

Pinoy Movies and Television in the Age of the Pandemic

Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.
De La Salle University

Abstract: How do Pinoy movies and television respond to the issue of poverty that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic? It appears that poverty is not an issue in the Philippine media industries. Entire programs are devoted to cooking. The taste test is *de rigueur*, with the host eating heartily on camera. Who says there is hunger in the country? If not food shows, broadcast time is devoted to *teleseryes*. From six in the morning till midnight, GMA has an exclusive channel that presents K-dramas, Chinovelas and Thai dramas, and Pinoy *teleseryes*. On the other hand, there is little moviemaking in the industry today; however, Viva Films exploits the situation through Vivamax, a subscription-based, video-on-demand app. It is notorious for its semi-pornographic movies. If Pinoy movies and television do not address a major issue like poverty, what can media accomplish in the time of the pandemic?

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In 2020, when a lockdown was declared in Metro Manila, moviehouses were closed down and television networks stopped the production of non-news programs. Some movie studios virtually closed shop. TBA Studios, the company that produced *General Luna* and many more independent films, totally cancelled films in development and stopped production. TBA has been reduced to running its small theater cum coffee shop, the Cinema 76, and streaming its stock of films. Movie and television production companies had to adjust to the health protocols of the pandemic and reinvent the process of producing films and television shows. Eventually, the idea of locked-in production became the accepted practice. For a set number of weeks, which may range from a few weeks to a month, actors and production staff are locked in a bubble, living on location and following health protocols, like vaccination requirements and regular tests, to keep the entertainment industry alive.

How did the movie companies and television networks respond to the issues caused by the Covid-19 pandemic? Aside from the havoc that the pandemic has wrought on the health situation in the country, affecting and infecting over 3.5 million people, exhausting the capacity of health care systems, and challenging the resilience of health

care frontliners, the stress on the economy is a major cause of concern.

One major issue that has been exacerbated by the pandemic is the problem of poverty. Of course, poverty has been with us long before the pandemic; but the pandemic has underscored the gravity of the problem. In a survey in September 2020, the Social Weather Stations reported that one-third of families in the country or 7.6 million households did “not have enough food to eat at least once in the previous three months.” Of these 7.6 million households, 2.2 million families went through “severe hunger.” (“Record hunger in the Philippines as Covid-19 restrictions bite,” Agence France-Presse, December 9, 2020).

In a survey done by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute between November 3 and December 3, 2020, six out of every ten Filipinos or 62.1% of the population, went through “moderate or severe food insecurity or malnutrition” (Margret Fermin, PhilippinesLifestyle.com May 3, 2021).

It should be noted that recent geo-political developments have worsened existing problems caused by the pandemic. The economic effects of the crazy war Putin plays in Ukraine have extended to our homes. The unprecedented increases in oil prices

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have created a burden to the entire nation, particularly the poor.

Considering the multi-faceted problems that the pandemic and political developments in the world have created in the country, how do the media people respond to the situation? What kind of films and television programs have been produced? How are the media arts used to respond to the times? The following discussion is not based on scientific communication research; there are no statistics, no hard data on number of films or number of hours of television programs. The following discussion is based on my impressions of what I have observed in local film and television. So, with this caveat out in the open, allow me to proceed.

Regarding the issue of hunger in the Philippines, based on the programs on local television, it appears that hunger is not an issue. A cooking segment is a popular go-to feature in morning shows. Anyone familiar with TV production would easily see the reason; a cooking segment can easily fill up time – the host interviews a chef or a cook, they talk about the featured dish; they talk about the ingredients and go through the motions of cooking, and at the end pull out the finished product from the oven. Voila! You have a program segment done. The cooking segment usually ends with the host tasting the dish, if not devouring it, unmindful of what some in the audience might be experiencing. If not a segment of a show, there are entire programs devoted to cooking. The host visits a province and features what dishes the province is known for. Of course, the end is *de rigueur*, the taste test, the host enjoying the food, on camera. Who says there is hunger in the country? These food shows almost always appear with a veneer of cultural purpose. An example would be a show where the host travels to various places in the country featuring the cuisine that each particular province is known for, e.g. *Biyahe ni Drew*. Sometimes, the program attempts to be more practical, showing viewers economic and useful ways of cooking, e.g. *From Farm to Table*. What do programs like these cooking shows have to say about poverty and hunger in the country? The question is not rhetorical, but I could not really fathom the existence of cooking shows when hunger is a real problem in the country. The television managers may say that the poor are not their audience; they don't have television. True, but that doesn't mean that they don't necessarily have to deal with the poor.

It seems that the broadcast people are actually disconnected from that section in our population that need to be heard. GMA Network, for example, has devoted an entire channel for *teleseryes*. The channel is called "Heart of Asia"; the tagline is "Ang nasa puso ng bawat Pilipino." From 6 o'clock in the morning till midnight, one can watch a load of K-dramas, tagged as "K feels"; plus Chinovelas and Thai dramas tagged as "Absolutely Asian," and Pinoy *teleseryes* tagged as "Atinovelas." So, you can have breakfast while watching *The Prince of Wolf*. The prince is the character who gets lost in Wolf Mountain as a young boy; a wolf he learns to call Papa Wolf takes care of him until he grows up to be a young man. The family eventually finds him and the heart-wrenching separation of the Prince of Wolf from his Papa Wolf has to happen. But, of course, the complications are just beginning. For lunch, there is *The Desire* and you will be amazed by the probabilities of love affairs. During the day, there's a variety of period dramas that will bring you to the fantasy world that imagination can create, e.g. *Scarlet Heart*, where the main character is transported from a drowning incident to another parallel world. If you prefer action, then there are programs featuring Jacky Chan or Jet Li. If you want a rest from the nonstop drama series, you can pause in the afternoon for "E-Z Shop," do some marketing on TV, and buy into its tagline "We make life worth living." What does Heart of Asia say about issues confronting the country? "Ang nasa puso ng bawat Pilipino." The whole programming could very well be what's in the heart of the Pinoy - the imagined home is in their hearts.

Meanwhile, in the weekly news feature program *State of the Nation* on GMA-TV, one of the highlights on March 10, 2022, is the statement from Kelly Day: She is not the third party that is alluded to in the break-up of Carla Abellana and Tom Rodriguez. I guess that segment tells us a lot about the state of our nation.

Enough of commercial TV. Let's move on to movies. Moviemaking has practically stopped – or so it seems. Since moviehouses are closed, production companies explore other ways to distribute their movies. The internet offers new possibilities – streaming. Viva, one of the major studios before the pandemic, exploits the situation and has developed Vivamax, a subscription-based, video-on-demand app. It offers Pinoy and foreign movies, television series, documentaries, concerts, stand-up comedies, fitness and workout shows, sports, and what it banners as "genre-bending exclusives that are all

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proudly Filipino-made.” Could Vivamax be alluding to the sex movies that it has become notoriously known for? Considering the limitations imposed by the pandemic, Vivamax produces films that can be done within these limitations – few shooting days, small budget, greater audience - and mixing known actors with wanna-be young women who are willing to disrobe at the command of “Action!”

Vivamax collaborated with a young writer-director by the name of Darry Yap and produced the following films: *When I Grow Up, I Want to Be a Pornstar*. Apparently, it was a big success that a sequel followed, *Pornstar 2: Pangalawang Putok*. Other films by Yap are *The Woman Who Cannot Feel*, *69 + 1*, *Barumbadings*, etc. In 2021, Yap wrote and directed ten movies, including a mini-TV series with eight episodes. Yap is happily advertised by Vivamax as the Philippine Pandemic Director. Incidentally, he is also the man behind the “Len-Len” campaign series for Bong Bong Marcos. I’m not suggesting anything; it’s just a statement of fact.

Other titles produced by Vivamax are *Kaka*, *Kaliwaan*, *Kinsenas*, *Katapusan*, *Sisid*, *Hugas*, *Eva*, *Palitan*, *Dulo*, *A Hard Day*, *Taya*, *The Housemaid*, *Sa Haba ng Gabi*, *House Tour*, *The Other Wife*. You get the drift. If I illustrate these titles with excerpts, this presentation will be rated “X.” Vivamax followed what happened in the past, in 1970, when the industry was in the pits, during the explosion of the *bomba* movies. While the young activists were busy confronting the Marcos administration in the streets, the movie companies produced sex movies for the moviehouses.

It should be noted that established directors have done and are doing movies for Vivamax. Joel Lamangan made *Island of Desire*, *Moonlight Butterfly*. Lawrence Fajardo who started as an indie filmmaker did *X-Deal*, *X-Deal 2*, *Mahjong Nights*. Brillante Mendoza made *Pusoy*. Ricky Lee wrote the screenplays of *My Husband*, *My Lover* (directed by Mac Alejandre) and *Nerisa* (directed by Lawrence Fajardo). Just like television programs that are passed off as cultural, these sex movies are done in the name of freedom.

What do these movies have to say about the issues confronting the country? Perhaps, the question should be “What do these movies say about Pinoy filmmakers?” Well, filmmaking, particularly in the mainstream, is the business of making money with movies. This is an undeniable fact - the industry is engaged in business, in making movies

to make more money. Anything foreign to that objective is irrelevant. The filmmaker who wants to be free from the constraints that the industry imposes has to find freedom somewhere else. One lesson that Ishmael Bernal shared in a private conversation is that there is a limit to compromise. His generation of filmmakers, including Brocka, Mike de Leon, and us, compromised with the commercial industry, but there was a limit that Bernal and others did not cross. The succeeding generation, composed of filmmakers like Joel Lamangan, Brillante Mendoza and others, were more open to the demands of commercialism. In the end, it’s all a question of money – “pera-pera lang ‘yan” – especially at this time of the pandemic. So, it is not surprising that established filmmakers would bend to the demands of mainstream companies like Vivamax. Whether they do the sex movies in the name of freedom and art, and not just for money, that is for them (and us) to say. The fact is that these films are packaged as sex movies and the films attest to that. Vivamax produces movies to produce more money.

Looking at the universe of filmmaking and television production would clarify to us why there is such a divide between mainstream products and the more independent works with the ambition of art. At the center of this universe are the commercial movies and the programs of the commercial networks. Beyond the center, towards the edge, are the special productions that the mainstream and other companies seldom produce. Aside from the main objective of making money, these productions along the periphery of the production universe have an objective of producing something more than making money. These productions have the ambition of art. Still beyond the periphery, farther away from the center and outside the universe of commercial production are the independent works. This is where we can find the more serious works of independent filmmakers and video producers who wish to produce some meaningful work, if not art.

Lino Brocka’s story is instructive.. He made a lot of movies at the center of the mainstream industry, but his noteworthy films were done along the periphery, just outside the industry – *Maynila...Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (Manila... In the Claws of Light, 1975), *Insiang* (1976), *Jaguar* (1980), *Bayan Ko... Kapit sa Patalim* (My Country... 1983), and *Orapronobis* (Pray for Us, 1988).

Another illustration is Mike de Leon’s films which were mostly done outside of the industry. His

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own company, Cinema Artists, produced his debut film, *Itim* (Rites of May, 1976); his other films, like *Kisapmata* (1981), *Batch '81* (1982), *Sister Stella L* (1985) were special projects produced by mainstream companies. *Aliwan Paradise* (Entertainment Paradise, 1992), the Philippine episode in the omnibus film *Southern Winds*, was financed by the Asian Center of the Japan Foundation. *Bayaning 3rd World* (Third World Hero, 1999), was produced independently by Mike de Leon himself. Another passion project that Mike de Leon himself produced is *Citizen Jake* (2018).

Quite clearly, we cannot expect the core or the center of the media industries to produce products that would offer more than entertainment. At this time of the pandemic the movie and television industries produce entertainment that are designed to distract their audiences from the problems that confront them. I'm always reminded by what Rey Ito, known for his seminal work *Pasyon and Revolution*, mentioned to me once. It was many years ago, most probably in the early 1980s when he taught for a while at De La Salle University. We were on an upper floor of William Hall, the faculty building at the time, overlooking the expanse of Leveriza. Out of the blue, Rey says matter-of-factly, "The problem in our country is that there is too much entertainment." I am a keen observer of Philippine media and I am aware that it is the paradise of entertainment. Rey Ito opened my eyes wider. Indeed, we have so much entertainment in the media; the country may be drowning in problems, but we still get to laugh and wallow in entertainment. We find distraction that takes our eyes and minds away from what we should really see.

If media like movies and television do not address the issues directly, like poverty and hunger, what else can media do? What can film or television accomplish in the time of the pandemic? Beyond giving imagined dramas, and hard news mixed with movie entertainment, what can film and television do? Perhaps, we can get a clue from the short video of a pianist, the Piano Man who brought his piano to the border of Ukraine and Poland and played for the refugees who were crossing from war to safety ("Piano Man," YouTube.com). What does this scene tell us about art? For me, I think it says simply and clearly that there is life beyond war. Art, in this case music, reveals that there is another dimension to humanity. Beyond conflict and violence in war, there is something more important, there is a greater

dimension to being human. The Piano Man has revealed it through his music.

In a short film entitled "The Art of Cinema," Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky says succinctly that film must deal with the question "Why does man exist?" And then he adds, "We have to use our time on earth to improve ourselves spiritually." I think that says something deep about film as art. Certainly, filmmaking (as well as television production), particularly in the mainstream, is business. This is why Tarkovsky says "Cinema is an unlucky art as it depends on money." Indeed, a filmmaker needs funds to produce a desired film. At the core of the mainstream, film companies provide the budget with the primary purpose of making more money; money begets money. For filmmakers with ambition of creating something more meaningful, the primary purpose is not to make money but to make the film. Obviously, one cannot find this situation in the mainstream. Fortunately, filmmakers can find funding from other sources – sources that fund filmmaking, not to make more money but to support non-commercial filmmaking. This situation is happening outside the mainstream, away from the core of commercial and industrial filmmaking, in the world of independent filmmaking. And independent filmmakers find various sources to support their goals, including crowd funding where filmmakers find support from people with the same desire of creating something meaningful through film or video. In the end, the result, hopefully, is a work that would be a source of transformation. As Robert Bresson says "There is no art without transformation" ("The Art of Cinema," YouTube.com). One interpretation of this transformation, in my view, is the possibility of becoming more human; films are able to display the spiritual and artistic dimension of being human and extends their transformative power among the viewers.

Despite what is happening in mainstream movies and television, where the media products are mainly used to distract audiences from pressing societal problems and keep the subjects that need to be heard absent from their consciousness, we can still end on a hopeful note. Outside the mainstream, away from the core of business where money rules, independent film and video workers can do their thing and create meaningful works. The mainstream, although it may still be a strong force, no longer rules the process of communication. The universe of communication is a maelstrom of voices and images competing for attention. Nonetheless,

(RE)IMAGINING THE ARTS IN THE POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY

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the online platforms offer possibilities of connecting with audiences. The concerned artist may just be a small voice in this crazy universe of communication but, at least, there is still the chance to be heard, to be seen, and to connect.

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