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Rolando B. Tolentino



An archipelago is a disparate group of islands, small and large, each surrounded by bodies of water. It is a mixture of diverse topographies and climates, a nation already fragmented geographically; a site of the peoples' contestation for national dominance and unity, and for the lopsided application of development objectives. And indeed Southeast Asia, which produces an estimated ten percent of the global national product, also dominates the world's output of abaca, natural rubber, palm oil, tin and copra (see Lumbera 1997, 15). The geopolitical production of space within the archipelago—the archipelagic space—represents both cultural diversity and parochial consciousness on the one hand, and on the other hand, both the insularity and transnationalism of island nations, nation of islands, and the islandic and peninsular region. The archipelagic space seems to geographically and critically locate the region, if not aspects of regional cultural politics.

On the one hand, International Monetary Fund chief Michel Camdessus uses the word "opaque" to characterize Asia's current currency crisis. The crisis, he says, "provid[es] a 'spectacular' example of how 'absence of transparency of a country's finance and economic system can feed uncertainty in markets and trigger a massive exodus of capital, which endangers macroeconomic stability.'" Echoing the colonial daddy figure, the IMF chief scolds Asian economies for their "denial syndrome." He states that "we warned them time and again" about the impending crisis that may result from this absence of transparency (Reuters 1988, C8). Camdessus remarks not only flatten national difference, but also homogenize the perception of Asia as childish, unwieldy, unstable, chaotic and inept.

On the other hand, speaking during the height of Southeast Asia's regional growth, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of

Finance Anwar Ibrahim discusses the "ongoing Asian Renaissance" as tending towards "inclusivism." Ibrahim's statement is premised on the notion that "genuine revival must also be a moral renewal" (1996, 186–87). This statement points to the introspective nature of national development, an idea that recalls Prime Minister Mahathir Mohommad's revisionist "Asia for Asians" regional policy advocacy.

Where, then, does one locate sites of identity formation? Torn between echoes of colonial masters and nationalist leaders, quite hegemonic stances, how can one speak both of difference and agency?

In this article, I examine the notion of archipelagic space, how insularity and transnationalism are evoked within the multi-dynamic geography of Southeast Asia. Using the film *Southern Winds* (1992) I investigate how shared and diverse representations of development and nationhood among three Southeast Asian nations—Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines—are shared and contested, discussing how the nation is "city-fied" in various discordant ways. My objective is to use the notion of the archipelagic space as a shared regional cultural idiom to evoke the various nations' own instantaneous negotiation with both insularity and transnationalism.

Insularity and Transnationalism in the Archipelagic Space

The archipelagic space is a geographic construct denoting social and bodily movements and transformations. This space becomes a filter through which we discuss the triple dialectics of history, society and modernity, or the co-production of time, space and being in our present predicament. This is the terrain where insularity and transnationalism are negotiated, an attempt at "interfacing the local and global." The archipelagic space is also a meta-space or a "meta-archipelago," quite self-reflexive with its nature of constant flux and crisis. Antonio Benitez-Rojo's conceptualization of the postmodern in the Caribbean uses the notion of the "meta-archipelago" as an analytical device of chaos theory to reinscribe fluidity and liminality, repetition and difference in this diasporic geography of the "repeating island." The space of the meta-archipelago is the trope that transmits the characteristic Caribbean hybrid subject and liminal subject position along the vectors of Anglo-European narratives of capital flow, colonialism and imperialism which in turn, provide the "repeating island" its libidinal economy (Benitez-Rojo 1992).

To speak of the Philippine archipelago, for example, is to engage in a "double-talk" on space. It is to speak of the archipelago as at once a hegemonic strategy of position and placement and a marginal tactic of location. I refer to "insularity" as the production of the parochial and familiar, imaginative and limited, personal and symptomatic knowledges of the nation, or simply how the Nation is desired, continuously consumed yet never consummated, from within. Transnationalism is enforced within the domestic national space through insularity. Capital's infusion and intrusion in the national space are negotiated through insular knowledges and tactics. My contention about insularity is contingent on narratives of capital and liberal democracy as the west has so defined these and as these definitions are imposed on the borders of the archipelagic space.

The age of multinationalism has made us experience kineticism in the unprecedented movement of goods, bodies and capital. Massive flow and fluidity have become the main currents of this age, with liminality becoming the emblematic transnational space. I emphasize the insular reverberations of multinationalism from within and outside—how the interior has been structured to respond to how the outside has been internalized, and how the internal has been internationalized. Insularity represents the interior's sense-making operations to an outside intrusion and enforcement. Insularity refers not only to how the outside "insulates" the interior for its own imperial design but, even more, how the interior resituates itself for its survival and emancipatory purposes. After all, the transnational age has marginalized the play of the interior in ways that produce diasporic existence as affects of the times.

The insular, therefore, is a contrary movement within the dominant discourse of global and regional capital movement. No insular perspective is made transformative of the present condition. What matters in the multinational geopolitical perspective is the effacement and containment of other discourses in order to theorize major shifts, developments and configurations for the First World.

Insularity and Southeast Asian Cinema

Without jettisoning the vital issues of the global (say, the movement of capital or institutions such as the International Monetary Bank and World Bank), films provide a visual space that mediates

between representational and historical claims of the local experiences and negotiations with transnationalism. The local or insular mainly rests on the issue of development—how multinational goals of liberalization, commercialization and privatization are enforced nationally, and how these take effect only through a creation of a stable middle-class economy; it also entails the homogenization of services, the further division and feminization of global labor, and the breaking down of economic borders. Culturally, newly acquired wealth creates a different sensing of time, space and being—gentrified, modern, cosmopolitan, and urbanized.

Southern Winds is a collection of four film segments from three Southeast Asian and one Japanese directors. It is considered as the first joint film project between Southeast Asian nations and Japan. Indonesian director Slamet Rahardjo Djarot's segment "Mirage" tells of a young girl's agony during and immediately after migrating to Jakarta from Eastern Java to look for work as a domestic helper. Filipino director Mike de Leon retells the classic narrative of *In the Claws of Neon* (Sa Kuko ng Liwanag) in "Aliwan Paradise," renarrativizing the young couple's struggle to survive a national crisis by seeking entertainment work in the state-owned employment agency in Manila. Thai director Cherd Songsri's "The Tree of Life" narrates the search for roots amidst the economic shifts in Bangkok and the nation in general, through a story of a soon-to-be bankrupt real estate developer literally going back to his childhood.

In all three segments, the cultural politics of the archipelagic space is articulated through the foregrounding of the city and body, themselves also considered as geopolitical spaces. The segments also foreground the libidinal economy that generates the archipelagic space. The national condition is in constant crisis and flux. The only thing stable about the various national conditions is its instability; change, therefore, is also inevitable.

But how each film deals with crisis and change, how each transforms crisis and change, reveals the specificity of the national condition in the archipelagic space. The archipelagic space, after all, is not homogenous: crisis as well as affluence are unevenly experienced in the national condition. For Thailand, crisis is premised on the nouveau shift from traditional to modern ways. The opening scene of the segment shows traditional temple towers. The camera pans to the left, repositioning the modern city—of skyscrapers and planned greeneries—in the same breath as the temple city. It is this fetish for

the simultaneity of traditional values and modern amenities that is repeatedly evoked in the segment. As the economic position of the real estate developer is threatened, he goes back to his childhood and the (rural) place of his childhood. This transgeographic and transhistorical movement, however, is a wish fantasy. Evocative of a morality play, the segment reveals its fetishistic bind: on the one hand, as already mentioned by the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, economic and moral revivalism go hand in hand; on the other hand, the same moral or traditional fundamentalism only gets heightened in times of economic crisis. This means that the crisis that generates the very nature of the archipelagic space is compounded by the crisis' either lack or excessive moral play. What it also implies is that national crisis, generated by the macro-economic policies of the nation-state, is individualistically reproduced.

The national crisis becomes the liberal individual's own moral crisis. Thus, the need to smile earnestly and frequently is prescribed by the developer's inner childhood. Such smile, however, given the tourist discourse that so pervades the gesture, is simply part and parcel of the national repackaging—one smiles to attract more tourists and investors, smiles to dismay the outside perception of a national crisis. For even within the nation, the crisis is only experienced by the developer in his mind, not in his actual childhood place that abounds in national cultural symbols and traditions. As such, the learning of the smile, becomes a bourgeois wish fantasy that things will get better before it gets worse. In the segment's end, the developer's morale is restored. He reenters his luxurious car, gaily ordering his uniformed driver to head back to Bangkok.

The individual allegory for the national is not at all covert. In the segment, the actor goes back to Ayundhya, Thailand's ancient capital. The teacher guide's voice-over is heard, explaining the present national and Bangkok population statistics. The national transformation may seem astounding, and this seems to be the desired filmic effect. For the sudden experience of newly found and lost wealth, as the literal movement of the nation's center implies, is part of the natural trajectory of nation-building. The present experience of economic highs and lows is projected as natural, as part of the project of developing national pride amidst constant and instant economic crisis and affluence.

Thailand's peninsular space, though evoking characteristics of the archipelagic space, is articulated through a simple horizontal mind

travel. It is as lateral as the camera movement in the film's opening scene. Perhaps, the particularities of the archipelagic space can be better articulated through the Indonesian segment.

In "Mirage," dreams of modernity are not just laterally experienced, as the long train-ride of Bawuk, the young female lead, suggests. After all, the train, like the female's body, is an agent of middle-class aspiration. Time and space are condensed in the film segment through the female lead's psychic development and entrapment in the city. Bawuk's travel to Jakarta, her anticipation of modernity, is not at all stalled even as her younger brother steals her modern clothes and throws these into the volcano's mouth. Unacquainted with city hoodlums, she is robbed in the train twice. She misrecognizes the police chief for the thief. While recovering from her anxious state, she is exposed to one of Jakarta's sex worker enclave.

What the film ingeniously presents is the activation of modern and middle-class aspirations transpatially, not through forms of literal mind play as in the Thai segment, but through technological mediations. In an intimate sequence in the film, Bawuk fondly glances at photos of friends from East Java, now working as household helpers in Jakarta. Similar photos are then flashed on screen, each one evoking the various markers of modern life: a posed shot beside an open piano, another beside the master's family car; a social circle of domestic helper friends, a heterosexual lover. Bawuk's poverty, the very status which occasions her aspirations of modernity, makes her susceptible to other tactics to acquire the middle-class markers. The film suggests the use of her body for sexual work, as what her new-found friend does in Jakarta's enclave. Poverty presents the material and psychic condition for her middle-class aspiration, producing a fantasy of mobility in the deprivation and anxiety of whether or not such dreams can ever be realized. There are two dream sequences in the film—one about an imagined lover suddenly struck by a car, another about her rural place. Torn between her deprived past and unstable future, Bawuk internalizes the city's contradictions.

The city again figures in the allegory of national development. The rural location is represented as backward and traditional, the city as riddled with internal contradictions. Torn between a backward periphery and a treacherous center—whether literally or psychically enclaved—the individual is continuously tormented. Her socialization to aspire for the modern, though meager, already prevents her from

returning to her originary past. Her movement is as inevitable as the movement of the city, i.e., its constant struggle to be the premier site and showcase of national modernization. The city's crisis is exteriorized through her interior anguish. Bawuk, like the city, unconsciously misrecognizes pain and suffering as natural and normal pathways to middle-class life. Her misrecognition of the identities of the cop and robber presents the critical edge to the understanding of the archipelagic space. Like the contours of the national condition, social identities, after all, are also in a flux and in constant crisis. Thus, the film intercuts rural and urban scenes, uses visual and audio transitions, conjures real and fantasy sequences. The film provides a dialectical positioning of ethos, one always imbricated and implicated by the other.

Bawuk's movement to the city is further exteriorized in the national movement of bodies for multinational work in "Aliwan Paradise." The state, through a static female figure transported through television, decides to re-use entertainment as an escape from the growing national crisis. It subcontracts the project through an employment agency, tasked with finding "radically new entertainment" in de Leon's black comedy. What then results from the lead characters' demonstration of real anguish and frustration is the repackaging of these images of poverty as commodity exportables. The segment ends with a sequence where the impresario directs an entire film production team to capture images of rural and urban poverty for commodity transformation.

Julio and Ligaya's bodies provide the nexus of these transformations. In Julio's auditioning to perform Christ crucified on a neon cross for traditional *sinakulos*, and in Ligaya's performing of sexy native song and dance numbers for an international male audience, the state imperative is again articulated through marginal bodies. The national bodies become the reliable sacrificial lambs that help sustain the economy especially in times of crisis. The couple's use of screen names (Jules Madigan and Gay Paradise) heightens a postmodern perspective in identity formation, one which foregrounds individual agency. Heralded by business and politics as ideal national representatives for export development, the lovers knowingly participate in the project, thereby placing themselves in some position of power, albeit limited.

What is specially interesting in the Philippine segment is the use of parody and media self-reflexivity. The commentaries are not only

socially generated but also mediated. The final scene, the audition for real jobs, and the board of inutile jurors all represent the diabolical nature of media. For media becomes liable to the whole project of nation-building and transformation. It is media which literally showcases nation-building and nationhood, creating spectacles and reinventing traditions for such national purposes. The recall of the immediate presidential administrations call the complicity into mind. Ferdinand Marcos controlled media ownership and proliferated warped presidential images even in times of personal and economic sickness and crisis. Cory Aquino used the media hype on her presidential ascendancy to pacify her atrocious human rights violations. Fidel Ramos used the media to sustain initiatives of a globalized nation through the proliferation of images of triumphant foreign trips.

The archipelagic space in this film is represented by images of uneven national development. So powerful are the images that the national individual's being is interpollated. This interpollation provides contexts for subjugation and subject formation. The archipelagic space is able to articulate the cultural politics of such a dialectics of erasure and foregrounding of social and geopolitical identities. Unlike the Indonesian segment that presented national identity and development as naturalistic and essential (the segment ends with a verse song, "The greatest gift goes purest in the heart."), the Philippine segment interrogates the arbitrariness of the construction and projection of national identity and development.

Conclusion

Southern Winds explores the contours of the archipelagic space: how transnational and local initiatives and maneuvers are experienced through the spatial planes of the city and body. These, in turn, construct the bifurcated notion of national being, always already engaged in a dialectics of modern and tradition, rural and urbane, cosmopolitan and parochial, nationalist and globalist, and so on.

The intertwining discourse of film and development in various national sites of the regional archipelagic space is analogous to the nature of insularity in two ways: how development is divergently experienced by "vested interest" (big businesses and the state), on the one hand, and by the vast majority of historically disenfranchised people, on the other hand. Like Raul Pertierra's take on the contour

of Philippine studies, insularity "is not local knowledge but knowledge of the local under conditions of the globality" (1995, 8). As such, it is a study of the familiar in the local as situated in the global. The insular is a perspectival approach, a way of working out issues of the transnational and multinational, colonial and imperial, postmodern and postcolonial imperatives.

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