

## ROLANDO B. TOLENTINO

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# LINKING PHILIPPINE AND SPANISH CINEMAS

According to Nick Deocampo, "Cinema [in the Philippines] was introduced by the Spaniards during the last two years of their regime (1897-98)."<sup>1</sup> After more than a hundred years of development, there is little that links Philippine and Spanish cinemas. Philippine cinema had stock mestizo-looking characters to depict the skin color of leading stars and icons of the times. Often linked to the color and physiognomy of saints and figures of Catholic divinity, whiteness became the norm of beauty, especially as involved in spectacles such as movies and politics. Whiteness, too, connoted the virtues of goodness and greatness. It was only the brown-skinned and petite Nora Aunor's breakthrough in show business in the 1970s that successfully challenged the landscape of whiteness in Philippine movies.

Strangely enough, the historical experience with the variant of whiteness from Spanish colonialism also provided the skin color preference for representation of villains: Etang Ditcher, Eddie Garcia, Subas Herrero, and Celia Rodriguez, among others. They acted in historically-set movies, as friars in Spanish colonial times, or as landlords or politicians in the post-Spanish era. Villains in Philippine cinema often heap abuse on and torment the lead stars, and have also attained iconic status for their excessive portrayal of the way to make life miserable for the stars.

While high literature, such as the writings of Nick Joaquin, National Artist for Literature, espoused a vision that celebrated Philippine culture under Spain, popular discourse, such as film, expressed the common sentiment towards Spanish rule and its legacy: elitist, feudal, anti-modern, and abusive. By the 1960s, and with the Filipinization movement sweeping society, the Spanish-language legacy was challenged. Spanish was removed by the 1973 Constitution as one of the country's official languages.

In terms of film style, it is *camp* that has a similar well-spring of creative energies in Philippine and Spanish cinemas. *Camp* refers to excess in the construction of the artifice, such as film and other artistic productions, that is able to comment on the politics of its own being and deconstruction. Not once have I heard Filipino cineastes claiming that even before Pedro Almodóvar made his high *camp* art films in 1988, using subaltern characters and life situations hinged on sex and sexual identity issues, there was Joey Gosiengfiao's oeuvre, beginning in the 1970s.

*Temptation Island* (1980) stands out as the most emblematic of Gosiengfiao's camp. Beauty contestant finalists coming from various economic and social backgrounds get trapped in an island after their ship sinks. Together with young male characters, the finalists outdo each other to survive on the island. Sexual tensions are released, making the heterosexual pairings of beauty contestant finalist and lowly male character possible. The finalists become friends in the end. The film is able to make a commentary on class and sex in the Philippines, especially in the Marcos era. The entrapment in the desert island can be read analogously to the dearth of cultural growth during the Marcos dictatorship.

What comes to mind as the only substantial engagement between Philippine and Spanish cinemas is the representation of heroism in the siege of Baler, the last remaining holdout of Spanish soldiers in the country. *Los últimos de Filipinas* (Antonio Roman, 1945) dealt with the heroism on the Spanish side. But read in hindsight, from the point of view of the Spanish Civil War and World War II (1945, the year of production), the film (from Spain's end) evoked the ethos of heroism and triumph even in defeat. It desired a colonialist nostalgia at a time and place when Spain's nationhood was also greatly under siege in the global arena.

*Baler* (Mark Meily, 2008) also focused on the heroism of Spanish soldiers in the outpost as surrounded by Filipino revolutionaries for 11 months. The heroism is emplaced in the conflicted love story of a Spanish soldier and a Filipina. The doomed romance locates the site for Philippine nationhood as emancipation from Spain becomes necessary for Philippine independence. The continuing quest for Philippine autonomy, as heralded in the year of production of the film, becomes the lingering key issue to Philippine participation in the global arena. It needs to realize its autonomy in from its failed colonial and post-colonial pasts.

There is little or even no joint production in Philippine and Spanish cinemas. What comes by way of exchanges in cinemas are exhibitions in film festivals. Spanish films are exhibited annually in the Philippines, mainly in Metro Manila and key cities, and Philippine cinema gets to be featured in various Spanish film festivals. With some 50,000 Filipinos working legally in Spain, 300,000 Filipinos, mainly mestizos, who have dual citizenship, and an estimated 4,000 Spanish citizens in the Philippines, there is minimal engagement at the ground level to effect cultural impressions. The Philippines is Spain's 28th largest trading partner, with bilateral trade at \$329.6 million in 2011.

Cultural exchanges are really effected from the ground. In the 1980s and 1990s, with a substantial number of Filipina entertainers in Japan, Filipina characters were rendered visible in Japanese films. Primarily through Ruby Moreno, a Filipina actress based in Japan, the "Filipina" presence was made visible to an already aware Japanese public. Moreno even made cinematic history by winning Japanese best actress awards for *All Under the Moon* (Yoichi Sai, 1993). This presence, plus the continuing interest of the Japanese public in issues of poverty in the Philippines, propelled collaborations in film, or the shooting of Japanese films in the Philippines.

With growing interest in South Korea, inspired by K-pop and Hallyu on the one hand, and Filipino migrant workers in Korea on the other hand, *Seoul Mates* (Nash Ang, 2014), a romantic comedy between a transgender Filipina and a Korean musician, was produced through Cinema One, a film-granting body in the Philippines. The film involved South Korean actors Jisoo Kim, Jiwon Cha, and Ryung Oh. Ang is a Filipino filmmaker based in Korea, and is doing his master's degree in filmmaking at the Korean National University of the Arts.

It is cultural exchanges benefitting target artists, filmmakers, and critics that could jumpstart Philippine and Spanish co-productions. The Film Development Council of the Philippines already has a mechanism in place to facilitate the location shoots of foreign productions in the country. The European film market, especially Spanish production houses, has yet to avail of the service. Independent Filipino filmmakers have had success in tapping European funding for co-productions. This could also be an area for co-production, with Spanish film grants funding Philippine film productions.

With the ASEAN region heading in the direction of integration and lessons learned from EU integration, rapid changes are affecting traditional movements and exchanges. Films still provide the visual power to represent collective desires and aspirations, and to make these desires tangible to the viewing public.

Novels and paintings had this power of illumination in the 19th and 20th centuries. Jose Rizal's novels indelibly marked the kind of Spanish colonialism experienced in the Philippine colony.

The other imaging of Spanish and Philippine relations can be gleaned through Juan Luna's painting *España y Filipinas* (1886), on display at the Lopez Museum. The painting depicts two female figures seen from the back, going up a step way. The Spanish figure is holding the Filipina figure by the waist and pointing to the future to her. Representing a shared past and likely separate autonomous future, the painting speaks of hope for the future. It is in the necessity of hope despite and in spite of the shared experiences in the past that filmic collaborations can be rendered in the present.

It is also in the shared quests for a national space in the global arena that hope can be visually rendered and its ethos represented.

1-Nick DEOCAMPO, *Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2003)