

KOLUM KRITIKA

CONFESSION AS A NARRATIVE MODE IN GAY INDIE FILMS

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Abstract

This paper is interested in confession as a narrative mode of media, specifically gay independent films, and the specific codes and mechanisms inherent in a confession that enable one to generate pity over the viewing public. I would discuss four gay indie films, *Ang Lalaki sa Parola*, *Daybreak*, *Sagwan*, and *Selda*, and look specifically at how these films use confession in their narration, as a cinematic style to develop their characters, and ultimately as a form of politics of viewing by which gay films in general become a sort of “public confession” constituting their viewers as their preferred “confessors.”

Such understanding of confession as a narrative mode therefore will have a bearing on the notion of “independence” in gay indie films—in particular, how these films advance the cause of being “independent” from mainstream films oftentimes characterized as commercial and lacking in artistic merits. My point is that confession as a narrative mode is still not enough and what is considered as a “gay indie” can ultimately be contained within the culture of homophobia caused by the uneven relations of power between these films and their target audience.

Keywords

contrition, politics of viewing, pornography, recall

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My decision to keep quiet is not because my brother Noynoy will be sworn in on June 30...Who knows, with the help of science, I may still look good. But then again, six years from now, maybe I'm the one who'll be sworn in.

- Kris Aquino on national TV regarding her split with husband James Yap

That said, let me tell you how I personally feel. I recognize that making any such call was a lapse in judgment. I am sorry. I also regret taking so long to speak before you on this

matter. I take full responsibility for my actions and to you and to all those good citizens who may have had their faith shaken by these events.

- President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on national TV on June 2005

INTRODUCTION

The confession of Kris Aquino about her break up with husband James Yap on national TV three days before her brother's proclamation as president of the Philippines is indicative of how media constructs and influences people's consciousness. All of the sudden, Kris can steal the limelight from her brother, and whatever political will or insight that ensues from our experience of the recent election is oftentimes sidetracked by controversial gossips and news on personal lives of actors. Kris knows how to handle the media since she has been hosting a program that generates gossips on media personalities for quite some time. Her confession on TV therefore should be seen as a media apparatus in itself by which viewers are conditioned to think about her and by extension, her family. Kris is not the only one who uses confession to her advantage; former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo uses the television also to confess her lapse of judgment¹ over election protocol almost five years ago. Both Kris and GMA try to win public consent using specific speech codes and mechanisms that generate pathos for their target audience.

This paper then is interested in confession as a narrative mode of media, specifically gay independent films, and the specific codes and mechanisms inherent in a confession that enable one to generate pity over the viewing public. I would discuss four gay indie films, *Ang Lalaki sa Parola*, *Daybreak*, *Sagwan*, and *Selda* and look specifically at how these films use confession in their narration, as a cinematic style to develop their characters, and ultimately as a form of politics of viewing by which gay films in general become a sort of "public confession" constituting their viewers as their preferred "confessors." Such understanding of confession as a narrative mode therefore will have a bearing on the notion of "independence" in gay indie films, in particular, how these films advance the cause of being "independent" from mainstream films oftentimes characterized as commercial and lacking in artistic merits. My point is that confession as a narrative mode is still not enough and what is considered as a "gay indie" can ultimately be contained within the culture of homophobia caused by the uneven relations of power between these films and their target audience.

CONFESSION AND SUBJECTIVITY

Confession as a religious practice is not unfamiliar to a country where Catholics are

majority and had been colonized for almost three centuries by Catholic Spain. For Catholics, confession is the Sacrament of Penance, a method of the Church by which individual men and women may confess sins committed and have them absolved by a priest. Only the priests are able to absolve penitents with their sins and such is the power they wield based on the tradition and history the Catholic Church.

One of the earliest Catholic manuals on confession is one written by Fray Sebastian Totanes. His work is instructive as a historical document that records not only his view of Filipinos back then but also a way of understanding the efficacy of such practice in their lives (73). Such understanding of the power wielded by priests then and now in extracting truth or demanding confessions will enable us to understand how we become complicit and enamored by any truth-telling discourse, or why there is a fascination among Filipinos for controversies and gossips.

Totanes wrote a guideline on how to examine penitents for confessions. Some of the questions listed in *Preambulo de la Confesion* are attempts in extracting recent memories of the penitent such as “Cailan ca nag compisal? (When was your last confession?)” or “Hangan sa huli mong pagcocompisal, ilan nang taon magpangayon? (Since your last confession, how many years have passed?)” However, some questions can be extremely probing such as “Ynubus mo cayang sinaisay ang lahat? (Did you tell everything?)” or “Mey ipinagcaela ca bagang tiquis alin mang casalanang malaqui doon sa pagcocompisal mong huli? (Is there anything that you withheld in your last confession?)” (75).

These questions are not only meant to set remorse; they are predicated on a more fundamental speech in the art of speaking in Christian spirituality and pastoral, namely, Revelation, such that all manner of speaking must always refer back to these fundamental truth of revealing or revelation. Since God is truth then it is necessary that men must aspire to these truths and that truth-telling must somehow be part of their regimen, their Christian upbringing and formation. Confession therefore is a truth-telling device by which penitents are subjected and taught of the fundamental speech in Christianity. Totanes further wrote in his guideline, “Ang tunay na catotohanan (anac co) ang sasabihin mo dito paran naalaman nang P. Dios. Cun totoong iquinahiya, cun iquinatacot mo sa Pare, at caya di mo ipinagcompisal, sabihin mo: ipinagcaela mong tiquis. Houag cang mahiya, houag matacot sa aquin. (My child, you tell me only the truth because God knows everything. If you are ashamed and afraid not to confess, then exert with utmost effort. Do not be bothered, and be afraid of me.)” (76). The priest therefore attains absolute power by his sense of command among penitents. Their belief in God is a belief in truth and forgiveness becomes possible only if one remains truthful. Shameful acts should be confessed to the priest and they are to be pardoned only by God through him.

The Church has in its disposal this truth-telling device in confession and it is not surprising

that some of these confessions were used primarily for knowledge-production so that the Church would have a firm control of their subjects, a better way of dealing with them. Any form of secrecy among natives would be considered as a threat to the Church's power. It must be noted that one of ways by which the Katipunan, a secret society of Andres Bonifacio that revolted against the Spaniards, was discovered through an alleged confession of a wife of a member of that society. Vicente Rafael discussed in his *The Promise of the Foreign* how all secret societies such as the Masonic lodges or Liga Filipina were banned since their secrecy would always be interpreted as a threat to the truth-revelation speech act of the church and the government (167-68). Our confession therefore assumes an Althusserian ideological apparatus² in which the relation between the confessor and the penitent was uneven, the former demanding truth and loyalty while the latter submits to his power.

Again in Totanes, this power can be incredibly probing especially on the mores and sexual practices of the Filipinos such as incest, masturbation, bestiality, and orgy. Some of the questions to be asked are "At mey guinaua ca caya anomang cahalayan sa alin mang hayop? (Did you have any filthy acts committed with an animal?) At cun ano caya yaon? (And what is that exactly?) At kung macailan? (And how many times you committed this act?) At mey caharap na tauo? (Did you do it in front of somebody else?) Ylan catauo? (How many were watching you?)" (112+). These questions not only hint at bestiality but also on the possibility of orgy. The last question about doing the sexual act in the presence of other people will be repeated in other questions such as the one intimated in this question "At paano caya yaon? (How did you do it?) Nag aaglahian, at nag dorocotan cayo, at nag hihipoan caya, cun nagpaquitaan naman cayo doon sa inyong catouaan? (Were you playing with yourselves and were you showing your naked bodies to one another?) At nilabasan ca nang marumi? (Did you experience orgasm?) Cun pinalabasan mo caya ang manga cabiroan mo? (Did you help your lovers to orgasm also?)" (112+). These questions are definitely questions that elicit not only truth but graphic depiction of sexual acts of the penitents. To answer these questions therefore is not just to admit guilt and be remorseful but to perpetuate and perform the act for a particular and special audience, and in this case, to the priests, who together with the theatricality of the church and the confessional, are able to wield power against the performing penitents. Confession becomes a performance as the guidelines of Totanes become the very script by which penitents are transformed into unwilling actors.

However, the extent of power of confessor can also be gauged not only in the manner of questioning but also in the supposed act of contrition of the penitent that proceeds from his confession. Accordingly, contrition is an admission of sin and the resolution not to sin again. To seal this act of contrition, the penitent is asked to pray for forgiveness. It is important to note that Totanes used the word "pagtitica" and this is given as a form of command from the priest: "Nasonor mo caya ang parusa nang Pare sa iyo sa confesion mong yaon? (Were you able to follow

all the instructions during your last confession?)” (76). The power to forgive sins is a privileged act accorded to priests only, as to how this power has been secularized and utilized by the media and indie films can only be understood in the context of the proliferation of radio programs that later turned into TV programs that highlight public confessions of common folk and actors during the late 70s and early 80s, the height of Marcos era.

CONFESSION AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE

It is quite surprising that the 70s would be the time when truth-telling or confessional radio and TV programs flourished. Eddie Ilarde’s *Kahapon Lamang* that started on radio in the 50s was later turned into TV program from 1976 to 1986 and Helen Vela’s *Lovingly Yours* which also started in DZBB was later turned into TV anthology program from 1980 to 1996. Both shows would actually feature the life stories of their letter senders and occasionally at the end of the show, the hosts would actually give an advice. There were TV shows that would concentrate on the lives of actors. These were shows started by Inday Badiday or Lourdes Carvajal in real life, also known as the “queen of showbiz talk shows” and “queen of intrigues.” She began her broadcasting career as a radio host who talked about the private lives of Filipino actors. One of her first shows was *Nothing but the Truth* and later *See-True* and *Eye to Eye*.³ These showbiz talk shows would appropriate the mechanism of confession, from the recall of past deeds to narration and elaboration, and finally through an appeal for understanding and help in which case the host readily dispenses an advice or words of wisdom to audience, usually accompanied by a melancholic music.

The proliferation of showbiz talk shows up to the present can be one of the factors that influence the narrative techniques of most gay indie films, primarily because these talk shows have already a sizeable and target audience, so the adaptation from TV to movies can easily be facilitated without much resistance from their audience since they were also the former radio listeners as well. However, it is also important to note that the fascination for gossips and such shows has been cultivated during the Marcos regime, when there was a systemic repression of freedom by Martial Law, thus creating an overwhelming desire of the people to be informed and to know what’s going on. The confession of ordinary people and actors fill this void that made institutional churches irrelevant and obsolete. As the number of confessional TV programs grew, including the branching out of media to public service, people would naturally gravitate to TV as the relevant institution that educates, informs, and gives them livelihood. It is not surprising that TV networks would necessarily have an influence on the formation of a national consciousness.⁴ Furthermore, both radio and television mimic the confessional box of the church. An ordinary confessional box preserves the anonymity of the penitents because the window by which a penitent confesses is

partly covered. This anonymity is important in so far that radio and television can actually disguise their letter senders with aliases and reenactments or dramatization.

Gay Indie Films like *Ang Lalaki sa Parola*, *Daybreak*, *Sagwan*, and *Selda*, despite their claims of being independent from mainstream cinema, will also appropriate confession in their narrative styles. In *Ang Lalaki sa Parola*, the story of Mateo's alienation from his father and pitiable relationships with Suzette and Jerome is intermittently interrupted by the confession of the old man, Tisho, who according to the story has seen the fairy in the lighthouse. In *Daybreak*, William discloses to his lover JP his plans to leave him and migrate to Australia and live with his wife, and it is in this disclosure that the story becomes complicated, with the two characters struggling against the truth about their relationship. Despite being drawn to each other, William and JP call it quits in the end. In *Selda*, the confession of Rommel comes towards the end of the movie when his relationship with Esteban begins to bother him and he accidentally kills his own daughter. The last scene of *Selda* shows Rommel trying to write a letter. In *Sagwan*, Alfred is haunted by a traumatic incident in his childhood that will be revealed in the end when his relationship with his girlfriend Cecilia and fellow boatman Emman is finally consummated.

In these films, we have the confession within the story itself. The confession of the main characters will necessarily involve a remorseful recall of past events. In *Ang Lalaki sa Parola*, Tisho is expectedly bothered and haunted by a past that he is confessing to Mario. The story itself is clearly demarcated by the constant question-and-answer dialogue of Tisho and Mateo. Their dialogue will also be crucial in the whole story itself since what is happening to Mario is already intimated or suggested in Tisho's confession. His confession somehow constitutes Mario's story and this narrative device tells audience that what Mario is going through is something pardonable and understandable. In this way the audience is conscripted to sympathize with Tisho and by extension to Mario. Such device is already imbedded in the story that makes Mario's story a reiteration and therefore familiar, something not entirely otherworldly and bizarre. Viewers then accept Mario's story as a reiteration, something that has already happened in the past and is happening now.

Confession in *Daybreak* is more subtle yet equally powerful since confession is not only used as a narrative device but the crux of the story where William is hesitant to tell JP his plans. William's disclosure of his plans to migrate to Australia will end their relationship and this ending only affirms the power of confessional discourse that characters can wallow on their sins and guilt, tell their stories and then in the end make a remorseful exit via a moral closure or a tragic ending. I was told by film critic Yason Banal that there were two versions for the ending of the *Daybreak*, one ending with a break up and the other with their reunion. These versions only attest to the power and efficacy of confessional mode of the film. Confession as a performance needs an audience. In this case, it is important to ask to whom the film is actually making a confession? Why

is there a need for an alternate ending? Could the alternate ending be a ploy to a specific audience so that confession becomes pleasant or agreeable?

In most confessions like in *Selda* and *Sagwan*, the voice over of the main characters intrudes in the story. In *Selda*, towards the end, we hear Rommel reiterating something that Esteban told him while they were still in prison, a sense of being dead, trapped, and without any direction in life. It is in this form of confession that the film makes a closure or moralizes. From the onset, the characters are already guilty of their sins, they are forced or compelled to narrate their stories, and in the end, their remorse or *pagtitica* would always be articulated in the form of a moral lesson. In the case of *Selda*, Esteban would ask the rhetorical question, “Sino ang mananagot? (Who will be responsible?)” and we see towards the end, Rommel, smoking, quite distraught, writing a letter inside a dilapidated room. Again the ending is quite convenient, the tragic ending of gay characters is the very formula for making their story palatable and agreeable. One gets the impression that gay stories are okay as long as in the end we know the moral lesson; gay characters end up as loonies looking for fairies, as repressed or closeted, prisoners, or being butchered or killed. In *Sagwan*, Alfred who is confessing is also explaining everything from his sense of alienation to his problematic relationships. Just like in *Selda*, Alfred’s confession is seemingly structured in his guilt, his exposition and narration of the sex trade in his area, and his attempt to moralize and rationalize his fantasies towards Cecilia and Emman. The convenient ending of their ménage à trois is the very formula by which their target audience must have a disavowal of the film and submit to a prescribed morality.

CONFESSION AS A HOMOPHOBIC DISCOURSE

Laura Mulvy in her seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* argues that viewers must be able to break the cinematic codes of films constituted by the overpowering male gaze and the illusion it creates and invokes to viewers. The cinema depends on three gazes: the camera, audience, and the characters. Illusion is achieved by downplaying the first two and enhancing the third. In most of the gay indie films, there is a tendency for the whole film to become the penitent while the audience becomes the priest who will absolve the gay film in the end. In other words, a politics of viewing is created, a politics of uneven relations where like before, Filipinos were expected to remember their sinful acts, be remorseful, and ask for forgiveness while the priest in return must listen and absolve.

With the proliferation of confessional type of TV programs and gay indie films, the function of the priest is relegated to the viewers. However, this does not result in a sense of empowerment of the audience. This simple role reversal in which the audience assumes the role of the priest only

reaffirms the uneven character of confessional discourse. Unlike before when the priest asks the probing questions, this time the film has been hailed enough to answer even if not being asked. The films and media in general have internalized this act of probing, have set the questions asked by priests as their rubrics, have studied their target audience and marketing strategies, and fully utilized the mechanisms of confession.

Gay films therefore become a matter of one variety after another, one daring role and scene after another, a bit different in performance but ultimately uniformly recognizable. Gay films with tragic characters only reiterate and such reiteration has the ideological effect of containing the radicalness of gay lifestyle and philosophy. This is the illusion that a lot of gay indie films are trying to project, primarily that they are free of any commercial value, but with the plethora of confessional films they have only succeeded in visualizing the pleasures of gay lifestyles and their concomitant commodification. The representation of tragic gay characters in these films is a ploy for sympathetic reading or identification. But what is achieved by the repetitiveness of these tragic representations is not a critical engagement on the part of viewers but rather a sense of disavowal. Gay films create the illusion of the free play of desire yet such desire must also be ironically contained in a moral dilemma and tragic ending of characters.

One should take note how recent these films have eroticized and exoticized the provinces and remote rural barrios such that the setting is not so much about the story but only an expedient backdrop in reinventing a familiar story. At some point the audience need not identify therefore with the gay characters; the film has already made a fetish out of this sympathy such that whatever anxiety the audience has is already controlled and determined. This kind of manipulation is teetering on homophobia, or the fear of gays and their lifestyle can only be accepted in certain agreeable situations and terms. One can recall the famous TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. At the onset one can see the boldness of such program in relation to a very conservative public, yet such shows reinforce only the conservative attitude of their target audience. Gay lifestyle is acceptable only if it is in the service of the straight guy, the very norm by which queer is actually being “straightened” so to speak. Similarly, characters in gay indie films are straightened out: Tisho and Mario are remorseful repentants seeking absolution, William and JP are the star-crossed lovers who will find love somewhere in their memories and dreams but not in their present situation, Rommel is the prisoner asking for an understanding of his failures and struggles, and Alfred and Emman are the unwilling victims of the flesh trade in their community. In each of these characters, their confession as the very mode of most gay indie films tend to be a “straightening” technique, making their attitudes, lifestyle and way of thinking palatable and agreeable to a conservative audience.

At some point as well, this straightening technique compels the audience to renounce gay

indie films as pornographic. They have no choice but to become like the priest hearing a public confession, only this time more theatrical and spectacular. Like the priest, the audience is compelled to absolve and forgive the gay character since the gay character has a tragic ending. Ultimately, gay indie films are definitely complicit to a culture of homophobia by structuring their narratives as confessions with all the mechanism of recall and the act of contrition, evoking a dual formulaic and cathartic effect of pity and fear.

Martin Manalansan discusses in *Global Divas* how his interviewees, all AIDS victims, use imaginative terms and coinages for their illness, sometimes using tragic heroines or characters to engage their subjectivity and agency. However, he also cites the problem of such identification with suffering for some gays in the US that with the advent of possible treatment of the disease, pathos is something associated with the gays in the Third World, gays who simply cannot afford the medication for their illness (180-82). Pity, in as much as it is a powerful emotion, can also bring about the unevenness of social relations. As in the case of films depicting suffering, pity can only heighten the unequal relations of the viewers and the object of their gaze. It is not surprising that sometimes films exploit tragedy for such commercial purposes and in history, the so called Third World has been the site of producing colonial fantasies and postcolonial identities. Sometimes it is within these desires and fantasies that the suffering gay character is depicted, and all because such depiction is an elaboration of masculinity of the West (Chari 277+). This is when gay indie films become pornographic, not because of graphic depictions of sexual acts and gay lifestyles, but because of the coerced pathos generated from viewers, pathos that does not critically engage their worldview but pathos that reinforces their conservative outlook, their superior stance, and their irrational fear of gays. One can argue, however, that pathos worked with Lino Brocka's gay films in the 70s, but then again one must also remember that pathos generated by Brocka's films has a politico-social context, it militated against the state-sponsored image of Manila and the Philippines back then. At a time when the Marcoses were promoting Manila as the city of man, a progressive city, etc., Brocka's films provided an alternative view of Manila. In other words, Brocka knew his politics; even if he is using the conventions of tragedy or confessionary mode in storytelling, he knew his purpose. The demand for gay indie films today do not necessarily adhere to Brocka's philosophy, although a lot of these films are direct copies, if not derivatives, of Brocka's films.

There is a growing need for the gay indie films today to articulate their politics, their way of thinking, and their specific intervention. The renewed interest in gay indie film and their continued exhibition abroad in various international film festivals, where they reap recognition and awards, are not enough to advance the cause of queer politics. They have to engage the viewing public to question their beliefs, norms, and values. If not, then what else is a gay indie film for?

NOTES

- 1 Part of the text read by President GMA over national TV on June 2005: "That said, let me tell you how I personally feel. I recognize that making any such call was a lapse in judgment. I am sorry. I also regret taking so long to speak before you on this matter. I take full responsibility for my actions and to you and to all those good citizens who may have had their faith shaken by these events. I want to assure you that I have redoubled my efforts to serve the nation and earn your trust. *Nagagambala ako. Maliwanag na may kakulangan sa wastong pagpapasya ang nangyaring pagtawag sa telepono. Pinagsisisihan ko ito nang lubos. Pinananagutan ko nang lubusan ang aking ginawa, at humihingi ako ng tawad sa inyo, sa lahat ng mga butihing mamamayan na nabawasan ng tiwala dahil sa mga pangyayaring ito. Ibig kong tiyakin sa inyo na lalo pa akong magsisikap upang maglingkod sa bayan at matamo inyong tiwala.*
- 2 Louis Althusser is a French Marxist philosopher. His contributions to the theory of ideology as interpellation and his concept of the ideological apparatus have been very influential among psychoanalyst and Marxist critics. See Louis Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*.
- 3 See Vicente Rafael, "Your Grief is Our Gossip," in *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History*, pages 204+.
- 4 Benedict Anderson believes that the birth of nationalism is catalyzed by the breakdown of religious communities and political dynasties on one hand, and the emergence of capital and technologies of communication, on the other. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*.

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