

A Film, a Moment

Marian Pastor Roces (Philippines)

Art Critic / Curator / President, TAO Inc. / ALFP 2003 Fellow

To describe the nexus between artmaking and society at this juncture of Philippine history, I can do no better than focus on a single film.

In the jargon of the moment, it is an indie. It was produced and directed by individuals in their 20s and 30s, as are the actors, notably including a child performing a leading role. It is a low-budget production meant for participation in the 2018 edition of Cinemalaya, the decade-old, annual independent film festival staged by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) precisely for low-budget, edgy, young projects that do not tend to be distributed on the commercial film circuit. Cinemalaya itself represents a successful turn in the direction of fulsome youth power in Philippine art. But in the indie film entitled *Liway*, Cinemalaya yielded up a singularity: a movie that, so to speak, lances a historical wound to ease a terrible inflammation.

It is necessary to describe the movie, however, not to heap praise; rather, to recognize and relish it as the moment art trumped the historical revisionism that has been relentlessly at play in the Philippines for about half a decade. The movie also represents the moment it was possible to grasp the elusive idea that perhaps only art can piercingly trump historical revisionism.

“Liway” was the nom de guerre of the title character, a commander of the Leftist underground army during the last few years—in the first half of the 1980s—of the martial rule of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Among other indelible passages, the movie follows a pregnant and armed Kumander Liway captured after a battle that had killed close comrades. Liway and her husband, also an anti-government guerilla, were incarcerated in a military camp. They raised their second son in this jail where the child was born, among other political prisoners. The narrative shadows the tension between Liway, who conveyed hope to her son (named Dakip, “To Capture”) through fleeting moments of imaginative play, and her husband, who wished the son to understand hopelessness. The son was nearly a teen when the family, enlarged by a third child, a daughter, was released upon the fall of the Marcos regime. Finally free, Dakip apparently inherited Liway’s imagination.

The audience at the premiere erupted in over-the-top exuberance when the final credits said that funding for the movie was partially from the financial reparations given Liway and family from the successful prosecution of a legal suit accusing Ferdinand Marcos of human rights violations. The audience fairly exploded in a paroxysm of joy at learning at the end that the neophyte director is Dakip; and that he, now called Kip, has indeed inherited his mother’s enduring capacity for wonderment. Shouted chants of the vintage 1970s “Marcos, Hitler, Dictador, Tuta!” street rally mantra—and an instantly recognizable Left coinage—filled the nearly 2000-seat CCP Main Theater, ringing from the orchestra pit to the heights of the parterre boxes and the cavernous volume of the building built in 1969 at the instance of the dictator’s wife Imelda.

The premiere was indeed held inside the iconic building that has since the 1970s been the Philippines' archetypal sign of Marcos ambition. CCP has carried on operationally since the 1986 People Power revolt, and has recalibrated its sense of mission to align with post-Martial Law political developments. This brief essay does not allow a policy and program review of the current CCP. It can be argued, however, that Cinemalaya is easily its current pivotal contribution to the country's art field.

But it is another matter entirely to experience the chorus of "Never Again!" to dictatorship within the CCP's now worn theater for the performing arts. For the thousands present, the chants were cathartic. Emanating from that red-upholstered theater/cave, waves of dissent oozed out—in the imagination at least—into a Philippines ruled by a new tyrant who has explicitly visited death on alleged substance abuse suspects who allegedly resisted arrest. This country, which does not apply the death penalty, has seen as many as 27,000 deaths in the current president's "War on Drugs," clearly a terror strategy to cow objection to autocratic rule. The emergence of this 21st century tyrant was enabled in large measure by plundered Marcos money and the machinations of the Marcos children to return to power—their techniques majorly involving systematic and shockingly successful social media use for historical revisionism.

The slick messages hypnotize targeted youth into construing the Martial Law years as a cultural and economic golden age, and Marcos as a benevolent leader who did not preside over the torture and murder of political activists. The Communist rebellion peaked during this mid-20th century Marcos dictatorship, and it was then that poor families—such as Kumander Liway's—saw armed revolution as the rightful response to the extreme social inequality produced by the overcentralization of power. By 1986, when Marcos and his family and allies were removed by a broad range of anti-dictatorship actors during four days culminating decades of resistance, it seemed in the euphoria of the moment that the Philippines was inoculated against any will to tyranny. Too many of us were naïve.

Until the *Liway* premiere, the current assault on accurate accounts of the Marcos years has seemed inexorable. Without a war chest for fact-checking and media literacy campaigns, a rosy memory of Martial Law continues to be conjured. In this environment of lies, mass murder and unprecedented corruption can be normalized; and naturalized. During its premiere, *Liway* momentarily cut through today's tangled ecosystems of deceptions. It is a young movie, and its makers will learn greater sophistication of technique in time. But it is no matter that critics will find bones to pick. *Liway's* telling crossed the generations with an education in truth.

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.