

Film Review

Ang Babae sa Septic Tank (The Woman in the Septic Tank). 2011. Directed by Marlon Rivera. Written by Chris Martinez. Produced by Martinez-Rivera Films and Quantum Films. 87 minutes.

THE TAGALOG MOVIE, *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* (The Woman in the Septic Tank), is about two young indie filmmakers, Bing Bong and Rainer, together with their production assistant, Jocelyn. They are in the process of creating a movie entitled, “*Walang-wala* (With Nothing),” which they hope will garner them awards and recognition particularly in film festivals abroad.

In the “theater-in-a-theater” setting, Bing Bong, the film’s producer, was particularly optimistic that their movie would win awards especially since the subject matter that they tackled was that of poverty and the plight of the urban poor in Metro Manila, which for him was a sure-fire formula to win awards in international film festivals. As he says in the film — in English, particularly that of the educated Filipinos — their movie was “Oscar’s” material since it “works on so many levels, metaphorically and sociologically...” and is “controversial.” And in a moment of hubris, he even adds, “It’s what the country needs right now!”

One of the points that Homi Bhabha raised in his article, “The Commitment to Theory,” was whether Third World countries have escaped the chains of colonialism or imperialism (Bhabha 1994, 19–38). He cites the example of “(A) large film festival in the West — even an alternative cultural event such as Edinburg’s Third Cinema Conference” as revealing “the disproportionate influence of the West as cultural forum, in all three senses of that word: as a place of public exhibition and discussion, as a place of judgment, and as a market-place” (21). Bhabha uses the example of a film about Bombay’s pavement dwellers winning an award in international film festivals that opened the doors for the film to be distributed in India.

In the movie, *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank*, the protagonists' eagerness and drive to win recognition at an international festival seems to imply their belief that winning an award there would validate how good/talented/genius they are as filmmakers. This indicates Bhabha's view of the West having an influence as "a place of judgment" (21). In what seems to be an ironic twist of life imitating art, the movie was the Philippine's entry for the Best Foreign Language Film category during the 2011 Academy Awards.

At the same time, the protagonists' envy of the good fortune of their colleague who won an award in the Venice Film Festival and the seemingly massive outpouring of film projects that he has experienced when he came back to the Philippines are indications of the West's influence as a "market-place," which opens opportunities for aspiring indie filmmakers. This seems to imply that we have not yet moved beyond the confines of colonialist or imperialist thinking when it comes to the relationships between nations. Instead, in this post-colonial world that we live in, new means of colonialism have emerged through popular media.

The protagonist's belief that using the formula of Third World poverty as a subject for their film would win them awards indicates somehow that the First World/West has a partiality to recognize films that it views as representing the gritty "reality" of living in the Third World. The protagonists, who probably come from the middle- or upperclass and are greatly influenced by Western perspectives, exploit this by presenting poverty according to the Western view of how poverty should look like.

As seen in the dialogue between the two protagonists (rendered predominantly in English), Ranier, the director, wants their movie to be "as real as possible" and "believable and not put on." To which Bing Bong replies, "Festival programmers won't have it any other way."

They were "pleased" to find a suitable location for a scene: a neighborhood with shanty houses. But there, they were confronted with the reality of poverty when they were robbed and their car was stripped off its parts. And they could not do anything but wail and cry. Even when they reported it to the police, they somehow knew that it was hopeless.

Their idea of poverty, which was of a mother being forced to sell her child to prostitution, showed only one side of poverty and did not represent its entire reality in the Third World. Aside from representations of poverty, another interesting point that the movie makes is how the representation of the characters in Bing Bong and Ranier's film can change the overall tone or impact of their movie. In one scene, the protagonists imagined how their film would be perceived if they used another actress with a different skin color or age or if they used a different gender for the child playing the role of victim. Even using a different race or nationality for the pedophile character can alter their film's message and the metaphorical meanings attached to it. In addition, the genre that will be used for their film (whether documentary, musical or drama) and even the perspective of the storyteller can shape the film's representation of reality to the audience. This is seen in the portion of the film where the lead actress, Eugene Domingo, playing as herself, tries to put her interpretation of the movie's sequences.

As a whole, *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* seems to parody the indie film industry by showing representations of what an indie filmmaker looks, acts, and thinks like through the characters of Bing Bong and Ranier. It seems to characterize the indie film industry as one that is obsessed with winning awards from international festivals. In the same vein, the lead actress, Eugene Domingo, plays a caricatured version of herself — another representation of what a famous, award-winning actress looks, thinks, aspires to, and acts like.

The movie makes the audience ponder whether the representations in the movie are the actual reality or just a version of reality that the author or director wants them to see.

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Reference

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.