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Archival Fragility: Philippine Cinema and the Challenge of Sustainable Preservation

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The urgency of Philippine cinema's archival situation is well-recognized: it is estimated that only 37% of domestically-produced films survive (3,000 titles from approximately 8,000 works) since the introduction of the cinematograph in 1897. Only a handful of feature-length Filipino films from the pre-war era remain: *Tunay na Ina* [True Mother], *Pakiusap* [Plea], *Giliw Ko* [My Beloved] (Photo 1) — all from 1938 — and *Zamboanga* (1936), a "lost" film discovered at the U.S. Library of Congress some years ago.¹ As of 2005, only one nitrate film print survives, *Ibong Adarna* (1941). (Photo 2)² The fragility of the Philippine audiovisual archive is all the more ironic when we consider that the Philippines, in partnership with Australia's National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), pioneered Southeast Asian media archiving initiatives in the early 1990s.³ Since outpaced by its

SEA neighbors, the Philippines, an early pioneer of the regional archive movement in Southeast Asia, would become a late implementer of the archive dream, waiting another 15 years before its own national film archive was set up in 2011. Measured against the 116-year span of our country's AV history, state-funded national film archives have existed in the Philippines for less than a decade.

Research on Philippine cinema is thus circumscribed by the acute temporal pressures of archival crisis. A dearth of funding, a lack of political will, and the deterioration of media storage formats conspire against a dwindling number of films. The first national film archive ever funded by the state, the Film Archives of the Philippines (FAP), was established by the Marcos government in 1982 and shuttered shortly after the regime's ouster in

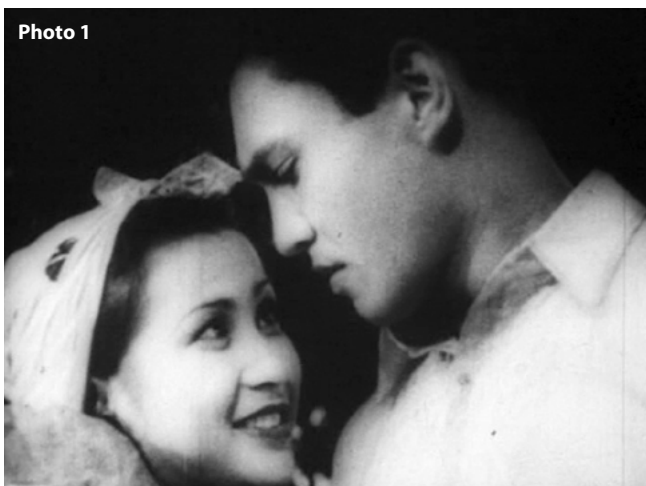


Photo 1



Photo 2

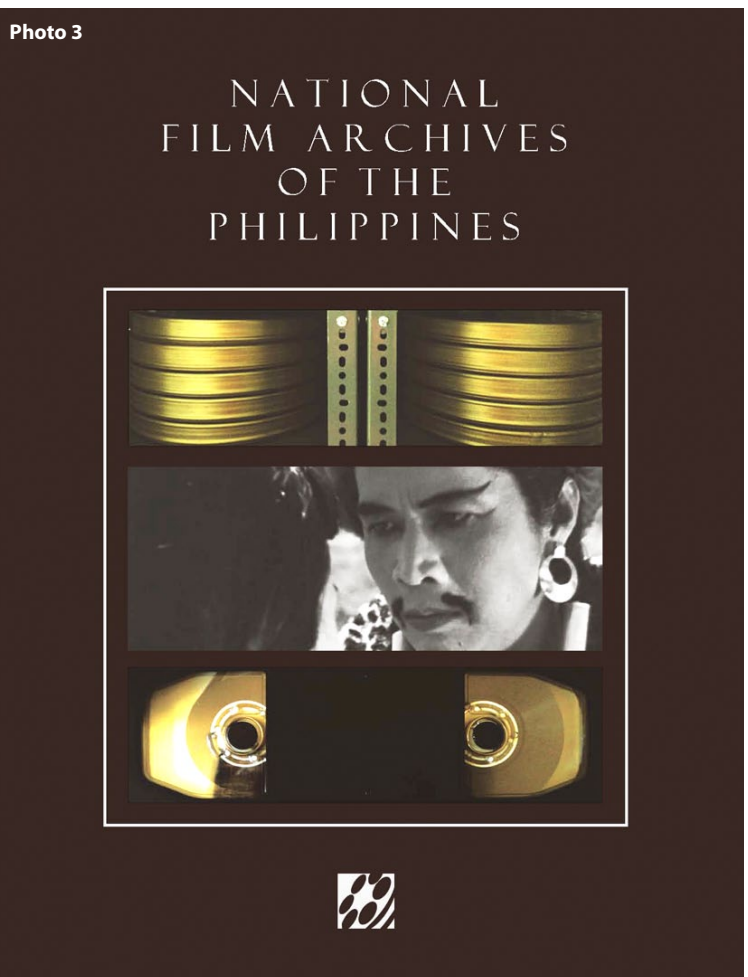


Photo 3

Photo 1: Mila del Sol and Fernando Poe star in the romantic musical comedy, *Giliw Ko* [My Beloved, dir. Carlos Vander Tolosa, 1939].

Photo 2: Fred Cortes in *Ibong Adarna* [Adarna Bird, dir. Vicente Salumbides and Manuel Conde, 1941], Philippine cinema's only surviving nitrate film print.

Photo 3: An image from *Genghis Khan* [dir. Manuel Conde, 1950] is featured on the cover of the National Film Archives of the Philippines' first annual report, for 2011-2012.

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1986.⁴ Not until 2002 did the Philippine government legislate the creation of another Philippine film archive under the incipient Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP);⁵ but this one-line archival mandate was left unrealized for almost a decade, until the founding of a new National Film Archive of the Philippines (NFAP) in 2011 (Photo 3).⁶ Credit is due to current Chair Briccio Santos for being the first leader of the FDCP to act on their archival mandate, and to the NFAP's recently-appointed Head, Benedict "Bono" Olgado, for prioritizing the long-term sustainability of the recently established national film archive.

The historic and long-awaited establishment of a new national film archive, and the promising pledge of support from the French government,⁷ however, have not entirely delivered Philippine film history from its predicament. The new National Film Archive is currently housed in an interim facility; a permanent archive is still in the planning stages, and its fate is dependent on firm political will and generous funding. The NFAP has prioritized building up its collection, aided by a presidential decree, Administrative Order 26.⁸ The NFAP's transitory archival storage in facility in Cubao now holds about 11,300 elements, 36% on celluloid and 47% on analog videotape. The three vaults at the Cubao facility, one of which is set aside for high-risk audiovisual materials in advanced stages of deterioration, boast round the clock environmental controls. The rapid growth of the NFAP collection — they are already at 70% capacity — means that new acquisitions are far outpacing the NFAP staff's capacity to accession them in a timely manner. If the NFAP is serious about its declared goal of becoming "a sustainable institution that will preserve these materials for generations to come,"⁹ then the number of qualified archivists must grow as quickly as the NFAP collection grows.

The first major film project undertaken by the NFAP, the restoration and repatriation of Manuel Conde's 1950 film *Genghis Khan*, was completed last year. Other ambitious restoration projects are underway, notably *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [Manila in the Claws of Neon], the 1975 film by Lino Brocka that heralded the dawn of what Joel David calls "the Second Golden Age" of Philippine Cinema.¹⁰ A new dynamism is palpable in Philippine film archiving, but to understand the continuing urgency of a full realization of the Philippines' archival mandate, we need to go back to what happened in the long years before the establishment of the NFAP.

The dismantling of the first FAP after 1986, and the eventual opening of a new NFAP in 2011, left an institutional vacuum, a yawning 25-year gap that has been filled with terrible stories. Filipino film historian Clodualdo "Doy" del Mundo Jr. recounts that in 1994, LVN, a major studio in the forties and fifties, decided to discard films by other production companies that had long remained unclaimed in its storage vaults. Only a handful of production outfits retrieved their films upon being notified of the purge; the rest of the films — over a thousand rusting cans of celluloid comprising 72 titles — were dumped in the studio's open basketball court, exposed to months of sun and rain.¹¹ The desperation that seized Filipino film and media archi-

vists in the 1990s, in the absence of a national archive, led to an era of cooperation and collaboration in a decentralized archival advocacy among the largest remaining AV archives in the country. These stakeholders were composed of "government and academic institutions," chief among them the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), the Philippine Information Agency (PIA), the University of the Philippines Film Institute (UPFI), and the National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA), which funded several collaborative restoration projects. Among the "private and industry-based institutions," the significant players are the Mowelfund Film Institute, the film studios, LVN Pictures and Sampaguita Pictures, and the broadcasting corporation, ABS-CBN, which has the premiere temperature-controlled archival storage facility in the Philippines, though being part of a commercial TV network inevitably constrains the nature of their archival efforts.¹² The third group of stakeholders include nongovernmental organizations and private individuals; in this category, the most important organization by far is SOFIA, the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film, which has functioned as the lead nongovernmental "coordinating body" in media preservation and restoration projects to date.¹³

Galvanized by the disastrous emptying of LVN's storage vaults, SOFIA in 1994 authored a "draft of a Master Plan to save the Philippines' Film Heritage." Three initiatives introduced by the "Master Plan" are highlighted here. First, the creation of a systematic inventory or "master list" of surviving Filipino films; second, the reproduction and restoration of 20 designated masterpieces of Philippine cinema; and third, the dream of establishing a national audiovisual archive.¹⁴ As to the first task, an unpublished master inventory was drafted in 2005, a groundbreaking effort undertaken by SOFIA and the NCCA. Between 2002 to 2005, three seasoned archivists engaged in a painstaking reel-by-reel and tape by tape inspection of the various media formats of existing archival holdings in the Philippines: "35mm, 16mm, Super-8; Betacam, Betamax, VHS, S-VHS, U-matic, disc."¹⁵ The master inventory lists 3,738 titles in various conditions ranging from excellent to good to "vinegar syndrome 2-3", plus a number of unlabeled reels in an advanced state of decay. Of the second task of restoration and reproduction of canonical Philippine films: 14 of 20 films prioritized for restoration in 1997 due to their "high heritage value," have been restored to date. The third part of the plan sketched by SOFIA, the establishment of a permanent archival storage facility, has still not been realized. Within the next four years, the NFAP hopes to build a permanent archival storage facility, possibly in Tagaytay, but that will be dependent on firm political will and generous funding.¹⁶

For Jacques Derrida, archives come into being from the privileged melding of place, medial substrate, and the "authority" of the "law."¹⁷ In contrast to Derrida's formulation, archives have emphatically not been the place where the law meets the medial substrate for most of Philippine history, given the state's negligence towards film archiving. I am writing of this now on the brink of change: the national film archives of the Philippines was finally established last year, and the state is playing a newly active role after 26 years of indifference.

Broadly, two crucial questions are posed by this moment

when a newly established NFAP is reaching out to its constituents for support and collaboration. The first question concerns the decades-long audiovisual archival vacuum from which the country is just emerging. As we know, there have to date only been two national film archives in the Philippines: the short-lived archive Film Archives of the Philippines (FAP) during the Marcos era; and the new NFAP established in 2011. What are the consequences we're living with from those 25 gap years, that long interval during which the country was without a national film archive?

NFAP Head Benedict "Bono" Olgado's response to this question emphasizes the tragic loss of not only countless films but also information about them. This loss of continuity is "manifested in weak paper trails, unknown rights issues, unknown locations of films"; as well as the erosion of public support and momentum for film preservation.¹⁸ Another important consequence of the long archival vacuum is that the archival advocacy for film became both decentralized and privatized. The state's abdication of its responsibility to film history meant that a handful of private collectors stepped into the breach. We owe a debt of gratitude to such private collectors, but a tension is inherent between the individual collector's impulse to privatization vis-a-vis the NFAP's stated objective of an archive that provides "permanent access" under the stewardship of the state. How this deep tension between decentralized privatization and state centralization plays out remains to be seen.

We are on the brink of change: the NFAP has finally been established, and the state is playing a newly active role after 25 years of indifference. What are the consequences of this sudden shift from state indifference to a government that has now taken the helm of the Philippine archiving movement?

As FDCP Chair Briccio Santos remarked, the long years of state indifference means that people's willingness to work with the government can sometimes be "laced with suspicion,"¹⁹ especially because the last administration keenly interested in Philippine cinema was the Marcos regime. The need for trust and good working relationships among an archive's constituency is as real as the need for a permanent archival facility to house our films. The state archive's constituency, as Ray Edmondson defines it, are the stakeholders, friends and supporters who will "defend the archive when it's threatened" but also serve as a "constructive critic," a necessary counterbalance that keeps an archive "honest and in touch with its supporters."²⁰ Trust is also a temporal issue, an issue of time, as Edmondson notes in his statement on sustainability: "Archives are inherently permanent entities ... government instrumentalities come and go, but archives have to go on forever."²¹

There is an inherent tension, as Edmondson notes, between archival permanency and the shorter cycles of government appointments. As a recent article by del Mundo in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* points out, film archive initiatives in the Philippines have historically been extremely susceptible to changes in administration; projects prioritized by the FDCP under one leadership may not continued by the next presidential appointee.²² Yet the extremely long-term temporality of real archiving — which extends beyond a single person's lifetime

— contrasts strongly with the short-term cycles of term appointments for key government posts related to film. If the NFAP is to realize its goal of "sustainable preservation,"²³ then it must wrestle with these temporal contradictions.

How to ensure the NFAP's sustainability? To its credit, the NFAP is tackling this question head on. The answer is likely to be multi-pronged, a combination of a legislative agenda that secures a Republic Act that amplifies the FDCP's archival mandate and guarantees continuity and funding for the archive; fiscal and staffing strategies that gain *plantilla* [permanent government staffing positions] to ensure that the archive has qualified people to run its operations; partnerships with the private sector or bilateral agreements with international partners to provide funding and other forms of support, and to induce the state to maintain a certain "national composure" where the archives are concerned.²⁴

As Derrida observes, an archive is never an "assured" concept. It is, rather, a "question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come."²⁵ We will only know what the Philippine audiovisual archive will have meant in times to come. This is not a failure of Philippine archiving, but only indexes, in a more overt form, the always-in-process character of all archives in their struggle against the twin processes of obsolescence and remembrance, ephemerality and sustainability.

Notes

¹ Nick Deocampo, "Zamboanga: Lost Philippine-Made Film Discovered in U.S. Archive." *Movement*. February 2004, 2-7.

² Society of Film Archivists (SOFIA). 2005. *Terminal Report: Philippine Audiovisual Archives Collections: An Inventory*. Earlier Undated Draft entitled "Philippine Audiovisual Archives Collections: An Inventory" (hereafter referred to as AV Heritage Inventory). Proponent: National Commission for Culture and the Arts - Committee on Archives (NCCA-CA), with the Society of Film Archivists (SOFIA), 7-8.

³ "Philippines hosts first conference of AV archive institutions," *The Southeast Asia-Pacific AV Archives Bulletin, Official Quarterly Newsletter of the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audio-Visual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA)* 1.1. January-March 1996: 1, 14.

⁴ According to most sources, the Film Archives of the Philippines (FAP) closed in 1986; however, in a roundtable session at the National Film Archive of the Philippines' Philippine Heritage Summit, held on January 25, 2013, Ernie de Pedro, former Director of the FAP, claimed that foreign funding from four international organizations allowed him to keep the FAP open until 1989.

⁵ Republic Act 9167, "An Act Creating The Film Development Council of the Philippines, Defining its Powers and Functions, Appropriating Funds Therefor, and for other purposes,"

Congress of the Philippines, Twelfth Congress, First Regular Session, 7 June 2002. The one-line archival mandate reads: "To ensure the establishment of a film archive in order to conserve and protect film negatives and/or prints as part of the nation's historical, cultural, and artistic heritage." http://www.lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2002/ra_9167_2002.html (accessed 15 December, 2012)

⁶ Bayani San Diego, Jr. "FDCP film archives now fully operational," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 9 July, 2011. <http://entertainment.inquirer.net/5147/fdcp-film-archives-now-fully-operational>. (accessed 10 December, 2012)

⁷ "France to Assist Local Efforts to Upgrade Film Archives." *Sunstar Manila* 28 November 2011. <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/manila/local-news/2011/2011/2028/france-assist-local-efforts-upgrade-film-archives-system-192969>. (accessed 10 December, 2012)

⁸ President of the Philippines. "Prescribing the Rules on the Deposit of Copies of Films and Other Audio-Visuals to the National Film Archive of the Philippines." *Administrative Order No. 26*. Ed. Malacanang Palace, Manila, 17 April, 2012.

⁹ NFAP *Annual Report*, 2011-2012, p.3.

¹⁰ Joel David. 1990. A Second Golden Age (an Informal History). In *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema*. Manila: Anvil Publishing, pp. 1-17.

¹¹ See Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.'s pioneering work on Philippine film archiving, *Dreaming of a National Audio-Visual Archive*, a SOFIA monograph for Ukay-Ukay: Where's the Archive, a Festival of Restored Filipino Film Classics in Celebration of SOFIA's 11th Anniversary, 16-17 July, 2004, 16.

¹² *Report on Asean Seminar on Film and Video Archive Management*. Held on 8 May to 3 June 1995, p. 5-6, Print; and Olgado, Benedict S. "Undergraduate Thesis Proposal: Towards a National Film Archive, an Analysis of and a White Paper on Policies and Practices in Film Preservation in the Philippines." 2008, p. 3-4, Print.

¹³ Belina Capul. "Annex H: Toward a National Film Archive for the Philippines, Presented at the Workshop/ Consultative Meeting on the Development Plan for Av Archiving in the Region: The Asean Catalogue of Film and Television Productions." Quezon City, Philippines, 1-5 December, 1997, p. 3-4.

¹⁴ Annella M. Mendoza, *Draft Elements for a Master Plan to Save the Philippines' Film Heritage (Society of Film Archivists, Sofia)* 29 June, 1994, p. 1-4.

¹⁵ AV Heritage Inventory draft, p. 3.

¹⁶ Ramon C. Nocon. "Finally, a National Film Archive." *Philippine*

Dailiy Inquirer 27 October, 2011. <http://entertainment.inquirer.net/18699/finally-a-national-film-archive> (accessed 15 December, 2012); and author's personal interview with Benedict "Bono" Olgado, 19 September, 2012, at the National Film Archives of the Philippines Operations office, 70C 18th Avenue, Cubao, Quezon City, Philippines

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida. 1996. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* *Trans.* Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 3.

¹⁸ Benedict "Bono" Olgado. Personal interview with Bliss Cua Lim, 19 September, 2012, at NFAP Archive Operations office, Cubao, Quezon City.

¹⁹ Briccio Santos, Personal interview with Bliss Cua Lim, 5 November 2012, Film Development Council of the Philippines Office, Makati, Philippines.

²⁰ Ray Edmondson, "Notes on Sustainability of Audiovisual Archives," unpublished statement distributed at the Philippine Cinema Heritage Summit, 25 January, 2013.

²¹ Edmondson, "Notes on sustainability."

²² Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., The dream need not be a nightmare, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 23 January, 2013. <http://entertainment.inquirer.net/77897/the-dream-need-not-be-a-nightmare>. (accessed 25 January, 2013)

²³ National Film Archive of the Philippines, *Annual Report, 2011-2012*, 1.

²⁴ Briccio Santos, personal interview with Bliss Cua Lim, 2012.

²⁵ Derrida, *ibid.*, p. 36.