

sucking in the 2010s

Dodo Dayao



Heneral Luna (Jerrold Tarog, 2015). Poster design by Mike Sicam, courtesy of TBA Studios. Courtesy of TBA Studios.

That Thing Called Tadhana (Antoinette Jadaone, 2014). Poster design by Karl Castro, courtesy of Cinema One Originals and CPI.

Yield (Toshihiko Uriu and Victor Delotavo Tagaro, 2018). Poster design by Tagaro, image by Emil Mercado, courtesy of T.I.U. Films.

Background photo: Interior of Cinema Centenario, a micro-cinema in Diliman, Quezon City. Courtesy of Hector Barretto Calma.

Consensus has it that the last decade in domestic cinema was marked by three movements that were not necessarily movements in the strict sense and not equal in any sort of across-the-board aesthetic pedigree but were more ubiquitous than the outliers and cross-pollinating renegades and glorious oddments and regional upstarts: maindie, rom-coms (which has an abhorrent coinage that I refuse to use), and documentaries. I don't disagree, but zeitgeists are finicky things and trying to draw a circle around what the tenor of a national cinema was over the course of ten years tends to lose a lot of nuance.

Like how consensus leaves out micro-cinemas, funnily enough, since their proliferation may arguably be the single most crucial development in domestic cinema and this cinema's distribution in the last ten years, for how it brings the films to the audiences they deserve, which the mall cinemas couldn't care less about facilitating, and gives films

the longevity they deserve, too. In a decade whose distribution paradigms were constantly unsettled by exhibition politics and dysfunctional marketing, having a chain of potential first-run venues that come with adherents and regulars seemed to have gone over everybody's heads. Does the math not add up? Are they just not sexy enough? Old school thinking? I don't know. But yeah, maindie, rom-coms, and documentaries.

Maindie is a conflation of two terms that are in the end meaningless, because what is mainstream exactly and what is indie really, except varying degrees of budget and creative leeway, but yeah, maindies can be boiled down to: edgy(ish) narratives told (more often than not) conservatively. Rom-coms need no explaining and have always been a cash cow but somehow it mutated into a license to print money, the local industry equivalent of American superhero tentpoles, in the sense that there's almost nothing else being made out there but also in the sense that they're the only sort of local film that can go head-to-head with superheroes.

Documentaries need no explaining either, but of the three, their resurgence is perhaps the most culturally and artistically vital, because in the last decade and maybe even farther back than that, documentaries have become more and more a part of the global cultural conversation, and in a country such as ours, documentaries are this almost necessary language, a mode of inquiry into supposed larger truths on one hand, and on the other, an art form that I argue is the closest we have gone to a propellant for evolving narrative.

I became a filmmaker in the last decade, a slightly narcissistic angle from which to approach this piece, sure, but in the decade before that, I was also a film critic, though I prefer the term film writer, and for the most part literally, a film blogger who wanted to be a filmmaker but couldn't quite figure out how. Meaning, I was specifically attuned to this anything goes sense of punk slash DIY abandon that seemed to run like a current through everything, because of the emancipation it implied, and that's a word that everybody who was talking or writing about that heady time when it was happening was fond of using—emancipation from having to shoot on film, from gatekeepers, from traditions. I'd always been prone to over-romanticizing matters, but it's difficult to refute that it was a diverse and protean and mercurial time. At some point, the only pigeonhole our cinema could fit in was that our cinema was not easy to fit in a pigeonhole, reflecting in many ways our mongrel psyche, that tendency to be many things at many times. For better or for worse, the decade that came after that may have brought our cinema closer to being an easy pigeonhole. I don't know how to feel about that, honestly.

The go-to folklore when a film critic crosses over to become a filmmaker has always been how the Cahiers critics became the ramparts of the French New Wave in the Sixties, but that has no function as an aspirational standard for being so lofty and removed. Besides, none of them continued to write, far as I know. Movie stars and musicians and even novelists fared better when they crossed over and did both, gone bilingual, if you will; film critics, not so much. Perhaps it has to do with the assumption that a film critic's judgment is bound to be impaired after going through what a filmmaker goes through when making a film. Perhaps it's to do with the wrong-headed notion that filmmakers and film critics are rival sports teams. I did stop actively being a critic after I made my first film, but only because I didn't have that much time left on my hands to do both.

But having made a career out of making films, I have developed a layer of empathy for films that were not really there before, as objects of industry, as products of collaborations, as visions with different priorities, and with this empathy came a deepening resolve to engage every film in the conversation it deserves, something beyond if I liked it or didn't, which is immaterial, and certainly beyond how many stars I rank it out of this many stars.

In the last decade, domestic cinema went from something that was restless and adventurous and form-pushing into something that is for the most part conservative and compartmentalized and commodified and perhaps even complacent, as energies poured seemingly into finding different ways to color inside the lines, boxing ourselves rather than picking up where the decade before left off. I did find it anticlimactic and disappointing, if not heartbreaking. But I also revere at least 75 films from the last decade, mostly the outliers and cross-pollinating renegades and glorious oddments and regional upstarts, a lot of documentaries and some maindies and rom-coms. While I still think an envelope is there for pushing and a cultural status quo is a tiny death, ten years is a long time to not like a lot of films, and sometimes you get complacent, too.

But something rather wonderful happened in the last few months of the last year of the last decade, when QCinema curated a short film program, made up of six films by seven (one was co-directed by two) relatively young and new filmmakers with fresh, distinct voices, oblivious of each other to a certain degree, but coming off like a collective riposte in the way they seemed to push the form, going out on narrative limbs, coloring *outside* the lines, picking up where the decade before left off. The irony of finding myself in the grip of an oddly profound nostalgic reflex for the decade before the last, while watching something as forward-looking, isn't lost on me. But it was an inspiring coda that could very well be (please let it be) a wishfully thinking prologue. Oh, and by the way, I saw the program in a micro-cinema. Place was packed.

Dodo Dayao writes films, writes about films, writes about other things, directs the films he writes and sometimes paints. His first feature, *Violator*, was released in 2014 and the short film, *If You Leave*, in 2016. He is currently in post-production with his second feature, developing his third, and finishing a book of essays. He lives in Quezon City and is always working on something.