

PERSPECTIVES

Bi-Phasic Dissonance in some Pinoy Boys' Love Series

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The growing fascination with Pinoy Boy's Love (BL) series, such as *Gameboys*, *Hello Stranger*, and *Quarantings* can be construed as part of the long struggle of LGBTQI community for more inclusivity as most of its fans were also fans of Thai Boy's Love series called "lakhon," according to scholar Thomas Baudinette who studied that Pinoy fan sites actively appropriate or "creatively misread" these series. My paper now would like to follow up on the efficacy of these reparative readings in Pinoy BL series, if the creative misreading in Thai BL series can be carried over to their Pinoy BL counterparts, and how such readings fare with the culture of "machismo" or toxic masculinity that perpetuates in Philippine society.

My approach will focus more on a closed reading of selected Pinoy BLs, namely, *Gameboys*, *Hello Stranger*, and *Quarantings* and prove that in as much as these BL series offer safe space or creative appropriations for LGBTQI communities, they are also enablers of the status quo of homophobia, heteronormativity, and toxic masculinity. I argue that the same mechanism behind this fascination can be attributed to what Theodor Adorno would call the bi-phasic dissonance between general attitudes of homophobia and specific behaviors of heteronormativity, which reinforces an atmosphere of social contentment and ultimately avoids more critical and solemn speculation about the state's role in our dire situation, in this pandemic.

Keywords: Pinoy BL series, bi-phasic behavior, homophobia, heteronormativity, middle class interests

It may well be said that astrology presents the bill for the neglect of interpretative thinking for the sake of fact gathering. There are, on the other hand, the "facts" both of stellar movements and well-known psychological reactions, but there is no real synthesis even attempted, no relationship that makes sense is established—and probably cannot be established between two spheres so widely divergent. Instead, an entirely extraneous subsumption of human events under astronomical law is attempted, externalization, as will be remembered, being an essential facet of astrology in all respects.

Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth*

The Seduction of BL Series

The allure of Thai boy's love (BL) series on *YouTube* at the height of the pandemic has given rise to our own versions, such as *Gameboys*, *Hello Stranger*, and *Quarantings*. This appropriation is not surprising since we have a history of producing our teledramas that are quite reminiscent of *Pasyon*, a Philippine epic narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, focused on his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, (Del Rosario 43–77) and a history too of appropriating or importing teledramas from the US, Mexico, Taiwan, and now in South Korea in as much as this cultural production or consumption is also happening elsewhere, like in Argentina (Aharoni 26). In addition, most of these telenovelas are produced by transnational media corporations in cooperation with local partners, and in the last decade their network has expanded with Internet and mobile devices offering a new means for distribution (Artz 202). Hence, the success of BL series is not an isolated phenomenon from other media genres. In fact, Thomas Baudinette who studied Thai homoerotic media genres called "lakhon," have found out that they are quite similar to the Japanese "yaoi," though a lot of Filipino fan sites would disagree, according to him, and insist on their novelty and how these shows provide safe spaces for them and their advocacies. Hence, for Baudinette, Filipino fans of Thai BL "misread creatively" and intuitively, to suit their own needs and purposes (101–105). Though one cannot deny the potential value of these serials, one should also be wary of the danger of being coopted, and some of them can indeed be escapist and would

perfectly fit into the urban poor's clientelist orientation through stories that grant them the possibilities for their fantasies to come true (Del Rosario 65).

My paper explores this possible reading, that Pinoy BL series are not necessarily "creative misreadings" of Filipino fans but instances of what Theodore Adorno would call bi-phasic dissonance swinging from general attitudes of homophobia and specific behavior of heteronormativity. I am using Adorno here as a framework, aware of its contradictions and problems about culture industry and I do not want to dismiss the agency of its viewers, rather I am more interested with how this charm works in a contradictory manner, that in as much as these BL series can be empowering, they can also reinforce our immaturity, conformity, and dependency needs. Adorno's work on astrology columns in *Los Angeles Times* in the fifties in his essay, "The Stars Down to Earth," is instructive in understanding tendencies of anti-rationalism inherent in New Age and cults and their ties with authoritarianism and manipulation of modern consumers in as much as astrology can be construed as innocent pastime. Adorno believes that popular culture is enmeshed with the condition of consumption, viewership, and identity that are not pure concepts, and oftentimes the result of negation, a recoil from an unreconciled, unemancipated state. Similarly, Jewish identity implies negations. The Jew is almost always a conceptual Jew and to think about identity, one must be aware of the subject's myth of self-creation and a force field of borrowings, and displacements. Hence, one could not understand nationalism or terrorism, liberation or domination, fascism, or liberalism without addressing identity and negative identity together (1–23).

Just as Adorno endeavors to articulate the conceptual Jew who is the defining and threatening other for more general mechanisms of prejudice, our BL series can be read as the collective scapegoat of our gay community. This can also be observed in some of the gay indie films popular in the early 2000 like *Ang Lalaki sa Parola*, *Daybreak*, *Sagwan*, and *Selda*. Most of these films assume a confessional mode of narration, allowing the gay character to wallow on and confess his "sins" and compulsive sexual behavior, while viewers are put on a captive position of being privy to his thoughts and feelings for reasons of absolution and expediency. These films then capitalize on the "otherness" of queer identities to placate its

homophobic audience. The popular reception leads not to a criticality against heteronormativity but rather toward affirming the prevailing, conservative order. After all, the film becomes a “safe” medium, it can only vicariously depict the gay lifestyle, and watching it from a distance can assuage the viewers, make them feel that their “comfort zones” and worldview are still intact and untainted by the so-called “gay sinners” in the films (DeVilles 148). It is in this respect that I find Adorno’s framework valuable to studying any contemporary culture, because it is always challenging to understand the contradictory nature of media whether it contributes to criticality or cooptation. I know that there is much that is arguable with Adorno, but nothing out of this world. His study of astrology establishes that the contradictions of modernity can be rooted in its psychodynamics, from character studies to the outcomes of processes of cultural, economic, political, and social modernization. Mostly these forces are antagonistic and not symmetrical, and the film along with its analogous cultural forms can sometimes serve both inimical interests.

Manifestation of Bi-Phasic Compulsive Behavior

Adorno defines bi-phasic compulsive behavior in relation to authority as one manifest submissiveness to those above him in a perceived hierarchy and bullies those below him (89–97). This is like fascism where the leader permits and sometimes requires the follower to give vent to sadistic impulses. This compulsive behavior happens in the everyday lives of people until it gives way in more and more spheres of life to corporatist policy making and other mass culture. There is a fundamental symmetry between mass culture and fascism, as both feed-off and reproduce immature characters with high, almost child-like dependency needs. As such, it is important to stress that we are viewing these Pinoy BL series at the height of our lockdown experience where we are all feeling vulnerable with the growing number of COVID-19 patients, deaths, and government inefficiency, on top of the numerous cases of graft and corruption in the state health insurance program. At this point we may ask; can we really ascertain that the fantasies depicted in soap operas or BL series be empowering? How do we make sense of the recent release and pardon of the killer of Jennifer Laude by no less than our president,

fondly called by his followers as their “Tatay Digong” (Abad)? Is it possible that the fantasies enacted by an authoritarian state in a pandemic situation are at home with the projected fantasies of BL series, no matter how progressive their ideas, stories, or themes?

There is a stark rise of Internet usage beginning March 2020 globally and, in the Philippines, it is estimated to have grown to 73M with 94% of 18–29 age group and 36% of 50 years old and above. Most are young adults with 24% of these or about 15.7M read news through *Facebook*, 18% on *YouTube*, 6% on *Instagram*, and 3% on *Twitter*. There is also a slight gender difference with females comprising 50% while males are 41%. The time allotted has considerably grown to 63.3% on the third week, from 13.4% on the first week of March 2020 (Sanchez 2020). These young adults are the target audience of TV soap operas and romantic-comedy films. Artz studied the influential role of transnational media corporations in the production of telenovelas all over the world, and he said that most of the time they lead through annual world summits, where executives, producers, marketers from 23 countries discuss how to capture younger audiences with love stories and social issues linked with music, live entertainment, and social media (195). The increase of youth viewership is not accidental and with the pandemic and ensuing various restrictions, the producers know that these young audiences do not have the luxury of spending more than an hour the way they watch TV series or cinemas. Laptops, tablets, or phones are also being used in work and school, and anything more than an hour of usage would mean additional expenses. So, the brevity or seriality of Thai or Pinoy BL series is really part of the enticement on the part of the production, and they have already done research on their target audience. They know that 8 to 13 episodes lasting about 20–25 minutes each is attractive for these young audience. One can easily squeeze *YouTube* viewing along with other platforms like Amazon Prime and Apple TV. In addition, storytelling in BL series tends to have a rapid pace. The bi-phasic behavior is then induced in undeveloped characterization, simplification of complex issues to handy formula, and evocation of gratification.

In Pinoy BL Series, bi-phasic dissonance will always be depicted and represented by the two main characters, and both will assume and oscillate at one point in the narrative with the more aggressive

and passive personality. In *Gameboys*, Cairo (Elijah Canlas) will be pursued by the more aggressive Gavreel (Kokoy de Santos); in *Hello Stranger*, Miko (JC Alcantara) will be meeker than Xavier (Tony Labrusca); and in *Quarantings*, Judah (Kyo Quijano) despite his flamboyance, is still perceived as more passive than the more masculine Rocky (Royce Cabrera). Since these series were filmed at the height of quarantine, there will be limited location settings, the private bedrooms usually where they use their laptop, or stores and grocery shops where they buy their necessities, and their cars. These locations are just convenient backdrop in the storytelling, enough to provide a realistic scenario. For instance, in *Gameboys*, we were told that they are video game players, but the story will not dwell on the intricacies of gaming, whether the game they are playing is an RPG that will allow them to use avatars, therefore, giving us a hint on how they play on their sexual identities or roles. Gaming or being a gamer will only be the extended trope of their relationships, who is the more aggressive and who wins or loses. In *Hello Stranger*, the class activity becomes the expedient set up for Miko and Xavier, but nowhere in the series will they ever discuss the poem and its significance to their lives. It will take the whole series, eight episodes or two months, to figure out the poem. The teacher instead of helping them understand the poem is more concerned with her matchmaking skills. This may be seen as a comic relief and totally harmless but precisely it is in typical scenes like these where realism is exaggerated, characters become stereotypical and the whole plot becomes unproblematic, bordering on the irrational. The same can be observed also with the Thai BL series *2gether*, where Tine and Sarawat are supposed to be students, but very few scenes dwell on their predicaments and limitations as students. Watching them you get the impression of how empowered these students are. Stories like these lead to unreflecting acceptance of the status quo. Similarly, Artz said that most TV serials really exploit personalization or the individualization of the social world as an epistemology:

They ceaselessly offer the audience dramas of recognition by locating social and political issues in personal and familial terms, but never do they take up societal solutions to individual problems. Poverty weighs on characters, but policies and practices contributing to social

inequality of access to education, health care, and capital resources are out of bounds. (215)

Among the three Pinoy BL series, *Quarantings* tend to have a more sensible set up, since Judah and Rocky are both trapped in the same apartment with only one quarantine pass. But even with this degree of realism, the series is replete with fantastic, hallucinatory images and delusional urges that can appeal to young adults, given their vulnerability, isolation, helplessness, or precarious situation. The series seems to speak to them by allowing a sense of identification with the two bi-phasic characters. If they see themselves as the more passive character, they are placated in a way that the series miraculously resolves its contradictions.

BL series promotes an atmosphere of social contentment in a more comprehensive sense, that even with the pandemic, the idea that love conquers all assumes a reasonableness that makes their inroad into real life, occluding a more critical and solemn speculation about the state's role in their dire situation. Ultimately, the series suggests not to question their condition, but to make the best of them from the viewpoint of their private interests. So, in *Gameboys*, Cairo blames himself for his father's death but his love interest, Gavreel, his brother, mom, and friends come to his rescue. In *Hello Stranger*, Miko is helped by Xavier inadvertently to be more open and truer to his emotions and desires. In *Quarantings*, Judah finds her new love interest in Rocky. Almost all relationships are infantile projections of objectified relationships, and their fantastic stories reinforce conservative ideology, guilt feelings, compulsive patterns, and unconscious motivations. Instead of working against these problems, the series promotes a sense of psychological dependence. So even if these are about young gay adults, they are overtly desexualized and recast with middle-class anxieties. This also explains the appeal of BL series even to the female audience who can safely identify with gay characters' fantasies by making them agreeable characters, almost always like the *7th Heaven* meets *Queer as Folk*.

Artz made similar observations and believed that it is the nature of mass media in a contradictory social environment to contain issues in the large, immobilizing structure of the status quo. All issues are addressed with individualism and the consumption of luxury goods—actors and characters find individualized

adjustments or successes demonstrated through their purchasing power. Furthermore, we need to understand that individualism focuses viewer attention on daily life choices, not the structures and practices that contribute to the limited menu of available life choices. Individualism also merges nicely with consumption as the preferred behavior in a market economy: all individual identities are acceptable and representable through buying the appropriate consumer goods (Artz 215). In the end, these Pinoy BL series demonstrates how the drive for profit adjusts to the expectations and habits of cultures, incorporating novelty for reproducing the social relations of power best suited for transnational capital. Telenovelas are indicative of the marketplace's long experience as well as in condensing knowledge that both shapes human aspirations and social demands and makes them motives of profit (221). It may be interesting that even if *Quaranthings* is a portmanteau of quarantine and things, the conditions of quarantine and objectification become the ultimate logic of these programs appropriate for a global consumerist culture. It would really be interesting if we can extend this study to how series melodramas are structured around advertising and the production of audiences for advertisers. In fact, the reason for the term soap operas in the seventies is because the main sponsors are soap companies, and the schedule of these programs are specifically laid out for most women who remained at home and have limited buying capacity (they can still buy soaps and shampoos!).

Mystification of Pinoy BL Series

Adorno found the same thing operating with astrology columns. Even though most of the readers of astrology are women, they do not have any problems being addressed as "he" in the columns since this identification grants them some sense of gratification. In the end, gratification seems tolerable if it bears the stamp of social confirmation, if it is channeled through preconceived censorship before it even enters the subject's experience. So, in *Gameboys*, it will not be a problem if Pearl or Terence as Gavreel's exes are the ones helping Cairo; in *Hello Stranger*, the teacher, Ms. Tina; and in *Quaranthings*, the grandmother. The nuclear family of young gay adults is always seen as alienating force and threat, so friends, classmates, teachers, and extended family like grandmothers will tend to be incredibly accommodating. This is still part

of the bi-phasic mood that BL series tends to capitalize on. Gays will have problems and some of these are coming from their immediate family, but the world is not totally broken, friends will come to the rescue, help will be given, there will be a divine intervention, etc.

Likewise, the pandemic problem will be sidelined in these stories or simplified as challenges that can be surmounted. These BL series are not unlike the astrology columns that give contradicting attitudes on their readers, asking them to adjust or be resolute depending on the stars' alignment. The charm of both astrology and BL series works simply because they cushion the terrible blow of the circumstances, we are all in. Therefore, instead of responding to the representational problems of the gay community, BL series can succeed only in isolating their agony, leading either to superficial romanticization or its reverse, a sense of internal loathing, which is again an aspect of the bi-phasic response. What is supposed to be liberating becomes mystifying. Complex issues are reduced to managing interpersonal issues. Artz believes that if we really want creative democratic, liberating content, then different production practices and democratic control over media institutions must be in place and for a culture of democracy, human solidarity, and human values, working classes and their allies must lead society, replace commercial media with democratic, participatory, public access media (221). Likewise, if these BL series are produced commercially, they are going to send mixed signals and we cannot ignore the possibility of cooptation of the culture industry no matter how liberating it tries to be. What must be stressed here is that the depiction of gay concerns and issues stem from complex power relations that can be oppressive, legitimate, and normative.

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