



Sino malaya?: Melodrama and the Integration of Contemporary Social Issues in Philippine Independent Films

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Abstract: Various film critics have written about the dominant themes found in independent films, such as gender and sexuality, culture, and sociopolitical issues. Independent filmmakers have distinctive ways of portraying these issues. Guided by Pathak (2017)'s framework on melodrama, the researchers chose to use melodramatic conventions and techniques to analyze further how these social issues are portrayed in independent films. Findings found that the independent films used melodramatic conventions in portraying social issues. Analyses showed that (1) the films made use of issues such as family relationships and understanding reality, (2) various cinematic elements were applied in the context of melodrama to deliver the film's message, and (3) setting and physical characteristics were utilized in independent films to display social issues better. This study may be relevant to future research on independent film analysis, the development of national cinema, and the progress of local independent films as a whole.

Key Words: independent films; melodrama; contemporary social issues; Philippine cinema; films

1. INTRODUCTION

To understand the contemporary issues in independent films in the Philippines, the researchers interpreted the issues through analyses of films in the genre. The concepts of what elements are included in the creation of independent films were analyzed. These were essential in understanding the need for these social issues to be addressed and if the future of Philippine cinema would be rooted in the country's troubles. The researchers used Philippine independent films, which are individually funded and produced, with little to no outside regulation that commonly deal with real social issues widely faced by third world countries such as the Philippines (Beng, 2010; Isla, 2010).

1.1. Background of the Study

In the 21st century, films remain one of many individuals' major leisure activities (Heo et al., 2017). Filmmakers and production companies continue generating endless possibilities when creating films. Notably, independent films have been 'breaking the scene' and are contesting movies by major film companies. Independent films are unique in how filmmakers deviate from standard techniques and methods, all amidst a limited production budget and manufacturing staff (Lim, 2019). In the Philippines, independent films have made their way into mainstream cinema, garnering numerous viewers and supporters. The content of these films aid in acquiring

audiences, with the most popular themes being gender and sexuality, culture, and sociopolitical issues. These subjects are essential since independent filmmakers risk tackling more challenging sociopolitical problems to shed light on current, pertinent issues (Bolisay, 2017). Through viewing independent films, audiences obtain new knowledge that sheds light on the present societal situation.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This research aimed to analyze the content of independent films by answering the following questions:

- What are contemporary social issues commonly portrayed in independent films in the Philippines?
- How do conventions in melodrama influence the portrayal of these contemporary social issues?
- How do cinematic elements work through the portrayal of these issues in independent films?

1.3 Scope and Limitation

The researchers focused on analyzing contemporary social issues in exclusively Philippine independent films, using melodrama conventions and cinematic elements. A thematic analysis was conducted on three independent films from different local filmmakers. The analysis was based on techniques elaborated in Braun and Clarke (2012) and limited to melodramatic scenes and contemporary



social issues found in the films. The data was used to determine similar codes in the movies that eventually led to discovering their respective themes.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Independent films have been rising in recognition throughout the years, providing a platform for filmmakers to explore unconventional ideas, deviating from mainstream media (Bolisay, 2017). Independent films are a way to present social issues in a consumable form, as the discussion and awareness thereof are vital. Moreover, the usage of melodramatic conventions, a common technique used in Filipino media, aids in understanding how independent films with melodrama will contribute to the comprehension of how much of an impact independent films have on society (First, 2008).

The results also established the importance of independent films and the social issues being portrayed. The researchers hope that this study could contribute to the sphere of the arts as a whole.

2. METHODOLOGY

The researchers' methodology made use of Philippine independent films that were showcased in public events. A total of three films were selected from two different directors, which all contained various social issues present in the Philippines. Then, data was gathered from these films and were analyzed using the thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2012).

2.1 Films Analyzed

In selecting the films to be analyzed, the researchers chose those presented in public film festivals like Cinemalaya. According to Bolisay (2017), the increase of such events that offer screening venues led to a similar increase in independent films, which is why the researchers chose this as a selection criteria. They sent request emails to local independent filmmakers who had films that fit this criterion. Given that some were unresponsive, the researchers looked for alternative sources such as legal streaming sites. Once the list of films was finalized, the director, synopses, and initial social issues were tabulated as a guide.

2.2 Data Analysis

The researchers used Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis method in interpreting the data that came from the movie analyses. They identified common ideas and patterns evident in the films and distributed them into codes per individual film. These codes were categorized into general themes based on their similar characteristics.

Afterward, the research questions were answered using the themes that were collected.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Four still images from each of the three movies, *Transit* by Hannah Espia, *Lola Igna* and *Pamilya Ordinaryo* both by Eduardo Roy Jr., were collected by the researchers to provide scenes that both utilize melodramatic conventions as well as portray the social issues presented by the film.

3.1 Lola Igna

Lola Igna portrayed themes and issues through various cinematic elements and melodramatic methods, such as landscape and positioning as narrative tools. The slow scene pacing and the use of natural sounds presented the simple provincial life of the main character. On the other hand, the camera movement was also manipulated for symbolisms. Contrasting static shots and "vlog" shots were utilized to portray the degree of connection certain characters and the audience had with the title character.

Symbolisms were also evident in dialogue, *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. This was showcased in the use of language variation to portray *Lola Igna's* opening to new experiences, the placement of insects to show the theme of death, and the penultimate final shot that represented both the life and newfound resolve of the title character.

3.2 Pamilya Ordinaryo

Pamilya Ordinaryo depicted the lifestyle of the Filipino poor and focused on the reality of living as beggars and their treatment in society. The film portrayed the realities that the poor have to deal with, such as maltreatment by members of the sectors of society, the higher tendency of drug abuse, and the need to live for survival.

Melodrama was implemented to create a connection of empathy between the audience and the characters, showing the side commonly known by most and the struggles faced by the *Ordinaryo* family and, in turn, the poor in the Philippines.

The ambiance of the shots used no filtering to glamorize the scenes; instead, it used background noise and realistic settings to depict the scenarios familiar to viewers. As seen in the still images, the dialogue was manipulated, often taking advantage of the silence or carefully chosen words to portray the emotions the characters feel in that moment. This movie effectively used the tools of melodrama to show what life was like for those in poverty and captured the audience's attention, raising awareness of the difficulty of surviving every day and changing how one perceives a beggar on the street.



3.3 Transit

Transit is a film that showcases the vast experiences of both OFWs and their children working in foreign lands. Most scenes used close-up to half-body shots, which followed each of the different storylines. Throughout most of the film, each scene was filmed with many gray tones, resembling bleak situations. The film utilized the different perspectives of the main characters to add new information and views regarding the issue.

The film allowed the audience to better understand the problems faced by OFW communities and learn more about the specific issue of deportation in Israel as both had significance to the nation's culture and economy. The children could not fully identify with their Filipino heritage due to the vast difference in their upbringing while also being unable to identify with the Israeli society due to their ethnicity. The adults also dealt with the deportation problems. These characters were being rejected by the country they were in while also leaving the hardship they would have on their return, which is a commentary on the country's labor quality.

3.4 Discussion

Based on the preliminary analyses of the still images, these scenes were categorized into different codes used to determine dominant themes according to each research question.

3.4.1. Social Issues

The themes of family relationships and understanding reality were drawn. First, the narrative of the films revolved around families. Lola Igna showed how her provincial family affected her everyday life and will to live. Pamilya Ordinaryo followed the daily struggles of a poor teenage family. Meanwhile, Transit explored the living conditions of illegal immigrant families. These films emphasized their dynamics and how they dealt with the problems they faced.

The family structures and relationships presented were in contrast with mainstream media's norms. Clark (2008) described American family movies as "middle-class, Caucasian, dual or single-parent family with one or two children" (p. 85). The chosen films deviated from this concept of family. Families in different settings, different classes, and different problems from the image customarily portrayed were seen in all films.

In line with this, realism was quite evident in the films analyzed. Unlike mainstream media, these independent films showcased realistic living conditions and stories. Zurcher, et al. (2018) discussed that many mainstream films portrayed families in positive environments. Despite promoting good family relationships, these lack in reality. The films chosen

not only showed real family conflicts but also individual journeys. The characters had to come to terms with the purpose of life, power imbalance between classes, and realistic consequences of their actions. These independent movies delved into issues and topics ignored by mainstream media.

3.4.2. Melodrama Conventions

Melodramatic conventions were utilized by presenting situations relating to the audience and drawing emotion through symbolism. With the filmmakers giving environments familiarity, a connection and empathy was formed between the characters and viewers. Pamilya Ordinaryo and Lola Igna were set in familiar environments while Transit was shot in unfamiliar Israel, which allowed viewers to see the unique circumstances of characters.

The cinematography in the films utilized the technique of stabilization in filming, with some melodramatic scenes shot in still, wide shots with little movement to portray the filmmaker's intended messages. Point of view helped emphasize who the audience identified with (Håkansson, 2012). There was also a sense of composition in scenes, found by Callenbach (1966) to be one of the critical components of cinematography. This was seen in how Lola Igna and Transit scenes were shot, creating an artistic quality in the scene serving a more profound meaning from the beginning to the end.

Landscapes and color were also important since they changed the film's atmosphere, as seen in the difference from the streets of Manila of Pamilya Ordinaryo to the province of Lola Igna, and even urban Israel in Transit. The dark colors of Pamilya Ordinaryo and Transit to Lola Igna's cheerful and natural elements, allowed the audience to become a part of the story.

Symbolism was also a key melodramatic element. Bakony (1974) asserts that symbols are the combined conscious and unconscious associations by the viewer. The films utilized multiple visual and verbal symbols that portray deeper messages, as independent films place importance in storytelling to deliver their stances.

3.4.3. Cinematic Elements

Drawing from codes cinematic elements were utilized to portray issues by reflecting circumstance in setting and character status in physical characteristics. Though each film showed different circumstances, each film adjusted the portrayal of the settings to fit the movie's theme.

Setting is a primary tool for social issue portrayal in films, allowing filmmakers to introduce themes through character interactions in an environment. Time and place, interact with one another in a film to portray a specific narrative



(Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2005). These settings exposed many previously unknown areas such as the rural Sagada, the slums of Manila, and Filipino housings in Israel. These inform viewers about the characters' lives and form an emotional connection to these places through momentary experience (Frost, 2009). Each film evoked an emotional response through the settings that showcased the characters' contexts and motivations.

The way characters carried themselves through personal adornment or interaction with others also allowed the film to portray their messages. All three films showed characters that lack money to buy clothing, symbolizing the characters' bleak financial status (Batten, 2010). The dialogue between characters also allows viewers to understand the emotional connection between characters and see the different ways of speaking and relatedness among the different groups of people (Azab et al., 2019). Character intimacy was also shown in both dialogue and proximity, allowing viewers to see that the theme of family is prevalent in different circumstances.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The three Philippine independent films analyzed used various cinematic elements and melodramatic conventions to portray their respective social issues. The different types of Filipino family dynamics were depicted, including realistic and flawed characters and situations. When it came to melodramatic conventions, the independent films presented situations with the audience and drew emotion through symbolism. Setting, cinematography, landscapes and color, and symbolism played essential roles in creating a connection with the audience and developing the story. Lastly, the cinematic elements evident in the films were setting to reflect one's circumstance and portrayal of character status through physical characteristics. The characters were defined by their setting and their interaction with other characters.

Through the rising popularity of independent Filipino cinema, filmmakers are given more freedom to express their views on social issues occurring in the country. Their works continuously inspire and motivate audiences nationwide, creating wiser and more knowledgeable audiences. Truthfully, Filipino independent films act as a common ground for both artistic expression and social awareness.

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