

Article

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Brillante Mendoza and the Temptation of Neorealism as Style

As large parts of the world grapple with various hues of authoritarianism creeping into their political spheres, perhaps no filmmaker on the global festival circuit has found themselves as closely aligned with it in the public eye as the Filipino filmmaker Brillante Mendoza. Mendoza has staked his reputation on an unanticipated alliance with Rodrigo Duterte's regime and its 'drug war'. Not only has he worked on two State of the Nation address by Duterte, but has also presented his television series *Amo*, whose global distribution rights were bought by Netflix, as a "neutral" look at a "necessary drug war." It is generally believed that the toll of vigilante killings as part of Duterte's campaign could be well over thirty thousand.

If nothing else, Mendoza's case is a rare challenge from within to the reputation of global neorealism as a cinema of humanism, however loosely defined. Mendoza describes his filmmaking as neorealist and I will discuss his filmmaking below but, taking this claim

at face value for now, his case deserves some very brief contextualizing in the history of neorealist bodies of work. Global neo-realisms have never been apolitical, but they have generally been seen as departing from repressive state ideologies. (The rider here is that a lot of film movements that fall under this banner have been set in motion through various state-funded initiatives by all sorts of regimes and, as has been argued in the case of Indian art cinema of the 1970s, may have been aligned with specific kinds of state ideological programs.)

In a way, though, Mendoza has dared to emulate the seminal neo-realist instance, that of postwar Italy, wherein neorealism was for a brief while aligned with the state program of reconstruction. Films of De Sica and Rossellini would, at least nominally, had screenwriters distributed across the ideological spectrum, from Catholics to Communists, before the boom made this body of work dispensable for the state. The key difference, of course, is

that where postwar Italian state was briefly an ideological open ground, present-day Philippine state, like a few others, thrives on ideological confusion to push through an almost anarchic politics.



Where Mendoza joins the Italian filmmakers is in stepping into a live moment of crisis to participate in a program for the complete reconstruction of the body politic. But, as I will argue, what his body of work also reveals, as a counterexample, is that neorealism was never merely a style but about urgent attempts to ground some contested, uncertain perspective into the sensorium of everyday life. And Mendoza has struggled over his career to find such perspectives for his style to work with. I will not be arguing that there was already something in his work that hid a clear fascination with Duterte-style political programs for Filipino society. Rather, I will suggest that there is a vacancy to his work that is only intermittently filled with a committed perspective, political or not, that transcends the superficially ethnographic.

Mendoza is a celebrated filmmaker who, along with some other such as Lav Diaz, Khavn and Adolfo Alix, Jr., is part of the current generation of independent Filipino filmmakers who have gained some recognition on the film-festival circuit. Of these, Mendoza is the one who has been supported by Cannes, a festival that, as is well known, uses its main competition to reward films that could possibly stage market “breakthroughs” for art cinema. On this front, Mendoza promised more than the others among his Filipino peers. His hand-held

camera work and a focus on the underbelly of Manila, often with an eye on headline events, offers an urgency and accessibility that Diaz’s hypnotically long works, unmoving camera and very-long takes do not.

This recognition has surely played a role in the few instances when the Filipino state’s appeals to Mendoza to take up a project on some subject of national significance. In 2015, for example, he released *Taklub* [*Trap*], a fiction set around the impact of Typhoon Haiyan on parts of the Philippines. Mendoza developed the project in response to a state department’s proposal to him to make a film on the effects of climate change. Similarly, he has been invited twice to shoot Duterte’s State of the Nation address and has lent support to the latter’s drugs policy. What I am interested in probing here are the continuities and discontinuities between Mendoza’s films and *Amo* as well as a feature film that released alongside *Amo* and which goes over similar ground as the series.

Mendoza has taken up narratives centered around the drug trade before Duterte came to power. The most talked about is *Kinatay* (2009) which won the Best Director award at Cannes, even as it left critics fulminating at the film’s provocations. As in other Mendoza films dealing with the subject, the characters *Kinatay* is interested in are those at the lowest rungs of the drug trade: the runners and the small market vendors who sell the product on the side. Here, though, it charts the initiation of a student of criminology, Peping, with already a family to support, into drugs-related organized violence. Without quite realizing what he is getting into, he assists a group of musclemen in the abduction, rape, murder, and finally the dismemberment of a prostitute who has run up unpayable debts with the local drug lord. On the way back into the city, her body parts are dropped at different locations, and a queasy Peping returns to his wife and baby.

It is the dispassionate look that the camera trains on the elaborately gruesome final act that has been upsetting to many viewers. At a time when spluttering gore had already become normalized, but in the camp mode, through a large swathe of American screen production—even in television fare such as *The Sopranos*—Mendoza might have been expecting a celebration of his film's capacity to restore horror to screen violence, a horror that one could not chuckle one's way out of. If so, this reveals a severe misunderstanding at the heart of Mendoza's conception of his own work.



Mendoza tries to play to a template of cinematic realism derived from the Direct Cinema aesthetics of a Fredrick Wiseman documentary. He aspires to pass his camera for an objective, even neutral, observer. He sometimes describes his filmmaking style as 'guerilla'. But the fact is that for all its shaky camera movement and rootedness in the landscape of Manila, Mendoza's camera presence is very classical. It rarely gives the sense of being taken by surprise; the action it captures is deftly choreographed and edited, and in *Kinatay* it is closely aligned with the perspective of Peping. But rather than accept this quality, his films attempt to give an impression of being not directly implicated in the narrative and its consequences. And often the burden for conveying this supposed detachment falls on characters not developed beyond the immediate circumstances in which they appear, and an impassivity in performance.

The fly-on-the-wall quality that Mendoza aspires for only ever works even in documenta-

ry through an undeniable exchange that such documentaries' subjects have with the supposedly invisible camera. In Wiseman's films, for example, the callousness or the incompetence of the institutions and their representatives he records is never as much of a surprise as is how little they think of letting themselves be recorded at their most callous and incompetent, as if mocking our belief that there is anything to be learnt by recording them. The famous scene in his *Law and Order* (1969) where a white policeman holds a black woman in a chokehold is remarkable for the way in which the policeman, in a dark space, deliberately places her in front of a light source accompanying the camera for the latter to record his action with all the clarity it can summon.

It is in this context that we must understand the utter futility of the disgust that Mendoza manages to evoke through *Kinatay*. Mendoza would like to present the butchery with all the shock of a discovery dispassionately recorded, but the effect is rather that of a smug demiurge who has led us to a well-prepared shock device; that is, in terms of the example from Wiseman's film, Mendoza figures here more like the cop performing the chokehold for the camera rather than the cameraperson who happened to catch the act on the fly. The result is that he cannot claim to share in the shock that he administers, and that distracts from whatever the purported objective is of this probing of violence related to the drug trade.

Mendoza's best work, of the films of his that I have been able to watch, appears in *Lola* (2009) where his style finds its purpose in characters and crises that have a value independent of any value Mendoza places on capturing something on-the-fly. Two grandmothers crisscross Manila in the aftermath of an incident their grandsons, one of whom has killed the other in a cell-phone robbery gone wrong. This incident has already occurred by the time the film starts, and the opening scene

is of a frail old woman, the grandmother who lost her grandson, attempting to light a candle in his memory on a blustery day... with another of her grandsons by her side.

The realism that Mendoza vaunts derives its value only from any resonance that the irony of a frail, old body mourning for the young might have. It is a cliché, if you will, as are almost all subjects. The patient realism enhances the resonance of the irony by putting the body of the actress Anita Linda up against a range of physical obstacles like the wind in the opening sequence, the staircase of an office building in another, and so on, as her character goes about arranging money for the funeral as well as preparing for the trial. But at no point can one say that what we *see* is all there is to it. Not just this irony, but the eventual negotiation between the families for a pardon raises the moral and emotional stakes of the drama. Outside of *Lola*, and parts of *Ma' Rosa* (2016) and *Serbis* (2008), Mendoza's realism constantly runs up against the limits of a surface material reality. And nowhere does this happen more than in his films dealing with the subject of drugs, starting with *Kinatay*.

Ma' Rosa came out the year Duterte came to power but was conceived well before that. Here, we see the eponymous character and her husband Nestor picked up by the police for selling drugs out of the tiny corner store run from their house. The set-up makes us familiar with the communal or shared space that is the locality in which Rosa and her family live. The cops, instead of booking Rosa and Nestor, try to get a hefty bribe out of them. Since they cannot afford the amount, they agree to turn in their dealer who might be able to. When the latter falls short of a part of the amount, Rosa's children and then Rosa herself try to raise the amount. The daughter is sent to approach an estranged family member, while the younger son meets up with an older man who pays him for sex. Rosa musters up the last bits by pawning the daughter's smartphone.

Ma' Rosa is brilliant at spatially constructing the cosmos of a neighborhood and that of a police station, the two bordering and crossing into each other, but distinct. What it adds to other Mendoza films from which the neighborhoods like the one in this film are very familiar is the evocation of the police station as lived-in space, where the business of ransoming and assaulting suspects happens alongside the exchange of meals, changing in and out of uniform, and the toing-and-froing of not only policemen of various ranks but also handymen, including children, who seem like regular inhabitants of the space without in any way being a part of the force. Suspects can be attended to sporadically, but firmly, but could also be almost forgotten about in between. This is important because they are often not formally under arrest, so detained off the books. At one point, as Rosa and Nestor wait for the money to be arranged, Rosa is given the task of mopping the floor.

But as the fascination with the quasi-ethnographic qualities of the film wears off, the film only sporadically goes beyond it in glancing at personal equations within the family and the neighborhood, and in a final moment where Rosa, over a hastily grabbed snack of fish balls and a moment by herself on the way to station to pay the remainder amount, seems to contemplate the difficulties that will begin only as the payoff has been arranged. It also a little too ominously suggests that the chain of such corruption goes to the top as we trail a policeman's walk from the back room where suspects are illegally detained to the office of a higher ranking official in the main building. And this brings us to *Amo*.

The television series is quite an anomaly in Mendoza's resumé. It uses some of the stylistic features—a handheld camera, an impassive acting style—and is partly set in the same milieu—that of the urban underclass of Manila—as in his features, but tries to slicken it in the hope of a broader audience: more Ram

Gopal Verma than De Sica. The most obvious part of this is the use of hip-hop music on the soundtrack, which is tethered to visuals of a group performing those songs on the sidelines of the narrative, commenting a too literally on it. Maybe I am missing something by not knowing Tagalog and relying on subtitles, but the results are unintentionally comical. It is as if all that denial of psychology in the rest of his work has spilled out in one go in this series.

The first half of the series follows a high school student Joseph Molina as he runs drugs in the neighborhood for local suppliers. He does this in the midst of the crackdown authorized by Duterte, who appears on television screens at various points. Joseph manages to avoid arrest and worse due to the intervention of his policeman uncle, Camilo Molina. Joseph's motivations are hinted at in the earnest manner in which he attends to his paralyzed father who is a former cop: a hard-up family. But the focus is more on the gang violence, the brutal initiation sessions for young runners, and their use of the drug war as cover for murder that they chalk up against the state. As Joseph rises through the ranks with the help of his brother-in-law, we are given another voyeuristic tour of Manila society, but this time of the decadent upper-middle classes. It all ends badly, of course.

Just as the series seems to set up an opposition between honest cops and the criminal scene, its second half shifts the focus to corruption within the police department. Fictionalizing the 2016 kidnap and murder of a South Korean businessman by policemen associated with the narcotics division of the Philippines police, it appears to offer an indictment of the police department in the anti-drugs campaign. Except that it is also a reminder that Duterte has not pitched his campaign on the efficiency of the police but on the mandate, *he* has almost personally given them. They need that mandate from him because by itself the police

force has not been able to address the issue effectively for so long. Corruption is to be expected, but it can only be stemmed at the very top.



The general paradox, almost a prerequisite, of a police state is that the police itself is not immune to suspicion and so needs surveillance like everyone else. And *Amo* plays upon the fact that people who rationalize an authoritarian implementation of an ideological mandate are not likely to be committed to state institutions in themselves. Therefore, critique of an institution cannot be confused with critique of the regime. We find further evidence of this in the current Philippine context in the American documentary, *On the President's Order* (2019), whose producers were given access to the Caloocan police department and its new chief appointed by Duterte to rein in the number of killings while temporarily scaling back the campaign. But, after a brief lull, as the violence is unleashed again, the same chief is sacked for the rising body count.

Above all, though, *Amo* is a transparent exercise in apologetics for the regime aimed at the international critics of the regime. Every press conference has reporters asking about the departmental response to these critics and their allegations of human rights abuse, as if Filipino journalists are not themselves concerned about this. The answer is always along the lines of "how much can you do to convince them." In the end, *Amo* is so transparently a PR exercise that Mendoza seems to have decided to make a film for himself simultaneously. (Perhaps an indication of how little he cares in *Amo* can be seen in a sequence where

a cop speaks on a phone held upside down, as can be seen from the screen in close-up.)

Alpha: The Right to Kill (2018) appears to have been made between breaks on location while shooting for *Amo*: many of the same actors and a scaled down look at police corruption, focusing on a single officer, but without the glitz demanded by the market for *Amo*. Here is a film that he could hope to slot into his festival filmography. The only striking thing about this film is the bizarre ending wherein the corrupt cop is shot dead by two helmeted men on a motorbike, the signature modus operandi of many of the vigilante killings as part of the anti-drug campaign. This incident leaves us with a well-calculated ambiguity.

The cop had just killed the pusher through whom he used to sell drugs stolen from crime scenes. He does so because he comes to know that this pusher is about to be found out by the police. Now then, who were those killers: assassins sent by drug dealers or one of those non-uniformed “death squads” that have become identified with Duterte’s regime? For someone already sold on Duterte’s program, it does not matter. If sent by drug mafia, this is “evidence” of the drug violence that is tearing Filipino society apart; if a death squad, then evidence that nothing escapes the extra-judicial mechanisms put in place by the regime, even as the police department has to officially observe the farce of a ceremonial funeral for a corrupt cop. Indeed, there is a vague hint in *Amo* that the only non-corruptible entity is

the death squad. We see it briefly as it lands upon drug users identified by an informer and shoots them without any preliminaries.

In the end, though, it really is not a question of whether Mendoza stands with Duterte or not. He claims that he has worked for other regimes too, and only because he is interested in engaging with subjects of importance. It is doubtful that *Amo* or *Alpha* will serve to justify Duterte to anyone who is not already sold on him. But Mendoza’s overall example serves to show the limits of a consecrated realist aesthetic as merely style rather than an expressive commitment. All that he has to offer is style as a vessel that will float with or without substantial expressive or ideological baggage. If this regime or another wants to hire it for their purposes, he is happy to rent it out for the occasion.

In one of his interviews, Mendoza has said that his career in advertising (he started making films only at the age of 45) has taught him to be satisfied with less than ideal results while shooting. He was referring to his quick methods of working, but I think it applies as much to his search for expression. What is important to him is that he keep making films and to make them with his chosen methods; if he sometimes does not know or care what they amount to, too bad, but not good enough to stop him. We might be tempted to take a dig at advertising here, but that would be a disservice to the many past and present filmmakers who cut their teeth in advertising.

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