

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

TO CONFORM OR NOT TO CONFORM, THAT IS THE GENDERQUEER QUESTION: RE-EXAMINING THE LESBIAN IDENTITY IN BERNAL'S *MANILA BY NIGHT*

Libay Linsangan Cantor
University of the Philippines Film Institute
libaylc@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to re-read the identity politics surrounding the lesbian character as presented in Ishmael Bernal's classic film *Manila by Night*. In doing so, it hopes to trace where the identification of the lesbian construct is coming from, and in the process investigates if the genderqueer construct in Philippine cinema intersects within this discourse.

Keywords

androgynous, butch-femme dichotomy, depiction of lesbians in Philippine cinema

About the Author

Libay Linsangan Cantor is a feminist/queer advocate who holds an MA in Creative Writing and a BA in Film at the University of the Philippines. She is a Palanca award-winning fictionist, a scriptwriter-director of children's TV programs, a freelance lifestyle/entertainment journalist, and a recipient of the UP Arts Productivity System Award. She is also an assistant professor at the UP Film Institute.

THE IDENTITY AND CLEAR IDENTIFICATION of a lesbian in Philippine culture has been reflected in cinema since the 1980s. One of the earliest prominent lesbian characters in Philippine cinema is the character of Kano [pronounced "Kanó"] played by Cherie Gil in Ishmael Bernal's 1980 film *Manila by Night*. While there are many nuances in this characterization that leads to the conclusion or impression of her leaning towards the lesbian butch identity, I posit that such characterization might have been suggesting the beginnings of gender nonconformity in Philippine

cinema, an identity concept that has not garnered currency in Philippine lesbian circles—as also reflected in Philippine cinema—but that has, in essence, been practiced for several decades already.

This paper, in using this specific portrayal, will attempt to trace these beginnings to differentiate existing and emerging identity concepts. In order to establish this premise, the paper will present a brief social mapping of the lesbian identity—and the challenges confronting it—in Philippine society from the 1980s to the 2010s to discover how such mappings—especially the specific genderqueer challenge—are being reflected (or not) in Philippine cinema, beginning with this particular film and portrayal. A close analysis of the lesbian vis-à-vis genderqueer portrayal of the character will follow, which will then reconnect with the larger portrayal of lesbian identities in Philippine cinema and how genderqueerness “fits” the larger picture.

Searching for Lesbian Characters in Philippine Cinema

In order to give context to the appearance of the lesbian identity in *Manila by Night*, it is appropriate to investigate the specific time and space wherein the film was produced and shown, contrasting it with other Sapphic depictions prior to it, as well as beyond its release. Female characters with implied lesbian identity presentations had been present in Philippine cinema as early as the touted Golden Age of the 1940s-1950s. In fact, there have been films that featured females clearly characterized as a tomboy or tomboyish. However, these tomboys do not carry overt storylines that pertain to themes with women having women-directed desires/affection. The most popular example of such a film is the adaptation of popular comics characters in Mar S. Torres's *Jack en Jill* (1954). This gender-bending comedy storyline involves two siblings: a male body whose gender identity and expression is that of a woman, and a female whose gender expression (only, not identity) is that of a man. Usually, the female body carries the storyline as she is presented to transform from being a tomboyish female to a girl-next-door feminine type with the introduction of a male bodied romantic interest. As for her male sibling, sometimes his storyline is not much developed and is left alone to remain as such.

Similar tomboyish characters appeared within that era. Often, these depictions are of strong-willed female characters that could stand on their own, meaning they are depicted as tough or toughened persons because of the hardships they face(d) in life. The sub-theme of being from the province (where rural life is perceived as slow and females are typecast as subservient) and migrating to Manila (where urban life is perceived as fast and females are typecast as headstrong) is also evident. Thus, part of being tough (inside), combined with toughening up (outside, as part of their self-defense/coping mechanism) when “donning” a Manila lifestyle, is characterized by their self-presentation of being a mannish tomboy, sometimes even dressing up for the part. Examples of such characters are the Waray character

and the comic gender-bending character popularized by Nida Blanca in the films *Waray-Waray* and *Galawgaw*, both directed in 1954 by F. H. Constantino. All of these 1954 films had sequels or were remade in subsequent decades, often including the original tomboyish lead character (an older character) and featuring a newer/younger generation actor that continues the tomboyish depiction.

Following this predominant tomboyish (gender-bending expression) theme, it was only during the 1980s when more mainstream-produced films featured predominantly lesbian characters in the lead or highlighted overt lesbian storylines, and this continued up to the 2000s. The films that had these kinds of depictions emerged during the 1980s with the production of films in mainstream cinema like the subject of this study, Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980); Danny Zialcita's *Si Malakas, si Maganda, at si Mahinhin* (1980) and *T-Bird at Ako* (1982). The next batch of overt lesbian-themed films came out in the next decades like the sexy film called *Nang Mamulat si Eba Part 2* (1997) helmed by a director who used the nom de camera Rico Mambo (Abbo Q. de la Cruz, bit player and sound-effects technician in *Manila by Night*); Carlitos Siguion-Reyna's *Tatlo Magkasalo* (1998); *Baliktaran: Si Ace at si Daisy* (2001) directed by Al Tantay; and Joel Lamangan's *Sabel* (2004).

The advent of low-budgeted digitally shot independent films during the mid-2000s also produced a handful of films that presented overt lesbian characters and storylines. These were Aureus Solito's *Tuli* (2005) produced under the Digital Viva production arm; Ned Trespeces' *Trabaho* (2005) produced under his own independent production outfit Dirty Kitchen Productions; Brillante Mendoza's *Kaleldo* (2006), produced under his independent production outfit; and Connie Macatuno's *Rome and Juliet* (2006), produced under the digital filmmaking grant program of mainstream production company ABS-CBN's Cinema One cable channel.

While it could be argued that filmmakers need not be queer to produce queer films, it could also be very disconcerting to queer audiences that patronize queer films if they see what kinds of representations of themselves are being told in such cinematic stories. While it is also not the aim of every film to be politically correct or to represent a specific population in a positivist framework, films sometimes do more harm than good when they propagate negative traits or stereotypes about certain populations of people in their films, especially those who have been relegated to the margins of society for a long time—such as women and lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, and queers (LGBTQ).

As Richard Dyer pointed out, the status quo is often reflected in the characters we see in cinema, in his discussion of stereotypes: “The position behind all these considerations is that it is not the stereotypes, as an aspect of human thought and representation, that are wrong, but who controls and defines them, what interests they serve” (246). Thus, whatever overt images we see in our daily life, films try to reflect in cinema, larger than life. When it comes to these lesbian depictions,

stereotypes are often found highlighted in most films, leading to the conclusion that perhaps Philippine society still views lesbianism in a pejorative manner. It could also suggest that perhaps the filmmakers and the producers also carry and present their own understanding of lesbianism as based on these judgmental depictions. But before looking closely at specific cinematic depictions, let us look at how lesbianism is generally perceived in Philippine culture.

The Lesbian in Philippine Society

Lesbianism as a concept and identity had already been in the consciousness of Philippine society since the twentieth century. Filipino lesbians have lived their lives parallel to their heterosexual counterparts in different ways, regardless of whether they are out in the open or remain in the closet. In a predominantly Roman Catholic country, the influence of a highly conservative interpretation of this religion has had a profound effect on how people perceived to be outside of normative societal structures live their lives and negotiate their daily existence. The concept of the Filipino society being generally “tolerant”—that is, recognizing it but neither deeply accepting nor understanding—of same-sex structures remains evident now as it was then.

As with realities in other parts of the world, different nuances of the lesbian identity also exist within Filipino society, and different kinds of interpretations of this identity have been presented and also challenged. The most predominant nuance of this identity, as exemplified by lesbian couplings, is still reflected in the traditional butch-femme dichotomy wherein one lesbian (the butch) takes on the traditional masculine-male role of a husband and the other lesbian (the femme) takes on the traditional feminine-female role of a wife (fig. 1). This kind of identity pairing has been observed in Filipino society whether in the rural provincial areas or in metropolitan city areas of the country. This observation was—and is—made obvious by the overt self-presentation of such couples where even the gender roles are reflected in the way they are dressed.

Perhaps the most prominent challenge to the identity of the Filipino lesbian was made by women-loving-women who come from the activist spheres of the local feminist movements, especially within formations created after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. Like an echo of their Western counterparts, most feminists who happened to be lesbians espouse lesbian feminist politics, where the main point is to deconstruct the patriarchal notions that govern not only the genders but those who belong to one gender who happen to love members of their gender, not the opposite one. In this regard, the butch-femme dichotomy was seen as a patriarchal mimicry of gender roles that needed to be deconstructed, challenged, or eradicated altogether.



Figure 1. Butch and femme lesbians during the 2011 Manila LGBT March. (Photo by author)

While most of those who operate on such a pairing may or may not be aware of this patriarchal mimicry, critics insist on its being patriarchal without considering that such subject positions are perhaps also performed as a matter of survival—i.e., that one has to conform to a normative identity in order to fit and survive within a society that insists on propagating fixed, often unchallenged norms. And since Philippine society highlights dichotomies—meaning the male-female, the masculine-feminine, the man-woman pairings—those who do not conform to such divided structures have to find ways to fit. This is perhaps what many butch-femme pairs do: conform, fit, role-play, in order to survive on a daily basis, in order to make a living, in order to somehow conform to what society perceives as acceptable.

As Judith Butler pointed out, in a norm-fixated society, roles need to be performed in order for the normative to be enacted:

gender is not a *performance* that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express. It is a *compulsory* performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence,

not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions.
(314–15, emphasis in original)

This is what critics of the butch-femme pairings have missed during the 1990s—the fact that perhaps being in a butch-femme set-up is not a deliberate or conscious mimicry but a form of strategy of survival in a patriarchy wherein the performers who enact such survival tactics need to find a middle ground as to where they could exist in their own perceived selves as intersected in the realities where their selves could actually be found.

Current definitions of the set-up reflect this notion, as cited by the entry of Theopano:

Criticism of butch-femme was usually based on the claim that these identifications are an attempt to replicate heterosexuality by designating one member of a couple as male (the butch) and the other as female (the femme). Even today this argument is frequently aired. However, it is highly problematic because of its own underlying assumption of heteronormativity—that is, the tenet that heterosexuality is normal, and that all other forms of sexuality are only weak imitations of it. Butch-femme need not be an imitation of *anything*; it is a unique way of living and loving. (emphasis in original)

Since in a patriarchy heteronormativity is indeed the “norm,” lesbians who find themselves living in it need to re-strategize themselves in order to fit this set-up. Thus, since the butch lesbian is deemed a male/man/husband mimic, she takes on the role that a traditional heteronormative male takes on, such as being the economic provider of the household which the femme runs as she, in turn, takes the traditional heteronormative role of the female/woman/wife. Outside society somewhat accepts this kind of strategy, for in a patriarchy, whoever enacts such “familiar” roles could be afforded some “leeway” of tolerance.

This kind of heteronormative assumption also extends to how the butch and the femme negotiate their desires and enact their passions. Since the butch is the manly one, she takes on the more active role of being the giver of pleasure in a sexual relationship, regardless of the absence of the penis (which she “makes up” for or covers up by hiding her body from her lover, inasmuch as most stone/hard butches in the Philippines do not even take off their clothes during sexual intercourse, let alone have their partners touch their private parts). The femme, on the other hand, takes on the passive role in this one-way sexual relationship (which, in Western definition, is known as the top-and-bottom structure), and only receives the pleasure.

Yet like the definition said, being in a butch-femme dichotomy is a form of expression that could also shed its earlier assumption that it is merely a heteronormative mimicry, since, as Butler also deconstructed, it is presumptuous

to call a mimicry a mimicry when the supposed model of that mimicry is a failure in its own structure in the first place. As Butler elaborated:

If heterosexuality is an impossible imitation of itself, and imitation that performatively constitutes itself as the original, then the imitative parody of “heterosexuality”—when and where it exists in gay cultures—is always and only an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original. (314)

Thus, if this copy of a copy exists, what forms could it actually manifest as, especially if such manifestations are used as strategies for survival? Or more important, what happens to inhabitants of this traditional set-up who do not necessarily “follow” its “guidelines” to the letter, and adjust it to fit their own strategies of survival?

As Butler also pointed out, nuances of an essentialized butch-femme persona do not—or perhaps should not—exist in such set-ups:

Sexuality is never fully “expressed” in a performance or practice; there will be passive and butchy femmes, femmey and aggressive butches, and both of those, and more, will turn out to describe more or less anatomically, stable “males” and “females.” There are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality. None of those terms captures or determines the rest. Part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that, which, to some degree, can never appear. This is perhaps the most fundamental reason why sexuality is to some degree always closeted, especially to the one who will express it through acts of self-disclosure. (315)

In the Philippines, such essentializing has also been challenged even during the 1990s when the femme-to-femme pairing was the one relationship form being essentialized as ideal in lesbian advocacy circles. Many lesbian feminists who are also butch in appearance were quick to clarify that just because they look and appear masculine does not automatically mean that they espouse the heterosexual mimicry of a man in their relationships, as being “macho” automatically negates the “feminist” part of their lesbian feminist principles. The same was espoused by their femme partners. Thus, there was a differentiation between the butch lesbian and the butch-looking lesbian, since gender presentation/expression did not automatically carry gender identity for these butch-looking lesbians. The primary evidence of this differentiation is the willingness of butch-presented lesbian feminists to be in two-way relationships, that they are willing to be the top and the bottom in sexual intercourse, and that they progressively allow their femme partners to be the same. This also translated into how they lived their lives, since both partners are encouraged to earn a living and thus, unlike macho-run households where the man/father figure is usually the sole breadwinner, many lesbian households

become a two-income generating household—a strategy of survival that is more practical in a developing-country set-up.

Are similar progressive depictions being reflected in cinema after the proliferation of the gender-bending mannish tomboys in comedy films?

Trends of Lesbian Depictions in Philippine Cinema

Popular culture products often reflect the biases and objectivities present in a society, and this holds true for lesbians depicted in Philippine cinema. Since the 1980s, the very obvious butch-femme lesbian identities began emerging in mainstream cinema, the kind that is clearly performed based on heterosexual constructs of the boy-girl/man-woman/husband-wife dichotomy, not the more progressive butch-femme pairing based on a consensus of equality in self-expression. In the 1990s and 2000s, some films presented these progressive pairings of the butch-femme kind as well as the femme-to-femme kind. However, such “non-normative” pairings are often used as a plot device to still showcase heterosexist-implied deviant-based spectacles.

Often, to give the audience a Hollywoodized heterocentric happy ending, the device that lesbians find themselves entrapped in are those which aim to undo their self-identification in order for them to transform/transition/go back to where they are duly assigned by the patriarchy—that of being “natural women” that perform traditional female gender roles. Thus, most narratives that dwell on lesbian lives onscreen take the form of this journey, but only if the characters are willing participants. The aforementioned *Jack en Jill* and similar gender-bending storylines embody this kind of journey. It is often the case that the female-bodied persona of such characters—who are often presented as mannish tomboys, or even butch lesbians who do not self-identify as such—gets “rescued” or “turned back” to being heterosexual when a cisgendered-identifying male body expresses his love for her, tries to woo her back to heterosexuality, and succeeds. The mannish tomboy is no more, and is replaced by a feminine-dressed leading lady to partner with her dashing prince charming—a heterosexual picture-perfect ending.

If the wooing does not take the form of a romantic gender-bender comedy film, then it takes the form of a sexy/titillating film where lesbianism is used to sell that trite girl-on-girl fantasy as a come-on for heterosexual (read: heterosexist) male audiences. Such is the storyline—and purpose—of films like *Nang Mamulat si Eba 2* where the clearly lesbian-identifying character gets seduced and “forced” to have sex with a heterosexual male body, and that changes her sexual orientation “automatically.” Again, the butch-looking lesbian is no more, and is replaced by a vixen-looking woman who yearns to have more heterosexual intercourse with her Adonis-like knight in shining armor—a heterosexual sex fantasy-filled picture-perfect ending.

Gender role inversion as a comedic device is also used in storylines with clearly queer-identifying characters like *Baliktaran* where two children of parents who are close friends are locked in an arranged marriage set-up, but the children grew up to be a gay man and a lesbian woman. In this instance, heteronormativity is used as a device to blackmail the characters in order for them to be accepted by their families and to get their respective inheritance.

Another twist to the gender role inversion is used in a dramatic form as well in the film *Si Malakas, si Maganda, at si Mahinhin* where an openly out soft butch lesbian and a swishy openly gay man end up having sex during a night of inebriation. This accidental intercourse introduces an offspring, and the soft butch and the swishy gay both shed their queerness slowly as the pregnancy ensues, and they eventually straighten up and settle into familiar heteronormative gender roles of non-swishy husband and non-butch wife in order to carry on this heterosexual traditional nuclear family.

If the lesbian-identified character is resolved with who she is and does not make any move to renegotiate her sexuality, then her storyline finds an unhappy or tragic ending in this mainstream cinematic scheme of things. In the most popular lesbian example of Philippine cinema, *T-Bird at Ako* finds the butch lesbian lawyer character as a jilted would-be lover whose object of affection—a heterosexual female client—judges her vehemently and sees her as an objectionable deviant. Sixteen years later, in *Tatlo Magkasalo*—the first time Philippine cinema is introduced to an overt femme-to-femme storyline—it is ironic that a butch lesbian is the one judging a femme lesbian in the film when this femme abandons the other femme (her former lover dying of cancer). In the end, heterosexuality claims the femme again (she leaves her fellow femme lover to become a wife to a man, then leaves the man temporarily but goes back to him again when she found out she was pregnant) as her former femme lover is eventually claimed by cancer, leaving the conclusion that, butch or femme, any lesbian-identifying character in mainstream cinema gets killed in society, figuratively or literally.

Independent cinema has also produced several lesbian narratives which present femme-to-femme pairings or overt femmes as main characters. However, even if their storylines do not remain as tragic as their mainstream predecessors, their storylines are still enmeshed within sad narratives that do not give their characters some sense of empowerment (from their own selves or from the society they inhabit) or their sexuality is renegotiated to fit some semblance of heteronormativity in order to be palatable. *Rome and Juliet* is the epitome of this lesbian tragedy. Taking off from Shakespeare's original tragic plotlines, two previously heterosexual women find themselves strongly attracted to each other and decide to explore their newfound sexual leanings. Once they decided to consume their romantic and sexual attraction for each other, their respective lives get destroyed plotline after plotline, affecting their livelihood, their family relations, and even their lives (one of the women figures in an accident and ends in a coma).

Similarly, the strong female lead character of *Tuli*, who falls for a feminine woman and is willing to be ostracized for it (which her village eventually does to her) is an example of this renegotiated storyline, where her lesbianism is “bargained” with her judgmental village mates only when she decides to get impregnated to bear a child (a form of “partial heterosexual pardon”) as she continues to live her life with her female lover. Meanwhile, *Kaleldo* features a butch-looking lesbian who carries the burden typically thrown at martyred unmarried heterosexual female characters and her whole filmic struggle revolves around this sad storyline. *Trabaho*, a multi-character light comedy, portrays its femme lesbian character as a jilted lover who tries to discredit her ex-girlfriend’s current boyfriend by seducing him and taking pictures to show her ex. She also pretends to be straight in order to get a job she is applying for. Again, partial heterosexual strategies—and traditional gendered performances—are adapted by strong lesbian-identified characters in order to negotiate their lives in a cinematic heterosexual world.

Revisiting *Manila by Night*, it is crucial to see whether its presentation of the lesbian character also rode the tides of the preceding gender-bending representations or followed its contemporaries’ patriarchal dichotomy-oriented depictions.

The Lesbian Identity in *Manila by Night*

Ishmael Bernal’s classic film *Manila by Night* is by no means an exception to these strata of lesbian depictions in Philippine cinema, as it was produced during the time when the earlier lesbian-themed films cited were produced, and it is definitely one of the prime examples of a classic lesbian-themed film predecessor often referenced in connection with the later produced examples, especially those in the independent cinema realm. Yet perhaps its relevance might be unconsciously working a different kind of negotiation when it comes to its presentation of the lesbian identity, as early as the 1980s.

Manila by Night is a multi-character story where many representations of sexuality are presented and exhibited as they unfold their characterizations, often intertwined/intersecting with that of others, as often seen and expounded on during the darkness that envelops the city. In the film, the lesbian is represented by Kano, a typical transplanted Manila nomad who moved to the capital city from her hometown of Olongapo. Her name—a shortened and slang version of *Amerikano* or American—is in reference to her mixed-race look and combined with the 1980s reputation of her hometown as a place where Amerasian children were born (commonly known as “GI babies”) sired by military servicemen who slept with bar girls near the US military bases, this one the former Subic Naval Base. We do not see her having a fixed place of residence but she knows how to navigate the dark alleys and seedy nooks surrounding Manila, especially near its red-light districts.

She earns a living dealing drugs but it is mostly marijuana she sells. She also acts as a sideline pimp of a blind sauna masseuse named Bea, her childhood friend and the reason why she moved to Manila (to follow her), as Bea appears to be the love of her life.

It is interesting to note that most of the characters presented in this film are intersected with the lesbian character in one way or another. As soon as the film opens, we immediately see Kano as she enters the bar where the male college student plays gigs as a folk singer at night. This college student becomes her drug-buying client later on, and she also pimps the blind masseuse to him as well.

As soon as Bea's world is unfurled (she works in a sauna but does extra jobs outside), we immediately see her interaction with Kano as it is established that they are more than good friends. It is obvious that Kano is in love with Bea and even jokes about it during their pot-smoking session (where they smoke in an intimate shotgun style). In this scene, the lesbian serves as the temporary relief of the masseuse from her harrowing world of maniacal male sauna clients by being a jester and an ear that listens to her heterosexist-filled whining. But it is also shown that, like the male sauna clients, Kano also tries to behave like a maniac with Bea but only in a lighter, playful manner (when she tries to kiss Bea) to which Bea looks more coy than annoyed, hence more "welcoming" of Kano's advances. In addition, the lesbian also serves as a temporary playmate/confidante as Bea reinforces the information that she will eventually leave the Philippines as soon as her male lover, a certain Greg Williams (yet another implicitly Amerasian character), takes her to Saudi Arabia. In between their banter, Kano merely accepts this information as fact.

The next time we see Kano, she is seen hanging out with Manay, the polyamorous fashion designer and also the most prominent gay character in the film. Similarly, as with Kano, Manay is also another character that intersects with majority of the characters in this narrative. At least two major scenes are shared by the two characters: one inside a club as they discuss the implications of their sexualities and another during their attempt to help resolve Bea's eye condition. The next moment we see Bea and Kano together, the lesbian plays the same playmate/confidante role to the masseuse during the time Bea feels betrayed by the world that "promised" her changes (fig. 2). The betrayal she felt this time was the promise of having her eye condition checked with the help of a nurse who turns out to be a fake medical practitioner. This becomes the biggest moment for the lesbian in the film as she takes care of the angst-ridden masseuse, tames her with some cough syrup they share to get high, and the lesbian eventually caresses her and kisses her angst out of her—the obvious prelude to making love (which is not shown in the film but merely hinted at). The moment is tender, the characters' actions not forced, and they feel the anticipation of the enactment of their desires—willingly, and openly. As with their earlier intimate moment, Bea again welcomes Kano's tender and careful "advances."



Figure 2. Kano hears the story of Bea's disappointment in her treatment for blindness (left); Kano comforts Bea with physical intimacy (right). (Left photo courtesy of Bernardo Bernardo, used with permission; right photo frame capture by Joel David)

The next big scene where we see Kano is when she hangs out near Manila Bay with the other “city deviants of the night” as they are obviously tripping on some drugs. They discuss life in Manila and surviving it, until a carnival-like atmosphere ensues where several flamboyantly dressed individuals—most of whom look like transgender women club performers in loud and colorful costumes and exaggerated make-up—join the trippy group until a dare to swim in the water gets passed around. Here, Kano participates in the revelry as she undresses by removing her denim jumpers/overalls, revealing that she wears men's sleeveless undershirts and men's briefs—no trace of feminine-identified underwear. As they jump into the water, they imagine tripping on lights and they see manifestations of that visual trip in the form of floating lighted candles around them.

Between these major sequences, we see Kano weave in and out of streets where it is being established that she is being followed or tracked by law enforcers, presumably undercover police/drug agents. The payoff for these weavings is the last time we see her, as she gets pursued by the undercover police agents and they catch up with her. As she is running away from them, two characters get involved indirectly. She runs to Bea in the sauna to ask for help but her heart gets crushed when Bea refuses to help her. The male college student, wandering aimlessly while looking for the chance to hit up some drugs again, gets confused with the chase and runs also, thinking that he is the one being pursued.

Analyzing the way the lesbian character is presented in the film, *Manila by Night's* strong lesbian theme emerges in the intertwining storylines of the characters, especially whenever the lesbian character is juxtaposed with other non-normatively identified characters. However, unlike the bisexual man and the transgender women—characters who could be classified as still following traditional/patriarchal gender roles—the lesbian and the gay man, in specific

scenes, had the “need” to articulate their subject positions as non-normative characters. It is as if by describing who they are (or trying to assess who they are), often in juxtaposition with who they desire (romantically and/or sexually), their strong non-normative identities needed validation that they, too, are present in society.

In these scenes, however, only Manay utters the clear identity presentation of being a gay male (uttering “bakla pa rin” [“still gay”] clearly pertaining to himself as well as “pero pag ibang sward, naku” [“never love another gay”] in another scene to refer to other gays like him), while Kano does not have any clear-cut claiming of her non-normative identity as a lesbian (noting the absence of common Filipino terms for lesbian during that time such as *tomboy* and *tibô* to refer to herself). This may be because she is not lesbian, after all, but another kind of woman-loving-woman: the genderqueer. In Philippine society, this is known as the androgynous lesbian.

Was Kano unconsciously feeling that type of identification? And was Bernal aware of such a depiction as well, as suggested by the presentation of Kano’s character?

Overlooked Identity, Emerging Identity: The Androgyne and the Genderqueer

Within the butch-femme and the femme-femme pairings, one distinct identity has also emerged in the global lesbian circles that is also seen in the local lesbian circles, and that is the identity of the “in-between”—that lesbian who cannot be overtly determined as butch or femme, since she appears to be dressed in manly clothes yet her demeanor is obviously feminine. Or there is no conscious effort to make an extraordinary effort to mask her female body parts like what other traditional hard/stone butches do when they wear special binders in an effort to flatten their breasts or wear layered clothing to make their chests look more evened out (to appear more manly). Sometimes, this lesbian also wears body-hugging clothes that make her female figure more flattering to look at, yet she acts and walks with a “manly swagger” and appearance that makes her look merely “tomboyish” to the heteronormative world, the tomboyish persona often associated with adolescent girls where acting boyish is seen as merely a phase that one outgrows in time. This specific identity is called the androgynous lesbian.

Perhaps the most recognized international celebrity of this time who closely embodies this androgynous look is American television talk show host Ellen Degeneres, herself part of the LGBTQ community in the US. Although she identifies as a lesbian, her appearance in her daily show is somewhat similar with how androgynous or genderqueer/gender nonconforming women present themselves; there is no overt masking of her feminine persona (as reflected in her behavior, countenance, and natural interaction with guests), and at the same time

her masculine-looking clothes are worn without gender-bending apology. In the realm of fictional depictions, two close examples of androgynous/genderqueer-looking women could be traced from the Showtime channel-produced American lesbian-themed television series *The L Word* (which ran from 2004 and concluded in 2009) and the BBC channel-produced Scottish lesbian-themed television series *Lip Service* (which began in 2010 and its second season concluded in 2012). The *L Word* had the lesbian heartthrob character Shane (played by Kate Moennig) whose self-presentation is that of a genderqueer female body while *Lip Service* had the character Frankie (played by Ruta Gedmintas) who was similarly depicted.

The androgyne or “andro” as she is popularly called in Filipino lesbian circles often finds it harder to negotiate her identity not only to the heterosexual world but also to the homosexual world (fig. 3). Lesbians caught up in the butch-and-femme dichotomy—then and even now—still try to re-categorize the andro as part of the butch spectrum where the identity varies based on the closeness of its manifestation to the heteronormative masculine, namely the hard or stone butch (closest to the manly norm), the soft butch, and the andro, which is identified closely to toeing the gender-bender line which sometimes includes crossing over to the femme side. Thus, most andros in Filipino lesbian culture still end up being paired with femme-looking lesbians because of their automatic association with the butch spectrum, regardless of how they present themselves as not merely belonging to any variants of the butch or femme spectrum but could very well belong to another umbrella concept—that of being queer. More specifically, being genderqueer, to the point of being gender-nonconforming.

But androgyny as a concept, regardless of its being pulled toward the butch spectrum, still retains its gender-bending quality in Philippine lesbian circles. Most androgynous lesbians continue to present themselves as women who are more comfortable in a state of nonconformity when it comes to gender expression. However, it is important to note that most andros in this community often appear quite “genderless” in the sense that they have lesser manifestations of being identified as female bodies. Therefore, most andros in the Philippines appear sexless, usually flat-chested, often with a relatively thin body type, and having less pronounced hips and buttocks often identified with female body voluptuousness. Perhaps this is the main reason they are often forced into the butch spectrum, as they are the perfect candidates who could “easily” morph into the heteronormative mold carried by the butch-femme dichotomy. On the other hand, those andros who are not quite genderless in body type are being claimed by the femme side of the spectrum, as they are encouraged more to become tomboyish lipstick lesbians in appearance and countenance.

In recent years, the identity of the queer as a clear identifier of persons who do not want to be typecast with existing terms has emerged. To intersect this advancement in queer theory and praxis with the developments in gender identity and expression in recent years, the Western LGB advocates have examined the



Figure 3. An example of a female-bodied genderqueer self-presentation during the 2008 Manila LGBT Pride March. (Photo by author)

reassessment of the gender-bending qualities of identities found under the current spectrums and have intersected these with the transgender spectrum. Now more inclusively termed as LGBTQ (or more, depending on which specific queer communities add definitions to the acronym), the Western alphabet soup of sexuality, gender identity, and expression has expanded its scope to accommodate more labels and categories.

As far as the process of adapting to and assimilating global trends goes, Filipino lesbians are mostly abreast of global issues and concerns pertaining to the LGBTQ community in general but somehow, most still need to accept and understand the concept of the queer, as this term—as accepting as it sounds, regardless of how “problematic” or controversial it seems to some sectors in the Western world—has not gained much currency in the Philippine setting, even if some women-loving-women click on this label to identify themselves in social networking sites without the benefit of fully comprehending its nuance. While the queer or genderqueer identity is somewhat gaining ground in the advocacy and academic circles, it has yet to cross over into the general lesbian populace in the Philippines.

In the very definitive spectrum of the lesbian identity in Filipino culture, it is no surprise that no matter how you define or redefine yourself, lesbians would automatically try to categorize someone based on their perceived gender expression, not the nuance of their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). The very concept of being more inclusive and open in terms of identities that the queer definition carries is somewhat still surprisingly alien to most in the community

whose primary concern is to automatically box lesbians into masculine and feminine roles, and then base their identities from their supposed respective box.

Going back to that butch spectrum, however, it is quite evident that there are those who are within this spectrum—whether by choice or as assigned by the community (regardless if they accept the assignation or not)—who obviously carry a more gender-nonconforming stance in terms of their attitude, behavior, and expression. But when it comes to self-identity, they are still forced to identify as merely “butch” or “soft butch” and not quite encouraged to be “andro” let alone encouraged to be “queer” or “genderqueer.” In fact, there are butch-looking and androgynous lesbians who would rather be “just themselves” without the benefit of carrying a specific (traditional) label, as they say and feel that they could sometimes feel both masculine and feminine, and they have no problems with feeling that way—a very genderqueer approach to self-identification, if one would look at it, without the benefit of the articulation of that particular label.

The concept of the “genderqueer” is an emerging terminology in Western gender-focused discourses that aim to either destroy or challenge existing gender binaries that define one’s personhood, as cited in the entry by Beemyn:

The term “genderqueer” began to be commonly used at the turn of the twenty-first century by youth who feel that their gender identities and/or gender expressions do not correspond to the gender assigned to them at birth, but who do not want to transition to the “opposite” gender. Characterizing themselves as neither female nor male, as both, or as somewhere in between, genderqueers challenge binary constructions of gender and traditional images of transgender people.

Often discussed together with the concept of androgyny, genderqueer takes the dissection of identities in a different discourse by positing that a person could both inhabit the form of society’s image of a man and a woman, not taking turns but most times happening *at the same time*. To blur the lines of sex-based gender binaries is the simplest explanation to describe such a figure: that one could be both masculine and feminine, both a man and a woman, yin and yang combined.

Yet this identity of blurred lines is not automatically digested or accepted in spheres where it should be celebrated, especially in communities outside the Western constructs. In a typical LGBTQ setting where the main characters often belong to one distinct identity—whether a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer—genderqueers often find it a struggle to present their category simply because they present more than one “traditional” category.

To expound on this, imagine how a female-born person whose romantic, sexual and spiritual connections with a fellow female body would be automatically prescribed as a lesbian. If this lesbian expresses herself in a traditional male/masculine expression, then the sub-category of “butch lesbian” will be automatically ascribed to her. But what if this butch lesbian both embodies male/masculine and

female/feminine traits at the same time as earlier discussed? If her self-presentation remains that of the masculine kind, her behavior would automatically be assumed to reflect this masculinity as well. To apply this categorization to the gender-bending androgynous lesbians, genderqueer identities still need to be recognized, but it does not mean that it is not being practiced already, as proven by earlier examples.

Kano as a Performative Butch

It is easy to see how the lesbian character in the film could be construed as a butch lesbian based on her looks alone—her obvious gender expression that clearly hones to a male/man appearance. From the way Kano is dressed in the film, we see similarities with how other lesbians in Philippine cinema had been dressed since the gender-bending tomboyish times of the 1950s: they usually sport short hair (or the hair is tied back to appear shorter), don short-sleeved polo clothes often with printed checkered designs and the front ends tied in a knot to appear tough-looking (fig. 4). The other cinematic butch-looking lesbians were similarly depicted/dressed.

In terms of identifying one's self, there is also some hesitation on the part of Kano herself, as evident in certain actions in several key sequences, whether to refer to herself as a lesbian, whether in a defiant or in a defeatist manner we are not so sure. In fact, we do not really hear her refer to herself as lesbian but it appears that, since the definition is already out there and is free to be used by those who feel like using it, she reluctantly takes it and uses it to define not herself but to define *other people's perspective of her*.

This is evident in the first sequence where we see Bea and Kano's full extent of their interaction for the first time. When Kano shouts "I love you Manila kahit ano ka pa man, bata, matanda, mabaho, pangit, babae, lalaki, bakla ... o tomboy" before the pot-smoking session sequence with Bea, Kano playfully shouts practically the whole sentence (translated as "I love you Manila whatever you are, young, old, smelly, ugly, woman, man, gay ... or lesbian") yet when it came to her utterance of the word "tomboy" which is the usual term for lesbian in Philippine society, we notice her slight pause before saying the term (fig. 5). When she finally says it, it is like uttering the word together with releasing a deep breath, as she lowers her voice and removes the playful tone altogether as soon as she says it, as if its utterance is accompanied by a deep sigh of regret.

The second time we get an intimation of Kano's hesitation is during the sequence inside the dimly lit club as she shares a game table with the polyamorous gay Manay (see video excerpt "Sequence 20: Conversation between Manay and Kano" <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El2NP8tV2nM&feature=youtu.be>>



Figure 4. Kano and her butch lesbian appearance, more “manly” than other men.
(Publicity still by Regal Films)

[Produced by Regal Films]). Out of the blue, perhaps as a way of making conversation or as a way of reaching out desperately to someone who would listen, Kano starts talking about love with him as she asks if he believes in true love, which the gay man caustically answers with an air of annoyance. Without being asked, she volunteers that Bea is her true love, and expounds with a simple explanation of her semi-soliloquy. However, she also sighs as she matter-of-factly concludes, with a heavy heart, that maybe Bea just really does not like lesbians per se. Note that the word she used to refer to lesbian is not “tomboy” but the patriarchally implied slang term for lesbian which is “pars” or short for *pare/kumpare*, a term males use on each other to refer to deep friendship, usually bonded through the baptism of one man’s child to whom the other acts as godfather. However, the term *pars*, when appropriated by the lesbian community, simply pertains to the butch lesbian, specifically the stone butch lesbian. (The female counterpart is “mars” or *mare/kumare*, to refer to femmes as well.)

Again, since these terms are already there, perhaps Kano simply uses these terms because it is the only one available that is easiest for others to explain herself to them, no matter the burden of such a term, or whether she agrees with the definition or not. This is what Dyer pertains to regarding the use of stereotypes as prefabricated characters as these prefabrications carry with them prefabricated meanings and hence, prefabricated implications and connotations:

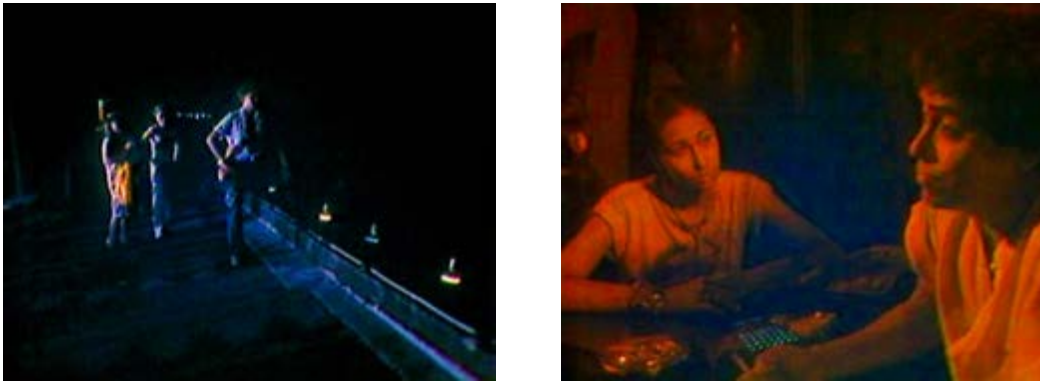


Figure 5. Kano as hesitant and anxious figure—with Bea at the sauna rooftop (left) and with Manay as they discuss true love. (Frame captures by Joel David)

In fictions, social types and stereotypes can be recognized as distinct by the different ways in which they can be used. Although constructed iconographically similar to the way stereotypes are constructed (i.e., a few verbal and visual traits are used to signal the character), social types can be used in a much more open and flexible way than can stereotypes. This is most clearly seen in relation to plot. Social types can figure in almost any kind of plot and can have a wide range of roles in that plot (e.g., as hero, as villain, as helper, as light relief, etc.), whereas stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative. (248–49)

Thus, it is a plausible hypothesis that perhaps in this film, Kano only *performs* the role of a tomboy or butch lesbian because that is the only kind of identity she could latch on to in reference to how people see her, not necessarily in reference to how she sees herself.

Another reason why Kano's butch lesbian appears as a performance only is that she is also trying to negotiate clashing with patriarchy head-on yet it is obvious that she already wants to try, though heteronormativity and homonormativity do not permit her. This is first acted out during the pot-smoking session scene where she joked about how Bea does not really love her because Bea is set on running away to Saudi Arabia with Greg Williams. Here, the lesbian feels like she is a substitute man and playfully asks what her function is in Bea's life (to which Bea jokes that she likes Kano because she supplies her with marijuana). Kano later expresses her true reaction to being Bea's temporary relief to heterosexuality as she bares her soul to Manay in the club scene.

Since in this instance the butch lesbian, the *pars*, the Pinoy tomboy, is very much burdened with being the heterosexual mimic, Kano does not have much room to

negotiate herself to at least be in sync with Bea's life since it was Bea herself, her object of affection, who made a clear distinction as to where Kano could participate and where she could not participate in her life—and Kano dejectedly accepts that in true melodramatic martyr fashion. Thus, she has no recourse but to go along with how heteronormativity does it: when men act like a maniac with Bea, she also mimics that but is still careful not to cross any lines. Her behavior is dictated upon not by how well she adapts to this patriarchal behavior but by how she could survive being with Bea using *nuances* of this patriarchal behavior. Again, the butch lesbian identity as patriarchal mimicry is used as a tool of survival and coping by a butch lesbian who does not necessarily agree with such an identity—because that identity was not created by hers to begin with, but by others outside her sphere.

Johven Velasco, in his article on feminized heroes and masculinized heroines, framed it succinctly when he posited: “People who constantly interact and communicate define, determine, and create reality, the meaning of their lives, experiences, and environment, and where there is no shared meaning, they negotiate for one” (51). In this way, this is what Judith Halberstam also discusses as being out of sync with the time and space that a queer persona inhabits and occupies which, to Kano, the time might be nighttime (who knows how she performs in the daytime, given the chance to explore it) and the space might be Manila, given that it could be construed that more than being a butch lesbian, Kano is more queer, or specifically, genderqueer, as evident in the narrative imposed on her in the film.

Obviously not all gay, lesbian and transgender people live their lives in radically different ways from their heterosexual counterparts, but part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space. (Halberstam 2)

Yet since there is still no distinct avenue for being androgynous as a Filipino lesbian, much more for being queer, lesbians who do not conform to such strictly gendered lesbian identities are at risk of being dislocated in their own spheres. Sometimes, they feel this dislocation and they try to adjust to it. Sometimes, they simply ignore it and try to assimilate as much as they could. Thus, we also see these strategies reflected in lesbians we see in local films. This “schedule of normativity” as Halberstam articulates it is the reason why Kano will not be allowed to cross the lines drawn up by Bea or society in general, because she is completely out of sync with it—performing as a butch lesbian in a patriarchal time and space that rejects androgyny and any form of normative or non-normative nonconforming—as she is assessed in an identity that does not conform to what she truly is, inside and out. Hence, the tragic outcome of her narrative, as Halberstam points out: “And the masculine woman in the past has rarely been depicted as an interesting

phenomenon—usually, she has been portrayed as the outcome of failed femininity, or as the result of pathetic and unsuccessful male mimicry” (17).

Kano as a Reluctant (Gender)Queer

If given a more concrete chance to be one mesh of a man or a woman, or to continuously challenge these gender binaries just by being and living, going beyond androgyny but flowing more into genderqueerness, exhibiting both masculine and feminine traits without being too self-conscious about the shifts, then perhaps Kano would have had a better chance of survival in life and in love. Perhaps if she saw that she was androgynous or genderqueer and accepted it without prejudice—meaning without the “help” of society’s impositions of still gender-nailed alternative identities—then maybe she does not need to perform the patriarchal butch lesbian she tries hard to perform but often fails. Perhaps her narrative would have fared better; we will never know.

Kano’s butch adaptation strategies could also be seen as continuing the line of the Second Golden Age’s mannish tomboy strategy for survival: the toughened and toughening up style as presented in a masculine manner that is more hyped and hyper than its previous cinematic counterparts. We often see this toughened persona whenever Kano is in a scene with heterosexual men, as if presenting herself as “one of the boys.” For a patriarchal society to assess a woman’s level of “readiness” to negotiate her persona with the world, the othered gender is measured according to her strategy of “leveling up” with the dominant gender. And since the othered heterosexual gender also recognizes this gender-biased presentation, heterosexual women perhaps tend to appreciate better those who don it. Thus, we see Kano’s toughening up stance whenever she presents herself to Bea, especially when she is specifically called for to help her chosen damsel-in-distress.

Another evidence of Kano’s (masculine) gender-biased toughening up is connected to her intersected persona of a Manila nomad—provincial transplant—mixed-race heritage. Her basic identity contributes highly to how she negotiates herself in the smaller time and space that she chose to settle in, as dictated not by circumstance or by opportunity but by her heart. Yet it is not as if she were the only one with an intersected persona. Her direct competitor for her one true love’s affection—the aforementioned Greg Williams—could be seen as possessing a “more legitimate” intersected persona (himself of mixed-race heritage, presumably American like Kano based on his white mestizo-like looks and American-sounding name) in the eyes of Bea. But since Greg Williams is a heterosexual man and Kano is presented as an “imitation man,” patriarchy wins in the end and the heterosexual woman goes to where the patriarchy dictates her to go, leaving the imitation man betrayed and loveless.

Note, too, that the only times Kano is seen as embodying both the gender-identified traits of the man and the woman are those when she is with similarly typed “outcasts,” particularly Manay. The way she narrates her nostalgic lines in reference to love and life during the sauna scene is dismissed by the gay man, as her opening up about her emotions could be typecast as a “typical female emotional outburst” yet her semi-drunken nearly slurred delivery, complete with tentative pauses, could be characteristic of a “typical way of a male sharing emotions” pejoratively termed “being emo” in contemporary slang. In this scene, she unapologetically unravels herself for who she is—or who she could really be—and curiously, the unraveling shows a gender-nonconforming person who unconsciously shifts from being masculine to being feminine and goes back and forth in shifting.

The second time we see this unraveling unconscious shift is during the Manila Bay scene before she gets really high from drug-tripping. Again, she shares her thoughts and feelings in that very vocal yet calculating “emo” way as she shares her opinions about living and surviving life in Manila. The sharing ends up in a literal stripping away of her self-presentation where we see her shedding her inhibitions together with her masculine-type clothes as she prepares to jump into the bay. The literal genderqueer strip could again be perceived as defying the typical stone butch peg of not shedding manly clothes to reveal an untransformed female body. Here, Kano does not hesitate to show that she, too, subscribes to the typified butch peg (as seen in her male underwear) but she is also not reluctant to show that she sheds this peg easily and thus is not afraid to reveal her female body to the world. In this scene, she quietly embodies both the man and the woman in demeanor, action, behavior and expression.

Thus, even if the film does not articulate it loudly—unlike with the gay persona Manay—a genderqueer persona is evident in the way Kano unconsciously presents herself.

***Manila by Night* and Philippine Cinema Days After**

Judging by the way women-loving-women were depicted before and after *Manila by Night* came out, it is evident that films with the overt lesbian themes/storylines still follow the typified butch-femme dichotomy. And if the filmmakers do not follow this dichotomy and opt to do narratives with a non-normative pairing like the femme-to-femme leads of *Tatlo Magkasalo* or *Rome and Juliet*, the stories often end up in a tragic manner, dangerously prompting audiences to associate tragedy (specifically violence and death) with lesbian lives, regardless of the lesbian’s identity politics.

After *Manila by Night*, perhaps the closest genderqueer female bodied character was “seen” 25 years later in *Tuli*. However, like its predecessor, its genderqueerness is only hinted at—if not covertly characterized—and the female

bodied genderqueer also chose to negotiate her sexuality by willingly playing the gendered role of a heterosexual woman, specifically the reproductive role (of being a mother). Whenever she asserts her masculine side, she too gets ostracized (by the outside world) and even doubted by her female object of affection (especially during the scene where she was presenting herself as a husband substitute by uttering “aasawahin kita” [“I’ll mate with you”] while narrating the typical husband/masculine partner qualities that she could also perform to her desired “wife”). Only when she succumbed to this patriarchal dictate of bearing a child was she “permitted” to pursue her female-directed desire by being “tolerated as a lesbian” by her village members. The only difference in Solito’s and Bernal’s “unconscious” genderqueer treatment is that the former’s is femme-presented while the latter’s is andro-presented.

In this light, *Manila by Night* could still be considered a pioneer in genderqueer presentation. However, as much as this film is seen as an out-of-the-box classic, some storylines—consciously or unconsciously—obviously try to run in line with boxed expectations, no matter how the filmmakers try to expand the space within that box. This is a specific challenge with enacting types whose meanings are somewhat found out of the box of traditional categories, as Dyer expounds on the non-flexible acceptance of the flexible:

This is the most important function of the stereotype: to maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it. Stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behavior, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none. Nowhere is this more clear than with stereotypes dealing with social categories that are invisible and/or fluid. (249–50)

Still, it could be argued that *Manila by Night* could have been one of the very first queer-themed and queer-oriented films in Philippine cinema to unconsciously present female-bodied genderqueerness. In a way, this specific portrayal of this character in this particular film obviously points to a presentation of a more genderqueer identity of a female body that loves female bodies as well, regardless of their sexual orientation. While androgynous personalities have already been seen in Philippine society during the time this film was made (but, as mentioned, were “snatched and claimed” by the patriarchal butch spectrum), it is also evident that the filmmakers were also trying to negotiate (then-)current concepts of homonormativity in formulating their queer characters’ storylines during that era, at least when it came to the lesbian character. However, with the way Bernal let the genderqueered nuances of Kano emerge in the aforementioned sequences, it

is admirable to note that his consciousness of the limitations of the butch-femme dichotomy occasionally peeks out from the genderqueer framing of the “closeted” genderqueer female body hiding in a butch lesbian package.

Conclusion

Philippine cinema still has to strengthen its participation in the queer cinema realm by producing more films that depict the various nuances of Filipinos’ existing personas of sexual orientations and emerging gender identities. While there have been more examples of male bodied narratives, female bodies are particularly invisible in this realm of cinematic SOGI presentation. It is thus not surprising that the female bodied genderqueer is also absent in this realm—or almost absent.

In this light, it is refreshing to discover that *Manila by Night* had attempts at such a genderqueer depiction. From its presentation, the film and the filmmaker, together with the “lesbian” character, are obviously aware of the limitations of homonormativity as well as the challenge of the articulation of these limitations. Indeed, the result of this challenge is the genderqueer embodiment of Kano.

Perhaps these unconscious depictions of genderqueerness also reflect the general unconscious stance of Philippine society about this subject position, as the andro continuously negotiates her existence in the Philippine lesbian spectrum. Yet while andros negotiate, they already exist, thrive and function—healthily, successfully, yet quietly. Maybe this is what Philippine cinema still needs to reflect in future depictions—that andros, as genderqueers, are already here, but they need not be depicted as having tragic lives or be typecast as deviants—just like the rest of the Filipinos that belong to the LGBTQ community.

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