

The Influence of Asian society on the evolution of Philippine Queer Cinema

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, Philippine cinema has been experiencing a slow but steady increase in its production of queer-themed films. Gradually replacing the heterosexual sex-oriented or *bomba* film genre condoned by Ferdinand Marcos for its escapist effect on the masses, the Filipino movie box office is at present, according to Filipino film maker Jade Castro, bombarded by at least one gay movie a week (Ng 3). By referencing and analyzing important films of the genre in different time periods, this paper will explore in greater detail the effect cultural, religious and political movements of Asia have on the evolution of Filipino Queer Cinema, and vice versa.

A brief history of Homosexuality in Asia

Same-sex relationships in Asia has been recorded for centuries.

Homosexuality in China was documented in numerous dynastic literatures, and the practice of *shudo* or male-love in Japan has existed as part of a monastic and Samurai tradition. The culture of transvestitism has also been prevalent in countries like Thailand, well known for its *kathoeys*, or ladyboys, and the Philippines for its *baklas*, or effeminate men.

In the more recent centuries, the rising influence of organized religions like Christianity, Islam and Catholicism has led to increasing suppression of the practice of homosexuality worldwide.

Beginnings: The *bomba* as Transgressive Art

The currently thriving Queer Cinema of the Philippines, with its blatant sensuality, has its roots in the *bomba* film. The emergence of the *bomba*, or soft-core porn films, in the late 60's led to the overt sexualization and liberalization of Filipino cinema. Bienvenido Lumbera observes in *Reviewing Filipino Cinema* that besides serving as the end product to a cultural revolt against a corrupt and oppressive establishment, *bomba* films like 1970's *Uhaw* ultimately highlight the dilemma that its female protagonists face between personal instinct and the moral expectations of a society (Lumbera 19). Not unlike *bomba* heroines of the era, the heroes of the early Philippine Queer cinema also address similar transgressive themes such as the repression of individual desires by a moralistic society.

1971: *Tubog Sa Ginto* and the persecution of gays

In 1971, the conservative Filipino public was shocked by the extended soaping scene between Eddie Garcia and Mario O'Hara in Lino Brocka's *Tubog Sa Ginto*. Detailing the double life of Don Benito, a closeted gay millionaire who takes on a gold digging hustler as his male lover, the film reflects the then puritanical stance of the largely Catholic/Christian Philippine audience on homosexuality. Mel Tobias notes in *100 Acclaimed Tagalog Movies* that Brocka might have been trying to please both the public and the censors in the moralistic ending where Don Benito, fearing exposure, commits suicide after murdering his lover. In executing that tragic end, Brocka makes sure that Don Benito and his lover do not escape punishment for their

forbidden love (Tobias 241).

1978: The sympathetic portrayal of gays in *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay*

Perhaps the scathing reviews of *Tubog Sa Ginto* has tuned Lino Brocka to the public's tastes in homosexual-themed films. Forgoing steamy shower scenes for humorous banter, *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay*, released in 1978, is one of Lino Brocka's best-loved films that movingly explore the anomaly of the gay family unit in the Philippines. Starring popular comedian Dolphy as an effeminate cross dresser who has to take care of the bratty son of the man he loves, *My Father the Mother* is perhaps Brocka's most light-hearted and sympathetic depiction to date, of the sensitive and likeable gay '*bakla*' stereotype. Owing to the likeability of Dolphy's character in the film, the openly gay Brocka is perhaps one of the pioneers to introduce to Filipino screens a staple diet of male homosexual protagonists.

1980s: The rise of erotic dramas, commercial homosexuality in the

Philippines and *Macho Dancer*

The Philippine film industry experienced a surge in erotic dramas or *bomba* style films in the 1980's. Erotic flicks like *Scorpio Nights* and *Ang Bangkero* were major box office hits in 1985, feeding to the demands of a predominantly heterosexual, sex-crazed audience. While the pangs of homosexual love took a back seat in minor characters of '80s films, such as Bernardo Bernardo's character in Ishmael Bernal's *City After Dark*, it was not until 1988 when homosexual protagonists again saw the light of day.

As J. Neil C. Garcia documents in *Philippine Gay Culture*, Manila and Angeles City of the 1980s were melting pots for commercial homosexual activity.

Numerous gay strip bars sprouted, raking in big cash from the affluent middle-class and American tourists alike (Garcia 222). Challenging the identity of the gay man as a highly feminized figure with limp wrists, strip bar dancers of '80s Manila displayed 'machismo' or manly attributes, such as muscular statures, dominating social behavior, and masculine facial characteristics. 1988's *Macho Dancer* takes its inspiration from such male strippers and documents the poignant tale of a backwoods youth sold into a seedy world of corrupt police officers and male prostitution for the sake of subsistence. Director Brocka titillates the screen with countless amounts of male-to-male copulation and elaborate shower dances in what seem to be the boldest film to come out of the Philippines in decades. Despite its highly sexualized and sometimes vulgar visuals, critic Mel Tobias sees *Macho Dancer* as a legitimate and honest social commentary on the moral decline of Third World youths in their pursuit of money (Tobias 153). Due to its *bomba* style treatment of homosexual coitus, *Macho Dancer* retrospectively became a staple at international gay film festivals (Tobias 154) and would soon influence a plethora of queer-themed films from the 1990s and beyond.

The 1990s and beyond: The LGBT movement in Asia

Asia had its very first taste of the LGBT movement in the early 1990s. In 1992, the University of Philippines founded UP Babaylan, an LGBT rights organization and similarly, Japan experienced her very first Tokyo Lesbian Gay Parade in 1994. As the LGBT rights movement swept across Asia in the early 1990's, more gay-themed films made it to the big screens in the 1990s, namely 1994's *Sibak: Midnight Dancers*, 1997's *Ang Lalaki sa Buhay ni Selya*, 1998's *Miguel/Michelle* and 1999's *Burlesk King*.

According to a thread on Bukisa.com, a knowledge sharing social network site, more than 70 Filipino gay-themed films were released from 1994 to 2010. With such an enormous leap compared to the two previous decades, it is no wonder that Filipino bloggers like Mr. Cheap Justice laments the fate of the Philippines becoming 'the number one producer of gay movies' in his blog post '*Why do we allow gays to dominate Philippine Cinema?*'

The 2000s: Arroyo, the death of *bomba* and the birth of Independent Gay Cinema, M2M films and the Pink Peso

As society's tolerance towards homosexuality and gay-themed films increase, independent gay cinema also accidentally flourished under the leadership of Gloria Arroyo from 2001 to 2010, spiking the production of Filipino homosexual films in the 2000s. Under Arroyo's leadership, the Philippines experienced a decline in film output from the average of 200 films a year to a mere 36. According to Rolando B. Tolentino, this decline was due to the 2004 ban on the screening of M-18 *bomba* films in cineplexes. Since *bomba* films

made up 60% of the total film output then, the ban caused the eventual death of the heterosexual *bomba* genre but gave rise to independent filmmakers like Chris Pablo and Auraeus Solito (Tolentino 1). Overriding the output of the big studios with digital format, 2000s indie queer movies like *Markova: Comfort Gay*, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* and *Duda* eventually succeeds heterosexual *bomba* films as the next big thing.

2000's *Markova: Comfort Gay* is based on the real life biography of a transvestite forced into sexual slavery during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. Besides recounting the troubled past of Walter Dempster Jr. with piquancy, *Markova: Comfort Gay* is also a stirring ode to the often misunderstood and abused underclass of *baklas*, or transvestites of the Philippines.

Another notable that has brought Philippine Queer Cinema to its brand new height is 2005's *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros*. Highlighting the coming of age struggles of an effeminate teen caught between his loyalty to his family and his infatuation for a kindly cop, *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros* clinched numerous awards at film festivals world-wide with its emotional depth and moving brevity.

The late 2000s is characterized by a series of shallow, 'M2M' (male-to-male) movies like *Showboyz*, *Heavenly Touch* and *Bathhouse*, with their risqué and conveniently indulgent lovemaking scenes. Despite their cliché storylines and pornographic content, these M2M films have found a niche audience in the 'Pink Pesos'- increasingly affluent working class gay men in the Philippines.

Conclusion: Modern Tragedy in Philippine Queer Cinema

For centuries, tragedy has been extolled as the greatest dramatic art form, as seen in the works of Aristotle to Mishima. Philippine Queer Cinema, with its exploitative characterizations of repressed male homoerotic yearnings, is quickly becoming the latest form of tragedy in this modern era. From *Tubog Sa Ginto* to *Macho Dancer*, *Miguel/Michelle* to *Ang Lihim ni Antonio*, the essence of these films have not changed in 4 decades – they all illustrate the disastrous consequences of shedding one’s heteronormative existence to taste the forbidden fruit. Indeed, it is difficult for one to discern between the catharsis evoked by the tragic demise of Don Benito in 1971’s *Tubog Sa Ginto*, and the bitter dissolution of Rommel and Esteban in 2007’s *Selda*.

Total Word Count exclusive of titles and headings: 1402

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