

The Personal in Cinema

IN "INTERLUDE: ARE YOU HAVING FUN?"

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It is said that the film-viewing experience is personal and subjective. Viewers relate to the characters and settings portrayed on the screen. But this personal nature of film is often felt only by a limited population or group. Growing up in a rural town in Isabela with neither film production houses nor movie theaters, I often had difficulty relating to what I saw on the big screen. “*Interlude: Are You Having Fun?*,” a short film by Mervine Aquino, is the first film that made me see myself in cinema. Its discussion of rural life through the use of familiar characters validated my personal views and experiences.

“*Interlude*” is a 12-minute narrative film that tells the story of a family reunion in a rural setting. It is set in Nueva Ecija where the residential areas are interspersed with agricultural lands. It follows a big family celebrating a birthday party. While the film follows the viewpoint of a child protagonist, it provides a sketch of various characters found in a Filipino family. By doing so, it presents to the audience a study on filial dynamics, relationships, and the idiosyncrasies of Filipino life in the barrio.

The film’s setting plays an important role in telling the narrative. The human experience presented in “*Interlude*” is tied to its setting in that the film’s elements would be starkly different when set in an urban locale. For one, the way of life of the people including their food and rituals are different from those belonging to different areas or social class. Nueva Ecija’s population, many of whom are farmers, have different concerns from, say, fisherfolks in Mindoro.

Contemporary mainstream Filipino films often focus on the middle-class experience of mestizo-looking characters. The lives of these characters revolve around the busy nature of the city, where they seek to solve grand problems and crises. “*Interlude*” counters these typical cinematic narratives as it tells an unassuming tale of a family gathering. There is no crisis to solve. Instead, life is captured as is. The film’s conflict is as simple as how a power outage stopped the party—goers from using a karaoke machine.

In the first few scenes, the audience can see the awkward “acting” of the cast, most of whom are non-actors. As the performers try hard not to look into the camera, they appear as stiff figures unable to convey emotions. Given this, the viewers may find it hard to suspend their disbelief. But this is the intention of the film. Hand-held shooting, zoom-ins, and mixing actors with non-actors form the home movie aesthetic of the film. The audience realizes that they are not watching a drama unfolding, but they are seeing an actual family revelry and are taking part in it.

While the use of home movies is not new to Philippine cinema, recent digital films like “*Interlude*” are

testaments to how local films can capture the lives of everyday Filipinos. What is real and present can be filmed as is. There is no need for extensive production design and lighting.

As the story progresses, characters become more comfortable on the screen. The line distinguishing them as mere cinematic personas begins to blur. “*Interlude*” does this by including non-scripted scenes. At one point in the film, the protagonist even gestures to the presence of the camera as he instructs others around him to not “look into the camera.” This kind of scene builds an emotional connection between the audience and the film. The audience is not watching an actor, but it is witnessing a real event.

The film also puts onscreen activities that may seem trivial. Ordinary activities that may be deemed unworthy of the costly process of film production are the highlight of “*Interlude*.” It allows people to look at cinema differently—not as a form of spectacle but as a record of everyday life. The formalities and borders of cinema are diminished.

For those who have lived a rural life like me, this form of family gathering is nostalgic. I can relate to the children characters playing by the rice fields. I am familiar with the reverence for the freshwater eels caught in fishponds because seafood is scarce in my region. Meanwhile, for those who grew up in a different setting, the film remains relatable as it showcases familiar scenarios. College students being asked when to graduate, young adults discovering alcohol, and the elderly exchanging gossip are examples of what happens during family reunions. Anyone who has observed or is part of a Filipino family can connect to the filial tale told by the movie.

It is high time for Filipinos who live in rural areas to see their stories told onscreen. In the film, the family gathers in a house beside a rice field—a site recognizable to those who live or have lived in the province. The activities revolve around an agricultural backdrop—a reality shared by more than half of the Philippine population. These minute details mean so much for an audience that has been exposed to films set in the concrete jungles of the metro. “*Interlude*’s” depictions validate such an audience’s experience, making the viewers feel that their view of Filipino life is as legitimate as the view of the middle-class mestizos that rule their media.

As filmmakers from local communities and marginalized groups get access to film equipment and technologies, we get to see more nuanced and complex narratives. As filmmaking becomes inexpensive, we get to see more local stories told in films. Narratives that have been set aside in the past get to be framed and eventually preserved by cinema.

Opposite page:
Screengrab from *Interlude: Are You Having Fun?* (Mervine Aquino, Kumukulong Sabaw, 2016). Courtesy of Heinrich Domingo.

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