

Cult Fiction:

Himala and Bakya Temporality

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Star discourse pressures ideas of textual boundary. Paradoxically enough, the movie star, that absorbing “invitation to cinema,”¹ invariably tends to exceed the borders of the frame. Filipino film scholars have astutely pointed out that in Philippine cinema, Nora Aunor, the Superstar, is herself the super-text of her films, her star discourse the very genre in which the diegetic worlds of her films unfold.² In this light, the canonical, critically-acclaimed *Himala* (*Miracle*), a melodramatic story of a woman’s deification, has been read as a reflexive allegory thematizing Nora’s own fandom.³

In what follows, I would like to pursue *cult* as the crucial hinge in the dovetailing of diegetic divinity and extra-diegetic fandom in *Himala*. There is not one cult but three in *Himala*, a film that strives not to occlude but to capitalize upon the star discourse of Nora Aunor. First, the cult of Mary (a Marian apparition is the catalyst for the narrative action); second, the cult of Elsa, the protagonist, a heretical saint; and finally, the cult fandom of Nora Aunor, the actress who plays Elsa. I begin by discussing the figure of Elsa as a heretical saint and proceed to consider how Elsa’s onscreen devotees point off-screen to the cult fandom of Nora Aunor, a fandom often construed by critics as a snapshot of Filipino “mass culture” in general. On each of these collocated levels, cult functions as a fascinating, disparate,



Fig. 1. *Himala*: Elsa prays to the Blessed Virgin at the foot of a leafless tree.

yet discernable through-line. In *Himala*, cult allows us to trace the movement of devotion across various registers, from textual to social, from divinity to cinephilia. Cult fandom as masscult symptom also opens up questions of cultural hierarchy and temporality in trashy popular taste — what has been dubbed the *bakya* sensibility in Filipino popular culture.

Forged Miracles

On the surface, *Himala* is an exposé of forged miracles. In a poverty-ridden barrio parched for rain, a housemaid climbs up a barren hill on the day of a solar eclipse, falls to her knees before a bare and leafless tree, and sees the Virgin Mary—or does she? *Himala* follows Elsa’s transformation from housemaid to faith healer, from wretched poverty to a brief, relatively lucrative, and conspicuous sainthood. As a result of her growing fame as a faith healer, the little town commercializes, and Elsa herself is commodified (her blessed water is sold, her followers charge a fee for her healing). (Fig. 1)

The climactic pivot of the film involves the demystification of her apparent miracles of faith healing. No divine force protects Elsa and her disciple from being raped; the sick begin to expire under her care. The questions generated by the story— Is Elsa telling the truth? Is she a fraud? —are apparently answered by the film’s final scene. In this

closing sequence, Elsa, who has hardly spoken throughout the film, tells thousands upon thousands of her stunned devotees—“*Walang himala! Tayo ang gumagawa ng himala! Tayo and gumagawa ng mga sumpa at ng mga Diyos!*” (There are no miracles! We are the ones who make up miracles! We are the ones who create curses and gods!)⁴—and is shot through the heart by an unknown assassin. Yet the film also offers another set of signals that point to a contrary interpretation of events. The apparition and stigmata remain unexplained and Elsa is shown to have uncannily prophesied her own death by gunshot. The film, then, gives us no easy answers as to the truth or falsity of miracles. (Fig. 2)

Himala is based on a historical precedent: a Marian apparition in a small Philippine town. In “*Tungkol sa Pagsusulat ng Himala*” (About the writing of *Himala*), screenwriter Ricardo Lee relates that he conducted research on faith healers and women who had claimed to see apparitions of the Virgin Mary:

The primary source for *Himala* is what happened in Cabra Island in 1967 to Belinda, a young woman to whom, it is said, the Virgin made an appearance. Life on the island became commercialized.⁵

Lee frames the film’s historical referent delicately: *Himala* is based on “*what happened* in Cabra Island in 1967 to Belinda, a young girl to whom, *it is said*, the Virgin made an appearance.” The ambiguity of the film is already present in the linguistic caveats of Lee’s statement: between *nangyari* (what happened) and the adverb *umano* (“according to someone”; or “it is said”), the gap between event and knowledge is signaled by questions regarding the evidentiary status of testimony.

From the perspective of rationalist historiography, a miracle is a highly problematic eyewitness account that calls the validity of testimony into question. In the case of Marian apparitions, testimonies of peasant girls like Elsa (and her historical predecessors, Belinda of Cabra Island and Saint Bernadette of Lourdes) are often dismissed as self-serving because they effectively announce young women of marginal social status to be



Fig. 2. *Himala*: “There are no miracles!” Elsa tells her stunned followers shortly before she is assassinated.

privileged conduits of divinity.

As Marina Warner puts it, miracles are gifts of “extraordinary grace”:

Above all, a vision designate[s] a new saint, in communication with the supernatural, while an apparition sanctifie[s] that portion of the terrestrial sphere where it took place with lasting salvific effect.⁶

The tendency of miracles to single out their eyewitnesses as new saints has been rationalized as a cynical bid for power by excluded and underprivileged social subjects. In this paper, I am not interested in pursuing the question of veridical status posed by *Himala*’s narration. The same question—regarding the truth or falsity of the fantastic event—is asked of accounts of female divinity and forged miracles. Yet far from reinscribing the boundaries between the supernatural and the secular, *Himala* calls these distinctions into question.

Heretical Saint: The Marian *Babaylan*

Every Marian apparition sounds a note of heresy. Regardless of whether an apparition

finally receives ecclesiastical sanction, it always contains a core of reproach, an intimation that scripture and Catholic Church doctrine have failed to fully disclose the salvific message. Apparitions "provide [up-to-date] information on what the divine will is at any given moment" in contrast to centuries-old dogma.⁷ Apparitions suggest that God, or to be precise, Mary, has more to say than what is in the bible, that divine revelation is unfolding rather than a closed book, and can be more germane to pressing concerns than the Catholic canon.

Marian apparitions have far outpaced posthumous sightings of Jesus or the saints:

While reports of apparitions have been recorded since the origins of Christianity, Mary and not Jesus has been the predominant subject of this phenomenon, particularly since the eleventh century.⁸

Excessive devotion to Mary always hovers at the brink of apostasy because the prominence ascribed to her role in redemption has little biblical basis. Over the centuries her cult has alternately been fostered and quelled by the Church. To the consternation of some Catholic theologians, in the late patristic era to the early middle ages, Mary was "becoming a type of Christ." Among her popular medieval following, Mary's role as "omnipotent intercessor" had begun to overshadow the mediating role of Jesus, and she was seen as surpassing him. Though several Church thinkers—Saint Thomas Aquinas not the least among them—were opposed to the Mary cult, they could not stem the growing tide of her support.⁹

Marian apparitions emphasize the problems that Mariology has always presented for Catholicism. In deciding for or against ecclesiastical approval for Marian apparitions, the Church attempts to maintain a precarious balance between shoring up the faith of ordinary Catholics (who are far less wary of embracing miracles) and detracting from the power of the institutionalized Church. Marian apparitions force the Vatican hierarchy to contend with a dilemma:

apparitions vivify faith and hence bolster the position of Catholicism, but they invariably announce a new saint, a more direct access to the divine. The Church's apprehensiveness about apparitions and miracles also arises from attempts to demythologize, to protect itself against possible secular disparagement. Enlightenment critiques of the Church did not provoke a "muscular response"; on the contrary, the Church has since exhibited "a form of acquiescence to [its] critics,"¹⁰ lest it be accused of giving credence to forged miracles.

In its attempt to demythologize amidst such a popular proclivity for supernaturalism, the Church ends up fence sitting, unwilling to admit that miracles are potentially everywhere and alienating itself from popular sentiment. This is what ends up happening in *Himala*, but in this film Elsa's detractors among Church and laity (parish priest and filmmaker) find themselves vindicated.

Lacking institutional sanction and framed by equivocal events which both discount and uphold her claims to divinity, Elsa embodies the *heretical saint*. Elsa as new saint answers to "the hunger for direct messages from heaven in visionary form," offering "another way by which the historical time continuum could be slashed" so that centuries "of increasing distance and alienation [could] be made to disappear."¹¹ Her temporal structure, then, is messianic (as in Benjamin's understanding of a now-time in which the Redeemer might at any moment appear),¹² an understanding of the present as unsevered from the past.

Through its rhetoric of deliverance and a final scene in which Elsa's cruciform corpse is carried aloft by a grief-stricken multitude, the film establishes Elsa as a kind of female Christ. (Fig. 3) This is in keeping with a host of other films in which *Himala's* lead, Nora Aunor, incarnates the Filipino conception of suffering feminine virtue, the female martyr or *babaeng martir*. Yet in considering Elsa as an exemplification of the Marian conceit of a female Christ we have still not exhausted the wellsprings of her heresy.

In her aspect as female priestess, Elsa gestures at the *babaylanes*, (religious



Fig. 3. *Himala*: Elsa, martyred before thousands of followers, is a kind of female Christ.

functionaries), largely composed of women or “effeminate” men, who wielded power in pre-colonial, pre-Christian Philippines. Like the *babaylan*, Elsa receives remuneration for her religious work (in *babaylanism* no stigma was attached to the financial compensation of the spiritual leader), and assumed her position by claiming that she was selected for this office by a divinity.¹³ That Elsa should also advert to Catholic Mariolatry does not preclude her being cast in the mold of the *babaylan*. In her study of *babaylanism* in the Visayas, Evelyn Tan Cullamar describes the *babaylan* movement in nineteenth and early twentieth century Philippines as a “revitalization movement” which exhibited pronounced “acculturation” to Spanish colonial rule.¹⁴ There is a long tradition of subversive incorporation of Catholic elements into *babaylanism*: the *oraciones*, one of many charms against danger (*anting-anting*), was a sacred prayer said to keep the wearer from harm which consisted of a linguistic mishmash of Spanish, Latin, and the vernacular.¹⁵

Elsa’s proximity to *babaylanism* is a particularly potent sign of heresy, as *babaylanism*’s roots lie firmly in the peasantry and in the fervent faith which has, in other times, led to rural insurrection. *Babaylanism* informs various Filipino millenarian movements, manifesting not only the coalescing of anti-imperialist pro-peasant politics with folk mysticism but also attesting to the resilience of these movements, which date from the wars of independence against Spain and the

United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁶

Elsa as the Marian-*babaylan* embodies a challenge to Christian pastoral power. Elsa must be denounced as a heretic and a fraud not on the basis of the “objective” truth or falsity of her claims and powers, but on the basis of her social position: as an uneducated rustic, a housemaid, and a woman, she is not allowed to speak within the discourse of Catholic theology. At the height of Elsa’s fame, the town priest delivers a somewhat plaintive sermon to a near-empty church:

What would happen if miracles came easy? Chaos would ensue. Anyone would be able to claim that they were God’s messenger. Instead of opening our eyes, religion would blind us.¹⁷

The priest speaks of “easy miracles” as a discursive impropriety —“anyone could claim that they were God’s messenger”—a chaotic enabling of any and all voices to speak for the sacred. Tellingly, his warning against the collapse of authority is phrased as the possibility that order (*ang kaayusan*) would become disorderly (*magugulo*). For the priest, gate-keeping and discursive exclusivity safeguard the order of things. As the narrative unfolds, the decline of Elsa’s power spells the resumption of the pastor’s. The priest can only speak kindly of Elsa after her fall from grace, when his pews are full again, when the sheep that strayed return to the true flock.

For Michel Foucault, the pastorate is a distinctly Christian mechanism of power. "Exhaustive and permanent confession" is a technique for the "production of truth" inaugurated by pastoral power, a means of affording the pastor "knowledge of the interior of individuals."¹⁸ The obligation to an "exhaustive and permanent confession" "binds" the pastor to every sheep in his flock. Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, heresies and reform movements have often singled out the pastorate as a central concern: many were attempts to find "less spontaneous forms of community in which the flock could find the shepherd it needed."¹⁹

Elsa's untoward success, the rapid growth of her devoted following, underscores the failure of the pastoral power embodied by the parish priest. In contrast to the pastoral mechanism of authoritative surveillance and instruction, Elsa hardly speaks to those who seek her out, except to ask what ails them. Her exchange with her followers is typically brief; she responds to their disclosure of problems not by mandating repentance but by a laying of hands. Elsa's power is thus distinguished by *healing not confession*. To the drought-ridden, impoverished townsfolk and the tourist-pilgrims of Cupang, Elsa is the truer shepherd for her forlorn flock. In her ascendancy we see the figure of the pastor undermined by the Marian-*babaylan*. Elsa's heretical sainthood articulates popular disenchantment with an effete pastoral structure.

Elsa is finally the braver confessor of the two, because she is neither one who confesses to pastoral power nor one who hears confession from a perch of institutional sanctity. Unlike Orly and Chayong, Elsa never feels herself accountable to the pastorate; her unburdening and absolution must come at the hands of her following. She knows she has transgressed, not against God, but against her people. It is to her devoted public, gathered by the thousands on her blessed hill that Elsa confesses; it is at the hands of their love and wrath that she is martyred.

Himala, then, is truly the story of a heretical saint: Elsa is the oxymoron that destabilizes

the firm delineation between Church and heresy, rationalism and faith. The Church is so demythologized as to denounce apparitions; popular movements are sufficiently catechized as to couch their dissatisfactions in the borrowed vocabulary of Catholicism. One hardly finds, in all this, a firm distinction between orthodoxy and apostasy, secularism and religion. *Himala* is not a simple tale of a hoax revealed, nor a tragic narrative of fraudulence unmasked. It is rather an oxymoronic, subtle tale which suggests that to focus solely on the veridical status of miracles misses the points of convergence between pastor and heretic, journalist and faith healer, whore and saint. The film upholds, in the finest sense, a heretical understanding of heresy.

Star Cult/Masscult

It has been said that the actor is always meant to be overshadowed by the role she is playing. "[I]n all acting, the person of the actor is exposed even as it is occluded by the site of signification."²⁰ This model of performance as a site of signification that obscures the actor who produces the sign is incompatible with the films of the legendary Philippine superstar Nora Aunor, whose performance in *Himala* has been justly hailed as the finest in Philippine Cinema.²¹

The overwhelming star presence of Nora Aunor can never be completely occluded. Indeed, her characters in her films are designed, not to overshadow the semantic valence of the actress herself, but to capitalize on the always-allegorical register of her off-screen persona so as to enrich the thematic of the film and bring audiences in droves to the theater. It is axiomatic for critics that Nora is inseparable from the roles she plays. For Neferti Tadiar:

[t]here is no Nora Aunor film that does not script her 'own' life. That script, as others have pointed out, invariably resolves the mythical suffering of the babaeng martir through some escapist fantasy or religious, almost superstitious, belief.²²

Benilda Santos, Neferti Tadiar, and Patrick Flores have drawn attention to the conception

of sainthood exemplified by Nora even when she is in ostensibly secular film roles: as a personification of Filipino female virtue, she is a *babaeng martir*, a long-suffering woman who puts the needs and wishes of others before her own, the noble heroine of melodrama whose tribulation is all the more deeply felt by the audience because it is so unjust.²³

Off-screen, the actress' biography is rendered by tropes of sainthood as well: a tapestry of passion and redemption, Nora's "real life" ordeals and triumphs parallel those of her onscreen characters. Dubbed the "Cinderella Superstar" in the 1970s, fans and critics alike have been captivated by the mythic aspects of Nora's life story, which narrates the "impossible rise to fame" of a "poor, small, dark-skinned, and barely educated country girl" (Nora was a sidewalk vendor in Iriga, a city in Bicol province).²⁴

Nora's biography, like Elsa's, reads like a saint's legend, reminding us of unlikely, downtrodden village girls beatified by Marian apparitions. The trope of stigmatization which attends Saint Bernadette, the "little idiot" vindicated in Lourdes, is echoed in the *putok sa buho* (sprung out of nowhere) insults endured by the orphaned Elsa in *Himala*, and in Nora's own experience of being taunted "Negra! Negra!" (Black girl! Black girl!) as a little girl in the 1950s.

What finally distinguishes Nora as Elsa in *Himala* from the star's other saintly filmic roles is the film's cult framing of her fandom. The cult of Mary, rhymed in the disciples of Elsa, figures the popular following of Nora Aunor, a fan base which has been read as exemplifying the characteristics of Filipino masscult.

The "social profile of Nora Aunor fans" is usually characterized as "lower class," consisting of housemaids, slum dwellers, and market vendors; any wealthy Nora fans are considered an exception to the rule. Her following is also characterized by the trope of obsessional devotion. Flores writes:

The conventional view [is that Nora's] fans [are] "strange" people whose almost selfless and slavish devotion to their "idol"

defies normal and rational expectations of adulation. The "strange" (in some quarters of academe even "psychopathological") terms through which fans make sense of their social relationship with Nora Aunor draw up a set of interactions between fans and their "idol."²⁵

Similarly, Behn Cervantes has noted the conspicuousness of Nora's following—not only their rabid devotion, but also their cognizance of the distinct character of Nora as the object of their devotion:

The ascendancy of Aunor, the dark and underprivileged Filipina, coincided with the rise of rabid nationalism during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her struggle against the mestizas was emotionally supported by the anti-imperialist, pro-*masa* [pro-masses] sentiment brewed by activism. Furthermore, her story was cinematic in proportion, being a genuine Cinderella who rose from rags to riches. She was the Dark Pinay [Filipina] who toppled the White Tisay [Spanish-Filipino mestiza]! The Filipino audience was ripe for Nora Aunor. Domestic helpers, atsays [housemaids], cigarette vendors, store clerks, and everyone else who identified with the diminutive beauty realized that with the price of a movie ticket they could make a difference. They were heard and noticed through Nora. Her smooth brown complexion and dark brown eyes legitimized their own skin and eyes. They became fanatically loyal.²⁶

For Cervantes, the public that loved her recognized the singularity of Nora Aunor. Aside from her considerable talent and her unforgettable contralto singing voice, she was a short, brown-skinned "native beauty" in a film industry dominated by actors with European or "mestizo/a" features. Nora's feat of effectively thumbing her nose at the industry adage that beauty is whiteness would never again be replicated at such a scale by another female star. Cervantes calls her "the atsay [housemaid] who toppled the señoritas."²⁷ The trope of the upstart, of the impoverished female servant who unseats the señoritas, nicely encapsulates the feminist and working-class sympathies of Nora's

persona, and it is these aspects of her star text which are so dearly prized, and so clearly demarcated, by her cult following.

For Telotte, the cult film cannot be defined solely on textual terms, but must be understood as a transgression of normal, "reasonable" movie going practices.²⁸ Hence, as Bruce Kawin notes, a cult film can be both "a picture seen repeatedly by a devoted audience," and a "deviant picture embraced by a deviant audience."²⁹ What unites vastly different cult films is their communal following, described by Telotte as "group that worships similarly and regularly, and finds strength in that shared experience."³⁰ In the case of Nora's devotees, the "unreasonable" attachment characteristic of cult is directed, not at her films, but at the actress herself. Flores gives a fascinating ethnographic account of Nora's fan base:

The members of the fan club, called GANAP (Grand Alliance for Nora Aunor Philippines), would affirm that Nora Aunor is the sole reason they "spend countless hours, experiencing sleepless nights, working day and night." Proceeding from this devotion is the claim of the club that the group is fueled by more than just adulation; it is a tribute to the "good name" of their idol. This "good name" is sustained through acts of charity. The shift from devotion to charity is effected by identification with the poor, a category of social location which resonates with the history of Nora Aunor as Philippine cinema's modern-day Cinderella and the present conditions under which fans live out their existence. *This mode of emotion for Nora Aunor may reach the level of worship.* A former president of the fan club asserts that some people do worship Nora Aunor... He relates in the GANAP souvenir program: *"Some fans would place Nora's picture beside Jesus Christ or Mary and they would place leis of jasmine around it. The others would die embracing Nora's picture, requesting that it be buried with them."*³¹

The extreme devotion characteristic of cult is unmistakable in the worshipful relationship between Nora's largely lower class fans and their star. As the fan club president's anecdote

suggests, such devotion verges on heresy, as the actress is venerated alongside Catholic deities.

In *Himala*, the Mariological resonance of cult is combined with its valence for film audiences: both Elsa and Nora are objects of untoward devotion. They find themselves at the center of an inordinate, transgressive horizon of reception among women and the underclasses.

Bakya Temporality

For Filipino film studies, scholarly fascination with Nora has been a fascination with her cult, her popular following. In the 1960s and 1970s, Nora's following was characterized as *bakya*, an appellation for Filipino masscult. Critical analyses of Nora and her films often segue into a theorization of her public as the quintessence of masscult.

In a 1970 essay, "Notes On 'Bakya': Being An Apologia Of Sorts For Filipino Masscult," Jose Lacaba put forward a groundbreaking, redemptive discussion of *bakya* sensibility in Philippine popular culture. The article opens by testing the reader's familiarity with, among other bits of popular trivia, the name "Nora Cabaltera Villamayor." Lacaba considered familiarity with the real name of the Philippines' reigning superstar a litmus test of belonging-ness to kitschy trash culture, incontrovertible evidence of being "a true connoisseur of bakya."³² According to Lacaba, the term originates from "wooden slippers worn in lieu of shoes by the poor in the barrios," a metonym which comes finally, in the late 1960s and 1970s, to denote the "style of popular culture, the sensibility of...masscult," disparagingly characterized by most as "cheap, gauche, naive, provincial, and terribly popular."³³ Lacaba's examples of *bakya* preferences reveal that this taste culture has a peculiar relationship to neocolonial mimicry: like the upper class sensibility which so impugns it, *bakya* taste is also drawn to "foreign fads and heroes." But the difference is that while her so-called social betters listen to Bob Dylan and The Doors, the *bakya* connoisseur prefers "ersatz" mimicry, whose obvious failure

can have a parodic effect. This would account for the *bakya* preference for *Darna* and *Kapitan Kidlat* over Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel.³⁴ Lacaba argues that the contempt heaped at *bakya* hardly stems from radical objections to colonialist mimicry or cultural imperialism; rather, it divulges the colonized imagination's cringing over poor imitation, its embarrassment over mimicry found wanting. I agree with Lacaba, then, when he enjoins us to reappropriate *bakya* as "a term of reproach, *bakya*, as a badge of honor—the way [our] forebears used the word *indio*."³⁵

We learn from Lacaba's discussion that, as coined and deployed by masscult's observers and detractors, *bakya* is less a descriptive characterization of a sensibility than a devalorizing gesture, an accusation with economic and cultural-temporal nuances ("they" are financially beneath, therefore culturally behind, "us"). I find it productive to consider the conceptualization of *bakya* alongside Nora's and Elsa's cults in *Himala*, even though, by the early 1980s, when *Himala* was made, the precise cultural practices and taste cultures associated with *bakya* in the 1960s and 1970s were in decline. In perusing the metonym which regards Nora's and Elsa's cults as the epitome of masscult through the lens of *bakya*, I seek to pry the term loose from its precise cultural referents in earlier decades and deploy it as a glimpse into the structure of elitist accusation: *bakya* continues to be relevant to *Himala* because the term illuminates, not only the outmoded contours of yesterday's popular taste, but the hidden temporal assumptions which continue to inform the denunciation of the culture of the "masses".

The crucial temporal axis of *bakya* as an instrument of derision is replicated in more current terms—in the word *masa* (the masses), or the phrase "C-audience", the economically disenfranchised social demographic that is said to prefer mainstream Filipino films over prestige Hollywood or art film fare. Though the term *bakya* has gone out of regular use, the audience to which it once referred continues to be collocated with the figure of Nora. Nora's

cult continues to be taken as emblematic of mass culture; in scholarship on her films there is invariably a rhetorical arc that reads thus: a film with Nora in it is always a film about Nora; and Nora as text is about her following, the *bakya*, the *masa*.

Lacaba's redemption of *bakya*, like other intellectual espousals of trash, camp, cult, and kitsch, is itself part of "the history of snob taste," as Susan Sontag would say;³⁶ like the cognoscenti of camp as described by Andrew Ross, academic champions of *bakya* and masscult must possess:

The accredited confidence to be able to devote their idiosyncratic attention to the practice of cultural slumming in places where others would feel less comfortable.³⁷

Only those secure enough in their cultural credentials can risk celebrating trash sensibilities, and in Lacaba's case the payoff for siding with masscult is to demystify the unquestioned standing of midcult, a middlebrow culture so steeped in colonial tutelage that it considers poor English usage (Filipino malapropisms) to be crimes against our better cultural sensibilities. It is because masscult so often allows intellectuals to deconstruct the disturbing assumptive horizon of middlebrow Filipino culture that the Filipino Left has always embraced Nora rather than Vilma Santos, the fair-skinned star who entered show business in the wake of Nora's explosive popularity in the 1960s and who has historically contended with her for the role of Filipino Cinema's female superstar. (Filipino film criticism, then as now, has always had much to say about Nora and by contrast acknowledges Vilma, in passing, as the middlebrow choice).

In Nora, the Left is able to embrace both mass culture and the glaring anti-colonial aspects of her unlooked-for rise to stardom: she remains the only short, dark, low-born actress in the Philippines ever to enjoy such sustained, spectacular success in the face of a long line of high-nosed, milky complexioned beauties whose features inevitably troped

American or Spanish mestiza origins (and hence, perceived wealth and social stature). Nora becomes then, a favorite of the Left (and I am guilty of the same favoritism) precisely because she seems to encapsulate the most progressive anti-colonial aspects of Filipino masscult. That this is clearly an overstatement of Nora's persona as well as her following has become clear: Nora cast her lot with the Marcos government in the mid-1980s, and suffered popular defection from her previously devoted following.³⁸ My discussion of the oxymoronic structure of Elsa as the heretical saint in *Himala* is consistent with my desire not to replicate the pervasive and unexamined collocation of Nora with subversive, progressive trends in masscult.

Bakya as a term of derision rests on a spatio-temporal structure: Lacaba writes that *bakya* is really a "symbol of the backward barrio." In the semantic horizon, then, of *bakya*, the culture of provincial indigents becomes conflated with the sensibility of the urban poor (though many among them may be recent migrants from the countryside, *bakya* recasts this as a generalized condition of permanent provincialism):

Bakya, then, suggests the class distinctions in Philippine society... It's usually what the urban and rural poor enjoy, embrace, support, and idolize which falls under the category of bakya.

Lacaba continues:

To be poor is to be bakya; what sociologists call cultural deprivation brings about the bad taste of masscult.³⁹

What we learn from Lacaba's critique is that *bakya* is not so much a place on the map (the countryside) as it is a *position in cultural time* from the point of view of upper and middle class elitism, as well as from the point of view of certain artists and cultural workers. Journalistic lore has it that *bakya* originates as a term of ridicule in the mouth of a pioneering Filipino film director, Lamberto V. Avellana, who "is said to have coined the phrase in his rage against an audience that failed, or refused, to appreciate his award-

winning movies."⁴⁰ Its origin-story is one in which popular taste is devalorized by those unsuccessful at profiting from it.

Collapsing spatial, temporal, and class configurations, *bakya* reveals elitism to be a defensive pose on the part of power. *Bakya* conflates rural peasant with urban proletariat in its imagination of "the masses" as people who are not just culturally and financially beneath, but also temporally behind, the speaker. *Bakya* is an elitist misnomer for difference which deplores aspects of "masscult" as backward and retrograde, throwbacks that embarrass the "hip." It is a way for local elites who dwell in the "now" to repeat to their social "underlings" the colonizer's "not yet." The temporal logic of *bakya* is betrayed in the opinion that the masses are lacking the "financial and educational resources" which, given time, would refine their sensibilities; for the moment, however, they are "not yet" ready for great movies, "not yet" capable of appreciating the fruits of cultural and political modernity.

In the "not yet" formulation of *bakya* as behind and beneath, we see a particular form of temporal elitism that resonates with the secularist disparagement of Marian apparitions and millenarian peasant movements in the Philippines. As *Himala's* diegesis and Nora's extra-diegetic fandom cogently demonstrate, the seemingly outmoded is conspicuously tenacious, constantly scandalizing attempts to think of the present or of modernity as unified and consistent. The rabid, religious devotion of Nora Aunor's *bakya* fans have been deplored as proof of the irrationality and unreadiness of the Filipino masses to move national culture forward. In *bakya* temporality we detect official culture's anxieties concerning nonsynchronisms which disrupt attempts to represent national modernity as homogeneous, and self-consistent. *Himala* is discomfiting because it explores what Franz Fanon called "the zone of occult instability where the people dwell;" Fanon's notion of a disconcerting, occult, popular temporality "liberated," as Bhabha puts it, "a certain, uncertain time of the people."⁴¹ In this film of female divinity's

devotees and detractors, occult times emerge; the seemingly outmoded is shown to never have been surmounted. These occult times of the people afford a glimpse into all that is disparaged and not easily cited by histories of national modernities' self-generation or self-grounding.

This "not yet" is often articulated by Elsa's and Nora's detractors on-and off-screen. It names a temporalized conception of superstitious peasants and the fanatical, trash-loving lower classes as anachronistic relics who are "not yet" sufficiently delivered from delusion to reap the benefits of, and contribute fully, to the modern nation. No matter their numbers nor the popularity of their cause, the masses are "not yet" ready to steer the nation on its course. The cults of Elsa and Nora share not only fervor and faith, but also an articulation of nonsynchronous temporality, frequently derided as backward.⁴² The salient difference, then, between *Himala* and all of Nora's other *babaeng martir* films is this: *Himala* discloses the temporal structure which underpins both secular and elite disparagement of Nora's cult following and of those aspects of Filipino mass culture which Noranians are seen to exemplify.

This "not yet" sounds familiar to us postcolonials. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, imperialists often maintained that colonized subjects were not yet ready for self-rule, that they needed to be consigned to a "waiting room of history" while they learned the principles of civilization and enlightenment; the colonized were slow learners and, in the world-historical unfolding of history, had to

be (coercively) tutored in order to catch up with those who were several pages ahead. To the colonizer's imputation of anachronism, to this debilitating "not yet," nationalists eager for self-governance shouted "now." (Despite fervid revolutionary wars against Spain and the United States, in the end the Philippines was "granted" independence by American officials who pronounced the nation's leaders sufficiently adept at their "schooling in democracy" to be allowed, at last, to take the helm.)⁴³

In the mockery of marginal miracle-workers and the contempt for the *bakya* we see how postcolonial elites—whether in the guise of secular skepticism, threatened pastoral power, or high- and middlebrow derision—frequently find it expedient to repeat the colonizer's not yet, the temporal structure of condescension, to their own countrymen. The trope of the "not yet" underpins the embarrassment of the "modern" third world atheist who decries the supposed delusions of faith healing; it subtends the charge, on the part of Church authorities, that Marian apparition cults are "not yet demythologized," medieval relics of an irrational popular piety. The proponents of high and middlebrow culture lament that the impoverished majority of the Philippine movie going public seems "not yet interested" or "not yet ready", for a higher class of films. Yet the mass/cult of Elsa and Nora militate against such imputations of anachronism: whatever the limits of their heresies, their collective power demonstrates that the poor and unschooled do possess the "now" of historical agency on par with the doubters of miracles.

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Notes

¹See, John Ellis, "Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Leo Braudy et al., (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 539.

²For John Cawelti, "the essence of genre criticism is what the construction of what might be called a macro- or supertext. The supertext (genre) claims to be an abstract of the most significant characteristics or family resemblances among many particular texts, which can be accordingly be analyzed, evaluated, and otherwise related to each other by virtue of their connection with the supertext." John Cawelti, "The Question of Popular Genres," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13.2 (1985): 56, quoted in J.P. Telotte, "Beyond All Reason: The Nature of Cult," in *The Cult Film Experience*, ed. J.P. Telotte (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1991), 6.

³All images reprinted by permission of the author, from Ricardo Lee, *Si Tatang At ang Mga Himala ng Ating Panahon: Koleksyon ng Mga Akda ni Ricardo Lee* (Quezon City, Philippines: Bagong Likha Publications, Inc. 1988). *Himala*, directed by Ishmael Bernal (1982). Hailed as one of the finest cinematic achievements of the 1980's, *Himala* was made under time constraints in order to be able to compete in the government-sponsored Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF), where it swept the MMFF categories of Best Film, Director, and Actress for 1982. As film critic Joel David points, out, MMFF awards do what "no other award-giving institution" can: "improve the financial performance of any film on which they bestow recognition." *Himala's* canonical position in Philippine film studies is owing partly to the heights of performance delivered by Nora Aunor in the film, heralded as the finest performance of the period and of Philippine cinema itself (David, *Fields of Vision*, 58). Its canonical status is also undoubtedly related to the moment of its emergence: it is emblematic of the achievements of what has been called the "New Cinema" or the "Second Golden Age" of Philippine Cinema, a period of artistic accomplishment beginning in 1975 (three years after Ferdinand Marcos's declaration of Martial Law) and ending in the February 1986 "People Power Revolution" which ousted him from power. In David's discussion of the various historical factors that contributed to the New Cinema — a paradoxical flourishing of cinematically accomplished and politically-engaged films under the repressive Marcos regime— David mentions two institutions which prove key to the production and exhibition context of *Himala* as well: the establishment of the MMFF and of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP). *Himala* was an early ECP production. See Joel David, "A Second Golden Age (An Informal History)", *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema* (Pasig, Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1990), 1-17; and Joel David, *Fields of Vision: Critical Applications in Recent Philippine Cinema* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995).

⁴Ricardo Lee, "Himala," (Screenplay, 1982) in *Si Tatang at ang Mga Himala ng Ating Panahon: Koleksyon ng Mga Akda ni Ricardo Lee* (Quezon City, Philippines: Bagong Likha Publications, Inc. 1988). All translations from Filipino to English are my own.

⁵Ricardo Lee, "Tungkol sa Pagsusulat ng Himala," [About the Writing of *Himala*] *Si Tatang At Ang Mga Himala ng Ating Panahon*, 82.

⁶Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 301.

⁷William Christian Jr., "Religious Apparitions and the Cold War Period", in *Religion, Power, and Protest in Local Communities: The Northern Shore of the Mediterranean*, ed. Eric R. Wolf, *Religion and Society* #24 (Berlin, New York, and Amsterdam: Mouton, 1984), 249 – 252, quoted in Bruce J. Malina, "From Isis to Medjugorje: Why Mediterraneans Must Have Apparitions," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20 (1990): 79.

⁸Maurice Hamington, *Hail Mary? The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 100.

⁹The sole scriptural support for Mary's active role as intercessor is the miracle at Cana, when she urged Jesus to turn water into wine, but the Mariological interpretation of that incident has been disputed. See, Hamington, 92-100.

¹⁰Warner, 312-313.

¹¹Warner, 298, 301.

¹²See, Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253 – 264.

¹³Evelyn Tan Cullamar, *Babaylanism in Negros: 1896-1907* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1986), 18.

¹⁴Cullamar, 1-2.

¹⁵Cullamar, 22-24.

¹⁶For the role of millenarian or cultist movements in Filipino anti-colonial struggle, see Luzviminda Francisco, "The First Vietnam: The U.S.-Philippine War of 1899," *Conspiracy for Empire: Big Business, Corruption, and the Politics of Imperialism in America, 1876-1907*, by Luzviminda Bartolome Francisco and Jonathan Shepherd Fast (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1985), and Reynaldo C. Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979)

¹⁷Lee, *Himala* Screenplay, 61.

¹⁸Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Power," in Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette, trans. Richard A. Lynch (New York: Routledge, 1999), 125.

¹⁹Foucault, 145.

²⁰Steve Tillis, "The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theater and Acting Theory," *Theatre Topics* 6.2 (1996): 109.

²¹Joel David writes: "the outstanding performance of the period [the 1980s New Cinema or what David calls the "Second Golden Age" of Philippine Cinema] belongs to that of Nora Aunor in *Himala*, which was honored only by the MMFF [Metro Manila Film Festival.] Joel David, *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema* (Pasig, Metro Manila: Anvil

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Publishing, 1990), 13.

²²Neferti X. M. Tadiar, "The Noranian Imaginary," in *Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Cultures*, ed. Rolando B. Tolentino (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 63.

²³Patrick Flores describes the overlapping sainthood of actress and role in another Aunor film, *The Flor Contemplacion Story*: "The Christ-like transfiguration of a maternal martyr like Flor Contemplacion contributes to the victim-savior dialectic underwriting the saga of sacrifice and persecution, a saga retold by folklore in the mode of a life story/folk tale of both Flor Contemplacion and Nora Aunor." Patrick D. Flores, "The Dissemination of Nora Aunor," in *Geopolitics of the Visible*, 94-95. Similarly, characterizing of the paradigmatic Aunor-as-martyr film, *Atsay [Maid]* (Eddie Garcia, 1978), Neferti Tadiar writes: "Nora Aunor's own blessedness, as manifested by her Cinderella success, sustains and is sustained by the repetition and public display of her ordeals. Inasmuch as it simultaneously extricates the blessed and wretched figure from common suffering and holds that suffering in view, film serves as the ideal medium for the production of both Nora Aunor, and the proverbial babaeng martir (female martyr), the long suffering atsay-heroine whom Nora, in enduring the ordeal of her "dark" skin and "small" physique, already visibly embodies and actively plays." Tadiar, 62.

²⁴Virgilio S. Almario, "Cinderella Superstar: The Life and Legend of Nora Aunor," in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero. trans. Alfred Yuson (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 135.

²⁵Flores, 79.

²⁶Behn Cervantes, "The Mestiza Mystique in Filipino Movies," *Pelikula: A Journal of Philippine Cinema* 2.1 (March to August 2000): 20. Vicente Rafael, in his discussion of "mestiza envy", writes, "in the Filipino historical imagination, the "mestizo/a" has enjoyed a privileged position associated with economic wealth and political influence," "close proximity to the sources of colonial power," and the "legacy" of late nineteenth-century Spanish-educated nationalists, the *ilustrados*." See Vicente Rafael, "Taglish, or the Phantom Power of the Lingua Franca," *Public Culture* 8 (1995): 104.

²⁷Señorita here is a loaded appellation: a deferential salutation for upper-class women, the use of the Spanish word also tropes, in this case, a lingering, class-based postcolonial resentment against those in the Filipino elite who either descended from Spanish colonizers or identified with them in the face of Americanization and the rise of nationalism.

²⁸Telotte, 7, 14.

²⁹Bruce Kavin, "After Midnight," in *The Cult Film Experience*, ed. J.P. Telotte (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1991), 18.

³⁰Telotte, 13.

³¹Flores, 92-93. Italics are my emphasis.

³²Jose F. Lacaba, "Notes on 'Bakya': Being an Apologia of Sorts for Filipino Masscult," in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, 117, Reprinted from *Philippines Free Press* 63.5 (January 31, 1970). See also Vicente Rafael's discussion of bakya in relation to linguistic syncretism in "Taglish, or the Phantom Power of the Lingua Franca", where he writes: "Within the nationalist framework, the bakya appears as one version of the crowd: as the depoliticized and indiscriminating mass of consumers... [F]or Lacaba, the bakya sensibility was tied not only to a kitsch aesthetic, but also to what seemed like a perverse linguistic economy... a kind of English full of humorous malapropisms." Rafael, 110-11.

³³Lacaba, 117-119.

³⁴Lacaba, 121.

³⁵Lacaba, 123.

³⁶See Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967), 275 - 292.

³⁷Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 2.1 (Fall 1988): 10.

³⁸Flores writes: "In the 1986 presidential elections, Nora Aunor campaigned for Marcos and was almost lynched during the EDSA Revolution. At the onset of the '80s, her career would wane, and after EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, the highway where the uprising which toppled Marcos took place for four days) she was declared out of commission. In 1990, she strove hard to stage a comeback, and since then has regained a tenuous foothold in an industry inured to the allure of youth and novelty. Also, Aunor has been nominated for the National Artist Award, the highest artistic distinction accorded by the State. In 1998, she vigorously bolstered the electoral bid of then-Vice President Joseph Estrada, who was eventually elected President; Nora is again in the good graces of the establishment." Flores, 88-89.

³⁹Lacaba, 120, 122.

⁴⁰Lacaba, 117.

⁴¹Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 303.

⁴²For a discussion of nonsynchronous temporality in fantastic cinema, see Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film as Historical Allegory," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 9.2 [Special Issue, Asia/Pacific Cinemas: A Spectral Surface] (Fall 2001): 287-329.

⁴³Renato Constantino notes that "when the stars and stripes were hauled down during the inaugural ceremonies on July 4, 1942," independence was viewed as "anti-climactic, little more than a ritual." He writes: "The Americans had given their Filipino wards progressively more autonomy as the latter demonstrated that they would exercise their freedom in approved ways. This was called tutelage in democracy. Later, they would still impose on a people whose institutions and values they had already thoroughly Americanized and whose economy they effectively dominated, several important economic restrictions on the independence they had promised. The Japanese and the Americans proved that those who exercise power may be willing for propaganda reasons to surrender it in form—or share it—as long as they hold onto its substance." Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, *The Philippines: The Continuing Past* (Quezon City: The Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1978), 95, 193.