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## **Our Men in Manila: The Secret Agent Film Craze of the 1960s in the Philippine Postcolonial Imagination**

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MICHAEL G. HAWKINS

# **Our Men in Manila** **The Secret Agent** **Film Craze of** **the 1960s in the** **Philippine Postcolonial** **Imagination**

Suave and sophisticated in the service of the nation, the secret agents who dominated Filipino film culture in the late 1960s were men in command of their times. Although derided by critics as not truly Filipino, merely crass copies of foreign fare, this article asserts that these cinematic secret agents were necessary heroes deeply and triumphantly engaged with the trials and possibilities of the postcolonial age. These Filipino James Bonds offered bracing pathways for imagining a hip and virile Filipino masculinity, a modern nation secure against the threats of the Cold War era, and a culture holding the lingering colonial influence of the United States under its sway.

**KEYWORDS: SECRET AGENTS • PHILIPPINE CINEMA • POSTCOLONIAL • MASCULINITY • TONY FERRER**

Our hero successfully defended the Philippines against the evil schemes of counterfeiters, communists, and drug lords. These enemies of democracy were no match for this intrepid secret agent. He once thwarted an attempt to assassinate the president. In pursuit of saboteurs and assassins, he dangled from helicopters, leapt across buildings, and raced down the narrow back alleys of Manila in his bulletproof sports car. Whether locked in a deadly speedboat chase with a drug lord, a karate battle with a foreign operative, or a shoot-out with kidnappers, his pompadour always remained perfectly in place, his sharkskin suit impeccable. With his skills, cunning, and the latest in crime fighting technology, he was always ahead of the villains. The ladies adored him, especially those tanned blondes from the United States, but he was sure to keep those seductresses at a distance for fear they might be double agents. He battled the forces seeking to undermine his country's future and promise. He was the Filipino James Bond—but was he really Filipino?

### **“Whither goes Hollywood, thither goes the Philippines?”**

Of the many celluloid images in the era of independent productions that sprouted after the decline of the Philippine studio system in the early 1960s, perhaps no figure inspired more contempt from critics than the Filipino secret agent. For those aspiring to a national cinema that would reflect the true spirit and essence of the Filipino, the secret agent genre represented all that was corrupt in Philippine cinema and the nation. Critics blasted these films as embarrassing and indisputable evidence of the industry's dearth of creativity, crass commercialism, and hopeless tendency to mimic foreign forms and themes. At the onset of this genre, journalist Corazon U. Cruz (1965, 57) specifically pointed to secret agent films as “prime specimens of the copycat mentality of local producers, who are ever watchful of the box-office trends set here by Hollywood or other foreign films.” As this cycle began to enjoy increased popularity and success, critic Ricardo C. Sia (1966, 51) pointed to this “invasion of the secret agents” as proof that “Our screen story writers are a sad lot. If there's one thing they lack it's originality. It seems that all a scriptwriter has to do to come up with a story is to go see a foreign made-film [sic]. His plot is borrowed or adopted from that film.”

For these detractors, the fact that audiences poured into theaters to watch the latest exploits of yet another super spy reflected a deeply ingrained

“colonial mentality.” Filipino moviegoers for too long had been held captive by Hollywood-inspired dreams and now identified with screen heroes foreign to their actual experiences. Assessing the local movie industry in 1964, specifically its newfound zeal for turning out cowboy pictures and carbon copies of James Bond, Wilfredo D. Nollado (1964, 42) declared, “Whither goes Hollywood, thither goes the Philippines.” For Nollado, Tagalog movies were the product of “miscegenation” between Hollywood and the Philippines, the ugly offspring of this “unholy pair” who long ago, “according to colonial rites, were pronounced man and wife.” With such polluted origins, rooted in the larger experience of American colonialism, Philippine cinema seemed bound to produce and consume the inapt and outlandish.

However, the ubiquity of these foreign agents could also spawn pathways to imagining a true and authentic national cinema built out of a true and authentic national essence. In accessing the 1967 Manila Film Festival, the second year of the event in which only “Filipino” films were to be shown in Manila's theaters (but featured many Philippine-American coproductions along with at least seven secret agent films), film scholar T. D. Agcaoili (1967, 24) lamented much of the festival fare and asserted,

The Filipino film indeed needs to be Filipinized, to be divested of its extraneous qualities such as secret agent exploits, cowboy themes, and uninformed Japanese occupation war stories. It has to turn inward to the life that runs, throbs and vibrates in the Filipino heart, the life that is lived in the Filipino home, with all its warmth and conflicts, its fears and visions, with all of life's mainstreams and cross-currents as influenced, conditioned, and affected by individual characters, social heritage, environment and social forces, primordial instincts, acquired knowledge, experience, and new insights.

A year later, Agcaoili (1968, 17) repeated his call for a genuine Philippine cinema marked by the absence of these derivative secret agent potboilers in stating, “If nationalism were used as a theme, then possibly some significant Filipino movies depicting the real nature and spirit of Philippine life and aspirations would be produced by serious film-makers, instead of the spurious war movies, the imitation of James Bond secret agent films and the bogus Filipino westerns that are the current staple of an irresponsible, uneducated and retarded film industry.”

In identifying the secret agent film genre as foreign in origin and imitative in manifestation, or as the unholy spawn of the U.S.-Philippine colonial marriage, these critics attested to the continuing presence of the United States in Philippine cultural life. Their assessment of the woes of the native industry inevitably returned to that abstract goliath, Hollywood, confirming its unshakable influence. As a reference point, a barometer for measuring all that was wrong with Philippine cinema and a means for imagining and aspiring to a true expression of Filipino culture devoid of American pollution, the secret agent film genre tied the United States and the Philippines together in the postcolonial period.

However, despite dismissals as mere crass copies of foreign forms, these secret agent films featured Filipinos actively engaged in the shaping of visual exploits. Far from being imaginatively subordinate to Hollywood, the Philippine film industry employed the conventions of this genre to turn out creative interpretations of immediate significance and meaning. In the hands of Filipino producers, directors, and actors, the secret agent could be crafted anew, an open form fashioned into this week's version of the Filipino James Bond. This genre in particular, with its emphasis on sex, style, technology, and international intrigue, provided the raw material for fantastic but identifiable fabrications. These heroes directly engaged with the most pressing demands of modernity all the while successfully defending their Philippine homeland. The secret agent was the perfect actor for sorting through the promises, contradictions, and complexities of the postcolonial Philippines in the early years of Ferdinand Marcos's presidency. Even as it drew in the specter of America closer, the secret agent film genre offered opportunities for expressions rooted in the concerns of the Filipinos who produced and consumed them. The secret agent film did not spring from some Filipino essence or deeply ingrained "colonial mentality"; it was of the moment, transitory, and pliant, and therefore its power lay in its ability to engage with the immediate. Designed to fulfill his mission and be replaced next week, our hero was indeed apt and appropriate, fashioned from and for the Philippines and its experiences with postcolonial modernity.

### **The Secret Agent as the Hero Necessary for his Time**

In early 1964, Eddie Fernandez pioneered the Filipino secret agent film with the success of *Lagalag*. Fernandez would reprise the role of Agent Lagalag in a series of films, but he was soon joined by an overwhelming number of

similar heroes. This "invasion of the secret agents" included Alberto Alonzo as Agent 69, Bernard Bonin as Agent 707, Charlie Davao in films as Agent 009 and on television as Agent Apollo, and Tony Ferrer as Tony Falcon, Agent X-44. Ferrer became the undisputed king of the secret agents, starring in dozens of successful Tony Falcon adventures produced in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1966 alone, Falcon battled the forces of evil in six different pictures, including *Deadline: Agosto 13* (1966; fig. 1) and *Code Name: Octopus* (1966). Many of these characters, like Amado Cortez's Agent Baltazar, were based on popular Philippine comic strips (*komiks*), and the film genre inspired new strips like the "Mike Prada, The ASPIA Man in Manila" series that ran in *Weekly Graphic* at the height of the secret agent craze.

Often filmed in color (at a time when many Tagalog features were still in black and white), and shot in locations throughout the Philippines and Asia, these movies represented the apex of the technological capabilities of Philippine cinema at that time. They were both the top grossing and most expensive films made in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A repeated explanation for the genre's popularity was the agent's use of "gimmicks" to aid in his mission. Audiences were treated to the amazing and outlandish: exploding tie pins, backfire darts, poisonous pens, and sports cars customized to emit smoke screens and oil slicks. With such gimmicks becoming a hallmark of the genre, filmmakers had to become creative in concocting ever more fantastic devices to wow viewers and outdo competing celluloid agents. The films' final confrontations often involved fabulous pyrotechnics with villains meeting their ends in exploding speedboats, helicopters, and airplanes (often supplied by the Philippine armed forces). The secret agent film genre demonstrated that local cinema was capable of producing technically elaborate and demanding films on a par with international standards, which could draw local audiences away from competing Hollywood fare. The secret agent was a necessary visual refutation of the fear that local cinema was woefully incapable of modern, sophisticated expressions.

Furthermore, the plots of these films were rooted in contemporary political anxieties, allowing for the crafting of fortifying visions of a nation capable of seizing and defending its place in the modern world even as these struggles proved vexing off-screen. The films themselves featured the heroic exploits of brave defenders of the Philippine homeland who held both the pressures and promises of the contemporary world at their command. Plots often reflected immediate threats associated with the Cold War or violations

of national sovereignty: in *Operation: Antonio Luna* (1968) Agent Lagalag (Eddie Fernandez) battles counterfeiters, in *Lady Killer* (1965) a CIS agent (Romano Castellvi) thwarts the efforts of a drug syndicate fronted by communists to poison the populace, and in *Deadline: Agosto 13* Agent Tony Falcon (Ferrer) spoils an attempt to assassinate the president of the Philippines on the fateful titular date.

Often the threat to the republic was foreign in origin, granting a strong nationalistic and patriotic message to the missions of these Filipino secret agents. In *Mastermind* (1965), Agent Falcon must outwit the title villain who has been hired by a foreign group seeking to undermine the Philippine government through a series of assassinations and kidnappings (fig. 2). The mastermind's ultimate mission is to create chaos in the country by snuffing out a foreign dignitary. This image of the Filipino successfully battling subversive forces seeking to hinder progress and unity in his country was made particularly vibrant by the casting of American and European actors in the villains' roles. For example, in *The Kingpin* (1967), Eddie Rodriguez plays an agent battling an international spy played by American actor Paul Edwards Jr. Across the flickering screen, the Filipino secret agent brought glory to the postcolonial Philippines through visions that were at once recognizable, invigorating, and fantastic.

But the Filipino secret agent not only domesticated the danger of the foreign, his prowess allowed him to enjoy its delights as well. As foreign actors often took the role of the nemesis, the secret agent genre also featured widespread casting of foreign actresses (mostly American B-movie players) as love interests or seductresses bent on killing off the hero. In films like *Trapped!* (1966; fig. 3), Agent Tony Falcon protected not only his country from danger, but a vulnerable beauty wrapped up in international intrigue played by American actress Carol McBain. While this genre's popularity was catching fire, *Weekly Graphic* (1966b, 47) remarked upon the visibility of foreign actresses in these films, referring to them as "imported sexpots" and "broads from abroad." Thus they were cast as objects in a variety of ways; in the films themselves, as ornaments testifying to the sex appeal of the Filipino secret agent, as articles of desire designed to tantalize audiences, and as cogs in the wheel of the Philippine film industry, evidence of its ability to secure the props necessary for screening this style of movie.

Often these "broads from abroad" were key selling points for the films, of equal billing with the male leads, as in the case of *The Gold Bikini* (1967)

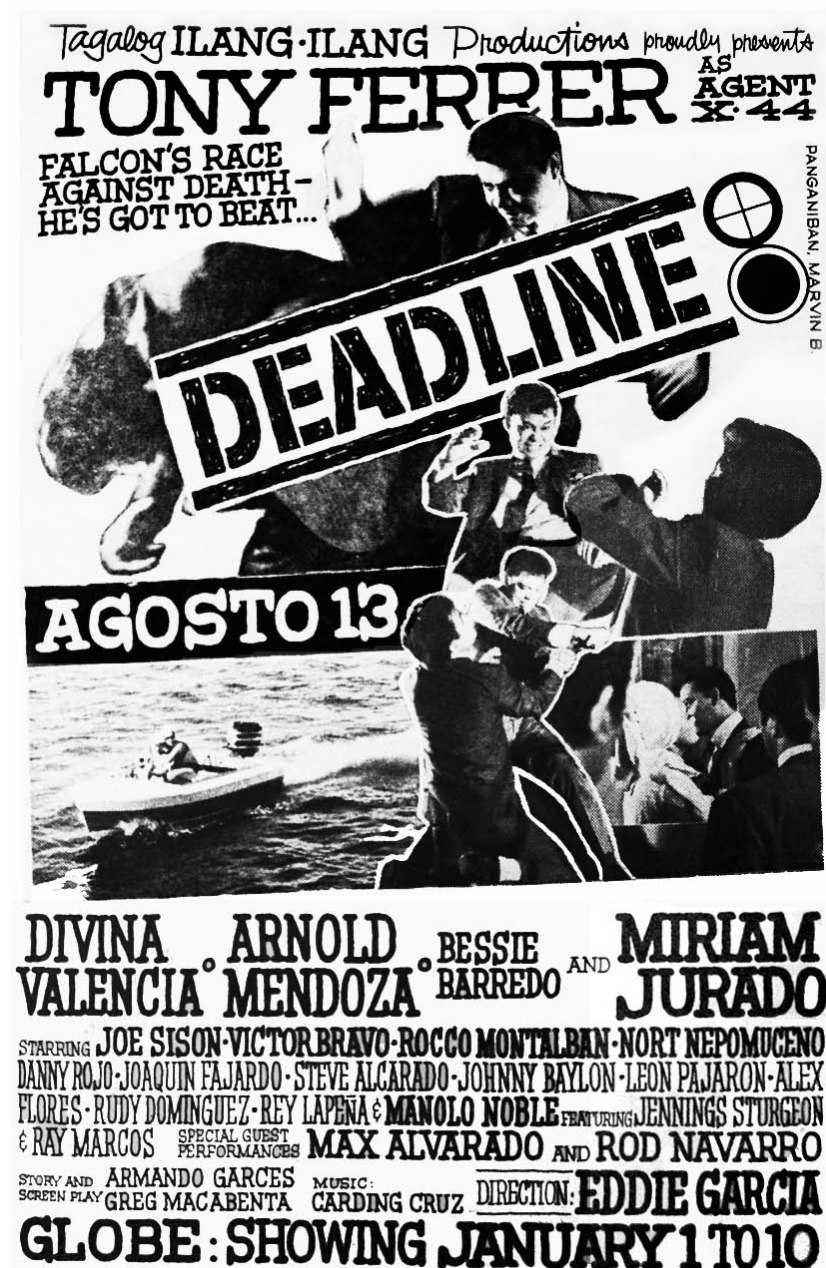


Fig. 1. Movie poster, *Deadline: Agosto 13* (1966).

Source: Video 48





Fig. 2. Movie poster, *Mastermind* (1965).

Source: Video 48



Fig. 3. Movie poster, *Trapped!* (1966).

Source: Video 48

which beckoned to ticket buyers with posters featuring “Hollywood Bombshell” Elizabeth Thompson locked in a deep kiss with star Ray Marcos (as Special Agent 777). Thompson’s arrival in the Philippines could have been a scene from the film. She debarked her jet wearing the titular gold bikini. According to gossip columnist Ethelwolda Ramos (1967, 36), Thompson “held the airport crowd spellbound when she quickly ran into the arms of local boy Ray Marcos. She exchanged clinches and torrid kisses with him right below the ramp of the plane that had taken her all the way from Hollywood to the Philippines.” After other foreign-born actresses like Margaret Davidson, Joy Dee, and Lori Hunter joined the ranks of McBain and Thompson in these films, movie critic Jimmy Obispo (1969, 52) gushed that the screen had become a “gamut of flesh and crumpled bedsheets and the libidinous moviegoers began panting and making a beeline to the box office. The impact of ‘foreign-made feminine assets’ in the economy of the local film industry is indeed tremendous.”

In a variety of forms, the secret agent films brought the foreign into the Philippines. In the case of the “imported sexpot,” this foreigner was an idealized object of desire, a blond beauty that melted in the arms of the virile Filipino hero. His charm, strength, and gallantry placed her within his grasp. On screen was yet another act of what Nollado termed “miscegenation,” Tagalog cinema being born again through this marriage of Filipinos and Americans sealed in “colonial rites,” albeit this time with the Filipino male holding the American female under his command. The secret agent thriller brought this inversion of colonial and postcolonial power dynamics to theaters across the Philippines, the suave Filipino man finally “getting” the blonde American girl. In those theaters, moviegoers could gaze upon these foreign beauties bedecked in their gold bikinis, taking them in. And just as the Filipino James Bond could conquer the world’s women, he could hold sway over the world’s threats as scores of foreign intruders were bested by his superior power. In both its products on screen and in the production itself, this genre showed how outside forms could be appropriated, domesticated, and fashioned anew to engage with the demands of the immediate.

This was further demonstrated by the spate of secret agent parody films that inundated Philippine movie houses in the 1960s and 1970s. As the secret agent thriller could celebrate modernity, it provided fodder for lampooning it as well. Almost as soon as the secret agent thriller was born, it was spoofed by Filipino comedians like Dolphy and Chiquito. Dolphy created

the alter ego, Agent 1–2–3, and starred in a number of James Bond send-ups including *Alyas Don Juan* (1966) and *Genghis Bond: Agent 1–2–3* (1965). Chiquito played a variety of secret agents: Agent 0–2–10, Agent Patumbok-Tumbok, Mister Burot, and Mister Pogi.<sup>1</sup> Often these spoofs used titles that were open plays on the contemporary “official” James Bond series with *Thunderball* (1965) refracted into *Operation Butterball* (1966), *You Only Live Twice* (1967) morphed into *We Only Live Wais* (1968), and *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971) reworked as *Diamonds Are For Eva* (1974).

As spoofs, these films employed the same plot elements, gimmicks, and visual thrills that constituted the more earnest secret agent pictures. In *Dressed To Kill* (1966), Dolphy battled communist spies and a crime syndicate as the well-dressed playboy agent, “Dolpong Dukot.” As Agent 1–2–3 in *Dolpong Istambol* (1966) (tagline: “It Takes A Dope To Catch A Dope”) he smashed up a drug ring poisoning the Philippines with narcotics. The silly secret agent was also hopelessly irresistible to the ladies. In *Operation Butterball*, Dolphy’s character unwittingly falls in love with a seductive communist spy named Diana. When Diana reveals her identity, pulling a gun on Agent 1–2–3, she finds herself unable to harm him, his debonair and charm overwhelming her devotion to the communist cause (*Weekly Graphic* 1966d). Dolphy and Chiquito’s characters also utilized the most hi-tech weaponry and gadgets. Agent 1–2–3 used a radio device hidden in his cigarette lighter to communicate with headquarters in *Operation Butterball* and, along with eight alluring villains, *Mister Gimmick and the Sexy 8-Balls* (1968) promised audiences Chiquito as a spy employing backfire dart guns and a pen that could melt metal (*Weekly Nation* 1968, 52).

These secret agent parody films further exhibited the inventiveness at work in film production in the Philippines rather than a slavish devotion to Hollywood. Far from merely imitating foreign products, the films took hold of a highly stylized formula and turned out even further stylized variations. Dolphy and Chiquito could incorporate all the trappings of the secret agent blueprint while simultaneously saluting and lampooning its conventions. They were the suave virtuosos who saved the Philippines, crushed the communists, and romanced the beauties—yet with a heavy dose of tongue-in-cheek pluckiness and self-conscious silliness. The spoof film not only exhibited the qualities alive in other secret agent potboilers, it goofed on those films as well. Were they making fun of the James Bond series, film fans swept up in “Bondomania,” the glut of secret agents made in America that beamed



across screens in both the United States and the Philippines, or the Filipino James Bonds created in the studios of Manila? In the frenetic, boundary-less, self-referential space of spectacle, possibilities begat possibilities and all was fit for appropriation and reworking. The secret agent could be anything; and, in the dizzying forms he assumed and reassumed in Philippine cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, he certainly was the property of Filipinos.

The secret agent genre lent its conventions to the production of films that connected with contemporary events in the Philippines and offered necessary and identifiable heroes. These films offered supermen steeped in all the perils and possibilities of the modern age, who ultimately triumphed on all fronts. With style and panache, our hero defended his homeland, vanquished the forces of evil, and, as the credits rolled across the screen, walked away with a beautiful woman on his arm. In the span of two hours, the secret agent had confronted, conquered, and brought to a truly satisfying end all the threats and anxieties of the postcolonial, Cold War era. He did so in a manner that represented the Philippines at the center of this modern age rather than on its margins. On the screen, the Philippines was not an enfeebled, neocolonized subject of the United States, but a player and winner in the game of international relations. In this sense, the Filipino James Bond was a soothing, satisfying fiction to counter the messy and discouraging realities of the early decades of Philippine independence.

### **Ferrer as Falcon, Falcon as Ferrer**

No other actor better seized the possibilities at play during the Filipino secret agent film craze than Tony Ferrer. Ferrer entered the spy film mania in 1965, assuming the role of Tony Falcon, Agent X-44, a persona that would define his career and public identity. Ferrer was regularly referred to as one of the best-paid actors of this period and his films were some of the top revenue earners of this era. The popularity of the Agent Falcon series separated Ferrer from his competitors. Many of them would move on to play other roles, shedding their secret agent identities and transitioning into roles in the urban action films that boomed in popularity in the early 1970s. But Ferrer found the Agent Falcon persona tough to shake. By 1973 he had starred in twenty-nine films in that role, solidifying himself as *the* Filipino James Bond (Arceo 1973, 52).

Ferrer's films are often cited by those critiquing and assessing the influence of Hollywood films on Philippine cinema as the evidence par excellence

of the industry's obsession with cranking out secret agent films in the first decade of the Marcos era (Tiongson 2000). For those who dismiss these films as copies of Hollywood fare devoid of any Filipinoness, the Agent Falcon series is an embarrassment, stark and irrefutable evidence of the industry's failings and dearth of creativity rooted in that ever-persistent "colonial mentality." But at the time of their release these films were very popular with fans and even points of pride by some observers of Philippine cinema. The many critics who launched forceful condemnations of the Filipino secret agent were met by contemporaries who celebrated Agent Falcon as exhibiting the best qualities of the industry. In the year of his debut as Tony Falcon, journalist Andy Salao (1965) singled out Ferrer as the actor who could do the most good for local films because his pictures all had "high production values" and were booked in "first-class theaters" (meaning those movie houses that regularly showed American films and only rarely featured Tagalog films) throughout the country.

Tagalog Ilang Ilang Productions (TIIP), one of the leading independent studios that bubbled up after the decline of the studio system, produced most of the Agent Falcon pictures.<sup>2</sup> In the early years of the Manila Film Festival, TIIP submitted Falcon films as their official entries to the competition, enjoying success both in the awards and at the box office. TIIP's head, Espiridion Laxa, eyed success beyond the Manila Film Festival. He believed Falcon's victories over foreign saboteurs and drug kingpins could be transformed into triumphs in foreign film markets. *Sabotage* (1966), *Modus Operandi* (1967), and other Agent Falcon adventures were shown in theaters in Guam, Hawaii, the west coast of California, the West Indies, Indonesia, Thailand, and Pakistan.

Tony Falcon was a Filipino emissary, meeting foreign villains and vixens on screen and foreign audiences in the theater. As its top agent, he represented the Philippines, protecting the nation's sovereignty and its citizenry. As its top grossing franchise, he also represented the Philippine film industry in the late 1960s. In this sense, his significance extended well beyond the movies themselves. Tony Falcon and his portrayer Tony Ferrer were both attached to the hopes, desires, anxieties, and aversions permeating the postcolonial Philippines. Agent X-44 celebrated the possibilities of the nation to control and conquer the challenges of the foreign. Whether it was communism or Hollywood, he could steer Filipinos away from the noxious influences of the outside.



This confluence of dreams fused the character of Tony Falcon with the person of Tony Ferrer. For Ferrer, his role as the Filipino James Bond allowed him to craft a highly stylized public persona that granted him all the powers possessed by his on-screen personality. But in harnessing the power of spectacle, Ferrer also had to submit to its demands as this image became detached from its referent and metastasized in the public domain. For audiences, critics, and the star himself, Tony Ferrer as Tony Falcon became a tough equation to derail. Tony Falcon was indeed a necessary hero.

The Philippine press conflated Ferrer with the Filipino James Bond. This fusion showed the press playing with the image allowed by the personage of the secret agent while lending verisimilitude to this character. In anticipation of the release of one of the earliest X-44 adventures, *Contra-Señas* (1965; fig. 4), *Weekly Graphic* (1965, 88) reported that Ferrer received instructions from Philippine intelligence officials on the latest in spy tactics. This entailed “a stiff course in tailing or shadowing a suspect, the selection and preparation of ‘drops’ for secret messages, encoding messages, ‘bugging’ a room with detective devices, and other tools by [sic] the spy trade.” This stirring summary not only teases an audience with the prospects of an exciting

movie, it stokes the fires of imagination beyond the screen. In being trained as an agent, Tony Ferrer does not act out his role; he becomes it. Furthermore, the image of this Filipino James Bond is used to confirm the actual presence of Philippine secret agents who do these very deeds in protecting the nation. This authenticates what is on screen and assures viewers that such heroism and mastery are also at work outside the theater.

A good deal of Ferrer’s verisimilitude was rooted in his physical prowess. His training in karate and willingness to perform his own stunts supported the idea that Ferrer was Tony Falcon. Ricardo Lo (1968, 54) recounted for *Weekly Nation* readers the genuine perils that plagued Ferrer in the production of these crowd-pleasers. Lo declared, “Tony displays daring and refuses to have doubles in risky scenes in pursuit of realism.” While filming *Boomerang* (1966), “Tony nearly lost his life when his car, its brakes suddenly rendered faulty, crashed into a tree badly shaking him.” On the set of *Frame Up!* (1966), huge blocks of ice caved in on Ferrer during a fight scene at an ice factory. Lo adds to the legend that would follow this incident and furthers the valiant image of Ferrer that became synonymous with the heroism of his character, stating, “even when he [Ferrer] was not yet fully recovered he went back before the cameras so that the picture could be finished in time to meet its playdate” (ibid.).

Filipino readers could imagine not only the real dangers their hero faced but also the accompanying rewards. Although Ferrer remained humble and self-effacing throughout his film career,<sup>3</sup> the press loved to remind audiences of his accomplishments in a manner that bolstered this conflation of Falcon with Ferrer. Although perhaps more befitting of a reclusive James Bond villain, Ferrer demonstrated an opulence and flair well suited to being the Philippines’s top secret agent when he purchased his own island in 1968. Off the coast of Baras, Laguna, Ferrer found his own special retreat, a sanctuary he dubbed “Isla de Falcon.” Ferrer’s success allowed him the means to live like Tony Falcon. This was the island that Falcon built, or made possible, the very sort of indulgence that Agent X-44 would have found essential. On his island Ferrer could entertain or enjoy some rare privacy as he told *Weekly Graphic*, “I enjoy my popularity, why not, but there are moments when I want to be alone, or with just a few friends in a private place” (Ramos 1968, 63). Ferrer may have found solitude on Isla de Falcon but his alter ego remained his constant companion. The image of Ferrer owning his own island was so perfect and apt, yet another ingredient in the making of a hero.



Fig. 4. Movie poster, *Contra-Señas* (1965).  
Source: Video 48

In the same year he acquired his own island Ferrer put the crowning touches on a mansion fit for a secret agent. Surpassing the size of Isla de Falcon, Ferrer's three-story house would have one room dedicated solely to housing his clothes, toiletries, and shoes; a gym; swimming pool; office; sizable sala; and a basement den complete with a bar. Upon completion of this Dasmariñas Village home, christened by Ferrer as "the house that love built," he allowed journalists and photographers in to document his bachelor's paradise. A photo spread in *Weekly Graphic* showed the spacious pool, the long window-lined hallway leading to a staircase, and the elegantly decorated terrace. One photo captured Ferrer's wardrobe room, an image that at once expressed a sense of modern style, wealth, and luxury befitting a suave secret agent. This was further reinforced by the fact that many of the suits on display were from his films. Tony Ferrer had Tony Falcon's clothes in his closet. After drinking in this epic abode, reporter Ernestina E. Sioco (1969) made this intermingling of film and reality clear, stating of Ferrer's home, "That is really living like a movie." Tony Falcon did not just belong to Tony Ferrer. Along with his own inputs to the form, the public and the press actively contributed to his persona, appropriating the archetype of the modern secret agent to craft an image certified as authentic, real, and rooted in the immediate. This combined affirmation that there was indeed an actual Filipino James Bond sustained his position as a necessary hero with a public investment, interest, and contribution.

Ferrer lived the role of Tony Falcon in ways beyond owning an island and a mansion, narrowly escaping death in car crashes, and receiving training from elite Philippine intelligence officers. Like his on-screen character, Ferrer was a stylized "ladies' man" with both he and the press eagerly indulging this image. Ferrer was frequently rumored to be dating the female lead in his films. Philippine magazines ran scores of photographs of the impeccably dressed playboy hitting Manila's trendiest hotspots with a starlet from his latest film on his arm. Along with "King of RP movies" and "the Filipino James Bond," Ferrer acquired the title "filmdom's most eligible bachelor," further stylizing his beyond-the-screen persona. Again Ferrer stepped into the role of Tony Falcon, a role that colored his public performance as Tony Ferrer, and crafted a grandiose but material image of the modern Filipino male who could have it all. But Ferrer was not merely a "carbon copy" of the secret agent, he was the *Filipino* James Bond, and his films, characters, and off-screen personality were always steeped in the immediate context of the

Philippines. As his films became barometers for judging the Philippine film industry and his screen adventures fodder for imagining a powerful Philippine nation fending off international threats, so too could his romantic escapades become public domain for measuring the New Society man.

With the kissing scenes not ending when the camera cuts, the "broad from abroad" and "imported sexpots" that were Falcon's domain became Ferrer's capture as well. The press rolled out story after story on these love affairs, eagerly availing themselves of the opportunity to candidly discuss Ferrer's sex life and run photos of these foreign actresses clothed only in bikinis or negligees. In an interview with his costar in *Trapped!* (1966) and *Sabotage* (1966), Italian actress Alicja Basili, Franklin Cabaluna more than intimated a love affair, noting Basili's "penchant for stripping and kissing with almost anybody and everybody she's paired with in her film assignments," and repeating rumors that on the set of *Sabotage* she lolled around in little or no clothing. Cabaluna described Basili's on-screen antics in a manner that insinuated that it was not just Tony Falcon who became entangled with this blond bombshell but Ferrer himself. He noted that after *Trapped!*, she "went on to kiss, kiss and strip, strip from sizzler to sizzler with Tony Ferrer for his Tagalog Ilang-Ilang spy epics" (Cabaluna 1969, 42). Along with his many European and Filipina costars, Ferrer was rumored to have romanced American actresses Joy Dee and Carol McBain. Any prestige that would come with this inversion of the colonial power relationship exhibited in these films accrued to Ferrer as well.

Like the secret agent movies, a contemporaneous film genre also employed sexual spectacle to offer pathways for imagining the Philippines at the center of the modern age while both revealing and making over postcolonial society through the mastery of images and material associated with Hollywood. In the late 1960s, the *bomba* (literally "bomb") or sex film rocketed to great success throughout the Philippines. Although they did not contain frontal nudity, these films offered glimpses of naked bodies in lurid scenes (often tangential to the plot) simulating sexual intercourse. Actresses like Divina Valencia, Merle Fernandez, and Alicia Alonzo became sensations in the media as "bomba stars" with mainstream magazines churning out cover photos and glossy spreads of them clad in bikinis and lingerie. On-screen and in the press, their bodies circulated through the public domain, offered up as visual commodities for the nation to consume.

Beyond their sexual imagery, bomba also shared with secret agent films the hope of bringing Filipino audiences back to local films. During their spasm of popularity, Jerry O. Tirazona (1971a) stated, “The coming in of the bomba trend is perhaps the best that has happened to the local films [sic] industry. For the first time, local producers are really able to compete with foreign films.” In utilizing a sexual boldness often associated with American films, the bomba appeared to have the power to achieve the long sought after promise of Philippine cinema, to unite Filipinos in a collective set of images and stories. Billy R. Balbastro (1971, 29) summarized the ability of these movies to span the national audience, noting that they “caused local films to be widely discussed and analyzed, not only in the *kanto* or barbershops but also in coffeeshops, as well as in mass media, even among executives and educators.” For a moment, the bomba became that truly Filipino film, appealing to all and fusing the fragmented archipelago together in a common visual language of sex and sensation.

The provocative content of the bomba meant its supporters celebrated it not only as proof of the viability of local films but also their ability to be as modern and on the cutting edge as anything coming out of Hollywood. With its virile secret agents and bomba queens, Philippine cinema had shown itself to be progressive and daring and the Filipino audience responded in kind. Tirazona (1971b) noted that with the coming of these sex films, “Our films have become more true-to-life, more daring to expose the immoralities and obscenities that are happening in our midst,” marking an ability to “not only entertain but to expose and teach.” Monina A. Mercado (1971, 48), confessing that bomba were the first Filipino movies she had seen in years, considered them to serve this valuable function, returning Filipinos to local cinema while “open[ing] the mind [of audiences] to the possibilities of what the movie critics call ‘realism in our cinema.’” The bomba seemed to usher in a new age in Philippine cinema, one in which the very sense of newness and modernity augured well for the development of local films and the society as a whole. Cinema reflected a nation willing to confront itself as it wrestled through the tumult of the sexual revolution, the exercise of free expression, and shifting gender mores (Leynes 1970; Feria 1971; Werning 1971). If film served as an indicator of the state of the nation and rendered this national community visible, it revealed Filipinos in the forefront of these debates central to the modern age.

Sex could serve as a leveler in U.S.-Philippine cinematic relations. The bomba film won Filipino audiences away from Hollywood films and local producers showed that they could be as bold as their American counterparts. A Tagalog sex romp featuring the nude, available bodies of local sirens could be as appealing as anything produced abroad. The big budgets and shining stars of Hollywood could be rivaled, the cultural power of the United States successfully challenged with the exploitation of the body. Similarly, the appearance of American actresses as the love interests of virile Filipino superheroes in the contemporary secret agent film genre put these male action stars on a par with the suave playboys of Hollywood. Scenes of them rolling around in the sheets with a blond femme fatale showed that these Filipino super spies could achieve the same sexual conquests as their American counterparts. The bomba star could be as appealing as the American sexpot, the Filipino James Bond just as irresistible as Hollywood’s greatest secret agents.

Tony Ferrer stylized the figure of Tony Falcon into a real-life public persona that only further solidified the connection between our hero and contemporary Philippine society, showing that the man on-screen of wealth, women, style, and skills was a material reality. Representing an apex of Filipino masculinity and mastery, the world was at his command. Tony Ferrer offered an image of possibilities lavish and immoderate, but still obtainable. He commanded a Hollywood film genre and Hollywood starlets, vanquishing the cultural power of America by making it his own. As the Philippine public imbibed or rejected this spectacle they remained connected to it, dreaming up vicarious pleasures or imagining counterbalancing cultural purities.

### **Suited to Fit: The Clothes Make the Modern Filipino Man**

The only public commentary that followed Ferrer more than the many testimonies to his sexual prowess were the countless salutes to his sartorial flair. As in so many other elements of his public persona, Ferrer never took off the uniform of Tony Falcon. Ferrer favored the same pomaded pompadour and sharkskin suits that Agent X-44 sported, the real and the reel again indistinguishable. The same magic that allowed Falcon to remain unsullied and unrumpled even after slugging it out with the commies also seemed to be at Ferrer’s command. He was always impeccably dressed and coiffed when photographed.

He embraced his role as fashion king, exciting reporters and fans with the most recent additions to his wardrobe and inviting photographers into his home and dressing room to document the rows of jackets, shoes, and ties in his collection. He seized the cultural clout that went along with this image; clad in suits tailored in the most chic patterns and cuts, Ferrer evoked wealth, success, and grandeur. He was the modern Filipino man living and looking good. Tony Ferrer's sense of fashion, like his expertise in karate and opulent lifestyle, became part of the armament that lent verisimilitude to his image. A profile near the beginning of his career cast Ferrer as "a noted member of the best dressed class, he knows male fashion like he knows movies. At a glance he can tell that someone's shirt collar is ill-cut" (Ortego 1965, 68). Ferrer, like Falcon, roamed the streets of Manila at the ready, on the look out for karate challenges, beautiful models, and bad tailoring.

The look of Ferrer and his character may have been Ferrer's own sense of style, but this guise ultimately belonged to the Philippines. The wardrobe became another barometer of his success, a marker of what the Philippine movie star and Filipino man could achieve. The sharkskin slacks and gabardine jackets filling up the closets at "the house that love built" were symbols not only of Ferrer's success, but they also could be fitted as emblems of the larger achievements of the Philippine nation. A TIIP producer pointed to Ferrer's clothes as an important part of his films' popularity while adding that these box-office triumphs represented the improvement of the national cinema. This unnamed producer quipped, "Fans have to be convinced that when they see our stars like Tony, we really do not lag behind foreign films. It is a part of Philippine movie progress" (*Weekly Graphic* 1966e, 39). Ferrer's crisp, modern attire refuted well-worn complaints that films made in the Philippines lagged behind global standards and failed to offer fans new and fresh thrills. Ferrer as Falcon represented in so many ways the hopes of the Philippines's film industry and the movie-made nation. Fighting the forces of evil, winning beautiful ladies, restoring pride in the nation, saving its institutions and industries—he accomplished it all while still staying so smartly dressed. Our hero could do anything.

Ferrer and his wardrobe could make the Philippines in other ways, too. For journalists, Ferrer offered the possibility to imagine an entire nation now clad as suave secret agents. Articles attested to his ability to introduce new styles and author the latest trends, thereby making over his fans. In a cover story fresh off the heels of *Sabotage*'s blockbuster success in 1966, *Weekly*

*Graphic* declared that "Ferrer is famous in the role of a dapper secret agent and male fans troop to his pictures to see him in the latest in men's fashion." The article affirmed the drawing power of these threads, noting, "Some male movie fans say that they see Falcon's pictures only to see the latest thing in men's suits" (ibid). Traveling all over the world to film and promote meant that Ferrer was also an ambassador of style and nation, a representation of the Philippine male abroad. The fact that his films were shown internationally, itself a token of prestige, only furthered his claims to being an emblem of world-class fashion. This made crediting Ferrer with introducing trends like the "continental style" to the Philippines both credible and impressive (ibid.). Ferrer knew the latest styles of Europe and Japan because he had been there, and he brought that knowledge back to the Philippines to share. Casting Ferrer as the model of the modern Filipino man and attesting to his ability to make over the nation grounded him in the Philippine immediate and kept this movie idol accessible and tangible.

One very direct collision between the secret agent genre and men's fashion was an advertising campaign that ran in major Philippine magazines at the onset of this filmic craze. The "Our Man in Terylene" advertisements featured scenes of men jumping from boats and brandishing pistols in photos that looked like stills from a spy film. One ad showed a spy pointing his gun after firing it at an adversary now slumped over the steering wheel of his car, a glamorous blonde woman dressed in an evening gown and heels by his side. It declared, "Well, that's one more enemy agent out of the picture. Nothing to it. And now for more important matters. Like getting Caroline to that small and private party at her hotel. Fast. No time to change suits. No need anyway. You're wearing "Terylene." When clad in these suits, you lived the life of a secret agent, a life made much easier thanks to that miracle fabric, Terylene. Like Tony Falcon himself (and his suits), Terylene promised to be "Uncrushable! Indestructible! Unbeatable! Indispensable!" Another "Our Man in Terylene" adventure featured a photo of the intrepid agent dangling off a ship, his sexy accomplice below in a power boat ready to whisk him off to safety. The copy featured an internal monologue that read like the plot outline and dialogue of a secret agent potboiler, "Grab that rope and over the side man. You've got to get out of here. Fast. Before this old crate blows sky-high. Good thing Miranda's down there with her speedboat. You can still have that drink at her apartment. No need to change. You're wearing a suit made of "Terylene."



Here the magical world of international espionage merged with the banalities of synthetic fiber, proffering a sexy image that invited Filipino men to imagine themselves as secret agents. Donned in these suits, they had the necessary attire for the demands and pleasures of living life on the edge. The filmic hero became the ordinary man on the streets of Manila, the cinematic assumed as lived experience. As the humble Tony Ferrer had shown, the secret agent was an accessible persona for the modern Filipino man. One could slide into it simply by slipping on Terylene. As an archetype of fashion and masculinity the secret agent remained at hand in the Philippines, a figure who belonged to any Filipino man who employed this style as his own.

Ferrer's modular and symbolic qualities point to how the secret agent film craze informed and overlapped with contemporary debates about masculine style in the early years of the New Society. Far from offering images foreign to the Philippines, these movies and their stars were part of a national conversation over the meanings of men and fashion. Magazine columns on men's fashion like "The Gentleman" that appeared in *Weekly Graphic* during the 1960s, the persistent commentary on the latest attire of Tony Ferrer, and the heavy volume of reportage devoted to the sartorial tastes of other male film stars all point to this larger public conversation. In serving as a representation of the modern Filipino man, Ferrer and his fellow filmic secret agents invited both praise and rebuke as public culture in the Philippines wrestled with the implications of these "modern trends" for the meaning of masculinity in the age of the secret agent film craze.

A 23 February 1966 edition of "The Gentleman" wondered of cologne, "Is it masculine?" only to conclude that if the scent was of leather, forest herbs, or lime then cologne, along with talc, pomade, deodorants, and shower soaps, was indeed manly (*Weekly Graphic* 1966c). In a 1968 article, Ernestina E. Sioco expressed amused but agreeable shock that hair spray had now become part of the Filipino man's grooming arsenal, a development she credited to the influence of movie stars. Although hair spray, follicle ointments, and permanents were once the province of "movie stars and play-boys," Sioco noted that among Filipino men, "At the rate things are going, hair spray will be as much a part of a man's life as soap, shaving cream, after shave lotions and the like" (Sioco 1968, 46).

Yet, some observers were unsettled by the thought of a Filipino male populace obsessed with hairstyles, grooming, and the latest clothing styles. In

a 14 June 1969 column in *Mirror Magazine*, Abraham C. Florendo decried this "Peacock Revolution." For Florendo such fastidious attention to one's appearance by men evidenced an alarming confusion of the genders. He chided the men adorned in the latest cuts of jackets and trousers, decked out in bold colors and prints, as going out in public "with a swish and a swagger—like something from a ladies dormitory." He wondered, "Is this a homosexual conspiracy?" and asserted that this development was one of the baneful effects of the modern age, as "a phenomenon never before known in history." These changes meant that the male realm had overlapped into the female domain, as Florendo (1969, 30) commented that this "Peacock Revolution" brought a feminizing sense of male fashion with men decked out in "something that looks snatched off his girl friend's clothes rack."

The other armaments of Ferrer's secret agent persona shielded him from such attacks on his masculinity. He was free to fill his closet with designer clothes and always appear perfectly coiffed because he was Falcon, the master of karate who did all his own stunts and had a bevy of beauties at his command. Early in his career, *Weekly Graphic* noted that Ferrer could never be mistaken for a "pretty boy." Referring to Ferrer as Falcon, the article stated, "What's more, despite the apparent dandying, Falcon did not behave like a dandy. He remained an action star, expert in fisticuffs, judo, and karate and his nice suits never got in the way" (*Weekly Graphic* 1966e, 39).

Tony Ferrer's ability to remain unmistakably manly while attired so impeccably echoes a contemporary who also successfully combined virility and vanity to craft an image of the modern Filipino male—Pres. Ferdinand Marcos. Personal appearance was a key component of Marcos's projection of power. An avid athlete and physical fitness enthusiast, Marcos presented a strong, muscular image of the male body that complemented his assertive and powerful political presence (Rafael 2000, 122–61). Apocryphal stories of his valor as a guerrilla fighter resisting the Japanese occupation during the Second World War and the all-too-real tales of his many extramarital affairs further aggrandized this manly image, imprinting him with a physical and sexual prowess worthy of Agent Tony Falcon (Hamilton-Paterson 1998, 85–106). Like Tony Ferrer, Ferdinand Marcos was always impeccably attired and coiffed. But their physicality and virile aura insulated both men from charges of being effeminately interested in their personal appearances. Also similar to Ferrer, the press credited Marcos as fashion leader. Assessing the sartorial prospects of the incoming administration shortly after inauguration

day, “The Gentleman” saluted Marcos, equally elegant in the traditional Barong Tagalog or “the latest styles” in men’s suits, as an admirable trend setter (*Weekly Graphic* 1966a). Ferdinand Marcos and Tony Ferrer were both icons of Filipino masculinity, fashionable and modern, yet unmistakably manly.<sup>4</sup>

In his role as fashion plate Tony Ferrer was not isolated from contemporary events in the Philippines. His lavish lifestyle did represent the good life, the zenith of luxury and opulence, but this was an accessible lifestyle, one the public participated in both vicariously and directly. Ferrer’s sartorial statements represented the productive power of spectacle. His on-screen persona spilled over into his public style, this style informed the selling of men’s fashion and represented to some a model for all to follow. The visual appearance of the Filipino man, from the everyman on the streets of Manila to our hero Agent Tony Falcon, became the source of expressing and accessing the Philippine nation.

### **“James Bond is a Filipino”: The Sabah Affair**

Although the secret agent film genre was firmly intertwined with the material and imaginative workings of contemporary Philippine society, it remained subject to condemnation and dismissal as imitative of experiences wholly outside the nation. As spy potboilers continued to beam across screens in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, they still attracted criticism as being poor copies of Hollywood films devoid of any “Filipinoness.” Espiridion Laxa defended his products as indicative of the true state of the nation. In February 1967 he asserted, “We see local agent or spy films, which indicate that we are fast learning the intricate art of espionage, an essential weapon against the insidious forces of ideologies opposed to the democratic way of life” (De Manila 1967, 44). Laxa pointed to a Philippines both made and known by movies. He argued the secret agent film more than represented the Philippines: it was the Philippines. For Laxa the much maligned genre showed not only that the Philippine film industry was asserting its independence, but also that the nation as a whole was advancing. A fleet of sophisticated and brave agents protected the Philippines from the threats of the modern age and Laxa’s films merely reflected this bracing but thrilling reality.

The ability of the secret agent film to mirror the realities of international intrigue in the Filipino public imagination is well evidenced in the public discourse surrounding the 1968 Sabah conflict. That year competing claims

over the Sabah territory in northern Borneo almost led to war between the Philippines and Malaysia. The Philippines’s claim to Sabah was rooted in the Sultanate of Sulu’s sovereignty over the area. In the late seventeenth century, the Sultanate of Sulu received Sabah from the Sultanate of Borneo in exchange for his efforts in quelling a rebellion. In a convenient and historically flawed presumption, President Marcos asserted that the Sultanate of Sulu’s allegiance to the Spanish and American colonial governments made Sabah part of the modern Philippine nation (Hamilton-Paterson 1998). After the Second World War, Great Britain annexed Sabah but ceded its rights to the territory in 1963 as part of the formation of the new federation of Malaysia. Marcos formerly recognized Malaysia in 1966 but with the caveat that the Philippines could pursue its claims to Sabah. The Sabah claim has remained an expedient and effective nationalistic card to play for Filipino politicians. Hoping to stoke the fires of nationalism and galvanize the public in the months before his 1969 reelection campaign, on 18 September 1968 Marcos played this card, signing into law a Senate bill asserting Philippine dominion and sovereignty over Sabah.

In many ways, this conflict was seen through the lens of a secret agent movie. The symbols, phrases, and aesthetics of these films framed much of the reportage and political grandstanding surrounding the conflict. In April 1968, a secret operation that trained recruits for a possible invasion of Sabah was exposed, thanks to the daring escape of one of the would-be commandos. Jibin Arula fled the training camp on the island of Corregidor by swimming to Manila Bay. He survived the long and improbable journey and was picked up by a group of fishermen. Arula then detailed to the press the story of his fellow recruits. They had been trained in warfare and sabotage operations by the Army’s Civil Affairs Office (CAO). The recruits soon learned that they were being trained to infiltrate Sabah. This revelation, coupled with the fact that the trainees had not been paid or properly fed, inspired them to mutiny. The CAO put down the uprising, killing a number of the recruits. Arula had survived this massacre and was able to escape and expose the shady covert operations of the Philippine government. He was the latest Filipino secret agent. When the story broke, *Weekly Graphic* (1968, 68) declared in its headline, “James Bond is a Filipino” and described Arula’s exploits as a film, stating that “It was a script lifted from the James Bond serials.”

In a follow-up article the next week, reporter Manuel F. Almario (1968a, 16) noted that this story of murder, mystery, and international intrigue had

all the “ingredients of a James Bond spy thriller, often projected in full color and wide screen in our moviehouses.” A photo accompanying the article claimed to show the cliff where Arula rolled down in order to escape his killers and make his way to the ocean. Another photo provided further evidence of how this already cinematic story blurred the lines between the real and the unreal. It showed actors posing with the recruits on the set of *Blackhawk Commandos* (1968), a film shot on Corregidor two months prior to Arula’s escape. Here in this photo was a group of Filipino men, whether as actors or as recruits, playing the part of commandos.

The exposure of this “secret army” and its catastrophic demise had the prospects of being very damaging to the Marcos government. Marcos claimed that the training was merely for defense purposes, not aggression toward Malaysia. The leader of the training mission, Maj. Eduardo Martelino, attempted to defend and explain the training mission with terms and imagery suitable for a secret agent thriller. He claimed to be a “double agent,” recruiting eager Muslims into a private army in order to win them over to the side of the Philippine government and defuse their ability to strike at Sabah and embarrass the nation abroad (Almario 1968a, 19). Filipinos angry at their government over its covert schemes and bellicose maneuverings could find in the fantastic story of Jibin Arula a source of outrage that boiled over with the sights and symbols of a secret agent film. But those sympathetic to the Sabah cause could also find stirring evidence of their government’s power to seize its rightful claim. In his article, Almario informed readers of the recruits’ intricate training for the invasion of Sabah where they would conduct elaborate commando raids and sabotage missions targeting radio stations, police headquarters, and government buildings (ibid., 22, 70). This was powerful imagery that agitated the dream of a band of intrepid Filipinos exercising their might and ingenuity, bringing glory to the Philippines while showing the world the power of this nascent nation. Just like the adventures of Tony Falcon, the story of the “secret army” of Corregidor offered rich and vivid fodder for imagining the place of the modern Philippine nation.

After signing the Senate bill claiming Sabah, secret agent fever intensified in the Philippines. The prospects of war brought the world of sabotage and foreign infiltration vividly into public culture in the Philippines. Politicians described the country as if it was embroiled in a Tony Falcon adventure. Representative Roque Ablan Jr., a member of the House Committee on Un-Filipino Activities, promoted himself as the nation’s top “spy hunter”

and alerted Filipinos that Malaysian spies were operating in the southern Philippines. More than a mere politician, Ablan staked his own claims to being a Filipino James Bond, asserting that he had conducted surveillance operations in Sulu and returned to Manila with his “catch” of six suspected Malaysian spies in October 1968 (Sison 1968, 8). Sen. Benigno Aquino Jr., a fierce political foe of the Marcos administration, also employed histrionics full of secret agent imagery, warning that the Philippines should be prepared for “the silent war, the war of the saboteurs and the infiltrators” (Osorio 1968, 58). According to Aquino, spies and double agents were definitely in the Philippines and could even target Filipinos while they were enjoying the latest Tony Falcon romp. He outlined one scenario in which “suppose an infiltrator goes to a movie house and leaves an attaché case with a time bomb under the seats. When it explodes killing perhaps forty people, he will already be in another movie house.” With the 1968 Sabah crisis, the plot of a secret agent film had become the lens of everyday reality in the Philippines. In reporting Senator Aquino’s remarks, journalist Emmanuel L. Osorio reiterated directly how the filmic world mirrored actuality, stating, “Although James Bondish in appeal, this is the real danger that faces the Philippines today. For what is James Bond but a reflection of the manners and expectations of the time, albeit glamorized by sex and expensive gadgetry?” (ibid.).

Like the secret agent film genre itself, the Sabah incident reintroduced the United States shadow into public culture in the Philippines, again agitating ties between the two nations. It is highly unlikely that Marcos ever intended to actually go to war with Malaysia in 1968. Asserting a claim to Sabah was much more valuable than the land itself (Hamilton-Paterson 1998, 291–93). Signing the Senate bill was political theater, a spectacle constructed and employed to appeal to Philippine nationalism. The use of spy thriller imagery was consistent with an event and discourse that was highly symbolic and performative. Almario (1968b, 60) made this point clear in declaring, “even more important than the success of the claim itself, is the fact that in pursuing it determinedly, we are asserting our manhood and dignity as a sovereign national and free state.”

As is often the case in this construction of Philippine nationalism, the image of the United States played a vital role. With the Sabah claim, the Philippines found itself not only in the world of Tony Falcon, but once again face to face with the lingering specter of the United States. The United States refused to intervene in the dispute, officially maintaining a neutral

stance on the matter and continuing to recognize Sabah as part of Malaysia. The failure of the United States to stand by its former colony angered many Filipinos (Patanne 1968, 2–3). Anti-American demonstrations broke out across the country in October 1968. Protestors built bonfires outside the American embassy in Manila. Pro-Sabah rallies became places to fulminate against the former colonial power who continued to take so much from the Philippines but refused to honor the bonds of reciprocity. The perceived arrogance of the United States only fueled the nationalistic rhetoric facilitated by the Sabah incident as Filipino politicians gave brazen but toothless talk about abrogating the base agreements with the United States and withdrawing Philippine support for the Vietnam War. In the public theater of the Sabah episode, the Philippines inevitably returned to the United States, revisiting the still open wounds of colonialism while cutting out some new scars. As columnist J. V. Cruz wrote in the *Manila Times*, “The Philippines, by forfeiting its self-respect in all its previous dealings with the U.S., has lost first and foremost the respect of the very power to whose every wish and whim it has shamelessly deferred. So, when the Philippines finally needed some support and friendliness from its patron, what did it get? It got its face spat upon” (cited in *ibid.*).

When Marcos finally toned down his bellicose posturing on Sabah and backed away from war, nationalists were quick to blame the United States for the failure of the Philippines to realize its claim (Hamilton-Paterson 1998, 294–95). Far from an assertion of “manhood” and “dignity,” the 1968 Sabah incident exposed the weakness of the Philippines, its inability to effect change as a sovereign nation, and its interminable dependence on the United States. Tony Falcon and his fellow Filipino secret agents were indeed necessary heroes. They never suffered such indignities, always completing their mission and maintaining the glory of the Philippine nation. Filipinos could only find such satisfying heroics on the movie screen. The Sabah incident and the secret agent film craze overlapped in many ways; interpolating the symbols and imagery of those movies into political discourse and offering pathways for imagining the Philippine nation. But this intertwined world of filmic and real international intrigue also conjured up the ghosts of American colonialism, demonstrating to some how the Philippines remained subject to control and manipulation by its former master in politics and culture. This discourse further showed the cinematic qualities of U.S.-Philippine relations in the postcolonial period. In this spectacle of

secret agents, both real and imagined, the Philippines was rendered visible; its lack of sovereignty in all things cultural and political exposed, its vulnerability as an independent nation naked for all to see.

## Conclusion

In volume and popularity, the secret agent film genre slowed in the early 1970s, eclipsed in appeal by the gritty, urban crime dramas (*bakbakan*), but the Philippine film industry continued to produce agents throughout that decade in films that remained relevant to contemporary events in the nation. Intrepid agents charged with securing the nation were a mainstay in such vehicles as *Spy Hunt* (1970), *Kill...RP-Nine-0* (1974), and *Interpol Malaysia Five* (1975). Female crime fighters and spy hunters also took the screen in *Panther* (1973), *Virginia Soliman* (1974), and *Target...Eva Jones* (1974). Tony Ferrer reassumed the Tony Falcon persona in films like *The Strategist* (1971) and *Jailbreak* (1976) while also performing as different agents in *Steel Trap* (1976) and *The Enforcer and the Pussycats* (1977). In 1979 Ferrer harkened back to the glory days when *Sabotage* filled the theaters during the First Manila Film Festival with the release of a sequel, *Sabotage 2* (1979).

For critics of the Philippine film industry, the continued popularity and production of secret agent films raised this genre from an embarrassing fad to graphic evidence of the larger failings endemic to the industry, government, and the whole of Philippine society. Despite the many ways these movies engaged with contemporary concerns and experiences, critics continued to single out the Filipino James Bond as a counterfeit. Writing nearly twenty years after the onset of the secret agent film craze, scholar Nicanor Tiongson decried Filipino filmmakers’ mindless imitation of Hollywood movies because “it falsifies the Filipino experience, by giving us characters, situations and problems that are not endemic to our society. For, indeed, one would have to be crazy or a visionary to see cowboys, indians, kung-fu heroes and James Bonds in our society” (Tiongson 1982, 31). Tiongson’s criticism revealed a faith in the existence of an authentic Filipino experience, but he could not imagine it accessible via Tony Falcon.

Yet, as an icon of global culture, a drifting symbol of all that is modern and cool, the secret agent can belong to anyone. But once appropriated, these ever-suave spies become grounded in immediate subjectivities and contexts. They become fixed on the page by screenwriters, captured on film by directors, and the temporary property of ticket buyers. As agitators of the



imagination they transcend the dream world of movies, bringing their style, arsenal of expressions, and reassuring messages into the larger cultural orbit. This is the story of the Filipino James Bond, a figure native and specific to the peculiar rhythms of the U.S.-Philippine postcolonial relationship. When viewed as an outsider, our hero could not hide his American pedigree— emblematic of American influence on Philippine cinema and Filipino culture more broadly, this heroic image could not fail to invoke Americanness— nor fail to produce longing and faith in a true Filipinoness. Embraced as an emblem of the modern Filipino, he represented all the wondrous possibilities available to a nation shaking off its colonial bonds and stepping boldly into a new age. Our hero could never be purely Filipino or a mere American imitation. These were Our Men in Manila, to be claimed and assigned by all sides. Deeply engaged with the immediate demands of this relationship, an active participant and contributor to this postcolonial exchange, our hero is located only within the continuing cultural bonds between the United States and the Philippines.

## Notes

*Permission to use the movie posters in this article, high resolution copies of which were provided by Video 48, is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are also due to Ferdinand Galang for providing basic information on one of his father's films cited in the reference list.*

- 1 The names for the agents in these filmic parodies exhibited some clever wordplay and silliness with Agent 0–2–10 sounding like the Tagalog word for flatulence, “Burot” meaning the “It” from children’s schoolyard games, and Mister Pogi translating into English as “Mister Handsome.”
- 2 In the early 1960s, the “Big Four” Philippine film studios (LVN, Sampaguita, Lebran, and Premiere) closed or severely curtailed production. Their financial woes were exacerbated when a forceful labor movement demanding higher wages and better working conditions drove up productions costs. Film production in the Philippines grew in volume in the wake of the decline of the Big Four as upstart independent film companies filled the void. The era of the Big Four dominance in the 1950s is often remembered as the “Golden Age of Philippine Cinema.” This assertion is rooted in the belief that the age of the Big Four marked a more unified and ordered cinema culture that crafted films that reflected the true nature of the nation before the many independent companies polluted local cinema with their genre pictures and crass opportunism.
- 3 At present Ferrer occasionally makes cameo appearances in film but is largely retired and absent from the film scene. Like so many luminaries from Philippine cinema, he deserves more scholarly attention.
- 4 Ferrer rarely appeared in a Barong Tagalog or other “traditional” clothing. As a cultural ambassador, he was often credited for introducing foreign styles to the Philippines while also customizing modern styles to his own predilections. His status as a manly action hero who defended his nation seemed to insulate him from accusations of both dandyism and mindless mimicry of foreign styles.

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