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## PHILIPPINE NOIR

### *The Cinema of Lav Diaz*

**T**HE FILIPINO DIRECTOR Lav Diaz has created a monumental body of work over the past two decades: some sixteen feature films—interspersed with as many miscellaneous shorts, documentaries and film-essays—shot almost entirely in black and white, with running times generally somewhere between four and ten hours. Produced on a largely artisanal scale throughout the archipelago of the Philippines, at one level they represent the everyday troubles and resilience of the Filipino people, the present-day plight of the country and the burden of its past. Although he is a well-known figure there, Diaz's films have been screened only sporadically in the Philippines itself, the product not only of political constraints—a number have been banned—but also of working beyond the bounds of an entrenched national film industry. Internationally, Diaz's reputation has grown since *Norte, the End of History* (2013)—a 4-hour, freewheeling adaptation of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* set in the contemporary Philippines—appeared at Cannes, with prizes and acclaim garnered at Locarno, Berlin and Venice. His oeuvre, though, remains little understood. On the global circuit, he is regularly acclaimed as a master of 'slow cinema'. In interviews, Diaz rarely fails to correct the record: 'it's not slow cinema; it's cinema.'<sup>1</sup>

First coined by the French critic Michel Ciment who identified an emerging 'cinema of slowness' in a talk at the 2003 San Francisco International Film Festival, 'slow cinema' has been consolidated in Anglophone film writing as a designation for a range of austere, minimalist films typified by use of the long take.<sup>2</sup> Directors who have been classified as practitioners alongside Diaz include Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Jia Zhangke, Pedro

Costa and Tsai Ming-Liang, while the category has also been applied retrospectively, with Ozu, Bresson, Tarkovsky and others enlisted into a genealogy of slowness. Conceptually it has been formulated primarily in terms of Bazin's classic ontological definition of realism, sometimes elaborated through Deleuze's conception of the modernist 'time-image'. Politically, this mode has generally been interpreted as a response to the accelerated tempo of late capitalism—as site of respite or resistance—with Rancière, for instance, describing such work as reopening time 'as the site of the possible'.<sup>3</sup>

A critical framework of this kind, encompassing such a heterogeneous set of directors of disparate geographies and lineages, has the potential to obscure as much as it elucidates. In Diaz's case, there is an evident disconnection between the discourse of slow cinema and the concerns that animate his films. The historical, social and political character of the Philippines is his primary subject—'the struggle is there. I cannot turn my back on it'—and his achievement is only fully visible within this setting.<sup>4</sup> Though duration is an element of his repertoire, it is mobilized for much more particular ends. Of a 21-minute sequence in the 11-hour *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004), a film that pioneered his singular approach, Diaz explained at the time: 'In the film's central death scene, I want the audience to experience the afflictions of my people who have been agonizing for so long'—'that is the death scene of the Filipinos. I wanted it longer, believe me.'<sup>5</sup>

### *A past that is not past*

Diaz's work can be profitably situated within a genealogy of politically committed cultural vanguardism in the Philippines—the films of Kidlat

<sup>1</sup> Reuters, 'Berlin Film Festival: director defends eight-hour movie that features hour-long lunch break', *Guardian*, 19 February 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of academic works on slow cinema include Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, eds, *Slow Cinema*, Edinburgh 2016; Emre Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema: Nostalgia, Absurdism, Boredom*, Cham, Switzerland 2018; Matthew Flanagan, "'Slow Cinema": Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film', PhD thesis, University of Exeter 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Béla Tarr: The Poetics and the Politics of Fiction', in De Luca and Jorge, eds, *Slow Cinema*, p. 260.

<sup>4</sup> Nadin Mai, 'Lav Diaz: Slow Burn', *Guernica*, 15 January 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Brandon Wee, 'The Decade of Living Dangerously', *Senses of Cinema*, no. 34, February 2005.

Tahimik and John Torres, and the fictions of Eric Gamalinda and Gina Apostol, for instance. There, the responsibility of the artist has a more dramatic history. For Diaz, filmmaking has a radically pedagogical value: ‘my idea is that aesthetics—the arts—must play a greater role in our culture, and educate people about self-awareness, about self-respect, about sovereignty, about freedom’.<sup>6</sup> As Caroline Hau has shown, there is a longstanding affinity between the vanguard of Filipino culture and anti-colonial liberation, stemming from the foundational figures of its literature, above all José Rizal, whose work sought to forge the living fiction of the nation.<sup>7</sup> Diaz however is operating in a different historical juncture: his work by turns a mournful coda to this revolutionary tradition and an attempt to revivify it. In this latter mode, his work heeds the call of the theorist Geeta Kapur, suggesting that new signifiers erupting from indigenous and subaltern post-colonial cultures could drive an avant-garde praxis in the global South.<sup>8</sup>

The post-colonial nation, however, is not the only framework within which to situate this body of work. Diaz’s films are concerned with the persistence of oligarchic domination, and their long takes present a landscape of diverse cultures and temporalities, imaginatively recalling the animist legacy of pre-colonial Malay civilization, as Diaz terms it, along with sediments of Muslim, Spanish, Japanese and American influence amid the combined and uneven geography of the archipelago, which intermingles hectic urban modernity with enduring forms of peasant life. Most of this work is set in the period that Diaz himself has lived through—circling around the 1972–86 dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, though also pointing forward to Rodrigo Duterte’s regime—but beyond this surface temporality, they are engaged with a longer history of foreign invasion and thwarted self-determination. Diaz has spoken of the successive ‘cataclysms’ that have befallen the archipelago—Spanish colonization, American rule, Japanese occupation, the Marcos dictatorship, Duterte’s disaster nationalism—and how his work attempts to contend with this traumatic history in order to awaken a ‘sleepwalking’

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Guarneri, *Conversations with Lav Diaz*, Bologna 2021, p. 103; henceforward MG.

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Hau, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946–1980*, Manila 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Geeta Kapur, ‘Dismantled Norms: Apropos Other Avantgardes’, in Caroline Turner, ed., *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, Perth, Australia 2005, pp. 41–100.

people: 'For centuries, we Filipinos have been imposed on, politically, economically, culturally. It was very, very violent, and we were—and we are—kept really, really ignorant.'<sup>9</sup>

It is within this longer political-historical time, rather than a post-industrial temporality marked by distraction and oversaturation, that Diaz's films can best be situated. Time in his films takes the form of the aftermath, staged amid the ruins of successive defeated attempts at liberation, but also of the return, the onset of further tragedy. The past is not past. The same oligarchic families command the scene, their modes of rule grotesquely updated. The broader temporal question that animates this oeuvre is how to overcome the relentless movement of Filipino history—the cycle of dictatorship, mass killing and impunity that has characterized it for centuries. Diaz: 'In the Philippines we have this malady: we free ourselves and then we immediately relapse into the old ways and end up in the claws of yet another colonizer, yet another dictator, yet another despot. It really is a national malaise! So the revolutionary inside me is always thinking about that: how do we break this vicious circle? How do we fight this very dysfunctional, fractured, cataclysmic system?'<sup>10</sup>

### *Lessons of Cotabato*

Diaz was born in 1958, eight years after the official independence of the Philippines from the US was declared, and seven before Marcos ascended to the presidency.<sup>11</sup> He grew up on the southern island of Mindanao, in the backwater of Cotabato, the son of a socialist father and Catholic mother who were committed schoolteachers, part of a movement of socially conscious graduates out into neglected parts of the country. Diaz recalls it as a 'hard life'—they lived without electricity, in a *barrio* with unpaved roads—but was grateful to his parents for what these years imparted to him, the experience of 'struggle, sacrifice, poverty', and the immersion in a village world that would leave a deep imprint on his work.

It was an upbringing of cultural contrasts. His parents were highly educated: Diaz traces his love of Russian literature, and its impress

<sup>9</sup> MG, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> MG, p. 168.

<sup>11</sup> The indispensable resource here is the Italian film critic Michael Guarneri's recently published *Conversations with Lav Diaz*, a dialogue between two friends sustained over the past decade, whose publication details are given in footnote 6 above.

on his cinema, to their influence. At the same time, American and British popular hits played on the radio—the Beatles, the Stones, the Beach Boys—and his older brother returned from college with records by Creedence and Led Zeppelin. This was a period of pop-cultural invasion from the West, prompting an explosion of local bands inspired by the new foreign sounds known as ‘Pinoy Rock’. Diaz also recalls regular weekend cinema trips with his cinephile father to the nearest town, Tacurong, where they would hop from one movie theatre to the next, catching double features of ‘Kung fu, spaghetti westerns, Filipino melodrama, Japanese westerns, everything.’ He also remembers the impression made by the films of Kurosawa and Herzog: ‘It was my film school.’<sup>12</sup> This was a feast of genres, which again would leave a deep mark on the cinematographic approach that Diaz would adopt, which proceeds by plays on archetypes and re-configurations of generic forms.

Diaz’s formative political experience was the military dictatorship. He was thirteen when martial law was declared in 1972—‘I was one of the martial-law babies; that’s what my generation is called’—inaugurating a period of ‘chaos and terror’.<sup>13</sup> Marcos had risen to prominence in the 1960s, presenting himself as a war hero in the fight against the Japanese and a descendant of an anti-colonialist general. (When he first ran for president in 1964, Marcos produced a propagandist biographical film about his life, *Iginuhit ng Tadhana* [*Drawn by Fate*], which Diaz remembers watching with his parents, amid audience applause.) With his term limit in sight, Marcos declared a state of emergency, on the pretext of a threat from the armed wing of the Communist Party, the New People’s Army and the Muslim Mindanao Independence Movement, which sought secession for the southern part of the archipelago that had converted to Islam long before the Spanish arrived. With Washington’s blessing, he imposed military rule.

In the run-up to the state of emergency, Marcos had covertly deployed the military to foster an atmosphere of fear and confusion. Diaz had personal experience of this, even in his small village. Some time after martial law was declared, the villagers discovered that a recently arrived carpenter and two peddlers were in fact military agents, and had been behind the mysterious happenings—‘hacking the cows and killing people, burning

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<sup>12</sup> Mai, ‘Lav Diaz: Slow Burn’.

<sup>13</sup> Mai, ‘Lav Diaz: Slow Burn’; MG, p. 162.

down houses, making noises in the forest at night—thought by many in the village to be the work of evil spirits.<sup>14</sup> So effective was this strategy that a majority in the country initially approved of military rule as a way to restore order. Security checkpoints were installed on the roads leading out of the village. Diaz remembers soldiers forcing those trying to pass to line up and sing pro-Marcos jingles, or the national anthem—‘if you made a mistake you got slapped, punched, kicked, or worse, until you got the song right’.<sup>15</sup> Diaz’s *barrio* was caught in the crossfire of the warring factions—military agents, separatist guerrillas, communist cadres: ‘there was this very complicated role-play game going on: a political role-play game, with all these interplays of characters. It was almost like a movie.’<sup>16</sup> Diaz’s film *From What Is Before* (2014), which portrays the degeneration of a rural *barrio* in the build-up to the imposition of martial law, draws powerfully upon these childhood memories of uncanny happenings and random terror.

Although their house was burned down, and the family briefly held hostage, while elsewhere relatives were killed or went missing, Diaz’s parents chose to remain in the area and continue with their work. Friends of Diaz left to join the communists in the mountains, never to return. But like his father, Diaz was not drawn to armed struggle. He has said that the guilt he felt at staying behind made him more committed to filmmaking.<sup>17</sup> The dictatorship coincided with a burgeoning underground youth culture, and Diaz played in punk bands—as rhythm guitar and chief lyricist—on the experimental periphery of the country’s pop terrain, yet to be exploited by the entertainment business. This was at a redeeming distance from the official cultural sphere, which became entangled with Imelda Marcos’s patronage and developmentalist ideology. The sensibility of punk and its emphasis on freedom and independence had a lasting imprint on Diaz’s conception of art and its political charge: ‘That’s the point of aesthetics for me. Art is all about freedom, about being autonomous and making your own decisions, about being free from the clutches of feudalism, imperialism, hegemonism. Art is all about liberating yourself from those who want to control your existence, telling you what to do, what to think.’<sup>18</sup>

Diaz attended university—he studied economics at Ateneo de Manila, Ateneo de Davao and Notre Dame back in Cotabato—at the height of

<sup>14</sup> MG, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Mai, ‘Lav Diaz: Slow Burn’.

<sup>15</sup> MG, p. 157.

<sup>16</sup> MG, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> MG, p. 103.

the dictatorship's violence. These were formative years, during which he was involved in the youth wing of the Communist Party and resolved to devote himself to film. In particular, Diaz cites the influence of Lino Brocka's street-level masterpiece *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1975), with its combination of neorealism, symbolism and melodrama. Brocka was a fearless critic of the dictatorship, who fought against censorship in the arts; Diaz has said that seeing the film on its release awoke something in him, that you could use cinema to fight the regime. *Insiang* (1976), Brocka's next film, also made a great impression, setting the bar for a social-realist cinema that would critically portray 'a system that doesn't work for the masses but maintains the status quo'.<sup>19</sup>

### *Pito-pito*

Yet the path to that cinema would be a long one. Having married young, Diaz worked odd jobs after university, notably as a journalist for the music magazine *Jingle*, founded in the youth culture upsurge of the previous decade. Martial law was formally lifted in 1981, and the regime overthrown in 1986 by the EDSA revolution—acronym of Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Manila, crucible of the popular demonstrations. But though Marcos fled to retirement in Hawaii, much of the old regime remained. The presidency went to Corazon Aquino, wealthy widow of an anti-Marcos senator who had been assassinated in broad daylight at Manila Airport in 1983 (Diaz included the footage in *Evolution of a Filipino Family*). Despite the formal declaration of democracy, the Marcos family remained a powerful presence in economic and public life. As Diaz would say, 'you only have to visit the Philippine countryside to realize that it is still the feudal era. We remained that way, man! It never changed: you see these big Filipino politicians, their families controlling whole villages and towns as if they were Spanish feudal lords.'<sup>20</sup>

Entry into filmmaking began in 1985 when Diaz participated in the courses run by the Movie Workers Welfare Foundation, an initiative organized by the Goethe Institute that helped to stimulate independent cinema during a period of relative political openness in the country. There he encountered significant filmmakers such as Lamberto Avellana and Nick Deocampo, as well as Larry Manda, a fellow classmate who

<sup>19</sup> MG, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> MG, pp. 55, 138.

would become his regular cinematographer. The workshops led to freelancing in the Manila studio system as a screenwriter, first for television and then the cinema; the first films he received a writing credit for were the action-crime dramas *Mabuting kaibigan masamang kaaway* (1991) and *Galvez: Hanggang sa dulo ng mundo hahanapin kita* (1993). For Diaz at the time, working through the studio system was the route to becoming a filmmaker—for lack of alternatives, this was the path that Brocka, who shot overtly commercial pictures to fund his more socially committed work, had taken.

Diaz also continued to work as a journalist, producing some photography and a documentary on Manila's street-children. This led to an invitation to New York in 1992 to exhibit his work as part of a Japanese Catholic charity's fundraising campaign. There he found a job at an NYC newspaper called the *Filipino Express*. He stayed there for a few years to raise money for his family—by this time they had three young children and were struggling to make ends meet—and eventually settled them in the US. During this period, Diaz began work on his first independent film, which he funded by moonlighting as a waiter and gas-station attendant. Shooting began in 1994 on what was then called 'Ebolusyon ni Ray Gallardo' ('Evolution of Ray Gallardo'), the story of a Filipino who jumps ship in America and is haunted by the ghosts of his past, inspired by a fellow reporter's article at the paper.

Returning to the Philippines in 1997, where he shot additional scenes for the film, he was advised by Manda to submit some screenplays to Regal Films, one of the biggest studios in the country, which had just started a low-budget division for young directors. Diaz was hired, and over the next four years wrote and directed four films for Regal, beginning with the heist comedy *Burger Boys* (1999) and crime drama *The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion* (1998). This was a breakthrough, yet the experience was a difficult and disillusioning one. The national film industry was facing a slump in profits due to the 1997 Asian financial crisis and competition from Hollywood and television. Regal's new division was an attempt to rectify this by adopting a breakneck production regime known as *pito-pito*, or seven-seven, previously only employed for *bomba* exploitation films, to revitalize profits. The formula involved seven days shooting, followed by seven days post-production. 'It was hell', Diaz has said, recalling crew members collapsing from exhaustion on set, and he found himself in relentless conflict with the company over conditions

and creative control.<sup>21</sup> The first film was only completed on condition that he renounce his salary, the second stalled until the first had made a profit, the third, the family melodrama *Naked Under the Moon* (1999) was re-cut without his approval with additional sex scenes added, and the fourth, the dystopian work *Hesus, rebolusyunaryo* (2002), led to a legal dispute. ‘The process woke me up and I left the movie industry’, Diaz has said, describing it as fundamentally ‘feudal’, no different from the power structures elsewhere in the country.<sup>22</sup>

### *Liberation*

As Diaz was coming to the end of his time with Regal Films, he managed to secure funding from a financier looking to launch the career of a young actor and completed his first full-length independent feature, *Batang West Side* (2002). Shot over the course of eight months in Jersey City, it follows the investigation into the death of a young Filipino immigrant found on the sidewalk of West Side Avenue, and develops into a portrait of the struggles of US–Filipino immigrants seeking a new life. At five hours, it was the longest Filipino film ever made at the time, to the dismay of its financial backer. In interviews, Diaz admitted that this was seen by many to be an issue, making distribution difficult, but stood his ground: ‘There are small and large canvases; brief ditties and lengthy arias; short stories and multi-volume novels; the haiku and the *Iliad*. This should be the end of the argument.’<sup>23</sup> He produced a manifesto at the time, denouncing the industry for being narrowly profit-driven, and audiences for regarding film as merely escapist entertainment: ‘It will take a long and involved process to change this perception, especially with Hollywood films still dominating Filipino theatres . . . We need to begin developing a National Cinema, a cinema that will help create a responsible Filipino people.’<sup>24</sup>

An escape route from the dictates of financier and studio soon presented itself. In the early 2000s, digital filmmaking and production software transformed the landscape. Speaking several years later of what this meant, Diaz declared: ‘We don’t depend on film studios and capitalists anymore. This is liberation cinema now. Digital is liberation

<sup>21</sup> MG, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> MG, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Lav Diaz, ‘The Aesthetic Challenge of *Batang West Side*’, in Nicola Mazzanti et al., eds, *Lav Diaz: Lying Down in a World of Tempest*, Brussels and Antwerp, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> MG, p. 22.

theology.<sup>25</sup> Ownership of the means of production allowed Diaz to return to his stalled first film, begun a decade before, supplementing the extant material with a large quantity of digital footage, financed by Diaz and a friend. The procedure was the inverse of the assembly-line of the studio system. The team worked with a premise—‘capturing the struggles of invisible Filipinos in this very dysfunctional, feudal and corrupt system’—but beyond that ‘everything was open’.<sup>26</sup> The final film, *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004), branches out into a black-and-white epic of the struggles of two peasant families split between Luzon and Manila, stretching from the advent of martial law to the EDSA revolution. Neorealist-style footage of rural family life is punctuated and contextualized by news clips of protests, of Marcos, of radio actors recording the soap opera on which the teenage sisters are hooked, as well as a recreated interview with Brocka about political film under Marcos. The sudden removal of constraints after a decade under the dictates of the industry seemed to stimulate a liberated extremity of technique. At the time, Diaz spoke of wishing to avoid the manipulations and contrivances of commercial cinema: no score, no close ups or quick cutting, and a preference for ‘long and oftentimes static takes, just like stasis—long, long takes in real time’.<sup>27</sup>

### Motifs

This established the *modus operandi* for the next few films, from *Heremias: Book One* (2006), a 9-hour piece following the life of a peddler, to *Florentina Hubaldo CTE* (2012), a 6-hour film about a traumatized girl forced into prostitution by her father. Budgets were kept to a minimum, the films produced with money from friends or small grants from international bodies, amounting to what would be only seed money for typical arthouse productions. ‘I don’t think much about the budget. Many times, the budget is a fake problem in cinema. Do you have an idea that you really believe in? Do you have an idea that you really want to express through cinema? Grab your cellphone and start shooting’.<sup>28</sup> Filmmaking proceeds according to what Diaz describes as an ‘organic’ method that involves a small crew moving to a location, usually a town or village in a peripheral region—and letting the landscape, weather and local activity shape the film. Scripts are developed throughout, responsive to local atmosphere and contingency. In the case of *Death in the*

<sup>25</sup> MG, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Wee, *Senses of Cinema*.

<sup>26</sup> MG, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> MG, p. 168.

*Land of Encantos* (2007), for instance, Diaz travelled to the Southern Luzon region of Bicol after Typhoon Reming in late 2006, leading to the story of an artist's return to his devastated home region. During the production of *Century of Birthing* (2011), a more explicitly self-reflexive work that intermingles the tribulations of a rural religious cult—rife in the Philippines—and the artistic struggles of a film director, farmers in the isolated village where they were shooting began organizing against a local landlord. This became incorporated into the film, with the actors joining the agitation, and with farmers prompted to speak about their struggles for the camera.

Each film tends to be precisely historically situated: in the case of *From What Is Before* in 2014, Diaz took great pains to seek out a village that still retained the look of the early Marcos era, discovering one on the tip of the northernmost province of Luzon facing Taiwan, whose atmosphere and state of abandonment uncannily reminded him of his childhood. The beauty of the subtropical rural landscape, filmed in a silvery black-and-white, often portraying characters travelling by foot across the land as they might have hundreds of years ago, gives the films the additional valency of meditations on the *longue durée*. Yet while the camerawork and *mise-en-scène* can provide a seemingly neorealist quality, particularly in the earlier films, their reliance on theatrically trained actors and tableaux, their radical recastings of melodrama, musical improvisation, archetypal figures and poetic images, constitute a uniquely non-realist cinematographic language, lending them the quality of myth or fable. While often explicitly opposed to the mythmaking of the state, Diaz's oeuvre is also engaged with the dialectical potential of mythology—its capacity to rouse a people against its exploiters, as well as to perpetuate their sleepwalking.<sup>29</sup>

Motifs, themes and figures repeat throughout the films—the return home, the search for the missing, the grieving mother, rape, madness, blindness. A central archetype is the male artist, typically a poet. Rather than laying the imaginative foundations for the post-colonial nation—or embodying Filipino society's hopes of progress—these artists are typically wayward and lost, in a state of deracination, struggling to cling to their sanity in a time of darkness. In *Death in the Land of Encantos*, a poet returns to his devastated region to bury his parents and former lover but is tormented by his past and a sense of the impotence of his

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<sup>29</sup> MG, p. 177.

art, even as it has resulted in his torture by the secret police. The film charts his transformation into an almost ghostly presence, wandering through a land of ruins. *From What Is Before* features another poet who has returned, in this instance to spend his final days living with cancer in his home village. When martial law arrives, he is one of the last men left, filled with remorse for having wronged his daughter and the belated realization of what defines a life well-lived.

One endpoint of the demoralized artistic vanguard is the intellectual who has succumbed to nihilism. The protagonist of *Norte, the End of History* (2013) is a dogmatic law-school dropout who argues for social regeneration through a purge of the country's exploiters, leading him to commit a murder. Marcos too was a gifted law student who committed a murder—in his case, he was tried and convicted, then argued his own appeal and won an acquittal. Produced three years before Duterte came to power, *Norte* might best be described as a study of the totalitarian mentality and the temptations of another Marcos. It is 'a warning', Diaz said at the time.<sup>30</sup> Despite Fukuyamian echoes, the title points to the area where 'the history of the Philippines ended'—Ilocos Norte, where Marcos was born and embarked on his political career. The cinematography accentuates the area's natural beauty, producing an ironic contrast with the extratextual entanglement of that locale in the nation's history. *Norte* marked something of an inflexion in Diaz's oeuvre: he was offered the project by producer friends, providing him with a larger budget, the film was shot in colour with more camera movement, and came in at a comparatively short four hours.

### *National epic*

These figures and themes are reconfigured in a historical context in *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery* (2016), Diaz's most sustained engagement with the legacy of the committed Filipino artist. Diaz had long planned to make a historical film about the 1890s revolution. In 1998, he wrote a screenplay about the death of Andrés Bonifacio—'the father of our revolution against the Spanish colonizers'—for a government contest held as part of the country's centenary celebration of its independence from Spain.<sup>31</sup> Diaz was one of the winners and was awarded 5 million pesos to make the film, but as he made preparations his contract was cancelled.

<sup>30</sup> MG, p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> MG, p. 99.

Instead, the government produced a film in which the murderer of Bonifacio, Emilio Aguinaldo, was presented as the real hero. Dismayed, Diaz discovered that the grandson of Aguinaldo, an influential politician who had been a functionary during the martial-law years, was on the commission. He tried to make the film again in 2003 but stalled, due to lack of funds. The idea endured, however, and finally in 2014 a moneyed young Filipino filmmaker offered to fund the film, providing approximately \$150,000, supported by a post-production grant from Singapore. This was colossal by Diaz's standards: *Melancholia* (2008) for instance, his 8-hour film about left-wing guerrillas and the grief of those who survived, cost just over \$3,000.

*Lullaby* is an epic, multi-strand work that incorporates fantasy and fiction as well as history, with the story of Bonifacio only one component. Though set in the vicious last years of Spanish rule, it narrates a counter-history of a revolution betrayed, carried out by the colonized against each other. Bonifacio's widow's search for his body—emblem for a country in search of its soul—is interwoven with elements from the novels of Rizal, whose execution is also portrayed in the film, as well as figures from Malay folklore such as the half-horse spirit, the *tikbalang* and a messianic giant. The principal artist figure in the film is a character from Rizal's *El Filibusterismo* (1891), who in the novel thwarts the plan to blow up a wedding party attended by the grandees of colonial society. Here, he is pictured adrift in the cataclysm, a spent force at the very moment that his nation was struggling to come into existence. Enumerating the film's political implications, Diaz has said of the disappeared bodies of Bonifacio and Rizal: 'common people are made to disappear too. For every dead hero there are thousands of normal people who are killed. There can be victims any day, as during the Marcos regime, and they are made into numbers, they are just statistics. It is happening again in the country these days'—a reference to Duterte's regime, which came to power the year the film was completed.<sup>32</sup>

With the revolution betrayed, and the cultural vanguard disoriented, where can the possibility of overcoming the traumas of Filipino history be found? The films present a catalogue of suffering and despair, but hope is not banished from them—it can be found in people's resilience in the face of the torments of history, in metonymic acts of kindness and

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<sup>32</sup> MG, p. 107.

forgiveness, and in the deep time of Malay civilization. Matriarchal figures who heal the sick and mourn for the dead can be one symbol of this. *From What Is Before*, for instance, has two such figures, the healer Bai Rahman—presented in a striking tableau performing a ritual healing dance—and Amrayda, whose lamentations for her son’s death contain a promise and a curse, that her tribe will ‘make them pay for what they did’. Never the protagonists of his films, they operate throughout Diaz’s oeuvre as figures of collective endurance, representing a connection to the time before the arrival of the first colonizers, and obliquely signalling the possibility of outlasting the tragic present. Diaz emphasizes the importance of this tradition and its imaginative remnants as a resource for Filipino resistance: ‘I want people to remember that there is such a thing called “Malay civilization” which existed before Islam, Spanish colonizers, Christianity: we had our own Malay perspective, we had our own Malay traditions, we had Malay culture.’<sup>33</sup>

The world of the films may be a fallen one, but it is also populated by figures—not only matriarchs, but victims of injustice, neglect and circumstance—who nevertheless refuse to perpetuate the cycle of violence. (Saintly characters of course are the purview of Russian literature as much as Malay mythology. In *Norte*, a poor man is wrongly jailed for the murder of the moneylender committed by the protagonist, yet, in jail, he nurses and cares for fellow inmates, even the murderous ring-leader who has attacked him but later begs his forgiveness.) Amidst the brutality of Filipino history, hope resides in this refusal to continue the cycle of revenge. In the second half of *Lullaby*, as Gregoria searches for traces of the body of her husband, one of her companions confesses that it was she who had committed a traitorous act enabling the Spanish to devastate the insurrection’s stronghold. Shocked and enraged, Gregoria beats the confessor to the ground, picks up a rock and holds it over her head—then hesitates. Emitting a howl, she lets the rock fall back down to earth.

*The Woman Who Left* (2016) is dedicated to this forking path of revenge and forgiveness. Inspired by Tolstoy’s short story ‘God Sees the Truth, But Waits’, it portrays a woman leaving prison after serving a 30-year sentence for a murder she didn’t commit (a plot line loosely recognizable from Diaz’s first studio script). The plot’s unfolding has a *noir*-like cadence—will Horacia kill Rodrigo, the ex-boyfriend and local man of

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<sup>33</sup> MG, p. 150.

influence who framed her?—but this is granted wider symbolic stakes. For Diaz, the Rodrigo character is emblematic of the entrenched feudalism of the country. As he told Guarneri, ‘You can see Rodrigo as a representation of the legacy of the whole colonial, imperialistic set-up that we are enduring. He is the colonizer within. He is a Filipino but has this very feudal mindset from the colonial era: he owns the land, he owns the business activities, he has a private army. He has the power of life and death over his fellow Filipinos . . . My point is this: if we don’t destroy Rodrigo, he will go on ruling forever and ever.’<sup>34</sup>

In Tolstoy’s original, the protagonist forgives the culprit in an act of Christian kindness, but Diaz’s adaptation is more dialectical:

There is no forgiveness because I am trying to change the way we are, I am trying to change our culture. Filipinos are very forgiving actually, but with *The Woman Who Left* I want to make them realize that justice must come with forgiveness. We forgave Ferdinand Marcos and his clan for the atrocities that they committed in our country during their dictatorship, but there still is no justice. The Marcoses are still out of jail. There is no accountability for all the Filipinos that they imprisoned, tortured and killed. The money they stole from our country, the loot, is still stashed in some banks overseas. How can there be forgiveness without justice?<sup>35</sup>

Ultimately, Horacia does not get to choose, exactly. The night she plans to kill Rodrigo there is a knock on the door—it is Hollanda, the transgender *bakla* whom Horacia had found collapsed on the street one night, who has been beaten and raped by a gang of the sons of local men of influence. Rape takes on an allegorical meaning in Diaz’s films: ‘We have that constant fear lurking in our psyche, as rape is an inherent reality in our life: the rape of our bodies, the rape of our land, the rape of our culture.’<sup>36</sup> Horacia nurses Hollanda back to health, and in doing so is averted from her plan of revenge. But in turn, Hollanda takes it on herself to execute Rodrigo.

### *Darker genres*

Diaz has said that he wanted to set *The Woman Who Left* in ‘an epoch of impending doom’, and that the year 1997 was right for that. He recalls it as a ‘complex, twisted and dark year’, when Manila became known as the ‘kidnap capital’, and many were justifying kidnappings of Chinese

<sup>34</sup> MG, p. 139.

<sup>35</sup> MG, p. 141.

<sup>36</sup> MG, p. 140.

businessmen on nationalist grounds, while the country was transfixed by a sensational case of the kidnap and murder of two Chinese-Filipinas.<sup>37</sup> Inevitably, *The Woman Who Left* was also produced with the contemporary moment of 2016 in mind, with the rise of violence and fear under Duterte. The film marked a return to a streamlined way of working, costing less than half of *Lullaby*. But, at a wider level it continued a new phase of Diaz's work, supported by much larger budgets. While by no means conventional, and still bearing the Diaz imprimatur, these recent films contain fewer static shots, proceed at a faster pace, with narratives less oblique and opaque in their unfolding.

This period also marked a turn to employing more explicit genre forms—*noir*, melodrama, satire and science fiction, historical epic, even musical, as with *Season of the Devil* (2018), a 4-hour *a cappella* opera set in 1979, at the height of Marcos's terror, in which a poet once again returns to look for his disappeared wife, embodying the inability of the country to grieve and overcome its sorrow. The singing was inspired by Malay mourning rituals; the film was shot in Kuala Lumpur out of fear that, with the rise of Duterte, it was too dangerous to make it in the Philippines. Strikingly, beginning with *Lullaby*, this recent run of films has featured major national stars such as John Lloyd Cruz, Piolo Pascual and Charo Santos, attracted by Diaz's international reputation. These figures have also assisted with financing the production. Diaz has spoken of how these actors have been educated by the process, and are now more altruistic and interested in working for the betterment of the country: 'They understand their role a bit more, and they understand more about the role of cinema as a tool to change the condition of our people for the better, to give our people knowledge, a direction, an orientation, to say what happened and what is happening in our country.'<sup>38</sup>

This shift in approach has attracted criticism from some quarters. Diaz says of his former slow-cinema fans: 'they want to put me in a box and they want me to stay there. But I can't live in that box forever, I can't repeat myself over and over . . . For me, filmmaking is all about being fluid and following threads.'<sup>39</sup> After years of a singular aesthetic riposte to the studio system, Diaz appears to be pursuing a double strategy, no less uncompromising, but now more consciously deploying stars and genres. One could speculate that this has been prompted by the urgency of Duterte's regime, presenting a more pressing need to intervene in

<sup>37</sup> MG, p. 134.

<sup>38</sup> MG, pp. 101–5.

<sup>39</sup> MG, p. 153.

the contemporary life of the country, and rendering his films' exclusion from the cinemas of the Philippines an even more pressing concern. Impelled to be careful within the country, abroad he has spoken plainly enough about his opposition to Duterte: 'He is interested in power, in ruling to achieve his twisted causes, not to help the people. And in fact, now that he is president, he is waging war against the Filipino people.'<sup>40</sup> The image he has employed again is one of recursion, of the endless cycle—'It is like the martial-law years again, it is like the Japanese occupation again, it is like the American period again, it is like the Spanish period again. We have gone back to the period of barbarism: suspicions, paranoia, lurking fear, violence'—and the urgency of pedagogy: 'We should educate not just the poor, but also the people from the middle class, among whom there are many Duterte supporters. If we don't do something, the past is bound to repeat itself and we will just prolong our agony.'<sup>41</sup>

Diaz's most explicit cinematic response to the Duterte era has been *The Halt* (2019). In this case, Diaz sought out financing from Pascual, leading actor in both *Lullaby* and *Season of the Devil*, who agreed to the estimate of \$100,000–\$150,000. The script was developed from a treatment, '2019', written in 2000 and rediscovered in the summer of 2018. It is an absurdist work of *noir* science fiction with clear resonances for the contemporary moment—a dictator has let a newly cultivated, deadly strain of flu virus rip through certain regions of the country as a strategy to contain the population. Functioning in the film as an allusion to Duterte's apparatus of extrajudicial killings in the name of the war on drugs, the subsequent outbreak of COVID-19 has provided another uncanny correspondence. The film is set in the near future in a sunless Philippines—the sun has not appeared in Southeast Asia for several years due to a massive volcanic eruption—rendering it a world of chiaroscuro shadows, night and rain. The beams of surveillance drones populate the dark sky; the military stalk the streets. The perpetual darkness is a play on the symbolism of the sun, found on the national flag: 'The Philippines are the so-called "pearl of the Orient", the place where "the sun always shines". This is the official rhetoric about our country. But the Philippines are also a very dark place.'<sup>42</sup>

Here we have a redeployment of figures—the artist, the nihilist, the mother, revenge and forgiveness. History's dark advance is associated

<sup>40</sup> MG, p. 107.

<sup>41</sup> MG, pp. III, 161.

<sup>42</sup> MG, p. 169.

with repetition, but in keeping with the more grotesque mode, the film is more attentive to irony, to history as a series of accidents and happenstance, as farce as well as tragedy. The film's dictator, Navarro, has already entered his decadent phase, his grip on the machinery of power is coming undone. He is played by Joel Lamangan as a caricature, a melee of grotesque tics, grimaces, and beatific karaoke-queen poses, yearning for the recognition of his vegetative mother. Though there are underground fighters aiming to assassinate Navarro, the dictator is instead unceremoniously beaten to death by a group of citizens at a neighbourhood cafe. But a successor is waiting in the wings. The beginning of the next cycle—as the female colonel of Navarro's inner circle takes his place—is presented with a tableau shot whereby we see a couple relaxing after work in their modest house with the television on. Diaz's camera occupies the position of the TV screen and we see their reaction—confusion mixed with indignation and fear—head on, as the official announcement of Colonel Martha's accession comes over the soundtrack. At the time of writing, Duterte's daughter is planning to run in 2022.

Hope is found in the margins once more, but here it is the consequence of another absurdity. Pascual plays another degenerate artist on the verge of nihilism, Hook Torollo. A classmate of the incoming dictator, he took a different path, playing in punk bands before becoming a member of a clandestine cell, and now tasked with assassinating Navarro. But when the moment arrives, in the split second that he has to pull the trigger, Hook's troublesome eyesight fails him. However allegorical, the absurdity of this timing is his redemption. Soon afterwards he experiences an epiphany while visiting a friend, a social worker trying to care for the many street children sent to her centre. In a theatrically staged tableau, Hook tells his comrades that he will leave them to become a social worker, news met with wry laughter mingled with acceptance of the path he has chosen. Diaz received criticism from some leftist friends for this conclusion, but for him,

*The Halt* is the story of a human being who is trying to fight against an oppressive, corrupt system. Hook's decision to be a social worker instead of a hitman is a human decision that comes after a long, long journey into the night, to hell and back. Hook has his reasons and these reasons need to be respected. His decision needs to be respected. It is a humanitarian thing: Hook wants to save the street children for the future of the country . . . This is his revolution.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> MG, p. 174.

A prose poem scripted for the poet in *Season of the Devil*, ‘The Last Filipino’, tells a story of the last Filipino on ‘the only island left in the vanishing archipelago’, whose days are filled with ‘songs and poems, blessings and mystery’ until the storms come and the water begins to rise. He climbs up the mountains, but the waters keep coming, until he is surrounded on the highest peak: ‘The last Filipino looked up and saw a cloud. He tried to reach the cloud while the water slowly submerged him.’ This is Diaz’s assessment of the plight of the nation in miniature, but it also restates an old and longstanding question: what is the role and responsibility of the artist and of cinema? Diaz’s answer presents a series of contradictions. The freedom claimed by his approach to filmmaking is the punk’s artistic expressionism, outside the walls of the institutions; but to get his films watched by more people, especially by fellow Filipinos to whom they are primarily addressed, Diaz needs the help of the media conglomerates.<sup>44</sup> In the past few years, his films have been increasingly accessible in the Philippines through collaboration with the ABS-CBN media network. *Lullaby*’s success in gaining slots in cinemas across the country was thanks to a promotional campaign bearing all the signs of conglomerate knowhow. In tongue-in-cheek fashion, it extolled people to show their love and pride for the Philippines, and celebrate Diaz’s win on the world stage at the Berlin Film Festival, by enduring ‘the Hele challenge’—the original title is *Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis*—and attending the screenings from beginning to end.<sup>45</sup> Paradoxes abound. But as the waters rise, the last Filipino will be filming them.

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<sup>44</sup> On the paradoxes of sustaining alternative cinema in the Philippines, see Jasmine Nadua Trice, *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila’s Alternative Film Culture*, Durham NC 2021.

<sup>45</sup> May Adadol Ingawanij, ‘Exhibiting Lav Diaz’s Long Films: Currencies of Circulation and Dialectics of Spectatorship’, *Aniki: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image*, vol. 4, no. 2, July 2017, pp. 411–33.