History and Identity in Raya Martin's Autohystoria

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All history is masturbation. It's just a matter of who you fantasize about.

(Raya Martin, Autohystoria pressbook)

Raya Martin and New Philippine Cinema

The recent string of awards won by Lav Diaz put Filipino cinema under the spotlight. Diaz is the central core around which younger Filipino filmmakers started to build their efforts: Raya Martin, Gym Lumbera, John Torres, and many others have worked in close contact with Diaz, forming a wide but heterogeneous group, which I call New Philippine Cinema. Each director has a unique and individual style, but their goal converges into one big theme: what does being Filipino mean? Through different ways, each one of them explores the history of Philippines and the way in which colonial power still affects its culture and cinema. These movies are distant from the neorealist aesthetic in the likes of Lino Brocka or Brillante Mendoza. They are, instead, purely cinematographic fantasies that enable the renegotiation between history and identity through acts of subversive disarticulation.2 This is an act committed both against colonial heritage and against cinema itself. The films share a pure anti-cinematic approach that goes against all the most common traditional conventions of film language. They often lack anything resembling a narrative or a plot, preferring a mixture of fiction, documentary, found footage, and guerrilla filmmaking, thus thinning the border between genres, life, and cinema.

Raya Martin, one of the youngest and most prolific filmmakers of his generation, has directed twenty titles in the span of ten years, radically changing style from one another, to the point that his cinema can be labelled as *anti-style*, symptomatic of a refusal to recognize himself as an author by his own admission.³ Among Filipino filmmakers, he is the one who more explicitly clarified his postcolonial and metacinematic thoughts, meshing the two together while also

¹ Diaz firstly gained recognition in the experimental section Orizzonti at the Venice Film Festival, and recently won the Golden Pard for Best Movie in Locarno in 2014, the Silver Bear in Berlin and the Golden Lion in Venice, both in 2016.

² Sarita Echavez See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. xviii.

³ See Alessandro Stellino, 'Alla ricerca del tempo perduto. Intervista a Raya Martin', *FilmIdee*, 3 (2012), http://www.filmidee.it/archive/31/article/265/article.aspx> [accessed 10 July 2016].

retracing chronologically the history of the Philippine nation and its cinema, showing how the remains of colonial powers still erupt among the textures of national imagery.

Filipino identity is still highly debated concept. As Rafael explains: '[A]ttempts at establishing a clear and undisputed fit between the Philippines and Filipinos are far from complete, and in fact, may never be realized.' This is mostly due to a fundamental asynchrony between the geopolitical creation of the Philippines and the raise of a nationalist sentiment. Thus:

[T]he identification of 'Filipinos' and the 'Filipino nation' proceeds experimentally, pursuing an unsettled and intractable course. The narrative script constituting the nation remains sedimented in fragments of scenarios from memory, customary rituals, idiomatic speech-acts and recursive practices. Until the coordinates are specified, we can only handle the 'interpretants' [...] of those signifiers provisionally.⁶

For the same reason, Joel David states that 'areas of postcolonial concern in Philippine cinema should therefore be presented as questions rather than statements, or rather as statements that are not so much inconclusive as they are tentative, premised on the interested of the same (postcolonial) subject'.⁷

At the age of 21, Martin shot *Maicling pelicula nañg ysañg Indio Nacional* (A Short Film about the Indio Nacional, 2005), his first international success. Divided into two stylistically different segments, it starts with a 22-minute scene, shot in DV, while the rest of the movie is comprised of silent vignettes shot on 35mm film that replicate the earliest examples of movies shot at the beginning of the century (fig. 1). Of about three hundred movies produced in the Philippines from 1919 until 1944, only less than ten have survived to our days. The lack of a national film archive in the Philippines has led to an almost total erasure of an entire cinematic heritage. Indio Nacional thus becomes a film about a nation whose cinema is not only lost, but that could never be in the first place. Martin is projecting a pure fantasy of what early Filipino cinema could have been, drawing heavily from the

⁶ E. San Juan, Jr., 'Reflections on Academic Cultural Studies and the Problem of Indigenization in the Philippines', *TOPIA*, 29 (Spring 2013), 73–93 (pp. 84–85).

⁴ Vincente L. Rafael, White Love and Other Events in Filipino History (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 7.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁷ Joel David, 'Philippine Film History as Postcolonial Discourse', in *Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Cultures*, ed. by Rolando B. Tolentino (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006), pp. 3–12 (p. 8).

⁸ Produced also through the *Hubert Bals Fund* and released in 2006 among many international film festivals (Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Nantes, Thessaloniki and Pesaro, where it won first prize).

⁹ See Bliss Cua Lim, 'A Brief History of Archival Advocacy for Philippine Cinema', in 2013 Philippine Cinema Heritage Summit: A Report (Manila: National Film Archives of the Philippines, 2013), pp. 14–20, http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gx6w8ff> [accessed 9 August 2016].

episodes told by Reynaldo Ileto in his seminal book *Pasyon and Revolution*. ¹⁰ The stylistic choice to combine digital and film is related to the choice of subject itself, but also creates a visual time-gap that prompts a reflection on the cinematic medium itself. Postcolonial thought is then entwined with the filmic support and what it brings in historical as well as cultural terms. *Indio Nacional* is a reconfiguration of history, an 'invention of a reality that *had to be there but has been suppressed in historical mediation*'. ¹¹ The bond between history and metacinematic reflections will characterize every other movie by Martin.

In 2009, Martin directed another *period piece*, set in the 1930s, during the US occupation. In those years, the Philippines were a leading force in southeast Asian cinema, producing hundreds of movies per year within a productive system that was closely inspired by Hollywood. With *Independencia*, Martin does not merely set the plot in the past, but tries to replicate the same means of production from that time, with a high budget film, ¹² shot on 35mm film, with a crew of almost one hundred people and actual in-studio shootings with handpainted backdrops and artisanal special effects (fig. 2). The act of realizing an independent movie with the means of a mainstream one is thus a political gesture in itself. It indicates an awareness of Martin's part of being a director involved in the system of international film festivals, a system that sustains and dictates the so-called arthouse or independent cinema, and the will of confronting this reality by questioning what is expected from a Third World director such as himself.

Autohystoria

In 2007, Martin shot what probably is his most radical and personal film. *Autohystoria* still deals with Martin's interest in Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines, but the narrative aspect is now close to zero, while his experiments with long takes and duration are almost taken to an extreme. For a length of ninety minutes, it is composed by only fifteen shots, which I will briefly summarize:

- 1. [2'5"] A black screen accompanied by a love song played on acoustic guitar ('And this space between us/What distance is possible/To traverse/For this forgetful heart of mine?').
- 2. [36'17"] The scene is abruptly interrupted, as well as the sound, which now

¹⁰ See Reynaldo C. Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998, first publ. 1979). The book deals with the active role of common people and their beliefs during the years of the revolution and after. Ileto's book is a prime example of 'history from below' and close to what can be defined postcolonial studies at an early stage, since it was published in 1979, just one year after the fundamental Said's *Orientalism.*

¹¹ Jonathan Beller, 'Iterations of the Impossible: Questions of Digital Revolution in the Philippines', *Postcolonial Studies*, 11.4 (2008), 435–50 (p. 442) [emphasis in the original].

¹² Indio Nacional was shot in five days with a budget of 700.000 pesos (circa \$15.000), while Autohystoria was shot in two days with a budget of 10.000 pesos (circa \$200).

becomes live recording of a trafficked street. The scene is shot with a hand-held camera, in really low resolution and in b/w. The camera follows a man from the other side of the street, until he reaches a house. This uninterrupted shot is longer than half an hour. In the last seconds, some lines of text in Tagalog are superimposed on the image: 'Last night, I read about Andres Bonifacio. He was killed with Procopio Bonifacio. I messaged my brother asking how he was. No answer. Soon after, I fell asleep.'

- 3. [12'] This scene is in colour, and shot on digital video. The shot is still, fixed on a tripod, and it frames a trafficked roundabout. The only steady visual reference is a monument. A police van is going in circles around it, its loud siren dominating all the other traffic noises, although no particular visual emphasis is given to the car.
- 4. [6'] The camera is inside of a vehicle, with a close-up of a scared young man. We hear the same loud siren from before. We are inside the police van that is circling in the roundabout. This shot is connected to the previous through the sound of the siren, being the first time in the movie in which two shots follow each other diegetically.
- 5. [2'56"] A close-up of another boy on the verge of tears, while the car keeps going in circles.
- 6. [1'12"] Hand-held camera. Outdoor shot of the moon covered by the dense vegetation of the jungle.
- 7. [13'22"] We see the two young men from behind, walking in the jungle. We can now be sure that this is not camera footage, but a POV shot of the kidnapper(s). The men walk with great difficulty, sometimes turning their heads towards the camera. One of them is covered in blood. He stops and asks: 'Will you shoot us?' There is no answer.
- 8. [1'27"] A short insert depicting the light of dawn filtering through the vegetation.
- 9. [5'] Still camera. The two men are at the centre of the shot, their faces are swollen and bloody, one of them has his arm in a sling. The two are trembling but don't utter a word. During the last seconds, a gunshot is fired. One of the guys drops dead, while the other tries to run through the jungle.
- 10. [4'] Bucolic shot on a fixed camera. The sound of a waterfall can be heard.
- 11. [2'] Fixed shot of the sky tinted with the colours of dawn.
- 12. [1'] Fixed shot of a waterfall.
- 13. [50"] Another stylistic change. An old black and white film from the silent era.¹³ Two soldiers are crossing the river followed by a pack of donkeys.
- 14. [40"] Another silent film, this time introduced by its title: *Aguinaldo's Navy*. Some small ships peacefully sail on a river.
- 15. [50"] A third silent film, with no title. American soldiers are parading along with the infantry.¹⁴

¹³ Martin does not introduce the film by its title. It is *An Historic Feat* (Raymond Ackerman, 1900), also known as *Gen. Bell's Pack Train Swimming Agno River*. The film depicts a real incident, where the American's army mule pack ended in the waters of the Agno River, in Luzon, by accident.

¹⁴ Again without title. It is 25th Infantry (Raymond Ackerman, 1900). It shows the 25th Infantry led

¹⁴ Again, without title. It is *25th Infantry* (Raymond Ackerman, 1900). It shows the 25th Infantry led by the generals Frederick D. Grant and A.S. Burt returning from mount Arayat. All three movies were shot by Raymond Ackerman, for Biograph.

16. End credits, written upside down and rolling from bottom to top. Among the others, we can read the names of Lav Diaz, Khavn de la Cruz, John Torres and Alexis Tioseco.

In what way does *Autohystoria* concerns Filipino identity? What kind of subalternity is at stake? I will answer these questions by fragmenting the multilayered structure of the film, while bearing in mind that, in Bhabha's words, 'identity is claimed from marginality.' ¹⁵

First of all, let us consider its (non)narrative content. As we can see by this short summary, the movie gives very few hints on what is actually happening. Only one line of spoken dialogue and some text provide the context to understand the historical references. Autohystoria, in a way, regards a fundamental episode in Philippine history: the homicide of Andres Bonifacio (named at the end of the shadowing scene), leader of the Katipunan secret society and of the Filipino revolution of 1896. He was killed, along with his brother Procopio, under the order of Emilio Aguinaldo, which soon after became the first President of the Philippines Republic. Despite being a people's hero while alive, shortly after his death both American and Filipino politicians and historians distorted and altered Bonifacio's memory and legacy, which is still debated nowadays. The monument shown in the movie, the Balintwak in Caloocan City, is dedicated to him. The lack of historical context given by Martin, except for the many references that still goes unexplained for the misinformed viewer, seems to echo the programmatic erasure to which Bonifacio has been relegated for years, until recently.¹⁶ Thus, Bonifacio's story cannot be labelled as a minority history, it being a 'narrative of a group or class that has not left its own sources'. The erasure, or downgrade. of his memory has been entirely and voluntarily political. 18 However, this kind of knowledge is not available to every spectator, especially to Western audiences, which represent the majority for this kind of film, mostly in film festivals such as Turin or Rotterdam (the venue of its international première). We must then look at how Martin deals with history through cinematic means.

For this purpose, I will conduct my analysis by relying on the concept of *postcolonial critique of time* as theorized by Filipino scholar Bliss Cua Lim (specifically regarding the concepts of multiple temporalities, anachronism, and

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004, first publ. 1994), p. 254. ¹⁶ See Ileto, 'Knowing America's Colony. A Hundred Years from the Philippine War', *Philippine Studies Occasional Papers Series*, 13 (Manoa: University of Hawaii, 1999).

¹⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 97.

¹⁸ See Teodoro Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1996, first publ. 1956); Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* (Quezon City: Tala Publishing Services, 1975); Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution;* Floro Quibueyn, *A Nation Aborted: Rizal, American Hegemony, and Philippine Nationalism* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999); Ambeth Ocampo, *Bones of Contention: The Bonifacio Lectures* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2001).

untranslatability), while also referring to the works of Chakrabarty and Bhabha.¹⁹ Today's time, as Lim argues, is determined by capitalism. Homogenous time, around which Bergson developed his 'corrective critique', does not exist in nature, but is the result of the world-historical project of modernity that hinged on colonialism.²⁰ To counter the concept of homogenous time Bergson, and Lim after him, developed the notion of heterogeneous time or 'pure duration', which cannot be spatialized nor calculated. What makes *Autohystoria* stand as a deeply political film is the way in which Martin deals with time in all of its aspects. 'The project of a repossession of the new subjectivity goes through the act of taking back the violent dispossession of time and of itself as a historic being',²¹ and *Autohystoria* configures itself as a way of repossessing time through different means. Martin refuses to follow a narrative plot or any dramatization, thus structuring the film around different temporalities, namely the historic temporality, the personal temporality, and the time of the event.

It is in fact immediately noticeable that the Bonifacios' story is set in the present day. The film's main episode is the murder of the two young men, which only happens near the end and is not shown in its full effect (fig. 3). We, as spectators, may identify the guys as the Bonifacio brothers quoted by the text, or with the narrator and his brother, or both. Martin refers both to the historical fact (the Bonifacios' murder) as well as a personal occurrence (his failed correspondence with his brother). The two subjects converge, merging the personal and the political aspect into one. Once again, Martin uses two different image-bearing media: analog video and digital video. But the gap between the two is less evident if we compare it to *Indio Nacional*. What matters more to Martin in this movie is his work on time, or duration, and the ways in which it can bring back from memory a controversial historical episode. There is no re-enactment — such as we see in the silent vignettes in *Indio Nacional* — but rather we see a transposing of history in a contemporary setting. This transposition allows the viewer to connect emotionally with the fate of the two brothers, despite their (lack of) knowledge of Philippine history. The shadowing scene, lasting for thirty-seven minutes and shot on low quality analog video resembles the looks of camera surveillance videos (fig. 4), a kind of image that proliferates in the post-9/11 era and functions as a 'highly disciplinary image'.²² It is an image that is intimately tied with contemporaneity. translating the Bonifacios' story to our days through the looks and technology of

¹⁹ The debate on postcolonial temporality cannot, of course, be analyzed extensively in these pages. An interesting take on its various aspects can be found in Stefan Helgesson, 'Radicalizing Temporal Difference: Anthropology, Postcolonial Theory, and Literary Time', *History and Theory*, 53 (2014), 545–62.

²⁰ Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 13.

²¹ See Marco Scotini, 'Governo del tempo e insurrezione delle memorie', in *Politiche della memoria. Documentario e archivio*, ed. by Elisabetta Galasso and Marco Scotini (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2014), pp. 7–18.

²² Ivi, p. 12.

a society obsessed with control. The following scenes, where the two are being detained in a police car, implicate the government in the death of the Bonifacios, as well as creating another link with contemporary history.

However, *Autohystoria* should not be reduced to an experiment in mockumentary, since the POV shots that most resemble a documentary aesthetic are linked with the contemplative shots of nature, as well as with the found footage fragments. These brief shards remind us of the author behind all of this, and of the movie's fictional nature. Without them, the snuff-like aesthetics of the stalking, kidnapping and execution of the two brothers (which constitutes the time of the event) along with the unusual length of the shots would end up being a full emotional and emphatic dive.

From a stylistic point of view, *Autohystoria* is made of time-images as theorized by Deleuze, where people and things occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space.²³ The extended duration of the shots functions as an act of resistance in and of itself, something that breaks the empiric running of time, creating a non-chronological time instead. This goes against the homogenous time described by Bergson and Lim. The lack of spoken lines makes *Autohystoria* a movie built predominantly on sound. The refusal to use language to articulate a critique of time is again found in Bergson, since 'all attempts to articulate pure duration are betrayed by language, [which] can only express time insofar as it is past, accomplished, and objectified (time flown, not time flowing)'.²⁴

What we call 'mainstream cinema' is also opposed to the concept of pure duration, since it is mainly based on plot, thus revolving around a linear narration (which even if fragmented can be put together in a mathematical way) which we might consider an example of homogenous time.²⁵ Produced in total independence, shot on a \$200 budget in two days, it is a product that avoids the restrictions not only of mainstream cinema but of independent cinema as well. From the point of view of the film's production, Martin is debating his identity from the marginality of experimental cinema. Being a prime product of modernity, cinema is in itself bounded to imperialistic and colonial logics of power and dominance, a legatee of modern homogenous time with a tendency toward the technical denaturalization, homogenization, and standardization of time.²⁶ Cinema is then an allochronic gesture, a tactic of temporal distancing that translates heterogeneity into the terms of homogeneous time, that which Chakrabarty describes as anachronism, the temporal hiatus imposed by colonizers on colonized, the 'not yet' to which the colonized nationalist opposed his or her 'now'. 27 It is exactly this 'not yet' that is manifested explicitly in Aguinaldo's Navy (Raymond Ackerman, 1899), the silent film used by Martin at the end of

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 39.

²⁴ Translating Time, p. 17.

²⁵ See Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

²⁶ Translating Time, p. 43.

²⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 9.

Autohystoria. This film depicts small fishermen's boats but labels them as general Aguinaldo's navy, thus creating a false image aimed at projecting the Philippines in a defenceless backwardness: '[E]thnographic cinema and photography [is] a "time machine" that transports indigenous subjects into a "displaced temporal realm," converting performers who share a space and time with the filmmaker into native specimens from an earlier age.'28

The filtering of history (the Bonifacios' murder) through a contemporary setting (todays Philippines) and by contemporary means (the video-surveillance/ digital aesthetic) questions every temporal gap imposed by colonialism. The pure duration engaged by Martin can be read as a "survival of the past", an everaccumulating ontological memory that is wholly, automatically, and ceaselessly preserved'. 29 By crafting a *mise-en-scène* that conjoins past and present in the same shot, with its climax during the execution scene where the viewer can finally iuxtapose the historical ghost of the Bonifacios on the beaten up flesh of the two guys, Martin resets the colonial distance between what is contemporaneous and what is not in the eyes of the colonizer. Autohystoria might thus be read as a refusal of anachronism, of a past left behind, impelling us to think in terms other than the present in order to see beyond seeming obsolescence.³⁰ The execution of Bonifacio functions as a fundamental point of intersection of the many trajectories that animate and complicate the meaning of Filipino identity and history, an episode that mobilizes the memory of both Spanish and US colonialism, as well as Filipino civil violence. The multiple temporalities triggered by the *mise-en*scène converges in this crucial moment which, to return to Bhabha, stands at the margins of modernity. It is a 'projective past', through which:

[The discourse of modernity] can be inscribed as a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences.³¹

The subalternity questioned by Martin is that of the historical self, personified by the Bonifacio brothers, relegated to the marginality of history. It is properly a *time-lag* where 'objectified others may be turned into subjects'.³² The two protagonists are, in fact, objects at the mercy of unknown perpetrators, who endure their (historical) fate without being the possibility of escape, along with the spectator who is bound to watch, helplessly. However, the representation of their agony, and the *pure duration* of their persecution, is where the postcolonial agency lies:

²⁸ Translating Time, p. 87.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 15.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 16.

³¹ Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 361.

³² Ivi, p. 255.

It is the function of the *lag* to slow down the linear, progressive time of modernity to reveal its 'gesture' [...] This slowing down, or lagging, impels the 'past', projects it, gives its 'dead' symbols the circulatory life of the 'sign' of the present, of passage, the quickening of the quotidian. [...]. *Time-lag keeps alive the making of the past.*³³

The personification of the Bonifacios as present-day men has a double postcolonial value. On the one hand, the co-presence of past and present underlines that colonial power dynamics are still alive in today's Philippines.³⁴ On the other hand, this epistemic violence funnels on Andres Bonifacio, the unsung hero of the revolution of humble origins that, as opposed to the *ilustrado* José Rizal which is probably the most famous Filipino historical figure. Bonifacio's beaten and dead body may be a metaphor for the Philippines as a gateway for 'the ghosts of 19th- and early-20th-century aborted or coopted revolutions'.³⁵ Postcolonial time thus highlights the irreversible hiatus caused by anticolonial revolts in contemporary history. These revolts, despite their negative outcome, have forever disarticulated the idea that time and space in the colonies were qualitatively 'other' compared to the cities.³⁶ It is precisely on this disarticulation of time that *Autohystoria* is constructed.

Lastly, the silent movies at the end of Martin's movie have a radically different function that those expressly created in *Indio Nacional*. These are three movies shot by an US operator during the Philippines-American war. They are not introduced as such because the images already speak volumes in terms of colonial violence. These images have survived to our days, merely because they belong to the colonizer, while the entirety of Filipino cinema until the 1940s and beyond has been wiped out, destroyed permanently, forgotten. The reason why we can still look at these images is the same reason why Bonifacio was murdered. Only the second film maintains its title, *Aguinaldo's Navy*, and it is the only one depicting actual Filipinos instead of American soldiers. And yet, these images are *anachronized* by the title, which distorts their content and temporally situates it in an aprioristic *before*.

Autohystoria condenses in a simple but disarming way the many heterogeneous flows that inhabit Filipino identity. Among all of his other films, this is the one that uses all of Martin's common interests in their purest way: the conjunction of personal and political; of past and present; of postcolonial questioning and identity fragmentation in a way that is highly anti-cinematic.

³³ Ivi, p. 364 [emphasis in the original].

³⁴ See San Juan, Jr., *Toward Filipino Self Determination: Beyond Transnational Globalization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

^{35 &#}x27;Reflections on Academic Cultural Studies', p. 79.

³⁶ See Stefano Mezzadra, *La condizione postcoloniale. Storia e politica nel presente globale* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2008), pp. 27–28.





Fig. 1. Fig. 2.





Fig. 3. Fig. 4.