

MAPPING MILESTONES IN THE CONTEMPORARY

FILM SCENE IN MINDANAO

Jay Rosas



SHORT TAKE

In October 2019, a three-day Davao film retrospective screening was held at the Holy Cross of Davao College as part of the centennial celebration of Philippine cinema called Sandaan. Although this event was specific to films made by Davao-born filmmakers, it commenced with a screening of *Lakaran ni Kabunyan* (Kabunyan's Journey), Kidlat Tahimik's episode in the omnibus film *Lakbayan* (Journey, 2018) with Lav Diaz and Brillante Mendoza. Like the other episodes that are centered on journeys, Tahimik's episode mirrors the road-movie narrative of his debut film *Mababangong Bangungot* (Perfumed Nightmare, 1977) as he films his son Kabunyan traveling from Baguio to Davao via a camper van. Kabunyan now resides in Samal, an island 15 minutes away by ferry from Davao.

The full-length film program included Sherad Anthony Sanchez's *Huling Balyan ng Bubi o ang Sinalirap nga Asoy Nila* (The Last Priestess of Buhi or The Woven Stories of the Other, 2006), Arnel Mardoquio's *Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim* (Journey of the Stars Into The Dark Night, 2012), Bagane Fiola's *Baboy Halas* (Wailings in the Forest, 2016), and Arnel Barbarona's *Tu Pug Imatuy* (The Right to Kill, 2017). Among the filmmakers, only Fiola continues to reside in Davao City, though he was born in Cagayan de Oro and has also lived in North Cotabato. Barbarona, for the most part, has lived in Davao City but has recently moved to Davao de Oro (formerly Compostela Valley), where he also shot his last film, the QCinema entry *Kaarway sa Sulod* (The Enemy Within, 2019). Sanchez is currently residing in Manila and Mardoquio abroad, but Mindanao continues to figure in the narratives of their films.

As the programmer, I pondered on this reality of movements and origins when I introduced these films to the audience in trying to make sense of the title of the event. It is a Davao films retrospective yet the opening film is clearly unclassifiable in its regionality. None of the films makes Davao, particularly its urban landscape and peoples,

the center of its narratives. (Fiola's second film *Sonata Maria* [2014], however, might be an example of a Davao City film, with the story entirely happening in the city's downtown area, but it was not included in the program). This difficulty in trying to identify a "Davao cinema" mirrors the difficult task of defining regional cinema as concretely as one would say there is filmmaking in the regions. This task surfaces the complex construction of a Philippine regional cinema that has, for the last decade, demonstrated a fluidity in its movements. Yet more films are now being produced in different regions in the Philippines, with vibrant filmmaking communities in Cebu, Pampanga, Davao, Bacolod, Iloilo, and even in towns like Nabunturan, where filmmaking is practiced by students, teachers, and local government employees.

Mindanao-born filmmakers, as shown in the films programmed, have chosen to tell stories of cultural and socio-political importance that are experienced by Mindanao as a whole, reflecting a consciousness developed by the realities of their origins and the experience of living in Mindanao. Unlike Visayas, Mindanao is an island-region characterized by its interconnectivity. While previous violent incidents have only occurred in remote parts of the region, more developed areas like Davao City are still vulnerable from emerging threats like the ISIS-led violent extremism that triggered the Marawi Siege. In 2016, a bomb exploded at the Roxas Night Market in Davao that killed 15 people and injured dozens more. Jarell Serencio's short film "Mga Bitoon sa Siyudad" (Stars in the City, 2016), about two boys plying the night market stall

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Omeles Laglagan, a Matigsalog forest hunter, plays the protagonist in Bagane Fiola's *Baboy Halas* (2016), shot in the hinterlands of Davao. Courtesy of Fiola.

A Manobo family at the heart of Arnel Barbarona's *Tu Pug Imatuy* (2017) about the lingering struggles of Lumads. Courtesy of Barbarona.



patrons for loose change, ends tragically with that bombing incident, while Keisha Halili’s short film “Ang Pagbalik sa Ugat-hinungdan” (The Return to Reason, 2019) examines the effect of the bombing on the lives of those affected through the story of a barbecue vendor.

Emergence of regional film communities and filmmakers

Sanchez’s *Huling Balyan ng Bubi* which became part of the 2006 Cinema One Originals Film Festival is considered to be the first full-length film to come from Mindanao, perhaps in decades. According to Dax Cañedo, the film “brought together many film workers and talents in Mindanao to a feature film production that would, for the first time, compete in a national film festival.” Cañedo, who was part of the production together with some Davao filmmakers, would a year after form the Mindanao Film and Television Development Foundation (MFTDFI). Initially, the group encountered a problem with the festival’s previous name—Guerilla Film Festival following the Guerilla Filmmaking Workshop—as a military guest reportedly mistook the festival as being connected to the New People’s Army (NPA). MFTDFI consequently changed the name to the Mindanao Film Festival but retained the name of the workshop, still owing to the guerilla style of filmmaking in the region. Now on its 17th year, the MFF is the longest running regional film festival in the country.

The emergence of regional film festivals saw the rise of film communities in Mindanao. In Northern Mindanao, the CineMagis Digital Film Festival in Cagayan de Oro City started in 2009 and in December 2019, the Cine de Oro Film Festival, a filmmakers-led film festival was launched. In Zamboanga, the Festival de Cine Paz Mindanao began its run in 2017. In Region 12, although the Lantawan SOCKSARGEN Film Festival in General Santos City which started in 2014 has been discontinued, the Sine Lamdag in Koronadal was launched in 2018. There is also Cine Animo, a student film festival in Ozamiz City, formed in 2014. The Nabunturan Independent Film Exhibition (NABIFILMEX) was launched in 2013. Without the presence of a theater or screening venue, the films produced were showcased in the open-air municipal plaza of the festival. When the Open Air Cinema Foundation learned about the initiative, it donated a 20-foot inflatable screen where the films continue to be projected even as their own Cinematheque was built in 2019. All of these festivals, whether led by academe or a community of filmmakers, started with a focus on showcasing homegrown films but later invited and exhibited films from other regions including those outside Mindanao.

There is also the Ngilngig Film Festival (now Ngilngig Asian Fantastic Film Festival Davao) which started in 2015 as a horror-genre film festival expanding thematically in 2018 to showcase a more diverse lineup of films, including fantasy, sci-fi, and experimental. The rebranded Ngilngig expanded its reach in 2019 with international films in

exhibition and Asian films in competition. The Salamindanaw Asian Film Festival also rebranded three years ago (from “International” to “Asian”) to showcase films from Asia with focus on Southeast Asia. Salamindanaw, launched in 2013, was the first international film festival in Mindanao. Both Ngilngig and Salamindanaw have a workshop component focusing on story and script development. Salamindanaw’s Mindanao Screen Lab birthed the first full-length film from Cagayan de Oro—Joe Bacus’ *Markado* (The Moon Devourer, 2018), which had its premiere exhibition at the QCinema International Film Festival and went on to be screened at the 2019 Fukuoka International Film Festival. Ngilngig meanwhile developed its film workshops into a month-long program. An alternative to formal film school settings, these workshops present opportunities for aspiring filmmakers to develop their craft and provide a platform to find new and emerging voices in Mindanao cinema.

It is exciting to track the development of young filmmakers following their more established counterparts. Following Bacus, who is now developing his second feature film, fellow CDO filmmaker Julianne Ilagan directed her first full-length film *Kauyagan* (Way of Life, 2017), which was produced with a grant from Tofarm Film Festival. Ilagan was the first female filmmaker from Mindanao to have made a full-length film. Also from CDO, Jeffrie Po is developing his fourth short documentary after attending the Yamagata Rough Cut program during the 2017 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan. Short filmmakers who are in the process of developing their first full-length films include Rynne Murcia and Xeph Suarez from Zamboanga, and Jarell Serencio from Davao. Promising short filmmakers continue to emerge from the regional film festivals and exhibit their films in national film festivals. These filmmakers include Edmund Telmo from Ozamiz, whose “3021” competed in the 2018 Cinema One Originals, and Shaira Advincula from Koronadal, whose film “Tembong” (Connecting, 2018) won at the Cinemalaya in 2019 after its premiere and win at Salamindanaw.



Sherad Anthony Sanchez directing *Huling Balyan ng Bubi* (2006), which ushered in the era of digital film production. Courtesy of Mark Limbaga.

Narratives of return and reconnection

Films from these Mindanao filmmakers and other lesser-known ones whose work add relevance to the spectrum of Mindanao cinema continue to mirror the realities faced by the island-region. They also continue to rally for a space in the national discourse, telling narratives that push for a better understanding of the region, beyond the sensationalism and selectivity portrayed in mainstream media. Mindanao films also echo a rich sense of place while portraying the restlessness in and of the region. Mindanao films are also narratives of return and reconnection, of the struggles of grappling with new and emerging realities.

The stories, though told in the point of view of fictional characters, reflect the conditions and aspirations of the marginalized sectors of Mindanao, the Moro population and the Lumads—the indigenous peoples of Mindanao—who have long been affected by the increasing development aggression in the region. Characters in the films are caught in Mindanao’s changing environment—from the priestess in Sanchez’s *Huling Balyan* to the women of Mardoquio’s *Paglalakbay*, seeking for refuge in a protracted conflict, to the characters in the films of Gutierrez Mangansakan—from *Limbunan* (The Bridal Quarter, 2010), *The Obscured Histories and Silent Longings of Daguluan’s Children* (2012) and *Daughters of the Three-Tailed Banner* (2016)—who are caught between traditions and the promise of new and better lives.

These films attempt to examine a present-day Mindanao that is caught between status quo and the threshold of change. The transgender Nora in Mangansakan’s *Daughters* who has lived in the city and returns to the countryside observes that “nothing has changed.” In *Huling Balyan*, we see the slow fading of a culture and people as represented by the figure of the priestess and the stasis experienced by both soldiers and communist guerillas. In *Paglalakbay*, we

witness an attempt to escape from the conflict even while roles played by actors embroiled in the conflict are examined. Off-screen, a war is still being waged and the characters face an uncertain future. In *Daughters*, the film happens on the eve of the supposed installation of a new Bangsamoro government, which then remained at a standstill until the 2018 passing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) that paved the way for the transition commission tasked to install the new Bangsamoro government. Sheron Dayoc’s *Women of the Weeping River* (2016) offers no clear answers as well—to the future of Moro families that is still caught in conflict whether internally by means of the generations-spanning *rido* (clan feud), or the conflict between the armed forces and Moro separatists. But there is also the prospect of change, and to understand these films is to ask: what is the future that lies ahead of Mindanao? We search for an answer like the exasperated rebels in *Paglalakbay*, and we hope for a better future like the displaced widows in the *Weeping River* who have lost so much.

Also constantly displaced in Mindanao are the Lumads, who are at the heart of Fiola’s *Baboy Halas* and Barbarona’s *Tu Pug Imatuy*. Though employing different narrative approaches, both films depict the constant threat to their natural environments. Fiola symbolizes this disruption in the life of the Matigsalog tribe with the appearance of a foreign animal, a white pig (in contrast to the endemic wild boar or *baboy halas*) that shifts the forest’s equilibrium and drives the film’s protagonist—the hunter Mampog—to madness. While in *Tu Pug Imatuy*, Barbarona points to the pressing problems of militarization and development aggression (in the form of large-scale mining) as concrete threats to the Lumads’ natural domains and indigenous ways of living.



First-time actress Laila Ulao leads the cast of local actors in Sheron Dayoc’s *Women of the Weeping River* (2016). Courtesy of Dayoc.

There is a sense of internalized displacement in the documentary films that tackle the Mindanao conflict. In Dayoc's *The Crescent Rising* (2015), we sense a filmmaker trying to re-familiarize himself with the complex issues hounding Mindanao and seeking answers for himself. The film shares a similarity with Adjani Arumpac's quietly powerful examination of the Mindanao conflict in *War is a Tender Thing* (2013), which looks at the topic through a more personal lens—her parents' separation. Her father says in the film that pointing to religious differences is a failure to probe deeper into the conflict. Through their documentaries, Dayoc and Arumpac, instead of settling for simplistic answers, explore a myriad of questions on identity and history that compel Mindanaoans to not disengage from their own narratives. Their personal journeys, in a way, resonate with the introspection of the characters in Mardoquio's *Paglalakbay*, constantly seeking their place and looking for answers, leaving us viewers with the more daunting task of completing the narrative. As Arumpac narrates and warns in *War is a Tender Thing*, "[It] is hard to feel the war one has grown up with. Chaos internalized becomes silent rage. With time, it settles down into melancholia, immovable."

Identity, history, and place are also central questions. Nef Luczon's *Migkahi si Ame Tey, Uli ki Pad* (Father said, Let us Return Home, 2014), an entry into the first Cine Totoo: Philippine Documentary Film Festival, is about a reunion of IP family members who have been separated for years. In the film, Luczon, whose ancestry comes from various places in the country, tackles the dilemma of home and identity.

Similar questions of home and family dynamics are explored in Nawruz Paguidopon's *God BLISS Our Home* (2017), a work which is notable for its "selfie documentary" style about his own story of going back to his hometown in Cagayan de Oro after living and working in Manila. Mostly known as an editor working on films in Manila, Davao-born Charliebebs Gohtia made films about homegrown subjects like the documentary *Kung Giunsa Paghubat ang Binisayang Chopsuey* (How to Make a Visayan Chopsuey, 2014), about the struggle for recognition of a Davao tchoukball sports team, and *Gukod sa Hapak sa Balud* (Chasing Waves, 2015), about a young boy in the hinterlands of Davao dreaming of experiencing the beach, with issues of land-grabbing and insurgency existing in the narrative's fringes. Meanwhile, Jeffrie Po's documentary *The Soil of Dreams* (2015) gives us a glimpse of the new realities that Mindanao faces in the era of climate change following the aftermath of Typhoon Sendong.

There are many more films worthy of examination that reimagine and locate Mindanao in the national landscape. While these examples are mostly full-length features, this appraisal is also overdue for short films, which consist of the bulk of regional film production, to be examined in terms of their thematic resonances and visual articulations of Mindanao.



Adjani Arumpac's *War is a Tender Thing* (2013) tackles the Mindanao conflict through the lens of family and personal history. Courtesy of Arumpac.



Davao film collective Pasalidahay organizes film screenings of independent and regional works in alternative screening venues and schools in Mindanao. Courtesy of Pasalidahay.

Towards an alternative film culture in Mindanao

Mindanao films, like their independently-produced counterparts in Luzon and Visayas, do not have a wide audience, given the highly commercial state of film distribution in the Philippines. Filmmakers from Mindanao who have had the opportunity of producing their films are able to do so mostly because of Manila-based festival grants or other public or private sources. Venues for screening Mindanao films are limited to festival screenings or limited runs in venues like the Cinematheque Davao. Because distribution is limited, very few people even from Mindanao are able to watch these films. Since most of the exhibition of these films are in Manila, only film critics, bloggers, and scholars based in the capital are able to write about and discuss them. Just like the festival films of this and the past decade, Mindanao films remain in relative anonymity and have not become part of the cultural discourse in Mindanao.

In Pasalidahay, a film collective I formed with Fiola and Yam Palma in December 2015, we focus on screening short films as a way of increasing awareness and appreciation of independent and regionally-produced works. The group started with small, intimate screenings in alternative spaces, the Cinematheque, and school tours around Mindanao. The work of Pasalidahay complements what the regional festivals in Mindanao are doing in their respective areas. Ultimately, the group sees Pasalidahay as an alternative model of distribution that hopefully finds sustainability.

More Cinematheques should be built, and these should be put to good use as venues where regional works can flourish. Local programming should be pushed and sustained with various activities that involve the academe and the community. Because ultimately, the growth and

development of regional cinemas like those in Mindanao should not be measured by the number of films produced every year. We should continue to discuss how these regional cinemas and regional filmmaking movements make an impact on Philippine cinema as a whole and in their immediate communities—for them to be truly called "cinemas of home." More innovative and alternative ways to exhibit and distribute films should be explored, nurtured and supported. The community of filmmakers in Nabunturan and some parts of Mindanao has already started doing it. The innovation and revolution we are looking for might already be in our midst—in the open, and open-air, communities where the experience of cinema offers boundless possibilities.

Jay Rosas is a writer and film programmer based in Davao City. He co-founded Pasalidahay, a local film collective which organizes film screenings and workshops. He contributes film reviews to *Mindanao Times* and *New Durian Cinema*. He was part of the Yamagata Film Criticism Workshop in 2015 and the Working Title Program for Asian film curators and programmers in 2017.