Iterations of the impossible: questions of a digital revolution in the Philippines

JONATHAN BELLER

Film is Dead. Please omit flowers.

Khavn

In a brilliant essay entitled ‘In the Womb of the Global Economy: Anak and the Construction of Transnational Imaginaries,’ University of the Philippines professor and activist Sarah Raymundo argues that Rory Quintos’s widely acclaimed film Anak [Child], ‘displaces History with narrative imperialism through cinematic mediation.’ Raymundo takes the concept ‘History’ (capital ‘H’) from Jameson’s ‘seminal work, The Political Unconscious,’ and the concept ‘narrative imperialism’ from Spivak’s Critique of Postcolonial Reason in order to suggest that despite appearances to the contrary, the film is an engine of reaction. Anak is a narrative film about a mother (Vilma Santos) who had to leave her family behind in the Philippines to work as a maid in Hong Kong. In a melodramatic and emotional tableau, it depicts her oppression as a domestic in Hong Kong and catalogues the numerous difficulties she faces with the children she left behind while delivering care to the children of her employer, particularly in the perennial and escalating conflicts she experiences with her troubled daughter Clara (Claudine Barreto) during return trips home. In Hong Kong, the protagonist is locked up by her employers, her wages are withheld, and she is treated as less than human. In Manila, the family whom she has supported with her remittances resents her and deceives her even as it counts on her money and longs for her love. Throughout the film, Santos’s character suffers, labours, accommodates, aspires, heals and understands. How can a populist film that is at once a lamentation of the conditions archetypically faced by OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) and a recognition, even glorification, of the courage that these unsung heroes bring to bear on such difficult conditions be part of a neo-imperialist undertaking?

The answer to this question can be found by attending to the formal dimensions of this representation, as well as to its mediological determinants in the global economy. In exploring this question of the mobilization of reactionary affects by ostensibly progressive media, we will also want to move beyond it in order to interrogate the political potential of cultural forms presently emerging; that is, in the Philippine context, we will want to analyse some of the strategies and limitations of the tried and (no longer so) true
protest genres of melodrama and realism, as well as of those emergent in the current explosion of digital cinema. To anticipate somewhat, I should think that we will find that the emergent digital does not simply represent a kind of aesthetic sea-change; rather, in some deeper way that we will have to make manifest, it is that change. Put another way, Regis Debray’s mediological paradigm, by which the term ‘communication’ is replaced with ‘mediation,’ is being realized in capitalist practice in the post/neo-colony, and more importantly from a political point of view finds its conditions of possibility here. Even if virtual reality is the order of the day, its emergence is indexical in some respect. Transformations in the media environment are inexorably linked to shifts in the dynamics of the socius.³

Speaking of Anak’s role in the situation of Filipino visual culture Raymundo writes, ‘Narrative Imperialism in this context operates to privilege personal accounts and singular voices which consequently displace History in the visual economy’ (p 9); in other words, ‘cinematic mediation transforms itself into a human drama, the drama of life’ (p 10). For Raymundo, this transformation of a mechinic array into something ostensibly human uses economic and technological vectors that are in fact alien (alienated in Marx’s sense) to create a point of subjectification that allows viewers a certain forgetfulness of ‘the actual conditions of possibilities of Filipina migrant labor’ (p 17)—which, in shorthand, would include Spanish colonialism, US imperialism, the feminization of labour and globalization/neo-imperialism—and generates

an instance wherein narrative imperialism displaces History ([a.k.a.] the contradictions within the current stage of global capitalism that conditions migrant labor). . . . This is why, it should not be a surprise . . . [that in] Carla’s testimony [regarding her mother’s heroism in her moment of familial reconciliation], which is Anak’s conclusive discourse on migrant labor, the Philippine state and the neoliberal discourse are one in extolling the migrant laborer as the ‘new hero.’ (p 17)

The point is not that the efforts, situations and sufferings of OFWs and their families are not disproportionate when measured according to the norms of the global middle class, or even with respect to the daily expectations of many more traditional Filipino families. The constant flow of remittances sustaining the otherwise flailing economy with money from the tech, energy and tourist economies that OFWs’ work sustains, and of body-bags from the Philippine diaspora back to the homeland, is there to remind us of the innumerable and at times insurmountable challenges faced by OFWs. However the recognition of the heroic undertakings of OFWs is not in itself some sort of victory over global capital; here it is a social script given spectacular valorization.

Narrative imperialism scores the imagination and stages a command performance of the spectator’s desire that legitimates and thus reproduces the status quo. If Raymundo dislikes Anak for subsuming the crises of economic unsustainability, ceaseless violence, foreclosed possibility and systemic super-exploitation under the narrative trope of the national hero, one might equally
dislike the compulsory crying and mandatory tears one must shed as a spectator of this melodrama each time a sacred mother–child bond is broken at every flashed-back departure for Hong Kong, during each angry misunderstanding and every terrible moment of isolation, each poignant familial memory of a past that had so much promise and is no more, and of course during the longed for and climactic, post-abortion mother–daughter reconciliation. For it is in the machinic reorganization of the imagination that this film does its work, and, we must add, demands work of the spectator as s/he engages with the spectacle. Anak provides a critique of sorts, but in Mbembe’s damning term, an all too convivial one. It commandeers spectators’ affective faculties and enjoins them to produce an iteration of reality that, while admitting flaws in the socius, can be accommodated with the compensatory recognition of the OFW as hero.

This commandeering of spectatorial labour occurs in many viscerally affecting scenes that admit no detachment if they are to bring off their productive effect. These scenes practically require that we shed tears for Clara’s shattered family. This compulsory crying, this emotional tax we might say, is extorted from the spectator who wants to understand Philippine reality and to see images that might be adequate to our contemporary situation and life experience. Of course it would be naïve to maintain that there is not some pleasure to be derived from crying here, in paying for this taxing pathos with one’s emotional resources: we would not want to miss that there is some rather complex form of recognition available to a variety of spectators who come to the film from various class and national contexts. As mentioned earlier, the film would confer a point of subjectification upon the spectator and, in Althusserian fashion, such an interpellation also confers a sense of reality. However, when paying this pathetic tax, a kind of behaviouristic commandeering of the emotions and the imagination leaves no space for a failure to feel in accord with the script. One cannot find a space of contemplation, nor any room for irony or detachment, nor indeed can one find any time to think, and still remain in some proper relation to the melodrama. This foreclosure of a space of ambivalence and reflection, a foreclosure that I would argue is built into the overall narrative movement of the film, with its relentless emotional tableaux and unitary temporality, allies this project with Eisenstein’s avant-gardist view of cinema, ‘a tractor plowing over the psyche in a particular class context,’ though here we would want to substitute ‘national’ for ‘class,’ and also recognize that this avant-garde is not the one that will be waging the revolution.

The quasi-corporeal reorganization of the spectator’s imagination vis-à-vis the scripted reorganization of emotions—what, following Pavlov, Eisenstein called the reconditioning of the conditioned reflexes—also happens to correspond to those physio-psychological adaptations required by the structures of everyday life in the global service economy as we are commanded to perform servile labour—labour which demands a subjective-emotional output (such as that required in domestic, call-centre and sales work situations—all of which are highly capitalized, state-supported Philippine endeavours). This emotional correspondence to the requisites of everyday as well as the techno-capitalist commandeering and redeployment
of these emotional capacities makes *Anak* look much like what Adorno decried as typical of culture-industry productions: an after-image of the work process. The form of the work has changed since mid-century modernity, and so have the images, but nonetheless *Anak* organizes our feelings in accord with an ideology that is in the service of a state and a capitalist economy that in some registers are almost undifferentiable. From this perspective one might grasp that the film takes both OFW and the spectator as media, even though these relations are neither thematized nor understood. In this it subsumption and incorporation of the worker-spectator into the logic of its transmission, *Anak* is one with neo-colonial capitalist production. The film can thus be understood as a machine for the general intellect, and the script a way of reworking the score (in Virno’s special sense of that term) for the parameters of discourse and feeling. Necessary for the machines function is a suppression not only of the historical conditions of possibility for its narrative, but a consciousness and critique of the mediatic and spectacular dimensions of social action in economies which are increasingly visual/digital, even as they continue to require embodied servile labour. What one might hope for then are other models of community, nationality, history, collectivity and agency—in short, different and (yes) better politics, along with a more serviceable something else that no longer seems optional in serious political thought: aesthetics.

One place to go seeking alternative ‘distributions of the sensible,’ as Rancière has nominated the category of the aesthetic, might be digital cinema. I do not mean to ignore the courageous anti-state, pro-masa documentary work done by groups such as Southern Tagalog Exposure, or the alternative cinemas being made by indigenous groups such as Abatan Records and Indigenous Film Productions in the Cordilleras—a study of these types of efforts seems essential to have a more complete picture of Philippine visual culture, cultural production and struggle. Here, however, I focus on the fact that in the past five years in the Philippines nearly 100 feature-length digital films have been realized along with countless shorts. Indeed commentators and perhaps the filmmakers themselves are beginning to speak of ‘a third Golden Age of Philippine Cinema.’

Recently I was asked by Jo Labanyi, Director of the King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center at NYU, to comment on two digital films being screened by the centre (it seems that Spain is becoming more interested in its former colonies). The films were Raya Martin’s *Maicling peligula nang ysaŋ indio nacional (O Ang Mahabang Kalungkutan ng Katagalugan)* (A Short Film about the Indio Nacional (Or, The Prolonged Sorrow of Filipinos) and Khavn de la Cruz’s *Idol*. Martin, a youth of 24, has made four feature films including his most recent, the 4’40’ *Now Showing*, which at the time of writing was showing at Cannes, and Khavn (pronounced Khan, like Cannes) has made over twenty-five features and seventy shorts, and at the ripe old age of 35 is already known as ‘the father of digital cinema in the Philippines.’ Khavn is also a composer, a Palanca-awarded writer, an accomplished musician, and front man for a punk-rock band, The Brockas (the band is named after cinema great Lino
Brocka, includes digital filmmakers Khavn, John Torres and Lav Diaz, and is regularly billed as ‘the greatest band you never heard of’). What is important to note from these ‘underground’ successes, in addition to the emergence of much talent at both digital filmmaking and self-promotion, is a kind of worldliness to these new undertakings that is analogous and yet counter to the aspirations of some of the more mainstream ‘independent’ digital cinemas. Independent films over the last year or two, such as Chris Martinez’s recent Cinemalaya success entitled 100, which chronicles the last three months in the life of a cancer-stricken woman, aspire to the universal (and also to commercial distribution) by suppressing aspects of traditional Filipino filmmaking that allowed the site-specific grit of daily life, an untranslatable local, to emerge in the form of everything from ‘low’ production values of a certain kind, to sweat, to city sounds, and forms of speech, as well as from the generic point of view, melodramatic and realist plastic qualities and structures of feeling. 100, offering a bucket list of things to do before the main character dies, prominently features a bourgeois apartment in one of Manila’s new urban cores, characters whose clothes are always new and clean, and ‘experiences’ that ‘everyone’ might covet, such as gorging oneself on Häagen-Dazs, kissing a stranger on the street, or eating exotic Filipino dishes, food that is here produced as one more possible eating experience amid the universal desire for a sanitized consumption of global difference. In contrast, Martin’s and Khavn’s films have a worldliness about them that differs from the universality of commodified reception and bourgeois experience characteristic of the aspiration of their more market-driven counterparts. However, what is significant is that, in nearly all cases, the Philippines is imagined as site for the operations of and encounters with globality.

Martin’s film, Indio Nacional, is divided into two sections: a digital prologue depicting in excruciating real time a portion of a sleepless night that lasts about fourteen minutes, and then a 16mm silent section of about seventy-five minutes comprised of vignettes ostensibly shot circa 1890 and accompanied by piano music composed and performed by Khavn. Khavn’s film Idol is a riotously troubling farce, also comprised of a series of vignettes, each shot in some multiply parodic relation to various film, television and art genres, during which the hero Bayani Makapili (whose name means Hero Villian) finds himself in a sequence of impossibly tight spots that prevent him from really getting the film going.

From these descriptions, I hope it is clear that both of these films are anti-films. Each film in its own way refuses various cinematic conventions regarding time, space, and narrative structure. Raya Martin’s film of a history that, properly speaking, does not exist is a film that never was, and Khavn’s film about the impossible aspiration to be a hero in a society in which heroism is only possible on TV and in the movies is a film that never could be.

Because we (should) now know that cinema is imbricated in the production and reproduction of what passes for ‘reality,’ and furthermore that representations that promulgate historical imagination and disseminate narrative function are machines for the making of history, we can therefore
see that each film stands in some antagonistic relation not just to film history, but to History. One useful comparison here might be to see these two films against the backdrop of what is sometimes called ‘the Second Golden Age of Philippine Cinema’ (Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mike De Leon, Laurice Guillen, Marilou Diaz-Abaya, among others). This cinema, which flourished during Martial Law, found its strong (protest) form primarily in Social Realism (secondarily in melodrama) and drew its compositional principles from a synthetic approach of the relation to objectivity laid out by Mao in his Talks at the Yenan Forum and somewhat differently by Lukacs in his analysis of realism. Specifically in the Philippines, typical provincial figures who for one reason or another associated with modernization can no longer sustain themselves in their traditional communities move to the metropolis in pursuit of survival, a better life and, of course, their dreams. In Manila, they strive for self-realization only to be destroyed by social forces beyond their control. These films were interested in the relationship between subjective aspirations and objective conditions, and showed the ways in which objective factors of colonialism, feudalism and capitalism combined with modernization to first overdetermine and then further delimit subjective potential. Thus, in many films, particularly Brocka’s, there was effectively an incitement to revolution because it became clear that only by changing the character and organization of society itself could individuals realize their dreams.

Without going too much more deeply into that history, I would want to note in passing another significant strain that arose in Second Golden Age cinema. This strain has to do with the reality of dreams themselves, that is, the poetic thematization of the subjective experiences and aspirations that were somehow disallowed by reality and were thus to be de-realized by the conventions of social realism as a form of individual fantasy that had to be overcome, let go of, and abandoned. Ishmael Bernal’s Manila By Night is probably the classic example here of a film that allowed those dream elements to achieve enough density to transform the plastic quality of the cinema text, but you see the resurfacing of these narratologically out of place yet nonetheless potent crystals of fantasy elsewhere as well (Chito Roño). These crystals were Solaris-like eruptions of fantasmagoria within the fabric of a realist text that seem to float on the tide of realism as a kind of purposeless but persistent iteration of the impossible, an expression of foreclosed dreams. These impossible elements—the aesthetic climax of Manila By Night that is willfully set apart from the narrative climax, or the provincial lovers’ kiss in Roño’s Curacha that stops a coup attempt—are foreclosed, as it were, by the movement of the Real itself and exist only in the interstices of the Real, or at least of Realism.

It is, perhaps, as iterations of the impossible that the two digital films named above could be discussed. In very different ways they are efforts to represent and perform iterations of Filipino life foreclosed by History, which is to say that they are developments of spaces and aspects disallowed both by Realism and its Real, i.e. the Real (both content and concept) that pertains to a certain world-historical representational regime; the Real understood as the truth-effect/meta-physical anchor/discursive placeholder for presence of a
certain modality of analysis that is itself being displaced by the historical re-
repurposing of the functionality of the signifier.

The synopsis that accompanies Martin’s film is as follows: ‘Set in the 1890s 
brewing revolution of Filipinos against Spain, Indio Nacional is a collection 
of silent film actualities revolving around an indio, the common man, during 
the colonial times. The film sketches the difficult situations of a people 
previously excluded from historical considerations. . . .’ This is to say that, 
like the term ‘indio’ itself, which in an act of ongoing violence imposes an 
extrinsic nomenclature on a people (or in fact on peoples who may not have 
thought themselves together), official history and its representations, along 
with the representations that uncritically draw upon this history, exclude the 
various experiences of interiority, temporality, community, indeed of life-
worlds that in the long gesture of colonialism were mis-identified and/or 
erased. Thus Indio Nacional can be seen as a kind of impossible compensa-
tion, at once an experiment and a corrective to what has been, in effect, the 
commandeering of History and everything that the term implies. The collision 
with contemporary film genres, the effort to remake artifacts which given the 
way things were could not have existed, is an effort to stave off the 
disappearance orchestrated by coloniality, imperialism and its history to 
date. This is why we have in Martin’s words, ‘the prolonged sorrow of the 
Filipino.’ Regarding this prolonged sorrow—extending from Spanish coloni-
list to the present—we might connect this film to the American efforts to 
disappear Filipinos with methods that included killing between one-tenth and 
one-sixth of the population of the Philippines during the Philippine-
American war, and to the US-backed Marcos effort to disappear the masses 
and their claims with the imposition of martial law which included press 
censorship, militarization, hamletting and the ‘salvaging’ of thousands, and 
also the current GMA administration’s efforts to suppress the legitimate 
claims of the people, by falsifying election returns, reclassifying insurgents as 
terrorists, accepting hundreds of millions in ‘military aid’ for the US global 
war on terror, and presiding over more than 900 extrajudicial killings at home 
during the past five years. Currently the repression is so intense, and 
sovereignty so obviously illegitimate, that numerous contradictory media 
adjustments are required daily to re-spin the government’s position on nearly 
every issue. Indeed, the prevailing political atmosphere is less of repression 
and more of farce—but no less deadly for all that. As if the proliferation of 
versions, the ecstasy of communication, had overtaken the function of 
repressive dictatorship in the sorrowful suppression of class struggle.

Given the current hyper-state/capital-mediated atmosphere for representa-
tion in the Philippines, we can bring this struggle against disappearance into 
even sharper focus utilizing the following Bazinian comments from Martin in 
an interview with Mark Peranson published in CinemaScope:

I become really excited whenever I see actualities and silent films. I think a silent 
film is how I really see cinema. It’s an exact transportation of time and space, 
and that there’s something about the purity of images, to see just the images
themselves, moving, and understanding that what you’re seeing was a real space in a real time.\textsuperscript{14}

It is clear from these comments that what for Bazin constitutes the unique character of cinema, ‘the object itself, freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it [since in reality, these change],’ is for Martin nothing less than cinema’s punctum.\textsuperscript{15} It is this prick of the Real, what Bazin saw as a ‘decal or transfer’ and what Martin calls the transportation of time and space, that has captivated him. It is also precisely here in this indexical aspect of photography that Barthes locates its unique essence, its \textit{noesis}, what he calls the ‘that has been’ of the photograph. And it is this indexical aspect of those now older analogue new media, the gramophone and the cinema, that for Friedrich Kittler harbours what is nothing short of an evolutionary change for humanity in as much as, all of a sudden and for the first time in history, the archive can overcome ‘the bottleneck of the signifier.’ Prior to these technologies all aspects of the past that were not communicated through traditional culture and architecture had to pass through the symbolic—in short, had to be written down. Thus we can see that Martin’s \textit{Indio Nacional} is an effort to return to a euphoric moment in the emergence of indexical technologies (before the rise of simulation) and instantiate the absent real of a subaltern history—times and spaces that because of the violence of circumstance were never allowed to impress themselves in the archive, that is, on representation, in any way whatever such that they might, now, pour forth. The shift from symbolic to indexical technologies, with their incessant harvesting of what Benjamin would call ‘the optical unconscious,’ indicates that in the Postcolony, even the Political Unconscious has been eliminated from the archive. This remove is more extreme than the analysis of the symptom or trace will remedy. Historico-technological process itself has repressed to the point of exclusion the appearing of ontological aspects of Filipino history—even as cipher or trace—and Martin has had to invent them.

This reading in which Martin simulates a reality in order to posit a Real that is more real than the Real, deeper as it were than the elisions and absences discernable in the form of or at the margins of the images that \textit{we do} have, allows us to see that the invention of a reality that \textit{had to be there but has been suppressed in historical mediation} is a kind of answer to the allegorical story told (in digital) during the sleepless night of the character in the prologue of \textit{Indio Nacional}. In this story a young witness is asked by the figure of the nation itself to move a mountain seen in the distance and place it on top of the ruler-exploiters that the nation has just buried. If the silent ‘actualities’ that Martin creates in order to capture the space-time Real of the Katipunan-in-formation are understood as a response to this allegory, then it is as if the impossible yet essential Real is the restless unconscious which keeps us awake during the night of false history, and that being forced to invent that impossible real, to restore the archive and therefore instantiate a History that is doubly repressed since it is not even legible in the margins of...
official, colonial history, may be the only way to move the mountain that will bury the historical oppressors (who are still upon us) once and for all.

This treatment of the unconscious and the Real, which despite being at a higher level of remove (because doubly absent) is in spirit much closer to the Lacanian Marxism of Althusser and Jameson then it is to that of Lukacs and Mao, should be contrasted with the treatments offered in the Representational ‘Realism’ of films like Anak which take their reality for granted, and also with the Social Realism characteristic of the Second Golden Age, which sees reality as something to be uncovered, and, what’s more, as something there to be uncovered. From Raymundo’s analysis of Anak we might see that what I call the world-media system is the unconscious of the film and that it is to remain the unconscious—necessarily so if the film is to realize its narrative and aesthetic effects. In social realism, the unconscious is more closely allied with the real relations of production, but it is presumed that through the careful intensification of the contradictions that inhere in the dominant ideology these real relations can be made narratively legible and therefore analytically discernable and strategically acted upon. The Real clearly has a different status in the digital moment for the hindsight of the digital and the paradigm of the database allow us to grasp that the lacuna in narrative (History in the ellipses) and the lacuna of the archive do not occupy the same epistemological status. To understand the full import of this claim also means to recognize that the delinking of the Real from consciousness via the Lacanian schema of the symbolic (which defines the Real as that which eludes symbolization) was an historical phase in the marginalization of the Real which was advanced (intensified) by the subsequent depresencing of being in Post-structuralism, and that, furthermore, these ostensibly autonomous theories were symptomatic of the mediated organization of global society as it achieved an increasing virtualization. They are theories appropriate to certain stages in the mediatic domination of social becoming. In other words, the displacement of realism by the digital allows for the understanding that the Real, as well as History, were simulations of the colonial media and the colonial archive.

It is interesting that Martin’s new film, Now Showing, has at its centre remnants and remainders from the lost history of Philippine cinema. The film, about a young woman, Rita, who works in her parents’ bootleg VHS/DVD rental shop, is split into two parts—the first a low tech amateur section looking on the end of her childhood, and the second a more polished section about her life as a disaffected young woman. Between these sections it situates a montage of deteriorated cinema fragments. We could compare this absence of images with Jacques Rancière’s treatment of Godard’s Historie(s) du Cinema, a film that is composed in significant part with images from the West’s film archive. Rancière understands Godard’s utilization of historical clips as at once a kind of critique of lost opportunities and abrogated responsibilities, but also, precisely because these materials are used to posit an alternative to history, as a form of redemptive advance. If Rancière is correct in saying that, ‘History, properly speaking, is this relationship of interiority that puts every image into relation with every other,’ Martin may be
understood to be asking, what are the consequences for a postcolonial nation such as the Philippines where, comparatively speaking, there are so few extant images? In a world saturated by images, and where some of the new aesthetico-political strategies are thought in terms of ‘re-mediation’ and ‘inter-mediation’—whereby one shifts the significance of images by shifting montage elements, contexts and platforms—Martin’s character Rita (and the ten million like her) has little to work with in order to construct a history that might be hers. With so few indigenous images to work with, how could a Filipino artist be a contemporary Godard? More importantly, what is the role of the filmmaker in the absence of an archive of her own? How could one constitute a subaltern history that cleaves closer to the agency of the colonized rather than merely being discernable from the unevenness of the colonial record? The archive perpetrated by imperial powers in an automatic, de facto and therefore ‘natural’ fashion during the ‘ordinary’ operation of their new recording devices is almost insurmountable. Particularly because, since with Foucault on the one hand and the contemporary analysis of the spectacle on the other, we can now see that violence was built into the sheer function or even absence of the apparatus, because the organization of the visible world has become decisive for world history and because media-technologies are never degree-zero political entities but are always already invested with the logic of their conditions of emergence and use. Thus, in addition to the well documented racist, sexist and psychological exigencies that have been shown by scholars such as Malek Alloula and Vicente Rafael to pervade early photographs, we must also consider the form, that is, the very fact, of the archive itself. Therefore the attrition rate of the archive in colonial-postcolonial societies such as the Philippines (which, due, in short, to historically produced poverty, cannot afford to preserve even the indexical materials that did get made as the world-media system was being built) is extremely urgent. This attrition, combined with sheer absence, may even limn the Real. This Real is not to be found in the interstices of representation; it is neither repressed nor unconscious, nor even there to ‘elude symbolization.’ It is, in short, outside, and consequently, impossible.

If Raya Martin feels impelled to invent an outside to representation (displacing the unconscious of the archive, with an impossible unconscious of an archive that does not exist) as a way of bolstering the sensibility that the story of the Philippines is one of deferred justice, then Khavn de la Cruz seems to operate from the sensibility that representation is all and thus that there is no outside to representation and most likely no possible justice. It is in Khavn’s work that we really can grasp the contemporary relationship between digitization, capitalization, narrative, representation and interiority.

Elsewhere (in ‘The Poverty of Farce’), I have analysed Idol in some detail, referring to the impossibility for the film to get a proper story going, the utilization of the ‘Get ready to rock’ FM radio voice-over as a lubricating interlude between vignettes that ceaselessly demonstrate the failure of the film’s hero/villain to live up to the ideas of the hero, and invoking Sianne Ngai’s new aesthetic category of the stuplime (an ego-shattering accumulation of comic fatigues) to describe the film. From the opening scene of the film
in which a mentally and physically challenged person is commanded by an offscreen voice to sing Bayang Magiliw, the Philippine national anthem, we see that one of the topics of Idol is the idea of Command Performance. Because television heroism and televisual/cinematic conventions have so profoundly structured the imaginary (this is one of the great themes of the drama of Idol’s principal character Bayani Makapili), audiences/social actors have internalized these scripts and use them to imagine their relation to reality and indeed to tactically organize their actions. This insight of Khavn’s is given a strong theoretical articulation in the work of Paolo Virno, who, in Grammar of the Multitude, convincingly argues that virtuosity has become a significant, if not the dominant, mode of valorization of late capitalist society. For Virno, the meaning of what Hardt and Negri call ‘the real subsumption of society by capital’ is that we now perform virtuosically, according to the score of the general intellect that we have internalized and that scripts the various activities that we engage in—both for our own survival and for the production and reproduction of society. For Virno, the effect of this expanded domain of production which now covers the entire socius is that capital has appropriated the last vestiges of the commons, i.e. language itself. In short, capital has captured the cognitive-linguistic capacities of humankind and nearly checkmated linguistic representation’s liberatory potential.

In passing it is worth pointing out that what is missing in Virno’s striking account, aside from an acknowledgement of his (unconscious?) debt to Marxist feminism and theories of servile labour, is an understanding of the role of capitalized media in the expropriation of the linguistic commons. Real subsumption does not take place in the absence of capitalized media technologies; however, ‘new left’ beyond-Marx Marxism has ‘advanced’ with little attention to the materiality, gender-politics, or even geographies— in short, the material mediations—of the very transformations (‘immaterial labor’) it has abstracted. While this is a necessary polemic, we can see here, with respect to the Philippine context, the impossibility of utilizing the old generic forms because of the changed situation of representation that brings about the failure/obsolescence of the realist, and the heroic narrative urgently demands a new set of aesthetic categories—i.e. the stuplime—along with new insights into the meaning and possibilities of affect, viscerality and performativity. In Idol, Khavn suggests that when aspiring for notoriety in accord with given cultural scripts, the common person’s virtuosic performance is always also a failed performance. This gives performativity in the postcolony a farcical aspect and reveals Khavn’s strategy of displaying the workings of power endemic to communication, now mediation. With the capitalization of the techno-visible and the expropriation of the linguistic commons, expropriation is endemic to ‘communication,’ which is to say that it is the very mediation of social logic. And since in the Philippines farce has become something like the meta-political reality—a corrupt, small-power nation is also subject to the same performative failures as it tries to take on the mantle of dignified sovereignty in a situation in which, to maintain its sovereignty, it has to regularly resort to extrajudicial measures, such as political killings and the censorship produced by the allied chilling effect, that
violate the conventions of reality. Because of the chill, and all that underlies it, in the Philippines, everyone knows the score and thus more or less willingly participates in the farce that passes under the signs of ‘democracy’ and ‘rule of law.’ The current investment of capital in signification and all the other mediations of the social renders these state-forms, along with heroism itself, impossible.

We also see from *Idol* the total imbrication of consciousness and cinematic convention. This dialectic between what once was called human being and media machines is manifest not only by the very organization, themes and structures of the impossible narrative, but also by the presence of ‘critics’ in the film whose comments necessitate the film’s five and a half separate endings. In one, Bayani Makapili lifts himself up on his hands before dying in order to declaim twenty or so of the most famous lines from Philippine cinema, and in another Bida (Bayana Makapili’s very own idol who came out of the TV in a moment of Bayani Makapili’s desperation to help him) fails, because of a brown-out, to be able to jump back into the TV and is left half in and half out. This relic, a TV screen with Bida’s legs and butt sticking out, is promptly taken to ‘Christies’ and auctioned off as art. Thus the film has not only a farcical notion of both high and low cultural production, but a completely cybernetic dimension to its understanding of human agency such that the distinction between bodies and machines is no longer discernable: media codes have overtaken the very structures of narrative, of the imagination, and of corporeal praxis. This cybernetic incorporation of codes into bodies and of bodies into codes speaks in turn to the larger metaphysical issues raised by the question of the digital itself, to the question implicit in ‘This is not a film by Khavn,’ ‘Filmless Films’ and ‘Be Movies’ that always appear in the opening titles of Khavn’s digital works. For we are talking here about a transformation of the material substrate of representation itself, in which one cannot help but ‘be movies’ even as the older metaphysics of the cinema, and its analogical relation to the real, have been vitiated. This of course would mean that all statements that would ground themselves on the real have been rendered highly suspect if not impossible. Using *Idol* to illuminate metaphysical questions (Khavn would love this), one could say that it’s media all the way down and that from now on the most intractable realities will have to make their way in the digital if they are to make their way at all.

In another film Khavn seems to challenge and confirm this reading, which suggests that the situation of knowledge and action is heretofore always-already cybernetic. I want to conclude here by speaking about, or rather ‘near-by’ as Trinh Min-ha might say, Khavn’s incredible film *Squatterpunk.*\(^{20}\) In some respects *Squatterpunk* is as simple and as monumental as Warhol’s epic eight-hour film, *Empire,* composed of one continuous shot of the Empire State Building (shot at twenty-four frames per second but to be viewed at sixteen). However in Khavn’s dialectical image, rather then allowing the immensity and duration of capitalist achievement to conjure directly from the substance of the viewer something akin to World History as the conditions of possibility for the image of the vertical mass that the viewer sees on the
screen, *Squatterpunk* juxtaposes shots of squatter children living on the outskirts of Manila with a punk-rock soundtrack, in order to create the conditions for a new and profoundly complex experience.21

The children swimming through the dense and toxic garbage on some coast on the outskirts of Manila combine play and work as they gather plastic in their small nets in order to sell it for a few pesos to buy food. Meanwhile, Khavn's band knocks out its syncopated punk-rock track, sometimes stammering with percussive tweaks, sometimes providing an acoustic bath of feedback and static, and sometimes grinding out a series of chords and licks that build to an emotional plateau of dark euphoria. A voice, scarcely human, bumbles here and there, and then disappears for long stretches. Meanwhile the kids ride a bike, roll a large metal ring down the unpaved street with a stick, run through the alley-ways that link their shanties, squat in a group to shit. Flies buzz about open sores on the legs and feet of one youth; aeons of garbage, forgotten truck parts, chain-link fence, broken pavement, old tyres, rotting metal structures compose the landscape. The tireless children, some no more than 2 or 3 years old, pee anywhere, dance hip-hop to karaoke, laugh while strumming guitars in a church, sniff plastic bags full of glue and lie stoned on the ground. Khavn's suppression of the soundtrack, that is, of the sounds that would have been recorded while the images were being made, is no more or less violent than leaving the camcorder machine to make the decisions about what a viewer should hear. Indeed by interfering with the normative operations of the digital machine, Khavn visits a set of difficult questions about the default operations of technology and the 'natural' or default formation of the digital archive. By showing the images in black and white Khavn estranges the viewer from the ordinary mode of visual appropriation and harks back to documentary traditions. However, the combination of the banality and the aesthetic violence of the images as well as the obvious manipulations—the use of the red chroma key as the kids sniff glue, the high-contrast solarization effect that renders the grey bodies bright silver and the streets full black and the metal structures a sizzling white—all give the lie to the dominant strain of the documentary project: that one is getting—or ever could get—an unmediated objective look into reality.

During all this, the viewer/listener is allowed their emotions—waves of boredom, horror, indifference, sadness, mild amusement and nausea, punctuated by humour, curiosity, awe, abjection, euphoria and disgust. These responses, as it turns out, are similar to those that give rise to punk rock itself and are, in fact, part of the whole aesthetic relationship that punk develops to alienation and disaffection in the capitalist metropole. But punk, as we know, also affects a kind of cultural cachet and participates, albeit as minimally as possible while still maintaining its visibility, in the legitimating realm of world culture. Put another way, Punk as a movement has been able to represent its experience and to own it. One recognizes then that its cultural function as a limit case, a rejection of bourgeois manners and sensibilities, an embrace of the corporeal, the cacophonous, the non-sensical, the anti-aesthetic and the abject, is at once a political position and a style-choice—it signifies a limit, but from the inside. And while the Punk ethos may approach the situation of
the children in the film, who live outside the basic rules governing hygiene, childhood, domesticity and acceptability that have been minimally agreed upon by what passes as world civilization, it is nonetheless a comparatively mainstream and enfranchised social form. The children, although they exercise incredible agency and creativity, also occupy a political position, but this position is not a choice in any sense of the word. Through the solidarity and the disconnect between punk and squatterpunk, Punk is thus construed as an aesthetic symptom, an expression of a deeper reality, a kind of world-historical sickness, that has at its core the subaltern, unrepresentable and indeed unfathomable condition, not just of some humans but of humanity in toto.

Who is the spectator/listener that takes all this in? Not, I think, one on whose bodies these images are grounded. These thoughts, like the film itself, are inscribed on those bodies. Nonetheless, just as the images Khavn produces are, in the first but also in the last instance, the conditions of possibility for the questioning and questionable aesthetic experience I am describing, these bodies, the garbage that feeds on the garbage of the third world, that itself lives on the refuse of the West, are the conditions of possibility for the viewer and for the reader, for all the meanings that will get made or not made, because the relations of global violence that inhere in the lives of these kids also inhere in the fabric of being that composes all of the other symbolic mediations imposed upon them, whether to think near-by or, as is more often the case, to make them disappear. I would say that it is these relations, this suppressed genetic material that underlies contemporary representation itself in as much as it thrives on and represses a world shattered by inequality and injustice, that are activated when we feel or understand something in the film. Thus the film not only effects the production of what Jameson, following Lukacs I think, called the concept of the social totality, it gives the concept an affective inflection that links it to the Real. However the meaning of this link is undecidable, and the derivation of objective knowledge from it is impossible.

It is for this reason that I am tempted to say that Squatterpunk could also be thought of as Squatterpunctum. In generating its dialectical image in which everything that has ever happened, colonialism, imperialism, globalization—all the mediations of history—are palpably the conditions of possibility for the spectator's experience (and not just this particular experience), it manages to create in the contemporary universe in which digital media is now paradigmatic, the prick of the real. Barthes's two ways of photography, mad or tame, are relevant here. As he writes at the end of Camera Lucida, 'the choice is mine, to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusion, or, to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality.' It is this wakening of intractable reality, the emergence of a reality at once extrinsic to representation and inherent in its capitalized computer-electronics, of a reality that would vitiate all prior and future semiotics, the squatterpunctum, that informs my use of the impossible throughout this essay.
When I invoked ‘humanity in toto’ a moment ago, I did so from the relatively informed perspective of post-humanism, or, rather, what would be post-post-humanism (from what Joel Dinerstein, in critiquing mainstream post-humanism as a white liberal techno-fetishism, calls the panhuman, ‘an emergent global identity invested in a creolized self-concept, and by extension a creolized world history’). The category of ‘the human,’ with its racist exclusions, its colonial and imperialist wars, its ethnocentric naturalisms, its genocides and concentration camps, has lost credibility and been on the wane in certain sectors for some time. Nonetheless, our aesthetic categories, our political imaginations, our narrative codes, and our media machines, all bear the impress of this historical construction, to such a degree that the disappearance of the human is seen by its mainstream expositors as a consequence and/or artifact of technological advancement and computation. ‘The digital’ as the summation and reification of world history may well mean the disappearance of the human; however, it has the impossible lurking somewhere behind, beyond, within or outside its simulation. Techno-capitalist mediation, that is, virtualization, is for us not a matter of mere technology but always-already contaminated with the radical inequality rife on planet Earth. This foreclosure, this impossibility of becoming, in short, the forestalling of world-wide democracy, is techno-capital’s, meaning to say, ‘the digital’s,’ historical condition of possibility. With the understanding that ‘the digital’ may be among the most pernicious reifications of all time (right up there with ‘the human’), today we must pursue the following thought: what would it take to stage the confrontation between the fully capitalized world of representation and the horizon of the impossible such that the results were not merely convivial but transformational?

Notes

4. For a full consideration of spectatorial labour, as well as of the larger framework of ‘the attention theory of value,’ see my The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle, Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth Press, 2006.
6. I am indebted to Neferti Tadiar for this observation.
9. Digital works break into two main groups, those of ‘Independent Cinema’ which, while not fully integrated into the major studio productions of Philippine Cinema, are sometimes made in cooperation with or distributed by these studios and are designed to have a commercial appeal, and those of ‘underground’ cinema, which, while not to be confused with the political underground in the Philippines, have a counter-cultural and non-commercial/artistic aura.
More recently Khavn had a rock opera performed at the Cultural Center of the Philippines and launched two books, one of poetry and one of prose, at Magnet (with readings of his work by luminaries of the leftist culturati), a gallery near the University of the Philippines, and Ateneo, which often screens alternative cinema and features live performance and gallery shows with painters such as Manuel Ocampo. Khavn’s reputation is growing as international festival organizers, bloggers and critics tirelessly compete to invent apppellations for this artist: he has been called the ‘Filipino Renaissance man,’ ‘one of underground digital cinema’s best kept secrets,’ ‘the Lars Von Trier of the Philippines,’ ‘the enfant terrible of Philippine Cinema,’ ‘an ass-kicking rebel priest,’ ‘Philippine punk rebel,’ ‘the new Takashi Miike,’ ‘the Philippine counterpart of Peter Baiestorf,’ and the ‘Che Guevara of the Digital Revolution.’

These citations are from one of Khavn’s websites: www.kamiasroad.com/khavn/bio.htm.

For his five manifestos see: www.kamiasroad.com/khavn/writings.htm.

Mao Tse Tung. See also George Lukacs, Studies in European Realism, New York: Universal Library, and particularly ‘The Ideology of Modernism.’


Jacques Rancière says of Godard: ‘He wants to show that cinema betrayed both its vocation to presence and its historical task. And yet the demonstration of this vocation and this betrayal suddenly turn into the opportunity to verify the inverse. The film denounces cinema’s “lost opportunities,” though all these “lost opportunities” are retrospective. If Griffith had not filmed the suffering of martyred children and Minelli two lovers dancing, if Lang and Hitchcock had not brought to the screen the manipulations of cynical and deranged calculators, if Stroheim and Renoir had not filmed the decadence of the aristocracy and Stevens the tribulations of a latter-day Rastignac, Godard would never have had the opportunity to tell a thousand new versions of the history of the cinema and the century with the fragments from their fictions. These “lost opportunities,” in other words, are so many seized opportunities. Godard makes with the films of Murnau, Lang, Griffith, Chaplin, or Renoir the films they did not make, which are the films Godard would not have been able to make had those directors already made them, had they come ahead of themselves, so to speak. History, properly speaking, is this relationship of interiority that puts every image into relation with every other; it is what allows us to be where we were not, forge all the connections that had not been forged, and then replay all the “(hi)stories” differently.’ Jacques Rancière, Film Fables, trans. Emiliano Battista, Oxford: Berg, 2006, p 186.


In her now classic deconstruction of the documentary form, Reassemblage, Trinh T Min-ha refuses to speak about the people of Senegal and instead chooses to ‘speak nearby.’

In Warhol the viewer is devoured by an all-negating time which destroys the viewer’s subjectivity and very life but hatches and sustains the edifice of empire; in Squattpunk the viewer is devoured by the inhumanity of humanity: the inhumanity of his own humanity which must disavow its conditions of possibility, and the humanity of those who have been rendered inhuman for him to exist at all.