

Reviews

Ilo Ilo. 2013. Written and directed by Anthony Chen. Produced by the Singapore Film Commission, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, and Fisheye Pictures. 99 minutes.

ILO ILO REVOLVES AROUND THE RELATIONSHIP of a Singaporean family with their Filipina housemaid, Teresa, “Terry.” The couple—Teck Lim and Hwee Leng Lim—hire Terry who hails from the province of Iloilo, Philippines to take care of their flat and their rather unruly young son, Jiale. During the family’s first encounter with Terry, Jiale already is rude toward her. This resentment continues until Terry herself berates Jiale and tells him off for his bad behavior. Their relationship improves when Terry tenderly takes care of Jiale after an accident. Unfortunately, the financial situation of the Lim family deteriorates tremendously during the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. The Lims eventually but reluctantly decides to let Terry go even if she has become a valuable part of the household.

Ilo Ilo can be considered a *film á clef*, since Anthony Chen was raised in the 1990s by an Ilongga, whom they referred to as “Auntie Terry.” According to him, “I would say 60 to 70 percent [of the film] is from real memories and events” (King 2014).

In order to understand the themes of *Ilo Ilo*, it is instructive to discuss Graeme Turner’s (1999) views about the relationship between film and culture. The Australian cultural studies scholar states that film has been regarded “as a ‘reflection’ of the dominant beliefs and values of its culture” (152). However, he considers this “too primitive” and asserts that,

The metaphor of reflection is also unsatisfactory because it bypasses the process of selection and combination that goes into the composition of any utterance, whether in film, prose, or conversation. Further, between society and this so-called “mirror” is interposed a whole set of competing and conflicting cultural, subcultural, industrial, and institutional determinants. (ibid.)

Turner states that other approaches to “reflectionist views” say that

Film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation, it constructs and “re-presents” its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of its culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium. Just as film works on the meaning systems of culture—to renew, reproduce, or review them—it is also produced by those meaning systems. (ibid.)

Thus, *Ilo Ilo* is not a “reflection” of the Singaporean society in the 1990s but rather a “representation” of it. Singapore is represented as an affluent country whose comfortably well-off citizens have a hard time coping with the Asian financial crisis. The Lims, a typical middle-class family, is not spared from this predicament. Teck, a salesman, is fired and reluctantly takes a job as a security guard. He considers this occupation beneath him since he keeps it from his family, even from Terry. He also loses money in an investment and is again laid off. On the contrary, Hwee Leng is relatively secure in her job. She has the dubious honor of typing and eventually handing out the termination letters to her colleagues. But even Hwee Leng is not immune from financial problems; she loses money to a con artist. Both Teck and Hwee Leng desperately cling to their middle-class status, as Teck continues his smoking habit and Hwee Leng insists on giving a bigger cash gift to a relative. They are also reluctant to sell their car and to send Terry home. Aware of his family’s financial problems, Jiale uses his intellect to try and win the lottery.

Despite their dire financial situation, Teck and Hwee Leng love their son deeply in spite of his sporadic outbursts of anger. This is seen when Teck agonizes over his decision to throw away his son's Tamagotchi, especially since he cannot replace it. Killing two birds with one stone, he buys chicks as a birthday gift and give Jiale a toy. The couple also develops a respectful attitude to, and a good relationship with, Terry. They allow her to eat with them and even give her hand-me-down yet decent clothes. They also bring Terry to a party, and are uncomfortable when she is reduced to eating outside the venue.

The centrality of the family in Asian societies is portrayed in *Ilo Ilo*. The Lim family has a large extended family, and they even remember their dead relatives. In Terry's case, she keeps in touch with her family in the Philippines through phone calls. Indeed, her family is the reason why she went to Singapore. This is highlighted in the exchange between Terry and Jiale about the former's infant son. This is also evident in the scenes depicting Lucky Plaza, a place where Filipino domestic helpers congregate during their days off. Although not explicitly stated in the film, Terry and these Filipinos—like other millions of Overseas Filipino Workers or OFWs—are driven by the desire to improve the economic situation of their families in the Philippines. The disparity between the economies of the Philippines and Singapore is depicted in the way Terry marvels at Singapore and at the beauty products Hwee Leng has.

The film touches on the theme of identifying with the nation. In the case of Jiale and his fellow Singaporeans, this is shown when they recite the Singapore National Pledge at school. It is clear from the way he delivers it that Jiale takes the pledge seriously. Terry's identification with the Philippines is shown when she calls her family or when she interacts with her fellow Filipinos in Singapore. Within the Lim household, the two contrasting nationalities interact in a fairly seamless way. Terry shows her Filipino Catholic tradition by praying before meals. This practice is respected by the Lims as a testament to their open-mindedness and to the multicultural nature of Singapore.

All in all, *Ilo Ilo* offers a glimpse into Asian societies—particularly the Philippines and Singapore, as interpreted by Anthony Chen. It also lets the viewers see a fictionalized rendering of a chapter in the life of the writer-director that shaped and affected him profoundly. By naming the film after his beloved nanny’s hometown, Chen acknowledges the huge role that she played in his family’s life.

References

- King, Susan. 2014. “‘Ilo Ilo’ Filmmaker Anthony Chen Recalls the Film’s Inspiration: Aunt Terry.” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 April. <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/apr/11/entertainment/la-et-mn-ilo-director-anthony-chen-20140411>.
- Turner, Graeme. 1999. *Film as Social Practice*. 3rd ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Angelo ARRIOLA

University of the Philippines Diliman