

# still lives

a digital video movie

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cast

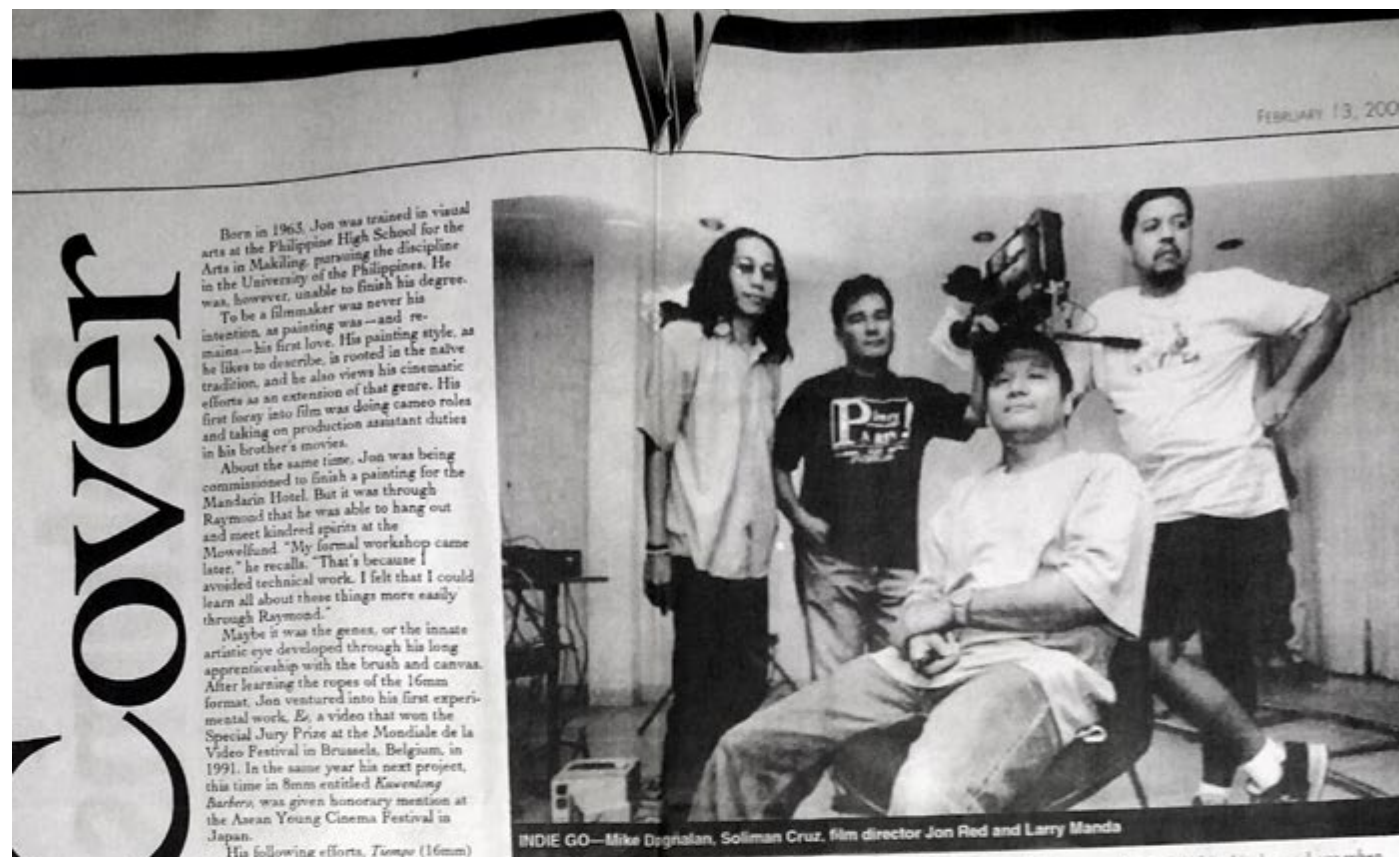
ray ventura  
nonie buencamino  
joel torre  
ynez veneracion  
allan paule  
caridad sanchez  
archie adamos  
raymond keannu  
mel martinez  
richard quan  
nathan forrest  
jon confiado  
andy punsal  
jason red  
benjie felipe  
leon miguel  
jun ureta  
ian victoriano  
soliman cruz

crew

director / writer / producer **jon red**  
co-producers **lawrence cordero** and **seleena cordero**  
supervising producer **carol bunuan red**  
assistant director **bombie plata**  
production designer **danny red**

editor **lawrence cordero**  
lighting director **ruben lee**  
camera **chuck escasa**  
sound **nolet clemente**  
music **bong rosario**





FEBRUARY 13, 2000

Cover

Born in 1963, Jon was trained in visual arts at the Philippine High School for the Arts in Makiling, pursuing the discipline in the University of the Philippines. He was, however, unable to finish his degree.

To be a filmmaker was never his intention, as painting was—and remains—his first love. His painting style, as he likes to describe, is rooted in the naive tradition, and he also views his cinematic efforts as an extension of that genre. His first foray into film was doing cameo roles and taking on production assistant duties in his brother's movies.

About the same time, Jon was being commissioned to finish a painting for the Mandarin Hotel. But it was through Raymond that he was able to hang out and meet kindred spirits at the Mowelfund. "My formal workshop came later," he recalls. "That's because I avoided technical work. I felt that I could learn all about these things more easily through Raymond."

Maybe it was the genes, or the innate artistic eye developed through his long apprenticeship with the brush and canvas. After learning the ropes of the 16mm format, Jon ventured into his first experimental work, *E*, a video that won the Special Jury Prize at the Mondiale de la Vidéo Festival in Brussels, Belgium, in 1991. In the same year his next project, this time in 8mm entitled *Kawentong Barbera*, was given honorary mention at the Asian Young Cinema Festival in Japan.

His following efforts, *Tumap* (16mm)

INDIE GO—Mike Degtalian, Soliman Cruz, film director Jon Red and Larry Manda

## The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Still Lives*

Dir. Jon Red, 1999

The 1990s was no Golden Age of Philippine Cinema, with most films adhering to the same family-friendly formulas concocted to treat the nation's trauma since World War II. Sex and action flicks were still popular, though noticeably in decline since its heyday. By 1999, the decade had seen fewer defining moments than in previous eras.

Recognized by many as the first Filipino digital feature, Jon Red's *Still Lives* was written for celluloid. Red is also a painter, and the film's title is a play on "still life" painting. The painting featured in the movie poster and in the film hanging on the wall was by the director himself. *Still Lives* was first previewed at the Mowelfund Film Institute in early December 1999 inside the house where all the workshops were conducted. A small crowd was in attendance that evening, including filmmakers Lav Diaz, Mike de Leon, and Cesar Hernando.

Budget concerns made it necessary for Red to shift to digital, but the adoption of the new technology inspired him to employ a stationary camera position all throughout the film. Conceived as a crime story, the shift made the characters rather than their crimes the focus of the film, which acted as an investigation of their lives in situ. In that sense, the film—rather than belonging to the decade it first appeared in—can be regarded as a prelude to what many consider a new Golden Age that came in the 2000s.

ERWIN ROMULO

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERWIN ROMULO

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one part about it is that all the actors looked like they were in a movie. I was just lucky these people were sympathetic to what I was doing. Some of them I met through my mainstream work. Others were just filling friends," says Red.

As expected, the acting was top-notch, with some improvised parts performed to be hit by these respected names in the profession. Red describes it as a mixture of a soap opera, crime thriller, a situation comedy and a documentary—all whipped up into an experimental salad bowl. The nonlinear narrative brings to mind Quentin Tarantino, as well as the irreverence and the spontaneity of the disreputable, and the rare occurrence of gun pointing in pure John Woo (whose style Red admires).

Into the main narrative, the director weaves docu-style interviews with the characters, probing beneath their facade and giving us a brief insight into their personal dilemmas. But the sure-fire audience-pleaser would be the hilarious faux advertisements inserted between plot developments: commercials promoting the use of shabu (as endorsed by stage actor Soliman Cruz).

The interesting aspect of *Still Lives*—which runs for 90 minutes—is that the camera never moves. Come to think of it, it is a kind of artistic statement that defines one of the basic tenets of cinema, that the camera should tell the story. Pretty much

during of Red in this day and age when intelligent cinema is deemed by fancy camerawork and other time-consuming aspects of cinematography. "Dito kami sa atin, kagay rinah, mung gumagana ang pakikala, ang silang kahina nag-i-improve na ang equipment," he explains.

The overall production effort of *Still Lives* is a throwback to the director's earlier "guerrilla filmmaking" days. Another consideration was "Back to basics," he adds. "The point I'm trying to get across is that the camera is not the point. It's still the story."

Red insists that all the people involved, including the production staff, also worked gratis. The project was made entirely out of borrowed equipment. The only thing Red had to pay for was the lighting rig.

His producer is a small outfit called BSC. A postproduction facility armed with high-tech editing tools. The company boasts of having cut music videos of bands like Parokya ni Edgar, Eraserheads, Rivermaya and Tron Faith, as well as award-winning short films and full-length features, commercials and AVTs. But true to the independent spirit, the photography for *Still Lives* was completed in two days.

Red has no grandiose ambitions of marketing *Still Lives* commercially, but "it would be a big bonus if we could blow it up to video."

Yet it'll still kick the butt of any pit-pit effort anytime.

**Into the main narrative, the director weaves docu-style interviews. But the sure-fire audience-pleaser would be the hilarious faux advertisements inserted between plot developments: commercials promoting the use of shabu.**



# 'Still Lives' docu tackles shabu problem head-on

BY POCHOLO CONCEPCION

THE heat is on. Burning hot: the issue of drug trafficking and its main men, so-called drug lords whose identities point to the very top echelons of power.

## Implications

Heavy are the accusations and their implications that could explode with a bitter truth—that the Philippines, especially its law enforcers, have virtually turned a blind eye on the proliferation of shabu, the most dangerous substance to hit the streets since heroin.

It's the perfect opportunity to take stock of the viewpoint that drug abuse is a problem that won't be solved any other way than through education. And that one great learning tool is watching movies.

Written and directed by Jon Red, "Still Lives" is documentary evidence that artists could provide some of the answers to the ignorance and confusion that the shabu problem has inflicted upon our society.

"Still Lives" is a movie that tackles the subject head-on, with a straight face, unblinking eyes and loads of humor. The story, taken from true-to-life files and inspired by Red's directorial stint in Erwin Tulfo's "Most Wanted" TV crimes series, unfolds like a soap opera, action flick, sitcom and docu-drama all rolled into a serious commentary on how the use and abuse of shabu has permeated day-to-day existence.

## Pushers

The plot focuses on Enteng (Nonie Buencamino), an erstwhile tricycle driver who gets into the stuff as member of a gang of mid-level pushers led by Salvador (Ray Ventura). Enteng wants out and plans a clean exit on the pretext of going home to visit his mother in the province.

He gets permission from Salvador, but only after Enteng kills an associate, Pol (Allan Paule), who has fallen from the graces of the syndicate.

Enteng succeeds, but he finds himself unable to leave the house that has turned into a den full of addicts coming in and out to sniff their fix for the day.

These addicts, composed mostly of young people, provide the meat of the story. Each of them has a story to tell, and director Red allows these characters to narrate events by talking straight into the camera.

Melodramatic monologue is avoided through the deft use of humor—and this appears not as a put-on

theme music ("Kagatan" by Juan del Cruz) provides: "Durugin mo hanggang sa ika'y maging bato..."

Although the story's pacing lags near the end, it is only a minor drawback considering the superb acting turned out by a cast comprising some of local filmdom's more recognizable names. The talk is that everybody worked for free, because they believed so much in the project and gave their "unquestionable dedication." This is perhaps one of the rare moments in which you'll appreciate the aforementioned actors, with Joel Torre, Ynez Veneracion, Mel Martinez and most especially Caridad Sanchez portraying off-beat yet natural characters.

## Biggest star

But the biggest star that deserves mention is the camera used in the movie: a single digital video cam that does not move but captures the movements of every character. The decision to use only one camera may have been dictated by economic factors, but then again, it apparently serves as a metaphor—as in the characters "trapped" or "stilled" by shabu addiction. It is, incidentally, quite a clever way to contrast the hyperactive behavior of shabu users.

In the end, Jon Red told his audience during a sneak preview of "Still Lives" not too long ago at the UP Film Center, people will appreciate the revolutionary wonders of the DVC—and how independent filmmakers like him may be able to do what they want without the constraints imposed by the the film industry establishment.

Red collaborated with friends to produce this fine, small-budget work in 1999. Lately it has been quietly making the rounds of small-audience venues (like some clubs in Malate).

We suggest that Viva Films or Star Cinema acquire the rights to screen "Still Lives" in commercial theaters—if only to put across its relevance to the day's headlines. Aside from that, of course, the bottom line is that this movie could be as financially rewarding as it is entertaining.





# Lights, digital camera, action!



## THE OUTSIDER

By Erwin Romulo

and a leading figure in the independent film scene, his attempts to convince a commercial film outfit to finance a project that strayed (even if not too far away) from the formulas already stagnating the industry were met with resistance and were not successful.

When, about a year ago, a producer, who initially expressed interest in a script that he pitched, backed out at the 11th hour, Red — understandably frustrated at the turn of events — decided to make the film anyway. To cut costs, he made two important decisions: first, the camera would remain in one position throughout the entire film and, second, he would use a digital camera. The result was *Still Lives* — the first full-length feature film shot entirely on digital video in the Philippines.

Of the two innovations in Red's film, the use of digital technology seems the more significant one when viewed in the context

of local filmmaking. It signals the start of what has been termed the "digital revolution" — a phenomenon that, while considerably new here, has already matured abroad, both in the West and our Asian counterparts. Cheaper than celluloid, digital film making allows just about anybody to make his own movies.

Compare the numbers: for a 10-minute 35 mm short feature, you will need about at least three rolls costing P5,700 each, P16,000 for equipment (per day), about 60 to 70 thousand pesos for processing and printing (minus opticals and sound), P20,000 for editor's fees (inclusive of use of editing equipment). All these figures are of

**F**ilmmaker Jon Red has long been trying to make a feature film.

Despite being an acclaimed director



Is the future of film filmless? Jon Red's *Still Lives* shows an exciting digital future in filmmaking.

course rough estimates for the cheapest possible cost. For a 10-minute digital feature, all you need is a digital camera (rental fee: P4 to P6 thousand per day), a digital eight recordable cassette (about P150 each and reusable) and any PC (Pentium 3) with roughly 128 MB of RAM and hard-drive space of about 17 gigs plus a broadcast-quality capture card, for a total cost of roughly P100,000. Using any editing software like Adobe Premiere, which you can buy cheap pirated discs, you can virtually create as many movies you like with special effects and in full stereo sound.

Red estimates that if he had made *Still Lives* with film, the rolls alone would cost him about P1 million. If he had made it the traditional way, with the backing of a big commercial studio, a possi-

bility he seriously doubts, the cost of production could easily reach a minimum of P3 million. What all this points to is that the chances of an independent filmmaker to make a feature-length film on film and outside the commercial circuit is very slim.

**W**hile essentially trumpeted as an independent filmmaker's tool, digital technology has made inroads into the mainstream. Commercial cinema abroad has actually embraced the development of digital filmmaking.

George Lucas is set to shoot *Episode Two* of the *Star Wars* saga using a digital camera, while current Hollywood practice these days is to edit movies non-linear, using software like Avid. Of course, who can forget last year's

*The Blair Witch Project*?

"Kodak has already announced that film will be phased out in about 10 years," says Chuck Escasa, who along with two other filmmakers, Ed Lejano and Nonoy Dadvivas, has just finished making a digital feature called *Motel*. This statement is still suspect, according to Escasa, but is a sign of where the industry is heading.

Film purists are of course naturally alarmed. One even remarked: "Can you imagine if *Citizen Kane* or some other masterpiece like *Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag* were shot on video?" (Note: It is curious to point out that the cinematographer of *Maynila*... and the director of such Filipino film classics such as *Itim* and *Kisapmata*, Mike de Leon, made the first video feature *Bilanggo sa Dilim* in 1986.)

Red said there are certain materials that suit the look of digital video. "*May binabagayan at pinipili na istorya ang video.*" The voyeurism inherent in the stories of both *Still Lives* and *Motel* suits the surveillance camera feel and urgency of video: the former being a look into an illegal trade, while the latter is a movie told in three parts but all set in the same motel on Valentine's Day. Red goes as far as interjecting segments within the narrative wherein the actors are interviewed in silhouette, a parody of investigative documentaries. In a sense, a film shot on digital video

combines the rush of snuff video and the finesse of traditional filmmaking, cinema with a knowing wink.

Of course, digital cinema will eventually give rise to a whole new set of standards and aesthetics quite divorced from celluloid filmmaking.

In a magazine article for *Wired*, *Neuromancer* author William Gibson writes of what he calls the "garage Kubrick" who will make films in his computer, wherein he will create everything from elaborate sets to the wireframe of his characters' bodies, a truly solipsistic cinema.

In Europe, movements such as the much ballyhooed Dogme 95, though not exclusive to video, have given rise to much-lauded digital video works as Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* and recent Cannes winner Lars Von Trier's earlier effort *The Idiots*, films so idiosyncratic and dependent on digital video's inherent qualities that it would hard to imagine them on any other format. Also, as practitioners in both media would attest, there are really quite a myriad of differences between the two.

So, is the future of film filmless? As has been noted, cinema is the one art form whose progress can be traced to technological development. Whatever happens, the answer will still largely depend on the filmmakers themselves and if the audience is only all too willing to take the ride.





**Erwin Romulo** is an award-winning writer, editor, music producer, and creative director. Known as the founding editor-in-chief of the Philippine edition of *Esquire*, he also produced the musical scores for films such as *On the Job* (2013), *Honor Thy Father* (2015), and *Buy Bust* (2018), including the sound design of *Hele Sa Hirwagang Hapis* (2016).