REVIEW

Home is (w)here?: Movement and longing in Miko Revereza's cinema

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Closely informed by his life story and personal circumstances as an undocumented immigrant living in the US for 26 years, Miko Revereza's filmmaking practice centers around issues of statelessness, identity, and diaspora. His films assemble traces of his life with his family and everyday images that conjure fantasies and memories of mobility. They reveal the precarious everyday reality of the immigrant whose existence is denied by a government that ironically relies on the exploitation of their laboring body for economic growth and political sustenance. Using the visual language of home video—in Super 8, VHS, digital, and celluloid—Revereza asks where and what "home" is, if "home" rejects and denies life and movement. In his cinema, movement is imagined to not only enable the many possible cultural lives of his art but also to appease a longing to close the distances brought about by the uneasy sense of belonging in America.

Revereza's diaristic film practice is influenced by Jonas Mekas, Chantal Akerman, and Naomi Kawase (Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, 2020, 0:06:24), filmmakers whose works "[transform] private record into public discourse and expand [the] meaning" of images and sounds recorded every day, over the years (Cuevas, 2006, p. 56). Following Mekas and Akerman, the home video takes a central position in Revereza's practice and is key to understanding its politics. Through the intensely intimate capture of everyday faces and places and moments, the act of recording itself marks a presence—albeit one that is constantly under threat. Within the context

of his family's personal history, the home video has been a tool to project an ideal life in the US, gathering "an unspoken Filipino American shot-list of typical things to stand and take a picture in front of" (Ramirez, n.d., para. 3). He uses the home video—his family's and his own—to recollect, to confess and daydream, to articulate into being his place in a country which has denied his existence and, later on, the home that he through his art has constantly aspired to. "Making a film, for me, is a thought process, and it's part of my personal transformation and how I navigate the world … My practice isn't a project-based one; it's a continual investigation," Revereza (n.d.-a) says in a profile by the Vilcek Foundation for his 2021 Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in Filmmaking. This review traces the outlines of this investigation, from *DROGA!* to *Distancing*, and follows Revereza's use of home video—not so much medium as stylistic format—to bridge personal narrative and History.

The home video as aspirational

DROGA! (2014), an 8-minute short film shot on Super8 tackles cultural identity as it plays with markers of American and Filipino pop cultures. Revereza credits *DROGA!* as his first film where he begins to ask what it means to be an undocumented Filipino immigrant in the US (Ramirez, n.d.). We are introduced to some of his family, which—as in almost all Filipinos everywhere—was an important anchor in his early life. Revereza summons his Lolo and Lola—"a backdoor to investigating my own cultural identity without going through my parents" (Wakai, 2017, p. 19) stable reference points that recur throughout his films—for the first time. Shot in black and white and having a grainy texture that highlights its imperfect surface, *DROGA!* foregrounds the materiality of cinema. Wearing a black masquerade eye mask, Revereza's Lolo in close up is the first thing we see: he looks at something then away from it. The edit makes him do this several times, like a tic. *DROGA!*'s aural landscape of music, noise, and voice is also deliberately degraded and made granular, leaving us with the distinct sense of catching something in our throats. Grey facades and marquees of tired-looking theaters in Los Angeles are intercut with a jumble of pop culture referents—logos of Levi's, LBC, Coca-Cola, Jollibee, and Rufina Patis, and a Mickey Mouse tattoo grins a thumbs-up from an arm—as Revereza himself chants to nonexistence and meaninglessness everyday Filipino words of everyday Filipino things. Shots of a busy motorway sometime somewhere in Metro Manila, sped up forwards and backwards, are overlaid with vocalized directions that vaguely command. This litany of everyday things that he knows, image and word of daily encounters, feels like they are being committed to memory, the prelude to a farewell perhaps. Revereza

himself acknowledges the scattered and cluttered character of *DROGA!*: "I almost have no clue what I am doing here or even [*sic*] or more importantly, I don't know what I am trying to say. Dreams, nostalgia and Americana are conflated into a confusing mess of a film, a document of a hallucination if you will" (Ramirez, n.d., para. 12). Yet as See (2020) notes, this "mesmerizing yet dodgy imperfection" (p. 1) of Revereza's work, perhaps best represented by his first, awkward film, is precisely what results from an art practice that has been defined by—and makes a statement on—the material limitations brought about by Revereza's personal circumstances as an undocumented immigrant and which Revereza later on consciously takes up as his space and means for articulation.

After filming *DROGA!* in Super8, Revereza fleshes out his home movie aesthetic, specifically in VHS, in *Disintegration 93–96* (2017), a short film he made for a fellowship at Visual Communications, an LA-based nonprofit "dedicated to the honest and accurate portrayals of the Asian Pacific American peoples, communities, and heritage" (Visual Communications, n.d., para. 1). Described as "a pop culture meditation on hyper-consumerism and cultural erasure" (Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, n.d., para. 1), *Disintegration* is also an excavation of shared secret hopes toward which Revereza's family's everyday lives gesture. Here, the home movie is the ground on which he holds a conversation with his parents: Revereza intersperses the home movies shot by his parents during the early years of their life in the US as a family and by himself as a young adult. As projection of economic mobility, his family's home movies had hid the disintegration of the family and of his parents' individual selves. In between triumphant images of the family "making it in America"—Keds for Christmas, the family's first car, Revereza's Huffy bike, white friends, and shedding his Filipino accent—he surfaces the figures of the family's funds-siphoning immigration lawyer, of his apologetic Dad on videotape talking about a "governor" and a "best friend" who make life very hard for them. The film also stages the disintegration of Revereza's own arrogant labeling of his father as "a basic subservient Asian" who bought into the American dream-hallucination-delusion even if it meant denying himself and his family a life free of the burden of "perpetually unresolved existence" (Revereza, 2017). Revereza sees anew these home movies as an affirmation of their existence, not merely as "illegal aliens" but as a family whose dream of a better life in a land of plenty is no less legitimate than their legally recognized neighbor's, colleague's, classmate's, friend's.

In *Disintegration* (Revereza, 2017), the presence of Revereza's voice coheres a more articulate personal politics. The voiceover is the most straightforward, political approach he can possibly—and did—take to

render the personal and private historically significant. This voice is notably more verbose and confrontational than, say Mekas's in his diary films, as if life for Revereza—all 30 years and so's worth of it—already makes so much sense. Perhaps at least from the perspective of being undocumented, maybe it does. In high school, Revereza first realized that not all opportunities were his for the taking because of his undocumented status: without the option of applying for scholarships or student loans, he couldn't go to college (CNN Philippines Life Staff, 2018). He couldn't apply for good jobs. He couldn't even get grants to practice his art. Around the same time that Revereza's DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)[1] status was up for renewal in January 2017, he chose instead to use the funds set aside for this purpose to apply for the MFA program in Bard College (Revereza, 2017). Revereza has since then outed himself as undocumented, despite continuing to live in the US until 2019.[2] This political act of exposure mirrors Revereza's "counter-assimilationist aesthetic of 'dis-integration' and opacity" (See, 2020, p. 10) that lends well to the project of documenting the experience of being undocumented in its fullness and nuance. This experience is foregrounded in Revereza's first feature-length film, *No Data Plan* (2019).

The home video as militant

Taking off from his father's allusion to oppressive state authorities in *Disintegration*, Revereza predicates *No Data Plan* (2019a) on how this oppression has immobilized him in particular. The film puts us on a three-day train ride from Los Angeles to New York that Revereza takes to get to Bard without needing to possess the necessary travel documents. Shot digitally on a Sony Alpha 7S, the trip becomes "a document of disappointed dreams, a family's slow breakdown, and a young artist's defiance against the crushing weight of inertia imposed by an indifferent state" (Manlapaz, 2020, para. 1). *No Data Plan* proposes the fundamental immobility of the undocumented immigrant, nuancing the Filipino "tago ng tago" (TNT) and revealing the slow violence of waiting for something that never comes. The tedium is broken only by flights of the mind; dreams and past lives recollected by phantasms—subtitles cut off from voices and voices cut off from bodies—are in turn punctured briefly by aural distortions and discordant images. The body is forced into stasis, but the mind that always tries to make sense, to *come to terms*, grapples with this.

The unremarkable marks *No Data Plan* from the very beginning, seeming to revel in setting up obstructions—literally and figuratively—to the act of bearing witness. It opens, after a brief shot of the back of a sleeping person's head dedicating the work, with a huge pillar overwhelming the film frame and goes on to present the cocoon that ensconces the passengers

of the train, a brief refuge for those like Revereza who have no funds or papers to take the quicker route by air. There is a necessity here for Revereza to take note of mundane life inside the train—of lines of song overheard, doors between cars whispering open and shut, sunlight crawling almost imperceptibly across surfaces—and outside it, documenting on impulse. Freight cars and landscapes are distorted in their passage beyond the train's dirty windows and America is revealed as *the* alien space. Nothing seems to distinguish the scenes inside and outside the train that are edited into the film, and nothing seems to explain how long Revereza cuts and how much these scenes show. "I think my mandate towards editing this film was to make sure it conveys human touch and timing" (Cronk, 2019, para. 13), Revereza recollects in an interview for *Film Comment*. "The separations of territory can be mended by creating new connections. How our eyes and ears reassemble space—I was just reacting to my gut feeling of where to cut, when I feel that one space connects to another" (Cronk, 2019, para. 13). And this space that he calls his own, that he carved out for himself and his narrative, is a special space that impacts time's unfolding as well.

Time crawls, stretches and contracts: the images themselves do not make a narrative—not that they wish to do so—and the train stops, as someone who has never been to America, do not cohere into one trip from one point to another. This disjuncture is aided by subtitles and voices that for the most part float away from the images. And yet, they turn into a presence that presses itself on us: we are made intimate with a mother's affair and the subsequent dissolution of her family. "I was the only person she confided to" (Revereza, 2019a, 0:02:33), Revereza—presumably this presence—quietly declares, thus sharing with us the burden of silence. He does not leave out anything, revealing not only the banal details of his family's disintegration—of items put in storage, of relatives talking behind his mother's back—but also probing his own motivations towards his mother's much younger lover. Revereza (2019a) calls the lover "driver", which he is, but this would not be so significant (at least to me) if Lola did not recall their family's old life before coming to America: the family's pedigree and their servants. Revereza draws this connection and gives us a good hard look at his own prejudice (perhaps a relic of that history or that culture which he has been unable to break with), even as he himself is made marginal. In America, according to Lola, "iba na, pantay-pantay ang tao"/"it's different, everyone is equal" (Revereza, 2019a, 0:36:40)—at least everyone who has legal status and/or is not a criminal low-life.

No Data Plan (Revereza, 2019a) captures the immediacy of experience of being undocumented in America—"the mundanity of its insecurity, the alternating torpid frustration and jagged fear" (Manlapaz, 2020, para. 4).

In an almost encounter with immigration authorities at a stop in Buffalo, New York towards the end of his trip, the body materializes. A shivery shot of a fist, pressed against a leg, engulfs the frame as Revereza recounts what happened. He thinks this "the most significant shot" (Grisham, 2019, para. 6) he takes of the trip: here the film folds in upon itself, narrows down to the body—Revereza's, the camera's, and ours. He knew what to do, in this scenario imagined countless times, but a programmed attitude of his body "to play it cool" is no ample armor. Suddenly, the camera sees much less (a hand touching a folded knee) and moves with the furtiveness of Revereza's body. We cower in turn. "Um did you see my story?" (2019, 0:59:38) Revereza asks us. He taps through his Instagram stories of the ordeal and these images and texts echo no introspective meandering here: "I'm ok 😵‍💫," "Wtf is America," "Help: do I decline questions on citizenship???" (2019a, 1:01:06-1:03:37).

For Revereza, as with millions of other undocumented immigrants living fugitive lives in the US, borders are everywhere. Reacting to the news that the DACA had been put in limbo by the US Supreme Court in June 2016, Revereza (2016) posted on Facebook:

> Most Americans will never know that fear of authority that a simple traffic stop can lead to a deportation or the sketchy feeling when filling out a blank form, applying for a job or registering for school and the look the clerk gives you when they find you're not in the system. (para. 4)

This sense of being perpetually on-hold, of life just on the brink of happening and then failing to happen pervades Revereza's dwelling in temporary spaces: not just the train and its stop-overs in *No Data Plan*, but also the LAX airport in *DROGA!* and *Distancing*. Zoom-ins of airplanes crossing bleak and dark skies—alternately taking off and (what seems like) crashing down—are seen from the ground. Revereza's camera meanders around the anonymous spaces of airport terminal and baggage counter and the unremarkable but at the same time bewildering traveler-clogged streets bearing signs that overwhelm with unfamiliarity. The near-encounter in the Amtrak train finally firmed up Revereza's decision to leave the US and risk not being able to return to his family for an indefinite period of time. There is simply no future for him in the US:

> I've missed so many opportunities to travel with my films because of my perpetual stasis here. That is what the US symbolizes to me: to be stuck in a stasis, stuck in a bureaucratic maze, stuck in bygone delusions of a 90's

> American dream. That shit is dead to me. (Grisham, 2019, para. 11).

Distancing (2019b), Revereza's most recently completed short film, circles back to *DROGA!* even as it documents his state of mind on the eve of his departure from the US. On parallel unfoldings of time, Revereza engages with his Lolo and Lola: on audio, he discusses with Lola, in her usual effusive self, plans for a trip to Manila; on video, his 16mm camera caresses Lolo's inert face. Lolo has been sick with Parkinson's disease for years, and who knows how long exile will be? It is very likely that these lingering moments on film will be the last Revereza will take of his Lolo. In *Distancing*, he bids goodbye to home—home as he has known it—even as he troubles the notion of home itself. Return is impossible. He has close to no memories of his early childhood in the Philippines, and has shed all traces of an accent in his English. But the US, which has constantly repudiated him, is also no home—what is home, if its memory rests on disappointed hopes and shoddy promises of mobility? The markers of his passage to and from the US—his 20-year-old US visa with an ID photo of himself as a smiling 5-year-old boy in a bowl cut is held up close to the camera in *DROGA!* and a brand new Philippine passport is "scanned" under the camera in *Distancing*—thus gather poignant significance. Yet a certain melancholic longing also pervades the short film; Revereza samples Mekas, another "displaced person," from the latter's *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972): "The minute we left we started going home. And we are still going home. I am still on my journey home." (Revereza, 2019b, 0:06:52-0:07:11) Denied their mobility, it is as if immigrants—but especially those who are undocumented—are condemned to constant movement in their search for a home that might never have existed at all.

After leaving the US in 2019, Revereza has been to Manila, Pangasinan, and Oaxaca in Mexico, writing, shooting, and editing *Nowhere Near*. In its project dossier, he describes the work as "a diaristic film of a person looking for their roots and their home, which seem perpetually lost in a bordered world" (Revereza, n.d.-b, p. 4), a document of "a search for that plot of land for answers it might still contain" (p. 4). Yet in this exile, Revereza (2019b) realizes his words are lost. "Sana lang, naintindi mo ako?" (0:02:59-0:03:06) he unsurely addresses his unseen audience in *Distancing*, speaking to the uncertainty that attends his displacements. We expect this unsureness with the language; after all, how else can one think and speak with a language one only really knew secondhand, a language barely remembered from early childhood? Film then, the language Revereza knows best and is most confident about, is his recourse.

I have described elsewhere Revereza's film practice as "a study in impulse and reflexivity … [that] explores the possibilities of a personal cinema that narrates the self into being" (Manlapaz, 2020, p. 5). This self, at least as long as Revereza locates his practice in America, is always inscribed with the precarity of his status and thus "inevitably labors under the politics of diaspora and identity, of borders and mobility" (Manlapaz, 2020). In a statement on his film practice, Revereza (n.d.-c) writes about a notion of stateless cinema that he has aimed to cohere, one that centers around "the malleability of identification" (para. 5), of "fake IDs and forged documents" (para. 5), to hack the system and to penetrate spaces previously closed off. Networks within world cinema, of the academe and international film festivals, now within reach, are expected to realize agency. *DROGA!* (2014), which in an interview with Diego Ramirez (n.d.) Revereza calls an "OFW film of Philippine experimental cinema tradition" (para. 12), was programmed in The Kalampag Tracking Agency, a curatorial project by filmmaker Shireen Seno and artist Merv Espina that gathered experimental films over a 30-year span of Philippine film history.[3] In their curatorial note, Seno and Espina assert the distinct identity of experimental cinema as "a confluence of uncanny juxtapositions and pleasant contradictions, an experience not unlike revisiting a familiar place in a new light" (Seno, n.d. para. 7), and locates in its characteristic dissonance a source of comfort and an assured sense of place. *DROGA!* and the films that he made thereafter have all gone on to international film festivals, and *No Data Plan* (2019a) was one of the British Film Institute's 50 best films of 2019. For the moment, these networks exist in a non-hierarchy for Revereza, and it is in this ether of idealized relations that he reminds us of the essentially mobile nature of life and art. His almost-perfect agency also enables his politics: in choosing to be seen, Revereza assumes a voice that speaks for thousands of others driven to silence. At equal turns lyrical and unforgiving, this voice tells of histories of longing for places left behind and places aspired for but never arrived at. Yet somehow, this loss becomes the "memory of absent richness" that Rebecca Solnit (2006, p. 23) speaks of, an abundance whose end we do not mourn if only because it is eternally present in longing.

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Endnotes

[1] A US policy on immigration that gives people who entered the US as undocumented children some semblance of a life in the country by allowing them to apply for a driver's license, a social security number, and a work permit. However, it does not help them get legal status.

[2] He calls himself an "undocumented immigrant" in his GoFundMe page and an "illegal alien" in his profile for a residency at the Coaxial Arts Foundation in Los Angeles.

[3] In general, experimental film cannot easily be defined and categorized based on its formal characteristics, encompassing as it does a wide diversity of filmmaking practices which are not usually connected to norms and conventions in cinema. Nevertheless, film historical accounts have traced Philippine experimental filmmaking to workshops run by the Mowelfund Film Institute in the 1980s which produced works by Nick Deocampo, Raymond Red, Roxlee, Joey Agbayani, and Mel Bacani III, among many others. Despite this, as filmmaker Shireen Seno points out, there has been no local experimental film community to speak of, primarily because of how experimental films have been perceived "as a curiosity, or a label for everything that doesn't fit into any existing notions or genres, or as a stepping stone to narrative feature filmmaking" (Turner, 2018).

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