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Fragmentation, Intertextuality and Hyperreality: The Postmodern and Popular Filipino Films

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ABSTRACT

Watching popular films can help students take certain arguments in the theory of knowledge more seriously. Such claims bring to fore what the postmodernist critic **Frederic Jameson (1998)** refers to as the erosion of distinction between high culture (as represented by philosophy and the act of philosophizing) and popular culture (embodied by popular films) as when these products of mass culture are used as texts for philosophical and literary studies. The present study was designed to analyze popular Filipino films as text, in order to achieve the researcher's aims: one is to prove that movies can truly be philosophic and literary, by highlighting the dominant features of postmodernist fiction discernible in the selected contemporary films, and how these features were related to the overall narrative structure, characterization, and thematic content. More importantly, the paper underscores the relevance of Filipino traditional traces still present in the Filipino post modern.

Keywords: Filipino film, fragmented narrative, pastiche, postmodernism, simulacra.

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1.0 Introduction

A number of theorists and film/ literary critics agree that the years trailing the Second World War marked the “passing of an old world” and the advent of the postmodern age (**Montealegre, 2007; Arriola, 2006; Hart, 2004; Harvey, 1990; McHale, 1987**). Also dubbed as ‘anti-foundational,’ the theories

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which constitute what we call postmodernism are best summed up in the book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984) by Jean-Francois Lyotard, probably the leading figure in this philosophy. Lyotard's plea, his contempt of authority, as Stuart Sim (2001) asserts, is to reject the so-called 'grand narratives' of the Western tradition, its 'universal theories' as regards culture, for the grand theories have, at that point, lost all their credibility. This skepticism of authority, of received tradition, Sim (2001) furthers, seems to be the best way to describe postmodernism as a philosophical movement. The form of dissent that characterizes the postmodern condition or impulse, according to Lyotard (1984), is what gave birth to the 'metanarratives' in reaction to the 'great recits' to answer questions like "What is knowledge?" and "What is knowledge ultimately good for?"

1.01 Postmodernism and 'Late Capitalism'

Knowledge is arguably now the most important 'commodity,' according to Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), and whoever controls knowledge, now exerts political control. It is within this atmosphere of political and socio-economic shift, when the first two stages of capitalism—'market capitalism' and 'imperialist/ monopolistic capitalism'—were already superseded by a 'post-industrial' or 'late capitalism,' where postmodernism began to thrive. In effect, late capitalism "sees the accumulative logic of capitalism extend into every possible area of society" (Nicol, 2009). It means that capitalism was able to seep into areas of society, including the arts, media and education, which were previously untouched by the laws of capitalism. These areas have then begun to require growth, profits and business models, and started to advance the so-called 'globalization' of consumerism, resulting in what (Nicol, 2009) refers to as 'cultural eclecticism' – an idea best summarized by Lyotard (1984) himself in a much-quoted statement of the postmodern condition: "one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong".

Focusing his work on how consumer capitalism restructures contemporary life, another postmodernism scholar, Frederic Jameson (1998) observes that the period of late capitalism is the third machine age, when the computer is the dominant technology. Thus, the computer has the utmost impact on the representation of reality and knowledge, as glimpsed in the arts:

Such machines are indeed machines of reproduction rather than production, and they make very different demands on our capacity for aesthetic representation...narratives which are about the processes of reproduction and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum (Jameson, 1991).

For Jameson, postmodernism focuses on the birth of a new mass culture, as part of late capitalism and the decline of "bourgeois hegemony." This dawn of a new cultural tradition results in the blurring of the distinction between high art and pop culture, and openness to the academic study of popular art, particularly the cinema. The dividing line between high culture and low art is now eroded. There is an obliteration of the older categories of genre and discourse; now, in the postmodern world, ideas like incorporation, collaboration, eclecticism exist.

The abovementioned postmodern approach to art, and by extension, to literature and motion picture, is characterized by its rejection of the distinction between high and low forms, and the tendency toward embracing diversity and contradiction amidst a consumer society filled with mass produced objects (Khosravishakib, 2012; Reive, 2011; Freeda-D'Cruz, 2009; Montealegre, 2007; Arriola, 2006). Thus, despite their wide variety of styles and thematic content, the postmodern "creators" (or more appropriately, "re-creators"), as Federman (1988) in his "Self-Reflexive Fiction" (in Lewis, 2001) observes, were able "to form a unified movement for which a coherent theory could be formulated." Different 'traits' are encountered time and time again, in the seemingly incomprehensible landscape of postmodern fiction. As Aldridge (1983) puts it in his *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (in Lewis, 2001):

In the fiction of [postmodernist writers]..., virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world

they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified. Characters inhabit a dimension of structureless being in which their behavior becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgeable because the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement.

Hence, the present study indeed ‘capitalizes’ on this blurring, by subjecting selected contemporary/popular films to a scholarly reading, using the tools of postmodernism. This task of effacing the line between the elite and the mass by problematizing aspects of the motion picture in the perspective of the postmodern, as [Arriola \(2006\)](#) remarks, would have looked very odd several decades ago.

The consequence of living in the postmodern, knowledge/information-driven, media/culture-saturated world is that human beings have become alienated from the aspects of life considered to be authentic or ‘real’. In the ‘high-tech’ postmodern society, people now spend most of their time in front of a ‘screen’, processing ‘information’ of one kind or another, engaging in what Baudrillard (in [Nicol, 2009](#)) refers to as ‘symbolic representation’ rather than real, tangible objects. Existence has become more ‘virtual’ than real.

The notorious French postmodern philosopher and critic [Jean Baudrillard \(1994\)](#) in his *Simulacra and Simulation*, espouses the idea that the postmodern world is a world of ‘simulacra’, where humans could no longer differentiate between reality and simulation. In the contemporary, postmodern society, people have replaced reality and meaning with symbols and signs; what is known as reality is only a simulation of reality. The signs of culture and communication media that create what humans perceive today as reality constitute the simulacrum, infused with image, sound, advertising, and other aspects of ‘virtual’ reality.

Moreover, [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#) theorizes that in the postmodernity of late capitalism, the world of the simulacra surpasses the world of the ‘real’, thus becoming ‘hyperreal’ – a world that is said to be ‘more real than what is real.’ The line between representation and reality vanishes; the simulacrum alone exists, and originality is rendered meaningless. The postmodern world is now experienced through the “screen”, with a barrage of projected images from TV news, film reels, internet chat rooms and social networking sites.

Another characteristic of the postmodernist world is what [Jameson \(2003\)](#) refers to as the *death of time*. The postmodern theorist argues that “time has become infinitely temporal, encapsulating the past, present and the future” ([Jameson 2003](#)). In the postmodern era, it seems that the world has started to live only in a state of ‘perpetual present’.

[Jameson \(1991\)](#) also argues that “historicism” now effaces history, and this situation renders incomprehensible the concept of historical/ chronological time, as mirrored in fiction, and concretized by postmodernist concepts of *temporal disorder*, *nostalgia*, and even in the way the styles of the past are *pastiched*:

In the postmodern world, history is taken over by the stylistic representation of history in which the new spatial logic of the simulacrum can now be expected to have a momentous effect on what used to be historical time. This process inevitably begins to wither the boundaries of chronological time and we begin to linger in a time notion in which we are surrounded by only the representations of history in stylistic forms.

As a result, postmodern works of fiction tend to self-consciously distort time and history ([Hutcheon, 1988](#); [McHale, 1987](#)). This ‘contradictory enterprise’ is said to be best represented in works referred to as ‘historiographic metafiction’ which accomplishes the distortion in several ways, including apocryphal history, anachronism, and blending of history and fantasy.

Apocryphal history involves the use of bogus or fake accounts of famous events. Similarly, anachronisms disrupt temporal order by providing/ flaunting glaring inconsistencies of historic details or setting, like the presence of electronic equipment (e.g. telephone, television) in a time setting when

obviously they have not yet been invented or used. Lastly, the blurring of the line between history and fantasy is achieved in fiction (and exemplified in Latin American writings) through the combination of personal reminiscences that are ‘real’ and ‘fake’ unsubstantiated anecdotes.

Moreover, postmodernist fiction does not only disrupt the events in the past, but also corrupts the veracity of present time too. It disorders the linear coherence of the narrative by twisting the sense of significant time (‘kairos’) and the seemingly dull passing of ordinary time (‘chronos’). Postmodernist writings are said to be filled with these kinds of temporal disorder, for in postmodernism, as Coover (1977) remarks in *The Public Burning* (in Lewis, 2001): “history does not repeat... there are no precognitions—and out in that flow all such assertions may be true, false, inconsequential, or all at the same time”.

Another significant effect of the “death of time” in the postmodern era is the use of *pastiche*. Derived from the Italian word *pasticcio*, meaning ‘a medley of various ingredients: a hotchpotch, a farrago, jumble,’ the term *pastiche* refers to the kind of permutation, to the intentional borrowing and transformation of another writer’s unique style. It arises from the frustration that in the postmodern times, everything has been done before; nothing new can be written and created anymore (Montealegre, 2007). Jameson’s (1983) essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” (in Lewis, 2001) sums up this postmodernist frustration: “the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds... only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already”.

Umberto Eco (1986) shares Jameson’s postmodernist belief in the inability of artists to create anything original or unique. He refers to this intentional borrowing and incorporation of old styles in contemporary works as *intertextual collage*. In his analysis of *Casablanca*, which Montealegre (2007) ‘pasted’ in her paper “Standing at intersections, traversing mazes, embracing spaces,” Eco (1986) looked into elements that fill what he referred to as “intertextual frames,” which are situations that point to preceding textual, if not filmic traditions. The result of such process, as Montealegre (2007) remarks, is something that appears new, but has nothing new in it. Fragments of different already existing textual/ cultural/ cinematic origin are incorporated to create a new whole—a postmodern whole, a postmodern totality.

Postmodernists distrust the wholeness and completion of traditional, modernist fiction. As a counterpoint to the epigraph in modernist E.M. Forster novel *Howards End*, which encourages the reader to “live in fragments no longer, only connect,” a postmodernist utterance in Barthelme’s “See the Moon?”: “fragments are the only forms I trust” points to the postmodern writers’ need to continuously find new forms of wholeness in the absence of old linear narratives (Lewis, 2001). The postmodernist writer prefers to deal with other ways of structuring and completing a narrative, through an offering of multiple endings and, more shockingly, literally breaking up a text into short fragments or sections, interspersed with spaces, symbols, illustrations, and other materials that are totally unrelated to the story. In so doing, the writer tears up the very fabric of the text, in order to come up with a postmodernist whole.

In addition, the membrane/ line between the text and real world of the writer is rendered porous/ permeable, to the extent that one cannot separate the two segments or sides. This segmentation/ fragmentation results in the arising of vicious circles in postmodernist fiction. When there is a merging of the literal and the metaphorical, and an inability to distinguish the different levels of discourse, as spelled out by Lewis (2001), the following occur: short circuits or when the author steps into or appears in the text, and double binds or when real historical figures appear in fiction. There exists a kind of ‘schizophrenia’ in the melding of fact and fantasy, which is rampant in the manifestation of the derangement of postmodernist fiction.

The postmodernist derangement is made clear by Tony Tanner (1971) in his *City of Words* (in Lewis, 2001). He describes the keenly felt “deranged” threat known as paranoia that numerous postmodern characters suffer from: “a dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of

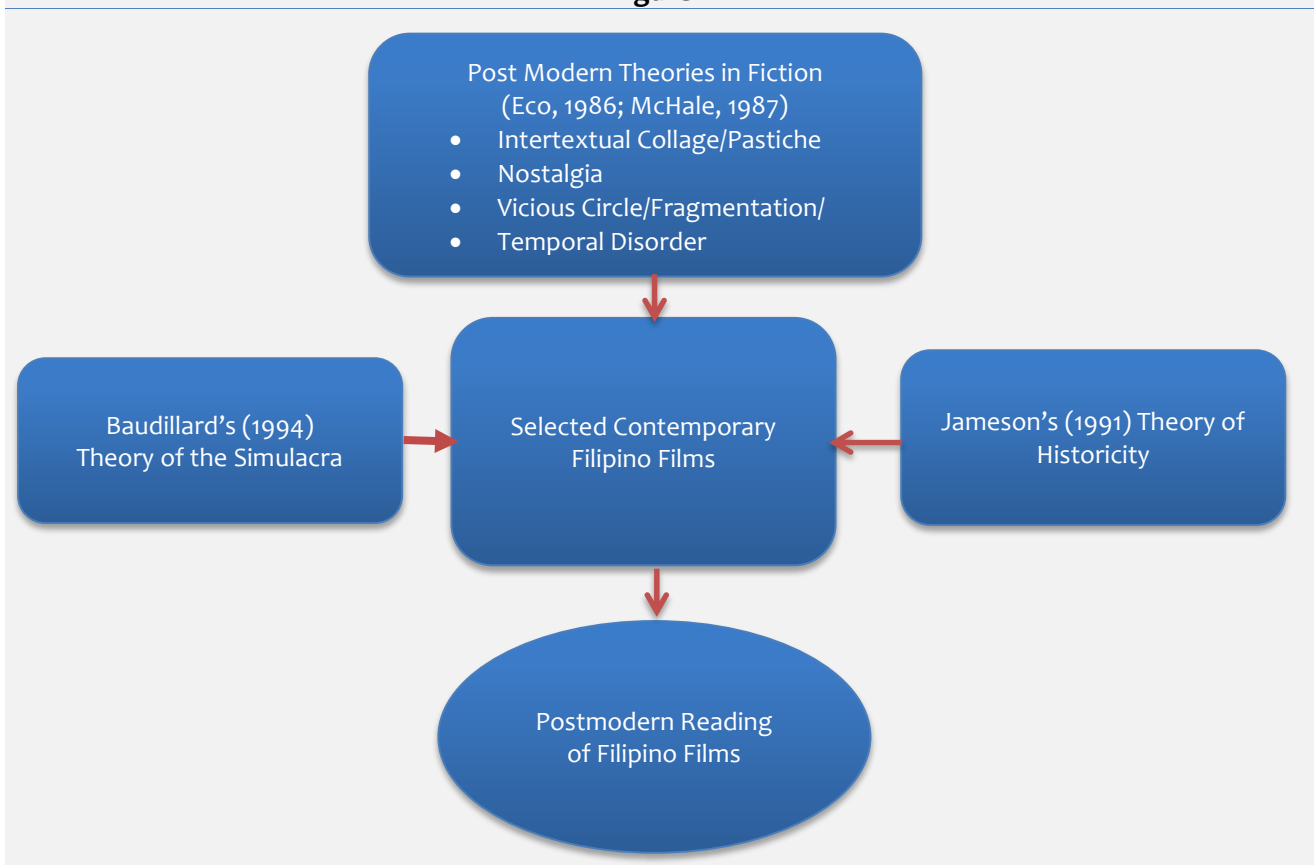
invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous”. Representative of the climate of fear and suspicion that prevailed during the Cold War, paranoia in postmodernist writing is reflected through various ways: the distrust of the character of fixity or a stationary space shown through imprisonment or being committed to a mental institution, the suspicion of the character that s/he is in the center of an intrigue or conspiracy, and the writer’s tendency to proliferate and maximize the use of story plots/ plans, as if to prove that they are indeed free from the ‘straitjackets’ of uncontrollable outside forces.

The researcher came up with this study as a continuation of a previous study done on the philosophical underpinnings of the motion picture, and an offshoot of the various seminars attended on postmodernism in literature and film. Embracing the spaces provided and rising to the challenge of “traversing postmodern” by the concluding statements from Montealegre’s (2007) paper on the postmodern in film, fiction and poetry, and Arriola’s (2006) monumental work on the *Postmodern Filming of Literature*, the present study is an attempt to prove that the primarily western concept of postmodernism has, at last, reached the developing, Eastern shores of the country, through her contemporary, independently-produced films.

This study embarked on a systematized endeavor to apply the precepts of postmodernist fiction, anchored on the groundbreaking theories of Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, with an eye toward identifying and highlighting points to prove that the selected contemporary Filipino films exhibit postmodernist strains. The study will also make use of critical and interpretive frames, as it studies the narrative technique, intertextual frames/ collages, and other symptoms of postmodernist ‘schizophrenia’ discernible in the film texts.

2.0 Methodology

Figure 1



The paradigm sheds lights on the way the selected Filipino films are subjected to a postmodern reading. After thorough library research, both on film studies and postmodernist philosophy, and sessions of

consultation with film and media educators, not only to help draft the criteria for the selection and the actual selection of the films to be used in the study, but also the postmodern theories that would lend themselves well in a descriptive/ interpretive reading of the film texts. The reading of the selected texts is slanted on the notions of *le postmoderne*, that is, to bring to fore the elements of the films that highlight, if not theorize the postmodern condition. Both the film texts and the postmodern theories involved in the present study would form a lattice of seemingly complex interconnectedness between the theory and the text, wherein one would be used to explain the other and vice versa, in an attempt to render a postmodern reading of the motion picture, particularly the contemporary Filipino film.

The present study is limited to the analysis/ reading of two (2) contemporary Filipino films from the postmodernist perspective. The following provides a brief description of the scope and delimitation of the present study:

1. The selected Filipino films under study include the following: Yam Laranas' *The Road* (2011) and Marlon Rivera's *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank (The Woman in the Septic Tank)* (2011)
2. It must be said that the filmmakers of the abovementioned films might have pursued the projects without intending to theorize on the postmodern. It is understood, though, that the postmodern reading of the films does not necessarily mean that they are intentionally postmodern (Arriola 2006).
3. The postmodernist concepts applied to the reading of the film texts are only limited to features of fiction included in the theoretical framework of the present study. These include: *temporal disorder, nostalgia, pastiche/ intertextuality, fragmentation, paranoia, and vicious circle.*
4. The study does not include other films written and/ or directed by the filmmakers for economy of time. Moreover, the study does not intend to analyze the film texts using other literary or philosophical approaches apart from postmodernism.

3.0 Discussions of Major Findings

The Road as a postmodernist Asian horror story: The postmodernist horror film

Pinedo (1996) qualifies what characterizes a 'postmodern' horror story in her "Recreational Terror and the Postmodern Elements of Contemporary Horror Film" (p. 17):

1. Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world;
2. Horror transgresses and violates boundaries;
3. Horror throws into question the validity of rationality;
4. Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure; and
5. Horror produces a bounded experience of fear.

Simply put, as Pinedo (1996) claims, a postmodern horror film operates on the notions of disruption, transgression, undecidability, and uncertainty—elements that haunt hallowed strip of land that is Yam Laranas' *The Road*. Being one of the very few Filipino films that were screened in Hollywood and graced different film festivals abroad, including the prestigious Brussels Film Festival, *The Road* did not go unnoticed in the country as well, with its nomination from both the PMPC Star Awards for Movies (which some people say is the counterpart of the Golden Globe Awards, with the members of the press composing the award-giving body) and the very celebrated FAMAS Awards (the country's Oscar?).

Temporal Disorder, Disrupted Narrative

The film tells the story of three teenagers whose lives have been disrupted when they sneak off in the middle of the night to take a drive down a closed-off dirt road. As the police officers try to investigate the whereabouts of the missing teens, they uncover and unwittingly reopen a twelve-year old case involving two sisters who have gone missing while traversing the same road. The film then, in the words of *The New York Times* reviewer, Catsoulis (2012), "crawls back in time" in its attempt to make sense of the disappearances through spine-tingling fragments of vignettes told in a sequence of

flashbacks. The traditional 'linearity' of a typical horror film is repudiated by driving the viewers on a backward ride to the cause of the haunting, into a dilapidated house with an eerie past.

The past, too, is not presented chronologically. The story literally moves forward through a sequence of scenes that run backward in time. When the film opens, we see a grim-faced, highly-decorated police officer as he accepts another recognition from the force. Similar to the dual personalities/ fragmented identities of the *Fight Club* lead character in Croome's (2002) study of the cult classic, this police officer in *The Road*, who serves as the protagonist/ hero in the film's prologue ends up as the villain/ perpetrator, as revealed in a series of calculated backward jumps in time, from 2008 to 1998, and by 1988, the viewer gets a glimpse of the troubled past that haunts the hero/ villain. However, the epiphany does not take place in 1988, but in 2008. In the epilogue, the viewer is yet again brought back to the 'present day,' which in the film's time is 2008, and shown the unraveling of the events after the epiphany. The story, in another of the films numerous shifts in time, ends in a seemingly positive light, as it cuts (and lingers) in the scene showing the hero, when he was still a young boy, traversing the path that leads outside of their haunted, dilapidated house. The viewer sees the boy's smiling face as he strains his eyes from the harsh, but welcoming rays of the sun. In effect, the scene invokes the feeling of acceptance if not sympathy for the boy's plight, having been locked inside the house with a controlling mother and a homicidal father.

Fragmented recollections, schizophrenic subject

The transgression in the linear story-telling, cause-effect structure of a typical narrative is not the only postmodern slant of the film. It also capitalizes on the notions of fragmentation and paranoia. A schizophrenic self, as Jameson (1991) suggests, is a fragmented subject, unable to "organize its past and future into coherent experience". The 'incoherent experience' or 'schizophrenic experience,' as Jameson (in Barbara, 2006) furthers, "is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers that fail to link up in a coherent sequence". The film appears to be the puzzle pieces of an 'incoherent sequence' of events, occurring in the disjointed mind of the lead character. The scenes serve as the fragmented recollections of a young man, raised in a household of fear, paranoia, and even derangement. Is it not paranoia that compels the mother to lock his son inside of the closet every time the son spills water on the table or steps for even an inch out of the house? Is it not derangement, brought about by extreme jealousy and frustration for having no control over his own wife and home that drives the father to kill the wife and hang himself, in front of the boy's innocent eyes? Are these events in a young boy's life not enough to transform him to a murderous, bludgeoning monster? Are these eerie recollections from a troubled, haunted past not enough to shatter a young mind into fragments?

Such questions affirm Pinedo's (1996) confident claims that undecidability and uncertainty are things that define the postmodern horror film. The film screams of a lot of uncertain events and situations: Will the spectral car without a driver that haunts the road continue to cruise the tiny strip of land? Will the bludgeoned body of one of the sisters stop haunting the dirt road? Will all the murdered bodies ever be found? In a time that is characterized by 'perpetual presents' which is the postmodern, in a road, which could be situated anywhere as in the postmodern notion of 'placelessness' where the ghosts of 1988 still haunt the ghosts of 1998, where the soft whisper and muffled cry of the phantoms of 1998 can still be heard in 2008, history is not only transgressed but ultimately rendered non-existent. Ah, postmodern!

Ghost of the nuclear family in contemporary Filipino society

The fragmented subject, as Jameson (1991) argues "is condemned to live in a perpetual present in which the various moments of his/ her life have little [or no] connection", a direct opposition to the "once-existing centered subject, in the period of classical capitalism and nuclear family". Hence, the postmodern character in *The Road*, as in other Filipino horror films of late, also is unable to escape this

curse of a postmodernist “isolation and disconnectedness” – different from the “once-existing centered individual” that belongs to a “nuclear family.” The ghosts of his troubled past that haunt the now ‘decentered’ self are mere ‘simulations’ produced to help the subject cope with fragmentation.

Interestingly, stemming from the same ‘Asian horror tradition,’ the Filipino variant of the postmodern horror film shares some elements with its neighboring countries. Aside from its propensity for providing slow, atmospheric narrative transitions, the Filipino horror film also constructs the ‘Other’ and ascribes this, in a number of cases, on the female. McLarty (1993) posits in her dissertation titled *The Limits of Dissatisfaction: Postmodernism, The Contemporary Horror Film, and The Problem of the Feminine* how in the postmodern, a period characterized by the effacement of distinction between the ‘norm’ and the ‘other,’ the dismantled distinction is then displaced on the feminine:

Much reactionary postmodern horror directs fear and disgust towards the feminine by transcribing postmodern anxieties onto the female body...becoming a woman is the ultimate postmodern horror. The threatening social world is made sense by ultimately invoking the feminine as an indication of its monstrousness.

This points to the fact that the contemporary horror film can also be better analyzed and probed within the confines of a feminist discussion, which, however unfortunate, is not part of the present reading. It is useful to note though that in most postmodern Asian horror films, monstrosity is also ascribed to the woman. Consequently, in *The Road*, the monstrous feminine is still seen in the guise of the young boy-hero’s domineering mother, who refuses to let his son set foot outside of the female-dominated household, or the possessed body of one of the missing teenage girls, who has the power to recognize her assailant, and even the bludgeoned bodies of the sisters who continually haunt the road and the dilapidated house. Such burden of monstrous female representation is carried by *Sadako*, *Shom-Ba*, and other female horror victim/ monster figures in Asian horror films.

Moreover, in their introduction to *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*, Choi and Wada-Marciano (2009) posit that a number of themes, which appear to be nation-specific, are discernible in recent Asian horror films:

In the case of Japanese horror films, technology seems to be the most crucial aspect as iconography and for narrative development, such as the cursed videotape in *Ringu* and *One Missed Call*. The horror films from South Korea are often concerned with adolescent sensibility, which can be seen within the *Whispering Corridors* series, while recent Hong Kong horror films seem to be tied to the Chinese national identity, and reveal Hong Kong’s oscillation between desire for and anxiety toward China.

Asian societies, however, despite the difference in economic status, share similar socio-economic concerns, as Choi and Wada-Marciano (2009) further, including technology, sexuality, and a blossoming youth culture—which explain the recurring themes in their horror film production.

In the Philippines, however, it is not so much from technology or sexuality where our postmodern concerns spring, but from the threat that postmodernism poses on the “nuclear family.” It is observable that most if not all of the ghosts that haunt the Filipino horror film, as exemplified in *The Road*, are a product of the fragmented family. The Filipinos’ sociological concept of the family lies deep within the subject’s now ‘decentered, fragmented’ self; that is why, when the unit collapses, as illustrated in boy-hero’s witnessing of his mother’s murder, committed by the father, aggravated by the refusal of the mother’s ghost to leave the home and the father’s suicide, the self disintegrates into fragments. The hero ends up just living in his own Baudrillard’s ‘simulacra,’ filled with ‘simulated’ images of his ‘once-existing’ family. Later Filipino horror films like *Pridyider*, *Tiktik: Aswang Chronicles (Refrigerator: Chronicles of the Supernatural)*, and even TV’s *Juan dela Cruz* perpetuate this theme—the desire for a unified, centered whole stems from the loss if not lack of a ‘centering’ agent—the family.

**Indie within an Indie: ‘Simulacra’ in *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank (The Woman in the Spetic Tank)*
The Self-Reflexivity of the Postmodern ‘Indie’**

After winning most of the major awards in the 2011 Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival, and dubbed as the “most successful independent film in the history of cinema” with box office receipts of not less than 38.4 million pesos (www.pep.ph), Marlon Rivera’s directorial debut *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* was the country’s official entry to the 2011 Academy Awards for Best Foreign-Language Film. Penned by another veteran filmmaker in the ‘indie scene’, Chris Martinez, and picked up for a nationwide release by Star Cinema, one of the biggest studio production outfits in the country, the film was able to accomplish more than any other ‘studio’ films had in the past—a testament to the fact that the boundaries between high art/ low art or commercial/ art films have been transgressed in the postmodern times (Jameson, 1991).

Transgression of genre categories, pastiche of old styles

The film also rejects strict genre categorization. Although advertised as a comedic film, the story opens, rather gravely, in the most somber of fashion, reminiscent of a typical *telenovela*/ soap opera, with a perplexing narration, detailing the kind of scene that is about to unfold:

Sequence Number 34. Exterior. Establishing shots. Day.

Magbukas ang eksena sa iba’t ibang tanawin ng kahirapan sa lungsod. Ipapamalas din ang mga kalunus-lunos na kalagayan ng mga taong naninirahan dito. (The scene opens with different shots of poverty in the city. The lives of the people and their struggles are shown.)

Then, the movie fades in to a bombardment of miserable images of the slums in an urban area (Metro Manila, perhaps!) exactly depicting what the foregoing narration has just described. And as the opening credits appear in every dejected and wretched scene representing the impoverished metropolis, the narrator’s voice chimes in again:

Wide shots. Establishing shots ng slums, ng mga barong-barong, ng gabundok na tambak ng basura. Dadako and camera sa lugar nina Mila. Sa kauna-unahang pagkakataon, papakita ang malakahong tirahan ni Mila. (Wide shots. Establishing shots in the slums, in shanties, in the pile of garbage. The camera focuses to Mila’s small, dirty, impoverished house).

Typical of the characters that inhabit the world of ‘indie’ cinema, Mila (the title character) looks pitiable, in her tattered clothing and haphazard hair, as she cooks the pack of ‘instant noodles’ in a steaming pot of boiling water—this means lunch for her seven (7) children. The movie continues in this fashion for the next few minutes, evoking a documentary-drama ‘feel’ to it. What could be a better subject for a ‘real’ life documentary that the impoverished condition of a widowed mother, living dirt-poor, in the slums with her seven young children? What makes her plight even worse is that on that particular Thursday morning, she is going to sell/ pimp one of her small children for the all-important cash she need to feed the rest of her brood. The film that promised to be a fun-filled, comedic laugh-out-loud ride into the ‘toilet-humor-filled’ septic tank of a life of a character portrayed by one of the leading comediennes in the country quickly turns into ‘real’ life drama, a non-fiction narrative, a truthful chronicle of a life—a serious documentary on poverty.

What Jameson (1991) refers to as the effacement of distinctive lines between categories, as seen in the blurring of genre distinction in *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* is made more manifest when the film turns into a musical! The characters that are previously seen living in the monotony of everyday, hard-up existence suddenly churn into a well-choreographed dance number, the impoverished denizens of the city slums break into song, and the spotlight is thrown on the lead character, still preparing her brood’s lunch, as she belts out a Fantine-inspired performance, decrying the misery in her impoverished existence. ‘Cultural eclecticism’ as in the term used by Nicol (2009) is shown here in the muddling up of the film genres—documentary, musical, soap opera/ *telenovela*, situational comedy, and even stand-up comedy, as shown in the sequences where comedienne Eugene Domingo plays herself, an actress who is asked to read/ audition for the role of Mila, and she readily demonstrates the kinds of acting in her book: the elevator acting, the TV patrol acting, and ‘as is, where is’ acting.

The idea of self-reflexivity, resulting in what postmodernists refer to as a ‘vicious circle,’ wherein the boundaries of what is ‘fiction’ is transgressed by what is perceived to be ‘real,’ (McHale, 1987; Lewis, 2001) however, is magnified in the film not only by the notion of a real-life actress playing herself in a film that stars herself, but more emphatically by the film’s major premise: three young filmmakers—Bingbong, the producer, Rainier, the director, and Jocelyn, the production assistant—are dreaming of making it to the film festivals abroad with their story, which they believe is the film that country needs to see. They set out to do pre-production work, which includes an interview/ audition/ story conference/ stand-up comedy top-billed by their lead actress, and a location inspection at the Payatas dumpsite. Simply put, the film is an ‘indie’ film made by two young filmmakers (Martinez and Rivera) about two young filmmakers (Bingbong and Rainier) who are making an ‘indie’ film. Ah, postmodern!

The filmmakers, the ‘real’ ones, in their attempt to create an ‘indie’ film, which in the words of Levy (1999) in his *Cinema of Outsiders*, is “ideally a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that express the filmmaker’s personal vision”, samples numerous other film styles that came before it. *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* is indeed a pastiche of Lino Brocka, Mario O’Hara, Brillante Mendoza, and even Cheche Lazaro and the PROBE team. In its portrayal of the filthy, grimy details of poverty, the film juxtaposes Mila with Brocka’s *Insiang* (1976) or Turing of *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (1984). Similarly, *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank* could easily be *Babae sa Breakwater* (2003) by Mario O’Hara, in its representation of a woman trapped in the miserable, degrading slums of the metropolis. Interestingly, Mila could also be any of the poverty-stricken ‘subjects’ featured in the multitude of documentaries made on the issue. One of Mila’s children, whom she is about to pimp to a pedophile, could be, in fact, Brillante Mendoza’s *Foster Child* (2007), as shown in the scene wherein Mila gives her child a bath before she ‘delivers’ her to the foreign client, which is lifted directly from Mendoza’s film (Wee, 2013). Hence, the film’s intertextuality and its pastiche of pre-existing films, as a form of tribute to Brocka or O’Hara or parody of Mendoza, as Branston (2006) showcases in his highlighting of Tarantino’s homage to French modernist auteur Jean-Luc Godard in *Pulp Fiction*, emphatically points to the postmodern tendency of films to create a ‘hyperreal’ world, built on the intertextual images of the ‘simulacra.’

Baudrillard’s ‘Simulacra’ in the Age of Jameson’s late capitalism

Jameson’s (1991) voice is protracted in the entirety of the film. In its representation of the independent film industry’s attempt to capture ‘poverty’ in the country, the film echoes the postmodern critic’s notion of “narratives that are about the processes of reproduction and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders, the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the ‘simulacra’”. The practice of consumerism that characterizes Jameson’s (1991) late capitalistic age is illustrated in the film’s manifest ‘branding’ and product placements. Whoever watches the film serves not only as a viewer, but also a ‘buyer,’ a consumer of goods, as he/ she witnesses the characters walk in a ‘café’ and order “tall, iced, non-fat, two packs of Splenda, extra shot mocha”. The viewer/ consumer also gazes in amazement as brands familiar to him/ her is paraded on screen: Mila cooks Payless instant noodles, uses Safeguard to bathe her child, and goes to Echelon Condominium unit, above the Echelon branch of Bank of the Philippine Islands, its wall decorated with Cathy Valencia’s youth promising spa treatment, to pimp her child to a Caucasian pedophile named Mr. Smithburger. Buzz words like wi-fi, iPad, Google, FB status, and even ‘pear salad’ reverberate in the characters’ dialogues. Such is the atmosphere of the postmodernist age, as emphasized by Nicol (2009), echoing Jameson’s (1991) howl of the “accumulative logic of capitalism extending into every possible area of society” (Nicol 2009), including the media and popular culture.

A reality filled with images of advertising, profits, business opportunities, and consumerism is a world that Baudrillard (1994) refers to as the ‘simulacra.’ As a consequence of living in the postmodern, knowledge/information-driven, media/culture-saturated world is that human beings have become alienated from the aspects of life considered to be authentic or ‘real’. In the ‘high-tech’ postmodern society, people now spend most of their time in front of a ‘screen’, processing ‘information’ of one kind

or another, engaging in what Baudrillard (in Nicol, 2009) refers to as ‘symbolic representation’ rather than real, tangible objects. Existence has become more ‘virtual’ than real. In the movie, the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ are also problematized. The ‘virtual’ filmmakers IN the *Septic Tank* are juxtaposed with the ‘real’ filmmakers OF the film. Or is it the other way around? Ah, postmodern!

Poverty pornography in the contemporary Filipino ‘Indies’

Wee (2013), in his article “Weighed and Found Wanting: Pinoy Pathology in Pictures,” spells out what constitutes the notion of ‘poverty porn’:

In these films, poverty is the formula that influences plots and motivates characters. Expositions are sliced from life. Stories are set in shantytowns where society’s under classes call home. Characters are cut from tattered and vulnerable cloths. Yet these attributes are overwhelmed by a lewd obsession with the pits of deprivation. Little is spared to show the most abject instances of filth and misery to dramatize the harshness of Filipino life as it is. While foreign consumers have praised these films as raw and uncompromising, few have pointed out how their images conjure a myopic vista of the Philippines.

Filipino critics decry this recent trend in the blossoming independent cinema. To attract foreign attention in international festivals, filmmakers have all looked into the age-old issue of poverty in the Philippines—a theme which has already been explored in the note-worthy films of auteurs like Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal and Mario O’Hara, and exploited by the Philippines’ own “Cannes protégé” Brillante Mendoza (Wee, 2013). The filmmakers in the *Septic Tank* are guilty of the same crime. They are shown to be more concerned with creating an Oscar-worthy film, which would catapult them to instant success characterized by international film distribution, film festivals in Berlin, Brussels, Vesoul, and Cannes. They also see the miserable plight of the Filipinos in the slum areas of the Payatas dumpsite when they go there to check out their film location. They squeeze themselves between very cramped spaces among grimy shanties, and smile in satisfaction as they pose for a photograph on top of a mountain of trash.

This condition of the independent film industry in the Philippines is what the ‘real’ filmmakers of the “most successful indie film in the history of cinema” attempted to lampoon. What lies in the core of Rivera and Martinez’ (the ‘real’ filmmakers) “strong personal vision away from the influence and pressures of the few conglomerates that control the industry” (Tzioumakis, 2006) is a postmodern self-reflexivity. After focusing the camera on the poverty-stricken misery of their subjects, they point it at themselves, only to show that nothing could be seen there but a mirror reflecting the same deprivation that permeates both the Filipino ‘indie’ scene and the contemporary Filipino society. The independent filmmaker ceases to exist outside of the dejected subject which he/ she himself/ herself created. The creators of the image or the ‘simulacrum’ become entangled in it, as Baudrillard (1994) exclaims, the ‘real’ becomes ‘hyperreal.’ The ‘real’ filmmakers OF *Septic Tank*, in their nostalgia for the Formalistic films about social injustice and poverty created by Brocka and O’Hara in the second Golden Age of Filipino cinema in the 1970s to 1980s (Wee, 2013), try to make sense of the contemporary ‘indie’ scene by transforming it into a ‘hyperreality’ characterized by society’s slum-dwelling underclass citizens, dancing and singing in a choreographed musical number created by the postmodernist society.

Nostalgia and cultural alleviation in the contemporary society

Proving to be a unique Filipino cinematic experience, despite its recycling or *pastiching* of old song, styles, and story lines, the film indeed becomes a site for the postmodern nostalgia and the “celebration of a pleasure gained from revisiting and re-experiencing a known text” (Conrich, 2006). Moreover, the film also becomes a mouthpiece, in its celebration of Filipino sentiments through songs, of what remains to be good in the traditional culture. Through its depiction of Shakespearean chaotic events that lead to a ‘star-crossed’ wedding, the value of the Filipino family is affirmed. Through age-old practices like *pamamanhikan* and *panliligaw*, presented in a fit of nostalgia, the film upholds some of the customs that, in the words of Eco (1986), “invoke a sort of intense emotion” in the hearts of the postmodern Filipinos that they “yearn to see again.”

The table provides a recapitulation of the discernible post modernist features and sociological themes in selected Filipino films under study:

	The Road	Ang Babae sa Septic Tank (The Woman in the Septic Tank)
<i>A Look into the Film and Genre</i>	Post modern Asian Horror Story	Self-reflexive 'Indie' Film Transgression of Genre Categories
<i>Dominant Feature</i>	Postmodern Temporal Disorder and Disrupted narrative Fragmented Recollections of a Schizophrenic Subject	Intertextuality and Pastiche of Pre existing Film "Simulcra" Narrative
<i>The Postmodern in the Contemporary Filipino Society</i>	Postmodern threat to the traditional, nuclear, Filipino family	Poverty Pornography in Filipino Cinema

4.0 Conclusion

The postmodern in the Philippines

In light of the findings stated above, it is still noteworthy, if not commendable, as gleaned from the film texts under study, that there still remains a 'reality' that is distinctly Filipino. That in spite of the postmodern characteristics of intertextuality, indeterminacy, undecidability, decentering if not schizophrenia, and self-reflexivity in its "cultural style as having arisen from the technological and consumerist propensities of the times," as Eagleton (1996) sums up, some of the playfulness and optimism of the Filipino spirit still remain.

Moreover, the universal belief in second chances as shown in the blissful reunion of a kidnapped daughter and her grief-stricken family, after witnessing the phantoms of past gruesome murders that took place on a deserted, fragmented *Road*, reminds us that the most genuine of Filipino values like the importance of the family, justice, equality, and optimism are able to survive the tide of the postmodern, as they are still represented on the contemporary Filipino films.

Similarly, the Filipinos' sociological concepts of family and its disintegration in the postmodern times serve as the nucleus in the understanding of characterization and thematic content of postmodern Filipino films. Also, traditional socio-economic issues like poverty, class struggle and social stratification, which *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank (The Woman in the Septic Tank)*, clearly shows, still provide contemporary films with a rich subject matter for representation. Finally, the close interrelationship among social realities, popular culture and media representation performs a crucial role in the viewers' understanding of the postmodern situation in the country.

As an offshoot of this study, a number of research activities can be considered. A postmodern reading of Filipino literature, including fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, and dramatic works can be explored. Also, other postmodernist features not included in the study may be looked at and applied in the study of films / literature, and other literary theories can be applied alongside postmodernism to come up with a more comprehensive study of Filipino film. The use of postmodernism in the investigation of Filipino films can be further limited to a particular film category to figure out features of the theory that are genre-specific. Other media, including TV and print can be subjected to a postmodern reading using the theories of Baudrillard and Jameson.

More importantly, various pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study. Literature courses (both in the Secondary and Tertiary levels) may be examined with the purpose of including film and other mass media in the content. Instructional materials, including lesson plans / instructional guides and worksheets may be prepared to account for a postmodern reading of film and / or literature.

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