

Lullaby of Diasporic Time: On Lav Diaz’s *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*

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Abstract

Lav Diaz is a Filipino independent filmmaker notable as a key figure in the contemporary slow cinema movement. Of his oeuvre, one of the longest is *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery* (Filipino: *Hele sa Higawang Hapis*), a 2016 epic film that runs for 8 hours, orchestrating narratives derived from what are conveniently sung as mythology (i.e., Jose Rizal’s *El filibusterismo* and Philippine folklore) and history (i.e., Philippine history and artifacts). The movie competed in the 66th Berlin International Film Festival, where it won the Alfred Bauer Prize. This success has earned Diaz’s the spotlight in the Filipino mainstream culture, enabling the film to be distributed to and showcased in mainstream platforms, albeit primarily garnering attention from the Filipino audience for its runtime and international attention. The movement of the film, as a text, from the local Philippines toward the international and returning home, incurs in it a textuality that disrupts the phenomenology of time diasporically, scatteringly: that as much as its 8-hour languor “opens new perspective in the cinematic arts” according to the international rendition of this time, it is also the 8-hour whose value in the Philippine time is that of a day’s labor, and thus the exoticization of its cinematic experience as a “challenge,” having to endure an entire working day of slow cinematography. This diaspora of time is of no cacophony; on the contrary, it is the lullaby, sorrowful and mysterious, that finally slows Diaz in to become a filmmaker attuned to both the spaces of the local and the international.

Keywords: *Lav Diaz, slow cinema, paratextual studies, diaspora of time, trans-cultural encounters and exchanges, hybridity and transnationalism, transnational text*

I.

Lav Diaz is a Filipino independent filmmaker notable as a key figure in the contemporary slow cinema movement. Born in 1958 in Maguindanao, a province in Mindanao, Philippines, Diaz moved to Manila to study economics, and working thereafter in order to support his own family (Finnane, 2016, p. 48). It was by 1980s, the waning of the Second Golden Age of the Philippine Cinema, that Diaz began pursuing his passion for film.¹ Of him, critics write:

Many argue that Lav Diaz is the most important filmmaker working in the Philippines today. Roger Garcia, director of the Hong Kong Film Festival, sees him as an “artist-as-conscience,” an heir to Lino Brocka.² His monumental epic movies that last up to eleven hours, examine the continuing social and political malaise of his country. (Baumgärtel, 2012, p. 171)

Walking the delicate line between fact and fiction, Lav Diaz’s films paint a bleak picture of his homeland, the Philippines. His movies are infamous for their lengthy run times, sometimes up to twelve hours, a device Diaz employs in order to depict conflicts in real time. He presents unflinching narratives of colonial oppression, including scenes of extrajudicial killings, abduction, and torture, both decades ago under martial law and in present-day Filipino society. Often, Diaz filters these themes through the lens of personal crises: *Florentina Hubaldo*, *CTE* (2012), for example, depicts the repeated rape of a young woman as a metaphor for four centuries of colonial oppression in the Philippines. (Mai, 2016)

Lav Diaz describes himself as a storyteller who makes films about the struggles of his people.³ In the past two decades, the Filipino film-maker has been fashioning a distinctive mode of epic melodrama. His films tell quiet tales of the sorrow and resilience of a people betrayed by the postcolonial nation state. Extreme in duration, Diaz’s epics reference the Philippine state as a force of death—a state that has, since its independence in 1946, consistently turned against its own people despite the promise of collective emancipation that drove the country’s national liberation movement against Spanish, then US colonial rule. At a time when people are being abandoned and oppressed by their own nation state, Diaz’s films attempt to bring the collective body back to life by embodying the utopian spirit of the nation. (Ingawanij, 2015)

Time is a signature in Diaz’s oeuvre: although his early full-length films *The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion* (Filipino: *Serafin Geronimo: Ang Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion*) (1998) and *Naked Under the Moon* (Filipino: *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan*) (1999) run on the regular cinematic duration of more than an hour, his more known works are those of lengthier durations: *North, the End of History* (Filipino: *Norte, Hilaga ng Kasaysayan*) (2013), contender in the Un Certain Regard category of 2013 Cannes Film Festival, runs for 5 hours; *From What is Before* (Filipino: *Mula*

sa Kung Ano Noon) (2014), winner of the Golden Leopard prize in the 2014 Locarno International Film Festival, for more than 5 hours; and *The Woman Who Left* (Filipino: *Ang Babaeng Humayo*) (2016), winner of the Golden Lion prize in the 73rd Venice International Film Festival, for around 4 hours.

Of his oeuvre, one of the longest is *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery* (Filipino: *Hele sa Higawang Hapis*), a 2016 epic film that runs for 8 hours, orchestrating narratives derived from what are conveniently sung as mythology and history. Four major keys are interwoven: according to the press notes for the film:

Interconnected narrative threads on the Philippine Revolution of 1896-1897 against Spain characterize *Hele sa Higawang Hapis*—the story of the ballad Jocelynang Baliwag⁴, which became the hymn of the revolution; Gregoria de Jesus' forlorn search for the body of the Father of Philippine Revolution Andres Bonifacio⁵; the journey of our national heroes' fictional book characters Simon and Isagani⁶; the role of the Philippine mythical hero of strength Bernardo Carpio and the half-man, half-horse Tikbalang/Engkanto⁷, on the Filipino psyche. It is a marriage of history, literature and mythology. (Berlin International Film Festival, 2016, p.5)

The movie competed in the 66th Berlin International Film Festival, where it won the Alfred Bauer Prize, given to “a feature film that opens new perspectives” (“Prizes,” n.d.) Although Diaz's films have been locally disseminated and critically hailed prior (including *West Side Kid* (Filipino: *Batang West Side*) (2001) and *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (Filipino: *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*) (2004), earning prizes from the Gawad Urian), the success of *Lullaby* has earned Diaz's the spotlight in the Filipino mainstream culture, enabling the film to be distributed to and showcased in mainstream platforms, via one of the biggest film and production company of the country, Star Cinema (Gaspar, 2016).

II.

Albeit primarily garnering attention from the Filipino audience for its runtime and international attention: a month after its premier in Berlin International Film Festival, *Lullaby* premiered on March 26, 2016 in the Philippines, where the rendition of its cinematic experience is sung as a *challenge*, given its duration octuple of the average of commercial Filipino films. Of the duration of the film, Diaz syncopates its significance in his rendition of the Cinema:

“My principle is, the filmmaker shouldn't struggle by himself...The viewer must struggle with me. Let's experience this thing together and be immersed in this universe,” the 57-year-old Diaz told Agence France-Presse in Manila before he left for Berlin.

Festival organizers have inserted one interval into the epic, but Diaz is relaxed about how audiences will cope.

“I understand the demands on the body, you need to defecate and urinate,” he says.

“You're free. You can go home and f-ck your wife or marry your girlfriend, you come back the film is still rolling. It's about life. Ultimately, cinema is about life itself.” (Agence France-Presse, 2016)⁸

“Cinema is about life *itself*”: critical in Diaz's articulation is the supplement of the pronoun *itself*, as signature not of the Heideggerian world of art, but the earthly life *itself*.⁹ Subtly then, as if a lullaby sung, is an articulation of a thesis on the cinema that sings this art to be beyond of mimetic value—that is, of art as representation of life—but instead as a form of ontological attunement.

This tuning of the cinematic world to earth life-itself is what syncopates the value of time in Diaz's film: it is through the duress of duration that the moving images of cinema is lulled, toward a tempo that aspires to close the strife between Diaz's cinematic world and Philippine earth itself:

My cinema is not part of the industry conventions anymore. It is free. So I am applying the theory that we Malays, we Filipinos, are not governed by the concept of time. We are governed by the concept of space. We don't believe in time. If you live in the country, you see Filipinos hang out. They are not very productive. That is very Malay. It is all about space and nature. If we were governed by time, we would be very progressive and productive. (Baumgärtel, 2012, p. 174)

It is then that the duress of 8-hour *Lullaby* is articulated: the 8-hour fragment of earthly life itself is not merely for the film to rehearse its harmonization of narratives, but to sing the very affect of this harmony to the audience themselves, as those who experience the film as an event in their very lives. The space of cinema is articulated thus as from being a Platonic cave whose projections on the wall are interpreted as *art*, toward being a space approximately just as earthly, alive, and *real* as the space outside it.

Approximately—if only because the cinematic art, as a thing, insists itself still as art, thus different still from life itself.¹⁰ The film is still spectacle, and its duration still unnatural, a conscious technique of art:

BAUMGÄRTEL: Nowadays films seem to be getting faster and faster. According to David Bordwell the average shot length of many Hollywood films is less than two seconds now. Is your cinema an attempt to provide an alternative to this?

DIAZ: I find long, long takes more emotional and more fulfilling in terms of creating pathos. I could chop up a scene in so many cuts, but I find long takes very emotional and very deep. I am not saying all the other concepts of *mise-en-scène* are not valid. You can do it fast, you can do it slow. But this is the framework that really gives me all the things that I want to see

in a film. In that sense, I represent my culture. That is what I want to share as a Filipino. (Baumgärtel, 2012, p. 175)

Diaz’s cinema, as gift, is that of duration, one which “do[es] it slow.” It is by his preference for the long take that Diaz is associated with the slow cinema movement, defined as “cinema that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality” (Romney, 2010, p. 43, in Mai, 2015, p. 71)

III.

And yet, how Diaz refuses this naming of his oeuvre as *slow cinema*, preferring instead a certain autonomy of his art from classification:

“Hele Sa Hiwagang Hapis” (A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery) was shown in competition for the festival’s top Golden Bear prize in a screening that started at 9:30 a.m. and ended shortly before 7 p.m., with a one-hour lunch break.

The film is similar to the duration of some other past festival favorites like Hungarian director Bela Tarr, whose “Satantango” clocks in at about seven hours.

But at a post-screening news conference Diaz rejected being labelled as a creator of “slow cinema”.

“We’re labeled ‘the slow cinema’ but it’s not slow cinema, it’s cinema,” he said.

“I don’t know why ... every time we discourse on cinema we always focus on the length.

“It’s cinema, it’s just like poetry, just like music, just like painting where it’s free, whether it’s a small canvas or it’s a big canvas, it’s the same... So cinema shouldn’t be imposed on.” (Roddy, 2016)

“Cinema shouldn’t be imposed on,” as in: to let cinema as a life itself, one whose time must not be signed nor measured. For the spectator of the film, the duress thus is to deny the very duration of the film, to behold the *Lullaby* not according to the human earthly time as experienced by the spectator, but in tempo instead with the cinematic worldly time.

Such duress then becomes a hailing for the spectators’ patience,¹¹ the virtue from which an aesthetic of *Lullaby* could be borne. It is by this patience that, for a Filipino viewer, one could sing of the grain of *Lullaby*:

Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis (Eng. title: *Lullaby for the Sorrowful Mystery*) is eight hours long. Everybody knows it, the producers made sure of that. This focus on runtime, daresay superfluous for a Lav Diaz film, is unfortunate because it misrepresents what *Hele* actually is—an epic of magic realism that overlays our history with action, literature, and mythology.

...

To be sure, *Hele* is a film that requires multiple viewings. Lav Diaz utilizes his trademark black and white static framing, and because of which along with the extended runtime of each scene, each frame becomes an immersive and introspective viewing experience. Because the camera is not moving, it dares the audience to look at the periphery, to make a deep examination. And because each scene has a languid pace, the audience is given the time to ponder what is being conveyed. (Espinoza, 2016)

[T]here is a logic to this Lav Diaz masterpiece which explains its length, its language, its aesthetics making it into a stylized piece of art! One needs to fully embrace this logic if one were to fully appreciate the historical, philosophical and artistic significance of *Hele*; a lack of openness to experiencing this kind of cinema can only lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, especially because it demands the audience’s engagement throughout eight hours. For Diaz’ logic is embedded in his vision as filmmaker to merge mythology, historical facts and a vibrant sense of history via a story-telling technique that brings together tributaries of legends, myths and events while tapping into the artistic reservoir of poems, songs, chants and symbols. For after all, ours is a culture that foments a sense of the romantic even in the midst of deep suffering and difficult struggles. (Gaspar, 2016)

The way “Hele” is being marketed as a sort of challenge to be taken and overcome has garnered flak from many cineastes who have been championing Diaz’s work over the years. One in particular is the film critic Richard Bolisay, who asks, “Is it worth it to make the impression that his films are challenging, that his films are something you have to endure?” Bolisay adds: “It makes it feel like an ordeal. It’s easy to pick on the length, and I get why. It’s a very valid consideration. But one should also be aware that with that length come the film’s scope and range. The emotional heft of Lav’s movies feel equivalent to the kind of experience a very detailed novel gives you. It’s something that allows you to feel and think.” (Musico, 2016)

As the focus on the 8-hour runtime of *Lullaby* is sung to be “daresay superfluous,” the virtue of patience conduct instead toward a beholding of the film as that which “overlays [Filipino] history with action, literature, and mythology,” rehearsed to and for the spectators at a “languid pace” that allows for “the time to ponder what is being conveyed.” Thus, *Lullaby*, by the proposed syncopation of patience against the intimidation of the cinematic runtime, is transformed from being 8-hour song lulling its spectators to sleep, toward becoming an 8-hour

symphony that demands “openness” for and “deep examination” on the film, as metonymic epic of Philippine history itself.

By allowing oneself the duress of patience, the languid time of *Lullaby* is aestheticized. It is by this aesthetic that John Lloyd Cruz, Piolo Pascual, and Alessandra de Rossi, actors who portrayed Isagani, Simon, and Gregoria de Jesus respectively, overtures the artistic and cultural value of the film, despite and because of its being “not part of the industry conventions”:

What makes “Hele” worth watching?

[John Lloyd Cruz]: The issue about the length of this film should stop. If you have concern for our history and what we are facing us a nation, you must watch “Hele.” The content of the film is not make-believe. (Carvajal, 2016)

[Pascual]s Pascual bothered by the movie’s length and the short attention span of modern moviegoers?

“I also have very short attention span. When it was pitched, *ang usapan* originally was five hours. (The original deal was five hours.) When Lav edited the film in New York after it was done, we found out from Direk Paul that it stretched out to eight hours. When they had the viewing with a very few people, they were one in saying it cannot be edited. It can’t be shorter than eight hours,” he said.

In fact, when he saw the movie in Berlin, Pascual said he didn’t even feel the eight hours passing by.

“*Maiisip mo talaga na* eight hours is nothing. (You will really think that eight hours is nothing.) At the end of the day, it’s about conditioning yourself as to how far or how long you’re going to be sitting in a theater. It’s a treat more than it being a sacrifice. You learn so much about history, about filmmaking. It brings you there. In all honesty, I’m not trying to patronize the film pero bitin pa siya. *Ang dami pang puwedeng puntahan ang story* (There are still more to go to for the story.)” he said. (italics and translation mine) (“Piolo on 8-hour film ‘Hele’, 2016)

Alessandra [de Rossi] illustrated what she felt when she watched *Hele*, based on her experience at the Berlinale.

“*Di ako maka-upo ng 30 minutes na walang ginagawa. ‘Di ko kaya yun.* (I can’t even sit still for 30 minutes without doing anything. I can’t do that),” she admitted, before recounting how her co-star Joel Saracho had pointed out to her during the screening that 3 hours had already passed. She let out a gasp and joked, “*Nasa demonyo si Lav Diaz.* (This demon, Lav Diaz, cast an enchantment).”

“I took the *Hele* challenge! *Ako ang nauna!* (I was first!)” she exclaimed in jest, referring to the TV commercials. (Abad, 2016)

IV.

Despite being articulated in jest, De Rossi sings of a fact that still is, despite the proposition toward an aesthetic of patience: *Lullaby* remains to be, to any other movie-goer, a film of spectacular challenge:

Lav Diaz’s masterpiece, “Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis,” offers not just something else, but something more.

After bagging the Philippines’ first Silver Bear Award at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival, Pinoys will finally get a chance to see what the fuss is all about. The movie opens on March 26 nationwide.

Are you ready to take the eight-hour challenge? It will be time well-spent as “Hele” is out to redefine patriotism. What better time could there be to have a renewed sense of nationalism than now that we’re caught up in the election frenzy? (Carvajal, 2016)

According to Direk Lav, your eight hours will not go to waste in watching this film! In fact, he notes that you will not really feel that it’s an eight-hour film because every scene is worth your attention! Plus, there will be intermissions during the screening so the audience can take up to 30-minute breaks.

Take the “Hele” challenge in select local theaters starting March 26 for a cinematic experience like no other! (Fallore, 2016)

Syncopated in such promotions is a resistance against the duress of patience that proposes to invalidate the human experience of time: pace Diaz and other vanguards of this aestheticized patience, *Lullaby* is still a challenge to behold for, simply, it *is* 8 hours long and languid. It is a third of the 24-hour measure of a day, equivalent of a night’s sleep and, in Philippine time, an entire day’s labor. In the duress of length and languor of *Lullaby*’s cinematic time, the Filipino, in autochthonous voice, can then only be compelled to articulate to the film:

Mamamalagi si Diaz sa isang eksena, hindi niya ito puputulin, paiikutin, gagawing dambuhala o mumunti; palalawigin niya nang lubos ang *stasis*. Lahat na nga ay *stasis*. Ang mundo na ipinalabas bilang may kalooban (kaya makasaysayan!), hindi niya paiinugin. Ang simulaing mangha at punong liksi na bumabalot sa larawan, gaano man siya kagila-gilalas, sisipsipan ng lakas, at sa kabila

ng lahat, magmimistulang katawang nasa comatose ang imahen, bibilangan na lamang ng naglulukuksuhang luntiang tuldok. Bilangin din kaya ang ugat-ugat ng pakô o ang butil-butit ng buhangin sa malapot na luwad? Anu-ano pa ang puwedeng bilangin sa tagal, at hanggan kailan? (Jacobo, 2016)

(Diaz defers on a scene, he will not cut it, rotate it, make it massive or minute; he prolongs absolutely the stasis. Everything is already indeed stasis. The world shown (*ipinalabas*) as to have *kalooban* (thus historic!), he would not let rotate. The overturing awe and zeal that surrounds the picture, however fantastic it is, is drawn of energy, and on the other hand, the image seems a body in comatose, to be numbered only of leaping green dots. Must then also the roots of *pakô* or the grain of sand in thick clay be counted? What else can be counted in languor, at until when?) (translation mine)¹²

The pretense that its runtime is 8 hours cannot be easily silenced, as time will only accent itself materially.¹³ For if Diaz’s cinema is that of life itself, it is by this virtue of life, of life insisting its vibrancy, that the need to confront the reality of the duress of its runtime must be augmented. Hence, in any critique of Diaz’s film, it is a demand of criticality that the materiality of time be heard:

[N]ot to talk about the length of Diaz’s films would be like pretending that the size of Anselm Kiefer’s paintings was of no consequence: when an artist chooses a canvas, whether it’s to be covered in paint or flickering shadows, its expanse is part of the means of expression. Besides, Diaz chooses to make very long films not as exceptions, but as his standard practice: duration, and his way of engaging the viewer’s floating attention over long stretches of often confusingly complex narrative, are central components of his artistic arsenal. (Romney, 2016b)

This materiality of time is what poses as irony the proposal for an aesthetic of patience that disregards the experience of cinematic runtime in favor of an “openness” for “deep examination” of the cinematic world—for it is by the very length and languor of its runtime that *Lullaby* is Diaz’s *Lullaby*, as it is, itself. To succumb therefore to the duress of passive patience silencing the 8-hourness of the real 8-hour cinematic runtime can only be—if not a sleep incurred from the lulling pretenses of Diaz’s art as disconcert from the materiality of human experience—deafness itself, at its most violent.

V.

And yet, how this silencing of material time is rehearsed. Prior to *Lullaby*, Diaz has composed for himself a filmography that identifies him internationally as Filipino artist whose signature is time and slowness; that *Lullaby* has won the Alfred Bauer prize thus is only a fortification of his international mark as an auteur. However, it is by this international attention that *Lullaby* has garnered, harmonized with the virtue of it being sung as a *challenge*—an exotic name accenting the 8-hourness of the runtime of the film, as a warning, as a welcome—that Filipino spectators are hailed. Hence: the movement of the film, as a text, from the local Philippines toward the international and returning home, incurs in it a textuality that disrupts the phenomenology of time diasporically, scatteringly: that as much as its 8-hour languor “opens new perspective in the cinematic arts” according to the international rendition of this time, it is also the 8-hour whose value in the Philippine time is that of a day’s labor, and thus the exoticization of its cinematic experience as a “challenge,” having to rehearse patience for an entire working day of slow cinematography.

In this diaspora of times, while *Lullaby* remains the stationary text toward which the inter/national gazes are directed, the differences in materiality of time/zones still incur a scattering in their utterances of their cinematic experience of the film. As much as being paratexts directed toward the central text that is *Lullaby*, these utterances are texts on their own, each reverberating the time/zone that vocalized them. It is then what syncopates for a critique that gazes tropically at Diaz’s global *Lullaby* through an attunement to the utterances that surround it.¹⁴ In the harmonization of these para/texts, one can hear the ironic tensions between utterances that, while created by opposing time/zone sensibilities, are what simultaneously orchestrates Diaz’s signature as a Filipino auteur. Thus: this diaspora of time is of no cacophony; on the contrary, it is the lullaby, sorrowful and mysterious, that finally slows Diaz in to become a filmmaker attuned to both the spaces of the local and the international.

VI.

Such scattering of utterance is in the rather “frustratingly basic” instance of synopsisizing *Lullaby*: pace Diaz’s vision of four major keys harmonized, spectators often only recite of two keys (that is, that of Simoun and Isagani’s, and of Gregoria’s) or, on rare occasions, of even three.¹⁵ Of this disconcert on the experience of the cinematic structure of *Lullaby*, an international critic writes:

[H]aving to quickly turn over a short trade review of *Lullaby*¹⁶ means fulfilling some basic—you might say, frustratingly basic—requirements. You simply try to describe what it feels like, what it’s about, how it looks, how it differs from the other Diaz films you know. I won’t go into that great detail on *Lullaby* here either, partly because the sheer scale and complexity of the thing somewhat defuses my critical capacities—but I’m also very aware that the nature of an extremely long film makes it something like an elephant—different people find themselves focusing on the ears, the tail

or the eyes, but most of us have to reconcile ourselves to not seeing the whole elephant in any great detail. (Romney, 2016b)

And beyond the filmic structure, even more so, is a disconcert between the narratives themselves of the film and the audience; from the same critic:

A Lullaby is a remarkably complex film, and navigating its rambling paths really is like hacking your way through dense foliage, occasionally arriving at a clearing where, to your surprise, you run into people that you hadn't sighted for a couple of hours. The fact that Diaz here plays with so many registers—historical, political, metaphysical and the further dimension of fictional borrowing—makes *A Lullaby* about as multi-dimensional and allusive as a film can be. How is a viewer supposed to handle all this, particularly one that knows nothing about Philippine history? Diaz doesn't make it easy for us: the names, the references, the allusions to specific incidents such as the 1897 massacre at Silang, all come thick and fast, with seeming disregard for what we can actually absorb and make sense of. (Romney, 2016b)

To this “dense foliage” that is the languor and length of the film, with its “seeming disregard” for its spectators, other international critics are not as kind to remark: *Lullaby* is “a work of stony, audience-opposed self-indulgence” (Lodge, 2016), revealing “another relevant question that can be put more bluntly: must art be so hard to endure?” (Grozdanovic, 2016). For approximate reasons, *Lullaby* has received mixed reviews, despite having bagged the Alfred Bauer award (“Critics’ consensus,” 2016).

For the Filipino gaze, however, the dense foliage that is *Lullaby* was a clearing: contrapuntal to the international utterances, the film can only augment its signature, as a song familiar to the Filipino—that of the unfinished national revolution:

It is easy to digest *Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis* as simply an exploration of the past, limited to men and women who have died decades ago or characters who are but figments of rich imaginations. It is convenient to view it as a period piece that dazzles with the sheer conceit of its daring concept and the bravery of its daunting length.

Diaz however offers his film and its challenge as a starting point for treating freedom not as an element of a foregone and finished history, but as a continuing struggle that everyone is still a part of. (Cruz, 2016)

[I]n the here and now, Diaz brings out his own views of Philippine history: even as Bonifacio is the father of the Philippine Revolution, it is important for each one of us to be part of this revolutionary agenda through our involvement in political and social developments; that the Revolution is no picnic; it can devour its own children; the birthing of a nation is an ordeal, the molding of a nation is one of clashing sins and virtues united by an unbridled passion for the heart's desires; art and literature has tremendous power in building a nation and sustaining its soul; there is no binary opposition between history and action; both are interchangeable; there is both beauty and terror as a people collectively imagine themselves as a nation; and freedom is not an element of a history that has long been buried in the past, but its quest should be a continuing struggle with everyone taking part in its fruition. (Gaspar, 2016)

Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis is a gorgeous film that traces the outlines of the Philippine character, flaws and virtues and all, from the ferment of an end-of-the-century rebellion through four hundred years of colonial past down to ancient pagan roots. If every foreign critic hated it for its many flawed details (forgot to mention, some of the Spanish sounded stilted), its dialogue-heavy dramaturgy, its (ultimately irrelevant) length, none of this would matter. The film was made for us Filipinos, to fill our hunger for poetry and narrative and magic, to give us back a sense of our storied past, our mythical and historical dead. (Vera, 2016)

“The film was made for *us* Filipinos,” the local critic sings, re/claiming *Lullaby* as an autochthone of the Philippine tropics. Thus, in as much as it was the international that has tempered *Lullaby* as a film worth of prize and global recognition, its cinematic world can only be penetrated by those who are attuned to the Philippine time/zone. For one to arrive at the heart of the *Lullaby*, one has to have already arrived at the heart of the Philippine imagi/nation.¹⁷

VII.

To simply cite the dichotomy of the inter/national to be the core of the differing utterance, however, is to rehearse fallacy, as even the naming of Philippines as a nation is an archipelago of contention.¹⁸ It is by this virtue that it is syncopated: the Filipino revolution *is* unfinished, one that continues in the present.¹⁹ With this declaration, Diaz articulates the sense of his art, as an act of revolution, “liberation theology” (Baumgärtel, 2012, p. 177) in itself:

...Diaz said he was not doing films to win awards or make money, but rather to help his countrymen find their national identity after centuries of colonisation by Spain and the United States, and more recently, a brutal dictatorship.

“Until now, we’re searching for that soul. I don’t want to make films for the market, I want to contribute to my country,” Diaz said.

Four metallic best picture trophies from the Filipino Critics’ Guild gather Diaz, admitted his movies were “so long nobody would buy them” but added: “I am freeing cinema. My films are not long, they are free. I am not part of convention anymore.” (Agence France-Press, 2016)

His cinema often labeled as unconventional thus as *his* convention, if only to continue the Filipino revolutionary dream of freedom: as such, Diaz augments his poetics of a cinema that is not merely about any life but life *itself*—and, particularly, not about any life itself, but *Filipino* life itself, its very soul.

This artistic concern on the Filipino life itself gestures toward the criticality of history in Diaz’s works: the cinema is the discursive moment oriented toward his fellow countrymen, that allows to collectively rehearse the assumed and aspired common Filipino imagi/nation. Upon the commercial release of *Lullaby* in the Philippines, Diaz can only reiterate such sentiment to only syncopate it for the Filipino audience:

When asked if the Filipinos have a shallow understanding of the Philippine history, Diaz said, “*Hindi mababaw, pero maikli ang ating alam. Mayroon kasi tayong katamaran sa pananaliksik. Tungkol kasi ito sa myth, literature at history. Gusto kong dagdagan ng lalim ‘yung diskurso* (It is not shallow, but we only knew a little. We have this sense of laziness when it comes to research. The film was about myth, literature and history. I want to increase the depth of the discourse.)”

Furthermore, Diaz also mentioned the Philippine Revolution, which he said was short but historic. “*Alamin natin para na-ko-contextualize ang lahi natin...ang nasyon natin* (Be aware of it so that our race...our nation would be contextualized),” he added. (Regis, 2016)

Through this signature of history in Diaz’s poetics, harmonized with the languor and length of his film by the virtue of his rendition of “Malay time,” is what prepares him in the global cinematic discourse to be not only a Filipino auteur, but indeed a *Filipino* auteur, through whose lens the Philippine imagi/nation can be beheld:

You can feel the weight of history, of the past, in every frame of a Lav Diaz film. It’s written in the worn wrinkles on the faces of his characters, in their stammered speech, their furrowed brow; their moments of silence. This is the key to Diaz’s cinema, and the well from which it draws its strength and importance. While many filmmakers in the Philippines, having been bred and influenced by the films and words of Lino Brocka (correct for their time, out of place now) seek to emulate the path of his career, Diaz has adapted and grown, stepped back and attempted to understand the present picture of our country and its people today. Twenty years ago, when under the rule of a sole dictator, we knew well whose wrists deserved to feel the sharp ends of our knives. Today, in a society so quick to judge and pass blame, the only flesh that remains to be examined is our own. Diaz’s camera, steadfast, unwavering, reveals the truths only found beneath the surface, and points us on the path to deliverance. (Tioseco, 2006)

VIII.

As the visual rehearsal of the Philippine history itself, Diaz attempts at a historiographic gesture that harmonizes history and mythology, as in *Lullaby*, where he “combined all these threads, and when you view the film, it is about the search for the Filipino soul” (Agence France-Press, 2016). What is then the art of of filmmaking but a gesture towards historization that recovers an archipelagic past burdened by the centuries of colonization: the cinema as an event of *decolonization*, with Diaz going as far as to partly refuse for himself the name of a *Filipino* auteur, as to simultaneously rehearse the identity of the precolonial *Malay*:

GUERNICA: In Locarno last year, you said you were a Malay filmmaker rather than a Filipino filmmaker. What is the difference?

DIAZ: Maybe I’m just rhetorical about it [*laughs*]. “Filipino” is the Spanish side of our history. The islands were named after King Felipe, so we became known as Filipinos. It’s a brand, it’s a name. But we’re Malays. Before colonizers came to our shores, we were Malays. My praxis is about being Malay—the struggle of the Malays before we became Filipinos.

GUERNICA: If you’re a Malay filmmaker, can you be part of Philippine cinema?

DIAZ: Yes, yes, yes. There is a national cinema. At the same time, cinema is very universal. I don’t want to create borders as if Philippine cinema is so different from other cinemas. It’s just cinema for me. But you can call me a Malay filmmaker, or a Filipino filmmaker, depending on how you see those things—or maybe just a bum. [*laughs*] (Mai, 2016)

In this performance of simultaneity between the pre- and post-colonial, Diaz rehearses the being of the Filipino *pusong*—the trickster whose liminality refuses the domination of the central power.²⁰ Translated to the discursive field that is the globe, such performative liminality can only be the archipelagic reclamation for tropicality, with all its Malay borderlessness, from the duress of empire temperament, under the name *Philippines*.

Therein lies the criticality of the history and mythology: if, for Diaz, these were the threads to reveal the decolonized Filipino soul, to interrogate such soul is possible through interrogating these threads. History and mythology then are the paratexts that allow for a tropic gaze at the Filipino soul still being recovered, and thus still absent. To critique then Diaz’s imagination of the Filipino soul is to critique these paratextual threads his cinema sings, as to trace whom these now globally-heard narratives belong. And in his singing of oneself as a

singer of lullaby toward a liberated Malay-Filipino identity, in his attempt to be the *pusóng* subverting the long and languid burden of the Philippine colonial past, Diaz can only be aspired to be a filmmaker weaving alternative threads, as in most rehearsals of decolonizing historiography.²¹

On these aspirations toward a decolonization via cinematohistoriography, a Filipino critic from Mindanao writes his sorrows:

But having lavishly praised *Hele*, this critic puts forward two contentions issues. For all its attempt to make *Hele* an integral part of Philippine history, it is also to be aid that the Katipunan—and Diaz’ depiction of it—is mainly a struggle of the Tagalogs; those living in Rizal, Laguna, Cavite, Bulacan and Quezon. After all, the Philippines at one time was referred to as Katagalogan. Thus the underlying cultural landscape of the film is Tagalog culture—the language, the music, the expressions, etc. Indeed, Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities posits that “the nation is an imagined community”; the Republic was initially the imagined nation of the Tagalogs, despite the bickerings and internal tensions among them. If one is Moro, Lumad and even as descendant of migrant-settlers growing up in Mindanao, the Katipunan story is a struggle quite distant from those whose struggles were of a diereent nature even if the goals were the same—emancipation and freedom from outsiders turned oppressors.

Diaz’ version of Philippine revolutionary history is close to that of the [Teodoro] Agoncillo’s and [Renato] Constantino’s; quite far from the one of [Reynaldo] Ileto.²² One vignette of *Hele* deals with the Colorum; viewing *Hele*, Ileto will squirm at his seat. While Diaz does not fall into the trap of fragmenting historical events as the Gomburza, the martyrdom of Rizal, the outbreak of the Philippine Revolution as if they were connected organically with each other; Diaz brings them together in a continuum. But in privileging the Katipunan as the only signicant moment in the people’s struggle for emancipation, he shows ignorance of the other signicant moment involving the social movements (pejoratively referred to as the “cults” of Mt. Banahaw) like those organized by Apolinario dela Cruz or Hermano Pule. Unfortunately, Diaz’ portrait of the Colorum is rather negative, thus perpetuating the myth that these were cults that eventually had little contribution of the entire revolutionary project. (Gaspar, 2016)

As historiographic gesture, *Lullaby* thus is not to scatter the imagining of history and mythology, not to cause a rupture in the dominant renditions. If his cinema then is about the Philippine life itself, the beheld Philippine life is then the duress of history as it has been already sung, time and again, by the voices, often tainted by the grain of the empire, that are already always heard. True to his song of his own liminality, Diaz’s *Lullaby* is then a *pusóng* at its sharpest: always elusive, if not refusing, even to the attempt toward the imagined Malay-Filipino citizenship, all the more sorrowful as it is he who sings it for himself to aspire to rehearse.

IX.

And yet, *Lullaby* sustains its own significance, despite the sorrow from Diaz’s own atemporaneity with his aspiration toward an imagination of the Malay-Filipino. The aforementioned Mindanaoan critic, for instance, in his articulation of praise simultaneous to his lamentations on Diaz’s failure to cause rupture on the dominant (cinemato)historiography, reveals a tropic rhetoric²³:

But in privileging the Katipunan as the only signicant moment in the people’s struggle for emancipation, he shows ignorance of the other signicant moment involving the social movements (pejoratively referred to as the “cults” of Mt. Banahaw) like those organized by Apolinario dela Cruz or Hermano Pule. Unfortunately, Diaz’ portrait of the Colorum is rather negative, thus perpetuating the myth that these were cults that eventually had little contribution of the entire revolutionary project.

But despite these two points, this critic has one last word: While it is still showing at the cineplex, dear reader, go watch *Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis* and I assure you, this is a cinematic experience you will not forget in a long, long time! (italization mine) (Gaspar, 2016)

“Unfortunately.... but despite”: seemingly out of nowhere, the prose upturns the instance of the unfortunate, if not to refuse it altogether, in order to re/syncopate *Lullaby* as a work of significance in history of Philippine cinema. As the coda synthesizing the prose, in such a minute leap from one paragraph to another, the preceding sorrows are lulled, transformed by the mystery of the critic’s “one last word.”

Which is, also, the manner by which Diaz’s *Lullaby* has earned its own moment for its song to be globally heard: the word of the auteur himself, in declaring one’s stake at the art of filmmaking as a self-sung Malay body; the word of the judges at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival, in the form of the Alfred Bauer prize; the word of the Filipino movie-market that names it *challenge*, that as much as it intimidates, also beckons the spectators’ gaze; the word of cineastes that succumbs to the duress of the length and languid, in their aestheticizing of patience; and the word of the inter/national critics, regardless of what they utter of the film, so long as they sing of it. Which then can only allow this essay a time to reverberate on itself: what is this present prose, a life in itself, singing now its coda, but also the same word that lets *Lullaby* another time for its song to be heard in the present.

The *Lullaby* thus is the field—very life itself that Diaz says this film is also about—from which these words are sung, and which these words simultaneously sustain. What surrounds the film then, diasporic as they are, sing of its being a life; the paratexts are not merely marginal rehearsals of various time/zones incited by the center

text, but that which permits an echo of an echo of such possible center. Or: that is, if there is even one, for what Diaz has created in *Lullaby* is a myth, which can only be the Philippine life itself.²⁴ Such myth is one whose core is elusive and mysterious, palpable if only for the diaspora of voices surrounding it, at their utmost variations, to the extent that contrapuntals are contemporaneous to each other, not as a cacophony but a lullaby of ironies.

X.

That “Lav Diaz is a Filipino independent filmmaker notable as a key figure in the contemporary slow cinema movement”: what is this then but a beginning of another variation of the myth of *Lullaby*, as it is being retold again, which can only be another event that attempts to scatter time tropically—a *critique*.²⁵

Notes

1. For a brief discussion on the Second Golden Age of the Philippine Cinema, see David (1990).
2. Lino Brocka is one of most renowned in the history of Filipino cinema. For a brief overview of his life, see Sotto (1992); for essays on his works, see Hernando (1993).
3. See Tioseco (2006). (Ingawanij’s note)
4. For a contextualization of the ballad “Jocelynang Baliwag,” see Molina (2013).
5. For a contextualization on the possible location of Bonifacio’s remains, see Ocampo (2001).
6. Simon and Isagani are characters from Jose Rizal’s *El filibusterismo*. Simoun is the character Ibarra from Rizal’s preceding novel *Noli me tangere*, who returned to his homeland as a jeweler-cum-saboteur, plotting a revolution against the Spanish government. Isagani is a student who wishes to found a school, as he cites education as means to liberate the Filipinos from the Spanish colonialism. *Hele* follows the fictional chase after Isagani, sabotaging Simoun’s planned bombing of his old beloved’s wedding, effectively impeded the beginning of a revolution.
7. Tikbalang is described in the Philippine folklore as a humanoid creature with equine head and hooves (Eugenio, 2008, p. 247). Its presence is said to cause travelers in the forest to keep returning to the same places, despite the turns they take.
8. Furthermore, such being about life-itself of cinema, for Diaz, grants it mobility. In an interview with Baumgärtel (2012), Diaz says “I don’t believe in the concept that you have to sit in the cinema for two hours and watch a story that is compressed into this period of time. Cinema can be anything. My films are not purposely done for the cinema anymore. You can watch them there, or in the streets, or... on a plane! Brandon Wee, a critic in Toronto, said, “Your cinema should be called the ‘flying cinema,’” and I asked, “Why?” “Because it would be good for planes, if you are on a long flight.” You can watch it at home, you can make love with your girlfriend for two hours, and when you come back, the film is still running. Or you could go to the farm, plough the land, and when you come home, the film is still on.” (p. 175).
9. The categories of earth and world is derived from Heidegger, in his essay “The Origin of Work of Art.”
10. Or, in Bennett’s (2010) terms, the *vibrancy* of cinema as a thing, that allows its insistence according to its materiality (p. xiii).
11. For a further problematization of patience in the Philippine time as *hinahon*, see Benitez (2017, pp. 153ff.); for the conceptualization of patience in Filipino tropology, see Jacobo (2011, pp.12ff.).
12. *Kalooban* is retained in the translation, aligning to the tradition of insistence of the intranslatability of the Filipino *loób*; see Rafael (1988, pp. 121ff). For a conceptualization of the *loób* in the context of Filipino popular revolution against Spanish colonialism, see Iletto (1979, pp.29ff).
13. For a brief historization on the materiality of time as articulated in modern timekeeping and scheduling, see Honoré (2004, pp. 4ff.).
14. For an introduction to paratextual studies, see Genette (1991).
15. For examples of two-keyed synopses, see Espinoza (2016), Jacobo (2016), and Roddy (2016); for an example of three-keyed synopses, see Vera (2016). Interestingly, in an interview, Diaz cites only 3 threads of narratives; see Cruz (2016).
16. See Romney, 2016a.
17. Echoed here is Anderson’s seminal book and thesis on the nation as an imaginary community; see Anderson (1983).
18. For an attempt towards essaying the Filipino *bayan*, see Benitez (2017b).
19. The phrase “unfinished revolution” is popularized by Agoncillo and Alfonso (1960); for an overview on the unfinishedness as a discursive trope in Philippine politics, see Iletto (1993).
20. For a brief exploration on the *pusóng* in the Spanish colonial context, see Lucero (2007).
21. For examples of renowned Filipino scholarship aspiring for an alternative historiography, see Iletto (1979), Maceda (1996), and Rafael (1988).¹
22. Agoncillo and Constantino are two renowned Filipino historians, to which Iletto’s work responds with a historiography “from below,” that is, one that engages with the criticality of the masses (instead of merely the *ilustrados* and the middle- and upper-class) in the Filipino national history; see Iletto (1979, p. 1ff).
23. For a thorough conceptualization of the tropic as category both geopolitical, as in the tropical, and rhetorical, as in the tropological, see White (1978, pp. 1ff).
24. Echoed here is the Barthesian conceptualization of mythology; see Barthes (1972).
25. For a brief theorizing on the critique and its Filipino rendition as *kritika*, see Campomanes (2014).

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