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## Of Non-Places and No Man's Lands

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A PROFESSOR IN ONE OF MY FILM COURSES once asked if we get lost in the movies. By 'lost' she meant being immersed in the intentionalities and problematics of the film's narrative structure that sutures you to its story and makes one forget about the political economy involved behind the creation of that particular film. In thinking through my own experiences, I thought Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) speaks volumes about loneliness in a foreign land—a position I was in during the first semester I entered graduate school. The protagonist's labyrinthine journey in the maze of Tokyo's business district found a correlative expression in my own mournful solitude in the sea of whiteness in my new university. The real and the reel followed different paths but somehow collided and created a city of sadness leading me to wonder what particularities of Coppola's artistic and personal politics enabled her to capture the exact shade of sadness in the film that a Filipino like myself also felt.

Pauline Kael (1965) has taught me that a film can be a cultural text that need not follow a formula to be dissected and discussed. This position clearly challenges everything that creates monolithic blocks of theory that taxonomically classifies films for whatever purpose and for whom it will be useful—from the auteur theorization Andrew Sarris helped to develop in 1962 to Siegfried Kracauer's seminal *Theory of Film* (1960). It emboldens me to evaluate Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik's *Mababangong Bangungot* (*Perfumed Nightmare*, 1976) not only through Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque but also through other approaches. These approaches are not necessarily glimpsed via the lenses of say, a displaced Filipino national or of a diasporic subject experiencing transnational melancholia. *Mababangong Bangungot* opens up a space where Marcosian jokes that are phenomenologically embedded in the consciousness of anyone growing up during the Martial Law years are trans-textually employed in the playful use of the local language that simultaneously captures and eludes the texts'

'official' subtitles. After Fredric Jameson (1992) presented the film and *Kidlat Tahimik* as art-naif in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1992), various other voices came to offer different readings. For sure, the film's palimpsest narration and guerilla aesthetics of 'found footage' accommodate a range of textual investigations and cultural mediations from various geopolitical spaces. *Kidlat* himself confessed to me in 2006 in Manila that he does not understand the polemical works being written about *Mababangong Bangungot*. Or in his words: "*Nagkaroon ng sariling buhay ang pelikulang 'yan'*" (That film has taken a life of its own outside of me).

As my own personal sojourns and explorations in film unfolded, I became enraptured with the various forms of 'national' cinemas. However unique they may be perceived in terms of thematics as lensed through their own brand of cinematics, I realized much later on that ascribing a specific national style for the films a particular country produces can be problematic: it perpetuates the notion that some kind of meta-narrative is responsible that mediates in the national cinematic articulation (Bhabha 1990). Someone asked me if I thought Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* (2000) is idiomatically Mexican. Can it also be Canadian? By extending this question, is the concept of national cinema still useful? Can there ever be a national cinema? It depends who is speaking. When you employ Marc Augé's theory of non-places, things show some ruptures and slippages. Non-places dislocate the embeddedness of 'national' signifiers because of the former's homogenized and anodyne qualities (Augé 1992). Looking at scenes showing terminals and supermarkets in *Amores Perros*, the space ceases to be associated with a country as these non-places of uniform culture manage to disorient the viewers away from the country the film hails from. Non-places also operate outside the realm of cinema: in the foyers of five-star hotels, the central business districts, theme parks and even in the iconographies used in the internet that offers service, information or mediated forms of gratification. Non-places never truly erase the referents but imbues these 'national' signifiers a gradual disappearance. (Augé 1992) Once when I was standing in line for a Danish film, a moviegoer remarked to me that to him all films at their base are alike. His statement was similar to what a news journalist said at the conclusion of Danis Tanovic's *No Man's Land* (2001). When asked by a cameraman if he will film the trench where a bloody confrontation took place minutes ago to give legitimization to the place, the news journalist replied: "No, a trench is a trench. They're all the same."

*No Man's Land's* titular place located between the borders of Serbia and Bosnia was actually shot in Slovenia. Does this 'crime against geography' matter to most moviegoers? Chris Lukinbeal (2005) has argued that geographic realism remains valid only among viewers if the narrative assists in the construction (and perpetuation) of the ontologically authentic. On the other hand, Kracauer observed that a particular kind of soul permeates a cinematic image with the use of the actual and real landscape. But this also begs a further question: real to whom? The world of media has offered

countless examples how new spaces opened up to create newer ones by utilizing the same codes and indexical likeness to replicate the original ones. Indeed, *No Man's Land's* geographic no-man's land serves as a postmodern and hyperrealist region that stands for everything and nothing at the same time. Like being home and abroad at the same time; simultaneously foreign and native.

The various constructs accorded to a continually shifting definition of 'foreign' (like in the case of foreign films) beg to ask what constitutes 'home' and 'abroad' (Harbord 2007). The word 'foreign' implicates an exclusion, closed boundaries and of being outside of the national boundaries of a given country (although one can argue that the diasporic and exilic films remain in the middle despite various degrees of assimilation) (Naficy 2001). While contexts play a crucial role in the definition, what does it say about the complexity of foreign interventions and co-productions when members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences reject Switzerland's submission of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Rouge* (1994) as that country's entry to the Foreign Language category? The director was a Polish national while the film's language is in French. Filming location was in Geneva. Which country has the 'rightful' jurisdiction to claim this film as theirs? The Academy members stated that issues of 'artistic control' were not met hence the film's disqualification as Switzerland's entry. It seems that *Rouge* has entered a no-man's land from the perspective of the mostly North American members of the Academy. Janet Harbord (2007, 11) says: "[M]any films contain an acknowledgment of their alterity within the text itself, an acknowledged 'foreignness' that prefigures and confronts its perceived 'foreignness' to be met in its journeys of circulation."

Rob Marshall's screen adaptation of Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) offers an interesting parallel. A mostly Chinese cast (and Hollywood mainstays) instead of Japanese actors played the lead roles. Moviegoers I talk to do not care much about verisimilitude that may evade cinematic capture as long as the image makes a lasting impression. Does that signal the triumph of affect over realist registers? When a movie provides a good story with engaging performances, audience members I talk to are less concerned about what goes on behind production and creation. The finished product is consumed and there is less interest for its subsequent worldwide circulation. Or enough about Third Cinema's manifesto extolling the virtue of the film's radical becoming via community efforts rather than as a commodity that ensures capitalism's stranglehold of the world and its culture. After all, *No Man's Land* won the Best Foreign Language Oscar in 2001 while the issue hounding *Memoirs of a Geisha* and its controversial casting decision were smoothed over by favorable box-office receipts on its opening weekend.

I am still wary about films when I read of their claims to greatness. Much as I champion unheralded films with their own grassroots financing, or those coming from other countries with fledgling movie industries, I am also aware of my fetishization for these types of films. Some of these subtitled films are hegemonic in their own countries of origin, quashing independent efforts that may not have the machinery to

move beyond the national border for circulation and distribution. The rise of digital films along with the rise of micro-fibric-based media forms has transformed everyday landscapes and altered the way we view films. Or as Janet Harbord (2007, 39) says: “one of the most critical tasks that a film performs is a question of how we thread together the differences that we come in contact with, or conversely how social, cultural and ethnic differences are to be comprehended as beyond our repertoire of experience.”

I am excited that *Aether* is creating a space to critically engage with the future directions and trajectories of media geography and providing a site to re-visit and re-engage with older debates. My interest in film as a form of media and the global path it has taken has allowed me to investigate slippages and ruptures on issues of identity, border crossing, hybridity and transculturation. I always remember that defining final scene in Walter Salles’ *Diarios de Motocicleta* (2004) when the pre-revolutionary Che Guevarra swam the Amazon in an effort to shatter, break and transgress the borders to be with the lepers whose voices are muted or not heard. It is therefore exciting to see how the film’s texts and contexts create an alternative map that allows affect, landscape, metaphor, and subjectivity to freely chart its own path and draw its own cartographic line.

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