

# The Prevalent Cinematic Adaptation in the Woman's Film of the 1950s<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The genre called the "woman's film" was transplanted from Hollywood to the Philippines during the Golden Age of Philippine Cinema in the 1950s. It may have drawn influences from Spanish colonial traditional theatre that was heavily predisposed to infusing elements of romance, music and even comedy. Although there were stories or plots that were written directly for the cinema, a number of films in the '50s were adaptations of komiks stories published in the Liwayway magazine. These productions revealed a close resemblance to the woman's film genre. This practice of generic re-articulation raises a number of concerns pertaining to the representation of the Filipino woman in popular culture, namely: (1) the embedding of the female image within the bourgeoisie ethos; (2) the female characters' subtle co-optation in maintaining the status quo; and (3) the deployment of the traditional concept of womanhood via the romantic comedy genre and the sub-genre known as the marriage plot.*

*This paper then investigates how female roles and female-related plots were engaged, invoked, or even compromised at the height cinematic adaptation during an important era of Filipino cinema.*

*Keywords: woman's film, komiks-to-film adaptation, prevalent film adaptation, feminism in film, status quo, romantic genre, marriage plot*

## Introduction

The "woman's film" is a category of film or film genre specifically addressing women's concerns. It may be of two predispositions. One is to address female spectatorship, which refers to the assumption that "certain representations are aimed at a female audience." (Kuhn, 2000, p. 440) Another is the subject of film which obviously is gendered or is about the woman. As Haskell (1973) avers: "In the woman's film, the woman – a woman – is at the center of the universe" (p.155). Therefore, the woman's film represents a genre that borrows from other types as it intersects with melodrama, comedy, fantasy, and the like in terms of subject and spectatorship.

Two films produced in the 1950s may be considered examples of the "woman's film," based on their titles. These are *Aristokrata* (1954) and *Despatsadora* (1955), both based on a komiks series published in

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of the paper read at the 10<sup>th</sup> ICOPHIL Conference held on July 6 to 8, 2016 at Silliman University, Dumaguete City. It is part of a longer work which aims to construct a theory of Filipino film adaptation.

*Liwayway* magazine and adapted into films by Sampaguita Pictures, Inc. Their being assigned the label "woman's film" shows an appropriation from their Hollywood precursors and which has been based on the subject matter and features of the two cases, both as source texts (komiks) and as target texts (film adaptations).

Mary Ann Doane (1987) claims that the woman's film cannot be considered a "pure" genre because it draws inspiration and influences from other types. In the case of the two examples, the films invoke the romantic comedy as genre and the marriage plot, the Female Bildungsroman, the crime and action subplots as part of the modes and strategies in executing the main generic category.

If *Aristokrata* and *Despatsadora* are examples of the woman's film, what may be cited as the function of the komiks source? The komiks sources serve as cultural proto-texts for the target texts which are the films. They reflect the multiple origins of cultural narratives and the influence of texts on other texts in a dynamic adaptive environment. The komiks series serves as one of the platforms by which narratives about gender relations may be explored even if the primary interest of the medium is commercial and not aesthetic. The provenance of the story material in komiks invites migration into another form; in the same manner that theatre and Tagalog novels inspired film adaptations in the 1930s. Without doubt, the readers of the *Liwayway* stories were not too far-fetched from the profile of the film viewers who were just happy to learn that their pleasure over this piece of entertainment has been given quite an extension or prolonged run. The transmediation becomes part of the natural order of things. It has been pre-meditated and expected.

*Aristokrata* began publication as a *Liwayway* komiks series on January 25, 1954 and lasted until November 8, 1954, with a total of forty-two (42) issues. Co-written by Nemesio Caravana, Clodualdo Del Mundo and A.P. Laudico, the komiks series was illustrated by Noly Panaligan. The film version was adapted for the screen by Conrado Conde and Willie Orfilada. Rogelio dela Rosa played the role of Carlos Carbonel and Alicia Vergel the role of Marieta Solomon. The film, directed by Olive La Torre, opened on November 1, 1954 at Life Theater.

*Despatsadora* began publication in the *Liwayway* magazine on October 4, 1954 and ended on July 18, 1955. It ran for forty-two (42) episodes. Written by Nemesio Caravana and A.C. Batungbakal and illustrated by Bes Nlevera, the film version was adapted for the screen by Chito Tapawan. Directed by Tony Cayado and starred Gloria Romero, Luis Gonzales and Dolphy, the film premiered on July 9, 1955 at Life Theater.

### **The Woman's Film and the Issue of Class**

Implicit in the narrative of the woman's film and the source komiks text is the delineation of class-based issues. The stories are predisposed to engaging the primary woman character in being complicit in maintaining bourgeois ethos. The characters are shown as products of their class, or as characters aspiring to move up the social ladder. Their struggle is both economic and moral in orientation. As Haskell

(1973) notes, "Central to the woman's film is the notion of middle-classness, not just as an economic status, but as a state of mind and a relatively rigid moral code" (p. 159).

In *Aristokrata*, Marieta Solomon, played by Alicia Vergel, is the daughter of the hacendero Don Pedro, played by Panchito. She is proud and unrelenting. She claims that she can only marry the man who can measure up to her. Protected by her family's money, the bourgeois in Marieta is self-fashioned, brought about by her pedigree. But similar to woman's films from the U.S. during their heyday in the 1930s, the woman character may have everything – money, education, taste – but without love, she is not a complete woman. The Hollywood example, for instance, requires a choice between love and the rest. Haskell recounts: "The pattern of such films is to open with a period in which the heroine is spoiled and petted (metaphorically, of course) by several devoted males whose infatuation she either does not notice or is aggrieved by after which she is given an ultimatum. She has to make a decision" (pp. 164-165).

Marietta's feistiness is soon softened by the appearance of an outlaw, Carlos Carbonel, who once belonged to her own class but was pushed to the margins after he was robbed of his land. The initial animosity led to love and their aspirations became united. The outlaw falls for the irreverent woman on the pretext of love. However, the more serious issues of feudal values and injustice are invoked as a function of the setting rather than that of politics.

This is also where iconography and stereotyping of women intersect in the woman's film. Part of the enterprise of maintaining middle class values is projecting a female stereotype. The men are typically depicted as social creatures completed by work and status but the women, in contrast, are forced to choose between career or family circumstance and love. Carlos Carbonel, played by Rogelio dela Rosa, has a historical back story. A *taong labas* or a bandit, Carbonel inhabits a particular space in recent Philippine history while Marietta could be any aristocratic girl who realizes that she needs love after all.

Claire Johnston (2000), in her article, "Women's cinemas as counter-cinema" confirms how filmic iconography has supposedly propelled the female stereotypes that have no parallel in the depiction of the male throughout Hollywood history. To quote Johnston (2000): "Iconography as a specific kind of sign or cluster of signs based on certain conventions within the Hollywood genres has been partly responsible for the stereotyping of women within the commercial cinema in general, but the fact that there is a far greater differentiation of men's roles than women's roles in the history of the cinema relates to sexist ideology itself, and the basic opposition which places man inside history, and woman as ahistorical and eternal" (p. 23).

An example of iconography becoming a conduit to stereotyping is portrayed in this scene from the komiks and film. The initial meeting between the outlaw and the aristocratic lady is embedded in the device of romance in which an initial animosity between the pair eventually leads to attraction. Dressed in their "Estacio's" wardrobe, the encounter foregrounds romance but seems to muffle the subtext of landgrabbing. Politics is overtaken by typeage and convention. Nevertheless, Carlos' characterization is

"historical" in that he is a bandit - a historical by-product of 1950s agrarian problem - while Marieta is "ahistorical" and occupies no particular space in the sociality of the narrative.



**Figure 1. Outlawed Men, Irreverent Women**

*Following the template of romantic comedy, the initial animosity between man and woman eventually leads to attraction and love.*

In *Despatsadora*, Corazon, played by Gloria Romero, is an illegitimate daughter of a rich department store owner played by Dolphy. While she belongs to the lower class (She plies the streets of Manila to sell local delicacies.), her rich biological father has promised to save her from such dire straits. As she has been recruited by her father to work in his store as a sales clerk in order to spy on erring employees, she meets Ernesto, played by Luis Gonzales, a rich bachelor, who would fulfill her bourgeois aspiration. The subtext is the commercialization of establishment in downtown Manila and the dream of every citizen to become part of the new social lifestyle tied to material goods and services. The love story between a rich boy and a poor girl, who will soon become moneyed, surpasses all texts, subtexts and contexts.

The consumerist subtext is muffled as the genre calls for the narrative to take hold of the new context. The deployment of the Escolta setting and the characters' occupation confirm that "there was an increasingly marked emphasis on consumerism within feminine culture" (Radner, 1993, p. 58). The figure below reflects how the struggle of a woman to become a bourgeois is tied to the consumerist environment of an Escolta store. The implication on the new materialist culture and the emphasis on blue-collared work are hardly problematized. Instead, the iconography of the actors, as this has been inscribed in a specific time and place, elaborate a sort of a stereotype of a modern Cinderella who can leap from sales girl to a moneyed heiress, by virtue of her father's wish and the luck of finding a man's love. Haskell (1973) describes such plots interestingly: "It is the fiction of the 'ordinary woman' who becomes extraordinary, the woman who begins as victim of discriminatory circumstances and rises, through pain, obsession, or defiance, to become mistress of her fate" (p. 161).





**Figure 2. Recreating the Fifties Department Store**

*Commodities are displayed inside the department store story. Sales girls become a regular sight in this komiks recreation of an Escolta store. Right. Doña Maria (Etang Discher) seeks the help of a sales girl (Bella Flores) in making her purchase.*

### **The Woman's Film in The Maintenance of Status Quo**

The woman's film is a genre film that intersects with similar genres and sub-genres. It is a type under the romantic comedy category. In the same manner, the romantic comedy may be considered as a mode of the woman's film, along with the marriage plot. As a genre film, the woman's film fulfills the same structure and function of other categories of films that have been characterized by convention rather than uniqueness, commercial viability rather than aesthetic considerations.

Raphael Moine (2008) connects the genre to a set of filmic techniques pre-conditioned by industry's needs and demands:

Genre thus serves to indicate a form of seriality, and the generic identity of a genre film depends on an industrial node of production that is characteristic of mass culture. A genre film is constructed out of a limited repertoire of techniques that can be viewed as common property, which allows a large audience to become established that remains enthusiastic about the genre. (p.99)

The key word in Moine's remark is "seriality," which captures exactly the migration from komiks to film and from film to other films of the same category. *Aristokrata* and *Despalsadora* follow the same path and thus cannot afford to include elements that may go against the grain or beyond convention. As "generically-modeled films" (Neale, 2000, qtd in Moine, 2008, p. 98), the two Sampaguita Films productions contain values that maintain rather than upset the status quo. Judith Hess (1977) confirms the partnership between genre and the status quo:

I think that we may see what genre films are by examining what they do. These films came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the

fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts; they helped to discourage any action which might otherwise follow upon the pressure generated by living with these conflicts. (pp. 53-54).

In *Aristokrata*, the character of Marietta fits what Haskell (1973) labels as "women as models" because they are "extraordinary" and they are "exceptions to the rule, the aristocrats of their sex" (p. 160). Marieta, similar to her Hollywood kin, is her own person. She lives independently and engages in men's physical activities. The figure below from the komiks and the film shows her traversing the



**Figure 3: The Setting As protagonist**

*Marieta is in her true element when traversing the countryside on horseback. Here, the setting is her willing accomplice and ally.*

This would be the last episode in which she is seen as a tough woman with a masculine sentiment because she would slide back into the role of a feminine character. Carlos takes her in captivity and tries to soften her. In the eyes of the male komiks writers, the old self must give in to the "authentic" which in their books means "acceptable." As Haskell (1973) laments the destiny of the extraordinary women: "But their status as emancipated women, based as it is on the very quality of being exceptional, weakens their political value as demonstration-model victims and makes them, in their independence, unpopular with a majority of men and woman" (p. 160). Soon after, Marieta, her defenses down, succumbs to the primal need of the woman to be cherished. It eventually drowns all other needs. Love becomes the ultimate gift.

In *Despatsadora*, the girl who finds strength in earning her own living and eventually being acknowledged and supported by her estranged father should be enough to make Corazon happy. The iconography of the "ordinary" girl, exemplified in Figure 4 below, is a regular feature in a woman's film.





**Figure 4: Manila Scenes Transposed From Komiks To Screen**

*The streets of downtown Manila in the 1950s saw the rise of big department stores. The opening credits in *Despatsadora* have been superimposed on actual images of Manila streets bustling with action and commercialism.*

Corazon's story follows the reversal of fortune motif which transforms a destitute girl into a legitimate heir but through some hard work and innate goodness. Haskell (1973) claims that this kind of heroine is found in a category of woman's film that accommodate the rewards of ordinariness:

It is the fiction of the 'ordinary woman who becomes extraordinary,' the woman who begins as a victim of discriminatory circumstances and rises, through pain, obsession, or defiance, to become mistress of her fate. Between the suds of soap opera we watch her

scale the heights of Stendhalian romance. Her ascent is given stature and conviction not through discreet contempt for the female sensibility, but through an all-out belief in it, through the faith, expressed in directorial sympathy and style, that the swirling river of a woman's emotions is as important as anything on earth. (p. 161)

The Cinderella story pattern is a convention of the romantic comedy although not all women's film operates this way. Corazon's journey may be desirable ostensibly – from poverty to wealth; from ordinariness to the cherished girl of an eligible bachelor but as in any genre film, the status quo is affirmed. The growing urbanization of the Manila environment is welcomed but is only made to serve as a background to action rather than a major issue. An example is seen in the following figure.



**Figure 5: The Home Of The Nouveau Riche As Portrayed In Komiks**

*Entrepreneurial minds such as Pascual's turn big time in the '50s. The home of Don Pascual has not been shown in full detail in the film. The movie version chose to concentrate on showing the interiors of houses and stores.*

The figures above confirm the role of new money and the industrial sectors in reinvigorating the *mise-en-scene* in a woman's film. The consumerism in Manila in the 1950s lends further challenge to the working single girl like Corazon but like in other romance flicks, she soon realizes that the empowerment brought by work and independence cannot compare to the love of a man.

The status quo is further affirmed through the invocation of the marriage plot – the ending of most romantic comedies and a great many woman's films. A legacy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional marriage or romance plot is the ultimate expression of the willing co-optation of the woman's film with the prevailing norm or status quo. The marriage plot is a strategy of the romance genre to provide a



resolution to the trials of the heroine through a reward of commitment from the man or a promise of marriage. The marriage plot, as Brownstein (1982 qtd in Radner, 1993) defines it, is about "finding validation of one's uniqueness and importance by being singled out among all other women by a man" (p.57). This is operative in the two films, which by implication, end with a promise of true love.

Marieta, the *aristokrata*, is promised to Carlos; on the other hand Corazon, the sales girl, ends up with Ernesto. All these do not just unfold in traditional narrative. The musical trope is summoned to add sparkle to the romance plot. This is true in *Despatsadora* as the heroine, Gloria Romero, bursts into a *kundiman* (Figure 6). Restie Umali's musical score and Pastor de Jesus' composition became the song to celebrate the excitement of new love.

**Figure 6: The Kundiman (song) Featured in a Romance/Woman's Film**



**Figure 6. The Kundiman (song) featured in a Romance /Woman's Film**  
*The heroine bursts into a song; a regular feature of a Filipino romantic comedy-cum-woman's film.*

Another motif is the denouement showing the enmity between the feuding families breached through the love between the two parties. The reconciliation is the only way to conclude the love that sprang from unlikely love interests. In Figure 7, Carlos and Marieta finally acknowledge the need to forgive in order to love freely.

The marriage plot is the ultimate expression of the status quo, being an affirmation of an institution that governs normative values. Through the marriage plot's salience in the woman's film, the conflicts and contradictions of power structures and gender inequalities are swept under the rug. Marriage becomes the neat solution to eradicate enmity between families who represent serious social ills. Marriage becomes the destiny of a rags-to-riches heroine whose victory is completed by the love of a man.



**Figure 7: The Trope of Romance**

*The romantic comedy genre is about a woman's self-realization through a love relationship. Here, both the struggle for justice and the meeting between man and woman have been romanticized -- which may be believable only within the universe of fiction.*

In the 1950s, many more films bearing these plots were adapted from their komiks sources because the status quo needs to be affirmed constantly. The plot survived because the social implication is far reaching. Hess (1977) articulates well the close link between the perpetuation of genre films and the status quo:

We may trace the amazing survival and proliferation of the genre films to their function. They assist in the maintenance of the existing political structure. The solutions these films give to the conflicts inherent in capitalism require obeisance to the ruling class, and cause the viewer to yearn for less, not greater freedom in the face of the insoluble ambiguities which surround him or her. He/she is encouraged to cease examining his/her surroundings, and to take refuge in fantasy from his/her only real alternative – to rise up against the injustices perpetrated by the present system upon its members. (p.61)

### **Vernacularizing an Alien Form**

As a label examined in academic discourse, the "woman's film" is an imported one. Haskell (1973) considers it a particularly Anglo-American genre and has no counterpart in Europe. In fact, even if it has been considered to be a growing part of feminist film criticism, it is viewed with skepticism, if not disdain. Pam Cook (in Collins, Radner and Preacher, 1993) revives a line she has written earlier: "One question insists: why does the women's picture exist? There is no such thing as 'the men's picture,' specifically addressed to men" (p. 229). The genre points to a realm where there is admission of the marginalization suffered by women both in discourse and in creative production.

While the scholars of the woman's film run the risk of self-othering, the discussion continues to produce debates from the serious to the parodic. Haskell (1973) delivers her with humor: "The term 'woman's film' is used disparagingly to conjure up the image of the pinched-virgin or little-old-lady writer, spilling out her secret longings in wish fulfillment or glorious martyrdom, and transmitting these fantasies to the frustrated housewife. The final image is one of wet, waster afternoons" (p. 154).



The image conjured of the woman in the woman's film in the 1950s Philippines may vary a little because the struggles of the Filipino woman have been slightly different from their American counterparts. The varying images of the Filipino woman were informed by their contexts. Several processes of filtration, of influence, of tradition of borrowing, and of indigenization render Philippine popular texts and the representation of women a more intertextual one. In her article titled "Beyond Madonna and Magdalena: The variety of female characters in popular texts," Soledad Reyes (2012) describes the behavior of Philippine popular texts in relation to other texts: "It is possible that these texts conceal or ignore their links with other texts, and yet it is also possible that the texts are conventionalized, in the sense that they are aware of and sometimes even refer to similar texts, and similar representations" (p. 31).

Annette Kuhn (2000) avers: "One of the defining generic features of the woman's picture as a textual system is its construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view" (p. 437). The female desire is decipherable in the characters' both conscious and unconscious pursuit of love even if they have other preoccupations (independence for Marieta; reconciliation for Corazon). In other words, the ultimate female desire remains to be cherished by a man or to lead a normal existence or to satisfy societal expectations. The woman is summoned to affirm the status quo.

The woman's film or the woman's fiction in general was a prevalent genre in the 1950s, which reflected parallels with the Hollywood template, but also revealed qualities indigenous to Filipino narrative traditions. The privileging of middle class values and the predisposition to rally behind the status quo for fear of upsetting comfort zones are universal in application but become more salient in the highly puritanical Catholicity of 1950s values and the attachment of Filipinos to family, to patronage, and the value of *pakikisama*. In the process, the woman question, a hostage of larger societal and cultural forces, bends to the milieu and to current exigencies. The woman's film becomes co-opted in the prevalent komiks-to-film adaptation by representing the woman as a product of class and at the same, a co-maker of the same class category. As a fictional construct, she is tailor-fitted into the romantic comedy genre, aided by the tropes of the marriage plot while upholding values that sacrifice debate in favor of conformity; that pursue love instead of other needs; and that follow the norm instead of upsetting sensibilities, which she helps suppress as a matter of convention. #

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