FALL OF GRACE: NORA AUNOR AS CINEMA

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Abstract
Nora Aunor is enlisted in this speculation as a medium in the register of both the cinema and the transmission of spirit. The key trajectory is the oft-cited film *Himala*, which opens up a conceptual space for mediumship, the technology of the actress, her biography and corpus of art, and the devotion to her person. The essay constellates a set of texts including the sculpture in honor of Elsa, the main character of *Himala*, the film *Silip*, and the life of a fan. Nora, the performative vessel of Elsa, becomes fundamentally cinematic. It is through her that Elsa is fleshed out as a miracle worker of vexing potency. Nora is herself a testament to the transformative potential of the technology of the cinema.

Keywords
devotion, film, image, medium, spirit, voice

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Ishmael Bernal’s *Himala* (1982) begins with an eclipse. The skies darken over the parched village of Cupang, and the folk stagger into the streets, look up, and speak of the end of days, or the dreaded but inevitable *gunaw*, the dissolution – or better to hear – the disillusion of earth. This exceptional shadow cast on the screen repeats the initial darkness before the film could even unreel – that of the cinema, the very site where this portent plays out. In a certain sense then, *Himala* is twice dark, and most probably, twice damned, and darkness and damnation are felt in the here and now, altogether, with others. Says the inimitable Roland Barthes: “the image alone is close, only the image is true” (“Leaving the Movie Theater” 348). It is in this half-light of a rainless, cursed Cupang and the hermetic cinema that a woman glimpses an apparition and reverses the order of day.

Among the distraught in the town, it is Elsa, compellingly in the guise of Nora Aunor, who keenly confronts a turning of the earth and therefore a turning of the imagination of the earth of those who inhabit it. The end of days is prefigured by the eclipse and may be construed metaphorically as a curse on an already inclement country. Elsa bears the burden of mediating its foreboding, a burden that is freighted equally with Nora’s own history of turning: the turning of her earth when she became a star in the sixties after winning an amateur singing title in her hometown in the Bicol peninsula south of Manila and then in the capital itself. Nora sang standards that spoke of moonlight in Vermont, sycamore leaves, ski trails, and the meadowlark. From her beginnings as a seller of water and cooked food at the train station to the nation’s performer of the most ample magnitude, there would be, too, a turning of the state and the imagination of the earth, one that is surely catastrophic in scale. The mingling of curse and catastrophe in the context of the cinema is irresistible: it helps us offer a theory of the cinema that is grounded in a tale of turning, a transformative technology that involves the fundamental premise of conversion. At the heart of *Himala* is the transition between beliefs, and the polysemic face of Nora is one of the trajectories of this transition, one that gathers the traces of personal struggle, the finitude of the earth, the time and the psychogeography of the cinema.
VOICE

But more than the face, it is the voice that articulates the project of Nora and Elsa in *Himala*. It is the voice that had propelled the stardom of Nora in the same way that it was a voice allegedly of the Virgin Mary that had summoned Elsa. And finally it is the voice of Nora as actress and Elsa as visionary that disconfirms the miracle. At various levels, therefore, it is the voice that enables both women to presage the otherworldly, to aspire to it, to “see it with their ears,” to rephrase the Biblical incantation. Again, Barthes crafts the phrase “grain of voice,” which is “the very precise space of the encounter between a language and a voice” (Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice” 185). This contact, this communicative event, is material: the “body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the body as it performs” (Barthes 192). And it is intriguing to interject the ties between this voice and the much-vaulted eyes of Nora for it is in this overlap of two faculties that a vision becomes haptic, palpable, moving.

The day of reckoning that attends the beginning of the film holds up an apocalyptic vision and the unfolding of a curse: the *gunaw* and the *sumpa* are the channels into the afterlife of earth and humanity. They are the mystical manifestations of the limits of the anthropocene that the seer and the actress transform, or perhaps more acutely, transfigure in miraculous terms. The miracle of the cinema/the cinema of miracle tends to supplement the denial of this end of days and proceeds to convene another formation of humanity and hopefully of a renewed earth. It is in this context that the *burol* or the hill where the Virgin appears is critical. Like Golgotha, it is the scene of death and salvation, violence and sacrifice. Shift the stress on the first syllable, and the word means wake for the dead, the vigil that is the liminal state in which the living enact a proper parting with the dead as Fenella Cannell would argue in her ethnographic reflections on power and intimacy in Bicol, again an uncanny iteration of Nora’s native clearing. Cannell dwells on the funeral of Christ, a wooden form that lies in state called the Santo Entierro, as a moment of devotion that mediates between the figure and the faithful. According to her:

> It is not only a process of a devotional contract...in which the sharing of suffering produces the return gift of healing; it is also a process of *magarog*, of becoming like Christ, Mary and other figures, taking on their clothes, gestures or words, and so transforming oneself. (Cannell 182)

Cannell then constellates this devotional body that yearns this transformation with the singing body, the embodied, expectant voice in an amateur singing competition, not impossibly in the tenor of Nora’s contralto itself, that wistfully croons the foreign ambience of “Autumn Leaves” but ever so delicately risks both
authenticity and alienation, and even poignantly evokes its intimate feeling of melancholy:

It seems possible that one element in the “sentimental” and nostalgic atmosphere of the singing is built precisely out of the origins of that risk; the loss that the author signified by “Autumn Leaves” makes no immediate sense in the tropics, but the idea of loss itself does; in singing a song part of whose meaning escapes one, one evokes among other losses, the sadness at not having completely understood, at being excluded in relation to a cultural register which, if one masters it, can open the doors of possibility and change one’s life. (Cannell 209)

In Himala, there are layers of voices with which the audience is asked to identify: the voice of the Virgin, the voice of Elsa, the voice of Nora, all of which are historically imbricated, and densely or robustly so. As Cannell would put it: “only when one’s identity is actively merged with that of the holy figures…can one become the ‘voice’ of Mary or Christ” (182).

After thirty years, Himala would be restored in Venice, screened with that other seminal work Genghis Khan (1950) by the frontiersman Manuel Conde, and deservedly so. Surely, all manner of acclaim has been lavished on it, but it seems that the most salient has not been intuited. Many highly regard it for subtly surfacing an “outside” or an “elsewhere” that it supposedly keenly reflects – “isang lipunan ng may sakit…. [Nabansot] ang kaisipang siyentipiko dahil sa mahabang panahon ng kolonyalismo at imperyalismo” [a society that is sick…. (Stunted) by the long years of colonialism and imperialism], as Bernal would himself propose (138). This being said, the film’s livelier legacy might in the long term be overlooked: that it is not so much about an outside or elsewhere as it is about its fraught becoming, its sheer mutation – or miracle – from within. “Film…does not reflect an outside; it opens an inside onto itself. The image on the screen is itself the idea” – that is how Jean-Luc Nancy (160) values the form of film, or its being formative.

So what is Himala as an “idea” and as a kind of cinematic thinking? This constitutes the problematic of the essay. Nora Aunor is enlisted in this speculation as a medium in the register of both the cinema and the transmission of spirit. The key trajectory is the oft-cited film Himala, which opens up a conceptual space for mediumship, the technology of the actress, her biography and corpus of art, and the devotion to her. The essay collects a set of texts including the sculpture in honor of the main character of Himala, the film Silip, and the life of a fan.

First, it is perhaps best to look into the kind of capital that it took to make this kind of film possible. Funded by the state agency called the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, it was a handsome production, afforded the correct
outlay for its technical requirements of scale and detail, including its legion of a cast and the singular stellar phenomenon that is Nora. That it was underwritten by a government that had earlier greatly invested in spectacles worthy of worldly attention (from beauty pageants to boxing and chess matches to meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) is important to keep in mind. For the film was part of an international film festival held in Manila under the aegis of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, premiered in a Parthenon-like palace said to be haunted by peons who had fallen (or had been entombed?) with their boots on. In 1983, it opened the second Manila International Film Festival and then competed at the fabled Berlinale where, as the story goes, Nora lost to a Russian actress by a mere vote. Also, that this sort of cinema projects itself as experimental is equally germane: that it is not of the market, but of the state, and not beholden to commerce but to the cultural agenda of strongman rule before the fall of its house.

Three decades later, *Himala* stands its ground as a solitary signpost, prompting us to pause and ponder: In this era of the digital, what has happened to this notion of the experimental? Bernal’s opus came as one of the final bursts of creative force of Philippine cinema at the end of the twentieth century, succeeded by truly decadent filmmaking best typified by the unfortunate career of that rather prissy daughter of the plantation widow who deposed Marcos. From this vacuum, an independent cinema of inflated exploits has risen up in our time and for the most part has contrived itself as the “alternative” to the much-maligned “mainstream”; for the most part, it has failed to come close to *Himala*’s kernel.

After discerning the possibility of making this film or how it has come about, it might interest us in the same vein to probe how film is, in fact, a possibility of its own. This is to say that how it comes about becomes its reason in the end, the basis of its belief, or its responsibility to profess to the “not-yet” possible. After all, miracles are about the impossible, that is, the not-yet possible, or the merely coming, in other words, imminent. And this is most telling in how *Himala* centers on the character of a medium and a visionary – and the procedure of telling the elusive or evasive truth. All told then, it might not be exactly right to say that this is what the film is about; it should be more to the point to conceive that this is the very matter of the film as a condition of transformation.

According to the film’s screenwriter Ricardo Lee, the narrative is inspired by a story from Cabra Islet unfolding from 1966 to 1972. On a windswept clearing in Mindoro, eight homespun girls from poor families, between the ages of eleven and thirteen, saw and conversed with the Blessed Virgin. The message was: “I am the Immaculate Conception.” In *Himala*, Elsa is the exemplary figure to motivate this kindred transformative process. A house help, who was a foundling of ambivalent origins, claims to have seen the image of the Virgin Mary on a barren hill with
a looming withered tree. She kneels before it – head thrown back, eyes closed, possessed as if in deep prayer. We hear the voice of the putative Virgin intoning “Elsa” and feel the surrounding ethereal atmosphere, so it is impossible to disavow it, at the same time that we cannot seem to fully convince ourselves that this event or incident can actually happen in so-called real life. Is it the wind merely howling the name of Elsa? Whatever it is, it rouses the desolate town from another kind of trance.

We suspend disbelief henceforth. Taking on the mantle of the peasant mystic, Elsa is soon made to appear as performing acts that are described as miracles. The community believes in her and casts her lot with her. She becomes a stigmatic medium, an instrument of God’s mother, and attracts curiosity from far and wide. This is the truth, which she later negates, or more aptly, disbelieves, a confession hastened by her inability to cure the children of her advocate and the documentation of her rape by a filmmaker, the self-conscious artist bearing the device of the camera, which is foil to Elsa’s ecstatic vision, or her obscura. After a sudden torrent and a night’s vigil lit by thousands of candles, she gathers her teeming faithful one day, with desert gale and the likeness of the Virgin at her back, and proclaims to the sea of the infirm and the fanatical multitude that there had been no miracle in the first place: “Walang himala! Ang himala ay nasa puso ng tao! Nasa puso nating lahat. Tayo ang gumagawa ng mga sumpa at ng mga diyos.” [There is no miracle. The miracle is in the heart. In all our hearts. All of us make the miracle. We are the ones who make curses and gods.] Like a politician in the plaza in a miting de abanse or proclamation rally, Elsa calls it quits.

Therefore, the truth is negative, only to be redeemed as residing in the formidable human, the exceptional secular. Himala is against the miracle and it is against the cinema. It is against Elsa, who disbelieves her fiction and is shot by an unknown assailant at the moment of revelation, with her bloodied frailty borne on the shoulders of a church in stampede. It is against the swarm of the hopeful, the mass of people who are captured like cattle and made poorer by their sympathies. And it is against the truth when Elsa’s inveterate retinue declares her a saint after she expires: “the image alone is close, only the image is true.” And it can reproduce infinitely.

It is at this point that Nora, the performative vessel of Elsa, becomes fundamentally cinematic. Gazing at Nora transpose from her miniature nature to the living “actress” on screen can be breathtaking; the discrepancy is so stark, it is almost unbelievable. It is through her that Elsa is fleshed out as a miracle worker of vexing potency. Nora is herself a testament to the transformative potential of the technology of the cinema: a poor girl, dark and diminutive, hailing from one of the poorer districts in Iriga who sold water and cooked food in the railway station,
wins in an amateur singing tilt and becomes an incomparable “sensation” in Manila and across the archipelago. After several decades of working in the industry since the sixties, she has turned out to be the country’s most accomplished transmedia star whose only rival in herding the rabble at the peak of her charisma was Martial Law. In Himala, the uncanny is cogent: Elsa is Nora and Nora is Elsa in a cinema that is cult. As a devotee of Nora testifies to this lasting obligation: “Some fans would place Nora’s picture beside Jesus Christ or Mary and they would place leis of jasmine around it. The others would die embracing Nora’s picture, requesting that it be buried with them.”

CROWD

The abovementioned crucial scene of revelation deserves retracing to reflect on the way cinema and community, community and religion surmount the antinomy and instead sets the conditions of a political theology that is demonstrated when Elsa takes the stage and speaks to the microphone as if she were at once priestess and potentate. Again, as it had been sound that has gathered the multitude so it would be sound that pervades the air of Elsa’s tell-all. It is a mixture of silence, the eerie wailing wind, and finally the feedback from the microphone when Elsa starts to speak the contentious truth: that the primordial premise of gunaw and sumpa had been false, an “error” like the glitch from the microphone, a distortion of sound and speech brought about by the instrument of amplification picking up sounds other than the voice and producing a high-pitched squeal in an unnerving loop. It is also at this punctum that Elsa sketches out her political personage in light of the absence of a strong state mechanism and bureaucracy in Cupang, an ethnographic detail that the film denies to be able to foreground an allegory. In other words, Elsa assumes a political mandate as well, the wherewithal to assemble the mass outside the control of local or national government and the supervision of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, which receives directives from the inherently transnational Church of Rome. Moreover, Elsa prefigures Nora’s own forays into the political field. It may be remembered that she had campaigned for Ferdinand Marcos in the 1986 elections, singing in one rally, according to lore, Tina Turner’s post-nuclear anthem “We Don’t Need Another Hero.” In 2001, she ran for governor of her province and lost to a traditional politician. And during the tenure of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Nora lent her support to the discredited government in exchange for favors. These moments reference the links between state, the entertainment industry, and the church in the production of the political in the Philippines. As Talal Asad reminds: “The concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion” (192).
The following scenes can perhaps concretize the transfiguration of Elsa as actress, that is, as Nora. Suspension of disbelief here is twice attained: the more obvious instance in which Nora essays the role of Elsa, on the one hand, and the more ostensive one in which Elsa plays the role of an actress and points to the fictiveness or the fiction of the role.

A prelude to Elsa’s performance is the expression of the belief in the return of the miracle, with the town folk exulting at a lifeworld coming back to life with the onslaught of water. Rain has come and those who revel in it troop to Elsa to tell her the good news: “Bumalik na ang himala” [The miracle has returned], a certain Baldo exclaims.

The first turning point in Elsa’s new script is an ominous line that she delivers, an imperative: “Tawagin silang lahat” [Summon them all]. There is transformation in habitus and hexis here from a medium acted upon by a spirit to an agent, a charismatic one undoubtedly, that commands her army. Where before she would be an ambivalent healer and in some instances dubious of her own gifts, she is now firm and exercises her authority to amass, laying claim to her people. The site of convergence would be the burol, a polytropic site where she was found as an infant, where she saw the Virgin, where she was raped, and now where she would tell the tale as if she were the Virgin beckoning her prophet.

The second turning point is the revelation. Elsa unravels her own mythology, laying it bare with a series of negations. In many respects, Nora takes over Elsa, supersedes her subjectivity. It is Nora who acts out Elsa’s drama convincingly, unveiling her pretenses – the very prospect that she might just have been acting all along – and also passionately rendering this necessary performance. It is as if Nora has possessed Elsa so that the truth could be uttered as a persuasion that only a “real” actress could crystallize cinematically and, therefore, socially.

crime, and deceit. When something wrong happens, we blame the curse.... But when something good takes places, we say it is from the heavens. A handiwork of the Virgin. A work of miracle. There is something I want to confess. There is no miracle.... It is not true I am pregnant because of the miracle! It is not true that the Blessed Virgin appeared before me.]

The third turning point is the performance of the crowd of 3,000 extras after Elsa is shot, which leads to a veritable Crucifixion scene in which Elsa is borne on the shoulders of her masa. In this sequence, largely no words are spoken. It is the crowd that acts out the panic until Elsa expires and smiles at a journalist, her interlocutor, the doubting Thomas to her miracle. Nora’s lifeless body is carried by a community, an image recalling the heady days of her stardom in the seventies. This may well be the same horde that refuses to let her die. When the tumult diffuses, she is nominated as saint – star and spirit. Her acolyte Sepa proclaims the new gospel:

Si Elsa’y isang santa! Namatay siya upang ipaalala sa atin na ang mundo ay makasalanan! Magbalik tayong lahat sa burol upang ipagdasal ang kanyang kaluluwa! Kailangang ipagpatuloy natin ang kanyang paniniwala! Itaguyod ang pananampalataya sa Mahal na Birhen!

[Elsa is a saint! She died to remind us that the world is sinful. Let us go back to the hill to pray for her soul! We have to carry on with her faith, with the faith of the Blessed Virgin.]

And the film closes with Elsa’s church praying the Hail Mary: “Aba Ginoong Maria, napupuno ka ng grasya...bukod kang ipinagpala sa babaing lahat” [Hail Mary full of grace...Blessed are you among women]. Elsa is Nora is the Virgin Mary in spite of the lies and the violation of her virtue.

In the end, only the desert and the multitude remain, the mise en scène of the motley who have braved the unstinting sun, sand storm, and the rush of ailing and fervent bodies. It may well be that this multitude condenses as the masa in the context of a political theology, with the otherwordly giving way to the radical affirmation of the anthropocene, the index of which would be the perceived reincarnation of Elsa as saint after she is killed and the perpetuation of her vision to be consecrated in devotion and pilgrimage. Such masa materialize in the way the universe of Cupang expands to take in the wider world under the spell of Elsa. It plays out most prominently when Elsa assembles them on the hill. First to be perceived is the influx of people from outside Cupang. There is as well the media; a national newspaper has Elsa on its front page. Then there is commodification of the Elsa icon through the production of t-shirts presumably for sale and the
development of sex work for tourists. All this incites a wave, a “single tremendous wave,” in the words of the philosopher of the crowd, Elias Canetti,

surging over the city, absorbing it: when the wave ebbed... the city was still there – this day was made up of countless details.... Each detail exists in itself, memorable and discernible, and yet each one also forms a part of a tremendous wave... the thing to be grasped is the wave, not the details. (Canetti 488)

The afterlife of Elsa may be the allegory of the film *Himala* or of film itself. The cycle of mystification returns to Nora, too, as the performer of Elsa and what Elsa instills, imbibes, and inculcates. It can be said that what Elsa actually saw in her vision was not the bleeding Virgin, but her own death, her future, her phantasm. To extend such reading, it can be inferred that what is seen in the film may also be Nora’s life and how faith in the image has bedeviled the public and how film pretends to the talent and the technology of a document or a testimony that leads to a catastrophe. As it is in Mike de Leon’s *Itim* (1976), where a photographer reconstructs a crime involving his own father, *Himala* and Nora herald the truth with such insistence, laden with both fact and feeling, and such heralding ends up in death: the cinema as a tragic, possessive aesthetic that cannot survive disbelief.

It is not clear who had killed the seemingly inviolate though vulnerable Elsa, a perplexing question to pursue. But it may well be that the more intriguing conundrum to crack pertains to who did not want her to die. Why was there a desire to declare her a saint, to reincarnate her as a saint and reiterate her mythology, and to undo the death of a superstar on screen? An analogous scene in this case would be Lino Brocka’s *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak* (1990) in which Rachel Suarez, the mistress of the politician Edmundo Guatlo, divulges the corruption of her paramour on the stage of a political campaign; she, too, is killed in the act of speaking the truth. In these processes of disclosure, always the media hovers as a partisan, a skeptical spectator, and ultimately a vulture of its carcass. In Brocka’s *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (1985), when the worker Turing Manalastas dies in the hands of his wife Luz, a hail of lights from the cameras of reporters almost pummels the Pieta tableau. In *Himala*, the media is cast as a counterpoint to Elsa’s belief, some kind of a modernist critique of the folk and its absence of science or rationality, the presumed idiocy of its rural life. In Brocka’s forays, however, the media becomes opportunistic, a sensibility that plays out quite unerringly in the current political scene. Such decadence of the media would find its peak in the way a network in 2009 spent countless hours on the death watch over the late President Corazon Aquino, the much-vaunted heroine of EDSA, an excess that interminably stretched to her wake and funeral and culminated in the launching of the presidential bid of her only son Benigno III. *Himala* is able to adumbrate this corruptive mysticism (Flores, “Peripheral Visionaries”) that is largely calibrated by
the interests of the media, which in the Philippines is cathected to the interests of the rent-seeking elite.

In a reprise of the scene in *Himala*, Nora takes the stage in the so-called EDSA II in 2001, her figurine of a persona set against the gargantuan statue of the Virgin, seizes the microphone, and bears witness to the violence inflicted on her by her former friend, Joseph Estrada, the action-star president, the only one in the nation’s history who has been impeached, deposed, convicted, and pardoned by an equal. Indeed, film confounds society through and through. And if Nora replays the film amid an upheaval, the forlorn and nearly aphasic Elsa had actually foreseen her future in the specter of the Virgin in blue veil, white dress, tears in the eyes, wound in the heart. Both Nora and Elsa are the meisters of this miracle. And what of it at the end of the day? Elsa is finally unsure: “*Di na ako sigurado ngayon kung ano’ng nangyari noon*” [I am no longer certain what had happened in the past.] And Bernal himself, he who had wielded the camera, has lost sight: “*Hindi importante kung may himala o wala. Ang mahalaga ay ang pangangailangan ng taong maniwala o manampalataya…. At sapagkat hindi natin alam kung may naganap ngang himala o wala, hindi mahalagang malaman natin kung sino ang pumatay kay Elsa*” [It is not important if there had been a miracle or not. What is important is the need of the people to believe or to have faith...And because we do not know if there had been a miracle that happened, it is not important to know who had killed Elsa] (138).

*Himala* is in many ways an apotheosis of Philippine cinema, of Nora, and perhaps also of the National Artist for Film Bernal who has always been suspicious of his own art’s artifice and the affectations of the industry of which he had partaken. In his first film *Pagdating sa Dulo* (1971), his heroine, erstwhile stripper and star of the moment, spins a soliloquy on the cost of fame outside the foyer of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. In *Manila by Night* (1980), the city itself is presented as a labyrinth of hypocrisy, abuse, dependence, and cruelty. In *Himala*, Bernal ever so adroitly insinuates, stratum after stratum, the density of a merciless society: the error of miracle work, the rape of Elsa, the birth of a brothel, the stalking of media, the death of children, the trade of religion, the crime and grief of the dispossessed, the surveillance of the police, the power-trip of the petty-politician, the avarice of the landlord, and the drivel of the bedeviled priest who in a sermon for a dispirited congregation could only sow further confusion:

[What will happen if miracles become too easy? There will be disorder. Anyone could just claim being the instrument of God. Instead of religion opening our eyes, it will blind. ... Sometimes we should not be blinded by the truth. Because sometimes the truth is not humane.]

The creed turns irrational.

The film is the seer. Himala may have prefigured certain motifs in the cycles of our political history and our obsessions with what is right more than with what is just. In its tale of corruptive mysticism, it may have also offered another sign system of excess of righteousness in the season of pornography, which was partly sustained by the state through the film’s own financier. Titles like Elwood Perez’s Silip (1985) and Celso Ad. Castillo’s Isla (Island, 1985) and Snake Sisters (1984) graced the halls of the Manila Film Center under the auspices of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines. In the year Himala was released, the beauty queen-turned-actress Tetchie Agbayani posed for the German edition of Playboy, sparking a wildfire debate on how the “Filipina” should “appear” in the “world.” It is through the worldview of Elsa’s childhood confidante Nimia, the trickster-prostitute from the city, that we glean this lush erotic landscape of copious indulgences and not a few indignities (see Figure 1). She asks the folk heroine-faith healer-superstar to her face: “Pinagbibilihan nyo sila ng himala…pareho lang tayong puta” [You sell them miracles...we are all prostitutes.] By threading metaphors of how mystification works in society and how crowds are swept up in hysteria by diviners, defilers like Elsa and Nora, Himala would intimate through its peculiar prism an assassination and a martyrdom, the frenzy of mob rule, icons of democracy revered to death, the waning of regimes, the waxing of new mythologies, and the rendering of a revolution as an insufferable miracle.
Figure 1. Estranged childhood friends Nimia (Gigi Dueñas) and Elsa (Nora Aunor) meet each other while visiting the grave of Chayong, the third member in their close-knit group, in Ishmael Bernal’s Himala (1982). Experimental Cinema of the Philippines; screen capture for Ricky Lee’s screenplay in Sa Puso ng Himala (Quezon City: Philippine Writers Studio Foundation, 2012): 129, used with permission.

FLESH

The isolation of the milieu in Himala as well as of the medium contrives an ideal, or better still an idealized, allegorical space that eludes the diligent explication of the ethnographic context. This is set up mainly to pursue social critique at the expense of social complexity. Such a critique tends to turn into a polemic against the system, as sweepingly conceived, so that it could launch a tirade against hypocrisy within a general frame. This disposition skews the milieu and the medium ultimately as fetish and is exploited for its polemical potential. As it is in Himala, so is it in Silip (1985), written by the same scenarist, Ricardo Lee, and shot in the same location, in the sand dunes of Paoay in Ilocos Norte. Both films were also linked up with the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines as producer for the former and venue for exhibition for the latter. The ECP was set up in 1982 to enhance the commercial possibilities of the film industry as well as the quality of its output. To realize its goals, it organized the Film Fund, the Film Ratings Board, the Alternative Cinema Department, and the Manila International Film Festival. By 1985 the ECP was dissolved, replaced by the Film Development Council of the Philippines. Towards its end, it was largely known as the financier and purveyor of sexually explicit films that were screened at the Manila Film Center without censorship, prompting
critics to denounce it as part of the declining government’s smoke and mirror act (Tiongson xxiii; also, see Lumbera 221-22). At a certain level, the ECP could be seen as a conjuncture of the cinema as a system that produces and disseminates “image” under the atmosphere of “freedom,” the political economy of the apparatus itself, and the source of the validation of film as an artistic enterprise. Here, an authoritarian government at its twilight lurches towards its terminus in the tension between repression and permissiveness, in the lust for a final release.

What is of interest in the reflection on Nora as a cinematic trope in relation to Silip is the constitution of mediumship as embodied by an Elsa figure in the character of Tonya, a virgin who lives in a village of salt miners and its libidinous men, and some promiscuous women. She sets herself apart as a virtuous woman, teaching catechism to young people, some of whom are on the cusp of sexual awakening. She calls herself and insists on being addressed as Maestra, or Teacher, who presides over prayer sessions in a makeshift chapel with an altar dedicated to the Virgin Mary. She can be overly zealous of this role to the point of being hysterical, at times dueling with an invisible diabolical force; she would even, in fact, be considered unhinged (baliw) like her mother.

This performance of a personhood is complicated by a sexual history that is repressed. She resists her urges for Simon, the town butcher. This repression unravels in two ways. The first is through an internal monologue that transpires in one of Tonya’s ablutions in which she implores her god to help her overcome the fire that is consuming her, the devil with a dangling genital who is Simon. At the end of the scene, menstrual blood trickles down from her vagina. The second is through her childhood friend Selda, who comes to visit from the city (see Figure 2). Selda had earlier snatched Simon from Tonya, who is desperately in love with the man. Tonya’s desire is finally consummated when she engages in a sexual act with Simon atop the sand dunes in the blistering heat. It is at this point that the mediumship is compromised, its potency exhausted. One of her students, a girl who is also attracted to Simon, catches the two in coitus and taunts her for being false because she, too, has succumbed to the advances of the devil.
In constellating *Himala* and *Silip*, three concerns come to the fore.

First is the locus. The landscape of Paoay ought to be interpreted as a “productive scene” that is home to Nora, Elsa, and the semblance of both in Tonya. The art historian Louis Marin describes the productive scene as not only a setting but a

“scene which produces,” on which some complex interactions of relationships, groups, and knots of relationships are displayed – a scene which, at the same time, discloses and envelops by giving a combinatory to be read, not only whose internal and external differences it would be appropriate to describe assiduously, but also its constitutive rules.

(Marin 19)

This scene of desolation offers up a primitivist theater for the Nora fantasy to play out. Selda’s white lover in *Silip* calls it “end of the world”; Tonya regards it as “hell.” Because it is arid and barren, the folk in the area might have lamented its failure to raise a fertile vegetal life. In other words, it is pestilential, so miserable that only a miracle could thrive, or salt that could be formed from the vast tract of sand facing the South China Sea. Such a miracle or a spiritual epiphany is juxtaposed in both films against decadence partly brought about by the mores of visitors and returning natives like Nimia in *Himala* and Selda in *Silip*. In the Paoay Lake nearby, people remember the folktale of the once-affluent town of Paoay inhabited...
by vain and profligate villagers; one day, the gods punished them with merciless rain that washed everything away. Lore has it that on full-moon nights, “fishermen on their boats see the lights of the old town deep below the lake’s surface; and occasionally, it is said, they catch fish, which, when cut open, disgorge rings and jewels from their bowels.”² And so, the desolate also becomes wild and tempting, universal and mythical, transforming itself as a proscenium for any existential situation to be dramatized even if it is nearly indifferent to material conditions. The opening scene of Silip in which Simon slaughters a carabao in full view of curious and wailing children is at once graphic and otherworldly, reminiscent of a cañao scene in the Philippine Cordillera that is reprised in Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now (1979); in the end, Simon is himself beheaded by the son of his married lover. Testifying to the highly plastic quality of the milieu is the fact films of varied tempers have been shot here, from Joey Gosiengfiao’s Temptation Island (1980) to Ronwaldo Reyes’s Ang Panday (1980), and on to Oliver Stone’s Born on the Fourth of July (1989). Without this productive scene, Himala would not be able to convey the necessary “reality effect.”

The second theme pertains to the discourse of prostitution or how the self or the body is instrumentalized by a structure, or allowed to be used and exploited. In Himala and Silip, it is religion that overdetermines the person’s bodily impulses, the thing that prostitutes. It is the embodiment of the norm that becomes contentious: the negation of the miracle and the affirmation of Elsa’s institutional sainthood and the assimilation of Tonya into religion as its self-anointed minister. When Elsa and Tonya exercise their agency as persons, they are killed. All this is distilled from the welter of contexts in which the films wallow. The indeterminacy is more acute in Silip, which morphs into some kind of ethnographic surrealism or anthropological kitsch with the mélange of pornography; classic dualisms between the sacred and the profane; and important details in social-science field work like head hunting, menstruation, and taboo. Moreover, the townsfolk in Silip seem to be open-minded about sexuality though in the end express their colonial desire in a white priest Felipe, the Spanish royal after which the country is named. In other words, the film, which benefits from competent technical control, is difficult to pin down.

The last element is the process by which mediumship is impaired. In Tonya’s situation, she nominates herself as a vessel of spirituality, a Maestra who can impart doctrine and convene a ritual context for this through the chapel and the catechism class. Like Elsa, this stature is doubted when some of her neighbors conclude that the teachings of the church should come from the priest and not from her, and when they incorrectly infer that she has made out with Selda’s lover. They would also take issue with some of her beliefs like pouring sand onto a girl’s vagina the moment she menstruates. And, finally, her virginal veneer altogether dissolves
when she permits Simon to penetrate her. As a mode of transmission of the spirit of supposedly spiritual knowledge, Tonya ultimately fails.

The issue here is how mediumship is disempowered by the disbelief of others and how the frailty of the disempowered medium begets either opprobrium or intimacy. For it is a fact that Nora, Elsa, Nimia, Tonya, and the actress who plays the latter, Maria Isabel Lopez, would become much-maligned women at the point when they are incarnated, as it were, or when they decide or are forced to partake of carnality, through either consensual sex or rape, or any other expression of an erotic life. Lopez, for instance, was crowned Miss Philippines in 1982 but was later derided for being a model of lingerie in the city’s night spots; in the interview section of the pageant, the actress Rita Gomez asked her if she was a virgin. The idealized purity of these women is polluted by the flesh and their prowess as mediums becomes a threat when it defies authority. As a woman in the village in Silip conceptualizes it: mediumship creates a condition of peril and precarity because it leads to either “falsehood” or “freedom.”

The medium as witness, therefore, becomes in the course of the narrative an object of witnessing, found to be wanting and fraudulent. The journalist’s camera in Himala and the visual motif of the peep hole or the slit on the wall in Silip serve as devices of witnessing. In fact, in the latter, the voyeur’s access to a forbidden scene is also the layer between the sinner and the foreign priest in the makeshift confessional.

In Elsa’s case, the medium who is aspersed because she has been violated and because she can no longer restore the infirm becomes closer to the faithful, unlike in Silip where Tonya and Selya are tied and raped by the men of the village and then burned to death. It is the frailty of Elsa, the death of her physical life, that renders her, to the eyes of her acolytes, incorruptible. It is this frailty that enables the actress who portrays Elsa, Nora Aunor, to express sympathy with her countless adorers who would become her kin because of the affinity they express with her vulnerability, on the one hand, and her unruliness and unpredictability, on the other. For while Nora is commodified as a star of an industry, constituted and parlayed into the capitalist machine, her life refuses to be easily governed or disciplined. Her bisexuality is exemplary. It is through this queerness that intimacy is partly generated. In fact, it is in Silip that erotic relations are queered quite interestingly, from the intimations of lesbian love between Tonya and Selda to the hypermasculinity of Simon who is the town’s lothario who distributes meat from house to house.

The devotion of a Nora fan, Mandy Diaz (born 1961, died 2008), is instructive in this process of queering (Flores, “Makulay na Daigdig”; all succeeding quotations regarding Diaz will come from this source). He had been a fan since his grade
school years in Caloocan City and would take pride in his intense devotion to Nora (see Figure 3). As he put it: “Ibibili ko na lang ng bigas, ipapanood ko pa ng sine” [What I would buy rice with, I would watch a movie instead]. He married his fellow office worker in 1986. They raised a daughter. In 1995, they broke up, owing to, among other things, Mandy’s being a devoted Noranian. His wife had tried to convince him to move in with her in a new house; but Mandy decided to stay. The “house,” therefore, another instance of the productive scene, transcodes Mandy’s sense of personal abode, distinct from the heterosexual nuclear family structure, as well as his kinship with Nora. To a significant extent, Mandy shared the house with Nora, whose presence was not only strongly felt; it preponderated. It was not only a domestic space; it was the altar of Mandy’s devotion to Nora.

Figure 3. Mandy Diaz holding aloft his recognition trophy as Dakilang Noranian [Distinguished Noranian] from ICON (International Circle of Online Noranians). Photo courtesy of Nestor de Guzman, used with permission.

Mandy made another important choice after the breakup: that he had to live as a gay person. He had had several lovers and entertained young boys and men in the house. He had many gay friends who frequently slept over. His wife and daughter knew about this; he displayed the family picture in the house.
Mandy's house, an area of around 18 square meters, was part of a two-storey wooden-framed box-like configured structure, with reinforced concrete hollow blocks and stucco finish at the first level. The second level was an accretion of improvised building materials, majority of which were scrounged from wooden sources. The structure lacked a prominent façade and openings fronted the irregularly shaped alley, which was at once street, canal, and faucet area. Mandy's place in this community was defined by Nora's poster, framed by golden tinsel, that marked his door. Beside the door was a screened wooden bay window that, together with the door, was the house's only opening. It opened to a living room of less than eight square meters and with minimal furnishings: a book shelf, a small wooden sala set, and cabinets. Nora's posters and other memorabilia of the star were prominently displayed.

When Mandy still had his karaoke machine, he would play Nora's hits full-blast as if to pay homage (“kung baga National Anthem” [as if it were my National Anthem]). For all his toil and the pleasure he derived from it, he was known in the neighborhood as “Nora Aunor.” He took pride not only in being a Noranian, but in being the only one who lavished Nora Aunor with fastidious attention the way he did: “Kung baga sa showbiz, isa lang si Nora Aunor di ba? Sa hanay naman ng mga tagahanga, isa lang din si Mandy Diaz” [It is like in show business, there is only one Nora Aunor, right? Among the ranks of the fans, there is also one Mandy Diaz].

Mandy kept a veritable archive of Nora Aunor facts and figures, including press materials, records, and posters. He also took dutiful notes of Nora trivia as in the names of Nora's characters and Nora's most memorable songs, keeping these data in notebooks that were carefully stacked in cabinets and drawers and hidden under the bed. He became the President of the Grand Alliance for Nora Aunor Philippines or GANAP in 1993 and was visited in his home once by the Nora: “Biro mo dalawin ka ng Superstar. Ang gaan ng feeling.... Hindi ko sukat akalain na aabot ng ganito, na pupuntahan niya ako sa bahay” [Imagine being visited by the Superstar. The feeling is light. … I did not imagine that it would reach this far, that she would visit me here at home]. While Mandy viewed this as a privilege, he also though that this was Nora's obligation to the fans because the fans would also sacrifice so much just to support her: “Kasi yung mga fans na yan, namasaha yan. Yung panahon nila ibinigay nila sa iyo. Tapos katulad ko, wala akong regular na income. Imaginin mo, basta’t may pelikula siya, tatlong linggo ako nanonood niyan, bayad nang bayad” [You see, these fans pay for their transportation. Their time they’ll spend with you. Like me, I do not have any regular income. Imagine, whenever she has a film showing in the theaters, I would watch it for three weeks, paying every time]. At the end of the day, Nora was Mandy's inspiration who revitalized his well-being:
I am alone in life. When I feel week, I would just bring out the pictures and the things I have written on Nora and I will regain my strength. I will look at my collection. When I am sick for instance, and I want to be strong again, I would play the tape of Nora, even borrow a karaoke machine. It is like I come back to life when I hear her voice.

This identification with Nora and the way Mandy gained vitality through her may be part of a gay continuum. Richard Dyer in his study of Judy Garland alludes to an “emotional register of great intensity which seems to bespeak equally suffering and survival, vulnerability and strength, theatricality and authenticity, passion and irony” (155). In light of Dyer’s contention that gay reception is governed by a persona’s constitution through “ordinariness, androgyny, and camp” (156), it might be productive to posit an equivalent matrix in relation to Nora Aunor: artifice, suffering, and polytropicality. The techniques of Nora to be liminal and spectacular, to languish and to transcend, and to shift registers of class, affect, mood, and sentiment create the conditions of a possible queering in both sadness and glee.

MONUMENT

It is, therefore, quite intuitive, that Himala inevitably is captured as an event, redacted as artifice, claimed as an object. It is in this space that cinema and Nora become so intricately that the devotional contract between Elsa and her crowd, Nora and her legion, cinema and its public come together. It also brings to a full circle the production of the film. It was Maria Imelda R. Marcos, daughter of Ferdinand and Imelda, who was the Director-General of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines when Himala was made. It was on her watch that the film was financed. And it was she who would commission the sculpture of Elsa in Paoay, Ilocos Norte, in 2014.

Gerry Leonardo, a well-known sculptor in the Philippine contemporary art scene, was tasked to conceptualize and realize it. Leonardo describes the sculpture as cast from two models, one for the body and the other for the head that most sharply resembles the subject. He used translucent fiberglass as material to best conjure the spectacle of a “beacon atop a desert hill.” In other words, the sculpture is lit from within as if it were a “spiritual yet mysterious lady floating on site at night.” The original plan was to put up an Elsa sculpture large enough to resist...
being “overwhelmed by the vast open space” of the sand dunes in Paoay. The site of the sculpture is the locale of the film, and so creating a continuum of the cinematic world and the world the cinema seeks to represent (see Figure 4). What disrupts the continuum would be the artifice of the sculpture that tends to arrest the flux of both worlds and detains an object in space, different from the moving image and different from everyday life; it is, therefore, at once an abstraction of the event and a recovery of the event in an overdetermination of landscape, mise en scène, and a future pilgrimage site. After all, as Rosalind Krauss asserts: “The logic of sculpture... is inseparable from the logic of monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation” (Krauss 133).

![Figure 4. Plans for the statue of Elsa in Paoay (right) and a comparable scene in Himala (dir. Ishmael Bernal, 1980). Left: screen capture for “POV: Iba’t Ibang Reaksyon sa Himala” [Different Reactions to Himala], Sa Puso ng Himala (Quezon City: Philippine Writers Studio Foundation, 2012): 166, used with permission; right: collaborative illustration by Gerry Leonardo & Marc Cosico, used with Mr. Leonardo's permission.](image)

This emergence of sculpture may partly be governed in the course of time by a Passional discourse in which the object is revisited, re-contemplated, and re-animated. The sculpture in the field memorializes the film along with its lifeworld of remembrances; and consequently reifies it as art. That said, the field of sculpture generates its own context, with art creating new conditions of encounter and reciprocities, new forms of becoming life, new communities of bodies. As Barbara Johnson interjects: “A monument...is supposed to confer on a memory the immortality that only inanimate things can possess. It seeks...to honor something mere living memory might forget, or something that demands a collective, not an individual response” (Johnson 39). However way it is imagined in this environment that stirs up traces of memory of the film, the person who is Elsa and Nora...
who becomes a thing that is the sculpture signify a certain process of facture, or the activity of having to be made. This could be what Johnson considers the “productiveness of self-alienation” (Johnson 22) of art as a kind of concretization, a symptom of the human inability to come to terms with the desire to be a thing and the failure of becoming one. As she puts it: “Whenever the subject looks, he sees only objects” (Johnson 232).

At this conjuncture, it is germane to implicate the cinema of Nora as a refraction of *Himala*, a dispersal of the diegesis across an oeuvre. Extremely relevant in this analysis of an oeuvre in relation to the locus classicus *Himala* are the films *Bakekang* (dir. F.H. Constantino, 1978) and *Bona* (dir. Lino Brocka, 1980). In the former, Nora’s face is deformed like a freak whose liaison with a white man begot a white daughter felicitously named Crystal; in the latter, she is nearly a slave to a movie extra or bit player who abuses her adulation. They are both tragic personages whose devotions to their objects of desire, who are aspirants in an industry viewed as potentially transformatory, are fatal. Bakekang, a character from a *komiks* serial by Carlo J. Caparas, drives her daughter to fatigue and eventually to death; and Bona, upon realizing that she is nothing in the eyes of her idol, pours boiling water on him during their routine ablutions. This is the last scene of *Bona*, indicating that she might be locked up for the act of scalding or even killing her god. Bakekang for her part wanders aimlessly in the streets distraught, recognizing in every little girl her dead Crystal. Taken together as a cluster of films, *Himala*, *Bakekang*, and *Bona* weave a thesis on mystification, the spectacle-effect via the culture industry in the formation of subjectivities that are so beholden to the opacity of objects, this carapace or sheen of image, that blinds them into belief. *Bona* alludes to the intersection between entertainment and religion when it opens with the Quiapo procession, a frenetic event around the devotion to the Black Nazarene in Manila that can last a day, and *Bakekang* may be read as an allegory of Nora herself: a dark girl from Iriga who conquers the mass media in Manila whose history is projected onto Crystal, thus exposing the limit of this conquest and also surfacing the repressed desire of the industry for the white girl, “white love” in the phraseology of the historian Vicente Rafael. Nora as actress becomes the worshipper with excessive empathy and trust. This limit and this repression end up in the death of the idol and the psychosis of the idolater, and uncannily in the universe of Nora, in sculpture. As Johnson would reprise the Narcissus problematic: “A self-image can suffer all the distortions to which any image is susceptible, but it can be known only as an object, not a subject. A subject can only cry out, ‘I am that!’ – which does not at all imply that the subject can be that” (49).

The subject’s intersubjectivity or *pakikipagkapwa* is, therefore, frustrated by objectification or *paggamit*, or by the instrumentalization of the other, be it spirit or mortal, or *pagkasangkapan*, a word that indexes “possession” in myriad degrees. It
becomes apparent then that a good part of Nora’s cinema rests on a misrecognition that her performance interrogates and deconstructs. This misrecognition is a cross between the literal maling akala or mistaken recognition or the metaphorical pagbabakasali, or risk-taking. The famous incantation of would-be immigrant Corazon de la Cruz in Minsa’y Isang Gamu-gamo (dir. Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara, 1976) in front of an American officer trying to pay respects to her brother who has been gunned down while scrounging for bullet shells in the American military bases would be: “My brother is not a pig; he is not a wild pig; he is a person.” And in ‘Merika (dir. Gil Portes, 1984), the nurse Mila Cruz returns to Manila after it dawns on her that America is a lie. The spectacle of the media, with a history spanning the political economy of the Philippine film industry and the career of Nora, is misrecognized and ultimately forsaken, the likeness of its promise disfigured.

In responding to the constraints of the project in Ilocos Norte, the sculptor of the Elsa monument Leonardo “thought it best to integrate the mound and pathway elements to the sculpture piece and allow for the ‘spiritual’ experience” to do its work. He continues that such a scheme may actually be an “anticipation of the sculpture as a pilgrimage site with Ms. Aunor as a metaphor for a ‘beacon’ for those who aspire to make it in the film industry.” If such were the project, Elsa the visionary and the vessel of the Virgin finally constitutes a devotional object and a template of earthly accomplishment. Moreover, its emplacement in Paoay initiates a process of pilgrimage for the followers of Nora and those who see in Nora the persona of Elsa via the film Himala. In fact, Leonardo has observed: “Some admirers were seen to have touched the sculpture with their ‘panyo’ [handkerchief] gesture à la Nazareno.” With the hand of the pilgrim (be)holding the sculpture, devotion is consummated and its persistence guaranteed. The film Himala that can be watched over and over again will have found its co-incident in the sculpture that can be revisited as often as possible. The reproducibility of film and the ritualization of pilgrimage further infuse the mythology of Elsa and Nora and all the more the two intensely cohabit each other in time, across time, and many times over. Mary Doane’s notes on contingency, a circumstance and a consequence that presuppose contact as well as contiguity, are essential in this confrontation between the hand of the believer or the beholder and the artifice of Elsa/Nora. Doane teases out the haptic and the performative in relation to the optic and the aural, redistributing the miracle of Elsa/Nora across the sands of Ilocos as a kind of sensible touching, or a touching moment in which a state of confusion is adumbrated:

Touching and happening are thus linguistically entangled here. Touch is the sense that is most strongly correlated with the real, while sight and hearing are always vulnerable to hallucinations. Touch cannot be exercised at a distance. Contingency, outside of any design, plan, or intention, bears witness to a real whose very lack of predictability reinforces its reality. (Doane 349)
The myth of Nora and the miracle of Elsa confound and confabulate, therefore.

The silhouette of the Elsa sculpture also “takes inspiration from the boat prow goddess that guides us through ‘rough’ waves,” says the sculptor. This compass would not have been possible if Nora’s likeness was not privileged. Leonardo relates that when Nora saw the sculpture, she exclaimed “Kamukha ko” [It resembles me]. It marks some kind of aporetic moment in which the misrecognition of, and identification with, the monument, the art, and the image masks a condition of alterity constituted by a long history of refusals along the lines of class, colonialism, gender, religion, taste, and appearance itself.

The figure that becomes the sculpture is taken from a scene in the film, an iconic pose of Elsa, deeply communing with the spirit of the Virgin, kneeling, hands clasped, head lifted upward, wind sweeping her tresses. Here, realism insinuates itself, a faithfulness to cinematic detail is sought; this testifies to the authority of film as visual culture and of the cogency of Nora as icon. The iconic reference has to be assured so that the indexicality of the relational could be achieved. Such a moment reminds us of another image that is captured in medias res, as it were, the Black Nazarene of Quiapo in genuflection after a fall. And in more recent time, a monument likewise halts the moment when Benigno Aquino, archrival of Marcos, descends the stairs of the airplane, seconds before he is gunned down by Rolando Galman, who is allegorized in Lino Brocka’s Gumapang Ka sa Lusak. But the consummate cognate might be Our Lady of EDSA, a sculptural homage to the EDSA revolt, dedicated to one of its alleged inspirations, Our Lady of Fatima, a Marian variation that had appeared to three children in Portugal and was said to have augured the conversion of the Soviet Union in the eighties. In Manila, her presence in the EDSA rebellion was marked either through statuary held aloft by the religious or through the visions of some of the protagonists in which the Virgin had honored them with her apparition. In the shrine for the EDSA event, she is somewhat indigenized, made Philippine, by the sculptor Virginia Ty-Navarro much to the consternation of art critics enamored of modernism. Here, EDSA as embodied by the Virgin Mary of whom the Marcos successor Corazon Aquino, the paradigmatic cacique who restored the oligarchy displaced by the previous regime, was a steadfast servant, ossifies into monument. One might glean in this arrangement a possible redistribution of the sensible with Himala’s rebuke of the “authoritarian” and the prospective transition to the “democratic” by way of Aquino. But this is not to be the case. In the same way, Himala petrifies into sculpture in the guise of Elsa in the act of channeling the Virgin in the desert of Paoay that is hopelessly Marcos country. This corruption of the animate image is Elsa’s false prophesy that is also the current Philippine political.
Notes

A part of this text was originally written for Rogue magazine (2011), and has greatly benefited from the author’s conversation with Eufracio Abaya.

1. I am indebted to J. Pilapil (Jayson) Jacobo for the elaboration of this concept in his dissertation titled “Mood and Metaphor.”

2. The quotation is taken from the recollection of Rene Guatlo.

3. Another line of inquiry that may be pursued is the translation of the film Himala to a musical initially titled Walang Himala (2003) and remade into Himala: The Musical (2013). This effort implicates Nora Aunor’s medium, which is music, and the response of the youth to the film.

4. All quotations from Gerry Leonardo are taken from email correspondence with author (May 2014).
Works Cited


