

The spectre of populism in Philippine politics and society: *artista, masa, Eruption!*

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This paper seeks to explore the origins of the populist appeal of President Joseph Ejercito Estrada, and to recapture some of its peculiar workings in the broader context of Philippine post-colonial politics and society. To that end, the paper provides a brief glimpse of the rapidly changing urban landscape which first saw the rise of Estrada as the superstar of the moviescreen and the mayor of San Juan municipality in Metropolitan Manila during the 1960s. In the following section of the paper, key developments in the Philippine film industry are identified, and an attempt is made to demonstrate the emerging possibility of a new kind of social imaginary, or mass consciousness, reflective of cinema's power to reveal to an audience entirely new structural formations of the subject. Here, the notion of Tagalog movies as a 'visualized lingua franca' – unburdened by tradition, hierarchy, and easily accessible to a wide spectrum of the population – suggests one possible link between the expanding cinema audience at lower-class theatres and the new forms of recognition implied by the rise of *artista* politicians in Manila in the 1960s. Finally, a closer look at narrative and character in some Estrada films from the peak years of his movie stardom in the 1960s and 1970s points to the kind of familiarity and appropriation Estrada may inspire among his fans and followers. The paper was completed as (former) President Estrada faced, first, an unprecedented impeachment trial in the Philippine Senate and, eventually, an unceremonious end to his presidency in the parliament of the streets (ie 'People Power' at 'EDSA').

After a period of political protests and legal proceedings against the presidency of Joseph Ejercito Estrada, his ousting by 'People Power' on 20 January 2001 stemmed the tide of a mounting constitutional crisis. This swift political resolution of the crisis was set off by the senatorial prosecution panel's walkout in protest against perceived irregularities in the hearing of the charges filed against Estrada for 'bribery, graft,

and corrupt practices, betrayal of public trust, and culpable violation of the Constitution'. Finally, on 2 March 2001, the Supreme Court of the Philippines confirmed in a 13–0 vote that Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was the country's legitimate President and not her deposed predecessor, Estrada. The charges brought against Estrada are consistent with persistent complaints of corruption and cronyism since he took office in 1998. More significantly, perhaps, these allegations highlight the peculiar personal style of 'Erap', notably, his infamous weakness for gambling, drinking, and womanizing.

To an extent, the current conjuncture reflects a cycle of *continuismo* in Philippine post-colonial politics, which I have examined elsewhere.¹ That is, starting in the early 1950s, in the period leading up to the first presidential election after the Japanese and American occupations, a dominant bloc of social forces has mobilized at regular intervals of approximately 15 to 16 years against presidents who have threatened to emasculate and undermine its interests (1953, 1969, 1985–86, 2000–01). This dominant bloc has included the Catholic hierarchy, and an oligarchy based in agriculture, industry, and finance, entrenched in both houses of the national legislature, and, over time, expanding social networks of professional, civic, and (especially Catholic) lay associations. In particular, such forces have reacted against perceived presidential expansion of already considerable executive powers in the realms of security and the economy, as shown by the opposition to Elpidio Quirino in the early 1950s, to Ferdinand E. Marcos in the late 1960s, and in the mid-1980s during the twilight of *de facto* martial law.

Viewed from this perspective, the efforts to oust Estrada followed a familiar pattern, albeit at a stepped-up pace, as they aimed to end his presidency in mid-term rather than to oppose his re-election, as in previous rounds. Once again, an incumbent president with considerable 'relative autonomy' from the Philippine legislature was charged with hijacking government mechanisms for managing state security and the national economy, as critics point to the increasing militarization of Mindanao and the particular cronyism of the current administration. Moreover, opposition politicians, corporate executives, and Catholic clergy have returned to the parliament of the streets – notably, the Ayala Avenue of anti-Marcos confetti rallies in Manila's premier business district, and the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue

¹ See especially, Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, 'In the Name of Civil Society: Participatory Crises, Critical Elections, and Transformist Mobilizations in the Post-Colonial Philippines.' PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1998.

(EDSA) of the People Power revolt that ushered in the post-Marcos era – with calls for ‘civil society’ to support the ‘moral crusade’ against Estrada.² While the impeachment hearings were the first such proceedings against a Philippine president, the recent campaigns to mobilize, once again, People Power recall a now familiar theme in political-crisis resolution in the Philippines.

However, in a number of key respects, the recent round of contesting of the Estrada presidency is quite different from past *continuismo* crises. For example, according to the new Constitution adopted in 1987, the Philippine president is now elected to a six-year term (compared to the previous four-year term), and is also banned from running for re-election (compared to the previous limit of two presidential elections). Moreover, with ‘Muslims’ having replaced ‘communists’ as the most serious challenge to ‘national security’, the threat of disloyal opposition to the regime in Manila remains largely a regional problem, a ‘Mindanao question’. Yet beyond these changes in the tenure of the presidency and in the nature of the disloyal opposition, the most critical departure from the pattern sketched above stems from the popular and populist appeal of Estrada himself when compared to his predecessors in Malacañang Palace. That is, Estrada won election first to the vice-presidency in 1992 and then to the presidency in 1998 with the largest vote margin in Philippine history, and, despite much public criticism of his administration, retained markedly high popularity ratings ever since.³ In terms of his populist appeal, moreover, Estrada, or ‘Erap’ (the inversion of *pare*, or pal/buddy) as he became widely known through a series of film comedies which he produced in the 1970s, built on his long-term movie superstardom and, after 1992, his high-profile leadership of the Presidential Anti-Crime Commission (PACC), as he

² For a recent glimpse of these rallies in the international press, see ‘The Elites vs. Estrada’, *Asiaweek*, 17 November 2000, pp. 26–28. For stories on the ‘Edsa Shrine prayer rally’ and the ‘People Power lunch in Makati’, for example, see *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5, 26, and 30 November 2000. Of course, there are many other groups and coalitions that still gravitate toward some of the old battlegrounds of the most radical opposition to Marcos – such as Welcome Rotunda, *Liwasang Bonifacio*, and Mendiola Bridge – and who thus seek to (re)claim alternative lineages and futures. See, for example, ‘Last Quarter Storm’, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 15 November 2000. In addition, the high-profile protest stunts of groups such as *Akbayan* provide not only interesting (and fun) alternative political theatre at Edsa and Makati rallies but also a measure of the expanding spectrum of the forces of civil and political society.

³ See, for example, Myrna Alejo and Joel Rocamora, ‘Explaining Erap’, *Political Brief*, 8, 2, 2000, pp. 16–27.

cultivated his *JEEP ni Erap* and *Erap para sa Mahirap* political campaigns.⁴

More importantly, whereas each previous instance of *continuismo* occurred within the context of surfacing participatory crises with subaltern classes – peasants, workers, and urban poor – supporting extra-electoral forms of popular mobilization, the current events suggest that what is so peculiar about Estrada is that, for the first time, ‘the threat from above’ also appears as a (hysterical) symptom of ‘the threat from below’. That is, not only did the president’s inveterate gambling, drinking, and womanizing signal the danger of moral and legal transgressions against bourgeois society and state; this unprecedented abnegation of official protocol and public propriety also served as a reminder of a greater threat to political stability and social reproduction – the excess of desire that, however repressed or deferred, remains a defining condition of the majority of the Philippine population, the rural and urban poor, the ‘have-nots’ or ‘not-enoughs’ (*kulang*). Thus Estrada’s lack of what Filipinos refer to as *delicadeza* (discretion) and his evident enjoyment of all that polite society abhors – the *bakya* and the *baduy*, even the (*medyo*) *bastos* (the common, tacky, and (semi-) vulgar) – unleashes into national political discourse the return of the repressed, whose mere presence, let alone aspirations, in everyday life is otherwise so carefully (although never seamlessly) contained through social hierarchies and geographies. In this vein, the fear of the subaltern (*masa*), previously identified with the threat of communist-led revolution, now haunts bourgeois sensibilities with the spectre of populism.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the origins of this *Eruption*, and to recapture some of its peculiar workings in the broader context of Philippine post-colonial politics and society. To that end, the paper provides a brief glimpse of the rapidly changing urban landscape which first saw the rise of Joseph Estrada as the ‘superstar’ of the moviescreen and the ‘independent’ mayor of San Juan municipality in Metropolitan Manila during the 1960s. In the following section of the paper, key developments in the Philippine film industry are identified, and an attempt is made to demonstrate the emerging possibility of a new kind of social

⁴ *JEEP ni Erap* literally means ‘Erap’s Jeep’, the jeepney remaining the most common means of public transportation throughout the Philippines. As an acronym, JEEP refers to ‘Justice, Economy, Environment, and Peace’, and, of course, to ‘Joseph Ejercito Estrada for President’. *Erap para sa Mahirap* means ‘Erap for the Poor’. For one account of JEEP, see Aprodicio and Eleanor Laquian, *Joseph Ejercito ‘Erap’ Estrada: the Centennial President*. Manila: University of the Philippines, College of Public Administration, 1988, pp. 175–180.

imaginary, or mass consciousness, reflective of cinema's power to reveal to an audience 'entirely new structural formations of the subject'.⁵ Here, the notion of Tagalog movies as a 'visualized lingua franca' – unburdened by tradition, hierarchy, and easily accessible to a wide spectrum of the population – suggests one possible link between the expanding cinema audience at the lower-class theatres and the new forms of recognition implied by the rise of *artista* politicians in Manila in the 1960s.⁶ Finally, a closer look at narrative and character in some Estrada films from the peak years of his movie stardom in the 1960s and 1970s points to the kind of familiarity and appropriation 'Joseph'/'Erap' may inspire among his fans and followers.⁷

Manila on the move

As Joseph Estrada first emerged as a contender for elected office in 1967, when he ran as an 'independent' candidate for mayor in San Juan, a municipality in metropolitan Manila, it is important to provide a quick sketch of some of the dramatic changes reshaping the socio-political landscape in the 1960s.⁸ The decade was marked by an especially dramatic socio-economic transformation, accompanied by mounting political mobilization from below – and, increasingly, from above. For example, by the 1960s the National Capital Region had replaced the northern and southern frontiers as the principal destination of internal migration in the Philippines. The socio-economic terrain also included both an increasing segment of urban poor and, in absolute terms, a growing urban middle class. These developments, scholars have argued, signalled an overall decline in the 'integrative capacity of political machines'⁹ because of

⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1958, pp. 236–237.

⁶ The notion of 'the visualized lingua franca' is explored in James T. Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. See also Vicente L. Rafael, 'Taglish, of the Phantom Power of the Lingua Franca', *Public Culture*, 8, 1, 1995, pp. 101–126.

⁷ For discussion of 'Tagalog movie formulas' in general, see especially Rafael Ma. Guerrero, 'Tagalog Movies: a New Understanding, in Rafael Ma. Guerrero (ed.), *Readings in Philippine Cinema*. Manila: Manila Film Center, 1982, p. 109 [reprinted from *Manila Paper*, 1, 4, 1975]; and on the power of superstardom in the case of Nora Aunor, see Neferti X. M. Tadiar, 'The Noranian Imaginary', in Rolando B. Tolentino (ed.), *Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Culture*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000, pp. 61–76.

⁸ This section draws on arguments developed in Hedman, 'In the Name of Civil Society', especially chapters 2 and 4.

⁹ Thomas C. Nowak and Kay A. Snyder, 'Clientelist Politics in the Philippines: Integration or Instability?', *American Political Science Review*, 68, 3, 1974, p. 1165.

mounting costs of ‘particularistic rewards’¹⁰ and weakening client leverage due to the ‘specialization in clientelistic structures’.¹¹

As existing mechanisms for political incorporation through the old Nacionalista and Liberal parties and their electoral machinery appeared increasingly inadequate, embryonic efforts at channelling social mobilization into alternative institutions with an added extra-electoral agenda emerged in the 1960s, as can be gleaned from the experience of peasant, worker, and student collective action during this period. For example, 1963 and 1964 saw the organization of a workers’ party supported by national labour federations (*Lapiang Manggagawa*), a peasant association backed by former Huks (*Malayang Samahang Magsasaka*), and a student movement endorsed by radical nationalists (*Kabataang Makabayan*), all three of which were identified with prominent Filipino socialists or communists. As the ‘increased vocality of a radical intelligentsia in the 1960s helped politicize worker and peasant discontent’,¹² these sectors began mobilizing demonstrations, launching strikes, and battling court cases. Student collective action similarly added to the tide of non-traditional forms of political action as ‘normal channels’, participants argued, were ‘inadequate and ineffective as instruments for achieving the redress of their grievances or for the institution of the necessary reforms they desired’.¹³

In addition to this proliferation of demands for alternative forms of organized political participation, election-related developments also pointed to the weakening hold of clientelist structures over Philippine politics in the late 1960s. For example, scholars have demonstrated that voter turnout in Philippine national and, especially, local elections correlated negatively with urbanization in the pre-martial law years.¹⁴ Moreover, while official voting turnout rates showed a slight increase

¹⁰ James C. Scott, ‘Corruption, Machine Politics, and Political Change’, *American Political Science Review*, 63, 1969, p. 1144.

¹¹ Nowak and Snyder, ‘Clientelist Politics’, p. 1152.

¹² Thomas C. Nowak and Kay A. Snyder, ‘Economic Concentration and Political Change in the Philippines’, in Benedict J. Kerkvliet (ed.), *Political Change in the Philippines: Studies of Local Politics Preceding Martial Law*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974 (Asian Studies monograph, 14), p. 154.

¹³ Special Joint Senate-House Committee on Mass Demonstrations, *Final Report on the Root Causes of Mass Demonstrations*. Manila: House of Representatives, 16 April 1970, p. 133.

¹⁴ Nowak and Snyder, ‘Clientelist Politics’, p. 1167, table 15. For similar findings, see Hirofumi Ando, ‘Elections in the Philippines: Mass-Elite Interaction through the Electoral Process, 1946–1969’. PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1971, pp. 42–43.

in 1967 and 1969 compared to previous elections,¹⁵ the decline in the absolute number of registered voters in those elections, contemporary observers claimed, amounted to *de facto* mass disenfranchisement, especially in certain densely populated cities.¹⁶

In combination, these changes pointed to the availability of an urban mass base for something beyond the old Nacionalista vs. Liberal Party contests, especially in metropolitan Manila, the most urbanized locality in the Philippines, with the single largest concentration of urban poor. In part, this expansion of 'economically insecure clients'¹⁷ served as a critical backdrop for 'the simulation of patronage'¹⁸ through spectacle, which the Marcoses first turned to such great political advantage in the Philippines. But beyond Marcos, consummate politician from the outset, this widening gap between the old electoral politics and the new social condition, experienced most acutely at first in the Manila of the 1960s, anticipated the emergence of a more pervasive political phenomenon in the Philippines – the rise of the *artista* candidate (see further below).

The 'dark ages' of Philippine cinema

Ironically, the decade remembered as the 'dark ages' of Philippine cinema coincided with the advent of a mass audience. That is, the 1960s saw not merely unprecedented migration to Metropolitan Manila but also, perhaps unsurprisingly, a massive expansion in the numbers of people flocking to movie theatres. Moreover, at the same time as traditional bi-factional politics failed to stem the tide of a mounting participatory crisis, the movie industry faced intensified challenges of

¹⁵ For a summary of turnout rates in Philippine post-war elections, see Ando, 'Elections in the Philippines', p. 39. Turnout figures measure the ratio of actual votes cast in a given election to the number of registered voters, as indicated by the records of the Commission on Elections.

¹⁶ Citing both presidential and senate committees, one article estimated that some half a million voters were disenfranchised in the 1967 elections. In addition, this source suggested, 'densely populated areas like the cities of Davao, Manila, Olongapo, and Quezon' experienced markedly 'confused' voters registrations. *Philippine Graphic*, 11 December 1968, p. 11. Allegations that on election day 'out of 178,000 registered voters in Quezon City, only 58,000 were able to vote' provide further testimony to the failure of urban electoral machine politics. *Philippine Graphic*, 6 December 1967, p. 27.

¹⁷ Nowak and Snyder, 'Clientelist Politics', p. 1151.

¹⁸ Vicente L. Rafael, 'Patronage and Pornography: Ideology and Spectatorship in the Early Marcos Years', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 2, 1990, pp. 282–304.

its own which served to undermine the oligarchical control of the old studio system. As a result, Philippine cinema underwent a marked transformation in terms of the forms of influence exerted upon production, as well as the kinds of films produced during this period.

Of course, movies were hardly a novelty in the Philippines in the 1960s. Indeed, the first 'cinematograph' showed newsreels at a *cine* located in the old downtown, on Escolta in 1897,¹⁹ and within a decade, 'travelling cinematographs' and a network of theatres had introduced the magic of motion pictures into Manila society. Thereafter, the artist-produced silent films peaked in the early 1930s before the talkies ushered in the movie studio systems in the mid-1930s. While interrupted by the Japanese Occupation, the local film industry made a swift post-war comeback, with more than 30 movies produced in 1946 alone.²⁰

However, perhaps nothing illuminates more clearly the dramatic changes in the Philippine cinema of the 1960s than a brief glimpse at the studio-dominated moviemaking of the previous decade. The 1950s, often remembered fondly as the 'first golden age' of Philippine cinema,²¹ was also an era marked by a high degree of oligarchical control over the making of celluloid dreams. That is, Philippine cinema remained, to a significant extent, a family affair for the Vera-Perezes, De Leons, Santiagos, and Antóns, who controlled the big four studios – Sampaguita (Vera-Perezes, 1937), LVN (De Leons, 1938), Premier (Santiagos, 1946), and Lebrán (Antón, 1949).²² In one estimate, three of these studios 'accounted for two-thirds of the films made' during their peak in the 1950s.²³

¹⁹ See, for example, *Philippine Graphic*, 6 May 1931, p. 56. For two recent short essays on the early years of film in the Philippines, see Nick Deocampo, 'Imperialist Fictions: the Filipino in the Imperialist Imaginary', *Movement* [Mowelfund Film Institute], 4, 1, 1999, pp. 9–18; and Agustin Sotto, 'The American Pioneers of the Filipino Cinema', *Pelikula* [University of the Philippines, College of Mass Communication Foundation], March–August 2000, pp. 5–9.

²⁰ Bienvenido Lumbera, 'Problems in Philippine Film History', in Rafael Ma. Guerrero, (ed.), *Readings in Philippine Cinema*. Manila: Manila Film Center, 1983, p. 70 [reprinted from *The Diliman Review*, July–August 1981]. See also Agustin 'Hammy' Sotto, 'War and its Aftermath in Philippine Cinema', in *Diamond Anniversary of Philippine Cinema*. Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, Special Publications Office, 1994, pp. 26–34. I am grateful to Nick Deocampo for a copy of the *Diamond Anniversary* publication.

²¹ See, for example, Joel David, *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema*. Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1990, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Cultural Center of the Philippines Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*. Volume VIII, Philippine Film. Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994, p. 36.

According to contemporary insiders and observers of the film industry, the big studios approached movie-making with a cartel-like orientation during this period. For example, Gloria Romero, movie queen of the 1950s, recalled in a recent interview that the big four 'would talk and plan what movies to make, what to send to the [annual Asian] festival, what kind of movies would get the awards'.²⁴ Similarly, film critics have noted a general division of labour in terms of genre, which further points to a strong control exercised by the big studios during this period. Thus, for example, 'Sampaguita Pictures was to be identified with melodrama, LVN with comedy, and Premiere with action pictures'.²⁵ Finally, prominent producers and actors alike have commented on the close watch kept by the studios over their stars. For example, the *grande dame* of Sampaguita Pictures, Mrs 'Mommy' Vera, introduced a morality clause into all contracts signed between the studio and its actors.²⁶ Years later, movie star Gloria Romero also recalled the paternalism of the old studio system: 'We had no managers, only the studio and our parents.'²⁷

Not surprisingly perhaps, the studio formula that had helped earn the Vera-Perez and the other family-run movie companies such evident success in the Philippines of the 1950s seemed increasingly out of touch in the 1960s. As suggested by one contemporary observer, 'that kind of product became too static, too standardized, too inexpressive of the times'.²⁸ Indeed, the old studio system foundered on the new economic constraints and opportunities reshaping Philippine cinema at the close of the 1950s.

First of all, the established formula for producing movies came under increasing pressure from labour during the course of the decade as '[d]emands for higher wages and better working conditions were made by unions that had been organized within the big studios'.²⁹ A number of such workers' organizations surfaced, including the Motion Picture Guild of the Philippines (MPGP), Philippine Motion Picture Workers

²⁴ *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 25 September 1994, p. 4.

²⁵ Lumbera, 'Problems in Philippine Film History', p. 70.

²⁶ *Philippines Free Press*, 6 August 1960, p. 36. When Mrs Vera took over the running of Sampaguita pictures after her husband died in 1956, the company produced five of the top ten 'money maker' (local) movies. In 1957, the first production of the Vera-Perez company – *Sino ang May Sala* – topped the box office hits of that year, and three of its other pictures also made the top ten list. In 1958, the same company had eight of the top ten ticket sellers. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁷ *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, 25 September 1994, p. 4.

²⁸ *Philippines Free Press*, 6 August 1960, p. 69.

²⁹ Lumbera, 'Problems in Philippine Film History', p. 74.

Association (PMPWA), Cinema Workers Union of the Philippines (CWUP), Premiere Productions Workers Union (PPWU), and Motion Picture Workers Union (MPWU).³⁰ Faced with labour strikes and disputes, two of the old studios (Premiere and LVN) had opted to close their traditional operations by early 1960.³¹

Another important change affecting the film industry from the close of the 1950s was advertising. While advertisements had featured in movie theatres since the 1920s, the use of slides rather than film as the means of advertising left much to be desired from the point of view of would-be advertisers. That is, '[e]xhibitions were largely haphazard, and the advertiser used the medium at his own risk. He never really knew where or when his slides were being shown or whether they were being shown at all.'³² This situation changed only in 1959 with the introduction of 35 mm film commercials which, for the first time, allowed for the emergence of advertising as a 'controlled medium' in Philippine cinema. As a result, the Philippines saw a dramatic increase in cinema advertising in the early 1960s. According to one estimate, receipts for cinema advertisements tripled from US\$210,000 in 1960 to US\$625,000 in 1965.³³

Against this backdrop, a new generation of showbusinessmen, including theatre booking agents and, especially, movie stars who had come of age within the old studio system began to venture into film production during the 1960s. Among the pioneers of this new generation was Espiridion Laxa with Tagalog Ilang-Ilang Pictures, whose formula of big budgets and big stars, rugged action heroes and sexualized leading ladies, placed his movies in the top 20 box-office hits in every year of the 1960s.³⁴ Of course, it was precisely this 'transition from the closed corporation to the freewheeling enterprise [which] in turn led to the rise of the actor-producers'.³⁵ Typically, the actor-producers were able to

³⁰ *Cultural Center of the Philippines Encyclopedia*, pp. 120–21.

³¹ With the exception of Lebran, which was the first of the Big Four to close down, the other three successfully cornered new markets, as indicated when, from the 1960s, LVN created a colour film laboratory, and Sampaguita and Premiere developed post-production services to the industry.

³² *Philippine Graphic*, 20 January 1965, p. 51.

³³ *Ibid.* For a list of the movie ad rates in Manila theatres, see also *Philippine Graphic*, 5 May 1965, p. 53.

³⁴ *Philippine Graphic*, 12 May 1965, p. 69.

³⁵ Quijano de Manila, 'Philippine Movies – in Crisis?', *Philippines Free Press*, 11 February 1967, p. 44. Estrada set himself up as a producer in 1964 with JE Productions, which became Emar in the following year. In 1964 he produced four of his own and nine outside movies. In 1965 he produced twelve of his own and only four outside pictures. In 1966 'his company turned out 16 pictures and he did only one outside picture, *Batang Iwahig*, for Larry Santiago'. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

wager studio-driven stardom for movie companies of their own by foregoing fees for a greater share of the box-office receipts. Prominent among these new so-called 'independent' companies were FPJ Production (Fernando Poe Jr.), Emar and then JE Production (Joseph Estrada), Medalion Films (Ronald Remy), RTG Productions, Magna East Productions, Golden Harvest Promotion (Leroy Salvador), BB Productions (Bernard Bonnin), Filmmakers Productions (Amado Cortez), Jela Production (Jess Lapid), and Jula Production (Jun Aristorenas).³⁶ As for the booking agent-producers, Ambassador and Lea Productions, for example, were both founded by bookers with long experience of the old studio system and, significantly, excellent contacts when distributing films to theatres around the country and securing good playdates.³⁷ Reflecting the changing political economy of the film industry, the Philippine Motion Picture Producers Association was founded in 1963 to include an additional dozen member companies, compared to the big four studios of its cartel-like predecessor, the Philippine Movie Producers Association.

The proliferation of 'independent' movie production companies during this decade also saw an increase in the number of locally produced – and shown – films. Thus, for example, of 5,882 film screenings in Manila in 1964, 2,326 featured local films.³⁸ By 1966, as many as 200 films were being produced locally, reportedly making the Philippine movie industry the fourth largest in the world at the time.³⁹ The following year, established movie producers who complained about increasing competition and declining profits due to the 'oversupply' of locally produced films also noted that 'more and more theatres are showing double first-runs'.⁴⁰

The dramatic increase in local Tagalog movie production during the 1960s reached a massively expanded audience, especially at Manila theatres, where 'certain Filipino films outgrossed for the first time the top earners among foreign films'.⁴¹ By one count, attendance at the 300 theatres that showed film commercials across the Philippines in 1961 exceeded 100 million people. The same source identifies the total number

³⁶ *Philippine Graphic*, 25 August 1965, p. 82.

³⁷ In the words of Lea Productions' founder and chief executive, Mrs Emilia Blas, '[t]he lifeblood of the movies is booking. The booker, who is often taken for granted by the producer, is the individual who brings in money to him by distributing his films to theatres around the country and giving them good playdates.' *Philippine Graphic*, 2 June 1965, p. 53.

³⁸ *Philippine Graphic*, 2 June 1965, p. 53.

³⁹ *Philippines Free Press*, 11 February 1967, p. 43.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Lumbera, 'Problems in Philippine Film History', p. 76.

of theatres in the Philippines at 700, and the price of admission at ‘as low as 5 US cents’.⁴² By 1964, according to another contemporary figure, Manila theatres alone counted some 36.5 million admissions per year.⁴³

In this regard, it has been suggested that locally produced movies attracted the attention of nationalist students ‘hoping to gain an understanding of the masses as represented by the audience for Filipino films’, and, through the so-called *bomba* genre of soft- and hard-core pornography flicks that exploded onto the screen in the 1960s, young professionals enjoying ‘a reflection of their own rebellion against repressive social conventions relating to sex’.⁴⁴ Moreover, it is perhaps also the case that, for an upmarket audience previously partial to foreign (American) films, the first Manila Film Festival held in 1966 ‘placed local films on the cinema map’.⁴⁵ However, with admission fees of P1.20 in Manila at the time, the movies drew the largest crowds from among the urban lower class, the so-called *bakya* (wooden sandals).⁴⁶ In the words of one contemporary observer of Philippine society and politics: ‘Tagalog movies in general are *bakya*, and so are the moviehouses that show them.’⁴⁷

Fans and slashers

Beyond the growing numbers and the changing composition of people flocking to the cinemas in the 1960s, a new kind of mass audience and a deepening ‘social imaginary’ emerged out of the dramatic trans-

⁴² *Philippine Graphic*, 20 January 1965, p. 51.

⁴³ *Philippines Free Press*, 4 March 1967, p. 22. The same article cites the following figures for average admission prices in 1964: P0.80 to P1.00 in 2nd class cinemas, and P1.20 to P3.00 in 1st class cinemas.

⁴⁴ Lumbera, ‘Problems in Philippine Film History’, p. 76. For an illuminating analysis of the *bomba* as scandalous spectacle, see Rafael, ‘Patronage and Pornography’.

⁴⁵ Isagani R. Cruz, *Movie Times*. Metro Manila: National Bookstore, 1984, p. 39.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the ‘crowd scene at Cinerama Theater during the joint premiere of *Aloha* and *Bayan Ko, Lumaban Ka*’ (caption), *Philippine Graphic*, 30 June 1965, p. 68. While no longer a common term of reference in everyday discourse, the term *bakya* has remained in circulation long after, first rubber *tsinelas* or flip-flops, and, increasingly, sneakers replaced the woden slipper as an easily recognizable visual marker of social status. It appeared to have had something of a revival in newspaper columns and in certain political debates over the question of continued *masa* support for Estrada during the impeachment hearings in the Philippine Senate.

⁴⁷ Jose F. Lacaba, ‘Notes on “Bakya”’, in Guerrero, (ed.), *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, p. 119 [reprinted from *Philippines Free Press*, 31 January 1970]. The term itself, Lacaba recalls, was coined by film director Lamberto V. Avellana ‘in his rage against an audience that failed, or refused, to appreciate his award-winning movies’. As for the cinemas, many were reportedly in a ‘dilapidated’ state – ‘filthy, stinking, and ill-ventilated’. *Philippine Graphic*, 30 June 1965, p. 68.

formations in Philippine cinema sketched above. In a process observed with regard to early cinema elsewhere, individual and mass audience responses came to imply each other, perhaps nowhere more so than in the anonymous darkness of a crowded cinema, thus anticipating a new kind of sociality.⁴⁸ In terms of the imagination associated with this new sociality, moreover, the notion of Tagalog movies as a ‘visualized lingua franca [that] sweeps up viewers, enabling them to think “I” in the form of another and another and another’, suggests not necessarily ‘identification’ with a particular character, narrative, or genre, although this may also have occurred. More significantly, perhaps, cinema seemed to inspire a different kind of recognition – recognition that there was a message in the first place, a message in circulation beyond the purview of tradition, hierarchy, and authority as inscribed in the dominant culture.⁴⁹

Perhaps one measure of this deepening social imaginary can be drawn from the growing number of fan clubs, ‘movie mailbox’ columns, and other showbiz news stories in the 1960s. While a careful study of such material has yet to be undertaken, it seems as if their circulation increased in both English-language magazines and Tagalog tabloids during this period. The following example of a letter written by a fan of starlet Lita Gutierrez, not to the actress herself but for publication in the *Philippine Graphic*, helps to illuminate the kind of social imaginary set in motion by cinema: ‘I wrote Lita Gutierrez at her new address in Bacolod City, but all this time (a whole month now) she hasn’t answered. I hope it’s only because my letter was delayed or she didn’t receive it.’⁵⁰ That is, letters may be delayed or go astray: but this fan, having herself received ‘a message’ through the movies, attempted to respond c/o the magazine’s ‘movie mailbox’ column. Not being a movie star herself, she first sought to effect a connection through private communication in the form of a letter to Ms Gutierrez ‘at her new address in Bacolod City’. As no response arrived – for ‘a whole month now’ – this fan proceeded to post a public announcement through the ‘movie mailbox’ column which, of course, suggests the possibility of an imagined community of sorts, in this case, for readers of the English-language *Philippine Graphic*. However, the determination with which this fan sought a response from her movie star cannot conceal an evident anxiety that, fan letters and magazine columns aside, something else may be at work here to prevent the desired reply from ever materializing. As

⁴⁸ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art’, p. 234.

⁴⁹ Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*, p. 74.

⁵⁰ Roseanna Avancena, Guimbal, Iloilo, ‘movie mailbox’, *Philippine Graphic*, 25 November 1964, p. 97.

stated in the letter: 'I hope that it's *only* because my letter is delayed or she didn't receive it' (italics added). In other words, the possibility of some other kind of failure makes itself felt.

In this vein, our movie fan offers insights into the peculiar force of the visualized lingua franca in at least two ways. On the one hand, as yet another message that there is a message, such fan mail constitutes testimony to the powerful recognition and the concomitant desires mobilized by films. On the other, as suggested by the (feared) lack of a (future) reply, this example underlines the failure of recognition, or the impossibility of the kind of chain-reaction hoped for by the movie fan, and the circuitry of desire thus set in motion by the cinematic experience.

Another indicator of the increasing circulation of this cinematic power to compel recognition and desire can be found far away from the movie columns of contemporary magazines – in the underworld of Philippine society or, to be more precise, in two municipalities in metropolitan Manila. That is, in the early 1960s an established criminal syndicate reportedly diversified into a new kind of protection racket, with operations primarily in Caloocan City and Quezon City. According to several newspaper reports, this so-called 'Big Four' syndicate started to prey upon actors and actresses, including superstars of the day such as Ferdinand Poe Jr. and Joseph Estrada: 'The modus operandi of the protection sellers is simple. They approach high-paid stars, mostly men, and tell them to "contribute" or else their faces would be scarred.'⁵¹

A world apart from the individual, often female, fan who goes public in a column with hopes for recognition in the form of a letter, photograph, or autograph from the object of her desire, such extortionist demands for protection money (*tong*) by a criminal syndicate threatening to disfigure movie stars for life, suggest a peculiar, or perhaps a perverse, measure of the increasing fetishization of the star, and starting in the 1960s, the superstar. Aside from the 'reality check' provided by this new predatory interest in male movie stars precisely as their market value started to increase, it also highlights, through the focus on scarring faces, what one author in another context has described as 'the magic of the fetish of appearances'.⁵² In short, these stories testify, albeit in different ways, to the power of the cinematic image to compel recognition and to mobilize desire, but also to the impossibility of a certain

⁵¹ *Daily Mirror*, 25 May 1963. See also *Daily Mirror*, 24 May, 4 and 10 June 1963.

⁵² Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*.

kind of appropriation of the power of the fetish. The fetish here operates as an 'orientation to a power which cannot be appropriated but which, nonetheless, one feels that one possesses'.⁵³

Compared to the stark reactions elicited from starstruck fan and predatory syndicate alike, most movie audiences since the 1960s have remained rather more circumspect in their affirmation of the fetish of appearances set into circulation through the cinematic. However, on closer reflection, there are perhaps countless instances of such mobilized desires and (frustrated) responses surfacing into everyday popular discourse, if one can only be bothered to listen, rather than, as is customary, bemoan either the *bakya* crowd's lack of 'proper acculturation' or, from a different perspective, the 'revolutionary consciousness'. That is, the wider impact of this cinematic effect should be apparent to anyone who has overheard the kind of movie star centred conversations and commentaries that have come to form such an integral part of popular discourse among the urban and rural poor of the Philippines since the 1960s. Note, for example, the typical rejoinder: *Alam mo naman si Sharon*, or *Alam mo naman si Joseph* ('Well, you know how Sharon is', or 'Well, you know what Joseph is like'). The tonality of such statements cannot but suggest an affectionate familiarity akin to that held for a wayward cousin, neighbour, or friend. This affectionate familiarity, in turn, reveals a process of 'eavesdropping', which perhaps best captures the nature of the (ever frustrated) response to the fetish of appearance on the part of the wider movie audience.⁵⁴

In short, beyond questions of character, narrative, and genre, the deeper social and political significance of Philippine cinema has stemmed precisely from its power to compel recognition and response, which, due to the developments sketched above, gained unprecedented circulation in the 1960s. During this decade, an expanding mass audience, especially in metropolitan Manila, began to participate in the process of eavesdropping described above. As suggested by this process, moreover, the frustrated desire for the returned gaze mobilized by the cinematic experience left the audience in a state of perpetual longing.

Thus it was through the 'phantom power of the lingua franca' that

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ The following glimpse from the mid-1960s offers further suggestive evidence of both the 'warm and sincere' affection of fans for their movie stars and the sense of longing and irrevocable loss thus inspired: 'Matinee idol Pancho Magalona . . . is often caught on camera with a tongue-tied, teary-eyed fan lost in the awe of meeting him [on his noon-time television show] At Last Face-to-Face', *Philippine Graphic*, 4 August 1965, p. 15.

cinema came to play such a vital role in inspiring a new social imaginary.⁵⁵

The magic of movie stars also gained greater circulation in Philippine society with the expansion of a mass audience, and the range of efforts to appropriate the fetish over the years – through letters or money or ‘eavesdropping’ – suggests something of both the desire and the failure it mobilized. ‘The lack of success in making this power one’s own’, it has been noted, ‘merely makes for persistence.’⁵⁶ Viewed from this perspective, it becomes more apparent why the cinematic magic of the fetish of appearance may have come to have greater impact in the political realm during this period.

The new ‘political effect’ of the movies and, notably, their stars showed up in several ways, especially in the Manila of the 1960s. First of all, contemporary sources point to the growing number of movie stars drawn into electoral politics ‘as rooters, or supporters, of particular candidates’.⁵⁷ For example, major screen stars such as Amalia Fuentes and Susan Roces publicly endorsed individual politicians during this decade. Moreover, many stars started to campaign for political office themselves, thus further underscoring the magic power released by the cinematic experience. Anticipated by lead screen actor Rogelio de la Rosa’s senatorial election in 1955 (followed by his abortive bid for the presidency in 1961 when he instead campaigned for winning candidate Diosdado Macapagal), these developments gained momentum in the 1960s. Indeed, this political phenomenon included not only movie stars but also other ‘showbusiness personalities’ whose spells were cast widely through the broadcast media.⁵⁸

As early as 1963, for example, radio-and-television ‘personality’ Eddie Ilarde topped the election for municipal councillor in Pasay City in

⁵⁵ This elegant turn of phrase is borrowed from Vicente L. Rafael, ‘Taglish, or the Phantom Power of the Lingua Franca’, *Public Culture*, 8, 1, 1995, pp. 101–26. Beyond the tricky questions raised in his essay about the status and circulation of Taglish, or perhaps ‘Taglishes’, in Philippine society, the argument advanced here shifts the main focus to the cinematic as a ‘visualized lingua franca’.

⁵⁶ Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution*, p. 10.

⁵⁷ *Philippine Graphic*, 13 October 1965, p. 64.

⁵⁸ Reportedly, de la Rosa timed the release of his movie *Dugo at Luha* (Blood and Tears), which focused on government neglect of the poor, for the election campaign in 1961.

⁵⁹ This raises broader questions about the significance of radio and television habits in the Philippines during this period. While comparatively high by regional standards, estimates for the number of television sets and the proportion of homes owning a set remained low during this period. In one estimate, some 130,000 television sets reached only two per cent of homes in the Philippines by the mid-1960s [*Philippine Graphic*, 4 August 1965, pp. 13–15]. Even allowing for television watching as a social affair,

metropolitan Manila.⁵⁹ Moreover, by the time Ferdinand E. Marcos ran for president – with a film of his own – in 1965, veteran actors Manuel Condé and Leopoldo Salcedo were campaigning for election to the House of Representatives in Manila's first and third congressional districts, respectively. As if to underscore the magic of the fetish of appearances set into motion by the cinematic (and, perhaps also the 'shrivelling of the aura' associated with the experience of facing the camera),⁶⁰ Condé filed a petition with the Commission on Elections requesting that ballots bearing the names of some of his most famous screen personas – *Juan Tamad*, *Sigfredo*, and *Genghis Khan* – be credited to him. Other contenders for a seat in Congress in 1965 included Eddie Ilarde (who successfully captured the First District of Rizal), as well as television and movie star Rudy Robles (Leyte).⁶¹ Finally, the mid-term elections in 1967 saw an unprecedented number of *artistas* running for public office. As noted by a contemporary chronicler:

The trail blazed by Roger de la Rosa and paved by Eddie Ilarde is a crowded highway this year. Amado Cortez, who's of the Padilla acting dynasty, entered the Quezon City NP convention for councilors, lost out but is reportedly running as an independent. Also reported as running for alderman are Fred Montilla in Quezon City, Ben Rubio from Tondo, both as independents. . . . Johnny Wilson of TV and film, who's on the official Liberal ticket of Makati, [is] running for councillor under incumbent and reelectionist Mayor Max Estrella. On the opposition ticket in that premier town of the country is a musical star of cinema and TV, Nestor de Villa, official Nacionalista candidate for vice-mayor of Makati.⁶²

it is not clear how many people in Pasay City with its large slums, for example, had ever seen Eddie Ilarde on the then popular 'Dariogold Jamboree' and 'The Eddie Ilarde Show'. What seems far more certain is that '[h]is cool, soothing voice has been familiar to housewives since he started handling *Kahapon Lamang*, a schmaltzy radio program' [*Philippine Graphic*, 3 November 1965, p. 50].

⁶⁰ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', especially p. 231.

⁶¹ *Philippine Graphic*, 3 November 1965, p. 50. More than two decades later, in 1987, major action star Ramon Revilla lost his senatorial bid arguably 'due to a miscalculation – he used his real name, Jose Bautista, instead of his more popular screen name', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 14 May 1992, p. 8.

⁶² *Philippines Free Press*, 23 September 1967, p. 2. This is one of three key articles by Nick Joaquin published under his pen name Quijano de Manila in *Philippines Free Press*. These articles ('Philippine Movies – in Crisis?', 11 February 1967, pp. 5, 43–44, 69; 'All Star Polls', 23 September 1967, pp. 2–3, 45–46, 75; and 'Joseph and the Brethren', 16 December 1967, pp. 3, 71–73) are included in the collection of essays by Quijano de Manila/Nick Joaquin, *Joseph Estrada and Other Sketches*. Manila: National Bookstore, 1977.

Of course, 1967 was also the year in which Joseph Ejercito Estrada first campaigned for elected office, as an independent candidate for municipal mayor in San Juan in metropolitan Manila. According to contemporary reports, Estrada's election campaign enjoyed unprecedented support from some of the Philippine cinema's biggest stars. For example, at his campaign launch, the so-called *miting de avance*, Estrada set a new San Juan record of 30,000 people, as he appeared with 'Ronnie Poe, Susan Roces, Amalia Fuentes, Eddie Gutierrez, Divina Valencia, Jess Lapid, Helen Gamboa, Vic Vargas, Josephine Estrada, Jun Aristorenas, Perla Bautista, Leopoldo Salcedo, and a host of other box-office names you couldn't get together on one stage for a million pesos'.⁶³

Camera, action: *si Joseph!*

Dear Joseph Estrada. I am one of your millions of fans. I have seen all your films shown here. And I admire unstintedly your acting. I think you're the best looking, most virile actor in local movies today. I will always be your fan, and pray for your success all of your life. Do you give photos of yourself to fans who write you?⁶⁴

At the time he stood for municipal election in San Juan, Estrada, or Joseph as he was then known to his fans 'from Aparri to Jolo',⁶⁵ was already one of the country's most famous movie stars, a superstardom unsurpassed by most of his contemporaries. In a career that came to span almost thirty-five years, Estrada started with a small bit part in *Kandilang Bakal* (Iron Candle) in 1954, and produced his last starring role (to date) in the anti-US bases movie, *Sa Kuko ng Agila* (In the Claws of the Eagle) in 1988. After his big break in *Asiong Salonga* in 1962, he soon joined the ranks of actor-producers with the incorporation of Emar and JE Productions in the mid-1960s.⁶⁶ While this was the decade that earned Estrada the most critical acclaim, with four of his five Filipino Academy of Movies Arts and Sciences (FAMAS)

⁶³ 'Joseph and the Brethren', *Philippines Free Press*, 16 December 1967, p. 72.

⁶⁴ This letter, attributed to Eve Panol, Acebedo Optical Clinic, Penaranda St., Legazpi City, was published in the column 'movie mailbox', *Philippine Graphic*, 24 February 1965, p. 71.

⁶⁵ *Philippines Free Press*, 11 February 1967, p. 44.

⁶⁶ Reportedly, Estrada appeared in four in-house and nine outside movies in 1964: in 1965 the figures were twelve and four: and in 1966, sixteen and one. *Philippines Free Press*, 11 February 1967, p. 69.

awards for best actor,⁶⁷ he continued producing and starring in an average four films per year throughout the 1970s.⁶⁸

In addition to his actor-producer contributions to Philippine cinema, Estrada played an instrumental role in shaping the movie industry in other crucial ways. As the president of the Philippine Motion Picture Producers Association (PMPPA), Estrada founded the Movie Workers Welfare Fund (MOWELFUND), a private insurance scheme for film industry workers, in 1974.⁶⁹ The following year, he gave support to the revival of the Manila Film Festival under the auspices of the new Metropolitan Authority headed by Governor Imelda R. Marcos, and under the conditions of martial law declared by President Ferdinand E. Marcos in September 1972. As a measure of his long-standing presence in the industry, finally, Estrada was presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Film Academy of the Philippines in 1989.

Whatever the significance of his roles in the PMPPA and the MOWELFUND, it is, of course, the Estrada films themselves that hold the key to the widespread recognition that he came to enjoy in Philippine society. While, as argued above, the kind of audience response inspired by the cinematic experience transcends any particular character, narrative, or even genre, a closer examination of some old Estrada films nonetheless opens a window onto the social imaginary set into motion by this 'visualized lingua franca'. As the availability of Estrada films remains limited, no claim is made here for the representativeness of the movies chosen for discussion. At a minimum, however, they offer illuminating glimpses of his 'critically acclaimed' films of the 1960s, as well as the shifting focus of the Estrada movies made throughout the 1970s.⁷⁰

The first two films discussed here are the award winning *Geron Busabos: Batang Quiapo* ('Geron the Tramp', or perhaps better, 'Geron:

⁶⁷ The five starring roles were in the following films: *Markhang Rehas* (Behind Bars) in 1962, *Geron Busabos* (Geron, the Squatter) in 1964, *Ito ang Pilipino* (Behold the Filipino) in 1966, *Patria Adorada* (Beloved Country) in 1969, and *Kumander Alibasbas* (Commander Alibasbas) in 1981. In 1981, Estrada was also awarded a place in the FAMAS Hall of Fame.

⁶⁸ This figure is based on a count of the films listed in Nicanor G. Tiongson (ed.), *The Urian Anthology, 1970–79*. Manila: Manuel L. Morato, 1983.

⁶⁹ For a brief official history of the Mowelfund Film Institute, see *Movement*, 1, 3, 1986.

⁷⁰ The author gratefully acknowledges the kind assistance of Vicente 'Enteng' Tenefrancia, video archivist at the University of the Philippines Film Center, as well as Jun E. Abarra and Rose Santiago of Millennium Cinema, in making several Estrada films available. Many thanks also to Rosary Benitez for the patient care with which she assisted in the transcription of key parts of *Geron Busabos*.

Quiapo Kid')⁷¹ and the less celebrated *Joe Nazareno: Ang Taxidriver*. They were directed by Cesar 'Chat' Gallardo, with screenplays written by Augusto Buenaventura, who worked on many other Emar or JE Production films. Produced a few months apart in 1964, these films share some notable similarities. Featuring Joseph Estrada in the title roles, both films convey a strong sense of place, as they follow the everyday travails of Geron, a *kargador* squatter in Quiapo, and Joe Nazareno, a taxi driver (with a chequered past) on the streets of Manila. For example, in the opening scenes of these films, the camera surveys crowded neighbourhood streets and key city landmarks, as a voice-over confirms the strangely familiar scenes with the announcement: *Ito ang Quiapo* or *Ito ang Manila* ('This is Quiapo', or 'This is Manila'). The voice-over accompanying the camera's visual trajectory in the first frames of *Batang Quiapo* is worth quoting at some length:

Ito ang Quiapo. Isa sa mga pinakamaunlad na distrito dito sa loob ng Maynila. Maraming nagsasabi, naririto ang puso ng lungsod pagkat sa pook na ito ay matatagpuan, ang lahat ng kulay ng buhay. Naririto ang mga mapapalad, ang mga nilalang na isinilang sa gitna nang kasaganahan at sila ang magandang mukha nang daigdig, sila ang larawan nang magandang pag-asa ng buhay. Ngunit naririto rin ang mga sawi, ang mga kulang palad na pinagkaitan ng kapalaran, sila ang mga pangit sa buhay, sila ang larawan ng mga walang pag-asa sa buhay.

[This is Quiapo. This is one of Manila's fastest growing districts. It lies, they say, at the heart of the city because all types of life flow through it. The fortunate are here, those born into prosperity, all the better face of this life, the very image of hope. The wretched are also here, the unfortunate, the forsaken, the ugly side of life, the image of despair.]

Through its close-ups of a busy intersection near Quiapo church at the

⁷¹ The English and French translations chosen for this title, which was selected as an entry in an international film festival, were 'Geron the Tramp' and 'Geron le Vagabond'. In view of Geron's strong social anchoring and regular work habits, however, the notion of a 'tramp' or 'vagabond' seems misguided. A familiar usage of *busabos* refers to a certain kind of dirty, or unkempt appearance associated with street children, for example. (Thus perhaps the common admonition to other children: *Huwag kang busabos!* 'Don't get dirty!') At first appearance, Geron's torn shirt, shanty dwelling, and (self-reported) bad smell would seem to align him with this kind of *busabos*. Apart from his perfect Elvis coiffure throughout this movie, however, the dictionary definition of this term suggests a deeper resonance with the underlying tensions of (suppressed) desire driving this film: '*busabos* (1) slave esp. one in a degenerate or abject state; (2) slave, meaning person who is controlled or ruined by some desire, habit or influence.'

very heart of downtown Manila, this opening scene, not unlike that in *Ang Taxidriver*, renders the familiar strange, in such ways as to illuminate a social condition typically experienced as a 'structure of feeling' in everyday life, rather than observed with the kind of critical perspective afforded a cinema audience. In this regard, the mobilized gaze of the camera provides a crucial contrast to the unseeing eye implied by the anonymous crowd of the modern city. Moreover, the very attention focused on streets, markets, and plazas in *Batang Quiapo* serves to highlight a public realm beyond the immediate circles of family relations. As suggested by the voice-over to the second scene of *Ang Taxidriver*, this widening sociological perspective, or social imaginary, is further enhanced by the introduction of the lead characters as *karaniwang tao*, or common folks, rather than exceptional heroes:

Ito si Joe Nazareno. Isa sa angaw-angaw na mamayang ng lungsod. Ang kanyang pagkatao pangkaraniwan. Ang kanyang ambisyon pangkaraniwan din. Ang kumain nang tatlong beses sa loob nang isang araw. Ang kanyang hanapbuhay lalong pangkaraniwan sapagka't siya'y isang taksidriver.

[This is Joe Nazareno. He is one of millions of people in the city. His is a common character. His view of life is also common. He eats three times a day. His work is especially common because he is a taxidriver.]

On the one hand, then, these films underscore the 'necessities which rule . . . lives'.⁷² As the voice-over reminds the audience in the case of Geron: *Siya'y isa lamang halimbawa sa kalupitan ng buhay* ('He's just one leading example of life's cruelty'). On the other hand, as suggested above, they also reveal 'an immense and unexpected field of action'.⁷³ As the camera invites the audience to follow the gaze of Joe Nazareno through the windows of his moving taxi, neighbourhood streets and major avenues in the city of Manila do not appear as fixed boundaries or forbidding distances but unfold precisely as such 'fields of action'.

The motor force propelling the narrative in these films is one of desire. In the case of *Batang Quiapo*, for example, the repeated attempts by the protagonist to maintain distance from family, friendship, or other attachments in the face of seemingly endless demands for his attention serve only to underline the strength of the desires inspired and, for much of the movie, suppressed by Geron. With the notable exception of the *labandera* (laundry woman), whose own desires left her a single, poor

⁷² Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', p. 236.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

mother of a ‘Liberation’ child fathered by an American G.I. some seventeen years earlier, everybody in Geron’s world wants something from him – a father figure to an orphan boy, a husband to a *sampaguita* girl, a friend to a wannabe tough-guy, a lover to an American woman, and a protector to market vendors and other urban poor in the community. The most difficult and ultimately least successful efforts to resist such claims prompt Geron to reveal that his reluctance to take in the young Beto (‘So you could become like me?’) or to affirm his feelings for the beautiful Nena (‘How could I marry her?’) stem from a sense of powerlessness to change the harsh realities of a life lived among the urban poor, or, in other words, of being enslaved (*pabusabos*) by the necessities that rule such lives. Beyond this evident reluctance to become his own mediatory object through such personal relationships, Geron, not unlike Joe Nazareno, also rejects several overtures for him to join or collaborate with a local syndicate in collecting *tong* (protection money) from the market vendors: *Hindi ako pare mo* (‘I’m not your pal’). At a key moment early in this film, Geron also refuses inclusion in another kind of debt cycle, linking him to authorized power as someone who has nothing and who may therefore ‘trade’ in pity by interrupting the movie’s honest policeman’s delivery with the outburst: *Huwag mo akong kaawaan!* (‘Don’t pity me!’).⁷⁴

As all eyes and expectations remain focused on Geron, however, he eventually finds himself unable to resist adopting the street urchin Beto, accepting the wannabe tough Digno, and, most significantly, courting the young mestiza Nena.⁷⁵ As he finally affirms his hitherto suppressed desires, Geron no longer retains any semblance of control over his everyday life. Indeed, the sheer force of this eruption of desire spells a series of failures. First of all, there is the scene in which Geron is so drunk outside Nena’s house one rainy night that, when her mother forbids any reply to his loud proclamations of eternal love, he ends up passing out in a nearby street. Second, after looking for his hero during that rainstorm, Beto comes down with a high temperature and, once again, Geron is shown desperate and helpless in extracting a response – this time from an indifferent hospital staff. Finally, having caught Digno lying

⁷⁴ The immediacy of Geron’s reaction recalls a wider social discourse on pity and debt in the Philippines. For an illuminating critique, see Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁷⁵ For an interesting survey of mestiza leading ladies in Philippine cinema, see Behn Cervantes, ‘The Mestiza Mystique in Filipino Movies’, *Pelikula*, March–August 2000, pp. 16–20.

and stealing behind his back, Geron realizes that, for all the recognition Digno craves, it remains impossible to reach him, and thus to trust him. Instead, this ultimate failure results in a double-cross of life and death.

However, the final scene in each film offers illuminating closure, twice over. In both films the title character, played by Joseph Estrada, finds himself at a juncture at which his field of action is limited and domesticated in crucial ways. The driving momentum of these movies reaches a climax in prolonged scenes of fighting – at a desolate spot by a monument on the suburban frontier for Joe Nazareno, and in an eerily empty underpass in the heart of downtown Manila for Geron Busabos – against the easily identifiable bad guys and, significantly, with eventual support from the otherwise conspicuously absent forces of the police. Moreover, the suppression of desire which has defined the title characters and, importantly, propelled the narrative of each film up to this point, is reversed in the final scene, as Geron and Joe find themselves in the tight embrace of the main love interest, played by Imelda Ilanan in both movies. In combination, the end spells a new form of active participation in the hero's subjugation – to a social order mandated by law and enforced by police, as well as to a family structure demanded by 'true love' and legitimized by society.

Despite the closure thus suggested, the dialectic of desire which is a theme of these films, and more generally at work through the visualized lingua franca, implies that something always escapes as an excess that could not be fully captured by such processes of incorporation and domestication. Then, perhaps, the focus of attention on the lead character and the inevitable excess of desire mobilized in 'the Joseph Estrada proletarian potboilers'⁷⁶ in crucial ways anticipated the subsequent 'Eruption' of a peculiarly populist appeal in Philippine politics and society. After all, it has been noted, '[t]he Estrada films, especially the *Batang* series, are the closest we have come to true Philippine cinema . . . alive and gutsy pop art as contemporary as a canto boy's latest belch'.⁷⁷ At the same time, the closure described above, however incomplete, nonetheless foreshadowed not merely the Estrada films to follow in the 1970s but also something of the decidedly conservative limitations of populism itself as political project and vision.

Beyond the painstakingly nationalist epics *Ito ang Pilipino* (1966) and *Patria Adorada* (1969), the Estrada films made during the 1970s signalled at least two notable departures from the old formula. That is,

⁷⁶ Lacaba, 'Notes on *Bakya*', p. 119.

⁷⁷ Joaquin, *Joseph Estrada and Other Sketches*, p. 6.

in the wider context of martial law in the Philippines, some of Estrada's trademark films came to feature him as a domesticated family man in screwball comedies, or, more frequently, as an anti- or non-revolutionary (sometimes free) agent in action dramas. Compared to the Estrada films of the 1960s, and especially the *Batang* series which also included, for example, *Pepeng Pingas: Ang Batang San Nicolas* (1965) and *Batang Angustia* (1965), the movies produced by Emar and JE Productions in the 1970s tended toward a more pre-emptive incorporation of its superstar into family and state.

In the same year martial law was proclaimed, Estrada appeared in two family comedies produced by JE Productions – *Okey Ka, Erap* ('You're Ok, Erap'), and *Tatay na si Erap* ('Papa Erap'). At least three other 'Erap' movies were to follow in swift succession – *Ander Di Saya si Erap* ('Henpecked Erap') in 1973, *Tama Na, Erap* ('Enough's Enough, Erap'), and, also in 1974, *Erap is My Guy*.⁷⁸ As if to confirm, and perhaps capture, the familiar affections of Filipino fans for their movie stars, the film 'Erap is My Guy' of course features Joseph 'Erap' Estrada as the *kuya* (older brother) to superstar Nora 'Guy' Aunor.⁷⁹ By giving 'Erap' star billing, these films also laid claim to a popular discourse of *erpat-* (*erap is pare* backwards) speak, associated with a certain youthful irreverence in the Manila of the 1960s. At the same time, however, the 'Erap' who is everyone's pal (*pare*) cannot but be found constantly lacking, thus in a sense signalling the decline of the Estrada hero who, by refusing to be everyone's buddy, always held on to something of himself, something more to be desired: *Hindi akong pare mo* ('I'm not your pal'). Perhaps this surplus kept in store for another day, another encounter, in the earlier Estrada films inspired a different, more powerful desire for appropriation, compared to the kind of overstretch evident in the subsequent 'Erap' movies.

In this regard, the film *Tama Na Erap!* offers some instructive insights. A married man with eleven children and another on the way, 'Erap' appears visibly overstretched as he seeks to support his large family, first, in vain, as a jeepney driver and then as an aspiring insurance salesman. At the visit of a *doktora* concerned with family

⁷⁸ With the exception of *Ander di Saya si Erap*, which was produced by NV Productions, the other 'Erap' films listed here were made by JE Productions.

⁷⁹ For an illuminating analysis of the Cinderella superstardom of Nora Aunor, see Neferti X. M. Tadiar, 'The Noranian Imaginary', in Rolando B. Tolentino, (ed.), *Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Cultures*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000, pp. 61–76.

planning, 'Erap' fails to introduce his children properly, mixing up their names.⁸⁰ At his new apprenticeship with an insurance firm, his faulty English prompts much merriment among the other trainees, and provides more general comic relief, in sharp contrast to earlier Estrada characters.⁸¹ Finally, 'Erap' neither takes sides against the bad guys, who in fact provide a useful 'insurance partnership' with their protection racket of local toughs: nor forsakes all others for his one true love, who instead appears more like a first wife unable to keep her man from other willing girlfriends. While still demonstrating a certain common touch, as suggested by the minor details highlighted above, this film nonetheless remains, at best, a parody of the kind of everyday life and concerns that are the focus of the earlier Estrada films discussed above.

Apart from these family comedies, Estrada also starred in many other in-house movies, as well as in several films made by other producers in the 1970s.⁸² The Estrada 'action movie' – for want of a better term – started developing into a peculiar martial law discourse during this period. That is, some of the best known JE Productions from this period, such as *Diligin Mo ng Hamog ang Uhaw na Lupa* ('Sprinkle with Dew this Arid Earth') with Gloria Diaz (1975) and *Bakya Mo Neneng* ('Your Wooden Sandals, Neneng') with Nora Aunor (1977), featured Estrada in the midst of a war waged by provincial warlords and their private armies against a toiling peasantry – with an ineffectual guerrilla band somewhere in the background, never quite in focus except perhaps in defeat, and with an ever-so-clean-cut Philippine Constabulary appearing just in time for the final curtain. When not situated in some distant and typically nameless province, Estrada films of this era also returned to the country's capital – as in *Manila Dragnet* (1973) and *The Manila Connection* (1974). However, the Manila portrayed in these films

⁸⁰ Named after 'national heroes' according to 'Erap', the children introduce themselves, with evident pride and, in some cases, an unmistakable *artista* flourish: Jose Rizal, Susan Roces, Nora Aunor, Amalia Fuentes, Vilma Santos, Apolinario Mabini, Ferdinand Poe Jr., Andres Bonifacio

⁸¹ Note the extraordinary scene in *Batang Quiapo* in which Geron, stumbling drunk into an unfamiliar bar, exchanges the following words with the waiter: GB: *Bakit ang malamig?* [Why is it so cold?]. W: 'We have aircondition, sir.' GB: *Kondition? Anong kondition?* [Condition? What kind of condition?]. W: 'Aircondition, sir.' GB: *Uh . . . May beer kayo? Beer? Beer! Pilipino ka ba?* [Whatever . . . Do you have beer? Beer? Beer! Are you Filipino, or what?]. W: 'Ah, cerveza! Yes, yes, sir.'

⁸² On the action hero in Philippine films, see especially Augustin Sotto, 'Christ Figures in Troubled Land', *Unang Pagtingin sa Pelikulang Bakkaken* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989), pp. 8–9. See also Rolando B. Tolentino, 'Power, Gangsterism and the Masses in the Films of President Joseph "Erap" Estrado' (unpublished paper, Manila, 2000).

appeared a world apart from the familiar neighbourhoods of the early *Batang* series, or even the bigger city streets criss-crossed by Joe Nazareno's taxi in the mid-1960s. Instead, these later films brought into sharper focus all that one did not know, must not know, but feared, about the sprawling metropolis – the dangers and predators that lurked in the dark, the conspiracies and rumours of death and crime that formed part of the backdrop to (and the justification for) the Marcos declaration of martial law in September 1972.

Batang pinaglabanan: from San Juan to Malacañang

Meanwhile, Estrada's move from *artista* superstar to mayoral candidate in the late 1960s recalled a pattern familiar from South India where, scholars have noted, screen characters and speeches have foreshadowed a distinctive political rhetoric.⁸³ After repeated portrayals of what contemporary observers recognized as 'the Estrada hero, the rebel with a cause, fighting for the underdog and for what he believes in, fighting against the pressures from a harsh, cruel world',⁸⁴ Joseph Ejercito Estrada launched his 1967 bid for mayor of San Juan as an independent candidate with his own organization, *Kilusang Bagong Pilipino*, on Pinaglabanan Day, 29 August, during the commemoration of the first battle of the Revolution.⁸⁵ The name itself, *Kilusang Bagong Pilipino*, harked back to an old line by one of the first to make the transition from *artista* to politician in the Philippines, Eddie Ilarde. Moreover, the chief caption on Estrada's campaign posters, *Ito ang Pilipino*, was, of course, the title of the 'superproduction in color' which Estrada not only starred in (and for which he received the FAMAS Best Actor Award) but also, significantly, produced, in 1966, the year before his first bid for political office.⁸⁶ Finally, '[t]o counter the rumor that his screen name, not being "real", would mean an invalid vote', Estrada 'provided every precinct and every board of inspectors in San Juan with photostatic copies of the court decision' granting him the right to use all his names.⁸⁷

⁸³ See Sara Dickey, 'The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52, 2, 1993, p. 355. This article focuses particular attention on the filmstar M.G. Ramachandran who came to power in Tamil Nadu in 1976.

⁸⁴ *Philippine Graphic*, 9 June 1965, p. 70.

⁸⁵ De Manila, 'All Star Polls', *Philippines Free Press*, 23 September 1967, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Joaquin, *Joseph Estrada*, p. 23. The 'superproduction in color' *Ito ang Pilipino* reportedly cost P380,000, or three times more than the usual Estrada picture.

⁸⁷ De Manila, 'Joseph and the Brethren', *Philippines Free Press*, 16 December 1967, p. 71.

Moreover, as noted above, Estrada's ambitions for a second career in the public eye also reflected a wider phenomenon in the Philippines of the late 1960s. That is, never before had the Philippines seen so many entertainment stars running for office as in the 1967 elections.

To a significant extent, the rise of *artista* candidates for local political office, whether running as independents or on the ticket of one of the two established parties, appeared symptomatic of the widespread popular disenchantment with traditional politics and politicians in the Philippines of the 1960s. And yet, in a curious way, perhaps it was also emblematic of the very resilience and absorptiveness of the political system. In this vein, the star-studded election campaigns in the Manila of the 1960s better captured the popular mood – and vote – than did their reformist predecessor 'alternative' political candidates for local government – the so-called 'City Citizens Leagues for Good Government'. Such leagues of self-proclaimed urban (professional) reformers emerged in Quezon City, Pasay City, Mandaluyong, Manila, and Makati, once mayors, vice-mayors, and councillors of most chartered cities were made elective offices in 1959. 'Thus, for the first time, the city residents were allowed to choose their officials, instead of having to depend entirely on patronage of the President and the local political bosses.'⁸⁸

For example, by the late 1950s, ten prominent families backed the initial organization of the Quezon City Citizens League for Good Government (QCCLGG), to counter pressures associated with a rumoured threat of 'creeping industrialization' and, significantly, the manifest 'presence of laborers, unemployed migrants from the provinces, as well as squatters and slum dwellers' on this closing suburban frontier.⁸⁹ While successfully campaigning for six councillors in the first election to city government in 1959, the QCCLGG enjoyed but a brief and rather lacklustre career, as did its counterparts elsewhere in the early 1960s.⁹⁰ Instead of suburban utopias of 'safety, security, and sanitation', governed by 'honest, efficient and responsible city government',⁹¹ these sprawling

⁸⁸ Jose V. Abueva, 'The Citizens League and the 1959 Local Elections', in Raul de Guzman (ed.), *Patterns in Decision Making: Case Studies in Philippine Public Administration*. Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1963, p. 511. Republic Act 2259, which mandated this shift to elected local offices, was passed on 19 June 1959.

⁸⁹ Abueva, 'The Citizens League', pp. 506, 513.

⁹⁰ See, for example, *Manila Chronicle*, 15 November 1963, p. 16; and *Manila Times*, 21 November, 1963, p. 24. By 1963, one study identified such citizens leagues in Pasay City, Makati, Malabon, Mandaluyong, and Manila. See Aprodicio A. Laquian, 'The City in Nation-Building: Politics in Metro Manila.' PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1965.

⁹¹ Abueva, 'The Citizens League', pp. 513, 518.

metropolitan social landscapes remained captive to urban political machines with their particularistic rewards and clientelistic structures.⁹²

While these initiatives in reforming the city through electoral politics had largely fizzled out by the early 1960s, as noted above, extra-electoral mobilization continued to gain momentum from the middle of that decade as student activists took to the streets of Manila, armed with radical political discourse, contentious collective action, and expanding protest repertoires developed on the peculiar social spaces of campus enclaves. Thus Estrada's victory in the 1967 election – or at least his eventual installation as mayor of San Juan after eventually winning his electoral protest case in 1969 – was overshadowed by the rise of alternative responses to the deepening participatory crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. On the one hand, the forces of the radical-nationalist left mobilized collectively, in student demonstrations building up to the First Quarter Storm and the Diliman Commune, and in the establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the New People's Army (NPA), and the Christians for National Liberation (CNL). On the other hand, President Ferdinand E. Marcos, who had won an unprecedented re-election in 1969, declared martial law in 1972 as his strategy for defeating subversion and disorder and for engineering a 'democratic revolution from the center' (self-avowedly anti-oligarchy, anti-corruption, pro-land reform). Thus the ascendant (populist) movie star turned politico in San Juan found his rise to power encapsulated within, and subordinated to, rival and alternative claims on the national imagination – even as he received recognition as one of the Philippines' 'Ten Outstanding Young Men' (TOYM) Awardees in 1972 and, moreover, remained in office until 1986.

Despite his long and loyal service under the martial law regime, however, Estrada succeeded in capturing a seat in the Senate in the 1987 elections, and thus not only launched a swift political comeback but did so at the national level. Indeed, Estrada was one of only two opposition candidates elected to the Senate in 1987 and, unlike Juan Ponce Enrile, he had been nowhere near EDSA during the four days of People Power that had precipitated the Marcos fall from power in February 1986. Instead, in the same year Estrada had figured in a peculiar 'People Power' show of his own in San Juan, holding on to the mayorship against the

⁹² For analyses of money and clientelism – and coercion – in Philippine politics during this period, see Scott, 'Corruption, Machine Politics, and Political Change', and Nowak and Snyder, 'Clientelist Politics in the Philippines'.

appointment of an Officer-in-Charge by the new government under President Corazon C. Aquino.

Aside from his opposition to a president whose endorsement made many a political career during this early post-authoritarian period, however, Estrada may have captured a deeper structure of feeling that pervaded this election and, more generally, this period of renegade political violence. That is, as the organized left had grown to become the largest revolutionary movement in the world during the long years of the Marcos dictatorship, and, under the new regime in Manila, as a broader range of left-of-centre forces sought to expand the field of electoral candidates, a political backlash was not long in coming. With the national government drifting towards a military solution, the May 1987 elections were held in the context of a mounting counter-insurgency drive which saw a proliferation of vigilante groups and their spectacular violence.⁹³ Moreover, the new legal left party, *Partido ng Bayan*, and its Alliance for New Politics, saw its candidates and supporters subjected to rampant red-baiting in the mainstream media and widespread harassment by armed groups. At the same time, some of the most charismatic leaders of the left were 'salvaged' – tortured, killed, and/or disappeared.

In this context, it is perhaps worth recalling the peculiar turn of the Estrada films in the 1970s, in particular as regards the anti- or non-revolutionary 'action movies' identified above (*Diligin Mo ng Hamog ang Uhaw na Lupa* and *Bakya Mo, Neneng*). While these two films featured well-meaning if misguided guerrillas in relations of subordination (a younger brother commander) and submission (surrendering weapons) to Estrada in the lead role, the movies he produced and starred in by the early 1980s reveal, despite themselves, a more perverse fascination with revolutionaries or, rather, with their criminality and violence. In this regard, two films stand out: *Kumander Alibasbas*, the film which earned Estrada his last FAMAS award for Best Actor in 1981, and *Pedring Taruc*, made in 1982, also by JE Productions. In both these films, Estrada played the title role of these well-known Huk leaders who, after a life of seemingly endless struggle and repeated betrayals, finally meet with a violent death, the futility of which is underlined by the difficulty of distinguishing the *Alibasbas* or *Taruc* gangs from their many enemies.

⁹³ See, for example, Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, 'State of Siege: Political Violence and Vigilante Mobilization in the Philippines', in Bruce B. Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner (ed.), *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, pp. 125–151.

As noted by one film critic, 'Estrada appears not only as "rebel" but does so without a cause.'⁹⁴

This cinematic retreat to a more distant guerrilla movement, the Huks, at a time when both Philippine and US military intelligence reports warned of marked NPA inroads, not only suggested a wishful fiction of sorts, but also pointed toward a deepening fearful fascination with revolutionary violence. Recalling a common vulnerability to sovereign violence, including that of the NPA, the vivid depictions of the decapitation of *Kumander Alibasbas* and the assassination of *Pedring Taruc* in a hail of bullets also embodied a dismembered revolutionary movement in its death throes. Not unlike the phantasmagoric rumours of the grotesque violence associated with the proliferation of para- or pseudo-military formations, first in the early 1980s, with the lifting of martial law, and then with the intensified counter-insurgency campaigns of the Aquino administration, these Estrada films also struggled to order this terrifying insecurity and uncertainty into the familiar script and dominant discourse of binary contestation for power between government and anti-government forces. However, instead of a symbolic incorporation of the infamous guerilla leaders into the state/law, these films pointed towards Joseph Estrada, the movie star, who, as everyone knew, outlived the Huk rebels he portrayed on the screen, and who thus not only appropriated their violent deaths but also succeeded in capturing some of the magic of their revolutionary/criminal violence.⁹⁵

As the state sought to re-appropriate the very magic long claimed by the New People's Army rebels through a renewed emphasis upon its own spectacular violence, Estrada thus emerged as the only 'non-EDSA' opposition candidate to capture a seat in the Philippine Senate in 1987.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Cruz, *Movie Times*, p. 120.

⁹⁵ The certainty of this knowledge provides further testimony to the power of the fetish of appearance and, in particular, the magic of the superstars of Philippine cinema. Thus, for example, the collective sigh of *Oh, si Sharon . . .* ('Oh, there's Sharon . . .') that could be heard in Manila theatres showing megastar Sharon Cuneta's movies in the early 1990s – especially on Sundays, the typical day off for the thousands of maids, nursemaids, and cooks who made up a large part of the audience in the early afternoon. Moreover, according to research associate Myrna Alejo at the Institute for Popular Democracy, a predominantly male audience response to action star (and now Governor of Pampanga Province) Lito Lapid often involved loud cheering during particularly heated moments of confrontation with the *contrabida* in his movies. Personal communication, December 2000. See also Alejo, 'Cinema and Politics: a Case Study of Lito Lapid', unpublished paper, 1998.

⁹⁶ Another action star associated with the magic of criminal violence, Ramon Revilla Sr., still famous for his portrayal of legendary Cavite bandit 'Nardong Putik' in 1967, is widely thought to have lost his 1987 senatorial bid 'due to a miscalculation

Within a year of his senatorial election, Estrada returned to the big screen with the most deliberately political of his movies, *Sa Kuko ng Agila* (In the Claws of the Eagle). Produced by Estrada, who also appeared in the movie together with (soon-to-be-senator) Nikki Coseteng, this film took aim at the United States military bases in the Philippines, in anticipation of the RP-US bases treaty expiration in 1991. After *Sa Kuko ng Agila* had played at cinemas around the country, Estrada then gave the star performance of his otherwise rather lacklustre (some say sleepy) senatorial career with a privilege speech of unusual nationalist sentiment, calling for the termination of US treaty rights to military bases in the Philippines.

Beyond the high politics of the Senate vote on the US-RP bases treaty, Estrada also appeared as a host in a new series, *Hot Line sa Trese*, in 1990. Aired every Tuesday night on one of the main television stations (Interisland Broadcasting Corporation) in the Philippines, this television show was patterned after the American 'true-to-life cops-and-robbers' format. As the most high-profile host of this, his 'latest showbiz coup', Estrada appealed to viewers for information about crimes which were re-enacted for the cameras. After showing such re-enactments of 'crimes perpetrated by suspects still at large', viewers would thus literally be asked to respond through a phone call to the station and to Estrada himself.⁹⁷ In an illuminating contrast to the frustrated response of the unanswered fan mail discussed above, this opportunity for an inter-island television audience to reply anticipated the kind of return made possible by simply casting a vote for Estrada when he stood for election to the vice-presidency in 1992 and, finally, the presidency in 1998.

Having thus attracted the media spotlight twice over for his nationalist and anti-crime crusades, Estrada went on to capture the vice-presidency with a larger proportion of the vote than polled by Fidel V. Ramos for the presidency in 1992.⁹⁸ When Ramos appointed Estrada to head a

– he used his real name, José Baustista, instead of his more popular screen name' – thus forfeiting his superstar power. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 14 May 1992, p. 11. In the senatorial election of 1992, Revilla, now running not merely on his screen name but also on the slogan *Agimat ng Masa* ('Amulet of the Masses') in an obvious reference to his 'Nardong Putik'-like roles, 'placed second out of 165 candidates vying for 24 slots in the Philippine Senate'. *Starweek: The Sunday Magazine of Philippine Star*, 2 August 1992, p. 6.

⁹⁷ *Starweek: Sunday Magazine of Philippine Star*, 3 November 1990, p. 5.

⁹⁸ A month prior to the May 1992 elections, it was reported that 70 per cent of Filipino voters knew Estrada by name and that '[t]he sheer number of Erap's movie fans' was expected to 'tilt the balance in his favor in the coming elections'. *Philippines Free Press*, 4 April 1992, p. 4.

specially constituted Presidential Anti-Crime Commission (PACC), many contemporary observers noted that the long-time action star ‘personally led raids to apprehend gangsters and free kidnap victims, and appeared frequently in front-page photos marching bad guys off to jail’. In short, ‘[t]he celluloid tough guy was suddenly the toughest actor on the political stage as well’.⁹⁹ Against this backdrop, Estrada’s successful presidential election campaign in 1998, *JEEP ni Erap* (‘Erap’s Jeep’), gained rapid momentum as it toured the country featuring not only political speeches but also, of course, some of his old movies.

In a curious parallel to his first entry into local politics – within a metropolis of failed urban reform campaigns and radicalizing protest movements in the 1960s – the ascendancy of Estrada’s populist star since 1987 occurred during a period marked by a national political vacuum between a reformism without much muscle and a radicalism without sufficient focus to contest successfully Philippine elections. (Meanwhile, of course, the politics of bossism flourished, and many so-called traditional politicians made a swift return to political life.)¹⁰⁰ After the heavy lid of martial law had lifted, the spectre of populism thus appeared once again to haunt reformists and radicals alike. As suggested in a recent essay on the cinematic president Joseph Ejercito Estrada: ‘the career of movies and the career of Erap intersect[ed] at a juncture in which advocacy of social justice collect[ed] its gains at the altar of a popular and populist government, nipped in the bud as it were by an action star’s political success through the decade’.¹⁰¹

Since 1986, a number of developments on the Philippine political landscape have encouraged the wider phenomenon of showbiz personalities entering politics in ever-growing numbers. The most notable of these developments have included the shift from a two-party system to one favouring multi-party competition, the ban on political advertising in print and broadcast media during election campaign periods, and the extraordinarily large number of elected offices, from the national presidency to local ‘village’ council members. In combination, these electoral realities have seemed to inflate further the political value of the peculiar

⁹⁹ *Philippines Free Press*, 25 October 1997, p. 20. See also *Philippines Free Press*, 5 September 1992, pp. 4–5, 16; and 24 July 1993, pp. 4–6.

¹⁰⁰ See especially John T. Sidel, *Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999; and Eric Gutierrez, Idelfonso C. Torrente, and Noli G. Narca, *All in the Family: a Study of Elites and Power Relations in the Philippines*. Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 1992.

¹⁰¹ Patrick Flores, ‘The Illusions of a Cinematic President’, *Public Policy*, 2, 4, 1998, pp. 115–117.

kind of recognition and response inspired not only by the cinematic president but also by his many *artista* colleagues (and, often, friends). As overheard by a journalist reporting on the 1992 election campaign: “‘Where are the *artistas*?’”, Angelita Castillo, a Las Piñas housewife asked a companion as she listened to the issues during the Las Piñas rally. “It’s getting boring.”¹⁰²

While political observers and strategists have long noted the importance of entertainment for a successful election campaign, surely the kind of spectacle on display in recent rallies reveals a renewed anxiety about this *artista* magic. In this regard, otherwise accomplished political candidates such as, for example, former budget secretary Guillermo Carague, sounded a very peculiar appeal to voters when on the senatorial campaign trail in 1992 he stated: ‘Remember me at election. . . . I’m the one who played the harmonica.’ Similarly, fellow senatorial candidate solicitor general Francisco Chavez seemed less inclined to highlight his public service record than to seize every opportunity to perform the old Diana Ross song, ‘When you tell me that you love me’, to cheering crowds during the same election campaign.¹⁰³ For all their musical performances, however, neither of these political candidates, nor many others for that matter, could match the three big showbiz senatorial bets in the 1992 election – ‘[a] noon-time television comedian, a movie actor famous for portraying amulet-protected heroes, and a sitcom actor/ex-basketball star.’¹⁰⁴

Beyond the national prominence of the *artistas* who have arrived at Malacañang Palace and the Philippine Senate, moreover, an impressive number of other showbiz personalities have been elected to local office in the capital city as well as in several provinces across the country. In metropolitan Manila alone, for example, a quick count identified the following showbiz politicians: at least one congressman (Jose Maria Gonzales in San Juan); three mayors (presidential son Jinggoy Estrada in San Juan, Reynaldo Malonzo in Caloocan, and, in Parañaque, Joey

¹⁰² *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 May 1992, p. 11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 14 May 1992, p. 1. The front-runner in this senatorial election, Vicente ‘Tito’ Sotto, polled more than twice the number of votes that won Ramos the presidency in the 1992 election. *Manila Chronicle*, 23–29 May 1992, p. 6. In this regard, there is little evidence to suggest that Estrada’s ousting from the residency will prompt a reversal of the *artista/pulitika* trend. Notably, the 14 May 2001 elections will feature a crowded *artista* field of candidates for city or municipal councillor, vice-mayor (eg Phillip Salvador, Mandaluyong; Herbert Bautista, Quezon City; Tirso Cruz, Las Piñas), mayor (eg Rudy Fernandez, Quezon City), vice-governor (eg Imelda Papin, Camarines Sur) and governor (eg Nora Aunor, Camarines Sur).

Marquez who is married to *artista* Alma Moreno); one vice-mayor (Herbert 'Bistek' Bautista, Quezon City); and a number of councillors (including Yoyoy Villame, George Canseco, and Connie Angeles in Las Piñas). Moreover, a number of superstars have captured elected office in several provinces: Lito Lapid (Governor of Pampanga), Ramon 'Bong' Revilla Jr. (Governor of Cavite), and Vilma Santos (Mayor of Lipa City, Batangas). At the time of writing, a bewildering array of other *artistas* are also rumoured to be joining the political fray in the coming May 2001 elections. For example, according to one report, such megastars as Nora Aunor and Sharon Cuneta, as well as a long list of other established showbiz personalities, including Gary Estrada, Rudy Fernandez (married to *artista* Lorna Tolentino), Richard Gomez, Lani Mercado, Aga Muhlach, Imelda Papin, and Philip Salvador, have been named as likely contenders for elected political office, either in municipal halls or provincial capitals around the country.¹⁰⁵ Thus while the first cinematic president stands out both in terms of his successful political career and notable populist appeal, the impressive field of showbiz politicians in the Philippines cannot but underscore a wider phenomenon. That is, beyond the specific characters, narratives, and genres with which Joseph Estrada, 'Erap', has been associated over the years, the 'visualized lingua franca' of Tagalog cinema (and television) has allowed for a more pervasive popular recognition and (attempted) appropriation of the peculiar magic of the *artista* stars through the electoral mechanisms of Philippine democracy.¹⁰⁶

Eruption: populist appeals in Philippine politics and society

As suggested in the preceding pages, the populist appeal and political success of Estrada in the past decade must be situated against the backdrop of his first forays from the silver screen into local politics in the 1960s. In terms of the objective conditions identified by scholars as crucial for the emergence of (urban) populism, or at least the growth in popular 'demand' as it were, for populist movements, parties, or leaders,

¹⁰⁵ *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 12 November 2000, p. D6.

¹⁰⁶ According to a Philippines-wide poll conducted in 1998, fully one third of all people identified by respondents as 'most admired man overall' were Filipino *artistas*, with Estrada ahead of 'father, husband, Bill Clinton and Pope John Paul'. The corresponding figure for 'most admired woman overall' was slightly lower, and not even superstars Nora Aunor, Vilma Santos, or Sharon Cuneta could poll ahead of 'mother'. 'Social Weather Report Survey', unpublished data base records, Quezon City: Social Weather Station, October–November 1998.

the Manila of the 1960s was arguably ripe for its first 'populist moment'.¹⁰⁷ The urban middle classes remained weak, as suggested by the failure of the various citizens' leagues in the early 1960s, while the rural landowning élite remained strong, resilient, and adaptable in the face of economic change and, arguably, dominant over the nascent domestic bourgeoisie. Its social and political power was buttressed by the persistence in rural areas of social relations and political competition based on clientelistic networks, coercion, and money. Meanwhile, in the cities, the urban working class had yet to develop strong, autonomous unions, parties, or other organizational structures, or a strong class consciousness of its own, and, as noted above, the 1960s saw an accelerated movement of rural migrants to major Philippine cities, most notably metropolitan Manila, and the growing size and presence of large unassimilated marginal groups (for example, urban squatters). At the same time, the Philippines' semi-peripheral position in the world economy and its 'late, late' industrialization encouraged some elements of the industrial bourgeoisie to look to the state for protection and support in the face of difficulties and competition from foreign capital. In short, the stage was set for some kind of populist challenge.¹⁰⁸

Yet the structural pre-conditions and this supposed 'objective' demand for populism ran up against the historically distinctive features of the institutions of Philippine politics, most notably in the Philippine pattern of state formation since the turn of the century. The carefully state-managed path of decolonization set in motion with the Commonwealth in the 1930s, and consummated in 1946 with Independence, precluded the emergence of a nationalist leader of populist orientation along the lines of Soekarno, Nkrumah, or Nyerere. The long-established pattern of civilian authority over the military, and the subordination of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to US strategic interests via JUSMAG (Joint United States Military Advisory Group) likewise thwarted the emergence of a charismatic radical-nationalist military leader of populist stripe, along the lines of a Nasser, Péron, or Chavez. The highly decentralized nature of the Philippine state and the bifunctional pattern of political party competition similarly stood in the way of a

¹⁰⁷ On this notion of a 'populist moment,' see especially Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: a Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

¹⁰⁸ For one version of this socio-historical perspective on populist challenges, see for example Alistair Hennessy, 'Latin America', in Ghita Ionescu and Ernst Gellner (ed.), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, p. 30.

more mass-based third-party challenge. In the post-Marcos period, the possibility for such a popularly organized populist party to establish itself has perhaps been favoured by neither the emergence of multi-party electoral contests since 1986 nor the subsequent introduction of the so-called party-list system in 1998.¹⁰⁹

Instead, Tagalog movies came to fill this gap in Philippine politics and society. As argued above, a new social imaginary emerged due to the dramatic transformation of the Philippine film industry and cinematic experience in the 1960s. At first, this new social imaginary remained focused on Manila, the most urbanized of Philippine cities and perhaps also an environment especially attuned to Tagalog, whether as a first language of native Manileños or as an adopted one among its growing immigrant population. With a greater number of Tagalog films showing in more cinemas than ever before, especially in Manila, an expanding mass audience also experienced the kind of recognition and (frustrated) response compelled by the magic of the fetish of appearance. The powerful desires thus mobilized by the 'visualized lingua franca' also anticipated a new political effect, as suggested by the growing number of movie stars and other *artistas* campaigning, and running and winning in local elections during the 1960s. With the increasing circulation of movies, television, and Tagalog in Philippine society over time, this mass audience and its participation in the new social imaginary continued to expand, albeit under the restricted circumstances of martial law and authoritarian rule under Marcos.

While the proliferation of showbusiness personae – comedians, news broadcasters, sports stars, and the entire spectrum of movie stars and starlets – points to a wider political phenomenon, especially in the post-Marcos period, Estrada's remarkable trajectory in Philippine politics and society stands out, as do the recognition and response he has inspired in his fans and voters over the years. Indeed, Estrada was chosen for the highest elected office in the land by an unprecedented number of Filipino voters,¹¹⁰ and evidently enjoyed continued popular support even when faced with widespread public criticism in the media and on the

¹⁰⁹ See for example Soliman M. Santos Jr., 'The Philippines Tries the Party-List System', *Kasarinlan*, 13, 2, 1997, pp. 5–18; and David Wurfel, 'The Party-List Elections', *Kasarinlan*, 13, 2, 1997, pp. 19–30.

¹¹⁰ In the 1998 elections, Estrada gained at least twice the votes – and sometimes more than six or seven times the votes – of the elected representatives in about 20 per cent of all congressional districts. Diosdado 'Dong' B. Calmado, '1998 Election Results (Based on COMELEC Figures)', Institute for Popular Democracy Polling Data Center, unpublished data tabulation, 18 October 2000. A televised exit poll on election day

streets, as well as during the first presidential impeachment hearing to reach the Philippine Senate. In as much as the casting of votes for an *artista* candidate indicates an attempted response to a kind of desire and longing mobilized by the cinematic experience, or, more generally, the magic of the fetish of appearance, there is much to suggest that the kind of recognition compelled by Joseph Estrada, or 'Erap', has proved especially captivating to large numbers of Filipinos, especially among the urban and rural poor.

The popularity of the 'Joseph Estrada proletarian potboilers' of the 1960s, one keen observer has remarked, demonstrated that a new mass audience 'could recognize excellence if it was presented to them on their own terms, in movies without pretensions to "prestige"',¹¹¹ that is, as familiar stories already in circulation in society. If Tagalog movies emerged as a 'visualized lingua franca', the stories they told, at least the ones most fondly remembered – and perhaps frequently remade – were, of course, already known, whether as 'social condition' or as individual destiny. As noted by one close watcher of Philippine cinema, '[t]he Tagalog movie formulas that are resurrected time and again as box-office demands reveal deep-rooted, tacit and even covert aspirations, frustrations, and complexes of more pertinence to the national character than to the established genres of the cinema'.¹¹² In the case of the film *Geron Busabos: Batang Quiapo*, for example, the opening scenes establish that this story is already known, with the following introduction of the main protagonist: *Maraming nagsasabi na siya 'y masama, ngunit maraming nagsasabi na siya 'y mabuti, ang katotohanan, siya 'y isa lamang halimbawa sa kalupitan nang buhay* ['Many say he's evil, but many also say he's good. The truth is, he's just an example of life's cruelty.']

Beyond the critical and popular acclaim for the kind of story-telling presented in the *Batang* series, moreover, Estrada owes much of his stardom to a familiar trope in Philippine society and cinema – that of the outlaw/criminal/rebel. Reportedly the first film to portray such a 'real life' story in the way outlaw stories are often told, as myth, *Asiong*

in May 1998 reportedly showed that '[i]ndividuals who looked like workers, drivers, vendors, generally of the poorer classes, unhesitating [sic] declared for Erap. The upper-class voters, as shown by their being well-dressed and well-fed, opted for other candidates like Rocco, de Venecia and Lim'. *Philippine Graphic*, 25 May 1998, p. 12.

¹¹¹ Lacaba, 'Notes on *Bakya*', p. 119.

¹¹² Rafael Ma. Guerrero, 'Tagalog Movies: a New Understanding', in Guerrero (ed.), *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, p. 109 [reprinted from *Manila Paper*, 1, 4, 1975].

Salonga (1962) featured Estrada in the lead role as a handsome young Tondo tough, Nicasio Salonga, whose rumoured death at the hands of a rival gang member had been in circulation since it first made headlines in 1951. Not only did the movie make Joseph Estrada into a big movie star in the early 1960s, but it is perhaps the one role with which he remains most strongly associated in popular discourse today.¹¹³ Perhaps Estrada's enduring and otherwise puzzlingly cross-generational popularity stems, at least in part, from this hitching of his own star to already familiar stories, making him part of the kinds of local gossip, jokes, and rumours that circulate in communities across the Philippines without, notably, much competition from any one grand narrative.

Through this dialectic of recognition and appropriation, Estrada, or 'Erap', thus appears as if he knows, or could know, 'the real people who lived, laboured, and suffered nearby, round the corner', rather than any would-be constituency or ought-to-be class, or, more generally, 'the people', invoked in such ways as to be useful for either (liberal) electoral or (radical) revolutionary mobilization.¹¹⁴ Given the vast economic inequalities and marked social hierarchies that characterize life in the Philippines, it is perhaps not surprising that the peculiar recognition commanded by Estrada should have had a certain popular resonance and political consequence. That is, large numbers of people who – as *yayas* (nursemaids), maids, security guards, and drivers – raise the children, keep the homes, guard the properties, and transport the commuters of the country remain not only, for the most part, underpaid and overworked, but also, notably, unseen, lest of course they risk departing

¹¹³ Note rumours that 'A. S.' on *jueteng* collection lists stands for *Asiong Salonga*, which in turn has been identified as Estrada's alias. Thus, perhaps, the Sanlakas poster seen at the rallies with the inscription: 'Now Showing – Asyong Salonga: The Godfather of the Philippines'. Estrada, in fact, made at least two other films with obvious references to Asyong Salonga and his *Angustia* gang: *Asyong Meets Alembong* (1962) and *Batang Angustia* (1965). Note also the *Nardong Putik* (1971) film which launched first the movie and, later, the political career of Ramon Revilla Sr. Note, finally, the peculiar films about former military putchists Rodolfo Aguinaldo (*Aguinaldo: the True to Life Story of Gov. Rodolfo Aguinaldo of Cagayan*) and Gregorio Honasan (*Colonel Billy Bibit – RAM!*), released in time for their campaigns for Governor (Aguinaldo) and Senator (Honasan). The significance of these films may thus stem less from their success in effecting a 'political makeover' than from the gossip-like familiarity of the stories thus retold. Cf. Alfred W. McCoy, 'RAM and the Filipino Action Film', in Tolentino (ed.), *Geopolitics of the Visible*, pp. 194–216.

¹¹⁴ Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Shore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. I am grateful to Eric Gutierrez for pointing out this illuminating analysis of the Bonapartist sentiments of the French peasantry, and, more generally, for his incisive comments on a (much) earlier draft of this paper presented at a workshop at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London in June 2000.

from what may be thought of as a prudent 'public transcript' of sorts.¹¹⁵ Against this pervasive disregard, the recognition and response associated with cinema in general, and with Tagalog movies and its greats in particular, gained powerful momentum among the urban and rural poor in the Philippines. In as much as 'Philippine Cinema was the first to identify the *bakya* or the subaltern culture', and thus to forge 'direct linkages with the largely invisible masses',¹¹⁶ Estrada's own second coming as a politician has brought these linkages full circle – *artista, masa, eruption* – into a national political life once again revolving around competitive elections.

In this regard, Estrada's arrival in national politics may have coincided with another kind of remembering, a nostalgia for a pre-martial law era when the Philippines was second only to Japan in terms of economic prosperity and promise in the region, now viewed from the perspective of the disappointments of the post-Marcos period. Beyond his very longevity in the movies, Estrada's trademark Elvis coiffure and spaghetti western moustache of some 35 years, in combination with unmistakable signs of ageing, suggest the perfect iconography for this kind of nostalgia. 'He looks like a fat, handsome, bow-legged policeman, off-duty. Or a jeepney driver. . . . All roles he once played in the movies.'¹¹⁷

Thus, even as Estrada faced the first presidential impeachment hearings ever to be conducted in the Philippines, he nonetheless retained a prominent place in the new social imaginary set into powerful motion at the movies. Despite his recent ousting from the presidential palace, moreover, Estrada may also have staked a more pervasive claim on a peculiarly 'subaltern' Philippine history and his own *bidang lalake*, or heroic leading role, within it. As he was fond of repeating on his recent visits to urban poor areas: *Para tayong bidang artista, nagpapabogbog muna sa umpisa pero sa huli panalo tayo bida pa rin* – 'It's like we're the good guy in the movies, taking a beating at first but prevailing in the end.'

¹¹⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. In the Philippines, a telling example of this remarkable disregard for people as people, even when they have lived and worked in the same home for years, is the not uncommon inability of their employers to recall even their most elementary personal details – such as where a particular maid or driver comes from, beyond the standard reference to 'the province' (there are 78 provinces).

¹¹⁶ Agustin 'Hammy' Sotto, 'Contemporary Philippine Cinema', *Contemporary Philippine Cinema: Selected Papers and Education*. Manila: The Japan Foundation, Manila Office, 1998, p. 113.

¹¹⁷ *Starweek: Philippine Star Sunday Magazine*, 26 July 1992, p. 11.

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