

## The Turn to Digital: Revival of Film Culture in the Philippines

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### **Abstract**

This paper will trace the digital development of cinema in the Philippines primarily its transition from celluloid. 2006 has been a crucial year in this period as digital films have overtaken celluloid films in terms of production output and aesthetic recognition, which in turn has given a shot in the arm to what many practitioners and scholars perceive as a dying industry. Digital technology has changed the way we produce, distribute and market Filipino movies. Case studies include a major studio (Viva Films), a National Artist for Film (Eddie Romero) and exhibition venues (mall-type theaters like those of Shoemart) embracing the new medium. This paper will also attempt to content analyze three recent digital Filipino films; Paolo Villaluna and Ellen Ramos' *Ilusyon* (Illusion) Mike Sandejas' *Tulad ng Dati* (Just like Before) and Aureus Solito's *Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros) using arguments developed from Christian Metz's idea of the "super-genre" film.

The much-debated “crisis of Philippine cinema” began in late 2000 when the steadily dropping box office returns of Filipino films, the currency devaluation brought on by the Asian economic crisis, and prohibitive government taxation (30% of a film’s profits go to the national amusement tax) caused the industry to flounder against the tickets sales of Hollywood fare. Film financing in the Philippines has been hit hard over the last five years. Records from the government’s Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) show a decline in the number of films made from over a hundred a year down to a handful (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Celluloid films produced from 2000 to 2006 in the Philippines

Year	No. of Films Produced
2006	7
2005	8
2004	55
2003	68
2002	79
2001	93
2000	110

However, the advent of affordable digital video cameras and the prospect of making films inexpensively and independent of the big studios have generated a lot of excitement in the Philippine film scene. Whereas traditional filmmaking requires huge investments in film stock alone, digital movie making is possible for a fraction of the usual production budget. Therefore many Filipino filmmakers have, by themselves or with the support of the grant-giving bodies like the Cinemalaya festival or the Cinema One competition, started making movies without relying on the resources of mainstream production companies. The output of digital films from these two organizations alone have overtaken the commercial celluloid output in the Philippines for 2005 and 2006 (see Figure 2) with a total of 23 films as of this writing.

Figure 2. Digital Films by Cinemalaya and CinemaOne

	2005	2006
Cinemalaya	<i>Pepot Artista</i> <i>Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros</i> <i>ICU Bed #7</i> <i>Big Time</i> <i>Baryoke</i> <i>Roomboy</i> <i>Laspongols</i> <i>Sarong Banggi</i> <i>Isnats</i>	<i>Ang Huling Araw ng Linggo</i> <i>Batad, sa Paang Palay</i> <i>Donsol</i> <i>In da Red Korner</i> <i>Mudraks</i> <i>Rotonda</i> <i>Saan Nagtatago si Happiness?</i> <i>Tulad ng Dati</i>
CinemaOne	<i>Sitak</i> <i>Sa North Diversion Road</i> <i>Anak ng Tinapa</i> <i>Dilim</i> <i>Sandalang Bahay</i> <i>Ang Anak ni Brocka</i>	[6 films currently in production]

*Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros), in particular, has reaped critical acclaim all over the world, including a nomination for the 2006 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, the first Filipino film to ever do so. Moreover, 2006 was dubbed as the “year of the Filipino digital feature film” (Torre D3) as digital films have trounced commercially-produced celluloid films in almost every category at the Urian awards (see Figure 3), widely regarded as the Filipino version of the Oscars.

Figure 3. Urian Awardees for 2006

Best Movie - *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* \*

Best Direction - Mes de Guzman, *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong* \*

Best Screenplay - Michiko Yamamoto, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* \*

Best Actress - Jaclyn Jose, *Sarong Banggi* \*

Best Actor - Robin Padilla, *La Visa Loca*

Best Supporting Actress - Hilda Koronel, *Nasaan Ka Man*

Best Supporting Actor - Ketchup Eusebio, *Sa Aking Pagkakagising Mula sa Kamulatan \**

Best Production Design - Mes de Guzman, *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong \**

Best Cinematography - Nap Jamir III, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros \**

Best Editing - Clarence Sison and Kanakan Balintagos, *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros \**

Best Music - Vincent de Jesus, *La Visa Loca*

Best Sound - Raffy Magsaysay, *Big Time \**

*\* Digital Film*

With the launch of digital cinema, the Philippine film industry is facing a revolutionary upheaval which has created a major impact on its modes of production, distribution and exhibition.

## **Production**

The digitization of the cinema permits filmmakers to a level of artistic control previously unattainable in film. Digital cinema can tell us traditional stories in new ways, or force us to think about narrative in completely new terms. The transition from celluloid to digital video is still in process, in an industry where creative goals are always balanced against economic necessity. But by working with digital data instead of chemical celluloid, filmmakers can edit scenes together and alter images with much greater ease and lower cost.

The availability of affordable filmmaking equipment for a lot of people means getting out there and making a film, is within their reach. Critics like Baumgärtel may argue that this will result in a surplus of no-budget, poorly made films and this is undeniably true. As Melvin Van Peebles mentioned: “Let’s go back to the most primitive technology. Everybody can talk, but that doesn’t mean some people aren’t boring.” But on the other hand, it will allow a generation of future filmmakers to practice their skills and develop their talent within the safety of their home, rather than on the set of a multi-million peso movie. The accessibility of the means of filmmaking, is possible with this single most significant aspect of the “digital revolution” but it is not limited to first-time filmmakers and amateurs.

Many experienced professionals are turning to digital for a number of reasons. 80 year old National artist for Film Eddie Romero was able to take advantage of the cheapness of the technology to finance and make his first digital feature *Nasaan ang Pagibig?* (Where is the Love?). In an interview, he said that he views digital movies as a venue for directors taking on untried subject matters that big studios would rather not touch. A concrete example of such film is *Sarong Banggi* (One Night) written and directed by UFO picture's Emmanuel Dela Cruz who concurrently is also a part of Star Cinema's Writers' Pool. A few years ago, Dela Cruz had the vision of making a film showing the Bicolano culture but knew there was no way that Star Cinema would finance such movie. With the Cultural Center's Cinemalaya grant in 2005, the accessibility of the equipment had enabled Dela Cruz to realize his vision. This is just one case where digital technology, in enabling the filmmaker to overcome financial obstacles, has given a cinematic voice to an otherwise unrepresented culture.

In addition to facilitating the creation of movies by new or disadvantaged filmmakers, the affordability of digital technology is leading to new ways of filmmaking. Where previously, the costs were prohibitive of the number of takes and the amount of footage shot, the minimal costs of digital videotape is seeing a radical change in the way a film is shot. A 150-peso digital videotape compared to the development and printing costs means that the director doesn't have to be happy with second best, he or she can do the take one more time in the pursuit of perfection or experiment with shooting the take in a slightly different way. These takes can also be fitted into similar length shooting schedules because of the less time it takes to set up the shot.

Digitization is similarly good news for most of the actors who have enjoyed the freedom of shooting digitally. The most significant aspect of this is the diminishing presence of the camera. With many directors filming rehearsals and more takes, there is less of a separation between before and after the director cries "action." Together with the smaller size of the digital cameras and in some cases a number of different cameras shooting simultaneously, actors are finding that they are no longer able, or no longer have to, act for the camera and that the presence of the camera and filmmaker is easy to forget.

The freedom to improvise and experiment with their performances without the pressure of “getting it right” for the take is also a benefit. As the veteran actor Eddie Garcia in Rica Arevalo’s *ICU Bed #7* says:

Every time someone you were interacting with changed their character, you ended up changing yours to meld in or conflict better. We were trying out new things all the time and it was a really beautiful and completely different way of working.

It has already been noted that there is a growing difference for actors between shooting conventionally and digitally. A situation which could possibly lead to a new generation of “digital” actors, at home with the freedom and flexibility of shooting digitally.

In two scenes in particular from *Kubrador* (The Bet Collector), the first digital film by Jeffrey Jeturian, the flexibility of shooting digitally was exploited to improve the performances. One is where the character is hallucinating and exhausted, wandering endlessly around a depressed area. To achieve the highest performance they were able to continue shooting for five hours inflicting the very characteristics on the actor. Later on, on the same shoot they were able to use the flexibility of digital to take advantage of an actual event (all souls day) in a cemetery and shoot a *verité* scene with the actors physically brushing against real people. Whether or not the greater freedom to repeat takes will result in less attention being paid to preparation and the adrenalin that getting it right for the one take brings will remain to be seen, but the advantages of liberation and freedom for the actors are indisputable.

In addition to moving the power from the financier to the filmmaker and lifting restrictions, digital technology is having an effect on film style itself. Most noticeably, the lightweight, portable cameras are at last providing the most flexible and versatile cameras possible. As Eddie Romero spoke of his earlier dreams, he now had a “camera with wings.”

Other filmmakers are also taking advantage of the digital cameras’ flexibility and ease of use. Take the case of the final showdown scene in *Tulad ng Dati* (Just like Before) where the band “The Dawn” was playing. Director Michael Sandejas used five cameras simultaneously

taking from different angles for greater coverage and to facilitate easier non-diegetic audio synching during post production. The unusual nature of the collated footage is reminiscent of some of the Soviet Montage editing by the likes of Eisenstein, except that in this case, they were able to capture the material in far fewer takes.

It is apparent that digital technology is not only changing the technical side of film production, it is also bringing with it new approaches to filmmaking. In allowing an unprecedented freedom of expression it is giving filmmakers the time and liberty to experiment with many aspects of filmmaking and not since the coming of sound has film culture had such an opportunity to evolve and reinvent itself. With the advent of digital technology the opportunities within the medium are huge, as we are breaking into the second century of cinema.

### **Distribution**

Digital technologies have also revolutionized the distribution sector of the film industry. The ubiquitous nature of the internet and the opportunities it present for a global audience have seen a rise in the use of the Internet as a platform for marketing, not just for major studios but also for smaller filmmakers (Alfonso).

Mario Cornejo launched [www.arkeofilms.com](http://www.arkeofilms.com) to promote *Big Time*. It was an online venue where one can download its trailer, read articles and other facts about the film, or browse through its picture gallery. Similar to its publicity approach was Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil's <<http://www.pusanggala.com>> (currently inactive) showing the synopsis of the digital film *Pusang Gala* (Stray Cats) and screening schedules locally and abroad.

Because of the relative ease of transferring digital movies to digital versatile disc (DVD) or video compact disc (VCD) format for distribution purposes, one of the major studios Viva Films established a subsidiary digital arm aptly called Digital Viva in 2004. It created a new pathway into the industry, giving previously independent filmmaker Jon Red to break into the industry with *Astigmatism* as its initial offering followed by Mowelfund's Paolo Villaluna and Ellen Ramos' *Ilusyon* (Illusion) in 2005. Each film was funded by Digital Viva with a shoe

string budget of 900,000 pesos (18,000 US dollars). The filmmakers were given total creative independence provided that the cast must come from Viva's pool of stars. Rival major studios such as Star Cinema and Seiko have also jumped on the digital bandwagon, acquiring local distribution rights to *Maximo* and Cris Pablo's *Bathhouse* respectively.

Digital films do not star glamorous and big-budget stars like Sharon Cuneta, Judy Ann Santos, Jericho Rosales and Piolo Pascual. But the digital films have made it possible for less well-known but talented actors and actresses to shine. In particular, they have put outstanding performers on the legitimate stage like Irma Adlawan (*Pusang Gala*), Bodgie Pascua (*Pagdadalaga Ni Maximo Oliveros*) and Jamie Wilson (*Big Time*) in the limelight.

### **Exhibition**

The final battleground of digital technology vis-à-vis celluloid is the recent acquisition of SM and Robinson's Malls of their respective digital projectors. Digital Films can now be played and shown directly from disc or tape, bypassing the expensive 35mm kinescope transfer. Malls command majority of the movie theaters in the Philippines and this movement to digital exhibition is a welcome development for digitization.

Another factor not to be overlooked is the integration of film appreciation courses into collegiate programs all over the country. This huge student audience is potentially the biggest market for alternative digital films. If digital films could win over the student audience, their producers would not have to depend on financing from the traditional financiers who do not want to put their money on what they call "risky" productions.

### **Implications and New Directions**

Most discussions of cinema in the digital age have focused on the possibilities of the interactive narrative. This is obvious since the majority of viewers and scholars equate cinema with storytelling, digital media is understood as something which will let cinema tell its stories in a new way. Yet as exciting as the ideas of a viewer participating in a story, choosing different



paths through the narrative space and interacting with characters may address one aspect of cinema which is neither unique nor, as many will argue, essential to it, which is the narrative.

The challenge which digital media poses to cinema however extends far beyond the issue of narrative. Digital media redefines the very identity of cinema. Andre Bazin's assertion of realism in film is now provocatively equated with flat images projected on a screen. Today one can "enter" a virtual three-dimensional space, and given enough time and money, almost everything can be simulated in a computer, to film physical reality is just one possibility. This "crisis" of cinema's identity also affects the terms and the categories used to theorize cinema's past. French film theorist Christian Metz wrote in the 1970s that "Most films shot today, good or bad, original or not, 'commercial' or not, have as a common characteristic that they tell a story; in this measure they all belong to one and the same genre, which is, rather, a sort of 'super-genre.'"

In identifying fictional films as a "super-genre" of twentieth century cinema, Metz did not bother to mention another characteristic of this genre because at that time it was too obvious: fictional films are live action films, i.e. they largely consist of unmodified photographic recordings of real events which took place in real physical space. Today, in the age of computer simulation and digital compositing, invoking this characteristic becomes crucial in defining the specificity of twentieth century cinema. From the perspective of a future historian of visual culture, the differences between classical Hollywood films, European art films and avant-garde films (apart from abstract ones) may appear less significant than this common feature: that they relied on lens-based recordings of reality.

During cinema's history, a whole repertoire of techniques (lighting, art direction, the use of different film stocks and lens, etc.) was developed to modify the basic record obtained by a film apparatus. And yet behind even the most stylized cinematic images we can discern the bluntness, the sterility, the banality of early nineteenth century photographs. No matter how complex its stylistic innovations, the cinema has found its base in these deposits of reality, these samples obtained by a methodical and prosaic process. Cinema emerged out of the same impulse

which engendered naturalism, court stenography and wax museums. Cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint.

What happens to cinema's indexical identity if it is now possible to generate photorealistic scenes entirely in a computer using 3-D computer animation; to modify individual frames or whole scenes with the help a digital paint program; to cut, bend, stretch and stitch digitized film images into something which has perfect photographic credibility, although it was never actually filmed?

The directions which were closed off at the turn of the century when cinema came to dominate the modern moving image culture are now again beginning to be explored. Moving image culture is being redefined once again; cinematic realism is being displaced from being its dominant mode to become only one option among many.

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