

REVIEW

Reading about a Lost Film

A review of *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api: Remembering a Lost Film* by Clodualdo Del Mundo, Jr. (De La Salle University Publishing House and Film Development Council of the Philippines, 2022)

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Two scores ago, National Artist Bienvenido Lumbera observed that the post-war Philippine film industry resided in a precarious position as it churned out film after film without enough critical praxes and historical documentation to record its achievement. He underscored four priorities of proaction: annotated filmography, selective bibliography, oral histories, and film archive. Of the fourth, he warned, “Unless an institution is set up soon to recover and preserve films of historic and artistic value, the time will come when the history of Philippine cinema can only be read about when it ought to be experienced through direct contact with them” (186). In the third decade of the twenty-first century, Lumbera’s cautionary tale has returned to haunt us.

Take, for instance, the Filipino masterwork *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api* (The World of the Oppressed, Cinemasters Inc., 1965) directed by National Artist Gerardo de Leon. Released in June 1966, it was one of the films to inaugurate the first Manila Film Festival and became the first in Philippine film history to bag seven major awards at the 1966 Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences Awards (FAMAS), including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Story (Pierre Salas), Best Cinematography (Mike Accion), Best Actor (Robert Arevalo), Best Actress

(Barbara Perez), and Best Supporting Actress (Leni Alano). It bested films which are now deemed magnum opuses, such as National Artist Lamberto Avellana’s *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, Armando de Guzman’s *Iginuhit sa Buhangin* (Drawn in the Sand), and Cesar Gallardo’s *Sapang Palay*.

Where is the film now?

Ang Daigdig ng mga Api is one of the multitudes of Filipino films deplorably lost in the deserts of the Archipelago, exposed to the inclemencies of sun and rain. Only scraps and tatters remain of the cartography of Philippine film empire, a hazy testament to the realm that was. “In all the land, there is no other relic of the Disciplines of Geography” (Borges 325).

The book by Clodualdo “Doy” del Mundo, Jr. is a memoir of *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api*. A simulacrum of an absent reality, it collects whatever memories could be awakened from the dark caverns of people’s mind, and whatever images—photographs, posters—could establish the film’s materiality. It contains del Mundo’s personal account of his encounter with the film, short profiles of selected film personnel, and a narrative reconstruction of the film project, including a transcription of the extant copy of the original screen treatment by Salas, with “Israel” as its title. It was foresight on the part of Clodualdo del Mundo, Sr. to

bequeath such marvelous document to his son Doy. And more than five decades later, the junior del Mundo meticulously pieced together a history of *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api*, exhausting a multiplicity of sources that included news articles, interviews, photographs, movie ads, blogs, and the reminiscences of living actors, actresses and production staff (Robert Arevalo, Barbara Perez, Ruben Ilagan, Leni Alano, Jet del Mundo, Dik Trofeo).

Salas's lucid sequence treatment sketches the film's main narrative structure: Israel, who is taking up medicine in Manila, comes home during the summer vacation. His eyes gradually become open to the peasants' suffering under a vicious cacique system. They toil the land which they do not own. They dwell in poverty and hunger, subjugated by a landlord whose bodega overflows with rice. Israel resolves to return to Manila and shift to law, believing that a lawyer can implement policies for land reform and other measures to address the problems that plague the villages.

Del Mundo's book is adorned with still photos and behind-the-scenes images, taken by Dik Trofeo, who was de Leon's assistant director, and the stills photographer Dick Baldovino. These images are hauntingly gorgeous in black-and-white, depicting major scenes such as the burning of the pest-infested rice fields, and the procession of villagers praying for the rain. These precious photographs allow us to see through a glass, darkly; to know in part the auteur's élan of the soul.

Del Mundo's book is a substantial documentation of a vanished artwork. In addition, it fulfills a historiographic function, refashioning an alternative history for the Golden Age of Philippine cinema, such things that we cannot locate in books like the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*. We see fascinating glimpses of the film production process, the birthing of actor, and the fandom phenomenon of the 1960s. In his reminiscence, Trofeo narrated how the emergency run scene was shot; the scene where the character Inong hurriedly drives a carabao pulling a sled, where his wife lays in childbirth pain. To create a muddy effect, the crew doused the road with much water and drove a dozen carabaos to trample on the ground. Leni Alano remembered how a major sequence, the burning of the rice fields, was filmed. Two locations—in Bulacan and Laguna—were used to create one fictional setting. Jet del Mundo, elder brother of Doy, recalled how he was “discovered” and given the main role in the film; and

how he and a friend stopped by Malolos, Bulacan to watch the movie, and how the screening had to stop suddenly because he was recognized and mobbed by the fans. These, sounding like trivia stories repeated over beer and crispy pork cracklings, are nonetheless significant tatters of memories that recreate the cartography of a once-upon-a-time film empire.

Del Mundo wisely includes paratexts and contexts that enhance a colorful history for *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api*: the modelling of Filipino actors after Hollywood stars, for instance, Barbara Perez as the Audrey Hepburn of the Philippines; de Leon's other masterworks such as *Noli Me Tangere* (1961) and *El Filibusterismo* (1962) back-to-back with his B movies such as *Women in Cages* (1971) and the so-called “Blood” Criterion collection (e.g., *Blood of the Vampires*, 1966); and Cinemaster Inc.'s commissioned assignment to produce campaign films. Del Mundo reveals that, intriguingly, the project was intended to be a propaganda film for President Diosdado Macapagal who was running for re-election in November 1965, and whose political platform advocated for land reform programs. He recounts how in the hands of an auteur, the script wonderfully evolved, additional characters were developed, conflicts intensified, and scenes became more nuanced. “Israel” metamorphosed into *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api*, a tour de force of human condition and social realism. Del Mundo mentions that in an interview for *The Review* in 1981, de Leon has professed, “You see we are merely human beings, and this capacity to love is the gift of our being human. Yes, that is what I tried to convey in *Daigdig ng mga Api*” (111).

In his concluding chapter “Hopeful Remembering,” del Mundo asserts, “Nonetheless, we keep on hoping that a copy of *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api* would be found in the dilapidated projection room of an old theater or in the storage room of an archive somewhere in the world or in some forgotten corner of a garage. In the meantime, we remember...because that is the best antidote against forgetting a lost masterpiece” (122).

Del Mundo's avowal recalls us to those delightful tales of serendipitous finds: Teddy Co's successful retrieval of *Sanda Wong* (1955) from a Hong Kong warehouse; Nick Deocampo's joyful union with *Zamboanga* (1937) at the US Library of Congress; members of the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SOFIA)'s painstaking investigative work in solving the mystery of *Brides of Sulu* (1934).

To remember is to dream that the treasure is just out there, hidden but alive, pulsating with vitality. *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api: Remembering a Lost Film* beckons like a starlight in the desert sky. It summons us to value our Filipino films, to realize the importance of art documentation and historicist investigation, and even more, to establish a fully functional, properly equipped national audio-visual archive. If you build it, they will come.

Works Cited

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