Tagaro, 2017, 89 minutes, color. Distributed by T.I.U. Cinema, uriu77@gmail.com

War Is a Tender Thing. Directed by Adjani Guerrero Arumpac, 2013, 70 minutes, color. Distributed by Saltwater Cinema, saltwatercinema@gmail.com

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In 1998, Jay Ruby expressed his frustration with ethnographic film as merely a fancy term for films produced by those with little or no anthropological training, by those who do not conduct fieldwork, or by anthropologists who produce audiovisual works within the all-encompassing category of “documentary.” Taking a different view, Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) insists that ethnographic cinema encompasses a wide range of films that move across and between the genres of science/art and reality/fantasy. Daniel Picton, in line with Rony, writes that discourses on the distance between the observer and the observed are potentially altered by “anthropology at home” and that changes introduced to the ethnographic cinema genre “should be celebrated” (2011, 434). Despite his “big tent” approach to ethnographic film, Picton argues that only films that are descriptive and explanatory are truly ethnographically valuable.

Taking into consideration the many possibilities for what could be considered ethnographic and anthropology’s seeming discomfort in relaxing the requirements for rigorous description, this review examines three recent films from the Philippines. Earlier examples of visual ethnographic documentation of the Philippines during the American colonial period reveal how early filmmakers set out to record “savagery” throughout the archipelago. In the postcolonial period, these films suggest ways to negotiate the dilemmas of representation, ethics, and location. The films reviewed here reflect on

the issues of identity, history, labor, and intimacy that emerge from a multiply colonized country. The way these films straddle ethnography and documentary, and their use of experimentation and reflexive approaches, contribute to ongoing conversations in anthropology.

The first film, *Bingat* (Sherds) (2015), was collectively produced by a team of film teachers, a poet-musician, and a young anthropologist. Informed by different approaches to creative practice, this team explores the layered and conflicting narratives that emerge from an archeological site in a coastal village called Tuhian, located in Bondoc Peninsula in the Philippines. Since January 2008, the site has been busy with activity for two weeks a year when professional and student anthropologists from the University of the Philippines and Australian National University gather for an annual archeological field school (Figure 1).

As if mimicking an ethnographic manuscript, the film divides its storyline into “chapters,” inviting its audience to leaf through the issues surrounding the archeological explorations in Tuhian. Led by archeologists Victor Paz and Marc Oxenham, participants of the field school unearth artifacts such as earthenware burial jars, human skeletal remains, and ornaments that have been buried in Tuhian’s shores since the precolonial period. The seascape and landscape of lush mountains and valleys seem to promise a life of abundance, but the narratives of the interviewed farmers tell otherwise. Controlled by landowners, farmers are not permitted to expand their lot or raise livestock, and those who have



FIGURE 1. Students at work in the archeological field school in Tuhian Village, Bondoc Peninsula. Image courtesy of Qubry Quesada. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

attempted to circumvent these prohibitions have been penalized by having their tenant farms razed to the ground. In the other chapters of the film, we learn in more detail about the difficult trail that Deo, a local of the area, followed to find what wealth lies beneath the sandy shores of Tuhian. His initial efforts seemed futile, as the disinterest in cultural heritage in his hometown extended even to the national agencies in Manila. Interviews with the residents, farmers, and other individuals tell us how this archeological project was welcomed with hints of doubts, suspicion, superstitions, and indifference.

In *Bingat*, the filmmakers make important assertions that this unassuming town is not a place without history. In locating this town's unwritten past, the film puts forward archeology as an avenue through which the residents' consciousness of their ancient heritage could be enriched. As Paz states in the film, the history of the Philippines is often presented in textbooks as "shallow," beginning only from the point of contact with the Spanish arrival and Chinese trade. *Bingat* repositions archeology as a kind of treasure hunt where the bounty that is sought is one's rootedness in deep history. Village residents and Filipino archeologists involved in the project tell us about the impact of the archeological project on their reawakening; the human remains are not merely artifacts, but the remains of their own ancestors. But rather than only celebrating archeology, the filmmakers of *Bingat* also want to shed light on what their informant describes as "tearful history"—the taxing life circumstances in places that are of scientific and cultural importance to the country and the larger world of archeology. When the visiting researchers and archeologists pack up, residents who labor temporarily for daily wages in the field site will eventually return to any available jobs in the vicinity. This is a village where informants recall the times when, to have food on the table, they would boil stalks of palm plants to the point of edibility. The film raises questions about the disjoint between the people's desires to know their origins, the project of archeology to systematically collect the evidences of these origins, and the dwindling community interest in learning about heritage because of the more urgent task to sustain the basic needs of their respective families. The film shows archeology as painfully intersecting with other desires for, among other things, stable employment.

Yield (2017) presents an even more difficult story of labor and survival in the Global South. Made by a long-term Japanese resident in the Philippines, Toshihiko Uriu, and artist Victor Delotavo Tagaro, the purpose of *Yield* is to create a longitudinal visual documentation of the lives of nine children filmed over five years in



FIGURE 2. A child laborer also takes a break. Image courtesy of T.I.U. Cinema. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

conditions where child labor has become a normative practice of family survival. The audience witnesses the labor, play, and pain of these children unfold on-screen, but it is only a few minutes before the film ends that their names are finally revealed. Jomar, in search for gold in the sediments on the ocean floor, breathes through a tube connected to an air compressor above the ground. Edralen plants vegetables and transports them on a bamboo raft to sell in the village. Three siblings work at a quarry, and they divide the intensity of labor among themselves depending on their age and strength. Rommel, the eldest, drives a chisel using his bare strength to pry rocks off a mountain of stone. Ariel, the second sibling, collects these rocks and moves them to an area where they will be cut into smaller pieces with the help of the youngest, April. Jason stops delivering vegetables to agricultural distributors in the village after he develops a lump on his spine. Finally, approaching its end, the film very briefly introduces Essam, a gun-wielding child in an Islamic separatist community in Mindanao, Southern Philippines. In a situation where conflict is unending as the Moro peoples continue to fight for an independent state for the long-displaced Muslim minority, some children are trained early in the techniques of war and self-defense for their community's own survival. Through this final portrait of Essam, *Yield* makes known the kind of labor that is deeply rooted in an ideology, whose warriors include children who perhaps paradoxically toil in a struggle to improve their conditions, being among the powerless and the oppressed (Figure 2).

Yield classifies itself as ethnographic but interestingly refuses to elaborate on context. *Yield* takes the route of non-explanation; it does not include sit-down interviews from the more than one thousand hours of footage that the filmmakers have accumulated over the years of data gathering. As the social reality at the heart of *Yield* is exploitation, the film could have been

a descriptive accounting of the dire conditions in the Global South. The filmmakers could have paired this narrative with the evocative images of child labor that they have captured. However, wary about crafting a transparent representation of the Third World condition, and critical of the privilege that sets their positionality as very different from those narratives being shown on-screen, the filmmakers of *Yield* attempt to avoid the objectification of poverty, depression, and misery by not allowing the audience to linger on dramatic and melancholic scenes. *Yield* eschews the progressive development of context, posing a question about the need for thickness in audiovisual description. The fast-paced editing denies any attempt to “exoticize” poverty, effectively delaying the construction of the audience’s “certain kinds of convictions” (Spivak 2010) on the themes tackled by the film.

While *Yield* is uneasy about introducing its characters more intimately, *War Is a Tender Thing* by poet-filmmaker Adjani Guerrero Arumpac offers her own family’s history as a filmic record of the common people whose stories are often diminished in the spectacularized discourse of conflict and peacebuilding in Mindanao—the same island where Essam the child warrior is being trained to fight. The film explores the question: what do we make of love that was nurtured but falls apart in the context of war? The filmmaker’s parents assure their daughter that they had never thought of themselves as divided by faith. Arumpac follows her elders like a curious child who wants to learn about family history in order to help her make sense of the chaos into which she was born. The family biography her relatives recount is deeply embedded in the larger history of Mindanao and the Philippines. Stories of love, reconciliations, and farewells for her Christian and Muslim families unfold against a seemingly abundant landscape. But as Arumpac narrates, the web of highways in Mindanao



FIGURE 3. A relative shows the filmmaker the grounds in which her grandfather rests. Image courtesy of Adjani Guerrero Arumpac. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

serves to transport bounty out of the islands. Mindanao is the home of the second longest conflict in the world. Since the middle of the 16th century, during the Spanish colonization of the Philippines, Muslims in the islands have been fighting for an independent Islamic nation. In the 1930s, during the American colonial government, key cities in Mindanao became a reluctant host for a massive Christian settlement program that was coupled with the introduction of capitalist ventures. This colonial government-initiated homing and industrial farming led to the displacement of the natives of the region and to land disputes among Christian settlers, indigenous peoples, and Muslims. The filmmaker’s father’s reflection is telling of the circuitous conditions of uncertainty and the permanence of bloodshed in Mindanao: “Peace is just a temporary period in between wars.”

Filipino historian Patricio Abinales (2012) once posed the question about how the history of the Philippines might look when viewed from the “peripheries” of the nation. Arumpac’s *War Is a Tender Thing* zooms in even closer to some of the stories in the margins of historiography, this time examining the reverberations of war at the level of the personal. Arumpac’s *hegira* (journey) to knowing her own story is akin to what Renato Rosaldo (1989) calls “agonizing introspection.” A distant relative of Arumpac narrates that in the 1970s, when conflict between the communist insurgents and the military under martial law was at its peak, soldiers came looking for the filmmaker’s Muslim grandfather named Macaurog (Figure 3). The film does not explain the reason and context for the search, but what it makes clear is that this failed hunt for Macaurog led to the execution of her distant relatives – sixteen men and five women. The relative says that a year after the massacre, the soldiers were killed in a river by men and crocodiles. In this scene, we only hear Arumpac’s voice behind the camera, timidly asking her relative about this incident of mystical retribution. The relative resolves that debts were indeed all settled via the supernatural. The filmmaker leaves the subject unexplored, no longer pushing her relative to answer questions about the story’s credibility. Far away from the political center and from agencies that deliver justice to those who seek it, Arumpac reveals how histories of reckoning—as told from the point of view of the commonly oppressed—could be tenderly received by audiences.

The postcolonial conditions wherein these three films are set are painful and jarring. While some in anthropology welcome new ways of representation through film, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003, 10) observes that anthropologists are often “caught off guard” by the reformulations introduced by “situated individuals with rights to historicity” who come from outside the discipline. These

three different stories—about the paradoxes imbued in cultural heritage projects, about the conditions of poverty that impinge upon the lives of the innocent, and about intimate stories embedded in a larger political world—are among the issues that anthropologists often write about in their ethnographic works. But as these films point out, stories that are layered with colonial histories and personal narratives create a palimpsest that is challenging to read, and within circumstances of uncertainties, the filmmakers make a statement that the work of revelation in film is not imperative. These films illustrate, moreover, that filmmakers can be haunted by their own ambitions and projects to advance the narratives of the weak. As filmmakers often need to unlearn the tools of the trade when the projects that they take on provoke self-reflection, so must anthropology. In the Philippines, a country that already has a genealogy of visual and performance practice but which lacks a formal institution that focuses on visual anthropology, and for anthropologists elsewhere who look for filmic examples that engage with uncomfortable issues in the age of postcolonialism, these films serve as powerful, albeit somewhat discomfiting, references.

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