

Forum Kritika: A Closer Look at *Manila by Night*

FILM PLASTICS IN *MANILA BY NIGHT*

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Abstract

As a sample of Third World cinema, *Manila by Night* (and by association its director, Ishmael Bernal) endured a reputation for technical inadequacy—an ironic assessment, considering its top-rank status in the Philippine film canon. This paper will attempt to reevaluate the movie's aesthetic stature vis-à-vis movements specific to Third Cinema, focusing on ethnographic filmmaking. First will be an analysis of the film's visual surface, with a consideration of scene selections/limitations/restrictions, the limiting and liberating aspect of night shooting, and the independent-minded spirit which refused to conform to standards of surface polish in filmmaking, as dictated by critics and practitioners. Second will be a consideration of sound, particularly its director's successful adaptation of the multi-channel recording system to convey overlapping and even simultaneous lines of dialogue. By this means the paper hopes to argue that, contrary to received impressions, Bernal devoted as much aesthetic deliberation to *Manila by Night* as he did to its justly celebrated narratological and ideological elements.

Keywords

ethnographic films, film censorship, film documentation, multicharacter narrative

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MANILA BY NIGHT holds a peculiar position among films contending for top rank in the canon of Philippine cinema. Even in relation to the other output of its director, Ishmael Bernal, and through no fault of its own, it had been unable to make an impact in any major international festival, the usual first venue among Third World countries for movies seeking global recognition. More curiously, its local record indicates some hesitation on the part of film evaluators in acknowledging its accomplishments as a technological product: in the only awards body (the Manunuring Pelikulang Pilipino, or Filipino Film Critics Circle) that opted to recognize it, not only did the film not get a nomination for cinematography, editing, or sound, it actually lost in the best direction category despite winning prizes for production design, lead male performance, screenplay, and film. In the organization's official anthology for the 1980s, the *Manila by Night* review concludes that "The film's technical aspects are not exactly first rate but they are well above average" (Bautista 158); it then qualifies the statement by starting with "What is more important is" and referring thereafter to the film's political content.

Despite the fact that the film has continued to gain critical ground since its initial release in 1980, it (and its director) has continued to suffer from the critics' institutional judgment regarding its alleged technical shortcomings. Appreciation tends to center on its narratological achievement as well as the political response it generated—a year-long ban by the martial law-era censorship board that also precluded its participation as competition entry at the Berlin International Film Festival. It is not the intention of this paper to recuperate the stature of *Manila by Night* as a sample of technical excellence in cinema; rather, the paper will begin with a recap of the tradition of documentary filmmaking that its director exploited as a strategy for industrial survival, and inspect how with *Manila by Night* this mode managed to attain an exemplary application in Philippine film practice, despite being misrecognized—and consequently undervalued—by local evaluators.

The Second Golden Age opposition between Bernal and Lino Brocka (whose *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* is the only other serious contender for all-time-best stature in the Philippine film canon) echoed an earlier rivalry, circa the First Golden Age and later, between Gerardo de Leon and Lamberto V. Avellana. While the latter had been criticized for currying favor with the martial-law government (accounting for his winning the government's National Artist Award ahead of de Leon), the former was held by local (and subsequently foreign) critics in higher regard. In fact, the MPP members effectively punished Avellana by withholding their Natatanging Gawad Urian (lifetime achievement prize) for him until two other directors, who specialized in musicals and comedies, were handed the recognition.

Fortuitously, Avellana received his critics' award (which, during the televised program, he admitted to have highly coveted) the same year that *Manila by Night* was in the running. The greetings and congratulations between him and Bernal served to remind cultural observers of how Bernal's industry apprenticeship proceeded from an association with Avellana—who at that late period of his career

had focused almost exclusively on documentary production.¹ Yet it was at this same program that Bernal would be deprived of his recognition as director, for a film that had generated enough buzz so that it had been widely anticipated to win the grand prize in Berlin, had its participation in it pushed through.

One matter that further complicated the deliberations for that year's critics' awards was the fact that the commercially released version of the film was severely mangled, owing to a record number of visual cuts (mostly sex scenes) and aural deletions (cusswords and all mention, directly or otherwise, of Manila) (Interim Board of Censors for Motion Pictures). In fact, the record of deliberations maintained that the film could not be provided with nominations for editorial elements (specifically film editing and sound) because of the condition of the print shown in local theaters (Dormiendo). The confusion had been so extensive and unprecedented that during the awards ceremonies, then MPP chair Bienvenido Lumbera read a statement from the organization that maintained how the integral version demonstrated clear superiority over the other entries and deserved to be released despite the government's disapproval. One implication of the statement is that if the release had been uncensored, *Manila by Night* would have won in more categories and have acquired a few more technical nominations; nevertheless, the damage to the film's plastic reputation had been done, and would never be recovered since then.

By way of clarification, the use in this paper of the term "plastics" departs from the original sense used by early film enthusiasts (cf. Canudo) who sought to lionize the medium as the synthesis of the Western art forms that had preceded it. Instead, the term as used here would be the more delimited current sense of the "surface" audiovisual elements, through which the work signifies its meaning. The semiological implication that this process implies will not be the direction of the present study; it will, however, focus on a more specialized mode of practice, following the career trajectory observed by the auteur (Bernal) prior to, through, and after coming up with the film-text in question.

Directorial Motivation

Ironically, in the earlier phase of his career, Bernal had been regarded as an astute intellectual filmmaker (with a prior career in film criticism [Vasudev 17]—perhaps the most successful critic-turned-filmmaker in the country) who had the capability of executing his choice of occasionally cutting-edge subject matter with technical flourish. In fact, he was the critics circle's second Best Director awardee, when his star vehicle *Dalawang Pugad, Isang Ibon* intercepted 1977's best film winner, Robert Ylagan's *Hubad na Bayani*, on its way to sweeping the usual clutch of major prizes. His next-year contender, an even more ambitious European art-film handling of a big-star love triangle titled *Ikaw Ay Akin*, won prizes for production design and music and had its advocates for major prizes as well.

By this stage in his career, nevertheless, Bernal was regarded as a narratological innovator, perhaps the country's finest, but not necessarily a major cinematographic talent on the order of other critically acclaimed Filipino filmmakers such as Lino Brocka, Celso Ad. Castillo, and Mike de Leon; again, going by the evidence of critics' awards (cf. MPP website), the work of these filmmakers consistently cornered the technical categories, with Bernal films able to wangle only "secondary" prizes such as the previously mentioned ones for production design (a latter-day spin-off from cinematography) and music (essentially a sub-category of sound). The logical expectation was that Bernal would be fortifying his potential in these categories, in order to prove himself the equal, by film-plastic standards, of his peers, just as he might be tempering his tendency to depict shocking sexual kinks and verbal obscenities in order to alleviate his standing with the militarized censorship board.

Instead, Bernal seemed to have decided on an insistence on these liabilities, intensifying them to an extent that may be termed "perverse" (in more ways than one). The turning point was in 1979, when Bernal's entry, *Aliw*, displayed several characteristics that would be further amplified in *Manila by Night*, from urban-lumpen material (with concomitant salty lingo) to multicharacter narrative structure to apparent slap-dash technique. *Aliw* was regarded as a triumph of content over plastic surface, although a minor controversy erupted when its scriptwriter, Cecille Lardizabal, complained in a letter to print media that her script had been bowdlerized by the director and that she was therefore refusing the critics' best screenplay nomination; the awards ceremony (and subsequent records) identified Bernal and Franklin Cabaluna instead as the movie's scriptwriters (cf. MPP).

The sudden emergence of *Aliw* coincided with a flurry of prolific filmmaking on the part of Bernal, where he would come up with four or more completed projects annually, up to the mid-1980s. The logical conclusion—that this (apparent absence of) style was his way of coping with a heavy workload—would be evinced in the minimal recognition his output received. With the introduction around this time to the Cannes Film Festival of Lino Brocka and Mike de Leon, who were renowned for their technical polish (the latter in fact won best director the year that *Manila by Night* was in contention), Bernal eventually took pains to abandon the style he had initiated with *Aliw* and returned to his less controversial "polished" filmmaking style. Not surprisingly, his winning streak with the critics' awards returned, and he wound up copping four best director prizes, more than any other Filipino winner. Ironically, none of the films he had won for share the same prominent canonical stature that *Manila by Night*, *Nunal sa Tubig*, *Himala*, and even relatively small-scale works like *Aliw* and *Pagdating sa Dulo* (his first film) enjoy.

A more plausible explanation for Bernal's resort to "flawed" technique in *Aliw* can be inferred from the fact that it was produced by the same person, but not the same production company, that financed his 1976 fishing-village epic *Nunal sa Tubig*. The production company could not be the same because *Nunal sa Tubig* had caused Jessie Ejercito's Crown Seven Film Productions to collapse. The movie

deployed a severe, distant, highly visual, and open-ended treatment that could not surmount the presence of “sexy” performers playing out a roundelay of lust and subsequent guilt. One may reasonably speculate that Ejercito, whose record of risk-taking contrasted with the safer sensibility of his more famous brother (and eventual Philippine President) Joseph Estrada, decided to gamble once more with a Bernal project once he had launched his new company, Seven Star Productions.

Bernal had, after all, provided Ejercito with several critically acclaimed blockbusters, notably *Ligaw na Bulaklak* (immediately preceding *Nunal sa Tubig*). With *Aliw*, Ejercito’s trust in Bernal paid off in spades once more—so much so that Regal Films, in scouting around for a project that would mark its second anniversary as a production outfit (after several years as film distributor), offered Bernal carte blanche if he presumably could pull off the same feat, but on a larger scale, as *Aliw*. *Manila by Night*, like its predecessor, could therefore be seen as opposed to *Nunal sa Tubig*, in the sense that it partook of a formulaic approach that had already proved commercially successful; yet *Aliw* and *Manila by Night* also surprisingly share several elements with the earlier project, starting with their intense ethnographic interest in dispossessed underclass populations.

The difference lay in Bernal’s approach to the material. Where *Nunal sa Tubig* was shot only after extensive research and scriptwriting, with every set-up subjected to as thorough a measure of control as could be mustered on a distant out-of-town location, *Aliw* (to the chagrin, as mentioned, of the original scriptwriter) and *Manila by Night* were essentially improvised on the set; the later film, in fact, had no shooting script to work from, relying instead on a fairly loose single-page sequence list (Bernal, Personal interview). Six people were credited as “script consultants,” all of whom had worked and/or would be working with Bernal, all with an avowed willingness to participate in improvisatory activity on his film sets. Among the six were Jorge Arago, who had scripted *Nunal sa Tubig*; Peque Gallaga, who was also production designer for *Manila by Night*; and Ricardo Lee and Toto Belano, who would write a few other scripts for Bernal, including some of his subsequent multicharacter projects.

The Documentarian Imperative

That Bernal had an apprenticeship in documentary production, and approached *Manila by Night* in a documentary-realist manner—holding off on actual production activity until he had extracted information from actual milieu personalities on what their everyday concerns were and how they responded to events outside the ordinary—ought to suffice in arguing that Bernal had worked out his technical choices with more careful deliberation than he had been given credit for. Coming of age during the flourishing of direct cinema, and eventually being offered the directorship of the University of the Philippines Film Center (which had pioneered

in *cinéma-direct* workshops in the country), he had been pondering the most effective way to shape film technique in the face of the Philippines' decline from developing to underdeveloped nation, a distinction it shared in reverse with other Asian countries which had experienced similar authoritarian systems of government.

The fact that he determined that documentary aesthetics would provide the most apposite (or the least objectionable) way of matching what was after all Western-sourced technology with Third-World realities bespeaks a certain level of integrity, considering that this was also the period when international film festival agents were discovering talents from countries like the Philippines—talents who could be packaged as anti-authoritarian personalities who happened to be “gifted” in the medium. For Cannes representative Pierre Rissient (who was in effect the Asian region's gatekeeper to the festival), this resulted in the exclusion of people like Bernal, who was allegedly “sloppy” as film craftsperson.²

No help for Bernal's situation was forthcoming from the end of Third Cinema advocates. If any consensus were to be drawn from the anthology *Questions of Third Cinema*, it would be that non- or anti-Western films ought to be exempt from the challenges of plastic aesthetic innovation. The closest to a pro-aesthetic utterance would be that of Teshome H. Gabriel, who maintained that folklore, as repository of popular memory, would most effectively counterpose the dominant versions of “official history” that Hollywood promotes and circulates (54-56). The several problematic implications of this assertion—the reconfiguration of tradition (as embodied in and exemplified by folklore) as a force for progressivity vis-à-vis Western culture, and the conflation of everything represented as “Hollywood” into a mode of reaction, among other possible issues—could not have been part of the aesthetic issues weighing on Bernal; otherwise, he would have gone the same direction as his contemporaries, i.e., into highly accomplished anti-authoritarian film provocations that would have been rewarded with foreign-festival acclaim and marketability.³

In fact, the trajectory of filmed ethnography (as distinct from its literal documentary counterpart, film ethnography) represented by a continuum from *Nunal sa Tubig* through *Aliw* and *Manila by Night* (with a return to the earlier position in *Himala*⁴) bypasses the strict delineation of the domain of documentary filmmaking outlined in what may be construed as the standard mainstream text, Bill Nichols's *Representing Reality*. A more useful starting point would be the same author's somewhat melodramatic description, in “The Voice of Documentary,” of what he champions as observational filmmaking:

Even those obvious marks of documentary textuality—muddy sound, blurred or racked focus, the grainy, poorly lit figures of social actors caught on the run—function paradoxically. Their presence testifies to an apparently more basic absence: such films sacrifice conventional, polished artistic expression in

order to bring back, as best they can, the actual texture of history in the making. If the camera gyrates wildly or ceases functioning, this is not an expression of personal style. It is a signifier of personal danger ... or even death. (Nichols 52)

Further confirmation of Bernal's observational strategy lies in the narrative sample he openly avowed as his inspiration: Robert Altman's *Nashville* (an American production, it must be noted) (David, "Primates" 86). The movie's scriptwriter, Joan Tewkesbury, achieved her ambitiously structured 24-character opus by spending several months immersing in the city's country-music culture (Stuart 46–48), the same process observed by Bernal in his preparations for *Nunal sa Tubig* and *Himala*. When this approach proved inadequate in the case of *Nunal sa Tubig* (in the sense that local audiences felt alienated by the result), Bernal did not jettison Altman's example altogether just yet; instead, he took the same extra step that Altman did, and introduced on-the-set improvisation to an extreme degree, with the box-office results of *Aliw* and another multicharacter Seven Star film, *Menor de Edad*, confirming the effectiveness of the approach. Beyond the pragmatic rationale, the strategy also serves to confirm the

narrowing of the gap between the languages of documentary and fiction.... Those same lightweight, silent-running cameras and recorders, plus film emulsions whose sensitivity obviates the need for extra lighting in most situations, have led to the production of films whose fluency of camerawork and naturalness of performances ... have opened up an unprecedented range of stylistic choice. (Vaughan 104-05)

At this point, in order to demonstrate Bernal's utilization of certain then-prevalent devices in film anthropology in *Manila by Night*, this paper will be inspecting first the film's visual elements, then its aural properties (sound first, then music). The discussion of the film's visual properties will observe a basic division that may be described as content followed by form—a problematic and admittedly artificial division but one that is necessitated by the separation made possible during the production process, wherein substance and technique may still be distinct from each other prior to their synthesis in the final product. Specifically, the film's observational elements, definable as the constituents in documentary practice that allow observers, even laypersons, to recognize its presence even without any awareness of film technique, will be broken down into a number of discussable subcategories. This will be followed by *Manila by Night's* documentary effects, the technical strategies, drawn from a wide range "allowed" by documentary practitioners but from which most conventional feature-film practitioners (epitomized by Classical Hollywood style) are discouraged.

Observational Elements

Proceeding from the blanket definition by John Grierson of the documentary as a “creative treatment of actuality” providing aesthetic satisfaction while articulating a social purpose (Hardy 35-46), one must also instantly qualify that, as a generic instance, the markers of documentary film necessarily remain unstable. Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, in discussing Nichols’s essay, maintain that

These days we think of handheld camera, obscured views, and overlapping sound as markers of documentary truth. And a general “messiness”..., unbalanced compositions, and an aesthetic of visual and aural clutter are easily read as signifiers of immediacy, instantaneity, and authenticity.... Yet these different markers, and realism as a style, have changed over time.

To better apprehend Bernal’s documentarian strategies in *Manila by Night*, visual samples in the form of frame captures will be presented alongside then (and perhaps still) contemporary markers, alongside a cursory discussion of the same technical elements. In focusing on the film’s plastics, rather than on its narrative structure, the paper does not intend to valorize one exclusive (or at the expense) of the other, even in relation to anthropological discourse. *Manila by Night*’s narratological accomplishments have been discussed more extensively elsewhere, over the years since its emergence, and as previously noted, as the likeliest way of “excusing” its supposed technical limitations. Yet even in viewing the movie as an ethnographic text, we can see how it confronts the charge that “the visual record remains ‘thin,’ while the written record allows for ‘thick’ description by the method of ‘language-shadows’” (Ardener 112, qtd. in Hastrup 15).⁵

1. Clinical Distance

Kirsten Hastrup maintained that, in addition to photography’s ability to provide a unique system of disclosures (as asserted by Susan Sontag—cf. Hastrup 11), the camera also has the more important advantage of restoring “commonplaces,” details that the researcher may have ignored or taken for granted (12). The resultant clinical gaze, as attributed to Michel Foucault, was “until recently ... the sole guarantee asked for.... We have come to terms with the fact that a ‘bias’ is not necessarily an evil ... because it is informed by intuition and implicit knowledge” (12). In *Manila by Night*, this method is most pronounced in scenes involving the type of character who would have shown up in *Nunal sa Tubig* and *Himala*, a naïve waitress, Baby, who is sweet-talked into yielding her virginity to Febrero, a promiscuous gay-for-pay taxi driver. In fig. 1, Baby had been accosted by Sonny, a customer who offers to pimp her to Japanese customers; she refuses and instead tells Febrero how the man had disrespected her, which leads to a confrontation between the two men. The scene unfolds in a single take.



Figure 1. Clockwise from top left: Febrero arrives at the restaurant where Baby works; Baby tells Febrero about Sonny so Febrero heads for Sonny's table; Febrero challenges Sonny to a fistfight; at the restaurant entrance, Febrero begins the showdown, but will be eventually overpowered by Sonny. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

The “rhyme” to this sequence is provided later, when Baby discovers her pregnancy and is abandoned by Febrero. She agrees to go with Sonny to the whorehouse, where Febrero's common-law wife, Adelina Macapinlac, works. After being threatened by Adelina, Baby is selected by the Japanese customer that Sonny brings. In fig. 2, Baby is overpowered by nausea, deriving from a number of possible causes—her abandonment by Febrero, the threats uttered by Adelina (whom, mistaken for a nurse, Baby had earlier approached for help), and her own pregnant condition.

Because of the deliberate avoidance of closeness, both sequences “read” as amusing, if not outright comic. Pathos and resignation respectively follow in Baby's next appearances, when she screams invectives at a fleeing Febrero, and later goes home from work, alone and pregnant.



Figure 2. Left to right: Upon being embraced by her first-ever john, a Japanese customer, Baby hurls on him; the customer helps Baby clean herself up but fails to notice and wipe off her vomit on himself; while being escorted back from the toilet to the bedroom, Baby loses consciousness. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

2. *Ironic Contrast*

A quality that indicates politicized positions in cinema in general, ironic contrast straddles the distinction between film fictions and non-fiction cinema; in fact, certain “purist” positions would eye this device with suspicion, on the (problematic and problematizable) assumption that ethnographic films should present wholenesses—of persons, objects, and actions (Heider 47-48). Vaughan criticizes such approaches as impaired by “the positivist naïveté of the traditional functionalist perspective—how ‘whole’ is ‘whole’?” and endorses instead “the ideal of ethnographic intentionality” (119). By this measure, ironic contrast, although more “cinematographic” than “ethnographic” (assuming that these distinctions, per Vaughan, can be opposed to each other), may still work if it were, to use another potentially controversial term, organic to the locale being documented. In *Manila by Night*, the device is handled with a casualness that could almost be accidental—in fact, Bernal made the claim that the set-ups were discovered on location, occasionally pointed out by members of his staff or by the subjects he was interviewing prior to improvising (Bernal, Personal interview). Fig. 3 provides a few examples drawn from various sequences in the movie.

All four examples also figure in sequences with shots that provide clinical distance. The technical difference is that distantiation is effected within the terms of a static composition, rather than situations (as in figs. 1 and 2) that require camera movements or cuts. This may be ascribed to the “ethnographic intentionality” mentioned earlier—i.e., since the contrast is inherent in the situation, then the contrast can be perceived even in a single frame.

3. *Confessional Moment*

A much-abused technique of the manipulative media interview, confessions in fiction films derive their power from the substitution of the camera (to which



Figure 3. Clockwise from top left: Adelina Macapinlac, in her nurse's masquerade, is a small figure on the right, her clean white uniform contrasting with the garbage truck; Bea (a blind masseuse) and an unidentified streetwalker pray before a street altar in the red-light section of Chinatown; at a formal and well-appointed Christmas dinner (minus her drug-addicted eldest son), Virgie nullifies her husband's attempts at pleasant storytelling by slamming her daughter's plate for some minor childish infraction; attempting to escape from her lover Greg Williams's insistence on performing live sex as an occupation, Bea feels her way alongside a parked vehicle that her blindness will never enable her to drive, but which also helps Greg recapture her. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

the subject relates her intimate thoughts and feelings) with another character in the text.⁶ This provides the viewer with several possible options rather than the sometimes-uncomfortable position of omniscience in the direct interview: identifying with either the confessing character or the one being confessed to, or maintaining distance from both without the "guilt" of having intruded into another person's privacy. Among several possible scenes in *Manila by Night*, only two (fig. 4) stand out from the rest because of the characters' sincerity in giving and receiving the confessions.

Exceptional as these scenes are, they also resolve in the larger pattern of betrayal and heartbreak, with perhaps the worst outcomes in the narrative for



Figure 4. Adelina talks to Manay about Febrero, the lover they share, saying how much she loves him for providing her with a refuge from the harshness of the city; Kano, despite her disapproval of Manay's preference for men, begins opening up about how Bea, the blind masseuse whom Manay is planning to introduce to Adelina, is her true love. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

each character: Adelina turns out to be a fake nurse, while Bea assists narcotics agents in pursuing Kano. With several people resentful of her deceit, Adelina dies from strangulation by an unknown assailant; Kano is arrested; and Manay suffers a nervous breakdown.

4. *Illicit Activity*

A variation on the confessional moment, scenes of illicit acts have been the stock-in-trade of television exposés and police procedurals. The usual context tends to uphold the notion of law and order premised on the disapprobation of socially unacceptable transgressions. The practice evolved from early documentary's so-called victim tradition, which necessitated the development of now-standard documentation technology "that allowed a degree of intrusion into ordinary people's lives that was not previously possible" (Winston 275), resulting in a tense balance between "the established right of the public to know and of the media to publish" (285). With the advantage of fictionalization, illicit events may be depicted, as they are in *Manila by Night* (fig. 5), sans editorializing, with verbal comments articulated afterward and relegated to certain characters according to their particular sets of values.

The primary difference between confessional moments and the depiction of illicit acts is that the former rely on the utterance of disclosure, whereas the latter remain primarily visual, with dialog a secondary, incidental, or sometimes even irrelevant component. In the preceding examples, the audience member is invited to identify with the character performing the activity, and by doing so overlook the immorality or illegality of the situation, with the viewer in effect suspending



Figure 5. Clockwise from top left: Alex and his girlfriend Vanessa, a college student, check into a hotel and use poppers to get high prior to resuming sexual activity; Kano, in order to finalize street-level transactions with Alex and his friends, engages an underage runner to fetch some illegal drugs; having nurtured a crush on Alex during his short-lived folk-singing career, Manay follows him into the restroom of a disco and succeeds in seducing him; in order to comfort her girlfriend Bea, who's depressed after finding out that Adelina, the nurse Manay sought out for her, was a fake, Kano provides some cough syrup to get her high, then necks with her in a pushcart beside a waterway; meanwhile Bea's girl Friday, Gaying, amuses herself by hooking a bra from someone's clothesline and trying it on; having discovered his drug habit, Alex's parents gang up on him in an excessively abusive manner, prompting their son to run away from home and live with his gay lover, Manay. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

her judgment. Since the characters are animated by their pursuit of happiness and material fulfillment (goals presumably shared by us, the viewers), we allow them to take their risk-taking opportunities and await the consequences, with the question of how far they might be able to succeed, providing a measure of suspense normally unavailable in (pre-judged) non-fictional presentations.

5. Symbolic Juxtaposition

Drawn from the tradition of Soviet montage, the placement of a succeeding shot intended to qualify a preceding one, whether by affirming, contradicting, or



Figure 6. Top: Baby tells Febrero that he had gotten her pregnant but is dismayed when he erupts in anger, castigating her failure to use birth control; meanwhile in a car accident nearby, one of the victims, a young girl, is hauled out of the wreck by passersby. Bottom: Sonny informs Baby that Febrero will never return, now that her pregnancy has given him reason to avoid her; their conversation is interrupted by a commotion in the restaurant, wherein the Chinese proprietor throws out his girlfriend, one of the waitresses, for flirting with a customer. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

amplifying it, has proved less effective in documentary owing to its attributability to editorial intervention. As with the confessional moment, fiction has the advantage of plausibility, i.e., in enabling the filmmaker to argue that the related incident happened to be in the same vicinity, if not within the same frame. The juxtapositions in fig. 6 pertain to Baby, the provincial waitress undergoing the process of realizing the painful realities of urban existence.

A different series of juxtapositions, providing ironic contrasts, occurs through two chronological sequences in fig. 7. Here the filmmaker would have been anticipating the possibility of resistant readings on the part of the audience, commonly observed among audiences (mainly students) of ethnographic films



Figure 7. Clockwise from top left: Adelina Macapinlac is strangled by an unknown assailant; the sound of her struggle is drowned in the din of New Year's Eve fireworks; Febrero, accompanied by Manay and his friends (plus another of Manay's lovers, Alex), visits the morgue; Alex is too stoned to participate in the series of events; Manay and friends find another woman's body in the coffin, wearing Adelina's uniform, and quarrel with the morgue attendant; after the apologetic attendant explains that the woman is really Avelina Macasaet and Adelina's body was switched in error, Febrero faints and is initially hauled by Manay's friends to the mortuary table. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

(Martinez 150), and channeling their responses toward a more heightened awareness of social dynamics. The sequences involve Febrero's live-in lover, the fake nurse, Adelina Macapinlac, from her murder up to a startling discovery at the morgue.

The series provides a more complex interrelationship among the shots, with a subtle attention to the repetition of cues in order to offset (or more accurately cushion) the impact of the plot twists: Adelina's uniform shows up again on the wrong corpse; Alex's deathly pallor (due to his worsening drug habit) suggests that a stint in the morgue might be in store for him sooner than later; Febrero, whose fainting echoes Baby's response to her first sex-work assignment (cf. fig. 2), gets carried around and is almost dumped on the mortuary table, the same way that Adelina's body might have been placed there earlier; even Manay's scream of frustration and outrage at the end of the sequence recalls the noise that the city had generated during the murder of Adelina.

These realist elements, it could be argued, could just as readily characterize a large number of Third World film products, and do not affect the prevailing consensus of Bernal's supposed failure to come up with a classically inflected visual design for his film; what weakened his standing during this period was the fact that Lino Brocka's cinematographer, Conrado Baltazar, specialized in night-time shots and succeeded in providing an atmosphere that was menacing and melancholy in the same instance, facilitated by an expert deployment of shadows, filters, and fog effects. In contrast, the flat and harsh lighting (to the point where star filters had to be used to lessen the glare of lights and light reflections) in a movie that consisted almost entirely of night sequences brings up the question of what kind of innovation Bernal had in mind beyond his multi-narrative conceptual coup.

The answer may be gleaned in the next section, which will inspect several groups of shots that indicate how *Manila by Night* utilized not only ethnographic research techniques to develop content, but also documentary stylistics in order to present these findings, so to speak, in a proper manner—that is, in a way that would not be mistaken as film fiction, but that rather could be readily identifiable as film documentation.

Documentary Effects

Understandably, *Manila by Night* as a whole could not be shot docu-style, even if the first step in its location procedure was precisely that of the seasoned documentarian: block off the actual places where the characters are supposed to appear, interview the people who live or work in those settings, and note down as accurately as possible their words and actions. The next stage—feeding the performers the lines and rehearsing the scenes—suggests the final category in Peter Ian Crawford's list of the possible permutations of ethnographic cinema, starting with rough footage and going through ethnographic films, small-format TV docus, education and information films, "other non-fiction films," and ending with a stand-alone listing for "fiction films and drama documentaries [that] may be labeled ethnographic because of their subject matter. In recent years, several fiction films have dealt with 'typical' anthropological topics" ("Film as Discourse" 74). While acknowledging that the boundaries among the seven categories "are obviously fluid and any one film may well fall into several categories," Crawford proceeds to focus (understandably, considering the terms of his study) on all types of ethnographic films except the last.

The following categories then may have been the means by which Bernal, with minimal theoretical assistance from experts in the field, signaled to his audience how *Manila by Night* was supposed to have departed from traditional (Hollywood-inflected) classical filmmaking.



Figure 8. Clockwise from top left: Febrero and Adelina as seen from the left side of their bed, facing the wall; the couple, as viewed from the other (wall) side, with their sleeping children visible beyond them; the couple as viewed from the foot of the bed, with a visible light source shining through a window (more on this later); the two once more from the bed's left side, right before one of the children cries and interrupts their moment. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

1. Axis Violations

The so-called 180-degree rule was the means by which Classical Hollywood set the terms for the use of then-new film technology, during a time when American cinema not only produced updated technologies, but also demonstrated how these should be used. The method, wherein a succeeding cut should not cross the imaginary line between two people in order to show one or the other's expressions during the delivery of dialog, became one of the cornerstones of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's monumental study of Hollywood style. It has proved more durable than another Classical Hollywood tradition—that of continuity editing, which was one of the technical rules immediately debunked by the French New Wave, particularly with Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle*. The

only formal mode of filmmaking where any hard-and-fast rule cannot be faithfully observed would be that of documentary. In fig. 8, where Adelina first gets home (cf. fig. 3, where she passes by a garbage truck), she proceeds to the bed where she and Febrero have a bout of lovemaking.

The movie is consistent in crossing the axis between characters in order to accommodate social commentary in the scene, the way that the previous example did to show the couple's proximity to their own children, and then to show how any voyeur outside the window could easily peek into their bedroom and, as the camera does, violate their privacy.

2. *Handheld Dollies*

The few instances where zoom shots are used in *Manila by Night*, these are so rare and subtle that they might not be easily perceived at first viewing. Instead, the movie makes liberal use of handheld camera dolly-ins (fig. 9), starting with the first public locale, the nightclub where Alex sings "Teach Your Children" to his admiring family and gay fan (Manay), and where Kano, a drug pusher from whom he will eventually purchase some contraband, transacts business with some of Alex's friends.



Figure 9. Uncut shot: Kano handing over drug merchandise to Alex's friends. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

Although a major studio production that could have easily provided other options such as tracks or cut-in coverage, *Manila by Night* makes use of a mobile camera in most of its "busy" sequences, thus providing the impression of ongoing actuality captured on-the-fly.



Figure 10. Left to right: Aware that she is being followed by narcotics agents, Kano slips into a dark alley, with her figure being highlighted at the end by a partly visible light source; on the way to bringing Bea (with her assistant Gaying) to Manay's lover Febrero's wife's supposed hospital workplace, the characters discover that a film shoot is in progress; chased by narcs in a car, Kano goes to Bea's workplace to ask for her girlfriend's help—which as it turns out will lead to a betrayal. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

3. Visible Light Sources

Reflexivity is a problematic aspect of documentary film practice. Astutely describing the condition as one of “anthropological transparency,” James C. Faris traces the origin of the requisite to the attempt to correct the imbalance of the coverage of non-Western peoples by Western anthropologists (epitomized in film practice by Margaret Mead, after whom the longest-running annual ethnographic-film festival is named). Reflexivity in this context could mean either the deliberate placement of reminders of the artificiality of media activity in a foreign or pre-modern culture, or the provision of non-Western peoples with the means to create their own images and statements.

Although the practice has become a commonplace of postmodernist literature, it is still securely contained in film practice, in the sense that either the work has to be a documentary (and therefore reflexive signifiers can be permitted along with other “errors” in production), or it has to be signaled as a fiction within the fiction (with Billy Wilder's *Sunset Blvd.* as the primordial sample). Yet one of the least remarked-upon aspects of *Nashville* is in its closing sequence: when the crowd, agitated by an assassination, is soothed, comforted, and otherwise mesmerized by the unexpected emergence of a new talent, the coverage becomes distinctly documentary-like without warning, with camera and sound personnel captured moving about and certain “raw” lens and lighting adjustments (e.g., rack-focused telephoto shots) included in the footage.

In *Manila by Night*, these indicators appear literally, as light sources directed straight into the camera (fig. 10; see also one of the shots with a window in the background in fig. 8). At one point, in fact, the visible light source actually signifies a reflexive sequence—a film shoot that the characters wander into.



Figure 11. Clockwise from top left: Psychic informs Bea of her past life; Al Tantay (husband of Rio Locsin, who plays Bea) prepares for a death scene; Marissa Delgado, who once played a prostitute in an earlier Bernal film, plays a nurse on the set; in an earlier scene (cf. fig. 8), the only character slated for death, Adelina (whose masquerade Bea and Manay are about to uncover), peers anxiously into a mirror. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

The reflexive sequence (fig. 11) initially appears to be a series of in-jokes that eventually make theoretical and pop-cultural points. It begins, as shown in fig. 10, with a floodlight being directed at the camera lens, and then turned around to illuminate the location shoot. After figuring out what is going on, the trio (Manay, Bea, and Gaying) are accosted by a clairvoyant woman channeling eighteenth-century Philippine existence, describing how Bea had been a coquette who frustrated a lovelorn painter so much that he wound up stealing for her and having his hand cut off as punishment. She avers that Bea has strong psychic powers—a suspicion the audience might have been entertaining, judging from the way that Bea could occasionally sense the presence of her acquaintances even without being alerted to their arrival. The encounter ends with the psychic identifying Manay as queer and leaving the trio, whereupon Manay mentions how Manila has been subject

to a proliferation of crazies. The dismissal by Manay of the psychic lady indirectly references Teshome H. Gabriel's prescription of folklore as a way of recuperating aesthetics for Third Cinema—Bernal's way of confronting the challenge without invoking tradition.

The trio then approach the movie set, wherein actors playing a nurse and a bloodied victim are being prepared for the camera. The actress is identified as Marissa Delgado, whose most prominent role was that of a whorehouse madam in Bernal's *Ligaw na Bulaklak*. Delgado is seen applying and fixing her own makeup in a handheld mirror—creating an association between her and Adelina Macapinlac, whose transition in the film would be in the opposite direction, from nurse to sex worker; to bolster the connection, the Adelina actress, Alma Moreno, was launched in *Ligaw*. The male actor, on the other hand, is played by Al Tantay (whose name is called out by Gayng), who at that time was the real-life husband of Rio Locsin, the actress playing Bea; at a later time, the two would break up and Tantay would be closely identified with Bernal, starring in several of his projects—but this would be more a retrospective rather than a reflexive detail.

4. *Multipplanar Compositions*

It is in its compositional aspects that *Manila by Night* shares the technical premise of *Nashville*—which, in turn, enlarged on a long-dormant formal innovation in film: that of deep focus, hailed by André Bazin as the method that resolved the earlier debate in film essentialism—whether the medium's specificity lay in (originally shallow-focus) shots or in the meaningful juxtaposition of these shots via montage. The challenge that Altman set for himself—the delineation of about two dozen protagonists in a regular-length production—could only have been made possible with the introduction of fast film stock. The fact that it took a few decades before a Hollywood practitioner figured the obvious question—Why not compose with characters in depth, instead of inanimate objects in unusual proximities to individual characters?—may be attributed to the issue, articulated by Laura Mulvey, wherein audiences were encouraged to identify with one (usually male) character in a Classical Hollywood text.

Serendipitously for Bernal, *Nashville* was conceptualized and produced as a critical response to the then-approaching bicentennial of the USA, about the time that he was presumably casting about for an effective way to unify his interests in film, literature, and ethnography. *Nashville's* depiction of several characters, sometimes en masse, also recuperated for commercial American cinema certain elements that may have proved uncomfortable for nominally conservative mainstream producers, critics, and audiences: “heroic” crowd scenes were associated not only with socialist visual expressions, but also with authoritarian propaganda—Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, a documentary, being the most notorious example. In relation to the present study, *Nashville* demonstrated the feasibility of composing in depth with (several) characters as the primary subjects, with a



Figure 12. Left to right: Manay scolds Febrero about his ignorance of Adelina's secret life while his friends (literally behind him) talk about how he professes disappointment in Febrero yet could not help assisting him; Manay returns Alex (who immediately walks out, still visible in back) to his abusive mother, Virgie, who in turn takes leave of Manay's sophisticatedly decadent friends (with an amusedly turbaned Evita Vasquez in foreground); Baby, having espied and approached Febrero at a city square, shouts curses at him as he runs away, with the Church and its night-time attendants witnessing her outburst. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)



Figure 13. Left to right: A security guard (in center, with megaphone) threatens couples—among them Baby and Febrero—in vehicles with arrest for making out in “private property”; poet Krip Yuson recites an ode to Manila in foreground, with street children watching behind him, and a possibly high transvestic dancer twirling in back; an already heavily addicted Alex attempts to mooch Manay for cash while behind them Manay's friends discuss the prospects of taking on Alex's other friends as lovers, even as gay-bar dancers attempt to entice other patrons to purchase their services. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)



Figure 14. Left to right: Congestion in Bea's apartment requires that her boyfriend Greg Williams dress up (in preparation for an overseas job which will turn out to be a swindle) in the presence of her children as well as her assistant Gayng; Kano, Alex, and his friends decide to join in the revelry of Halloween masqueraders behind them, some of whom had already leaped into Manila Bay; Alex, after having been chased by narcotics agents (who managed to arrest Kano), wanders through the city until the morning sun finds him directionless and isolated at Rizal Park, with people heading for work before him and others exercising behind him. (Regal Films, frame captures by author)

social locale (a city) being created via mainly the people in the text, rather than the traditional signifiers of architecture, government and business markers, flora and fauna, climate and weather, and other non-human elements. Altman's innovation would extend to sound design, which will be discussed in the succeeding sections.

To illustrate the use of multiplanar arrangements in *Manila by Night*, three (admittedly arbitrary) sub-groupings will be created: the first (fig. 11) showing commentary, clashes, and violence; the second (fig. 12), diffusion, distractions, and negotiations; and the third (fig. 13), congestion, revelry, and isolation.

The design behind these sequences, as noted earlier, could conceivably figure in European (or Euro-influenced) cinema. What distinguishes the way that Bernal executes them in *Manila by Night*—and on a smaller scale, in *Aliw* earlier—is the way that he had opted to adapt Altman's innovation in film sound in *Nashville* to the requisites of Third World filmmaking. Before proceeding to a discussion of sound (including music), however, it would be useful to reconsider the complaint, mentioned earlier, by ethnographers that film provides a “thinner” description than does writing (Hastrup 15). The presentation-in-depth of characters (sometimes literally, through deep-focus), complemented with a multi-channel sound treatment, not only provides the equivalent of “thick” description; by harnessing the conceptual merits of writing, by enriching thematic interplay and ensuring that the multi-protagonist “thickness” is maintained all throughout, it also exceeds the capability of writing, in the sense of providing emotional discourse and dramatic

involvement, with generic flexibility and star appeal constituting additional sources of pleasure and insight.

Sound Logic

The difficulty of isolating the soundtrack of *Manila by Night* for analysis lies in more than the standard objection to the separation of the integral elements of the aural and the visual in film (Burch 200-01). On the one hand, the plastics of the movie's soundtrack parallel the efforts of Bernal to shift from a high-art approach in his prestige productions to something more accessible for a Third World mass audience. On the other hand, as already mentioned at this stage in Bernal's career, his output bypassed the standard Classical Hollywood values that had ironically enabled other Filipino filmmakers to be noticed and successfully promoted in foreign film festivals. *Aliw*, the stylistic and thematic predecessor of *Manila by Night*, was entirely unrecognizable when set alongside all of Bernal's previous works. It had a rough, seemingly unfinished surface, and it indulged in scenes of melodramatic excess, alongside the director's usual unflinching depictions of expressions of erotic desire. Because of its choice of the milieu of nightclub sex workers, its use of gutter language was casual and frequent. It also relied on a score that melded the hard rock and disco preferred by its hard-living characters with the then-standard over-orchestrated martyr-woman ballad, immediately recognized as a form of low camp.

Aliw's most renowned achievement was its interweaving of a triple character-based narrative, without favoring any single one as exemplary or as representative of the others. In fact with this multicharacter narrative strategy plus its rough-edged execution, it can finally be reconfigured as the prequel to *Manila by Night*. And the soundtrack to both films, as well as to Bernal's other multiple-character exercises, is key, again in the sense that Bernal's direct inspiration was Robert Altman's *Nashville*: not only was Altman's movie a musical, with its inevitable emphasis on sound, it also exemplified the triumph of his Lion's Gate sound system, in which several channels would be processed simultaneously in order to yield distinct yet overlapping aural information, with astute use of the Dolby noise-reduction system (Schreger 350-51).

This type of technology would have been too costly to replicate, much less import, in the Philippines, even more so today. In fact, when one listens closely to a Bernal soundtrack, what is surprisingly evident is that major characters rarely talk simultaneously. At most, one of the major characters would be delivering dialogue while one or usually two minor characters would be chatting in the background. This allows the audience to continue focusing on singular characters, even as it conveys the impression that the movie "democratically" allows other characters to emerge, sometimes with eventually equal importance.

Manila by Night had a sufficiently large ensemble to allow certain characters to speak in specific ways. Virgie, with whom the film opens, maintains a devout middle-class motherly aura increasingly disrupted by a neurotic rage, which we early on understand as coming from her anxiety over a sex-work background that sometimes returns to haunt her. Bea, the blind masseuse who hopes for the kind of salvation that Virgie had achieved, wallows in the same frustration and rage, to the extent of betraying the only person who truly loved her. That person, Kano, combines the street-smart attributes of a drug peddler with the tenderness of her being Bea's naïve and sentimental lover. Adelina is Virgie in reverse, in the senses of having been unable to rise in social status as well as in accepting and maintaining her nightlife profession while mimicking the trappings of respectability in her masquerade as a city-hospital nurse.

In contrast with these openly contradictory women characters, the straight men are unusual only in the sense that they reject the then-standard Western dictum of exclusive heterosexuality, and instead (following prison logic—cf. Fleisher and Krienert) regard their conquest of gay admirers as an enhancement of their sense of machismo. In other terms, they are indistinguishable one from another. Alex, Virgie's son, never runs into the other major male character, Febrero, except at the end where their mutual gay lover brings them to Adelina's funeral (see fig. 7), but the latter can easily be seen as an older version of the younger, irresponsible, charming, and dissolute Alex.

Manay, the queer male character, is in danger of being read as a stand-in for Bernal. This is a contestable reading, which Bernal himself had found objectionable, but it is also understandable, given the extended exchanges that the character has with Alex, Febrero, Kano, Bea, and Adelina (cf. fig. 4). And while we may on the whole see characters like Manay and Kano as embodying a middle ground—male and female in the same presence, in a way that has become increasingly acceptable even in contemporary mainstream cinema—this kind of compromise-by-definition is fraught with risk and difficulties, even as it holds a fascination for the way that Bernal navigates their characterization with a keen understanding of their strengths as well as their weaknesses.⁷ In Manay's case, the exchanges are more in line with a character trying to cope with a bewildering array of several types of survivors in the urban jungle, while making sure he gets his share of available beefcake.

Manila by Night arrived at a moment when Hollywood practice had absorbed enough European-inspired new-cinema innovations to attempt a return to field recording, in place of extensive studio dubbing. The merits of such a practice would have been immediately evident to someone trained in documentary filmmaking like Bernal. However, such a transition would have also encountered resistance from producers, who would have had to invest in more sophisticated field-recording equipment and dispense with their extensive and profitable post-production facilities. (In the case of the movie, this would have been Magna Tech Omni Studio, as acknowledged in the closing credits.)

What resulted instead in Bernal films, starting with *Aliw* and *Manila by Night*, was a mergence of seemingly opposed values of documentary “noise” (in the sense of small talk, rather than of non-human or inanimate dissonant sounds) created in the studio, just as on the narrative level his characters also embodied severe and unstable contradictions. In this sense, he had gone a step farther than using sound within the standard feminist argument of its being the womanly counterpart of the image (cf. Lawrence). This argument had been subjected to a number of possible deconstructive qualifiers, in the sense for example that sound per se is also associated with patriarchal interdiction.

Technical Queering

As mentioned earlier, Bernal during this period was known in industry circles for being supposedly cavalier when it came to film plastics. Certain of his characters all throughout his films until the early 1980s would profess an unfamiliarity with or alienation from media technology, and any individual instance was taken to be either an extension of the filmmaker’s own anxieties or, more likely, a humorous self-reference with its own ironic over-simplification, considering that when it came to questions of narrative technique and thematic development, no one had equaled him before or since.

Hence his decision to reproduce milieu-specific cacophony by careful observation, notation, and recording partakes of the same painstaking efforts by which seemingly randomized high-art output (Jackson Pollock’s abstract-expressionist paintings, for example) are accomplished. In an interview, he outlined how everything in the soundtrack would be devised, including the dialogue, since (as mentioned earlier) all he had had in the beginning was a sequence list rather than a screenplay. His subsequent multicharacter movies all relied on independent scriptwriters, so it was only during this period that he had been able, as it were, to do things entirely his way. Yet the fact that the city (more accurately, its residents) as raw material went through a phase of recording, processing, and reproduction wound up strengthening, rather than refining or distilling, its documentary properties. In this regard one could argue that even more than the visual surface, the sound design of *Manila by Night* exemplified a queering of technique, a conflation of unruly source material with the exacting discipline of studio recording, in order to present a result that was faithful not to the demands of standard film practice, but to the nature of the original material itself.⁸

If we further isolate the music of *Manila by Night* from the soundtrack, we find that this seeming rejection of standard filmmaking conventions betrays itself, in the sense that Bernal’s interest in the merits of modernity becomes apparent (as upheld in standard prescriptions for film-music analysis [Buhler 44-47]). A casual listen might lead us to suppose that the musical soundtrack of *Manila by Night*

repeats the strategy of *Aliw* described earlier, with music selected in order to serve as further illustration and amplification of the diegesis. But the opening credits begin with a raw jazz-inflected progressive-fusion number, an original composition by Vanishing Tribe, a band that had won for itself a critics' prize for its use of baroque chamber and impressionist piano music in an earlier Bernal movie, *Ikaw Ay Akin*.

The first instance of pop music in *Manila by Night* is an on-site performance of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's "Teach Your Children" at a folk-music cafe, and unlike in *Aliw*, this separation between diegetic pop and non-diegetic prog-electronica is maintained. The pop music selections are also more varied, ranging from jazz fusion to heavy metal, Christmas carol to Pinoy rock, and even including spoken word alongside the heartbreak and disco numbers (Raval). Typical of the wit behind the choices is the insertion of Festival's harmless-because-fluffy disco version of "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina," from the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Evita* (also the name of one of the characters, a customer of Manay)—which had been banned in the Philippines because of its then-perceived reference to Imelda Marcos.

As an example we could inspect two samples of how sound and music are interwoven in order to provide commentary on the dialogue, both of them in this instance involving the movie's queer characters. The first is a discussion of true love between Manay, the gay couturier, and Kano, the lesbian drug pusher (see frame capture in fig. 4). Here the triangulation between dialogue, sound, and music is fairly consistent and straightforward. Jeff Beck's prog-jazz number, "Full Moon Boogie," situates the action in the "cool" present, while the sound of the Space Invaders video arcade game played by Kano portends a more individualist and self-obsessed future, even as the two engage in an ages-old debate on the merits and failings of true love.

The other example is between Manay and his polyamorous taxi-driver boyfriend, Febrero (first frame capture in fig. 12, see also video excerpt "Sequence 24: Febrero learns about Adelina from Manay" <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8CTrhWkkU&feature=youtu.be>> [Produced by Regal Films]). Manay has just discovered that Febrero's common-law wife, Adelina, is not the night-shift nurse that she claims to be, and he worries that she might be engaged in less-wholesome activities, a suspicion which turns out to be true. Both of them are in an all-night people's park, the Luneta. There will be interruptions by friends of Manay as well as by a street poet and a circle of cultists. In this example the interplay among the sound elements is more complicated, with some elements, like dialogue, functioning like music and vice versa, per high-modernist prescriptions (Adorno and Eisler 27–30). The diegetic disco number, Lipps, Inc.'s "Funkytown," presumably being played on park speakers, provides ironic contrast to the anxiety-laden exchange between Manay and Febrero, the commentary by Manay's gay friends, and the prayers of the circle of cultists. At one point a poem, Krip Yuson's "There is No City but This

City,” gets recited by the real-life poet himself, but in this case it functions as the equivalent of the Classical Hollywood non-diegetic musical commentary, serving in effect to remind the audience that, for all its broken dreams, Manila will continue to endure, as it had done so in the past.

Open Closure

Bernal had paid a steep price for his decision to attempt an innovation that had not been validated in any critically accepted mode of film practice up to that point. The type of material being endorsed by certain gatekeepers to European film festivals as representative of Philippine cinema displayed a surface polish unusual then for local products, although the Berlinale’s more progressive-minded festival director accepted *Manila by Night* for competition and dissuaded Bernal from producing a more refined cut. But the outrage of Filipino film censors, compounded by the personal intervention of Imelda Marcos herself, ensured that the movie would never be able to make the much-anticipated global debut that observers were predicting for it.

One final aspect of *Manila by Night* might enable us to see the extent to which Bernal had subjected film form to a critical assessment so subtle that even through the present, commentators have misperceived it as a weakness of the film. Unlike the model proffered by *Nashville* and its predecessors in European film and world literature, *Manila by Night* does not provide definitive narrative closure. After the last significant event—the capture of the drug pusher—the film follows Alex, its “lost-generation” character, as he wanders aimlessly through the now-still red-light district, encountering night-life characters on their way home and increasingly numerous regular workers preparing for the arrival of the morning. By sunrise he finds himself amid another kind of crowd, the normative citizens exercising or heading to work—the kind of people who rest, unaware of his discoveries and adventures, during the period when he keeps awake. As he falls, exhausted but also possibly exhilarated, he lands on a patch of garden surrounded by flowers—a figure of drug-devastated pathos, directionless and unproductive, but also appearing more at peace than he had ever been; if the greenery around him were to be associated with anything similar in Philippine culture, it would be the floral wreaths presented to mourners during funerals.

This “inability” to end the narrative (also characterizing *Aliw*) betokens not just the reality effect of documentary, wherein any life being captured and presented ethnographically will necessarily persist after the documentation, just as it had been in existence beforehand; it also acknowledges the then-standard practice of Philippine film theaters allowing audiences to enter at any point in the presentation, staying as long as they wish, and exiting similarly at will. The relative commercial failure of *Manila by Night* (retitled *City After Dark*), in contrast with the strong

box-office performance of *Aliw*, would have been attributable to the excessively butchered condition of the film print. Yet even the Marcos government capitulated to its acclaim and screened it uncensored, to capacity crowds, at the government-run Manila Film Center, as part of its campaign to prove its democratic credentials after the assassination of opposition senator Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. Its release in videocassette formats (Betamax and VHS) proved to be highly profitable, and it continues its lucrative shelf life in the digital disc (DVD) version, despite the fact that each format contains a different version from the others, sometimes radically so, depending on which print had been accessible to the manufacturer.

Yet the burst of creativity that Bernal had nurtured and developed from the beginning of his career, peaking in *Manila by Night*, would no longer be evident soon afterward. In effect, after a series of critical rebukes, Bernal was also pressured to abandon the technical strategies he had accumulated and rely on the more acceptable surface polish that brought him further local acclaim, but only limited foreign exposure. It may be possible now to see this turn toward surface gloss and sheen as a step back for him as well as for Philippine cinema, and this same turn might help explain why he was unable to return to the vibrancy and urgency that marked the movies he had made when he still had a critical perspective on film technique and signification.

Notes

1. Bernal, in a personal interview, acknowledged the invaluableness of the apprenticeship that Avellana provided. Since formal college-level film education did not begin in the Philippines until 1984, when the institution now known as the University of the Philippines Film Institute first opened its Bachelor of Arts in Film program, aspirants in earlier generations had to work out their own preparations and arrangements with individual practitioners (Vasudev 17). Around the time that Bernal was arranging for his film training, Avellana had already started to focus on what would turn out to be an extensive specialization in documentary productions, starting in the mid-1950s with *Si Mang Anong* and peaking with an international prize in 1969 for *The Survivor* ("Alternative Cinema"), with his brother Jose Avellana and a growing circle of practitioners similarly devoting themselves to the activity; Bernal, in fact, became secretary of the Film Society of the Philippines, headed by documentary filmmaker Ben Pinga (Vasudev 17). A further claim on Bernal's interest would be the timing of his studies in literature and philosophy in France, where the impact of *cinéma vérité* practitioners would be making itself felt in the stylistic experimentations of the *Nouvelle Vague*. Subsequently, as a Colombo Plan scholar about to leave for the Poona Film Centre in India ("Bernal, Ishmael"), Bernal would have had a more formal qualification than most Filipino filmmakers up to his generation;

the fact that he opted to train with Avellana bespeaks as much of Bernal's cinema interests as it does of Avellana's openness to young and promising talents. Ina Avellana Cosio, Avellana's granddaughter, confirms in a *Facebook* message to the author that it was also Avellana who persuaded Bernal to continue his film training in Poona.

2. Relayed in confidence by the late film critic and historian Agustin Sotto, during the same period (1981) when Brocka was able to garner favorable reviews for the participation of *Jaguar* in the Cannes competition and was finalizing *Bona* also for Cannes participation. The context of the discussion was that the next Filipino to make a Cannes debut would be Mike de Leon, whose technical competence was regarded as superior to Bernal's. Sotto was instrumental in facilitating the circulation of Brocka's and de Leon's films in Europe, assisting in the subtitling and promotion of their material. (An unarticulated issue never brought up in any public venue would have to do with the directors' respective personas: Brocka, like his serious films, was formal, reserved, masculine in deportment; Bernal was boisterous, catty, inclined to camp, effeminate. Although both acknowledged being homosexual, Brocka went through a phase of being "discreet," forbidding queer behavior at the Philippine Educational Theater Association and quarreling with journalists who played up his gay inclinations [Velasco 31]. Whether this implied that homophobia played a factor in Cannes festival gatekeeping would be up to scholars of gender to tease out.)
3. Kirsten Hastrup inadvertently responded to this predicament in her critique of what she described as "the folklorist tradition of haste: those who really know are always at the point of dying out..., and scholarship is a constant battle with time.... It will never be possible for anthropologists to document all histories serially; at best we can record particular conjunctures in the continuous development of societies" (15). Hastrup's other points, notably the distinction between ethnographic writing and filmmaking, will be brought up presently.
4. After he had accompanied *Himala* to various festivals in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Bernal related how observers kept complimenting him for having successfully pulled off an "ethnographic film" (David, "Filipino Films" 20). His emphasis on this detail in the reception of the film may further affirm his motivation as much as his appreciation for audience members who were able to read his aesthetic intent accurately.
5. It may be necessary at this point to provide a useful description of the highlights of the narrative in order to allow the reader to track the characters who will be mentioned in the forthcoming examples. The interwoven stories include those of Virgie, who tries to maintain a decent middle-class lifestyle despite reminders of her background as a sex worker; her son, Alex, who gets lured into the urban underworld via drugs and sexual promiscuity; Kano, the lesbian drug pusher who supplies Alex and his friends and remains true to her love for Bea, whom she nevertheless pimps to Alex; Bea, the belligerent masseuse who looks forward to working in Saudi Arabia with her boyfriend and finding a cure for her blindness; Greg Williams, Bea's boyfriend, who's victimized by an illegal recruiter and returns to the Philippines, and in desperation arranges

live-sex performances for him and Bea; Manay, a gay couturier who maintains a gay-for-pay taxi driver, nurtures a crush on Alex and manages to seduce him, and is persuaded by his new lover to help find a cure for Bea; Febrero, taxi driver and Manay's lover, who lives with Adelina Macapinlac yet sleeps around with a naïve provincial waitress; Adelina, Febrero's live-in partner, who's a sex worker masquerading as a nurse and whose cover is blown when Manay brings Bea to the hospital where she pretends to work; Baby, the waitress who gets impregnated and eventually abandoned by Febrero, and out of frustration agrees to sex work with Japanese tourists but messes up her first encounter. Among the major developments is Virgie's discovery of Alex's addiction and her abusive punishment of her son, driving him to run away from home and live with Manay, from which Virgie has to retrieve him; the death by strangulation of Adelina, whose murderer is unidentified, and whose corpse is accidentally switched in the morgue with that of someone else; Manay's nervous breakdown after the discovery of the switch—coming after other disappointments in being unable to cure Bea and watching Alex descend into drug dependency; Bea's return to her massage work after refusing Greg's incitement to perform live sex, and her betrayal of Kano to narcotics police officers. The movie ends with Alex, having eluded the pursuing officers, wandering through the city until morning and lying down, exhausted, in Rizal Park.

6. Calvyn Pryluck refers to the crisis of *cinéma vérité*, where “the method of obtaining consent is stacked in the filmmaker's favor” inasmuch as “the presence of the film crew with official sanction is subtly coercive” (256). Because he confines himself to the context of film documentation, Pryluck in effect locks himself in a mode of hesitancy, stating for instance that the “hazards posed by direct cinema suggest the necessity for extreme caution on the part of filmmakers in dealing with potential infringements on the rights of subjects” (260).
7. The true raconteur in the film would actually be Evita Vasquez, a client of Manay's couturier shop, who regales Manay's friends and visitors with her provocative and sometimes randy run-ins with actual representatives of Manila's rich and famous; at one point she names tourism minister Jose Aspiras and agriculture minister Arturo “Bong” Tanco, Jr.
8. One of the few though perhaps most convincing arguments for the primacy of film sound over the image track in film evaluation was advanced by Kathryn Kalinak, who references Adorno and Eisler in maintaining that “music can radically critique and even undercut a film's dominant ideology” (34).

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