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Presencing the Transcendent

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Abstract

This essay is a reflection on the presencing of the transcendent in Filipino cinema. It looks at certain films whose styles are able to hint at the trace of the transcendent in the mundane and finite existence of Filipinos. It takes on a philosophical perspective to reflect on these films. This is a preprint of a chapter in the book *The Stories We Tell When We Tell Stories About Ourselves* by Agustin Martin G. Rodriguez.

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Decoupling Image, Sound, and The Sense of the Mundane World

In this reflection, I wish to look at the possibility of Filipino film as an art form that makes us aware of how *outoob* is rooted in the transcendent. It is an exploration of films made in the 21st century which (consciously or not) make present this rootedness in the various stories they tell. I will focus here on form, on how the story is told in order to show how the transcendent can be made present in various stories about Filipino lives. There is a way that Filipino film makers have been telling stories that make us (consciously or not) aware that the workaday world lives we are living signify a beyond which gives the mundane genuine meaning and fullness. This making present the transcendent through their story telling makes the movies discussed here worth reflecting on.

I will begin with the film *Anacbanua (Child of the Sun)* (Christopher Gozum, 2009) whose intent is to bring to light the profundity and beauty of the language and culture of Pangasinan. But what it also achieves is to make us aware of how our most mundane activities could be imbued with cosmic significance. Let me quote their published synopsis because this explains exactly what the film is about:

Synopsis: *A middle class and Western-educated poet (Umaanlong) returns to the Pangasinan region, the land of his birth and his ancestors from which he was uprooted for a very long time. He is sick with a lingering physical, mental and spiritual illness. He meets the Musia (Muse) who takes care of him during his illness. The Musia performs a series of rituals that identifies the cause of the Umaanlong's disease and appeases the ancestral and*

nature spirits inhabiting sacred spaces in Pangasinan's physical landscape. While in half-sleep, the Umaanlong's soul leaves his diseased body. The soul flight transports the Umaanlong to places and time zones in Pangasinan's landscape and history where he undergoes cosmic immersion, a deep and intense spiritual experience for chosen people like him where the self gets absorbed in the universe. The Umaanlong discovers the Ogaw (child) who serves as a spirit guide in his magical journey. In this cosmic immersion, the Umaanlong undergoes a series of gradual and violent transformations similar to the fermentation of fish sauce, slaughtering of livestock, pounding and shaping of burning metal rods in the anvil, the moulding of the clay into pottery, and the baking of the moist bricks in the fire of the kiln. These series of rituals are tests a novice undergoes when he is called and destined to serve his people. Through this soul travel, the uprooted poet reclaims his primal and ancestral connection to the water (danum), to the land (uma), and to the people (katoan), key figures that mark Pangasinan's landscape, history and identity. Like his ancestors who belonged to the exclusive ranks of traditional healers, storytellers, and wise leaders in the ancient communities of Pangasinan, the Umaanlong completes these series of difficult tests in a novice's initiation. The Umaanlong returns to the real world offering himself and his art towards the humanistic progress of his community and the people of Pangasinan. In this renewed and higher state of being, the Umaanlong reunites and becomes one with the Musia.²

I quote this synopsis because the film makes more sense when you know all this. It clearly explains all the lead character's experiences and their cosmic significance, giving the audience an appreciation of the ritualistic and mythical character of the film. Clearly, the film is about the existential suffering of a man who has become ill with the loss of the connection to his native self and the *metis* or wisdom that it bears. Being a poet colonized by Western modernity, the modernity defined by the angst of Dostoevsky and Sartre, he has lost his Caboloan ways or the ancient ways of Pangasinan.

The film's director is a founding member of a movement of artists and intellectuals called the Anacbanoa. They are intellectuals who desire to revive their culture which has been marginalized by Westernization and the imposition of the dominant Tagalog culture³ by restoring to living practice their cultural ways in its various forms. This film contributes to that mission by presenting the healing journey of a man who seeks to restore his soul by dwelling once more in Cabolan, which is the ancient name of that province. He wishes to restore the meaning of being a son of Urduha, the warrior leader of that land and in that way becoming Anacbanoa once more. These symbolic figures clearly embodied the greatness of the people of that realm as warriors and poets deeply rooted in their land and the culture that emerged from it. If he can restore the authenticity of his being Anacbanoa, the people who originally settled Pangasinan, he can become whole again.

This journey of restoration is framed by a poem which is a lament for the betrayed language and culture. This poem of lamentation makes us feel what is lost by demonstrating the beauty of the language and its ability to evoke the dignity of the lost culture and its people. We are taken by the film to view scenes of daily life, mainly of people occupied by the industries and doings of a day. Every scene is accompanied by an offscreen recitation either by the afflicted poet or the Musia. Their words frame each scene which effectively transforms mundane activities of the world into mythical acts which

belong to a ritual of death and rebirth. They also achieve this effect when showing landscapes or cityscapes. The lament goes on throughout the film and while the audience is immersed in this work, all they are viewing is given a mythic significance. The river is the home of spirits, the people are the heirs of Urduha, their industries are world creating or transforming. Thus, what could have been a corny travelogue becomes a mythic journey that transforms mundane goings about and sceneries into ritual acts and places that evoke the original world. If the viewer did not read the synopsis provided (I am assuming) by the creators of the film, they would still experience this evocation of the other realm of meaning pervading the mundane workaday world.

Aside from the poem, we are made aware of the mythical world through the cinematography. The film photographs the industries of the province and its natural sights with a sense of gravitas because of its use of stark black and white. Daily activities like slaughtering pigs, pottery baking, and cement making are rendered in deep shadow and light and framed dramatically such that it is clear that one is not seeing the world as one would going about one's day. This film is the diametrical opposite of the touristy travelogue because instead of reducing the scenery and the people into digestible bits of curiosity, they are blown up to transcendental proportions. There is this long sequence from 30 mins to 1 hour into the film where various persons in local industries are shown making fish sauce, drying fish, making steel rods, etc. shot in Eisenstein worthy cinematography. Freeze some shots and one could be looking at a Man Ray. Suddenly, the world we experience every day as the site of our business is tinted with a deeper sense of tragedy, precisely because all the mundane meanings of our lives have been suspended. We are made to bracket the everyday world with this film because of how it is made.

Firstly, the film separates the expected sounds from the moving pictures. We never once hear the sounds of pigs protesting their slaughter, the chatter of workers slapping clay into shape, or the grinding of metal. We only hear the speaking of the man who is the afflicted poet and the woman who we are told is the healer. We don't even hear them speak on screen because they never speak on screen. Their voices always come from off screen. The sounds and music come from off screen too and they provide atmosphere and rhythm, not the sound effects of the goings on presented on screen. This way, the scenes we are watching become ephemeral. Ironically, they are also very solid. When they are about people working, they are very heavy with solid matter. Nonetheless, they present a beyond—an above which invites our thoughts to see the lofty things that are beyond this matter and yet is made present. The matter on screen though heavy seems to be there to remind us of what is beyond matter but can be present in the densest matter and most mundane doings. The gravity of the moving pictures and the poetry that contemplates a more authentic human existence allow the images to hint at the truth that this arena of the mundane holds greater truth than just our everyday perception of it. This is because the separation of sound from activity allows for the image to present what feelings, thoughts, intuitions, and meanings dwell in things. It is as if the image presented in this way, frames the usual world in a way that it becomes unframed, lets out other shades of signification that open us to its other meanings. Of course, the frames that present the picture are the verses spoken and the man posed in various states of agony or folding into himself.

Secondly, the film becomes even more meaningful when we understand that what is happening is a journey of healing. The poet has been contaminated by the toxicity of Western culture represented on the poet's desk by Sartre and Dostoevsky. He needs to get back to his wholeness as a person by restoring his being an Anacbanua. This means, in the

non-mythical world most of us dwell in, creating works using their culture's heritage and its language. However, in the mythical reality of this film, it means actually purging the poet of his impurities, bringing him back to his truth, through a dream walk of sorts or some kind of babaylan purification process. The film is some kind of dream walk where the poet traverses his land but in mythical space. It is the same land, but he has a spirit guide leading him through its spiritual spaces. This land which was imposed by the destructive and mundane ways of the modern world exists parallel to that of Urduha and the Caboloan. The power and the wisdom of these people are still on this earth. This is like a journey on a palimpsest where one encounters the magical and the creative ground from which a people have sprung and on which others have trod upon. Walking the journey and seeing what has been written upon allows the poet to restore his mythic connection to this powerful people.

The film seems to also depict the preparation Babaylan go through to be able to mediate between the spirit world and the human world. The Babaylan are usually tested and then made adequate to cross over to the reality of the *abyan*, or their spirit guide, by suffering trials. These trials are physically manifested by intense, life-threatening sickness, like a fever that could lead to death or purification. Internally, the person has a dream or a series of dreams where the *abyan* leads her through various endeavors to test her capacity and her worthiness. Not everyone is able to mediate for the spirit world because experiencing their reality and encountering its denizens is painful and demands strength and the capacity for extraordinary openness to the other world. The purification process prepares the chosen mediator to be able to perceive what transcends her world. This film seems to document the trials of a babaylan. As the poet goes through the mundane industries of his people, we are given the metaphor of all forms of melting, forming, reshaping, burning, purifying, and killing. All the metaphors for rebirth.

The poet has his guides, the spirit child and the healer woman. And the poems are like the chants of healing which the babaylan perform during the rites. Through their chants they speak appeasements to the spirits in a language the spirits understand and appreciate. In this way, they can be convinced to heal or restore the afflicted one. It is hard not to see this film as some sort of recreation of the babaylan healing ritual. In the way it is constructed, it is meant to awaken us to a mythical world. Such an awakening leads to restoration to health. In this case, the restoration is the return of the Anacbanua to their native soil, and their native spirit.

I choose to begin my discussion on film with Anacbanua not because of its great artistic achievement. I find that in parts it can lack subtlety and is sometimes heavy handed with the poetry. That said, it is still a work of art worth considering because it shows how film can pierce the dome of the mundane world and allow us to be present to the transcendent again. Only film can pierce the dome in this way. Let me discuss two other works which I believe show how film pierces the dome of the mundane to make us wonder about/at what lies beyond.

Todo Todo Terros (John D. Torres, 2008) in a film similar in style to Anacbanua. Like Anacbanua it is a decoupage film composed of footage collected by the director from his life hanging out with his indie filmmaker and musician friends. All the scenes are the home movies of a filmmaker with his friends as they waste time together in bars, go to film festivals, and watch people in the streets around their regular haunt. It also holds footage of the director embarrassingly flirting with a Russian woman in Germany—most likely during a film festival. This film is a bag full of silliness. It highlights men (mostly

men) at their most rowdy, playful, and even childish. Without the framing of the voice over narrative, much of this footage is ridiculous, potentially boring, and could be annoying. But the hodge podge of footage is in fact framed again by a voice over narration. What is in fact mundane was elevated by a narrative about spies and terrorists. Which again is potentially silly. I am personally on the fence about how well that worked artistically. (The director's later films are much more successful.) As we watch scenes from the director's nights in and around their favorite bar, he gives us a sense that beneath our trivial lives is the movement of terrorists threatening our peace. Or, alternately, we are made aware that the lives of even the most air headed child-men may bear more gravitas than we perceive because these floofs may be terrorists with hidden deadly intentions. This is where the film succeeds. It is able to gather found footage and bring it together as if it were telling a story with substance. It makes us aware of how we can bring our own stories to the seemingly random and terribly mundane events of our lives. And then everything seems grander than it is. Even the embarrassing-to-watch flirting of a young man and woman can be made to seem like destined love when narrated with the right words spoken with a soft voice and broken cadence.

Although the story imposed on the events is rather absurd and even a bit juvenile, it works to give us a sense that we can and do try to give our mundane lives greater meaning than they actually have. But there was one moment when the film suddenly turns more serious than one would have thought it could. There are a few scenes into the film about 1 hour 6 minutes onward when the terrorist/man-child's wife sees the footages of his flirting with the Russian woman. These scenes are the most poetic in the film where the wife writhes against the projected images on the wall in agony as she watches her husband engage in his embarrassing flirting. Her agony is played out like a dance against the wall framed by the painful scenes. There are even scenes where the meaningless flirtations are projected over his child's innocent and playful face. Here we see the real terror and realize how the man-child is actually a terrorist. The suffering and horror that the wife has to endure is played out without its natural sounds, framed with music and the terrorist's voice over. And thus, we see how his little life and its mundane adventures lead to actual suffering. The man-boy is a terrorist after all.

The insight one gets from watching the film is that life's randomness can be assigned a random meaning which can be convincing to yourself. Meanwhile, there is real suffering caused and masked by these fantasies. This is the opposite of what Anacbanua is doing. Anacbanua is showing how the mundanity of the real world is a palimpsest on a native, more authentic world of human flourishing. In *Todo Todo Teros* we have a trivial world and trivial lives being imposed on by fantasies of a more meaningful existence but even that fantasy does not amount to a more authentic human becoming. Meanwhile, there is authentic, human suffering caused by all this triviality. These images remind us that as we mindlessly go about our days, there is a being who is hurt. And the hurt caused seems to come from a place beyond this trivial space. The triviality of the happening and the pathetic attempt to give these happening a higher meaning than just boys goofing off gives us a very real sense of the truth of a person beyond what we try to make of it in the dailyness of life. This pain, the wife's suffering, is only possible because she is a being with a value and truth that can truly be disvalued by the lives we lead.

In both films, we see how the decoupling of the image from its lived-world meaning can open a door to the transcendent. In the case of *Anacbanua*, the decoupling opened a door to the mythic and in *Todo Todo Teros* we were made witness to

the suffering of a human being whose deepest self was wounded by trivialities. What I mean by the lived-world meaning of images is how an image presented would have been interpreted according to the common sense of the culture in which it is situated. When you separate the sounds and dialogues that are expected to emanate from the image, the commonsense meanings can be suspended so that another level of meaning can make itself present. Another film which demonstrates the effects of this decoupling is *Ang Mga Bulong sa Bituka ng Sta. Mesa* (Murmurs from the Somber Depths of Sta. Mesa) (Baretto Calma, 2015).

This film is a very quiet documentary. Shot in black and white, it presents the denizens of a part of Metro Manila that echoes something of the mega city's old-world charm. However, on the whole, this part of the city is defined by landscapes of squalor—at least in the eyes of the wealthier citizens of the city. Sta. Mesa could represent an older world which has not caught up with the development of the more gentrified parts of the city. It is a part of the city that belongs to older times. It is a thriving part of the city, but it does not carry signs of 21st century development. And so, its murmurs are those of a people who are at the borders of the mainstream. It thrives with the informal sector and is one of the places where labor from the more genteel parts of the city comes home to. The documentary wishes to capture the voices from this city at the margins. How it captures these voices makes us aware that behind the whispers is a reality that stands steady and expansively behind those who live hand to mouth existences.

The murmurs are both from the district and its people. The murmurs of the people are heard as voice overs narrating their lives. While they narrate their lives, they are presented variously in long, medium, and close ups for extended shots. For instance, while a pedicab driver tells his story, the camera shows him seated on his vehicle. We hear his narrative while we watch him staring into space for quite a while until he talks to his child who all this time has been sitting in the cab. The shot remains a steady medium shot and then later moves to a close-up which it holds steady. The story moves from person to person, telling their stories in their own voices. Each telling is accompanied by a series of extended shots that dwell on their faces, their settings, their goings about especially in relation to their livelihoods, and their surroundings. The stories come from a male and female pedicab driver, a young teen who operates a trolley on the train rails for passengers, an old professor/poet, a grade school student, a college student, a street food vendor, and a washerwoman. They tell their stories set against low-cost housing buildings, a well-known but not well-funded state university, endless railroad tracks, the underside of a flyover, a bridge, and the top of the flyover. Behind all that is the sky towering and spread wide, framing the old district. None of its buildings are tall enough to blot out the sky.

Here we are again given an example of how the decoupling of image from its natural sounds (in this case the city noises, especially the voices of the people who are framed in the shot and are obviously speaking off-screen) allows us to become aware that beyond this world of goings about, there is a deeper reality. In the case of this film, it is the realm of thoughts and feelings. It is the depth of people's inner life from which the murmurs of their dreams and regrets, ambitions and disappointments, contentment and small victories emerge. This film makes the realm of those murmurs present and reminds us that beneath the bustle is the stillness within where all happenings are taken in and given a meaning. It reminds us of how the noise above suppresses all those murmurings and keeps that world hidden and even forgotten. These are the smallest of lives. It is the murmuring of boys and girls who dream only of finishing school, of men and women who failed to finish school and have accepted their hand to mouth existence as the best life they can live as long

as their children are able to live better lives. It is the story of an old professor and forgotten poet who remembers the stories of his students and desires to enkindle the love for literature in them. Their lives may seem blasé and nestled in squalor, but their inner lives reveal the aspirations of selves that have existed significantly.

As these people speak, they are framed by the solidity of the world that stands behind them. Old buildings that are so old that it seems they cannot get older. Railroad tracks that go on and on and remain so that the people can be transported on rickety wooden platforms balanced on makeshift rollers. A university that has hosted innumerable young people and has been made derelict by the lack of maintenance but is still capable and willing to host so many more. The rows of buildings that stand for low-cost housing nestled on the ghosts of informal settlements. And then there is the sky—present, clear, unmoving. Like everything that frames it, this city too stands unmoving. It seems that it has been that way since I was a child and it will remain so—no matter how many condominiums, malls, and flyovers they install, the city will remain old and unmoving. In its being old and unmoving, it signals the steadiness of the earth, old and unmoved by all our busying about. The stillness of this movie seems to say that if we go and immerse ourselves in this district, we will be lost in its business and the noise that drowns our thoughts out. But if you listen enough, you will hear the deep murmuring of selves, *loobs*, deep in the eyes of people in constant movement looking for the next racket. And above all this is an unmoving world that promises to remain in its being steady as we go about and lose ourselves in our forgettable lives. Sta Mesa will remain even as the people fade. The skies, its squalid buildings and the tracks will echo the murmurs of its people as it continues to murmur with the voices of the past.

With the past three films, we have discussed how the dissociation of moving pictures with their natural sounds and markers for our sense experiences can signal transcendence. I would like now to focus on how the immersion in and intensification of the awareness of the moving images and their sensorial clues can equally signal the same. This is probably the only short film I will speak of in this book. I do not have sufficient access to short films and have not been able to study this art form enough to speak about them with insight. However, this film merits exception mainly because of its high artistic achievement and its deep insight into what speaks beyond and embraces us in tragedy.

Tungkung Langit (Kiri Dalena, 2013) is a 20 minute short by multimedia artist/freedom fighter Kiri Dalena. It is a documentary that focuses on two children who lost their parents in the super storm Sendong (Haiyan) which devastated the Visayas particularly Iligan City where Apolonio and Analou live. These sibling survived one of the strongest and most devastating storms to hit the Philippines in the 21st Century and is one of the first hints of what Global Warming promises the marginalized peoples of this country. The children were orphaned in this storm which paralyzed major cities and buried towns along its wake. They only survived the raging storm surges by clinging on to the logs carried by the flood waters from the mountains. But this is all background knowledge to the documentary. The film presents us a few days and nights in their lives. If one did not know what the children suffered and did not understand their quiet dialogues during the nights, the viewer would think they were watching a film that celebrated the innocence and deep connectedness in the life of a brother and sister nestled in a mountain community. However, it is a film, a quite beautiful film, about a grand tragedy.

It begins in the simplest of ways. The screen is blank and two children are speaking. The brother is asking “What did you draw?” We do not see the drawing because the screen is completely dark. But we realize soon enough that Analou has

drawn herself clinging to a log with a snake, the waters, and flowers floating around her. As the scene fades into the screen, we see a shot of a child's feet treading in the ocean and then the image of a small child's arms embracing the log. This could be an image of a child gleefully playing in the ocean on a hot summer day—especially since the shot is taken from under the water where everything almost always seems serene. The next scene hints at what that moment could have been about. It might have been a memory of what the children are talking about in this next scene. Here they are sitting in lamp light thinking about the loss of their parents and wondering where they are now (Beneath the sea, and forever gone they conjecture) while sitting with the sadness that is lingering between them.

The rest of the film shows the children going about their days. Their days are simple and quiet. There is no bustle, only quiet walking and running about, playing, doing chores, and more talks at night in lamplight. Their talks are about the memory of tragedy and death and present fears, but it is timid and innocent and so quiet. Clearly, children of the margins, they are shy and do not act or talk like they own the world. They are of the earth. They are nurtured by it, live in it, and embrace it. When they speak of tragic things, when they play without a care in the fields and among the animals, they blend so easily into all that embraces them. And although now and then the deep sadness manifests in their faces, in their inability to sleep right away perhaps because they fear their dreams (One night, the brother asks if she will sleep right away and she says no. He asks why and she jokes that it is because he is still talking to her. Then he asks if she wants to dream when she sleeps and there is a long silence, a very hesitant silence, but in her face you see her apprehension until she responds "Not yet.") they still embrace the joys of present life.

These children are still mourning the loss of their parents. Now and then, on their smiling faces, you can see how deeply they miss their parents. There is one scene when Analou's grandmother is combing her hair and she is smilingly looking at her and then looks away seeming to playfully speak to her grandmother all the while. But for the slightest of moments, her face drops and it seems that tears are being fought back as if taken by surprise by the feeling breaking through and then returning to the caring moment with her grandmother. Throughout this short film, we know the tears are there, that they are keeping things together, but as children of the earth, they know how the earth moves and seem to have forgiven its violence and are once again learning to immerse it in loving embrace. The night is an embrace, the forest is an embrace, sky is an embrace. And all will be forgiven because all will be as it must be. We the viewers know this to be so because the hyperfocus on their quiet conversations, the feel of the night, and the deep sounds of the world around them makes us feel embraced by what transcends these children. Like the children, we are immersed in the world, we accept it as what we belong to, and in the end, we forgive and embrace its ways.

The final scene of this film is a beautiful and simple shot of a tree immersed in a body of water in the dark against a heavy sky. It is clearly the aftermath of a storm and a great flooding. This is the aftermath of great violence and upheaval, a clear disaster. And yet, all is stillness. Even the waves flowing are gentle enough and still enough. We accept the stillness as the children accept that what has passed has passed and they allow the world and their grandmother to embrace them. Of course, clearly, these children will endure more hardships as they are poor and face the violence of men which is less forgivable because unnecessary and without redemption. But for now, at the end of this film, we are presented with the peace that transcends all violence and tragedy, and we are reminded of the promise that there is an Earth greater than all

our tragedies which will embrace us. And maybe there is a sky that waits to embrace us if we can forgive it and accept its healing.

In these films discussed, we can also see the contrast between the sense of the transcendent of contemporary and traditional rationalities. With traditional rationalities, whether they are situated in urban or rural landscapes, whether the characters are conscious or not, the transcendent is present as the steadiness standing above us. In their ephemeral lives, the transcendent stands above all of us promising some form of *kaginhawaan*. On the other hand, in the contemporary world and its trivialities, we are made aware of the transcendent by how we miss it in the disappointment of how small our urban lives are. But in all these films, there is that which stands above our lives, embracing us, reminding us of a wholeness that will heal us, restore us. Even in tragedy, even in lives without a sense of the transcendent, these films show us how the cinematic arts can make present the transcendent.

In the story of these two children, the awareness and openness to the flow of life is matter of fact. The people of Sta. Mesa also have this characteristic. There is this acceptance of the flow of life and that which stands above in their demeanor. Some will call that the fatalism of those deprived of agency—the children, the poor, and the old. However, the labeling of fatalism may speak more of those who impose the label than those being labeled. Certainly, life is difficult for the persons in these films. They live with loss and regret, tragedy and the potential absurdity of life—of their lives and those they love. They live with the struggle to realize *kaginhawaan* as they live with exploitation and suffering. However, it seems they have a capacity to see the good in the tragic reality of their lives. They seem to have the kind of *loob* that still have this deep connectedness to that which stands above them and heals them. At least they are healed enough to see the good in life when it is given. They are able to dwell in moments of peace, comfort, and love when these are given. This is not to say that they should accept the unjust structures that other people have imposed on them or that they should not struggle to establish social justice. But their quality of existence signals an awareness of the transcendent that gives meaning to all their suffering and somehow it is captured on film.

Their own struggles stand in direct contrast with the struggles of the more urbane and sophisticated films we have discussed. In *Todo Todo Terros* the narrative had to create a frame of gravitas for the mundane scenes in the film to transcend their mundanity. The real tragedy of the suffering wife was the only scene that did not need any artificial framing for the audience to realize there was something profoundly human going on. And although Anacbanua succeeded in revealing how the daily enterprises of life were grounded in existential struggles, the poet's artifice seemed to want to impose his own drama into the reality of what was lost and continues to be lost into the struggle for an authentic human life. Thus, at points, the ailing poet could lose our sympathy because he could be overdramatizing things based on his own self-induced malaise.

There is the tendency among urban existentialists to intellectualize or artificially frame human suffering because if they don't, nothing will give it sense. This tendency is lessened when they allow the marginalized, less Westernized people speak with their own voices because their suffering is less exaggerated though more existential (because it involves life and death). Again, this is perhaps their *loob* is still more able to recognize that transcendent which promises meaning and consolation, even a greater *kaginhawaan*, to their suffering. Perhaps, their acceptance of the rhythms of life is less due to

the fatalism of those who lack agency and more to the *loob's* attunement with the cosmos which embraces them.

A film which makes us dwell in this contrast is Lav Diaz's *Kagandanan sa Banwaan ning mga Engkanto* (Death in the Land of Encantos, 2007). In this nine-hour epic, documentary and fiction are meshed into one story. It tells of the tragedy brought about by typhoon Reming, one of the worst storms to hit Bicol. This storm which triggered floods and mudflows from Mayon Volcano which caused the destruction of many villages and the loss of hundreds of lives frames the narrative. In almost every scene there is a reminder of the destruction: landscapes scattered with the skeletal remains of homes, felled trees, and mud everywhere. The effects of the typhoon on the lives of the people is also narrated by them in actual interviews spread throughout the film. But theirs is not the story of this film. The other element that frames this tragedy is the intensification of extrajudicial killings of activists initiated by the Arroyo administration. We hear on the radio and from the discussions of characters that leaders of the left are being executed on an almost weekly basis.

This film is the story of a fictional Bicolano poet, Benjamin Agusan and his friends. These are the markers that define the personhood of Hamil, as he was known. He was an activist writer who had written critically about the violence and corruption in Philippine society. He seems to have been known to the government and was seemingly under surveillance—but we cannot really be sure about this. He was lovers with the sculptor, Catalina, with whom he had a child, and Carmen, his muse, greatest obsession and regret, and perhaps his great love. (We cannot be sure of this either.) He left Carmen when he took a fellowship to teach in Russia. Catalina, who is still his friend says he must have accepted the fellowship in Russia because he wanted to escape Carmen whose love was becoming oppressive for him, but which he says was getting obsessive. We learn that when he left, Carmen still kept his studio clean, waiting for him to return. He says he told her not to wait for him, but he is haunted by his abandoning her. He is also guilty for not being a father to his child with Catalina. He is also tormented by the guilt and sorrow over the death of his mother which was caused by her madness. In Hamil's memory, she wasted away waiting for the enchanted prince to would come for her. In the end, she died alone in a psychiatric institution. Hamil is guilty about not being able to take care of her and is worried that he might have inherited her condition. We learn that he suffered a breakdown in Russia which was intense enough for his doctors there to say that he would not recover from the next one. Hamil lived with many ghosts, the torment of his failings as an egotistical person, his sufferings for his art, and the angst over the certainty that he would fall into madness.

Hamil returns to Bicol because the typhoon has killed Carmen. He dreams of Carmen as the most perfectly beautiful woman like the volcano whose mud killed her. He meets his friends Catalina and Teodoro and they spend their days discussing about art, the choice one has to make between being an artist and making a living, the cruelty of the perfect volcano, and the evil that the government inflicts on activists and its ineffectiveness and corruption in the shadow of the unprecedented suffering and death Reming has inflicted. Together they embark as artists on a ritual of mourning and healing. With Hamil's homecoming he must face the death of his mother and lover, and the possibility that his psychological condition is worsening and he may be under surveillance by state or extra-state forces. His torment is made very real in the nine hours of the films contemplation on his days in Bicol until he finally succumbs to his madness and he dies violently. During his last days, he himself becomes a ghost and haunts the site of his old studio where Carmen died. He writes poems to her, cries his goodbyes, and finally slits his own throat (which, again, we can't be sure of because he may have been executed).

The final scene of this film shows how Hamil is tortured in a safehouse by the man who claims to be surveilling him. As he is beaten, he is being told that his writings are a lie, that he is painting the country in a bad light because it makes people believe that his is an exploitative and violent nation. This is shown after long scenes of Hamil remembering about his mother's moments spent waiting for the enchanted prince, longing with regret for Carmen, and obsessing about his life and his work, writing poems on the sand day and night in the space where his studio once stood. And so, we don't really know if this final torture scene actually happened or was representative of the state of Hamil's mind. The suffering in this film is of Russian proportions. It is the kind of suffering that eats one's soul until one is twisted in such pain that your whole embodied self (especially your mind) is knotted into a broken thing. Hamil is a broken thing with a slashed throat at the end of this nine-hour odyssey.

At the end of it, we can ask ourselves, what did Hamil suffer for? His art? His nation? Clearly, he did not suffer for the people he loved. He was not there to care for them when they became too difficult. It seems he suffered for himself. As Catalina says to the interviewer, in bitterness but also with much truth:

Pareho lang kami ni Hamil. Walang kuwentang magulang. Nagpakalulong lang kami sa aming sining. Pinaniwalaan namin ang aming sarili na mahalaga ang aming mga obra. Mahalaga kaming tao: sa kultura, sa bayan. It's all bullshit. Kung susumahin mo, umiikot lang sa iisang mundo ang artist: ego. ... Sa huli it's all about the self. Lalo na ang mga artists. Masyadong makasarili ang mga artists.

We're just the same, Hamil and I. Worthless parents. We just let ourselves be caught in our art. We let ourselves believe that our art is important. That we are important people for culture, for the nation. It's all bullshit. If you sum it up, artists revolve around one world: ego....In the end, it's all about the self. Especially for artists. Artists are extremely selfish.

It's true. Perhaps he lived only for his art which was all about his ego. The creation of art, after all, could all be about ego, about stoking one's godlike capacities. In being artists, we are like gods and being gods is addictive. What if Hamil was just all about his ego? That would explain so much of his selfishness. Perhaps his being so trapped in his ego drove him to madness or intensified his inherited condition. His ego killed him in the end. This explains the amplified suffering and self-absorption which manifests as madness at the end of his life.

However, we can ask ourselves this question. What if the artist's suffering is warranted like the suffering of martyrs? What if, because we can only attend to our suffering and the meaning of our suffering up to a point and then we need to get about the business of life, what if we needed artists to genuinely suffer for us? What if artists suffer in Russian proportions because someone has to face the enormity of human tragedy, must articulate its potential absurdity, and rage and mourn and be deformed by it otherwise the truth of suffering will be lost to humanity? And so, the greater the artist, the deeper the insight, the more profoundly she touches the indifference of the infinite, the more intensely the artist must suffer our finitude. So like Jesus, the artist must suffer to bear our sorrows and tragedies. Unlike Jesus, they bring no redemption. They just allow the rest of us to go about life and accept its necessity. They are the sacrificial lambs whose sacrifices

bring no redemption but only relief to us and destruction only to themselves. If this is so, the intensity of Hamil's suffering is meaningful and necessary.

But what if all his suffering was caused mainly by his condition? In a way we can say that the afflicted are also some kind of sacrificial lambs. Their condition opens a window that allows them a special insight into the tragedy of human existence. Perhaps their suffering is necessary to free the rest of us so that we can go about our days as well. What if, for human life to be possible, not everyone can look out into the void and we must ignore the open window? Yet, some of us have to look. Otherwise, we would forget. Some of us have to be staring out that window if most of us are to live without completely forgetting the truth of human existing. If this is true, then, does that mean that those who suffer the angst of the potential nothingness of human existence suffer for all of us? But perhaps not.

As I said, there are interviews throughout the film. It is a quasi-documentary in which survivors and actors who are pretending to be survivors are interviewed. You can tell which ones of them are actual survivors. You can see it from the mark of tragedy on their faces and the way they carry their bodies. You can hear in their voices the shock of their most tremendous encounter with nature. But you cannot hear from their voice the ironic bitterness, the existential struggling, and the desire to theorize it all. They simply need to talk about it and share what it was that they lived through. Why is that? Perhaps it is because they have no deep interiority which can distance itself from nature and theorize tragedy and articulate absurdity. They lack sophistication. But do they really? What if we understand this all from the perspective of *loob*?

What if, the great artist is suffering her tremendous suffering because they view the eternal from their interior through a window. They do not suffer their tragedies as *loob* capable of dwelling in the horizon of the transcendent *askapwa*. For this, I would like to discuss the film *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimungtong* (The Road to Kalimungtong) (Mes de Mesa, 2005). This film centers on the life of two children and the people they love. Potpot and Jinky are brother and sister who live in the Cordillera mountains. They live with two brothers and their grandfather. The title of the film refers to their trek to school from their home. Kalimungtong is the center where their school is located and they reach it by crossing a mountain. Such a trek to school is not unusual for Filipino children who live in the hinterlands. Their brothers are often away trying to earn a meagre living where they can. They do odd jobs here and there where unskilled laborers are needed. Because of this, Jinky and Potpot run the household. They feed the pig and chickens and take care of their invalid grandfather. Jinky cooks, does laundry, and sings to her grandfather to calm him when he is having difficulties. Potpot does odd things around the house that he can. These children are discriminated against in their school because they are among the poorest of the poor, such that they eat *saluyot* almost daily for extended periods of time. Their household income depends on their brothers whose earnings are meagre and seasonal. There was one worrisome time when her brothers worked for a mining company. They were gone for months without word. For all that time the children had to depend on a limited supply of rice and *saluyot* every day, and take care of their grandfather on their own. As time passed, and rice supplies ran low, the children begin to think about the possibility of running out of food. Finally, their brothers come home, injured but alive. They come home as poor as before and with injuries. They are planning to go back to the mines but the children implore with them to change their minds. At the end of the film, one brother works as a loader in the market and the older

brother stays home to take care of their father. Nothing has changed except the brothers have exchanged roles.

There is a side story to this. Jinky has a favorite teacher. She loves the children and loves her work, but she is only a temporary, substitute teacher. What's more, she has failed the teacher's licensure exam three times. She has no chance competing against 20 other candidates for teaching positions in her school and so she has to go abroad to work—most probably as a domestic. Jinky's is the saddest, most quiet, and kindest teacher. She is not qualified for this job because she is not that well versed in the world of the West and is deprived of the capacity to engage the dominant systems successfully. And this is the heart of the suffering in their community. Like their teacher, everyone in the community is to some degree capability deprived.

The capability deprived are the truly poor in a society. They are the people who are not fully integrated into the dominant (in our case Westernized) systems. They are usually part of the indigenous communities which were not assimilated by the colonizers. Thus, they do not know their way around the imposed world. They are capability deprived because they cannot earn a living, influence public policy, and live in a way that gives them *kaginhawaan*. They are doubly deprived because they are also alienated from their original way of life which traditionally allowed them to realize a good life, even a life of indigenous affluence. But with this imposed system which favors the dominant minority classes who serve the global economy, they are deprived of any ability to live a subsistence life. They live with constant violence against their persons. Thus, a woman who desires to teach children and is probably qualified in supervising their development as human beings has no chance to do that because her epistemic marginalization will not allow her to pass a qualifying exam. A hardworking man willing to take on any work is not capable of earning a steady and livable income for himself and his sibling because his marginalization from the dominant rationality will not allow him to navigate its systems. And this gives us a sense of the futility of the children's daily walk on the road to Kalimungtong. Jinky is particularly hard working and intelligent. However, she is a person who is of the margins and despite her hard work in school, she will never become successful in the dominant world. Her life will be a variation of the teacher's failure and Potpot's a variation of his brothers'. And so this film is about the genuine marginalization of its characters.

Given the violence these characters suffer, why don't they experience the monumental angst of the Diaz/Dostoevskian artists and intellectuals? It seems that it is precisely because they are the capability deprived. Those who are not empowered do not have the entitlement to rail at life. They are the people who have learned to accept what is given because one has no rights in the face of nature's processes. When you have no claims to nature, you have no right to feel disappointment, you have no angst over what you were not given, and no dread over what might be taken away. Life just is. Suffering just is. Death just is. Because they are capability deprived, they see the unjust systems of men to be like those of nature. It just is. It is beyond our capacities to reform or undo. Thus, the brothers of Potpot and Jinky, like the children, accept their fates. They know that it is hard and sad that their lives have to be this way, but they can accept it with resilience. This is true of the sad acceptance of the poor of their fate. However, the road to Kalimungtong signifies more than just this tragedy of capability deprivation.

When we watch the children traverse the road to Kalimungtong, we are made to experience the mountain. The mountain is immense and greater than them, and yet it is kind to their journey. It is great and can swallow them up, and yet it is

allows them to traverse its ways and its light and air fills their hearts so they are given to play. The mountain is not harsh to them, men are. The mountain can bring danger and death. However, it brings death only as it sustains life and brings new life. Suffering is never born of malice but serves life, and even those who suffer know that suffering is never the last word. It seems that this is known to them because they are people whose *loob* is *kapwa* to the mountain. So yes, there is the acceptance because they are the capability deprived. But there is also the acceptance of the *kapwa* who knows that the mountain is a fount of eternal life. This is conveyed in that scene where the grandfather is able to rise from his sick bed to watch the sun rise on the cordillera range.

One early morning, the grandfather rises to the waking world and quietly he walks to sit across the mountain range covered in mist. He sits silently to watch the mountains mantled by the healing mists. Not like man made smog which is a blanket of poison, this blanket of mist is nourishment and healing. He takes in the world and Potpot sits by his side to take it in with him. Then Potpot comes to sit by Jinky who is starting the fire for brewing coffee. He sits by his sister shivering from the cold. She sits closer to him to wrap him in her blanket. Brother and sister settle into its warmth while sipping coffee. And then, in the next shot both are taking the road again to the school, which is also wrapped in mist. They are blanketed again by the nature and life is good again.

The blanket of life is larger than the mountain and restores all things to life. This is the faith of the *loob* who is *kapwa* to the mountain. It allows itself healing and the blanketing of the life greater than ego, greater than suffering, and greater than death. Maybe even greater than madness.

Footnotes

¹ *Anacbanua (Child of the Sun)*, directed by Christopher Gozum, (2009; Sine Caboloan Co. Ltd.)

<https://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/2352/Anacbanua--The-Child-of-the-Sun-.to>

² <https://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/2352/Anacbanua--The-Child-of-the-Sun-.>"

³ <https://dalityapi.blogspot.com/2014/03/anacbanua.html>