Filipino Film Melodrama of the Late 1950s: Two Case Studies of Accommodation of Hollywood Genre Models

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*This paper takes two Filipino melodramas of the late 1950s – **Sino'ng Maysala?** and **Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak** – as case studies to highlight the Filipino response of accommodation of Hollywood genre films. Analysis reveals that the two films adopted many of the formalistic and thematic conventions of the Hollywood model. However, it cannot be claimed that these features completely and solely came from Hollywood. Even before filmmaking technology came to the country, the Philippines had had a long melodrama tradition in its Hispanic-influenced theater and literature. Further, the ideological values that melodrama extols (patriarchy and the bourgeois family) can also be seen as survivals from the country's historical, colonial experiences that preceded the introduction of Hollywood films.*

With the introduction of film into the Philippines by the Americans at the turn of the 20th century, the archipelago is said to have imported not only the technology but the manner of producing and promoting films as well. It is also argued that the rampant imitation of Hollywood film genres and stories has brought into the country even the ideology of Hollywood.

One of the practices that the local film industry adopted from the American model is the assembly-line process of filmmaking. Films are produced in a factory-like setup where there is division of labor. Preproduction, actual production or principal photography and postproduction processes have their own sets of staff. Besides the artistic group are the production management group that takes charge of logistics and production administration, and the marketing and promotions group. Assembly-line production makes for efficient delivery of tasks, especially for a commercial enterprise like filmmaking, as in the Hollywood model. In fact, through the years, film production developed into an industry or even an industrial complex that would include film production's auxiliary marketing and promotions concerns.

Foremost in the Hollywood style of producing and promoting films that Filipino producers of the 1950s readily adopted were the studio and star systems. The two came in a

package, wrapped in film-genre segmentation as a matter of marketing strategy. Each studio specialized in a particular genre or two, and the exclusive participation of particular actors from the studio's stable of stars distinguished one genre from the others. For example, John Wayne appeared exclusively in westerns, as Clark Gable did in romantic dramas and comedies. Similarly, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford were the melodrama queens, as Judy Garland was the musical princess.

This paper takes a closer look at the local film industry's adoption of the abovementioned American filmmaking practices, and seeks to answer the following questions: In adopting the form and, presumably, the content of their American models, did early Filipino genre films likewise import the social and cultural values of these models? How valid is the assumption that the importation of the technology also meant the transplantation of the ideology of Hollywood?

In this paper, two Filipino melodramas of the late 1950s are evaluated and compared to Hollywood models using three criteria: 1) the **content** consisting of the internal conventions of the genre that include story theme and subject, character and plot development; 2) the **ideology and cultural values** that the films carry and promote, including the position of women; and 3) the **formal, expressive content** that includes the external conventions of the genre adopted by the films, as manifested primarily by elements of their *mise-en-scene*.

Melodramas of the 1950s are chosen because the period marks the heyday of the local studio system which produced a wealth of melodramas. Moreover, in Hollywood, it was also in the 1950s when the valuation of formula films was in fashion, notably with the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, along with the psychological suspense thrillers of Alfred Hitchcock and the crime-detective movies that starred James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, as fetish actors of the genre.

Sino'ng Maysala? (1957) and ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*** (1959) were both produced by Sampaguita Pictures, Inc., one of the "Big Four" movie studios of postwar years. ***Sino'ng Maysala?*** took off from Nicholas Ray's ***Rebel without a Cause*** (1955), and remotely, from Elia Kazan's screen adaptation of the John Steinbeck classic novel of the same title, ***East of Eden***

(1955). Both ***Rebel without a Cause*** and ***East of Eden*** starred James Dean, the young American movie sensation of the 1950s who became a cult icon following his early death in a car crash.

Alive or dead, Dean commanded hordes of fans wherever Hollywood films were shown. In the Philippines alone, there were at least three James Dean clones whose star personas were patterned after that of the Hollywood teen idol. Lou Salvador, Jr. of LVN Pictures, another major film studio, was "officially" the "James Dean of the Philippines," for he bore the closest physical resemblance to the Hollywood original, more than the two other pretenders who, nonetheless, made up for their deficiency by aping the famous James Dean attitude, body movements and gestures. These were Zaldy Zshornack of Premiere Productions and Romeo Vasquez of Sampaguita Pictures. All three projected the "misunderstood youth" or "bad boy image," which up to our time is a lucrative market positioning in the local cinema as proved by Robin Padilla. While Salvador appeared mostly in youth oriented musicals and Zshornack in action films, Vasquez found his berth in youth oriented melodramas, in which his mother studio specialized. Vasquez was the principal male star of ***Sino'ng Maysala?***, a family melodrama.

Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak foregrounds the gangster's relationships with the female characters who all gravitate toward him, and secondarily focuses on his career in crime in the second half of the film. In fact, it is the criminal connection and activities of the femme fatale, played by Bella Flores, that are given more prominence; she was the one who recruited to the criminal world the ingenue character played by Susan Roces, another young star then being groomed by her mother studio for big-league stardom just like Vasquez, and the gangster played by Eddie Garcia. In effect, the film, like the Hollywood melodramas of the period, is more of a site for the study of women issues. It is in this context that ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*** is taken as the second subject film.

The Hollywood Melodrama

Melodramas became popular in Hollywood in two eras, both of which bore the impact of two global wars: the pre- and post-World War II; the 1930s-40s and the 1950s-60s. In both instances the men, who earlier went to the battle fields, came back home to a significantly altered domestic situation (Hayward 1996). The American woman or wife had taken on a job to eke out a living, whether as a factory or office worker or as an entrepreneur. Generating her own income, the woman subsequently became economically self-sufficient, independent and assertive. In some cases, the woman was liberated as well from her traditional gender role of subservience to her man and family, and even from patriarchal or feudal sexual mores in some cases. Such was Mildred Pierce, a character portrayed by then come-backing movie queen, Joan Crawford, in a film named after its main character. She became a successful entrepreneur and single parent after her husband left her.

In contrast, the American male was starting to feel inadequate and insecure as a result of his diminished domestic power. Often, he stayed home, relying on his postwar pension. He was no longer the chief provider nor did he continue to exercise economic dominance. On screen, in the so-called male melodramas, this inadequacy was depicted negatively as emasculation. The family patriarch was now incapable of providing his sons proper guidance and, more important, a sterling example of manhood. The paternal figure suddenly crumbled. Such was the case of the father characters in the films ***East of Eden*** and ***Rebel without a Cause***. In some films like Sirk's ***Written on the Wind***, male inadequacy, despite economic and industrial power, is strongly suggested as sexual impotence that is tragically bequeathed like an heirloom by the family patriarch to his scion, as sexual aberration is handed down from mother to daughter.

This is not to say that the position of the woman was enviable vis-à-vis that of the man. While the woman enjoyed economic independence and power, she had not completely liberated herself from her traditional servile role; she continued to be the homemaker and caregiver, the manager of household

chores, the self-sacrificing nurturer of her children. That is the martyr wife and mother complex (Hayward 1996) played up in melodramas like Michael Curtiz's ***Mildred Pierce*** (1945) and ***All that Heaven Allows*** (the latter was remade in 2002 and deconstructed by Todd Haynes as ***Far from Heaven***). Worse, in film noir, the woman takes on a negative image as a femme fatale (Hayward 1996). The mysterious female is dubious and dangerous, sly and treacherous. She is the main suspect in a crime under investigation and subsequently declared the culprit, sent to prison, or eliminated outright. Such is the character of Brigid O'Shaughnessy, played by Mary Astor, in John Huston's classic film noir, ***The Maltese Falcon*** (1941). In both cases, the woman, despite her new familial and societal position, continues to be oppressed and repressed on the big screen. For her newfound subjectivity, she has to pay a stiff price.

In comparison to these American melodramas, what ideology and cultural values do the local subject films carry and promote? What is the position of the woman in these films?

Sinong Maysala? Feminine Pulchritude and Power

Privileging the Star Persona Armando Garces' ***Sino'ng Maysala?*** tackles the social issue of juvenile delinquency, so a young actor being built up by Sampaguita Pictures as a matinee idol was picked to play the lead role. He was given overwhelming star support by the studio's brightest luminaries, such as Paraluman, Rogelio de la Rosa, Gloria Romero (the reigning movie queen then), Lolita Rodriguez, Ric Rodrigo and Luis Gonzales. The female stars were the acknowledged queens of the studio that was known best for its stable of film personalities generally regarded to be the most glamorous in the industry.

The Star is so celebrated in this film that the characters assumed the names of the actors rather than the other way around. Gloria Romero was "Gloria," Lolita Rodriguez was "Lolita," Susan Roces was "Susan" and Romeo Vasquez was "Bobby," a nickname for his real name, Roberto Sumilang. The same was true for the male lead actors and characters. The only exception was Paraluman, whose character was named

Romeo Vasquez (foreground) plays a James Dean-inspired role in Sampaguita Pictures' ***Sinong Maysala?***. Rosa Mia plays his mother while Paraluman, Lolita Rodriguez and Gloria Romero (background, left to right) play his sisters.

"Gloria" (Gloria Romero) and "Luis" (Luis Gonzales) face parental disapproval over their relationship.

"Carmen," since "Paraluman" even in the 1950s sounded archaic or probably because, according to one insider, the role was originally meant for Carmen Rosales, another movie queen of an earlier generation, who for one reason or another, backed out of the project (Interview with Lena S. Pareja, July 1, 2003). Needless to say, the female stars, along with their love teammates, were among the biggest, if not the brightest, box-office attractions of the studio and as such would not be content to play supporting roles. Because of this, each of the three female leads was given subnarratives of their own, intentionally and cleverly plotted into flashbacks and intercuts to give practically equal screen exposure and significance to the female leads. In effect, the film is a five-in-one story, including that of the juvenile delinquent and that of the family as a whole. The subplots were simply the stories of each sibling in the family. The three sisters' respective love experiences had tremendous impact on the young brother and contributed largely to his delinquency.

Bourgeois Ideology of the Filipino Family. The dramatic inquiry of ***Sino'ng Maysala?*** traces how a middle-class Filipino family rises up from bankruptcy and copes with the individual problems of its members that affect the whole family. As in most melodramas, whether local, American or European, the story is family- and class-centered. The family is the site not only of the dramatic conflicts among characters but also of ideological contradictions (Elsaesser in Grant 1986). On the one hand, there is the high cultural value of keeping a family whole and intact at whatever cost; on the other, there are the various self- and selfish interests that threaten that value. In foreign models, this value has been identified as bourgeois, perhaps because the melodrama as a theatrical genre is associated with the morality play; and as a fiction genre, with the French romantic novel (Elsaesser in Grant 1986). In the local setting, that value seems to be common among all social classes. Uncommon are the concerns that haunt the middle class to no end: marrying someone from at least the same class or preferably from the higher class (social mobility should always be upward, not downward) and hypocritical moral

uprightness. That local melodramas share these values with the Hollywood models is hardly surprising, for ultimately, the melodrama genre promotes the ideology of capitalism and patriarchy (Hayward 1996). It cannot be hastily claimed, however, that the ideology is an influence of the Hollywood film genre model alone, for these values are present even in our markedly Hispanic-influenced theater and literary traditions. Rather, the Hollywood influence is a reinforcement of existing values.

Where lies the difference between local and Hollywood melodramas then?

It is in the position of women. In ***Sino'ng Maysala?***, although the suicide of the family patriarch is blamed on the misguided extravagance of the women in the family, these women are nevertheless presented as possessing strong character spines. Carmen took over the administration of the family finances; furthermore, she set aside all moral qualms and defied societal conventions and ostracism by resuming her aborted romance with a former boyfriend, Roger, initially someone beneath their class and social standing but now more affluent than they were. Gloria, whose boyfriend, Luis, was sent abroad by his family, waited not in martyr-like, masochistic stance but rather in stoicism. Lolita, for her part, rebelled against accepted mores and decided to take matters into her own hands. After Eddie, she played around and took another boyfriend, whom she did not take seriously. And when the sisters were blamed for the delinquency of their youngest sibling, this was more of a recognition of their authority and moral ascendancy than a condemnation of their character flaws and weaknesses, as in Hollywood melodrama and film noir.

In contrast, the male characters were less etched. The family patriarch died with his own hand at the beginning of the film. The male suitors, although portrayed by big stars, were virtually relegated to "partnering the prima ballerinas." The male juvenile delinquent was no wall to lean on either. In fact, it was he who needed to be protected and guided. It was only the mother figure who had to take a back seat to these stars, because her presence was unusually minimal (probably because she was portrayed by a character actor, Rosa Mia, the quintessential

mater dolorosa of the Sampaguita lot). Nonetheless, the maternal character accepted in great humility and nobility her responsibility over the fate of her son and family.

Mise-en-Scene* and External Conventions**. Melodrama's formalist expression is found in a film's mise-en-scene elements. In the Hollywood model, especially in the Freudian films of Sirk like ***Written on the Wind, what could not be said or explicitly shown on screen was expressed in symbols and metaphors (Elsaesser in Grant 1986). Initially, the device was used to circumvent stiff censorship laws. In time, it became a genre convention. Thus, colors, objects and settings expressed externally the inner turmoil and conflicts of the characters. For instance, Sirk used harsh reds and yellows to express the passion and the repression of his characters; a replica of an oil drill tower made into an executive table piece became a phallic symbol; and a small pistol turned into a metaphor for impotence. Less Freudian but stylistically melodramatic were the opulent interior house decor of the bourgeoisie, complete with large mirrors (not just one but several) and even larger closed windows framing the rains outside. In addition, huge, winding stairs with iron-grill balustrades were used as the set for characters who went up and down the stairs as their family experienced reversals of fortune (Elsaesser in Grant 1986).

All these are replicated in Filipino melodramas of the 1950s, like those of Sampaguita Pictures, and even of recent times, such as the glossy melodramas of Viva Films and even those of Lino Brocka's small-town family melodramas. Hence, the grand staircase of the mansion of the Veras, producers of Sampaguita Pictures, became probably the most photographed bourgeois staircase in local films. In many Sampaguita productions, moreover, the female leads were dressed in elegant gowns designed by the czars of Philippine haute couture – Ramon Valera, Pitoy Moreno and Ben Farrales – and sported sparkling jewelry. They were photographed and made incandescently beauteous in glossy, Hollywood-type glamour shots.

Excess, indeed, is the stylistic hallmark of melodrama (Gledhill 1991), whether Hollywood or local. But in the

Philippines, the tendency to go overboard seems greater. Extravagance is evident in production design and lighting, as well as in music-and-sound scoring. But it is best exemplified in the staging of scenes and in a type of stylized acting, which has become through the years the identifying features of local films, including the supposedly more realistic genres. The final court scene in ***Sino'ng Maysala?*** amply illustrates the point. The same excess is carried over and reinforced to this day in our television dramas and soap operas. It is possible that the tradition and heritage of formalistic "excesses" on stage, as found in the *komedya*, *sinakulo* and *sarsuwela*, have exerted a profound influence on our cinematic modes of expression (Tiongson 1983).

Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak: Power-sharing between Man and Woman

Film Noir Iconography and Internal Conventions. Tony Cayado's ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*** takes off from the classic Hollywood gangster-film noir, because it largely adopts the iconography or external conventions and visual style of the genre: black-and-white cinematography; images of the seamy side of the city, such as *esteros*, isolated streets and under-the-bridge settings; nightclub and safehouse scenes made even more mysterious and foreboding by sharp-contrast, low-key, chiaroscuro lighting; and a final scene showing the tragic death of the gangster protagonist executed in tableau-like blocking. Similarly, ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*** exhibits the genre's internal conventions of organized criminality, manifested primarily in drug-pushing; duplicity and treachery; the presence of underworld characters with menacing faces, such as the gang lord, the up-and-coming pretender to his throne, the gang moll or femme fatale, the sidekicks and bodyguards perpetually holding either pistols or high-powered guns and the initially innocent-looking recruits to the criminal world; scenes of violence; and the absence of the family (Harvey in Belton 1996).

Just the same, the film can still be considered a melodrama because of the dominance of the female characters and the foregrounding of women's position in the film's title, in the society that it depicts and in its screen representation. In

Eddie Garcia plays a gangster in Tony Cayado's ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak.***

Then young stars Susan Roces (left) and Romeo Vasquez (center) play teenagers saved from moral corruption by Tony Marzan who plays a detective in this Filipino version of a gangster movie.

this film, which actually mixes genres, the representation of women is not necessarily singular. Here, the traditional coexists with the progressive or radical.

Reinforced Ideology amidst Revisionist Internal Conventions. The protagonist of a Hollywood gangster film is invariably male. Even in film noir where the femme fatale is accommodated and even relatively foregrounded onscreen, the protagonist, the detective, is still male. In ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak***, however, screen and narrative positions are apparently equally shared by both the male and female protagonists, Greta and Conrado. Still, if we take into account the other significant characters in the film, it may be said that the balance is actually tipped in favor of the females. As in ***Sino'ng Maysala?***, the women take central exposure in the second film. In ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak***, the adult women characters – except for femme fatale Greta – take traditional women roles in that they pine for the men they love, waiting for their attention and affection at their own time, their own pace, their own pleasure. Lily, Annie and later even Vicky to a certain extent, allow their lives to revolve around their men. The first two women become willing victims and the last one a reluctant but open-season game to predatory masculine charm (perhaps just a few notches better than her matronly boss, the sex slave Mrs. Lim). Moreover, the men, in exchange for their love, and presumably sex, command unquestioning obedience and loyalty, rightly or wrongly. Projected on the screen is the woman as amorous conquest and slave, definitely an unflattering chauvinistic image of the female gender.

In contrast, Greta represents a progressive image of the woman: she is in control. Although initially presented in an unflattering light because of her criminal occupation and illicit preoccupations, she proves to be nobody's pawn in the end. Moreover, she demonstrates nobility of character when she risks her life to save an innocent friend whom she herself had earlier introduced to the criminal world. This is a revisionist image of the femme fatale, or in local cinema, of the female villain, because here she possesses redeeming values. That the part was played by Bella Flores, the quintessential virago of local cinema, makes it doubly revisionist.

The male protagonist played by Eddie Garcia simply plots his action and dramatic premise: to succeed, to reach the top, wherever he may be. The characterization of his Hollywood counterpart is more defined and fleshed out: the gangster is of humble beginnings, an outsider dreaming of a better life, and in America, "the land of opportunities," everyone is encouraged to improve his lot by dint of hard work. But the gangster wants to accumulate the most in the shortest time possible, so he resorts to illegal means. Society does not allow this, however, so in the end the gangster must die to impress upon the audience that "crime does not pay," a wishful thought because in real life, crime often does pay. The obligatory death of the gang lord at the end serves the mythical function of the genre (Mitchell in Grant 1986). Although the local subject film failed to etch in high relief the social and psychological circumstances of the gangster protagonists, it nonetheless serves the mythical function of a crime film story. Conrado dies, while Greta is saved and forgiven because she demonstrated "heroism" in the end. In this regard, the genre film follows the Hollywood model. After all, who will quarrel with such a traditional capitalist "moral lesson"?

Shared Value and Concern. In the case of both subject films, there is a shared value and concern: the proper guidance and unconditional protection of our youth. Adult characters – and viewers – are admonished to be upright models for the youth. The depiction of the characters' erring ways is a stern warning against negative behavioral examples and a nagging reminder of social and moral responsibility. ***Sino'ng Maysala?***, rightly or wrongly, identifies adult responsibility over a contemporaneous social problem – juvenile delinquency. ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak***, meanwhile, seems to point out that the corruption of the youth constitutes the worst criminal act. Maybe the pontifications sound uptight, especially to contemporary cinema audiences. But those were the days of relative innocence – and of the beginnings of youth unrest.

Embodied in the genre film is a society's wishful thinking, the articulation of present fears finding vicarious resolution and reaffirmation in the film's finale. As the curtain comes down, the consumers know if the film that they have

watched has served its mythical function. That consideration precedes all others, including a film's aesthetic merit.

Summary

Undoubtedly, Hollywood models have had tremendous impact and influence on local cinema. This is seen first in the economic prototype local cinema inherited: namely, filmmaking as a commercial concern, developed through the years as an industry engaged in the production, marketing and distribution of consumable cultural artefacts which are made in a factory-like, assembly-line setup. But the influence goes beyond the economic because film is also a profound cultural activity. It engages in the production and interpretation of meanings. Nowhere else are these diverse concerns most evident than in the genre films that involve both the studio and star systems. They fulfill both economic and cultural functions. The latter is served through the articulation of society's mythical imperatives which are embedded in narratives and symbolic images.

Hollywood has provided genre models for local cinema. In two Filipino melodramas of the late 1950s, this study identified the obvious accommodation of Hollywood models by the Filipino melodrama, as well as the few instances of its digression from the original in its adaptation of cultural values. The two subject films adopted many of the external conventions of the Hollywood model, notably the iconography. The same thing may be said of the genre's internal conventions, although it cannot be claimed that these features completely and solely came from Hollywood. When filmmaking technology came to the country, the Philippines already had a long melodramatic tradition in its Hispanic-influenced theater and literature. The tradition is seen in present times not only in our theater and film but also in our television and radio dramas.

The question of ideology is a similar case. Melodrama extols the virtues of capitalism as it reinforces the ideology of patriarchy and the bourgeois family. Yet it cannot be said that the ideological values are strictly Hollywood imports. They can also be seen as survivals from our people's earlier historical,

colonial experience before the advent of Hollywood. Happily, specific cultural values rear their enlightened heads amidst the negative impact of dominant ideologies. There is the deferential regard for women, despite the patriarchy (which suggests perhaps the true position of women in our native culture) and the social concern for the welfare of the youth.

Not all Filipino family dramas of the 1950s followed the strategy taken by ***Sino'ng Maysala?*** and ***Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak*** in accommodating Hollywood inspirations. Some like Manuel Silos' ***Biyaya ng Lupa***, Lamberto V. Avellana's ***Anak Dalita*** and Gregorio Fernandez's ***Higit sa Lahat*** – all produced by LVN Pictures, Inc. – and perhaps even Gerardo de Leon's ***Huwag Mo Akong Limutin*** and ***Kamay ni Kain***, produced by Premiere Productions, Inc., showed more resistance to the Hollywood model in their narrative structure, mise-en-scene treatment, and in playing down the star persona. Critic Nicanor Tiongson prefers to call this strategy indigenization rather than resistance (Tiongson 2002). But that is a subject for another study.

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