

Exhibiting Lav Diaz's Long Films: Currencies of Circulation and Dialectics of Spectatorship May Adadol Ingawanij¹

This article forms part of a larger project to explore the contemporaneity of the long films and mode of artistic practice of Filipino independent filmmaker Lav Diaz. Its research method encompasses the practice of curation combined with an exploration of the trajectories of circulation and exhibition of Diaz's films. Drawing on my recent experience of co-curating the exhibition *Lav Diaz: Journeys* (January-March 2017), the article starts from observations concerning the practical, institutional, conceptual, and discursive challenges of exhibiting Diaz's long films.² *Lav Diaz: Journeys* took place in a university gallery in suburban London and experimented with a mixture of exhibition and programming conventions rooted in cinema, gallery, and educational contexts, in order to show six of the artist's long films, the lengths of which ranged from nearly four hours to nine hours. The curatorial intention and pragmatics of creating a mixed exhibition environment in an educational site created illuminating frictions. The process of exhibition making, and some responses to the strengths and limitations of the exhibition's form, opened up productive hesitations over the question of how one is to exhibit Diaz's long films in the way that they are 'meant to be shown.' The frictions encountered in the curatorial process and during the exhibition's life would seem to signal the way that Diaz's films invoke disparate, and at times contending, conceptions of cinematic experience, participation, and spectatorial ethics. These tensions highlight the suggestiveness of characterising Diaz's practice as a dispositive of sorts.

Along with my description of the curation of *Lav Diaz: Journeys*, in this article I use the concept of cinematic dispositive to grasp the intertwining of production and circulation characterising Diaz's practice. The concept is proposed as a helpful starting point for thinking through the theoretical implications of the circulation and spectatorial experiences of Diaz's long films, and the values associated with them. In doing so, the article aims to contribute to a

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² For exhibition and events detail see: <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/lav-diaz-journeys> and <https://www.westminster.ac.uk/lav-diaz-journeys-symposium>

recent shift within the theoretical conceptualisation of slow cinema, one that focuses on the question of spectatorship over stylistic analysis. Since the conceptualisation of slow cinema has tended to specify contemplative spectatorship as its constituent element, the article firstly questions the extent to which Diaz's practice speaks to this notion of cinematic experience and spectatorship. Secondly, it asks whether there are dimensions of the durational value and physical mode of realism of Diaz's long films whose significance are better understood via different models of theorisation of contemporary spectatorship.

Cinematic dispositive

The term "dispositive," which has come into circulation in the past two decades as a keyword in contemporary film theory, is a useful one for grasping the improvisatory composition of Diaz's cinematic practice. Francesco Casetti's definition of the term emphasises the creation of a mutable but recurring structure that implicates subjects yet implies room for agency. Cinema is an assemblage in this sense: "a 'machine' made up of multiple elements that recompose themselves in response to the circumstances" (Casetti 2015, 10). It consists of a provisional, yet recursive ensemble of image and sound, film consumption practices, environment, and symbolic needs. Its coherence as a flexible, recurring structure emerges via the adaptive capacities of technologies and spectators (78-87). Other theorists, such as Adrian Martin and Rosalind Krauss, translate the idea of the dispositive into propositions for critical engagement with particular artistic or filmic practices, processes or bodies of work – a critical labour of understanding which begins with attentiveness to the specificity of each heterogeneous assemblage enabling the practice of this or that artist or filmmaker (Martin 2011; Krauss 2000).

Guided by the concept of cinematic practice as assemblage, my starting point is to establish an initial distance from the denomination of slow cinema, when the latter is used as a classificatory shorthand implying Diaz's auteurist typicality within a filmic movement, theoretical school, or stylistic niche of the festival film. While in terms of form Diaz's films share some of the defining characteristics of the stylistic concept of slow cinema,³ such as the use of the long take, taking a broader view of Diaz's cinematic practice should draw critical attention to the improvisational quality of his films and their circulation via dispersive forms of exhibition and spectatorship. Diaz's cinematic practice might instead be grasped as a

³ For analyses of the aesthetics of Diaz's films see: Tioseco (2012), Flanagan (2012), Brown (2016), Mai (2015), Ingawanij (2015), Mendizabal (2015). See also the reviews of Diaz's films by Filipino cinephile critic-bloggers Noel Vera (<http://criticafterdark.blogspot.co.uk/>), Oggs Cruz (<http://oggsmoggs.blogspot.co.uk/>). For in-depth interviews with Diaz see, for instance, Tioseco (2006), Ingawanij et al (2011), Guarneri (2014), Kasman (2016).

generative ensemble of elements; film, literary and art historical traditions and influence; digital's technical tools and means of production and circulation; multiple genealogies of viewing and participatory behaviours; and affective imaginaries of collectivity.

The most evident of these elements are the centrality of digital hardware and software enabling Diaz's mode of film production and postproduction, as well as the migratory circulation of his films across institutional and informal sites of exhibition and spectatorship. Within the context of contemporary independent cinema in Southeast Asia, Diaz was indeed an early champion and experimenter of an integrated digital cinema, utilising digital tools and means for the cultural work of liberating cinema, as he puts it, through DIY production, post-production, and itinerant exhibition across multiple networks (Tioseco 2006; Baumgartel 2012). Yet the thematic concerns of his films, as well as his artist-intellectual speaking position, are less concerned with digital cinema's conceptual and ethical bedfellow: the valorisation of cinematic transnationalism or the notion of post-national cinema. His films enunciate the national in their counter-historical thematization as well as their affective force, and the language with which he articulates his speaking position as an artist cum culture worker remains squarely within the leftist third world tradition of artistic discourse.

The pacing of Diaz's long films would seem to qualify, at a rudimentary level, the description of slow cinema - a classificatory category whose relevance to his practice the filmmaker himself continues to question (Romney 2016). While slow cinema's detractors often associate it with the mannerism of the allegedly made-for-festival film, it is interesting to note that the sheer length of Diaz's long films has somewhat delayed his endorsement by the institution of the film festival. Indeed, it took nearly a decade after the completion of his first long film that his work began to be included in film festival competitions and subsequently awarded prizes. In this sense, while Diaz's early long films have been funded by the Hubert Bals funding scheme of the International Film Festival Rotterdam, he does not easily fit the mould of the festival circuit filmmaker of contemporary slow cinema. Between the mid-2000s to the early part of this decade, his films came to visibility via a combination of grassroots, digitally networked cinephilia, and the support of a few large film festivals in Europe with an interest in Asia. What is worth emphasising here is that the gathering of circulatory momentum for Diaz's long films consisted of limited exposure in prestigious institutional sites such as the Rotterdam or Venice Film Festivals, which took place alongside rather than prior to the spectatorial activities and curatorial activism of informal, piratic, grassroots cinephiliac, and educational nodes across translocal networks, as I discuss later. It was the enthusiasm and curiosity of these informal nodes within a global network that kept Diaz's films and name in constant circula-

tion, a viral cinephilia that in spreading helped to create an eventual opening for more visible and widespread institutional acceptance.

Furthermore, while Diaz's long films do not fall neatly in line with the durational tradition of North American and European originated experimental or avant-garde films, such as those of structural film, his mode of production and process of artistic creation resembles these non-narrative film traditions in some respects. He practices a minor economics of filmmaking, which increasingly relies on cultural and academic grant funding streams to sustain itself. His familial, communal artistic networks within and beyond the Philippines are his long-term source of collaboration, support, and exchange of artistic labour (Kintana 2015; Bolisay 2016). Diaz is an exceptionally prolific filmmaker who usually works with a very small crew and creates films at an accelerated pace of production, as evidenced in 2016 when he won the main awards from the Berlin and Venice Film Festivals for two different films. This is perhaps an influence from his previous experience of making low cost B-movies for a domestic studio. His long films are of course acutely distanced from the notion of the film as a commercial product. What is less often mentioned is that they also shift away from the notion of the auratic singularity of a work. Diaz's body of works partially resembles a combinatorial system whereby plots, scenes and stories within a film are repurposed, spawning a subsequent film. Sometimes he even shows work in progress at exhibitions. In this respect, his practice might be said to overlap with the avant-garde's proclivity towards a notion of film as an open and serial body.

Spectatorship and slow cinema

In order to understand the ways in which Diaz's films challenge commonly held assumptions regarding exhibition practices and their attendant modes of spectatorship, it is first necessary to interrogate Diaz's place within what is now largely referred to as 'slow cinema.' So far, discussions of slow cinema in film criticism and recent scholarship have tended to focus on analysing the stylistic characteristics of a group of contemporary global films, or else they have taken the form of contentious debates around questions of connoisseurship, market, and cultural values.⁴ In a recent article Tiago de Luca shifts the terms of theorisation to questions of exhibition sites and spectatorship. In his observation, films bearing the hallmark of the slow cinema style are at odds with the present terrain of fragmented and migratory modes of film viewing and consumption. They are films whose exploration of duration demands "a mode of engagement perhaps attainable only in the film theatre" (de Luca, 2016, 24). De Luca identifies the theoretical stake of the concept of slow cinema as

⁴ For a comprehensive survey of the concept of slow cinema see, for instance, De Luca and Jorge (2016), Lim (2014), Flanagan (2012).

one that asks us to “reassess the distinct economies of attention and engagement associated with theatrical and gallery settings” (24-25). In his view, the durational rhythms and aesthetic properties of slow films imply the valuing of collective rather than individualistic viewing experiences. For de Luca, the thickness of the viewing experience of slow cinema is one in which spectators oscillate between intense sensorial absorption and mental drift. In that duration of oscillation, slow cinema encourages awareness of the temporal qualities of perceiving, the space surrounding the screen, and the presence of others in the situation (38-42). Despite associating the collectivity of spectatorship with a minority rather than a mass film form, de Luca’s theorisation of slow cinema spectatorship is one whose lineage is the retrieval of cinema’s potentiality for publicness by film historian-theorists drawing on the Frankfurt School. This film theoretical precedent, exemplified by the writings of Miriam Hansen on early cinema, identifies the contingent possibility of the cinema theatre to embody a modern public sphere of universal access, proximate presence of anonymous strangers, and interpersonal recognition whose expanded horizon of intersubjectivity bears a dialectical relationship with the mass commercialisation of culture (Hansen 1991, 2012).

The valuing of attention, implied to be a perceptual capacity under threat in the accelerated present, is a shared feature among a number of perspectives on slow cinema and contemplative spectatorship. For Asbjørn Grønstad, the ethics of slow cinema is connected with their effort to give form to duration and to visualise presence, “that which cannot be visualised” (Grønstad 2016, 279). Slow films attempt to stay true to cinema’s ontological capacity to present the world in all its enigma to spectators, as a presence prior to preconceived meaning. For him, such endeavours imply ethical values such as “recognition, reflection, imagination and empathy” (274). While Grønstad prioritises the possibility of empathy in slow cinema’s contemplative spectatorship, Matthew Flanagan’s authoritative analysis of the diachronic and synchronic characteristics of slow cinema aesthetics establishes a correlation between the contemplative or the observational and the cinephiliac look. Formal properties such as the long take, long shot, or the dilated sequence shot, allow the image field to carry a decentred wealth of details, thereby facilitating for the spectator a panoramic mode of looking that allows one to pause over elements within the frame that are redundant in terms of providing narrative information or progression (34-42).

Another salient connection raised by slow cinema theorists concerns the relationship between the durational form and the labour of viewing. Karl Schoonover’s commentary on the contentious critical debates about the value of slow films proposes the question of productivity of labour, rather than style or connoisseurship, as the

underlying stake in different discursive positions regarding contemporary slow films. He points out that the dilated temporal form of slow cinema, and its antecedent mode of art cinema, allows for the visualisation of labour on screen and makes visible the spectatorial labour of viewing. Observing that the longstanding opposition between passive and active spectatorship has been restaged within the context of the slow cinema debate as “the opposition of time wasted versus time laboured” (Schoonover 2016, 155), he questions what non-productivity might look like on film, and what might be the basis for associating political value with the uneconomic temporality and wastrel bodies in slow aesthetics.

As I address below, there are three senses in which issues of the ethics and labour of spectatorship become acute with regards to Diaz's long films: the expenditure of time and spectatorial labour, the valuing of participation in the films' migratory currency, and the association of political value with the productivity or otherwise of experiencing his films.

Curating Lav Diaz's long films

The main space of the exhibition *Lav Diaz: Journeys* was a purpose-built university gallery (London Gallery West, University of Westminster) in a northwest suburb of London, and thus off the London art map. The gallery is a small, versatile rectangular space housed by the entrance of a campus building and is adjacent to a large, open-plan reception, café, and socialising area. For this exhibition, we turned the gallery space into a temporary cinema by installing a large screen, approximately 5x3m in size and a professional standard digital projection system, as well as laying dark carpet on the floor and changing the lighting fixtures to create a partial black box effect.⁵ The screen size and projection quality were intended to facilitate appreciation of the compositional rigour of Diaz's long take, minimalist aesthetics, and the tactile qualities of the black and white images. The seating was a combination of giant bean bag cushions strewn on the floor in front of the screen and a few rows of small sofas at the back. This was to try to facilitate bodily comfort and to give viewers scope to stretch and move around without feeling they would be disturbing others should they aim to stay for the duration of the films. Institutional restriction in the guise of health and safety rules meant that we had to keep the thick wooden sliding door of the gallery entrance partially open. We tried to leave as small an opening as possible so as to maintain some degree of approximation with the light and sound insulated black box.

⁵ My exhibition co-makers were Michael Mazière, Aviva Leeman, George Clark, and Julian Ross.

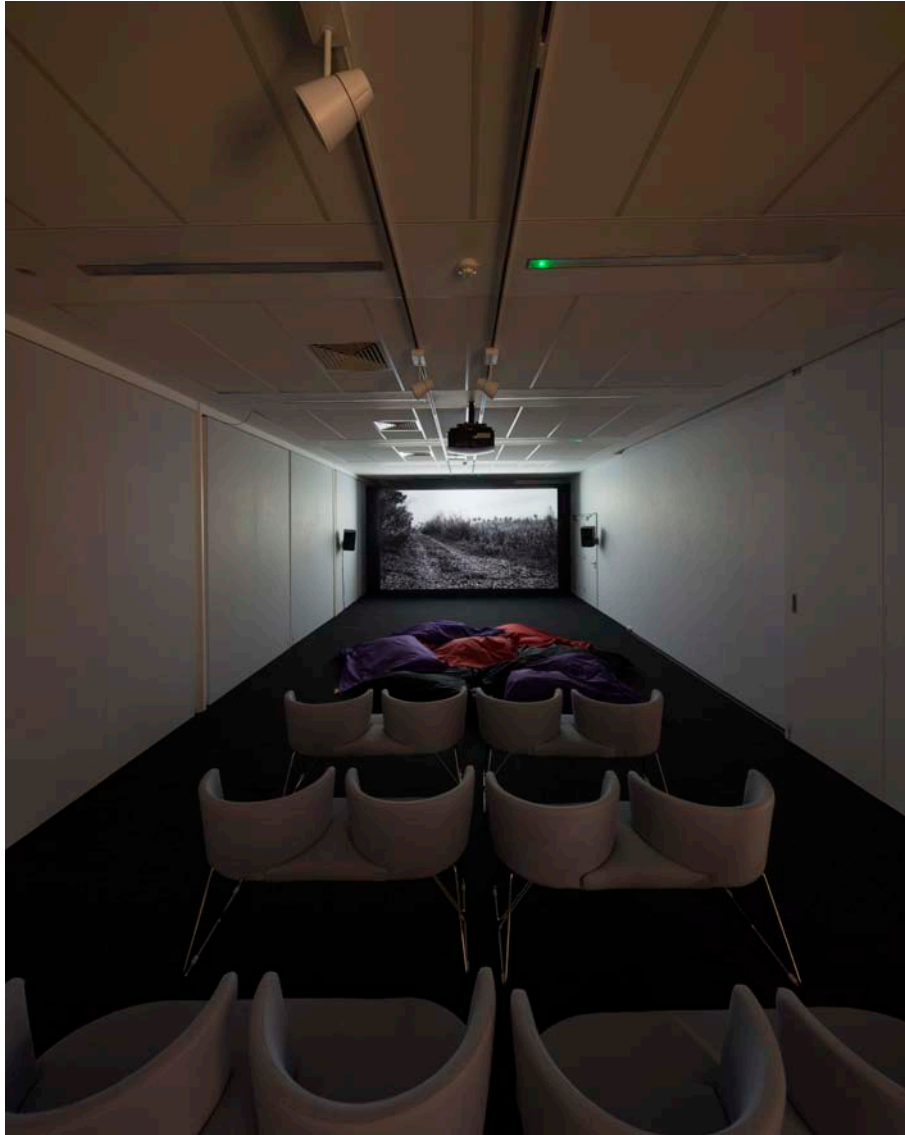


Image 1: *Lav Diaz: Journeys* installation at London Gallery West.
Photo credit: Dave Freeman

The length of Diaz's films prevented them from working under the gallery convention of exhibition moving images on a loop without announced start times. Instead, the show, which lasted six weeks and ran daily, appropriated the programming convention of cinema theatre exhibition by scheduling a weekly rotation of films and publicising the start time(s) of screening. Three of the films, the running times of which were between seven to nine hours long, had one screening per day starting in the morning with no intervals.⁶ The other three films with running times between three to five hours were shown twice a day, with the first scheduled in the

⁶ These were *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007, 540mins), *Heremias (Book One: The Legend of the Lizard Princess)* (2006, 510mins), and *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery* (2016, 485mins).

morning and the second in the afternoon with a one hour break between each showing.⁷

In acknowledgement of the university context of exhibiting *Lav Diaz: Journeys*, coupled with my curatorial intention to draw attention to the value of the pedagogical and the dialogic in Diaz's practice, the screenings were accompanied by an extensive discussion programme and a resource display area. We used the annex room adjacent to the main gallery to display printouts of interviews with Diaz and articles on his films or working process, books and catalogues featuring his films, as well as the novel *El Filibusterismo* by Filipino nationalist writer Jose Rizal, whose subversive novels constitute a major reference point across Diaz's body of works. The printouts were arranged on a long table for viewers to browse through, and long wooden benches were placed in the room. There were also two wall monitors, with one displaying stills of Diaz's films and some photos from the shooting set, and the other showing his short film *The Day Before the End* (2016). In a humorous citation of a word often used by Diaz in interviews and face-to-face conversations, we called the room the "Discourse Space." Five conversations were held in it during the exhibition.

Diaz came to London in the last week of the exhibition and took part in an open conversation with the curators and attendants. The other conversations took place between the curatorial team and invited artists, film programmers, film theorists, and art historians. These were partly about Diaz's works, but the emphasis was also to use the works as departure points to explore a range of film theoretical, curatorial, and art historical questions. Among these were conversations about the presentation of land and other elemental matters in his films, pursuing lines of thought associating certain compositional frames in films such as *Death in the Land of Encantos* and *Norte: The End of History* (2013) with latent references to canonical works in modern Philippine art history as well as their resonances with video practices in Philippine contemporary art.⁸

⁷ These were *From What Is Before* (2014, 338mins), *Batang West Side* (2001, 300mins), *The Woman Who Left* (2016, 226mins).

⁸ Filipino contemporary artist Pio Abad in conversation with myself and co-curator George Clark at *Lav Diaz: Journeys*, 4 February 2017; Eva Bentcheva, 'Reading Lav Diaz's Films Through Philippine Visual Art History,' at the *Lav Diaz: Journeys* symposium.



Image 2: Display of *El Filibusterismo* and a CD of Lav Diaz's music in the Discourse Space of *Lav Diaz: Journeys*. Photo credit: Dav Freeman

Lav Diaz: Journeys culminated with a symposium and a theatrical screening programme. The symposium aimed to feature current scholarly research and curatorial propositions on Diaz's works, acknowledging the importance of cinephile critics, researchers, and practitioners who straddle an institutional foothold with participation in voluntary work building alternative circuits and cultures of film and art. As one of the first academic events addressing Diaz's films and artistic practice, the range of speakers invited to the symposium was also intended to signal some preliminary directions for broadening discussions of Diaz's film aesthetics and relevant contexts for understanding and appraising them. While the symposium encapsulated the valuing of research-informed discourse in engaging with Diaz's works, the exhibition ended with an auratic event: a one-off theatrical screening of *Batang West Side* in a cinema in Central London with the filmmaker in attendance. This theatrical screening, as the exhibition's climactic event, played on conventions of presence and prestige in several ways.



Image 3: Q&A with Lav Diaz at the *Batang West Side* screening, Regent Street Cinema.
Photo credit: Khong Kok Wai

The screening took place at the University of Westminster's Regent Street Cinema, which lays claim to heritage value as a recently restored cinema where the first ever film screening in the UK took place. The selected film and its chosen mode of projection gently subverted the notion of Lav Diaz as the digital auteur. *Batang West Side* was the first of Diaz's long films in terms of its completion date (although he had begun making *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004) prior to this colour film shot in New Jersey). Due to a previous conflict with distribution rights, the film had been out of circulation for some years, which added to its mystique. Unusually, in comparison with Diaz's subsequent development of his practice, it was shot largely on 35mm in colour. The screening at Regent Street Cinema played on the archival value of *Batang West Side* by showing the film on a newly restored 35mm print borrowed from the Austrian Film Museum, a fact prioritised in the promotion of this climactic event. While this screening harnessed traditional theatrical values to create cinematic presence, it also nodded towards contemporary cinema experience by collaborating with the video on demand platform MUBI. The latter's promotion of the event via its social media channels, which boasts a large following, brought viewers to the cinema at close to full house capacity. Significantly, its promotional tweets triggered social media participation in the screening event via tweets and retweets on the build up towards the screening, post-screening discussions about the film, real time reports during the Q&A with Diaz, and posts of pictures taken of Diaz in the cinema auditorium and adjacent bar after the screening.

Currencies of circulation

One aspect of Diaz's films that has yet to receive much attention concerns their migratory currency.⁹ Over the past decade, divergent modes and experimentations with showing, circulating, and viewing his long films have emerged. In curating *Lav Diaz: Journeys*, we had immediate precedents to borrow from, revise, and recombine. Devising a provisional curatorial method to show the long films within a given location brought the greater realisation that they are exemplarily dialectical. They are open to and reliant on a range of contexts of exhibition, while creating different kinds of friction with each convention of exhibiting or displaying moving images. Rather than assuming that there exists out there an appropriate method for showing Diaz's long films, one that would stand the greatest chance of inviting a properly attentive or contemplative mode of spectatorship, a brief survey of preceding experiments with showing Diaz's films should help to highlight the various ways in which their durational properties both rub against existing conventions of exhibition and spectatorship and signal potential new associations with other experiential or cultural-political values.

As mentioned, grassroots cinephile groups and agents have played an important role in facilitating the early circulation of Diaz's long films, alongside their limited exposure at a few film festivals oriented towards Asia.¹⁰ Their first public screenings have tended to take place in informal, alternative, or educational sites of moving image circulation. An important precedent, as detailed in Jasmine Trice's media ethnographic study of film exhibition spaces in Manila in the late 2000s (Trice 2009), are alternative exhibition spaces in districts in the city around which art groups and communities have come to cluster. These sites function simultaneously as neighbourhood art spaces and as nodes in a transnational cultural network. They are in the latter sense part of another circuit of cosmopolitan

⁹ I have borrowed the term from David Joselit's theorisation of the accruing of value to images in the contemporary period: "it is saturation through mass circulation – the status of being *everywhere at once* rather than belonging to a single place – that now produces value for and through images" (Joselit 2012, 16).

¹⁰ Within the circuit of globally influential film festivals, Venice and Rotterdam were among the first to endorse and endow visibility to Diaz's long films. The former programmed *Death in the Land of Encantos* and gave it a special mention prize in the documentary section, causing some controversy for casting the film as a documentary. Venice then gave *Melancholia* (2008) the Horizons prize in 2008. Within this global film institutional realm, Diaz's breakthrough moments were Cannes's inclusion of *Norte* in the Un Certain Regard section of the programme in 2013, and the Golden Leopard prize from Locarno in 2014 for *From What Is Before*. Since then, retrospectives of his works have been organised at major North American and European film institutions and museums, including the Lincoln Film Centre and the Jeu de Paume museum, as well as in small-scale film festivals with a strong curatorial reputation such as Courtisane. Exposure at and prizes from major festivals have helped to secure a small number of distribution deals, a limited DVD release of *Norte*, as well as television sales of some of the films.

film culture within which objects, people, and activities move (147-50). The microcinema Mogwai Cinematheque, which shares its premises with a restaurant and a bar, is one such site that pioneered a cinephiliac experiment in exhibiting Diaz's long films. As Trice observes, the location of Mogwai, along with the informal, floor-cushion strewn seating arrangement of its screening room, endowed the space with the value of sociality.¹¹ When *Death in the Land of Encantos* was screened in it, viewers were accustomed to wandering in and out, entering the film late, and taking extended breaks (157-63). The screening took place in 2007 when Mogwai hosted an alternative film festival curated by the late critic, blogger, and film cultural activist Alexis Tioseco. Until his murder in 2009 Tioseco was a significant supporter of Diaz's films, doing so through acts of curation alongside print and online advocacy and criticism.¹² What is significant to note about this precedent, embodied by Tioseco's curatorial activity at Mogwai, is the different conception of cinephiliac spectatorship implied when compared to the version accompanying the theorisation of slow cinema discussed earlier, which emphasises an ethics of attentive looking. In this case, Tioseco's curation of Diaz's film was a cinephiliac act of agency bypassing the traditional separation between the place of the viewer-consumer and that of the exhibitor or distributor. Tioseco grew into his role as an early champion of Diaz's films by taking it upon himself to do what he could to try to increase the local and transnational currency of Diaz's works (and those of other independent Filipino films) through the activities of writing, speaking, and curating. Rather than participating in the discursive and audiovisual circulation of Diaz's long films as a consumer, this mode of cinephilia is one in which participatory spectatorship¹³ converges with curation as mediating, advocating, and pedagogical activities. It embodies cultural-political agency in the orientation of its actions towards a future time of national film-cultural liberation.

The above precedent signals two key terms for describing possible values associated with, or projected by, the exhibition and spectatorship of Diaz's long films. The first is attendance, when that no longer describes the traditional model of film viewing involving the physical act of going to a cinema theatre to attend a film programme among anonymous strangers. In the above example, the

¹¹ Contrast this example with the application of the traditionally European, 'picture palace' model of exhibition to Diaz's films was during the competition screening in Berlin of *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery*. The red carpet walk and screening took place at the Berlinale Palast theatre. Ushers tried to prevent viewers from taking food and drinks into the auditorium, and to accommodate viewers' bodily needs there was instead an intermission lunch hour.

¹² See the website Criticine for an archive of Tioseco's writings and interviews (<http://www.criticine.com/main.php>).

¹³ See Casetti's proposition that spectatorship has become performative. Compared to the attendance model of 20th century cinemagoing, spectators in the present "must act to make their own viewing possible" (2015, 186).

sociality of attendance becomes one with closer resonance to certain ritual forms sustaining intersubjective horizons operative in unevenly developed, southern locations of contemporary art such as Southeast Asia.¹⁴ Attending an opening or a screening at independent, alternative or grassroots spaces are rituals of participation, and in this sense part of an ethics of friendship (following curator Zoe Butt’s articulation of agency in contemporary southern art). The latter compensates for institutional and infrastructural lack, and related forms of national authoritarian and contemporary colonial neglect, through practices of mutuality and interpersonal relations that stand a chance of creating the necessary time for artistic practices to develop and change (Butt 2015). To attend is to turn up in support of the people making the event and to legitimise their work by being in its space or coming into proximity with the works for a while, without necessarily immersing oneself in the entirety of the works as such.

The second key term is “translocal,” and concerns the relationality of agents and sites making up nodes in an alternative circuit of cinematic mobility. An example is precisely the circulation of Diaz’s early long films across Southeast Asia via such networks of informal or grassroots moving image groups, whose relationships took the intertwined forms of friendship and social media interactions. The retrospective of Diaz’s works in Bangkok in 2009 came into being in this context, as an instance of translocally connected performative spectatorship. A group of writers, viewers, and film and art practitioners in the city shared a curiosity about Diaz’s long films and were enthusiastic about bringing the films to their locality in order to experience them. The friendship some of these cinephiles had with Tioseco meant that the latter could facilitate the preparation of the retrospective from nearby Manila and persuade Diaz to spend time in Bangkok. The cinephiles were sufficiently connected to the local arts and independent film culture scenes to pull off the organisation of the “Death in the Land of Melancholia” retrospective within an informal setting under the aegis of Filmvirus, a rhizomic grouping of cinephiles that produced film cultural advocacy activities such as publications and screenings of overlooked films.¹⁵

¹⁴ See writings on the curatorial and Southeast Asia by Zoe Butt (2015), David Teh (2012), and Patrick Flores (2008).

¹⁵ See the conversation between the curatorial team, Diaz, and Tioseco during the Bangkok retrospective in Ingawani et al. (2011).

DEATH IN
THE LAND
OF
MELANCHOLIA
LAV DIAZ
RETROSPECTIVE
IN THAILAND

ความตาย
มาโตर्फ
มททพพพพพพพพพพ
ลาว ดิอาซ

ศุกร์ 31 กรกฎาคม 2552 ที่ สถาบันวัฒนธรรมและเทคโนโลยีสารสนเทศ
18:00 น. ชม HERETAS BOOK II (Pough out) (๕ ชั่วโมง)
ร่วมพูดคุยกับศิลปินของ LAV DIAZ และศิลปินที่มาร่วมด้วย
กับ LAV DIAZ และ ALEXIS TIOSECO ร่วมกับ อธิชาติ ชุมนานนท์

เสาร์ 1 สิงหาคม 2552 ที่ สถาบันวัฒนธรรมและเทคโนโลยีสารสนเทศ
18:00 น. ชม MELANCHOLIA (๕ ชั่วโมง) ร่วมชมและวิจารณ์ภาพยนตร์จากภาพยนตร์เรื่อง

อาทิตย์ 2 สิงหาคม 2552 ที่ BANGKOK CODE
18:00 น. ชม DEATH IN THE LAND OF ENCHANTOS (๑ ชั่วโมง)

จันทร์ 4 สิงหาคม 2552
Campus tour มททพพ

เสาร์ 8 สิงหาคม 2552 ที่ CONFERENCE OF BIRDS GALLERY
18:00 น. ชม EVOLUTION OF FILIPINO FAMILY (๑ ชั่วโมง)

อาทิตย์ 9 สิงหาคม 2552 ที่ CONFERENCE OF BIRDS GALLERY
18:00 น. ชม HERETAS BOOK I (๑ ชั่วโมง)

เสาร์ 30 สิงหาคม 2552 ที่ บ้านต้นไม้(สีบ) ๒๕๓ ภูเก็ต
18:00 น. ชม MELANCHOLIA (๕ ชั่วโมง) ร่วมชมและวิจารณ์ภาพยนตร์จากภาพยนตร์เรื่อง

อาทิตย์ 31 สิงหาคม 2552 ที่ บ้านต้นไม้(สีบ) ๒๕๓ ภูเก็ต
18:00 น. ชม DEATH IN THE LAND OF ENCHANTOS (๑ ชั่วโมง)

เสาร์ 6 กันยายน 2552
18:00 น. ชม EVOLUTION OF FILIPINO FAMILY (๑ ชั่วโมง)

อาทิตย์ 7 กันยายน 2552
18:00 น. ชม HERETAS BOOK I (๑ ชั่วโมง)

ติดต่อถามข้อมูลเพิ่มเติมที่ filmsick@gmail.com



Image 4: Poster from Lav Diaz retrospective in Thailand, 2009.
Credit: Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa

The informal basis of organising the retrospective in Bangkok, and subsequent screenings branching off to grassroots and educational venues in other provinces, was a pragmatic way to make an alternative cinema event happen despite the reality of lack of institutional and infrastructural support. But informality in this sense is also an ethics, and implies the possibility of access, intimacy of interpersonal exchange, and discussion at the face-to-face level. Diaz's presence to viewers was not restricted to the conventional mode of the 20-minute appearance at the post-screening Q&A. He was present as an invited participant in a self-organised cinephiliac event, and within that context he had to make himself available as a con-

versation partner to fellow participants in the spaces in front of and around the screen, spilling over to other spaces of socialising taking place before, during, and after the running time of his films. The site of the Bangkok retrospective combined the sociality of attendance with an emphasis on discussion, particularly those exploring the proximate situations of independent cinemas in the Philippines and Thailand as regional neighbours, and similarly those addressing a resonant question of cinema's capacities and responsibilities in proximate societies with parallel political legacies of military authoritarianism and US clientelism during the Cold War. At the same time, informality of organisation, as that which aims to facilitate access to alternative forms and experiences of cinema, implies the participatory labour of spreading sites for screening and conversing about Diaz's films. Expanding the network is prioritised even if at times the trade-off for doing so is utilising spaces whose physical or technological capacities are restricted to displaying poor images.

Despite differences in terms of site and organisational identity, the platform MUBI's initiative to devote 2017 to a year-long retrospective of Diaz's films shares elements of the values of advocacy and cumulative spread of access. Operating under an entrepreneurial rather than non-profit or voluntary model, MUBI is using its global online platform to curate a rotating exhibition of one Diaz film per month in all of the territories it reaches, offering a range of image resolutions compatible with divergent internet capacities and the usage of different playback devices. The platform is also accompanying its exhibition with a series of interviews and articles introducing the style, themes, and contexts of Diaz's film practice. With this model of experiencing Diaz's films, the spectators lose a physical site of attendance and face to face discussion, but they gain the possibility of undertaking a sustained rhythm of watching his films in an enlarged possibility of settings, the specific configuration of which would need to be arranged and modified as appropriate to their circumstances, viewing habits, and desires. The online retrospective makes it possible to integrate watching Diaz's long films with daily life. It is relevant to note a revealing comment by one of the platform's programmer concerning the underlying value of MUBI's gesture of making Diaz's films globally accessible to its subscribers. Around two months into the season, the programmer mentioned that the total number of viewers of the retrospective was not large, but the point of doing the retrospective was a "moral act."¹⁶ MUBI's initiative might also be regarded as a formalisation of a pre-existing currency of circulation of Diaz's films within global online cinephiliac networks across unauthorised film sharing sites and viewing platforms.

¹⁶ MUBI programmer Chiara Murañon in conversation with curators Adam Roberts and Michael Mazière at *Lav Diaz: Journeys*, 5 February 2017.

Another notable example of experimentation with exhibiting Diaz's films was the 2012 edition of the AV Festival of contemporary art in the north of the UK whose overall theme was slowness.¹⁷ Similar in some respects to the values embodied in the advocacy screenings of Diaz's films in Southeast Asia, AV Festival channelled its efforts into creating a sociable and intimate setting for watching the films and conversing with Diaz about his works. The festival took place across sites and spaces in four northern cities and encompassed screenings, gallery exhibitions, performances, and walks, over a time span of one month. AV Festival programmed a small selection of Diaz' films during one weekend in a cooperatively built and run cinema in Newcastle. The whole building of the Star and Shadow Cinema, including the kitchen and bar area adjacent to the screening room, was given over to this weekend event. The cinema screened Diaz's films alongside those of Ben Rivers and Fred Kelemen, and in between the screenings there were roundtable conversations with Diaz and other filmmakers and critics in the multi-functional space next to the screening room, which overflowed into the communal meals and conversations over drinks.¹⁸ What is striking to note about this example is the astuteness of the AV Festival's conceptualisation of the notion of site. It was not just the physical properties of the cinema auditorium and the surrounding interior spaces of the building that the festival's curator made use of. Invisible factors pertaining to the Star and Shadow's ethos of operation, and the tradition of mutuality it practices, helped translate the cinema into a sympathetic material-discursive site for an intercultural experience of encounter with Diaz's films. It is worth pointing out a resonance between AV Festival's harnessing of the potential of the Star and Shadow Cinema as site and recent developments in artists moving image theorisation. AV's valuing of sociality and discourse is congruent with the turn towards conceptualising the installation space as a discursive site charged with awareness of both the screen and the surrounding situation, and one which no longer instrumentally associates the mobility of bodily movement of attendants with active or critical engagement (Connolly 2009, 22-31).

Although Diaz himself does not appear to be especially interested in making the crossover into institutions and spaces of global contemporary art, there have been a few experiments with gallery installations of his films. In 2016, the exhibition *The Inoperative Community* included *Melancholia* among its substantial selection of experimental narrative films made from 1968 that approach issues of the communal. The show took place at Raven Row in London, an

¹⁷ For details of this edition of AV Festival, As Slow As Possible, see <http://www.avfestival.co.uk/programme/2012?category=all>

¹⁸ This is drawn from the presentation of AV Festival director Rebecca Shatwell, "As Slow as Possible: Lav Diaz at AV Festival," at the Lav Diaz: Journeys symposium, 4 March 2017.

18th century townhouse gallery, and experimented with combining gallery and film exhibition conventions through such arrangements as publicising the daily screening schedule on the gallery's website and displaying the information prominently by its entrance. *Melancholia* played on a screen in a small room at the top of the house dedicated to it. The room led onto the gallery's flat and the adjoining kitchen area was left open for viewers of the film to use should they wish to stay for most or the entire duration of the film.

The exhibition's curator described the decision to place Diaz's film in the space next to the opened flat as a small, unmarked gesture of hospitality towards those attendants aiming to watch the film for as long as they can. He told an anecdote that at the end of the two-month exhibition, the gallery's invigilators totted a total of just under twenty attendants who managed to stay to watch *Melancholia* the whole way through. The curator and gallery staff could not agree whether this figure was cause for celebration or disappointment.¹⁹ Such hesitancy over the outcome of this curatorial experiment raises a further intriguing question concerning what counts as a successful showing of Diaz's long films, and according to what terms and values. This story also nicely draws our attention to a certain ambivalence accompanying the act of staying for the whole duration of a Lav Diaz film. *The Inoperative Community's* experiment might in this sense be situated as an unexpected comparative partner with another important example occurring the same year as the exhibition: the commercial run of Diaz's *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery* in multiplex and cinematheque screens across the Philippines shortly after the film had won the Silver Bear prize from Berlin.

Here, mainstream film advertising tactics were used to capitalise on the festival success and the presence of big soap stars in the film. Cunningly, the campaign associated the spectatorship of this eight-hour film that has won accolade from the West, with affective nationalism. That is, it symbolically framed the activity of attending the theatrical screening at the multiplex or the cinematheque, viewing the film alongside anonymous strangers and staying for its duration, with affective participation in a banal nationalist²⁰ ritual. The promotional discourse glossed the act of going to the cinema to see the film as a rising up to the "*Hele Challenge*,"²¹ whose symbolic significance was analogous to the collective act of expressing love and pride for one's country by going to the stadium to cheer for one's national sports team(s) (Sallan 2016). Beyond the rare context of the domestic exhibition of Diaz's prizewinning films under the

¹⁹ Exhibition curator Dan Kidner in conversation with Tiago de Luca and myself at *Lav Diaz: Journeys*, 12 February 2017. The Operative Community exhibition information on http://ravenrow.org/exhibition/the_inoperative_community/.

²⁰ The term is proposed by Michael Billig (1995), to grasp the affective force of everyday nationalism which works through repetition, subliminal mediation, and habitual rituals.

²¹ The Tagalog title of the film is *Hele sa Hiwagang Hapis*.

sign of Philippine nationalism, prominent critic of slow cinema Jonathan Romney's review of *A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery* asks the pertinent question of what it means to watch an eight-hour film, and whether "the very fact of getting all the way through an exceptionally long film can numb the critical faculties?" (2016).

Diaz's attitude towards exhibiting his films is an iconoclastic one in many respects, and not only in the most obvious sense of making works whose lengths disregard the dominant convention of the commercially viable feature length film. The only requirement he tends to make (and not always successfully) concerning exhibiting his long films in a physical public setting is to project them straight through without intervals. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the filmmaker expects viewers to devote their bodies and time to the screening situation for the entire duration of the film. In an important text on Diaz's filmmaking process, written by his close collaborator Kristine Kintana, she tells an illuminating story about her first encounter with Diaz in 2006 where she was tasked with projecting *Heremias* at a film festival in Manila. Diaz told her "It's a nine hour film... you can leave, get married, and when you return the film would still be running" (Kintana 2015). On this question Flanagan makes the astute observation that Diaz's requirement for the uninterrupted projection of his long films turns them into presence to be, quite literally, "lived with" (Flanagan 2012, 210). The desire expressed here is for the films to be brought alive by the performative act of uninterrupted projection so that they may be integrated with the flux and flow of the world rather than looked at in spatial situations and cinemagoing rituals one step removed from daily life.

Dialectics of spectatorship

Lav Diaz: Journeys experimented with exhibiting Diaz's works on an educational site located, in physical and discursive terms, at a remote distance from the Philippine nation but in proximity with debates and practices concerning curating and producing art cinema and artists' moving image. As such it encountered several instances of thought-provoking tensions, echoing some of the ambiguities identified in the above precedents concerning questions of cinematic experience, spectatorship, as well as the values and ethics associated with slow cinema.²²

Turning the gallery space into a partial black box affirmed the goodness of a slower, more sustained act of viewing moving images within a gallery site. The display arrangement, such as the screen size, image definition, and seating options, invited attendants to

²² This is drawn from my conversations with gallery attendants, the feedback in the gallery visitors' book, and posts on social media.

spend an extended amount of time in the gallery and to immerse themselves in the temporally dilated *mise-en-scène* of Diaz's films. Yet, this approximation of cinema did not assert the necessity of staying in front of the screen for the whole duration of the films. Attendants could easily slip out for refreshment and food or make a trip to the loo, and there were no programmed intervals to create such rest points on their behalf. They could sit directly opposite the screen or move the beanbags around, and they could sit on the seats or stretch out on the floor. While the screen dominated the gallery space, in audio terms the exhibition site was at the mercy of the sounds of daily campus activities taking place in the open area adjacent to the gallery itself. As such, the exhibition space paid homage to the realist *mise-en-scène* of Diaz's long films with an enlarged frame and high-quality image projection, but it could not institutionalise the full separation of the gallery space from the gaggles of the university's daily activities. Nor could it constantly approximate the operational efficiency of a well-resourced cinema.

Lav Diaz: Journeys had its own ambition to be a destination show, but it was located in an irredeemably unfashionable suburb far removed from London's cultural and creative hubs. The exhibition required one's effort and will to travel to it, yet the exhibition itself did not promise to meet art cinema's traditionally idealised model of film projection in an insulated auditorium resourced to run with clockwork efficiency to facilitate a fully absorbed cinematic experience. The exhibition's fulsome screening and talks programmes was a gesture of recognition of Diaz as a significant contemporary film artist. Viewers committed to participating in that curatorial gesture of recognition did so by journeying to the gallery and attending the duration of a screening, and in some cases returning to repeat the ritual with the change of programme. Some expressed disappointment with the sparse number of bodies in the gallery at the time of their visit, with whom such ritual of recognition could be shared.

Casetti proposes *hypertopia* as a conceptual partner for the notion of *heterotopia*. The latter is commonly used to theorise the potential of the traditional, attendant model of cinema spectatorship, and the auditorium as a distinctive kind of public space for private reverie. While *heterotopia* defines a concrete space that suspends the flow of everyday time and encompasses a movement across a threshold into an elsewhere, *hypertopia* signals a contemporary condition of cinematic environment in which "there is no longer the opening of a 'here' toward an 'elsewhere,' but rather an 'elsewhere' that arrives 'here' and dissolves itself into it" (Casetti 2015, 144). The notion of *hypertopia* hinges on cinema's potentiality to affirm and enlarge worldly experiences and intersubjective horizons through its saturation in the daily spaces of life. Defining contemporary cinematic experience as a dialectical shuttling between the two poles of *heterotopia* and *hypertopia* is a helpful way to grasp the

ambivalences of Diaz's film practice and the values associated with spectatorship of his durational films. Most of the curatorial experiments addressed in the article of exhibiting Diaz's long films in a physical public location, with their valuing of sociality, engagement and discourse, might be said to assume the continuing potency of cinema as heterotopic space. Yet, as Diaz hints at and the viral cinephiliac modalities of circulation recognise, the durational extremity of the long films themselves pulls away toward the virtual force of hypertopic contact between spectators going about their daily lives and a filmic presence running uninterrupted.

The question of whether the right thing to do is to make another space for Diaz's long films or to let them take presence in everyday life, echoes the other vexed question concerning the ethics and labour of viewing them. What values are projected and what dreams materialised in the act of gifting time to Diaz's long films? What is at stake in staying for the whole duration? Is the stake of participating in the experience of a Lav Diaz film a question of paying as much attention as humanly possible during the projection of a single long film, or does that experience entail other kinds of effort of engagement? Taking an expanded view of the short exhibition history of Diaz's long films thus far suggests that the completion of marathon viewing should take less pride of place than other kinds of participatory activities geared towards increasing the currency of their circulation. At their best, the latter enhance the values of Diaz's films through activities consolidating their serialising conception of filmmaking as ongoing cultural work oriented towards future cinematic, national, and collective liberation.²³

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