

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Lost in Adaptation: Antifidelity and/in Mike De Leon's *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and *Bayaning 3rd World*

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Following the tenets of auteur criticism that proposes a film auteur to have an autonomous, original, and individual voice despite the nature of filmmaking as an art form that follows the *Fordist* model, this essay looks at how Mike De Leon's artistic style has become the ordering agent for his two films: *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and *Bayaning 3rd World*. This study puts under the lens De Leon's signature and confronts the difficulty of assigning authorship and originality within a collaborative, institutionalized medium that aims to adapt for the screen one literary and one historical material. De Leon has his own way of reclaiming an adapted work and a historical figure, and by wrestling *Bilanggo sa Dilim* away from the pages of the novel and by being unfaithful and transgressive in adapting Jose Rizal in *Bayaning 3rd World*, the filmmaker creates a space for himself and his signature in his cinematic transmediations.

**Keywords:** Mike De Leon, film adaptations, metacinematic adaptation, adaptation by transgression, *Bilanggo sa Dilim*, *Bayaning 3rd World*

Much has already been said about Mike De Leon as a filmmaker and his contribution to Philippine cinema. Patrick F. Campos posits how De Leon is regarded as “an insider of Philippine cinema history, an outsider of the commercial film industry” and perhaps as a result is “a hero of the mythic Golden Age of the National Cinema” (88). Campos brings to the fore how De Leon, like the important films that came out during the Golden Age of Philippine Cinema, is a result

of the “cultural imaginaries of the nation” (92). De Leon is perceived as a “hero” who goes against the cinematic tide given the challenges the director had to deal with as he worked from the very fringes of Philippine cinema. That Mike De Leon is able to create one masterpiece after another despite the misgivings of Philippine cinema makes him an icon, a “model of idealism” (120).

The same high praise is asserted by Bienvenido Lumbera, who claims that De Leon must be considered a major filmmaker in Philippine cinema, this after his faultless artistry and storytelling in *AKO Batch '81*.

By virtue of its stunning impact as a film about the making of a neofascist, and its sophisticated craftsmanship, *AKO Batch '81* ought to move De Leon up from the rank of “outstanding young director” to the level of “major Filipino film-maker” when its merits are seen in the context in the cumulative achievement of his previous films. (217)

Lumbera calls for a contextualized study on De Leon, a full examination of his film “in the context of the cumulative achievement” of his films. Lumbera’s comment invokes the merits of an auteur study on De Leon. Lumbera recognizes the significance and implication of studying the filmmaker not piecemeal but by looking at the aggregate totality of De Leon’s oeuvre.

Lumbera’s awareness of De Leon’s contribution to Philippine cinema is anchored on what he perceives as the filmmaker’s twofold strength: his ability to tell an intelligent story and fuse it with polished technique. He believes that while most people are inclined to just emphasize De Leon’s refined craft as evidenced in the director’s previous films, it is valuable to appreciate the “what” along with the “how” in De Leon’s works. On *Batch '81* Lumbera states, “it calls attention to the intellect behind the craftsmanlike artist—here is an adventurous, inquiring intellect that has so merged with sophisticated craft as to seem absent” (218).

Lumbera illustrates a confidence in De Leon having a singular voice, an identifiable signature that is apparent not just in *Batch '81* but in the filmmaker’s other films. While attention was paid to the performances of the actors as a solid element in *Batch '81* and the other elements such as music, editing, sound, and cinematography were cursorily mentioned, Lumbera asserts that “as in previous De Leon films,” the other elements in *Batch '81* “have been artfully orchestrated,” the result of which is “a rare product of the Filipino film industry, polished, accomplished, disturbing and, above all, intelligent” (219). That *Batch '81* is “artfully orchestrated” recalls one of the salient principles of auteur criticism—that the “voice” of a strong filmmaker must be able to rise

above the numerous elements involved in filmmaking. As all artful orchestrations go, harmony matters, and it is the masterful handling of the various elements of a cinematic composition that creates such harmony.

### Searching for a Signature

De Leon’s personal vision is embedded in his filmic signature via the themes and stylistic elements he consistently employs in his works, the cinematic aesthetic he seems to be known for, but this signature is complicated and problematic, given the nature of filmmaking as an art form that follows the Fordist model. Surely, his vision is a result of cooperation if not concession to various forces at work within Philippine cinema. His signature is tightly linked with several determinants, namely, the commerce of his very name, Mike De Leon; multiple authorship as a result of his constant work affiliation with his usual team of artists; the genres he fiddles with; the studio policy he works around with; etc. Moreover, his cinematic voice is further complicated by his engagements with literary and historical adaptations. Adaptations automatically raise questions about the nature of an auteur; the idea of originality amidst a nonoriginal undertaking seemingly screams conflict. The Nouvelle Vague (French New Wave) filmmakers and critics of decades past had their own take on adaptations. Francois Truffaut and the rest of the New Wave critics considered film a kind of extension of creative literary authorship that used the camera instead of the pen and, by extension, condemned the servility, the brownnosing of the classical cinema—the cinema of “quality”—toward the novel and the inadequacy of a system intent on reproducing, on merely appropriating the original. To further auteurism, Andre Bazin writes, “The more important and decisive the literary qualities of the work, the more the adaptation disturbs its equilibrium, the more it needs a creative talent to reconstruct it on a new equilibrium not indeed identical with, but the equivalent of, the old one” (56). This idea of equivalency in adaptation runs counter to the idea of privileging literature over its filmic version and also calls attention to film’s particular need to do things differently and separately in the transmediation of the written word. This transference with interference necessitates a mediator, one who is not simply tasked to negotiate a successful translation from literary to cinematic but, more importantly, one who is tasked

to create his/her own style and personal vision in the process of conversion. This person is the auteur.

The slippery nature of originality (as demanded by the French New Wave) and the personal signature vis-à-vis adaptation is the main crux of this essay. How can we identify a single shaping intelligence, an auteur, given this creator's waddling through an unoriginal text for an enterprise? In other words, is there room for unfaithfulness in De Leon's adaptations, and is this unfaithfulness a mark of the filmmaker's authorial signature, perhaps an attempt to not just create his own style of storytelling but to insert his signature in a work and make the text his own? How can personal, directorial agency remain in the act of page-to-screen transference? Can an adapter be an auteur, and vice versa?

Thomas Leitch argues that some filmmakers who worked on adaptations have risen from the rank of an adapter (a *metteur en scène* according to Truffaut, one who merely photographs the existing literary world) to an auteur.<sup>1</sup> "Their success in establishing themselves as auteurs depends less in each case on any artistic aspirations of the filmmaker or textual features of the films, than on the filmmaker's success in establishing control over a diverse series of projects, defeating the claims of potentially competing auteurs (producers, directors, writers, stars), and projecting a public persona capable of being turned into an appealing and recognisable trademark" (107). On the one hand, Leitch echoes Truffaut's assertion that the director is the major creative force in a film, that he or she is the synergist of a production, the one who synthesizes, directs, and pilots the contributions of other personnel. Cinematographers, production designers, editors, and sometimes even screenwriters subordinate their artistic visions and interests to the desires of the director in an effort to help the latter get the results he or she wants. On the other hand, he also challenges the idea that the director's role is merely custodial in the arena of adaptations (a *metteur* as opposed to an auteur), and by focusing on the individual adapting styles of Walt Disney, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick, Leitch articulates how the relationship between adaptation and authorship is more fluid and less monolithic than the French critics have initially envisioned. The auteur-adapter's goal in the transmediation, as evident in the style of Hitchcock, is to "wrest authorship of his films away from another plausible candidate: the author of the original property" (110). This deliberate act

signifies the auteur's concern in maintaining his or her own voice in the process of adaptation. "Auteurs of this sort are made, not born; they emerge victorious in battle with competing auteurs, whether writers, producers, or stars; and their authorial stamp is less closely connected with original creation than with brand-name consistency and reliability" (120).

This essay looks at how Mike De Leon's artistic style has become the ordering agent for his two films: *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and *Bayaning 3rd World*. How is his signature consistently evident in both films given their very nature as film adaptations, the first one based on a novel and the second, on a historical figure? Is De Leon's transmediation via cinematic adaptation reliable enough for a solid anchoring of an auteurist signature?

### Infidelity and Authorship

After the surprising box-office success of *Hindi Nahahati ang Langit* in 1985, award-winning filmmaker Mike De Leon was flooded with offers from producers who suddenly realized that he could make a financially rewarding movie aside from those critically acclaimed box-office failures he was known to direct. Combined with the sudden promise of a more liberal movie industry after the People Power Revolution, the offers must have been tempting. True to form, De Leon looked the other way. Instead of pursuing the commercial, mainstream path, De Leon made *Bilanggo sa Dilim* in 1986, the first Filipino video feature for Solid Video, a Sony Philippines subsidiary.

The story is based on the novel *The Collector*, written by John Fowles, published in 1963, and later turned into a movie in 1965. *William Wyler's The Collector* was nominated for three Oscar awards including Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay. It won two acting awards at the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for a Palme d'Or for Wyler. *Bilanggo sa Dilim*, on the other hand, did not win any major prize, nor was it screened at any major international film festival. It was screened at the Independent Film and Video Festival at the Sony Wave Cinema in Cubao, but it was never distributed or released commercially, so naturally, it didn't break box-office records. It was also not the first or the last adaptation De Leon helmed.<sup>2</sup>

Adapting the novel together with Jose Almojuela and Bobby Lavidés, De Leon had full control over this project since he also served as the editor alongside Emy Santiago. He likes to exercise some control over

the material as he previously tells Caagusan in a 1983 interview, “I’ve co-written practically everything *but I don’t share with the fee. I just want to be part of the writing* because it makes it easier for me to make changes, suggest changes, and we work more closely” (51).<sup>3,4</sup> De Leon realizes that having his name in the credit assures him some form of flexibility in the adaptation, giving him a guaranteed authority over what is to be filmed given the words on paper.

*Bilanggo sa Dilim* tells the story of a serial kidnapper and killer named Lito, aka Eddie (Joel Torre). His first abductee is Margie (Rio Locsin), who, in the course of her long-term abduction, committed suicide in an attempt to be free from her abductor. The second and current abductee is Marissa (Cherie Gil), a model/fashion designer, a woman who is, in the mind of Lito/Eddie, superior to the first abductee. The plot revolves around both abductor and abductee, with the abductor hoping for a softening of Marissa’s heart toward him and the abductee playing the role of a sympathetic victim, with an ace or two up her sleeve.

This is also the main synopsis of both the book *The Collector* by Fowles and Wyler’s film adaptation, but it would be a mistake to say that there are no divergences between *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and the other two. Excluding minor changes like language and other details in the book and the Wyler adaptation, De Leon did three major departures in his adaptation: 1) the setting, 2) the characters (their psychology and rationale for their actions) and their points of view (techniques such as flashback, letter writing, voice-overs), and 3) narrative resolution.

The most obvious departure in *Bilanggo sa Dilim* is how the victim is made to stay inside the house of the kidnapper. The house in this movie acts as the third character in the story, representing the boundaries that Marissa is not allowed to cross, as well as the scope of Lito’s/Eddie’s power. It is a two-storey house, with abundant space, good furniture, and a lawn overlooking the shore. It is practically a beach house for Marissa minus her freedom, of course. Although imprisoned inside, she is allowed to wander about, even outside the house, under Eddie’s watchful eye. She stays on the second floor with her own bed, a new set of wardrobe, and, presumably, even her own bathroom. Marissa has become part of the house and has become Lito’s property, albeit comfortably.

Consider the setting of Miranda’s abduction in the novel and in the Wyler adaptation. She is made to stay

in a cellar that is not even part of the main house of the antagonist. While she has her own new set of clothes and food is delivered to her regularly, creature comforts are limited. She has to ask permission every time she wants to take a bath since the bathroom is inside the main house of her abductor. She is separated from her captor, concealed underneath the grounds, practically buried alive. Just like the butterfly collection of the antagonist, Miranda has been captured and pinned underneath a case for the collector’s own sick pleasure. This hobby of collecting butterflies is a key element in both the novel and the Wyler movie. While the novel’s approach is organic in illustrating the relationship between Miranda and the captor she has nicknamed Caliban (an obvious Shakespearean reference), Wyler is less subtle, and his visual allegory is evident. This allegory was totally removed in *Bilanggo sa Dilim*. There is no reference about some insect hobby that occupies Lito/Eddie.

The Wyler adaptation is a faithful adaptation despite its curious insertion of the name “William Wyler” in the title, an obvious attempt to showcase a reownership, if not reauthorship, of the source material. Watching the movie is just like reading the book all over again. You still have two characters: one obsessed with the other, with the abductee dying of pneumonia by the end of the movie while still under the “care” of her abductor. There is no redemption by the story’s end. Instead, there is the added horror toward the conclusion of both the Wyler movie and the novel, when the audience sees the mind of the victimizer as he targets another woman to abduct. And it ends there, on a dreadful tone.

In De Leon’s adaptation, you have three characters: Lito/Eddie, Margie, and Marissa. What De Leon did is to make his film a seeming follow-up to the novel, what with the main female character Marissa acting as the second victim of Lito/Eddie. Margie, the first abductee, appears in the form of flashbacks and through a clandestinely written note left behind, like a letter addressed to no one, telling her tale of woe, in the hopes of forewarning the next victim of her abductor. What is striking in De Leon’s adaptation is how he deviates from Wyler’s one-person voice that the viewers could hear or even from the novel’s two-person point of view that readers could read—that of the abductor and the abductee, something like a seesawing of perspectives, from “Caliban” to Miranda. De Leon gave all his three characters a voice that the audience could hear: the psychosis of Lito/Eddie through his many voice-



overs; the fears and schemes of escape of Marissa, also through her voice overs; and the story of Margie through the hidden letter that Marissa found. Margie's voice-over is Marissa's own reading of the note. In this case, we see how the first victim's experiences not only dovetail with the experiences of the present victim but also inform the thoughts and plans of Marissa to understand her captor and, hopefully, escape. A connection is made between the two women, and this connection is absent in the original text and in the Wyler adaptation. In the latter, Miranda is voiceless. We hear her speak to her abductor, but we never hear her own thoughts. Marissa in the De Leon adaptation, even though she is the second victim, goes through the whole ordeal as if she were Miranda from the novel and the Wyler adaptation. All three women—De Leon's Marissa, the novel Miranda, and the Wyler Miranda—go through the same experiences, but it seems as if Marissa, thanks to Margie, now has the upper hand among all the victims across the three works.

The novel also does not provide sufficient rationale for "Caliban's" sociopathic behavior. It does not follow, of course, that a lepidopterist will automatically progress to collecting women, but we see no foundation for the character's depravity in the novel, save for his obsession with Miranda. The same thing can be said about the Wyler adaptation, but the same thing cannot be said about *Bilanggo sa Dilim*. In the latter, we see a possible rationale for Lito's behavior, where it stems from, and how it progressed toward abducting women. The first moment we catch a glimpse of Lito, we see him on the floor, his head on the lap of someone wearing a nightgown, his hair being caressed lovingly. Everything happens in a dreamlike state, as if in a flashback. This motif is repeated several times. We see Lito caressing the same nightgown amidst a number of framed photographs on the wall, presumably of his own mother. Marissa, with all her cunning, persistently asks Lito about his mother. After their exchange, consider this separate voice-over from both characters:

MARISSA

Since he can't have his mother anymore, he looks for her in me.

LITO

Now she wants to psychoanalyze me. So predictable. So middle-class.

Lito says this while hugging the same nightgown

we have seen earlier. *Bilanggo sa Dilim* provides us with an intriguing rationale, an Oedipal complex, as context for the kidnapper's psychological state of mind and, ultimately, for his sociopathic criminal behavior.

If the film provides us with a more solid foundation for the main character's psychosis, one that is absent in the source material and the Wyler adaptation, it also provides us an ending totally different from its sister materials. In the Wyler adaptation, the victim dies while the antagonist lives to tell his tale and, worse, end the story with his thoughts to plan another abduction. In De Leon's adaptation, not only do we see the protagonist escape, but we also see her killing her abductor. The movie ends with the man getting his comeuppance: death not only by the hands of the woman he imprisoned but also by the very same shovel he used to bury his first victim, giving us some kind of cinematic poetic justice. Marissa's defeat of her captor signals a certain fortitude and her eventual freedom, one that is absent in the novel and in the Wyler adaptation.

*Bilanggo sa Dilim*, while it claims to be an adaptation of the Fowles novel, is not the Fowles novel. Not only was De Leon unfaithful to the ending; he did a 180-degree turn, thereby making the narrative his very own. The killer collector has been collected. While his victims were literally the prisoners, it was Lito who was trapped in his own darkness. His death, while it guarantees the freedom of Marissa, also marks the release of Lito, not just from his mortal coil but also from his mental cage.

Also worth noting is how De Leon alludes not so much to the Fowles novel but to an earlier text. In the end Lito says, "Dreams do not lie. It becomes real. It's better for me to dream for eternity. To rest forever in the company of my beautiful dreams. To sleep. To dream. To die."<sup>5</sup> Lito's voice-over is a veiled reference to Caliban's attempt at being poetic about the beauty of his environment and of his dreams. This connects Shakespeare's monstrosity with De Leon's idea of evil. Perhaps we can see the unseen mother of Lito as the character of Sycorax. Miranda's desire to educate Caliban is the root of Marissa's plan to, in her own words, "not fight him, but to teach him."

De Leon's attempt to connect *Bilanggo* with *The Tempest* is a natural one, given the context already provided in the Fowles novel. While there is no shying away from using the Shakespearean text, it becomes apparent how De Leon wants the viewer to shift not just

our attention but also our sympathy to Lito, the same way we are invited to do the same for the subjugated Caliban. Unlike in the novel, the nature of good and evil is suddenly not as black and white in De Leon's hands. Lito's more humane treatment of Marissa compared with the cruel treatment of Miranda by "Caliban," as well as his numerous voice-overs, gives the viewers that opportunity to understand his psyche and the moral compass by which Lito lives.

The ending of *Bilanggo sa Dilim* is a total departure from the novel and consequently from the Wyler adaptation. While comeuppance and justice are delivered, something else is lost. On the surface, it seems there is no longer that sense of dread that hovers over the cinematic narrative, unlike in the source material. While evil eventually triumphs and continues well after the last page of the novel and in the Wyler film, there is a clear termination of it in De Leon's cinematic world.

Is this deviation a *Filipino* thing, a desire for a happy ending—to want redemption and a happily ever after? Is this cultural adaptation, an act of appropriating the novel according to Filipino consciousness and social realities? If it is, then there is truth to what Arriola said about postmodern filming of literature, that by positioning an adapted work within a culture, we situate it within that culture's history and context.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps *Bilanggo* is an echo of the national fascination for *komedya* and *moro-moro*, for the *awit* and the *korido*? It is the national yearning for a happy ending.

But if we are to put *Bilanggo sa Dilim* side by side with other De Leon films that explore human evil, this assumption becomes highly unlikely. De Leon's penchant to continue playing with the minds of the viewer well after the last scene is part of his signature. With *Bilanggo sa Dilim*, the ending is a ruse. Lito may have died and Marissa now lives to tell the tale, but the darkness continues. The dream truly begins as the man has shuffled off his mortal coil. This fascination for the human psyche, with all its darkness and misery, is undoubtedly very Mike De Leon. Besides, why would De Leon, given the murky tenor of his earlier works, give what the public presumably wants? He was not one to cater to conventional box-office expectations, so it does not make sense to think that the "happy ending," at least in relation to Marissa, is to cater to the audience's perceived desire.

De Leon has shaped the material into his own distinctive world—inventing new scenes, changing the

dialogues to fit the society and the socioeconomic class of his characters, and making intertextual references with other texts as he saw fit. Lito/Eddie fits in quite nicely in De Leon's universe, a tortured photographer trying to find himself in a world he sees as cruel. The manner by which De Leon reshaped the material is reminiscent of another filmmaker who also adapted several works of fiction for the big screen. In an interview, Alfred Hitchcock said this about his process of adaptation: "There's been a lot of talk about the way Hollywood directors distort literary masterpieces. I'll have none of that! What I do is read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema" (Truffaut, *Hitchcock* 71). It seems De Leon may have taken a leaf from Hitchcock's playbook—forget the source material and just create your own vision.

### Historical Adaptation by Transgression

Coming from the heels of Tikoy Aguiluz's *Rizal sa Dapitan* and Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Jose Rizal*, Mike De Leon added his name into the Rizal cauldron by helming *Bayaning 3rd World* in 1999. De Leon was originally in talks with Butch Jimenez and Jimmy Duavit of GMA Films, then Cinemax, for a possible Rizal film starring Aga Muhlach, but due to preproduction snafu that held the project for almost a year, Muhlach had to leave the project. De Leon eventually followed suit, and the Rizal project was taken over by Diaz-Abaya. *Jose Rizal* starring Cesar Montano was shown locally in June 1998 to mark the country's celebration of independence. But De Leon was not ready to give up entirely on the national hero. Doy del Mundo writes,

We couldn't let go of Rizal just like that. We jammed several times, exchanging ideas, searching for a different way of filming Rizal. Central to the discussion was the retraction, Father Balaguer, Josephine Bracken and, of course, Rizal. Then the Filmmaker came into the scene. At first he was just in the background... but in the end he became a primary character. And then it became two Filmmakers. The film is about making a movie about Rizal, an exploration about the heroism of the recognized 'national hero.' (*Rizal/Bayaning 3rd World* viii; translation mine)

The movie opens with several illustrations of

national symbols followed by a montage, a behind-the-scenes look at how one should go about filming Rizal's life. The film delves into action by showing two Filmmakers, one director and one scriptwriter, obsessed with the idea of making a movie about Rizal. As they figure out along the way, almost all facets about Rizal's life had already been explored, both by historians and by filmmakers. They argue about the path their film should take: should it be an academic postulation about heroism? Or should they opt for a more youthful, commercial movie? But as the director continues to scrutinize Rizal's controversial life, he is faced with many unanswered questions. The director decides to stop production to refocus his movie and probe deeper into Rizal's still contestable retraction document. Director and writer recreate Rizal's past as they go through the hero's letters and other historical accounts. They come "face to face" with different characters close to Rizal: Josephine Bracken, his mother Donya Teodora, his siblings, etc.

As the past is revealed, the two Filmmakers dig up more of the gray areas of Rizal's life. Both of them set out on their journeys to the past only to find themselves having a difficult time reconciling their personal beliefs with recorded history, even after "confronting" Rizal and his deeds. Finally, they give up their search for the one true Rizal account. Both director and writer conclude that Dr. Rizal's life is not cinematic enough.

It is tempting to infer that *Bayaning 3rd World's* "film-within-a-film" structure and the characters of the lead actors—Unnamed Director and Unnamed Scriptwriter—were all patterned, if not completely cut out, from real life: from the film's real director De Leon's and real scriptwriter Del Mundo's combined vision of what a Rizal movie should look and feel like.<sup>7</sup> One can imagine the "jamming" sessions of De Leon and Del Mundo as they try to figure out a way to adapt their own Rizal, one that will not be a mere shadow of Diaz-Abaya's biopic but a film totally different from what is usually expected. Instead of the conventional biopic that adapts for the screen the life of the national hero, the film focuses on one issue the Filmmakers believed to be central to Rizal's heroism—the retraction controversy. The cinematic Filmmakers' frustration may very well be the real-life frustration that hounded both De Leon and Del Mundo as they rewrote their earlier *Rizal* drafts. This frustration became the fountainhead of *Bayaning 3rd World's* unique way of adapting Rizal for the screen, a metacinematic

adaptation of the hero. Repeated adaptations—since Gross's and Yearsley's 1912 silent film adaptations of Rizal up to the present—confirm the value of the original—the historical figure of Rizal as the master text—and maintain the subject's position in the national psyche. Most adaptations seem to evoke a sense of duty to the primary text, how close or not it is to the source material or, in Rizal's case, how close to reality the cinematic spectacle of the execution is. Of course, this closeness of correspondence does not by itself define adaptation or whether it is a good one or not. It implies a connection, whereby one text inspires the creation of another. But the film does not want to confirm the value of the historical figure. Quite the contrary, its very existence is to question the repeatability of the primary text, despite problematic issues that surround the text's status as national hero.

*Bayaning 3rd World* constantly calls attention to its very existence and objective, that it is a film about attempting to film Rizal's life. Aside from the viewer seeing what is usually behind the camera such as the filmmaker, the crew, and the usual madness that happens off-camera, the viewer is also reminded that the characters onscreen, however fictional and affected, are but mere extensions of the real filmmakers behind *Bayaning 3rd World*. The cinematic narrative is the actual display of the filmmakers' research, and as this is an adaptation, their original source material is the giant looming figure of Rizal and all the documents about the man available to the filmmakers (both real and cinematic). From these texts, they try to create a unique narrative. While most adaptations try to stay faithful to the original text, that is, by taking a literary or historical experience and then attempting to translate it as close as possible into a cinematic experience, De Leon's film veers off the usual course and does the exact opposite. The challenge is how to transform, film, and adapt the available materials into a unique cinematic Rizal experience. In the end, the Director and Writer figured that fashioning a narrative out of the already-established story is problematic due to one needling question—the retraction controversy. The film theorizes that the document allegedly signed by Rizal is fake, and this becomes the film's main argument. If the text is dubious, then how must they showcase the dubiousness of this source material? Instead of weaving a conventional story with a straightforward narrative, De Leon opted to step back from the conventional and stepped inside the cinematic adaptation. Alongside Del

Mundo, De Leon fashioned fictive representations of themselves to stand in for them, putting themselves at the foreground of their own film, and Rizal as a mere artifact in their metanarrative.

As a metacinematic adaptation, we see and hear little of Rizal and rightly so, given the filmmakers' distinctive approach to their adaptation. The ones always at the foreground are the Filmmakers. They struggle to figure out how to adapt the master text, arguing back and forth about what has been done to death, what is a box-office hit, and what has not been done before. They cannot pick a spot to stand on, always finding other ways to look at the picture, literally looking at Rizal's execution photo with a magnifying lens. Until finally, the Director figures it out. It is a detective story, an investigation about Rizal's heroism. *Bayaning 3rd World* calls attention to the very manner by which it is adapting Rizal. It lets the audience know that they are going to make a detective story and proceeds by manner of an investigation. The scene between the two Filmmakers and Rizal illustrates this interrogation; all that is missing is a swinging light bulb over Rizal as they cross-examine the hero in good-cop/bad-cop fashion.

Both Filmmakers want to make sure that elevating Rizal once again to some kind of pedestal is not the path their film will take. In the process of their investigation, they de-elevate Rizal. The film's tone is irreverent—to Rizal, to the Catholic Church, to historians, even to the audience at certain points in the narrative. There is also an eccentric sense of humor, a sardonic tenor reminiscent of De Leon's earlier films. We see Rizal running around the park, trying to escape from his executioners. We see him playing *tong-its* (a card game). We see friars in an assembly line, like in a scriptorium of old, writing the retraction documents side by side with a photocopying machine. The process of "interviewing" all these personalities is just the filmmakers' (De Leon and Del Mundo/Davao and Villanueva) trick in telling the viewers that the "interviewers" are actually going through the cumbersome research process and, as a result of this research, they get to meet all these historical figures with varying memories and agenda. They take turns interviewing/researching about a character's potential knowledge about the retraction, and in the process, both Filmmakers unearth possible fabrications depending on the agenda of the individual characters.

This De Leon work as adaptation does not concern

itself with faithfulness to the material or to history in general since the very nature of the document in question that they intend to adapt is, quite possibly, false. Unreliability becomes not just the focal point but the manner by which the filmmakers intend to convey the idea. The voice-over at the beginning establishes this would-be transgression: "If it's a sin to doubt Rizal's heroism...it seems we will trespass in this movie." The filmmaker wants the audience to doubt everything, and this skepticism is what fuels the film, with the audience realizing that the narrative is not being faithful to what has been established in history books. There is a sense of mischief in every frame, and we are left all the more curious as to the direction this film is headed. At one point, the film-within-a-film becomes a film-within-a-film-within-a-film as we see the actor Davao as the Director directing the actor pretending to be the American director Albert Yearsley directing his Rizal film. All these, of course, under the hand of De Leon.

The film also interchangeably uses real documents side by side with fabricated ones. One example is how the director looks at a portrait of Daria Ramirez, the actress playing Donya Teodora, and the writer, as he grabs the same portrait, now looks at a portrait of the real Donya Teodora. It means to play with the viewer and to make us question the artifice and the trickery they are using to convey their distrust of their own narrative. The way historical events are narrated or shown side by side with film photographs (culled from old period films produced by LVN Pictures) also alludes to this questioning manner in which De Leon visualizes the past. Instead of showing the viewer documentary footage or even historical photographs, De Leon banks on the cinematic power of LVN films. The created, cinematically produced past on celluloid illustrates the questionable historic past he is trying to problematize in his own film. The way *Bayaning 3rd World* cinematically reproduces/parodies historical characters also blurs the line between real and filmic/fictional, for example, by consciously employing anachronistic dialogue between the historical characters—"Hong Kong bitch!" Trining screams at Josephine, "Todas!" Rizal tells the friars after winning in *tong-its*, both instances displacing the seemingly sublime from their hallowed position in the past. Nothing is sacred here, not even the national hero. The Filmmakers accuse him during their one and only confrontation: "You look filthy...you didn't shave. Your costume...you don't



look like Rizal...why are you smoking? Rizal doesn't smoke!" The hero angrily responds, "Because I am not Rizal! I am just a figment of your imagination in order for your movie to make sense!"

This pull and push between the real and the imagined bears De Leon's transgressive tone, which is evident in his overall fictive world. That he hired Joel Torre (real name Jose Rizalino De Leon Torre), already typecast in Rizal-centric films such as his turn as Ibarra in the 1992 TV movie *Noli Me Tangere* and also as Ibarra in the Diaz-Abaya film *Jose Rizal*, to play the historical figure calls to the viewer's mind the long-recognized image of Rizal, mustache and all. Torre has become the ideal Rizal, and De Leon banks on this familiarity. Only with our familiarity can he create a defamiliarizing effect. It is also worth noting that Torre was in a previous De Leon film; he was the abductor in *Bilanggo sa Dilim* alongside Rio Locsin, his first victim, who in *Bayaning 3rd World* plays his sister Trining. Does this recurring cast simply showcase De Leon's trust in his usual actors, or does it prove his confidence that nobody has seen his earlier work? Or if it is intentional, does it reveal, however obliquely, his trust in the audience to make the connection, to see the subtle wink? That this time we recognize how the antagonist from the past has transformed to become the hero?

The film ends in the same manner it begins, with both Filmmakers looking up at Rizal's statue. In the opening scene, they mock the hero's small stature while literally looking up at his larger-than-life sculpture. In the end, they find themselves at the park named after the man, again looking up at his exalted figure. After an hour and a half of historical meanderings and maneuverings with various historical figures, they are still puzzled and lost in the middle of so many conjectures. As the camera reverses, we too are invited to look up to the man. Are we as bewildered as the two Filmmakers? Are we as bewildered as De Leon? This film upholds De Leon's desire to problematize the hero: "this project is an obsession for Mike... one he spent around twelve million pesos for" (Del Mundo, *Rizal/Baying 3rd World* vii–viii; translation mine). This obsession ends with De Leon, like the Filmmaker in his own film, realizing that Rizal, like history, is a formidable constant and is as daunting as the larger-than-life statue of Rizal. De Leon's manner of adaptation is his own way of problematization. By bringing Rizal down a peg or two (or more), De Leon

comes face to face with a man who is quite possibly no better than anyone. It signals a demotion of the national hero, and it impacts our understanding not just of Rizal but of ourselves. Our self-image is damaged by proxy. If Rizal is a fraud, then everything—our nationhood, our patriotism, our sense of pride—they are all questionable. We are breakable, like the small bust sculpture of Rizal smashed by the Director—of poor quality, with Third-World value. The final realization then becomes an agreement between both Filmmakers: "Rizal's life is not filmable. There are too many gray areas...he's just meant for the books," says the Director, to which the Writer chimes with "That's difficult to break. National hero."

If an adaptation is a paraphrase of an original material, the material being Rizal's life, then De Leon's brand of adaptation is questioning the act of rephrasing. He scrutinizes the very act of adaptation, of merely filming a well-woven tale of heroism. As an adaptation, the film does away with the notion of fidelity. The only sense of fidelity this film ever considered is the fidelity of the retraction, never fidelity to the minutiae surrounding Rizal's well-known life. It even pokes fun at the usual fetishization to detail most historical adaptations have, as in the scene when they try to visualize Donya Teodora. As the Director describes his "conversation" with Rizal's mother, the Writer claims that the Director's visualization of the old woman is inaccurate. In one instance, the Writer goes back and forth from Donya Teodora to the Director, as they try to come up with a more authentic look for the character. With betel nut or without? With spectacles or without? "Do you have a spittoon?" the writer asks the Director, to which the Director replies, "We don't have that prop."

The film's objective is not to present a "real" or faithful Rizal (the word *real* is problematic, of course, but "real" in the sense that it follows the traditional, well-accepted facts about the hero, its faithfulness to established history). The intention is to question the traditional and the seemingly faithful: "How can you make a movie that is contrary to the usual narrative?" asks Del Mundo (15). And since it calls attention to its act of adapting a fragment of Rizal's life, that they are making a film or at least trying to, it becomes a metacinematic adaptation. Inadvertently, it also questions the other films about Rizal. If Rizal's life is unfilmable, then what do we call the other Rizal films we have seen? When the Writer tells us, "In 1912,

when filmmaking was still new here, Rizal was already a box-office attraction...Two American filmmakers competed in filming Rizal),” he could very well be making an analogy between what happened in 1912 and what happened with the original De Leon project on Rizal that was taken over by Diaz-Abaya. He might as well be referencing all the Rizal films that came out before, during, and after the centennial celebrations, including *Bayaning 3rd World*. It is a self-mockery. It is one of many that jumped into the fray and, in the end, has the impudence to mock its audience by declaring the impossibility of filming Rizal. Again, it makes the viewer wonder, “What was it that I just watched?” Over a century of Rizal adaptations and not one of those qualify, at least not according to De Leon’s standards. Not one measures up in the De Leon weigh-in. Or have we merely imagined all the Rizal movies we thought we have seen?

The Director, when he said that Rizal’s life is not filmable and that he should just stay in the books, seems to privilege the written word over cinematic language. Hayden White makes the two languages distinct, calling the latter *historiophoty*, “the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse,” while the former is *historiography*, “the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse” (1193). Ruminating on Rosenstone’s proposition about film’s portrayal of history,<sup>8</sup> White adds that it is the act of losing something in the process of translation that creates this bias against film adaptation of history: “among the things supposedly lost are accuracy of details, complexity of explanation, the auto-critical and inter-critical dimensions of historiological reflection, and the qualifications of generalizations necessitated by, for instance, the absence or unavailability of documentary evidence” (1197). In De Leon’s film, it is not so much the absence or unavailability of documentary evidence that leads to the two lead characters’ generalizations (if one can call their assertions generalizations) that pushed the narrative, but the dearth of rock-hard evidence pointing to the credibility of the document in question, that is, the retraction letter. Given the disputed historical document, the two Filmmakers cave in in the end and decide to give up on a *historiophotic* Rizal. According to the Director, Rizal has a solid space in historiography, but not in cinema. The gray areas about his life make the cinematic endeavor impossible; cinematic language according to the filmmaker is not equipped to do the

translation. But, and with apologies to Hutcheon, who coined historiographic metafiction,<sup>9</sup> De Leon’s film is *historiophotic* metafiction, a self-reflexive cinematic adaptation of history or at least a fragment of it. De Leon utilizes his own syntax, his own language as befitting his signature to deal with his chosen historical problem that he felt needed articulation and solving. By using the lens to fill his canvas and utilizing mise-en-scène to craft the visual language, De Leon, despite his cinematic avatar’s protestations, was able to adapt Rizal for the screen.

In his adaptation by transgression, what De Leon tries to expose and subvert is the idea that history is a closed, autonomous, authoritative object that derives its power from, well...itself, that is to say, time. Because of time’s passing, history has assumed control over the Rizal narrative, protecting and maintaining it for whatever reason (patriotism, national identity, etc.), and it has become difficult to question the past that would have access to the truth. But in the end, due to his own transgression, by parodying and mocking Rizal in his film, De Leon reestablishes the power and authority of history. The film articulates its dependence by its use of the source material, the master text that is Rizal (and all the documents related to the man), but declares its insubordination through ironic treatment of it. The film accepts the premise of a possible retraction and finds itself caught up in the web of history. *Bayaning 3rd World*, unwittingly, has become part of the body of work about Rizal and reinstates Rizal’s position as hero—“*Mahirap basagin ‘yan.*”

De Leon showcases his transgressive character by upsetting the status quo and then maintaining it in the end. The director as jester is in a bind. Must he displace Rizal by proving he signed the retraction (and give a point to the Church’s way), or must he claim that Rizal is every bit the hero we imagined him to be because there was no retraction (point to Rizal, not to the Church)? Which institution must De Leon be a dissident of? History or the Catholic Church? The Filmmaker provides a way out when in the end he says, “His novels, poems, letters and declarations say something else about his principles and his way of thinking...and you will see how there shouldn’t be any doubt.” Is this a cop out? This restores Rizal back to his lofty position. Both Filmmakers are looking up at his monument while the Director (the actor and perhaps De Leon) is telling us to trust literature, to have faith in Rizal’s fictional world, to trust his world

of make-believe. If Rizal's ideas in his works are the stuff of heroes, then he must be one, for Rizal must share his characters' ideals. Then, no doubt, he didn't sign a retraction. His position in history is safe. After ninety minutes of upsetting the established order and contradicting our collective nostalgia, De Leon goes back and shows us nothing more than what we already knew in the beginning. It was an exercise to provoke, to question, but not to provide answers. The audience, in the end, still has to decide. If at all, De Leon gives the power to the viewer, as it should be.

In adaptation, the source material is king. The adapted work is simply a gratuitous, second-rate supplement. In De Leon's world, not necessarily. The source material may be king, but not for long. The adapted work will serve to question the very sovereignty and authority of the source material. The filmmaker questions the whole process in the same manner the peasant in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* did with the king. Anteriority does not automatically assume supremacy, the same way being king is not "just 'cause some watery tart threw a sword at you!" The filmmaker as jester is making fun of the whole process, laying open for the viewer the magic not just behind filmmaking, but behind the writing of history. He questions the many voices from the past, oftentimes conflicting. De Leon does not give primacy to one voice, often allowing for the multiplicity of voices to be heard. The result is a cacophony of Rizals. Instead of a strong, singular version that we have always had, we now have several diluted versions, made a little watery and thin because of all the poking and questioning by the filmmaker.

*Bayaning 3rd World* is not a Rizal film. It is a De Leon film. The strength of this De Leon film lies not just in its loose narrative, centered around attempting to answer the retraction question, but in the potential open-endedness of it (which it delivers), and its coherence is dependent on the way the filmmakers structure their line of questioning, the doubt furthering the narrative. Ultimately it is this uncertainty that persists in the end, that assures the certainty of their mission, that is, the impossibility of filming Rizal (which the real filmmakers actually accomplished).

## The Auteur's/Adapter's Signature

Whether it is an adaptation of a fictional work or a historical figure, what we have in De Leon is a transgressive translator. He is not satisfied with the conventional translation of a material and seems to be deliberately and stubbornly on a mission to be unorthodox in his manner of transforming the source material into a filmic adaptation. His hand over the adaptations is evident in both *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and *Bayaning 3rd World*, not only in his responsibility as a writer in both films but also in his manner of articulating his cinematic language to illustrate his own world. Fidelity to the original material is a moot point for De Leon; his only concern is his fidelity to his own voice. In fact, it is not so much unfaithfulness as the word implies falsity—as if the original texts can yield only one meaning, one message from the author Fowles or from the historical Rizal, and that succeeding adaptations are but reproductions of THE meaning onscreen, and that to veer away from it implies cinematic adultery. It is not infidelity, but antifidelity. There seems to be a conscious determination to reinsert the cinematic author within the texts. By going against expectations of fidelity, he has endowed *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and *Bayaning 3rd World* with organic unity and meaning quite independent and far removed from the literary/historical Author-God. By doing so, he not only dehierarchized literature's and history's superiority over film but has also, in the process, proven himself to be an auteur.

De Leon is a master "disruptionist," perhaps even a "desecrationist," for an auteur as he loves to upset, even treat with disrespect, existing literary materials and even authority figures like Jose Rizal with seeming impunity. His disinclination to submit to the tried and tested template of the national hero and his apparent deviations in his adaptations illustrate De Leon's ability to rise above the cookie-cutter formula for most adaptations and imprint his personality on his films, even if it means finding himself in constant conflict with studio executives given his consistent box-office failures. His concessions during film productions show how the filmmaker is willing to work with other artists, but not at the expense of his artistic integrity and personal vision. While this may form part of the De

Leon aura, it does not seem to help any at the box-office returns. His attempts at cinematic intellectualization is perhaps the reason why Corrigan's "commerce of auteurism" seems discordant with De Leon as an auteur. His conscious effort to make his films "cerebral" is a De Leon mark, although realistically an off-putting one.<sup>10</sup> He is not and, as long as he maintains his cerebral approach, will never be considered a "safe-bet director." His very name assures his inclusion in the pantheon of the most important Filipino filmmakers, but his signature is not a marketable commodity. De Leon is an uncommercial, unapologetic auteur.

De Leon's defiant manner of reclaiming others' original works to serve his own purpose is unmistakable in *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and even more so in his cheeky and insolent treatment of Rizal in *Bayaning 3rd World*. This subversive attitude forms a huge part of his signature as a filmmaker in general and as an *auteurist* adapter in particular. Not one to give in to what his audience expects, De Leon even challenges the traditional language of cinema by continually using metacinema as a technique, frequently calling attention to his act of filmmaking. While we see its roots as early as his 1980 film *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?*, De Leon used it to full effect in *Bayaning 3rd World*. By doing so, he creates a natural parallelism between the real world and his cinematic world, allowing his viewers to see through the conceit and implied hierarchical authority of his created/imagined world. By breaking the cinematic fourth wall, De Leon talks to us, albeit mockingly at times, making us hyperaware of the fine line between his art and our reality.

By adapting a material, De Leon makes it a point to not simply relay a story, one that has already been communicated in the original text, but to take that story and fashion something different out of it. By altering and contradicting the source material, he counters the expectations of the viewers and gives us a fresh take on a story or a fragment of history. This allows us to see the world according to De Leon's eyes and forces us to recalibrate our expectations as we willingly enter his creations.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Truffaut in his landmark article "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français" was critical of what he took to be a great emphasis among his contemporaries on the

screenwriter in the assessment of the film. He attacked well-written, "well-made" literary films and their "tradition of quality," in which excellence was almost entirely understood in literary terms, with the director considered merely as that person who adds the images.

<sup>2</sup> His first foray into the world of adaptation was as cinematographer and producer of *Maynila, Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, directed by Lino Brocka in 1975, based on the novel *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* by Edgardo M. Reyes, and adapted for the screen by Clodualdo Del Mundo, Jr. His first adapted film as director was *Kisapmata*, with screenplay written by Del Mundo, Jr., Raquel Villavicencio, and De Leon, based on the nonfiction crime reportage of Nick Joaquin's "House on Zapote Street." The *komiks Hindi Nahahati ang Langit* was De Leon's next adapted work, although he did not have an actual hand in the writing of the adapted screenplay, and his tenth film, *Bayaning 3rd World*, is also a form of adaptation, a historical one. Arriola wrote about *Kisapmata* in "A Third Way to Film the Story: A Filipino Film Adaptation of a Work of Literary Journalism" in *South East Asia Research* 18.2 (June 2010): 271–300.

<sup>3</sup> Recall how De Leon removed his name from the credits of his 1985 film *Hindi Nahahati ang Langit*, a *komiks* adaptation, as a result of a conflict between him and the producers. He knows the power of his name, and he chooses to wield it whenever he feels it is to his advantage, not simply out of vanity, but out of principle.

<sup>4</sup> All italicized portions of interviews from hereon are my translations into English from Filipino as transcribed in these sources. I also translated into English cited Filipino dialogues from De Leon's films.

<sup>5</sup> In Act III, Scene ii of *The Tempest*, Caliban acknowledges his island's beauty, with all its sounds and sweet airs, "That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep, Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming, The clouds methought would open and show riches Ready to drop upon me, that, when I wak'd, I cried to dream again."

<sup>6</sup> In "Pelikulang Komiks: Towards a Theory of Filipino Film Adaptation," Arriola writes, "By locating adaptation in culture, we do not fall into the trap of isolating a practice from the larger terrain of narrative culture. Instead, we see adaptation as an adjunct and an expression of history and culture." See [http://iskwiki.upd.edu.ph/images/archive/b/b7/20130408023517!ARRIOLA,\\_JOYCE\\_PHD\\_DISSERTATION\\_PELIKULANG\\_KOMIKS\\_UP-CMC\\_2013.pdf](http://iskwiki.upd.edu.ph/images/archive/b/b7/20130408023517!ARRIOLA,_JOYCE_PHD_DISSERTATION_PELIKULANG_KOMIKS_UP-CMC_2013.pdf) (accessed December 17, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> In a personal conversation, Del Mundo says that *Bayaning 3rd World* started out as De Leon's attempt to write a working draft in English. The revisions that followed the original draft were the combined efforts of both Del Mundo and De Leon.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenstone considers the cinematic rendering of



history and how most historians seem to have developed a certain prejudice in this act of visually rendering the written account. See “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History on Film” in the *American Historical Review* 93.5 (Dec. 1988): 1173–1185.

<sup>9</sup> Hutcheon coined *historiographic metafiction* to refer to postmodern novels that fuse the literary and the historical, calling attention to its own conventions.

<sup>10</sup> In “Conversations with Mike De Leon,” De Leon mentions wanting to make *Bayaning 3rd World* a “cerebral” film, a deliberate attempt to veer away from the usual melodramatic tone previous Rizal films have assumed. Reacting to the word *cerebral*, Del Mundo writes, “There, Mike mentions the dirty word that might just drive the audience away.”

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