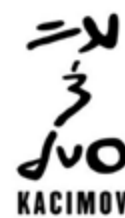




DECENTRALIST SENTIMENTS AND STRUCTURAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE CASE OF KAPAMPANGAN FILM PRACTICE

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Kapampangan Cinema
Movement (KACIMOV)
founded by Jason Paul
Laxamana.
All images courtesy of
CineKabalen, unless noted.



CineKabalen Film Festival.
Image from CineKabalen
Facebook page.

Opposite page:
Astro Mayabang (2010)
directed by Jason Paul Laxamana.
Photo from IMDB.

LONG TAKE

Resistance from the regions has shifted discourses regarding Philippine cinema in the past decade. Due to the democratization of film through the emergence of digital film technology, there has been a rise in alternative film practices in the regions in the 21st century. The movement began with the aim of decentralizing culture, breaking apart essentialist and homogenizing nationalisms and returning to the diverse regional roots that make up the heterogeneous Filipino identity. While national cinema began as predominantly Manila-centric and Tagalog-centric, the end goal of regional film movements is to redefine Philippine cinema, from being predominantly nationalist and anti-colonial, resistant to external hegemonic influences such as Hollywood and European cinemas, to being more accurately reflective of the Filipino experience.

One of the regional film practices that emerged in the 21st century is from the province of Pampanga. Kapampangan cinema, although relatively still unpopular in academic discussions of regional film movements, has proven itself to be potent in espousing the decentralization of film culture from the geographical center, Manila, through the promotion and representation of Kapampangan language, culture, traditions, history, and way of life. Its role in building a film culture in the central part of Luzon, through the establishment of the homegrown CineKabalen Kapampangan Film Festival (CKFF) and the Kapampangan Cinema Movement (KACIMOV), has been crucial in recent years.

However, while Kapampangan filmmakers have been assertive and vocal in these objectives, Kapampangan film practice has faced problems in both economic and cultural sustainability. Economic sustainability refers to its capacity to support film practice and the individual actors that make it possible, while cultural sustainability pertains to its ability to maintain its promotion of Kapampangan language, culture, and identity amid the uneven economic structures that maintain the existence of a “dominant core” and “powerless peripheries.”¹ Furthermore, the current conditions of Kapampangan film practice are symptomatic of relevant issues that regional film movements face.

While there are no clear-cut answers to these problems, the goal is to present these issues and to analyze the relationship between Kapampangan decentralist sentiments and the overarching economic structure that affects the materialization and sustainability of Kapampangan film practice. Loosely adapting Steve McIntyre’s model of core/periphery in film cultures, as well as Michael Kho Lim’s cultural economy model, the objectives are as follows: to historicize the decentralist sentiment of regional film movements in relation to nationalism; to provide a brief historical description of the emergence of regional film practices, ultimately narrowing it down to Kapampangan film practice; to analyze the relationship between cultural sentiments from the “regional peripheries” and the economic structures that benefit the “dominant core”; and to raise questions on the sustainability of regional film movements and Kapampangan film practice.²

Decentralist Sentiments and the Roots of Regional Film Movements

Early films produced in the country are debatably regional (although not labelled as such), and only became national as the result of anti-colonial sentiment. According to film historian Nick Deocampo, the emergence of native film practices in the country began with the production of Tagalog films in the 1930s, which “challenged the almost monolithic control that European films had of local movie houses.”³

The national character that became associated with Tagalog films was actually born from the growing anti-colonial sentiments of the elite, who had access to film technology. This began with the production of the first Tagalog sound film *Punyal na Ginto* (1934), followed by the anti-Spanish film *Patria Amore* (1929), and *Si Juan Tamad* (1947) which was based on Philippine folklore.⁴ The intention was to promote nationalist aspirations through the illusion of “oneness,” in order to foster anti-colonial sentiments against Spain.⁵ Later on, these anti-colonial aspirations were extended against American cultural influences, which showed the growing *filipinismo* at that time.⁶



CineKabalen 8 organizers.

As cinema became associated with the nation and national identity, it became a tool for nationalist resistance against the hegemonic Hollywood, through highlighting specificity and difference.⁷

Claiming a particular history of a “national” cinema raises ontological questions regarding the nature of cinema and the nation. The attribution of Tagalog cinema as the national cinema reinforces a problematic Filipino nationalism, which has been criticized for its lack of anchor on any “natural” bond, whether it is a common culture, language, identity, or shared historical past, and its tendency to suppress multiple and diverse ethnic and regional identities in the archipelago for the sake of a homogeneous, national identity.

From an outside perspective, defining a cinema in relation to a particular nation is limiting, especially in the context of other national cinemas, globalization, transnational cinemas, and Hollywood, and because of the fact that cinema is an imported technology from Europe. Meanwhile, a more inward-looking perspective—more crucial to this discussion—sees national cinema in two ways: first, in relation to its function in the historical and cultural formation of identity; and second, in relation to the existing film industry within the nation-state and the economic structures that determine its processes of production, distribution, and exhibition.⁸

The distinction between culture and economy in the latter approach substantiates what is usually perceived as film’s “dual quality.”⁹ Film is a profitable business whose capability to represent and create illusions of reality has become ingrained in the cultural and political practices of nations; likewise, at its fundamental base, it remains grounded in the material economic conditions of the community wherein it is practiced. This dual quality implicates cinema in the creation of the “nation-state,” in which, while “nation” has been more recently conceived as the Weberian “community of sentiment”¹⁰ or the Andersonian “imagined community,”¹¹ the

“state” is much more defined with its distinct geographically bounded territory and sovereign power through established rules.

Filipino nationalism has thus resulted in internal oppositions, with people exchanging nationalist loyalty for regionalist, sometimes separatist, sentiments.¹² In film, the notion of a homogeneous, i.e., Manila-centric and Tagalog-centric, national cinema had become so controversial that it triggered resistance from the regions.

While regional sentiments in cinema have been strong as early as the 1950s during the Golden Age of Cebuano Cinema, sustaining regional film practices has been a challenge. One of the most prominent reasons for this was the lack of access to film equipment during this time. In an article published in *Movement*, Teddy Co expressed the need for better access to film equipment in order to proliferate film practices in the region, which was impossible with celluloid technology. Using bulky celluloid cameras was a physical and financial burden on individual regional filmmakers who would not have been able to recuperate the investment due to the non-existence of a market outside of the popular genre.¹³

Since filmmaking required a huge amount of capital, it was easier for production studios to have an advantage and gain monopoly over the industry and harder for individuals to use the medium for personal and non-profit purposes. Although there were cheaper options such as 8mm, 16mm, the standard for full-length features was 35mm, which cost millions to make.¹⁴ The limited access to technology, the means of production, and the film market allowed the establishment of a “dominant core” in the film industry, while those without access formed the “powerless peripheries” that included independent and regional filmmakers.

This would change with the arrival of digital film technology in 1999, which brought about the democratization of film production and did not only open up a new set of

innovative possibilities but also transformed the foundational structures of the film industry through the “digital revolution.”¹⁵ The subsequent rise in the number of regional films and film festivals across the country suggests that digital technology contributed to the realization of regional sentiments. Co also saw the possibility of utilizing video technology as a cheaper option for the proliferation of film practices in the regions.¹⁶

The first regional filmmaker to utilize digital technology, JP Carpio, who directed the Hiligaynon film *Balay Daku* (2002) and shot it for 11 days in his hometown in Bacolod through a grant from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), echoes Co’s decentralist sentiments of building filmmaking practices in regions.¹⁷

Metro Manila filmmakers, even those with regional origins, are not adequately exploring the cultures of Filipinos living outside Metro Manila. Thus, Metro Manila perspectives continue to dominate. [...] There is also a lack of exposure for films from the other regions in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao.¹⁸

At present, issues in theatrical distribution and exhibition remain. While film festivals such as Cinemalaya, Cinema One Originals, and CineFilipino, as well as smaller regional festivals, provide distribution avenues for regional filmmakers, concerns regarding sustainability of film practices still arise, especially since regional films commonly do not have the capacity to earn profit like mainstream films. Although part of the resistance is to veer away from profit-oriented standards in order to have creative freedom, regional film practices are finding it challenging to sustain themselves. Grants and sponsorship from private, public, and international institutions also tend to reinforce the core/periphery structure.

Therefore, certain questions remain to be dealt with: Is it possible to reconcile the seemingly conflicting sides of cinema? Can regional film practices be economically feasible and, at the same time, capable of carrying strong decentralist sentiments? To what extent can culture and economy affect one another?

Anti-Tagalog Sentiments and the Emergence of Kapampangan Film Practice

Similar to other regional film movements, Kapampangan film practice sprouted as a result of strong resistance to Manilacentrism and the dominance of Tagalog. Unlike other provinces like Cebu, Pampanga was late in terms of fostering a homegrown film practice. Although there were notable Kapampangan performers in the film industry, such as the iconic Rogelio dela Rosa, it was not until the 2000s that Kapampangan artists began to be involved in making films.

One of the most popular Kapampangan filmmakers that rose to prominence was Brillante Mendoza. His debut feature, *Masahista* (2005), was arguably the first predominantly Kapampangan language film in digital format. Mendoza shot the film in Angeles City, Pampanga and Manila. The film garnered multiple awards from local and international film festivals, including the Golden Leopard from Locarno International Film Festival, and all of the awards from the Young Critics Circle Film Desk.¹⁹ After gaining recognition, Mendoza continued to make films for international film festivals, such as the Cannes Film Festival, from which he got his Best Director Award in 2009.²⁰ His quick rise to fame from 2005 to 2009 led to many critics hailing him as “the auteur Philippine Cinema has been looking for all these years.”²¹ Although Mendoza himself did not have any particular opinions with regard to the decentralization of culture and cinema,²² his bigger-than-life presence was pivotal in building the sentiment among young Kapampangan

filmmakers, who saw the possibility of a film practice that represents Kapampangan pride.

During his pre-industry days, now acclaimed film director Jason Paul Laxamana was an avid proponent of promoting traditional and modern Kapampangan culture through his blog, *The Prodigal Kamaru*, which ran from 2007 to 2009 and featured various topics related to Kapampangan culture and new media²³. While studying as an undergraduate student in the University of the Philippines Diliman, Laxamana immersed himself in film by working as a production assistant for Jeffrey Jeturian and Maryo J. Delos Reyes, as a script supervisor for Delos Reyes’ *A Love Story* (2007), and as a local/talent coordinator and script supervisor for Mendoza’s sixth feature, *Serbis* (2008).²⁴

Laxamana looked up to Mendoza, constantly featuring him in his blog and expressing support for his films. Laxamana²⁵ saw Mendoza’s films as crucial not only in building a Kapampangan film practice in their community, but in promoting Kapampangan identity, culture, and language, which to him was “dying”²⁶ due to “Tagalog imperialism”.²⁷

According to Robby Tantingco, the Kapampangan language has come to be “in such an advanced stage of deterioration” because of the formation of a national language, which “became the medium of media, including TV and cinema” and “wiped out the traditional forms of public entertainment like zarzuela, crissotan and kuriru, which were

the last refuge of classical Kapampangan.”²⁸ Furthermore,

Kapampangan was taken out of schools, which led students to think it is inferior to Tagalog and English, discouraged them from using it in intellectual discussions, prevented it from evolving and expanding its vocabulary.²⁹

The marginalization of Kapampangan intensified regionalist sentiments that resisted conformity to nationalist ideals. Laxamana vehemently expressed his strong anti-Tagalog and decentralist sentiments, recognizing the potential of new media and cinema in the resistance against Tagalog supremacy; thus, his first films were all in pure Kapampangan.

With his group Kalalangan Kamaru, Laxamana produced his first film, *Anak ning Kapri* (2007), and submitted it to the Cinemalaya short film category.³⁰ In the following years, Laxamana and Kalalangan Kamaru produced three more short films: *Sexmoan Adventures* (2008), *Ing Bangkeru* (2008), and *Balangigi* (2009). Laxamana slowly built his network by actively joining film festivals and film events. In 2009, Laxamana was invited as a participant for the first ever Cinema Rehiyon Film Festival, held in the Cultural Center of the Philippines. In his blog,³¹ Laxamana shared his frustration at the lack of Kapampangan participation in the festival. His film *Ing Bangkeru* was only included in a vaguely categorized block “Short Films from Various Parts of Luzon.” Laxamana also saw that Kapampangan films produced in recent years were not recognized. He wrote,

I know why. It’s because these Kapampangan films are not organized, unlike in Davao, Cebu, Bacolod, Iloilo, and other areas. Kapampangan productions sprout here and there, in various competitions, in various places, from Manila to Pampanga. They have all been individual efforts by various filmmakers who represent only themselves or their schools, not their homeland; filmmakers who are not yet well organized into a Kapampangan film community.³²

Because of these realizations, Laxamana organized the first CineKabalen Philippine Film Festival, also called Sinukwan Festival in August 2009. With Laxamana as the festival director, supported by the Holy Angel University Center for Kapampangan Studies and the Circle of Young Angeleños,³³ the festival’s objective was not only to “exhibit existing Kapampangan works but also place in competition fresh Kapampangan works from participants, may they be student, professionals, mere enthusiasts, or ex-patriates”.³⁴ It “seeks to explore, criticize, promote, empower, and/or describe the Kapampangan experience through independent cinema”.³⁵

According to the rules posted on CineKabalen’s Facebook page, the competition requires Kapampangan as its main medium of dialogue, while the filmmakers must be from Pampanga or neighboring provinces such as Tarlac and Nueva Ecija. Residents outside Central Luzon are allowed to enter as long as they are of Kapampangan descent. Only short films that tackle the “Kapampangan experience” are accepted. In the CineKabalen Facebook page, Laxamana wrote in 2012,

[T]o those wondering if CineKabalen will one day cater to Tagalog-language films, I’m sorry, no. There are other film festivals out there which you can join, where the language is not limited mainly to Kapampangan. I believe that there should AT LEAST be one film festival in the world that encourages the use of the Kapampangan language in film.³⁶

Although 2009 was a successful year in establishing CineKabalen in the regional film scene, the festival was not able to have a second run the following year. Still, Laxamana continued to produce short Kapampangan films and was able to join Cinema One Originals Film Festival with his first full length film, *Astro Mayabang* (2010).

It wasn’t until 2012 that the festival was relaunched, reinforced by additional institutional support from the NCCA and the Foundation for Lingap Kapampangan. The 2nd CineKabalen saw an increase in the number of entries, with seventeen short films submitted by fourteen filmmakers, compared to its previous run, which only had seven short film entries. The festival also featured free workshops on cinematography, directing, and acting to foster the skills of especially amateur filmmakers who didn’t have proper training or access to film schools.

2013 saw the most number of entries in CineKabalen, with twenty-eight short films and twenty-five filmmaker participants.³⁷ The festival was also able to screen, for the first time, its films in SM Pampanga, along with Laxamana’s second feature, *Babagwa* (2013), which initially premiered in Cinemalaya Film Festival. 2013 is a crucial year in the development of the Kapampangan film practice. The recent presence of Kapampangans in other festivals such as Cinema Rehiyon,³⁸ which annually featured selected films from CineKabalen’s lineup, as well as award-giving bodies like Gawad Urian,³⁹ combined with the increasing number of entries in the festival from its debut year to 2012 and 2013, led to Laxamana’s conclusion that Pampanga has become a “filmmaking zone.”⁴⁰

CineKabalen witnessed a decrease in the number of its entries in the 4th CineKabalen with only 17 entries but Laxamana said the decrease “[wasn’t] necessarily a bad thing,” noting that collaborations between filmmakers were prioritized over making their own individual entries. He said it was crucial to the increase in quality of film entries. For him, quality is evident in the number of nominations and awards of Kapampangan films, some of which he mentioned: CineKabalen 4’s Best Short Film *Mis Da Ka* (2014) by Carlo Catu was a First Honorable mention for Best Film awardee in the 5th Singkuwento Film Festival, while *Qng Pangacupas Ning Matingcad Cung Cule* (2014) by Jerome Cunanan was a finalist. *Susukdul King Banua* (2014) by Cheska Salangsang also won Jury Prize and Best Editing Award in CineSB. Nonetheless, he also lamented, “an eventual disintegration of the event is looming somewhere on the horizon.”⁴¹

The number of entries for CineKabalen continued to decrease, from sixteen in 2015, to thirteen in 2016, to six in 2017, eventually leading to CineKabalen’s one-year hiatus in 2018. Aside from recurring issues in funding and organizing the festival, the decreasing number of entries was also a huge factor, triggering a “less enthusiastic, if not less certain, outlook about the future of the festival.”⁴²

In 2019, CineKabalen returned for its 8th year led by Carlo Catu as the new festival director, and added two new categories: Central Luzon short film category and Culinary Cinema section. The goal is to increase the number of participants and for the festival to become more inclusive. The 8th CineKabalen received a total of thirty-nine entries—twelve from the Culinary Cinema section, fourteen from the Kapampangan short film category, and thirteen from the Central Luzon category. The festival, initially scheduled to conclude on March 22, 2020, was postponed to a later date due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the struggles in organizing CineKabalen, Laxamana claims Kapampangan film practice in itself has not vanished:

Kapampangan filmmakers [. . .] have decided that the production of Kapampangan films should not stop just because CKFF does. It is for that reason that a number of young Kapampangan filmmakers decided to band together to form not an organization but a movement, called KACIMOV, or Kapampangan Cinema Movement.⁴³

During the peak of CineKabalen, Laxamana formally launched KACIMOV (2013), a collective of Kapampangan filmmakers and CineKabalen participants who vow to promote Kapampangan heritage. Their signed manifesto expresses the initiative of uplifting Kapampangan identity and building a Kapampangan film culture. The rigid rules and guidelines of CineKabalen, which include the strict use of Kapampangan language, the narrative focus on Kapampangan ways of life, and the short format was perhaps limiting to Kapampangan filmmakers. KACIMOV is more flexible with its obligations. For its members, it encourages the creation, or at least participation, in the production of “mainly Kapampangan films [. . .] at least once a year, with or without film festivals, competitions, or requirement by any institution [. . .],”⁴⁴ but not too rigorously to allow room for them to explore opportunities outside the movement.



Carlo Catu’s entry for CineKabalen 2013 won Best Film, Best Direction, and Best Actress.



The 7th CineKabalen Kapampangan Film Festival poster.

After KACIMOV was established, CineKabalen participants and signatories of KACIMOV began to produce their own full-length films. Industry neophytes such as Bor Ocampo, Vargas, and Catu grew from making short films for CineKabalen to entering national film festivals. Ocampo directed *Dayang Asu* (2015) for Cinema One Originals, followed by *Hitboy* (2018) for CineFilipino Film Festival. Vargas debuted with *2 Cool 2 Be 4gotten* (2016), written for the screen by Laxamana, for Cinema One Originals. Meanwhile, Catu released *Ari: My Life with a King* (2015), funded by the Holy Angel University. It was followed by *Kung Paano Hinihintay Ang Dapithapon* (2018), his entry to the Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival; *Ang Mga Anak ng Kamote* (2018), his entry to the ToFarm Film Festival; and *Aria* (2018), the second film funded by Holy Angel University.

Some of these films are not limited to Kapampangan language and their stories are not limited to showing Kapampangan culture. The anti-Tagalog and decentralist resistance of Kapampangan filmmakers, which began with Laxamana, slowly mellowed to upholding a more nuanced Kapampangan identity and film practice.

On the Sustainability of the Kapampangan Film Practice and Sentiment

Despite its struggles, Kapampangan film practice persists; however, so do questions regarding its future. While KACIMOV carries strong Kapampangan sentiments, its design is contingent on the agency of its members. Kapampangan filmmakers may strive to produce films that are faithful to the movement, but institutional concerns still affect and determine its viability.

A lot of regional filmmakers have been dependent on institutional support from both the private and public sectors in the form of grants and sponsorships. However, while grant-giving bodies such as film festivals are crucial in the emergence of regional film practices, this economic model does not guarantee stability for regional filmmaking. For instance, the competition format encourages competitiveness and more established filmmakers with greater reach have greater advantage. Furthermore, it reinforces the particular standards and conventions of each festival in order to determine the winners. When these festivals become obsolete, film practices dependent on them for production, distribution, and exhibition are also adversely affected.

On the other hand, making profitable films means sacrificing regional sentiments of promoting a diverse and plural Filipino culture in exchange for commercial conventions. Laxamana’s ventures in the commercial film industry attest to that. While he was able to enter independent film festivals through his earlier full-length films, the awards he obtained still didn’t provide him with financial stability.⁴⁵ His shift from making Kapampangan- to Tagalog-language films was thus not to let go of Kapampangan sentiments but to conform to the market for the sake of career stability.

Kapampangan film practice has to reach beyond film festival grants and the commercial industry. It is possible, as attested by Catu’s films funded by the Holy Angel University. Academic institutions have the potential to change the game. They encourage creative freedom on the side of filmmakers, and they possess institutional power that makes it possible to economically support film production. Furthermore, academic institutions already have an established audience in their students, which not only secures the market for films but also fosters audience literacy necessary in building new film markets.

Even with that, the future and sustainability of regional film movements remain to be determined in light of economic limitations of regional film practices. Despite the claims that regional film movements have managed to remove itself from the periphery, the economic structure tells otherwise. Kapampangan film practice, as a whole, *remains* in the periphery. While it is impossible to escape the economic burden of making



Kapampangan filmmaker Petersen Vargas attends Locarno Film Festival's Open Doors Hub



An image from *Mitatang* (2018) by the late Kapampangan animator Arvin Gagui

films, it is possible to ease them through more state support. Fostering the national film industry through developing and building a unified and centralized national film policy⁴⁶ has the possibility to stabilize the efforts of regional film practices. On the other hand, this can also lead to the danger of state monopolization of filmmaking practices across the country through state policies and the suppression of dissenting voices. Thus, in building a national film policy, the focus must be on fostering the individual regions in order to give them the chance not only to develop their own voice but also to develop their own economies.

There has always been a great focus in separating economy from culture in film. However, with the recent shifts in academic discussions, new considerations in the relationship of the two have begun to surface. For Lim, instead of “colliding,” culture and economy are actually “connecting.”⁴⁷ While this paper has yet to actually delve into the future possibilities of regional film practices, the aim is to consider economic conditions of filmmaking to establish local film industries in the regions toward a diverse and plural Philippine cinema.

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36 Laxamana, “To those wondering if CineKabalen will one day cater to Tagalog-language films. . .” Facebook. December 28, 2012. Accessed on March 11, 2019 from [tps://www.facebook.com/cinekabalen/posts/448159748583619](https://www.facebook.com/cinekabalen/posts/448159748583619).
37 This number is based on CineKabalen’s Facebook post.
38 Cinema Rehiyon is known for partnering with other regional film festivals in curating the selected films for its yearly line up. In 2012, CineKabalen included five films in Cinema Rehiyon’s Luzon block: *5:00 ning Gatpanapun* (2012) by Petersen Vargas *Lakbe* (2012) by Carlo Catu, *Mariposa* (2012) by Arianne Viardo, *Maniglo* (2012) by Patrick Paule, and *Brlye Lakingdanum 1990–2012* (2012) by James Jordan. Laxamana’s short film, *Lagyu* (2012), although not a part of CKFF line up, was also included. Vargas and Catu represented Pampanga in the film festival, which was held in Los Baños, Laguna from February 5 to 9. Laxamana, on the other hand, was the Luzon regional representative of the NCCA Cinema Committee, as part of its Executive Council.
39 CineKabalen films *5:00 ning Gatpanapun* by Vargas and *Tulamitam* (2012) by Kragi Garcia were nominated in Gawad Urian 2013’s short film category. See Laxamana, “With the quantity of Kapampangan short films this year. . .” Facebook. November 19, 2013. <https://www.facebook.com/cinekabalen/posts/606738759392383>. Accessed on March 11, 2019.
40 Laxamana, “With the quantity of Kapampangan.”
41 Laxamana, “Pampanga Situationer.” In *Cinema Rehiyon* 7, 2015, 60–61.
42 Laxamana, “CineKabalen Kapampangan Film Festival (CKFF).” In *Cinema Rehiyon* 11, 2019, 91.
43 Laxamana, “Pampanga Situationer,” 61.
44 Laxamana, “What is KACIMOV?” In Kapampangan Filmmakers Facebook group. Facebook. July 16, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/kapfilm/permalink/854926781255216>. Accessed on March 31, 2019 .
45 Laxamana, “Prospects and Challenges of Philippine Cinema.” In *Cinema Rehiyon* X, 2018, 29–31.
46 Lim, *Philippine Cinema*, 255.
47 Lim, *Philippine Cinema*, 22.

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