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Source: *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Summer 2017), pp. 102-125
Published by: University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44867842
Accessed: 24-03-2025 13:11 UTC

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The Cinematographic Unconscious of Slum Voyeurism

by Elmo Gonzaga

Abstract: This article examines how films set in the informal settlements of the Global South are exhibited and awarded at international festivals because of their authentic evocation of "third world" reality. According to the discourse of global news and aid organizations, the metropolitan areas of developing nations are congested megacities, which are encapsulated by the squalor, criminality, and violence of the slum. The article analyzes acclaimed works of Filipino filmmaker Brillante Mendoza, which are controversial for being examples of poverty porn. The effort of such films to create authentic realism inevitably generates an excess of meaning that subverts the prevailing urban discourse.

F
ilmmakers from Southeast Asia have garnered acclaim at prestigious international festivals such as Cannes in recent years, with Apichatpong Weerasethakul of Thailand winning the Palme d'Or with *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* in 2010 and Anthony Chen of Singapore receiving the Caméra d'Or for *Ilo Ilo* in 2013. Consistent among these awarded films is their distinct picture of everyday life in Asian cities. One such trend in Filipino independent cinema, which has experienced a renaissance over the past decade, corresponds with a dominant tendency in international news agencies and aid organizations toward representing "third world" reality as a slum.

Brillante Mendoza was awarded best director at Cannes in 2009 for *Kinatay (The Execution of P)*, a highly controversial work that had eminent film critic Roger Ebert calling it the worst festival film ever.[1] Mendoza's film elicited strong, even hateful reactions from its audience.[2] Writing for the *Hollywood Reporter*, Maggie Lee likened it to a "snuff film."[3] Peter Bradshaw of the *Guardian* described it with the words

1 Roger Ebert, "Cannes #4: What Were They Thinking Of?," *Roger Ebert's Journal*, May 16, 2009, http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/cannes-4-what-were-they-thinking-of.

2 J. Hoberman, "The Most Hated Movie in Cannes? (Surprise! It's Not the One with Genital Manipulation. It's *Kinatay*)," *Village Voice*, May 19, 2009, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2009/05/the_most_hated.php.

3 Maggie Lee, review of *Kinatay*, by Brillante Mendoza, *Hollywood Reporter*, May 18, 2009, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/film-review-kinatay-84186.

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"hardcore extreme" and "sickeningly horrible."[4] I ask why *Kinatay*, alongside Mendoza's two other critically praised festival films, *Tirador* (*Slingshot*, 2007) and *Serbis* (*Service*, 2008), would provoke such a contentious response. I argue that their reception is tied to particular narrative elements, which, while enhancing their authentic portrayal of material conditions in the Global South, have caused them to be deemed examples of poverty porn.

Mendoza's international success with such films could be situated amid a preoccupation in contemporary Filipino independent cinema with urban poverty. Evident in acclaimed works like Jeffrey Jetturian's *Kubrador* (*The Bet Collector*, 2006), Ato Bautista's *Sa aking pagkakagising mula sa kamulatan* (*Awaken*, 2005), Jim Libiran's *Tribu* (*Tribe*, 2007), and Sherad Anthony Sanchez's *Imburnal* (*Sewer*, 2008) is a picture of everyday life in a developing nation as mired in insurmountable destitution, crime, and despair. Because of the striking prevalence of these tropes, local writers have labeled such films "poverty porn."[5] The provocativeness of their depictions of the urban milieu is underscored when contrasted with the more humanistic form of social realism of Lino Brocka, the only other Filipino auteur to compete at Cannes, with *Jaguar* in 1980 and *Bayan ko: Kapit sa patalim* (*My Own Country*) in 1984. Maggie Lee, chief critic at *Variety* for Asian cinema, has suggested that the subsequent work of Mendoza has not received as much praise on the art-house circuit because of its lack of provocation.[6] Ebert mentions a conversation he had with Cannes festival director Thierry Frémaux about how Mendoza's most prominent films were not necessarily excellent in aesthetic terms but rather "deserve[d] to be seen."[7]

It is this desire to discover the unknown, sordid reality of nations perceived to be different and underdeveloped that I examine in relation to how filmmakers from these nations negotiate such perceptions in crafting an authentic portrayal of their reality. Rey Chow asserts that cultural products from the Global South, which circulate in the world market, are the result of active self-representation.[8] Many scholars have written about how filmmakers, with limited means of financing and exhibiting in their home countries, must produce works that hew to the expectations of film funds, festivals, and critics. In line with their arguments, I discuss why cinematic representations of the Global South cannot be extricated from prevailing discourses of urban poverty, which measure the circumstances of developing nations against the norms of industrialized countries.

The increased fascination of news magazines and research institutes with urbanization in the current period has as its obverse themes the ascendancy of global cities in industrialized countries and the emergence of megacities in developing nations. This

4 Peter Bradshaw, "War and Whimsy in Cannes," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2009, http://www.theguardian.com /film/2009/may/21/cannes-film-previews.

5 Gilda Cordero-Fernando, "Poverty Porn," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 17, 2012, http://lifestyle.inquirer .net/53111/poverty-porn.

6 Maggie Lee, review of *Taklub* (*Trap*), Centerstage Productions, *Variety*, May 19, 2015, http://variety.com/2015/film /asia/trap-review-cannes-brillante-mendoza-1201500559/.

7 Ebert, "Cannes #4."

8 Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 180.

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tendency has coincided with the resurrection of slum terminology in the rhetoric of international aid organizations, such as the "Cities without Slums" plan concretized in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (2000). Bolstered by the success of Mike Davis's best-selling book *Planet of Slums* (2006) and Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), emotive images and narratives of everyday life in the Global South have been appropriated by an emergent tourism industry that offers visits to informal settlements in megacities like Mumbai, Johannesburg, Jakarta, Nairobi, and Rio de Janeiro.

I am interested in how this global assemblage of iconographies and practices highlighted by Ananya Roy is entangled with the voyeuristic techniques characteristic of the genre of poverty porn. Departing from other scholars of world cinema, I argue that the determining influence of film funds and festivals obliges filmmakers to craft not so much a racial, national, or universal identity as a globalized impression of urban reality, whose attributes are supposed to be common among megacities. Following Roy, I use the term "third world" to refer to this representation—in my case to stress how the congealed perception of the Global South as primeval, chaotic, and destitute builds on preexistent notions that stretch back to enduring discourses about urban poverty from the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

Instead of simply adhering to norms, some of these works carry the possibility for their own refusal of these norms. Although the production and circulation of poverty porn shape the dominant understanding of material conditions in the Global South as urban squalor, the cinematic portrayal of this complex reality can result in a visual excess, which contests and ruptures the dominant understanding but without leading to a transformation of the established order, as Rey Chow has suggested.[9] I conclude this article by exploring how their evocation of "third world" reality is refused by the very elements of everyday life that must be incorporated to construct it.

The Global Art-Cinema Industry. In a globalized world, international film festivals serve as a conduit that helps art films produced in the Global South to transition between local and international markets.[10] Because local distribution circuits are constrained by theater owners worried about guaranteed profit, filmmakers from developing nations like the Philippines seek to exhibit their works abroad, where they could obtain greater success. They are obliged to create cinematic narratives that cater to the demands and expectations of the global cultural marketplace, inasmuch as inclusion in an international festival is supposed to provide access to larger networks of distribution and communities of spectatorship.[11]

With the global circuits of production and circulation being dominated by the cultural industries of North America and Western Europe, films from other parts of the

9 Ibid., 10.

10 Azadeh Farahmand, "Disentangling the International Festival Circuit: Genre and Iranian Cinema," in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 267.

11 Tamara L. Falicov, "Migrating from North to South: The Role of Film Festivals in Funding and Shaping Global South Film and Video," in *Locating Migrating Media*, ed. Greg Elmer, Charles Davis, Janine Marchessault, and John McCullough (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 14.

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world tend to be valued only in relation to the cinemas of these regions. Categorized as "non-Western," their content and aesthetics are presumed to be disparate from those of conventional Hollywood entertainment and European art films. To differentiate themselves amid a highly competitive market, film festivals vie to feature the newest auteurs.[12] Chosen to represent neglected national cinemas, such works allow viewers in cities such as Toronto, Telluride, Venice, and Berlin to "discover" unfamiliar cultures from elsewhere.[13]

Films from the Global South are especially given value on the art-house circuit when they accentuate their particularity.[14] Festival programmers are said to prefer works that display a unique local identity but one that can be comprehended by an international audience.[15] While afforded the space in festivals to articulate their marginalized voices amid predominant global discourses, filmmakers must modify their heterogeneity into a more legible form.[16] Governed by the demands of selection, they are inclined to create works that feature recognizable and alluring traits, which resonate with common ideas about their geographical origin. Although celebrated for their artistry, the works of Abbas Kiarostami and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, for instance, are notable for exemplifying the enigmatic quality associated with the Orient. Whereas the films of Jia Zhangke document the relentlessness of progress in Mainland China, those of Abderrahmane Sissako ruminate on the languor of development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Given the clutter of the marketplace, filmmakers must produce something almost strikingly distinctive, which has a higher probability of gaining attention. Thomas Elsaesser writes that attention from criticism, news, and gossip is one of the most important prizes at festivals.[17] Provocateurs like Lars von Trier and Gaspar Noé are proof of how controversy can increase news coverage. The magnified attention that provocation generates has the potential to widen access for filmmakers to global circuits of film exhibition and distribution.

The analogous cases of the Netherlands' Hubert Bals Fund and Germany's World Cinema Fund are informative for how systems of film production that are geared toward assisting fledgling filmmakers from the Global South can influence the character of their work. Championing the art cinemas of developing nations, the Hubert Bals Fund provides financial and creative support through its programs for scriptwriting, production, postproduction, and distribution.[18] Often, such transnational organizations are the only means of funding and circulation for works from the Global

12 Ibid., 4–5.

13 Bill Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit," *Film Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 16–17, doi: 10.2307/1212956.

14 Lee, *Kinatay.*

15 Falicov, "Migrating," 14.

16 Libia Villazana, "Hegemony Conditions in the Coproduction Cinema of Latin America: The Role of Spain," *Framework* 49, no. 2 (2008): 71, doi: 10.1353/frm.0.0021.

17 Thomas Elsaesser, "Film Festival Networks," in *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 102.

18 Miriam Ross, "The Film Festival as Producer: Latin American Films and Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund," *Screen* 52, no. 2 (2011): 261, doi: 10.1093/screen/hjr014.

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South.[19] In the Philippines, independent filmmakers are able to obtain some degree of support from national competitions such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines' Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival and the ABS-CBN Corporation's Cinema One Originals Film Festival, but the opportunities are limited for the more experimental, and thus less marketable, works.[20]

Because of their specificity, the Hubert Bals Fund's criteria for material assistance can have a profound impact on the final outcome of the works it selects.[21] This influence resembles that of Programa Ibermedia, a film fund comprising Spain, Portugal, and Latin American nations, whose requirements for the inclusion of actors from the different coproducing nations tend to affect narrative coherence and plausibility.[22] The rules of the Hubert Bals Fund stipulate that the proposals of filmmakers from developing nations can be considered only when they present an authentic portrayal of conditions of development. Before a filmmaker can even be considered, that filmmaker's nation of origin must be on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's list of nations qualified for Official Development Assistance. The filmmaker is required to be a citizen of that nation, and the film is obliged to be set and shot in that nation.[23]

According to the website of the Hubert Bals Fund, works that have a stronger likelihood of selection "should be rooted in the culture of the applicant's country."[24] Its requirements echo those of the Berlinale's World Cinema Fund, whose aim is to develop cinema in parts of the world with a "weak film infrastructure," namely Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.[25] To be able to obtain funding, films must feature the "voice" of a "native director" telling "local stories," which are "strongly linked" to the "identity and reality" of his or her "homeland."[26] Such criteria suggest that films whose plots revolve around cosmopolitan life indistinguishable from that in global cities and industrialized countries are less likely to be selected.

Dependent on attention from film financiers, programmers, and distributors, filmmakers from the Global South hence turn to some degree of self-exoticization.[27]

19 Falicov, "Migrating," 8.

20 Clarence Tsui, "Cannes: Philippines Cinema Comes to the Fore," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 21, 2013, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/cannes-philippines-cinema-comes-fore-526170.

21 Ross, "Festival as Producer," 262.

22 Tamara L. Falicov, "Programa Ibermedia: Co-Production and the Cultural Politics of Constructing an Ibero-American Audiovisual Space," *Spectator* 27, no. 2 (2007): 21–30.

23 Ross, "Festival as Producer," 263.

24 Hubert Bals Fund, "General FAQ," International Film Festival Rotterdam, https://iffr.com/en/professionals/faq/hbf-general.

25 World Cinema Fund, "Profile," Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, https://www.berlinale.de/en/branche/world_cinema_fund/wcf_profil/index.html.

26 World Cinema Fund, "Frequently Asked Questions," Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, https://www.berlinale.de/en/branche/world_cinema_fund/06_faqs/wcf_faqs.html; World Cinema Fund, "Guidelines, Deadlines, Submission Forms," Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, https://www.berlinale.de/en/branche/world_cinema_fund/richtlinien_formulare/index.html.

27 Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim, "Situating World Cinema as a Theoretical Problem," in *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture, and Politics in Film*, ed. Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), 3.

Mary Louise Pratt refers to this practice as "autoethnography," to describe how individuals appropriate the idioms and stereotypes of dominant groups concerning their location or culture to be able to represent themselves to them in a legible manner.[28] Situating the practice within an age of global connectivity, Rey Chow sees this mode of self-representation as constituted by the awareness of being a spectacle to the world.[29] She argues that films with even the slightest interest of circulating in the global marketplace are inevitably fashioned to address its norms.[30] To be appreciated by audiences from other locations and cultures, artists from the Global South must rely on tropes, themes, or styles that these audiences would associate with the so-called third world on the basis of its depiction in the international news media and entertainment industry.

Distinctive films that attain singular praise end up propagating a template that other aspiring filmmakers try to follow.[31] When conventions of cultural particularity become entangled with standards of aesthetic quality, they are regarded as arbiters for the critical approval crucial for international funding, exhibition, and distribution.

Brillante Mendoza's Urban Realism. By convention, narrative films strive to evoke an impression of plausible wholeness in the fictional world that they present so as to immerse the spectator in its reality.[32] In particular, many Filipino independent films with the city as their principal setting have aspired to construct a vivid, unsentimental rendering of everyday life in metropolitan Manila that can be taken as factual truth. In such films, the emphasis is on the inclusion of characteristic details of the urban environment that would generate a semblance of authentic realism. The selected details must be consistent with one another such that the reality they combine to create possesses the credibility of fact.

Since the emergence of cinema, filmmakers have been fascinated with the spatial and sensory environment of the modern city. Walter Benjamin explained that, in contrast to prior visual media such as painting and photography, only cinema had the intrinsic technological facility to capture the dynamism of the urban milieu.[33] Films set in an urban environment have conventionally used characteristic details of the modern city to establish their setting such that this setting operates as a determining factor in the narrative. In King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928), a seminal early city film, the modern cityscape is both a site of "romance" and "excitement" as well as "impersonality" and "congestion." Urban motifs that would later become dominant are already present in this silent movie with its bustling crowds, disorienting traffic,

28 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9.

29 Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 9.

30 Ibid., 58.

31 Farahmand, "Festival Circuit," 274.

32 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 301.

33 See, for example, Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 37.

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towering skyscrapers, and alienated workers.[34] Here, as in prototypical city symphony
films like Walter Ruttman's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Dziga Vertov's
Man with a Movie Camera (1929), which rely on motifs of dynamic movement, both the
vitality and the incoherence of urban experience are captured through an "overload
of visual stimulation."[35] Foregrounding this sensory excess in his films set in informal
settlements, Brillante Mendoza draws on conventional tropes that are associated with
megacities in the Global South such as congestion, lawlessness, and despair.

Mendoza's series of internationally acclaimed films from the late 2000s is marked
by a preoccupation with the material conditions of the third-world slum. Pursuing
multiple plotlines with nameless characters, *Tirador* revolves around the everyday life
of the residents of an informal settlement. *Serbis* and *Kinatay* unfold over the span of
a day: *Serbis* discloses the private affairs of a family that manages a dilapidated movie
theater and must exhibit soft-porn movies to stay financially viable; *Kinatay* focuses on
the anxieties of a young police trainee, who, forced to engage in petty crime to support
his family, helplessly finds himself indoctrinated into violent murder.

Mendoza graduated from the University of Santo Tomas, a conservative Catholic
institution, with a degree from its renowned fine arts program. The vivid artifice of his
mise-en-scène could be attributed to his start as a production designer in the Philip-
pine movie industry during the 1980s and 1990s. He honed his craft as a filmmaker
in advertising before creating a low-budget film, *Masahista* (*The Masseuse*, 2005), which
found success in the international festival circuit.

In interviews, Brillante Mendoza repeatedly mentions his desire for authenticity
in his cinematic representation of the urban milieu. But this authenticity that he aims
to convey does not simply entail working with nonactors and shooting on the streets,
as was typical of Italian neorealism and the French New Wave. His intent goes be-
yond meticulously re-creating the environment of the informal settlement as Fernando
Meirelles did in *City of God* (2002).[36] Mendoza explains that he must eschew the styl-
ized techniques of Hollywood entertainment, as exemplified by the hyperkinetic cam-
era movement and rapid-fire film editing of *City of God* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, so that
his portrayal of the material conditions of destitution and squalor would be as uncom-
promisingly truthful as possible without the contrived artifices and illusory pleasures of
the spectatorial experience.[37]

In constructing an authentic reality, Mendoza's films are distinguished by their
prominent use of a handheld camera, which frequently hangs over the backs of char-
acters while they navigate the meandering layout of the cramped urban setting (Fig-
ure 1). The documentary effect created by the handheld camera is typically meant

34 Colin McArthur, "Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City," in *The Cinematic City*,
    ed. David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), 25.
35 Carsten Strathausen, "Uncanny Spaces: The City in Ruttman and Vertov," in *Screening the City*, ed. Mark Shiel
    and Tony Fitzmaurice (London: Verso, 2003), 25.
36 Lúcia Nagib, "Taking Bullets," *Third Text* 18, no. 3 (2004): 244, doi: 10.1080/095288204000227946.
37 Elvin Amerigo Valerio, "Defining the Aesthetics of Philippine Independent Cinema: An Interview with Brillante
    Mendoza," *Asian Cinema* 22, no. 2 (2011): 64.

to heighten the sense of realism in a film with its evocation of spontaneity and immediacy.[38] Hovering close to the bodies of characters, Mendoza's handheld camera shifts in and out of focus while its lens automatically adjusts its field of vision. This narrow depth of field contrasts with Vittorio de Sica's and Satyajit Ray's deep-focus realism, which

Figure 1. Nayda (Jaclyn Jose) navigates the winding corridors of the decrepit movie theater in Serbis (Centerstage Productions / Swift Productions, 2008).

upholds the egalitarian ideals of their liberal humanism by featuring the entire bodies of individuals as they inhabit the same cinematic space. While comparable in style to the works of the Dardenne brothers, the most notable exemplars of this documentary effect, Mendoza's use of this cinematic device is interested less in fostering empathy with the character than in engendering a feeling of entrapment.[39]

To capture the characteristic arbitrariness of everyday life with a plausible degree of realism, the slice-of-life narratives of Tirador and Serbis refuse the logical plot structure of a commercial movie, which would ideally build up toward a climactic scene that resolves its main conflicts. In these narratives, everyday life bustles with a multiplicity of unrelated, random activities unfolding at the same time. Bodies are in constant motion, traveling from one location to another, which provides a harsh contrast to their lack of economic advancement. With no establishing shots that would situate the setting within the larger metropolis, Brillante Mendoza's films present their world with a sense of inescapability. Instead of fostering community, the cramped, labyrinthine spaces of the mise-en-scène suggest this entrapment. The constant motion by the characters through these constricted spaces gives the impression that they are moving in circles without any possibility of fleeing or transcending their situation. As opposed to the linear evolution of progress, their cinematic portrayal emphasizes the insurmountable and disempowering cyclicality of poverty.

While conscious of his effort to capture the listless rhythms of everyday life, international critics have noted what they consider the limited aesthetic of Mendoza's films. Roger Ebert is highly critical of Kinatay's dim lighting, particularly the lengthy car ride sequence throughout which the face of the protagonist in the back seat remains obscured (Figure 2). According to Ebert, the degree of lighting should have been able to reveal the feelings of anxiety and helplessness etched on this face. In response to this criticism, Mendoza has explained in an interview that his goal was to depict with

38 Joanna Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 38–39.

39 Joseph Mai, "*Lorna's Silence* and Levinas' Ethical Alternative: Form and Viewer in the Dardenne Brothers," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9, no. 4 (2011): 435–453, doi: 10.1080/17400309.2011.606532.
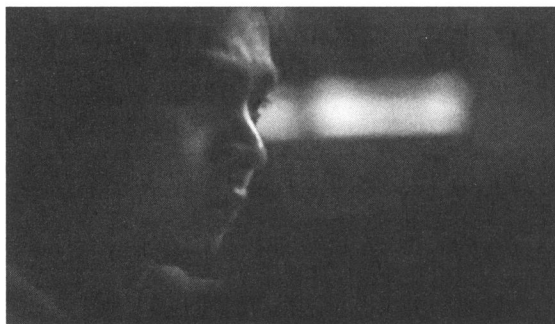
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Figure 2. Shrouded in darkness, Peping (Coco Martin) is overwhelmed by forces beyond his control in *Kinatay* (Swift Productions / Centerstage Productions, 2009).

complete authenticity the material conditions of the megacity, where most of the roads are poorly illuminated.[40] From his self-representation of his trademark directorial style, Mendoza appears to give more primacy to accentuating the scarceness of the setting than to delineating the humanity of the characters.

In addition, international critics have complained about the distracting urban soundscape in Mendoza's films. Their pronounced incorporation of ambient noises is Mendoza's attempt to reproduce the natural hubbub of the megacity, including the shuffling of feet, the overlapping of chatter, the honking and screeching of traffic, and the blaring of the television and radio. Instead of relying on the stirring emotional cues of melodramatic music, as in the liberal humanist works of Vittorio de Sica and Satyajit Ray, Mendoza's films feature thick, superimposed layers of mundane cacophony. Simulating the atmosphere of the urban milieu, these ambient noises have their volume in the soundtrack turned up so that they actually diminish the clarity of the dialogue, which is supposedly the case in the real world. Critics have remarked on the sound being excessive, or unnecessary to the coherent construction of the diegetic world, but Mendoza has claimed it is part of the reality of everyday life in the megacity.[41] The lack of verbal clarity in the conversations between characters suggests that Mendoza is concerned less about the development of an engrossing story line than about the creation of an immersive experience.

Out of his desire for authentic realism, Brillante Mendoza's films present the particular conditions of their setting in an uncompromising manner to the extent that international audiences misrecognize their raw particularity as a lack of artistry. Through his mise-en-scène, Mendoza strives to generate an experience of overwhelming profusion, which would approximate the urban milieu of the Global South. By containing an overabundance of sensory detail, his slice-of-life narratives offer a distillation of the hectic, remorseless circumstances of everyday life in a third-world megacity, which could be seen as curtailing the autonomous trajectories of its residents.

Iconographies of Third-World Reality. Mendoza's evocation of the remorseless profusion of his local milieu borrows from global tropes of urban poverty, which elevate his impression of a third-world megacity into a transnational image. However, diverging from David Martin-Jones and María Soledad Montañez's concept of auto-erasure,

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40 Valerio, "Interview with Mendoza," 63.

41 Kristin Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 130–142.

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in which films from the Global South turn to universal attributes to appeal to a broader market, this impression is not characterized by the anonymity of its location.[42] Easily apparent from its mise-en-scène, its rendering of its setting adheres to the conventional picture of third-world reality. Even though it may not eliminate every visible marker of its specific location, it incorporates attributes of underdevelopment commonly believed to be typical of megacities in the Global South. This self-representation relies on tropes that have congealed into objective knowledge through their circulation in the discourses of international news agencies and aid organizations.

In global discourses about urban informality, the third world is repeatedly characterized as pervaded by poverty, filth, overcrowding, ignorance, amorality, crime, squalor, disease, violence, and inertia. These are the defining attributes, which, according to Mike Davis's best-selling *Planet of Slums*, describe the informal settlements that are rapidly spreading throughout the globe in an inexorable process of "overurbanization" or "urbanization without industrialization": "Thus, the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay."[43] Prominent scholars like geographer Alan Gilbert have criticized Davis's "hyperbol[ic]" and "apocalyp[tic]" account of a contemporary world where the Global South forms an immense slum.[44] According to them, Davis renders marginalized populations "docile," "atomized," and "apolitical," with no hope of deliverance.[45]

Echoing the language and outlook of *Planet of Slums*, feature articles in both local and international periodicals about visits to the world's most notorious informal settlements consistently describe their cramped, filthy, congested, and labyrinthine spaces, which result in an animalistic lack of privacy for their residents.[46] Among the conventional tropes of these texts, residents are portrayed as struggling to survive in a merciless, dog-eat-dog environment.[47] As evident in these examples, the slum has become the paradigmatic urban space of the third-world megacity.[48]

Loïc Wacquant notes that the long-standing source of this negative picture of urban poverty is Oscar Lewis, whose seminal yet controversial theory has helped form

42 David Martin-Jones and María Soledad Montañez, "Uruguay Disappears: Small Cinemas, Control Z Films, and the Aesthetics and Politics of Auto-Erasure," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 34–35, doi: 10.1353/cj.2013.0064.

43 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006), 19.

44 Alan Gilbert, "Extreme Thinking about Slums and Slum Dwellers: A Critique," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2009): 35 and 39–40, doi: 10.1353/sais.0.0031.

45 Tom Angotti, "Apocalyptic Anti-Urbanism: Mike Davis and His Planet of Slums," review of *Planet of Slums*, by Mike Davis, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, no. 4 (2006): 961–962, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.2006.00705.x.

46 Paul Mason, "Slumlands—Filthy Secret of the Modern Mega-City," *New Statesman*, August 8, 2011, http://www .newstatesman.com/global-issues/2011/08/slum-city-manila-gina-estero.

47 Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto," *International Journal of Urban Regional Research* 21, no. 2 (1997): 347, doi: 10.1111/1468-2427.00076.

48 Roy, "Slumdog Cities," 224.

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the scientific basis for the policy documents of state institutions and nongovernmental organizations until the present.[49] From the viewpoint of Lewis's theory, the conditions of poverty are entrenched, the awareness of which causes the poor to feel helpless, cynical, and inferior.[50] Commonly uneducated and atomized as individuals, the poor mistrust larger institutions and organizations, and engage in illicit behavior to subsist.[51] The poor are caught in an incessant cycle in which they end up dwelling on the necessities of the present while incapable of delaying immediate gratification to improve the circumstances of the future. Fatalistic about their prospects for transcending their situation of poverty, they are said to be listless, lacking in ambition and initiative.[52] Deprived of material resources for subsistence, they often resort to financial dependency on relatives, institutions, or organizations.[53]

Without having experienced firsthand the material conditions in these communities, Mike Davis is accused of drawing his conclusions from the reports of transnational organizations such as the United Nations' *The Challenge of the Slums* (2003).[54] The rhetoric of these reports must highlight the ubiquity of urban poverty with harsh, ominous language to be able to solicit financial assistance from donor countries.[55] From their viewpoint, the third world is backward and chaotic, suffering from the inability to govern the processes and byproducts of development.

In his study of the World Bank report on Lesotho, the political anthropologist James Ferguson argues that the development projects of international aid organizations are dependent on evidence that condenses and modifies the social and historical complexity of their target location. According to Ferguson, the discourse of foreign aid inaccurately depicts its target location as having stayed "traditional," "poor," and "primeval" for generations as a result of government neglect when its economy was already partly industrialized with a thriving market. Its effect of perpetuating existing structures of dependency is similar to that of film funds, which, reproducing established practices of patronage, do little to improve "weak film infrastructures."[56] Instead of issuing from the linear advance of progress, the future of the Global South is viewed as a repetition of the same, which can be remedied only through the intervention of foreign aid. This notion of the cyclical time of third-world reality encourages financial dependency on donor countries while reaffirming established hierarchies in the world market.[57]

Shaped by such discourses about the abject conditions of the Global South, cinematic representations of third-world reality as pervasively destitute have been labeled

49 Wacquant, "Ghetto," 346.

50 Oscar Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty," *Scientific American* 215, no. 4 (1966): 19.

51 Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Random House, 1966), xlv.

52 Ibid., xlvi–xlviii.

53 Lewis, "Culture of Poverty," 23.

54 Vyjayanthi Rao, "Slum as Theory: The South/Asian City and Globalization," *International Journal of Urban Regional Research* 30, no. 1 (2006): 227, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.2006.00658.x.

55 Angotti, "Anti-Urbanism," 965.

56 Miriam Ross, *South American Cinematic Culture: Policy, Production, Distribution, and Exhibition* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 129.

57 James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 37.

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"poverty porn." A prominent example is Danny Boyle's British production *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), one of the more critically and financially successful films about the plight of the poor in a megacity. Set in the dense, frenetic milieu of Mumbai, this Oscar-winning Best Picture focuses on the struggle of two orphaned brothers to overcome their destitution despite becoming embroiled in the prevailing system of crime and betrayal. Indian critics have accused the filmmakers of practicing poverty porn by reducing the rich complexity of everyday life in Mumbai to stylized stereotypes of an impoverished India.[58] Punctuated by Danny Boyle's trademark flashy, hyperkinetic style, the film includes striking scenes with indigent children digging through trash and covered in shit. Taken from the God's-eye view of a helicopter, establishing shots are used to demonstrate the sprawling disorder of the slums. Like other films that focus on urban poverty in developing nations, the narrative highlights how violence has become entrenched and routinized in this milieu, with police officers who depend on torture and religious fanatics who resort to rioting. Instead of dwelling on a visual evocation of anguish that would be typical of a melodrama, in which one character privately experiences the emotional impact of unrequited romances or marital problems, examples of poverty porn such as *Slumdog Millionaire* fixate on the shocking public misery of the poor on the congested streets of their urban backdrop.

Akin to *Slumdog Millionaire*'s deployment of global iconographies of third-world reality, Brillante Mendoza's cinematic representations equate the spatial configuration of the megacity to that of a slum. One convention of Mendoza's mise-en-scène is its depiction of the slum setting as labyrinthine.[59] In Mendoza's films, the domestic spaces where the characters reside are portrayed as dim, austere, and cramped, located not too far from garbage dumps or filthy canals (Figure 3). Focusing on the inevitable financial and moral bankruptcy of its matriarchal proprietor, *Serbis* is set in an old, neglected movie theater akin to a slum, with dim corridors and winding staircases amid filthy and decaying trash-strewn floors and graffiti-covered walls. Preoccupied by the rampant criminality of the residents of an informal settlement, *Tirador* opens with a nighttime police raid, whose hunt for criminals through the multitudinous turns and corners of its narrow passageways immerses the viewer in their alien reality.

Many of the characters who inhabit these worlds are depicted as listless, with few of them holding steady, legitimate employment. In the background of the urban setting, individuals can be glimpsed simply hanging out, whittling away hours of the day without anything purposeful to pursue. In one climactic scene in *Serbis*, the elderly matriarch of the movie theater complains about the complacency of her extended family, which depends on her financial patronage for their subsistence.

Another recurrent trope in the three films is rampant criminality, in which individuals gain advantage over other individuals through the practice of theft, deceit, bribery, or coercion. In contrast to the bleakness of Pedro Costa's films, in which the poor have nothing left but their bare dignity as human beings, Brillante Mendoza's works illustrate

58 Madhur Singh, "*Slumdog Millionaire*, an Oscar Favorite, Is No Hit in India," *Time*, January 26, 2009, http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1873926,00.html.

59 Patrick F. Campos, "The Intersection of Philippine and Global Film Cultures in the New Urban Realist Film," *Plaridel* 8, no. 1 (2011): 13.
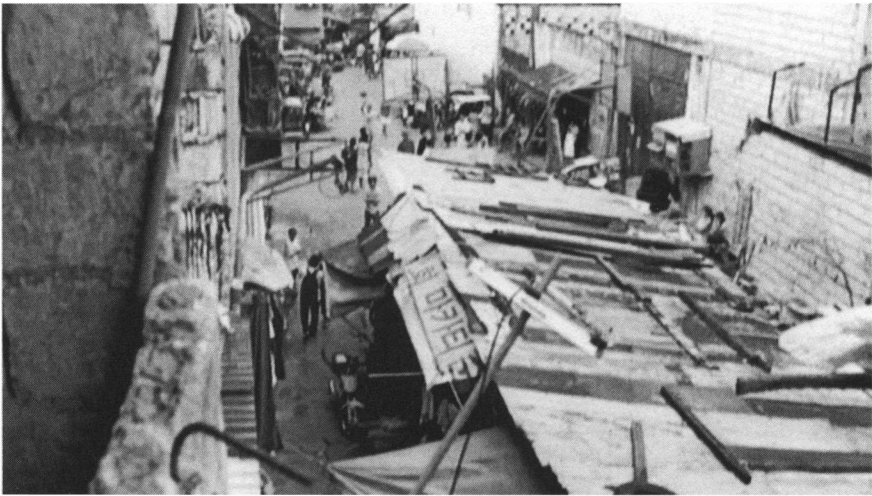
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Figure 3. A God's-eye view of the slum setting in *Kinatay* (Swift Productions / Centerstage Productions, 2009).

how the poor can be resourceful through illegal activity. *Tirador* is filled with details about the social relations of petty deceit, where every individual is a minor swindler (Figure 4). Two men swindle a third man out of the jewelry they stole together, even though each considers the other a friend. A young man discovers that his girlfriend

is dating someone else in his gang of young friends when he trails her to the church where she meets her lover. Although these instances highlight the resourcefulness and opportunism of ordinary people, they also convey the notion that urban poverty is a dog-eat-dog environment.

Figure 4. Young delinquents swindle a helpless student in *Tirador* (Centerstage Productions / Rollingball Entertainment, 2007).

Because of the distrust and atomization that is supposed to obtain among neighbors, community cannot flourish in the world of the slum.

In *Tirador*, the prevalence of deceit and mistrust in the slum is emphasized through an abrasive visual style, with abrupt jump cuts before actions and sentences can be completed. Frantic and disjointed, this style is unsettling because it prevents the viewer from intimately identifying with the characters, none of whom is portrayed as a sympathetic individual. Although the works of the eminent Filipino filmmaker Lino Brocka are also set in informal settlements, Mendoza's visual style differs from that of Brocka in that it insists on heightened attention to the sensory details of the urban milieu. In Brocka's films, the interiors of the domestic spaces of informal settlements

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are comprehensively framed without suggesting constriction or suffocation. Humanizing his characters through this aesthetic of deep-focus realism, Brocka's camera never dwells on the more sordid aspects of the setting.

In Mendoza's picture of third-world reality, urban poverty is systemic, insurmountable, and disempowering. Trapped in the squalor and desperation of the slum, individuals cling to any faint hope of deliverance from their plight. *Tirador* is bookended by scenes featuring two pervasive structures of legal and moral authority, the police and the church, which the film presents as offering no ultimate protection or liberation. In the world of Mendoza's films, the law is helpless, even indifferent. Being caught in a criminal act does not punish the characters or teach them a lesson. When a couple is caught trying to steal a DVD player, the wife becomes hysterical, pleading with the store manager that they need the money for their sick child, but once they are set free, they steal again. From the viewpoint of these films, policemen are irremediably corrupt, blatantly engaging in criminal acts. *Kinatay*'s bewildered protagonist is a young police trainee who relies on petty theft to support his wife and son. The church is equally misguided or ambivalent about the plight of the poor and marginalized, similar to its portrayal in the works of Vittorio de Sica and Luis Buñuel. In de Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948), the unsuccessful search for an informant amid the obliviousness of a Catholic mass signifies the apathy of religious doctrine and worship. By juxtaposing an important religious event to an array of routine illegal activities, *Tirador* implies that systematic religion is another form of deceit.

Contrasted to the linear trajectory of economic progress, the time of urban poverty in the Global South is portrayed as cyclical. During the police raid at the beginning of *Tirador*, a son and his father, the man who is cheated of the jewelry he helps to steal, fool the police into believing the father to be bedridden so that he avoid arrest. Revealed to be responsible and resolute in supporting his family, the father dies midway through the film, his body crushed during a massive religious festival. In the single instance of community in *Tirador*, neighbors assist the son by organizing the father's wake and giving him some money. Faced with the necessities of survival, he follows the path of his father and gambles his funds in the lottery. The cycle of poverty and underdevelopment continues, such as when the earnest young tricycle driver is forced to turn to petty theft to subsist after his source of livelihood is stolen. *Tirador* offers no sympathy for these characters by lingering over their plight with swelling, melodramatic music. Their desperate situation is treated in a blunt, matter-of-fact manner. They are submerged in the film's nameless panoply of characters, caught within the homogeneous rhythms of third-world reality, where development is a repetition of the same.

The seemingly inconsequential misdemeanors that *Kinatay*'s protagonist participates in inevitably lead to his embroilment in a greater crime of kidnapping, torture, and murder, whose harrowing experience overwhelms him. The original Filipino title of the film associates his desperate situation with that of a butchered animal, a conventional trope of the brutal oppression of poverty. This cinematic trope is used to the same effect in other films about urban poverty, such as Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), Lino Brocka's *Insiang* (1976), and even Tran Anh Hung's *Cyclo* (1995), in which the abrasive shaking and squealing of a pig being slaughtered heightens the keen emotional experience of helplessness. Throughout the

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film, the young police trainee is confronted with the ethical option of fleeing the crime or even freeing the captive but ends up not pursing any concrete action. With long stretches of asynchronization akin to a horror film, in which nothing can be heard except the heavy breathing of the protagonist and the shrill creaking of the passenger seat, the film depicts the profound anxiety he experiences when thrust into a situation beyond his control. Torn between his tenuous moral principles and obstinate social forces, he is racked with indecision. Swept away by the inescapable progression of events, he can only vomit in response. In De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), an elderly man fights to keep his apartment when he is no longer able to pay rent. Contemplating mendicancy, he is too proud and ashamed to even attempt it and is thus able to retain his dignity. In Mendoza's films set in the city, this concrete act of refusal is seemingly impossible. Debilitated by the larger structures determining their environment, its denizens are conceded little hope of deliverance.

Despite featuring legible attributes of urban poverty in their mise-en-scène, Brillante Mendoza's films are regarded by international critics to be deficient in style. Although meant to evoke a plausible, emotive impression of poverty in the Global South, Mendoza's inclusion of abrasive sensory details shocks audiences, who misrecognize its cinematic world as being unjustifiably excessive, as being poverty porn. Writing about new Argentinean cinema, Joanna Page discusses how its filmmakers produce autoethnographic representations that unsettle their validity as objective knowledge by foregrounding how they stay provisional through gaps in the narrative continuity of important dramatic scenes.[60] Even while borrowing from their dominant tropes, Mendoza ends up unsettling discourses of urban poverty when he presents a rendering of everyday life in the megacity that is opaque and repulsive to international audiences because of its incommensurable particularity.

Defending Mendoza against international critics, Filipino writers and critics have explained how his seemingly limited aesthetic is actually Mendoza's attempt to capture as truthfully as cinematically possible the disparate material conditions of his local milieu. Refuting Ebert's comments, the critic Noel Vera describes Mendoza's style as "raw realism" without the conventions of European art cinema.[61] Writer Gilda Cordero-Fernando shares this sentiment when she remarks that the sensory excess of Mendoza's films reflects a strong affinity for local reality.[62] This incongruence in the reception by local and international audiences reveals an impasse in the communication of realistic narratives about experiences in the Global South. Instead of highlighting the irreducible singularity of their content, it leads to their misinterpretation as third-world inadequacy.

Poverty Porn and Voyeuristic Discovery. Exemplified by the jarring grittiness of Brillante Mendoza's raw realism, poverty porn could be defined by its portrayal of excessive destitution with the following tropes: "Violent deaths. Bone-chilling rapes.

60   Page, "Argentine Cinema," 41.

61   Noel Vera, review of *Kinatay, Critic after Dark* (blog), May 15, 2011, http://criticafterdark.blogspot.com/2011/05/kinatay-brillante-mendoza-2009.html.

62   Cordero-Fernando, "Poverty Porn."

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Diseases that leave bodies ravaged and mutilated. Hunger that is evident in the rib cages of small children."[63] Its gaze fixates on striking details of the sordid conditions of poverty that no longer serve any narrative purpose. Poverty porn is excessive in that realities normally kept private are abruptly exposed to public view. These are realities that would offend moral sensibilities because they transgress the norms of acceptable behavior toward civilization and humanity. The implication of such iconographies is that the conditions of poverty they reveal are so desperate they would drive the poor to transgress acceptable norms regardless of the consequences just to survive. Because these realities are violations, they have a tendency to shock, which elicits a strong emotional response of revulsion from the viewer.

In lieu of poverty porn, I prefer the term "slum voyeurism," given the connotations of the other term. On one level, pornography implies the complicity of the objects of its gaze in the experience of visual consumption and sexual pleasure. Through their looks and poses for the camera, pornographic bodies consciously or willingly submit themselves to the gaze. Slum voyeurism apprehends the objects of its gaze without their consent. More than that, the dictionary definition of "porn" refers to its explicit sensuousness and sensationalism, which are meant to arouse beyond the limits of what is tasteful or acceptable.[64] Unlike pornography, the act of slum voyeurism is not necessarily illicit or taboo but socially acceptable as a legitimate leisure practice within the entertainment industry. Instead of transgressing valued norms of civilization or humanity, it reaffirms prevailing discourses about poverty and underdevelopment. Because it provides an antithesis for measures of progress and prosperity, it functions as an integral component of the world market.

Embedded in the workings of the world market, the visual and epistemological practices of slum voyeurism are evident in the global culture industry of poverty tourism, or "poorism." Slum tourism typically involves excursions to the impoverished communities of a developing nation such as the favela of Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro or the township of Soweto in Johannesburg. It is driven by the voyeuristic desire to uncover remote or hidden realities that are normally inaccessible because of their geographical location or social standing. To provide the participants of slum tours with an authentic immersion in the everyday life of an informal settlement, residents act as guides to their own communities in a form of autoethnography. Showing the residents of informal settlements hard at work, tour organizers maintain that their goal is to undo the negative stereotypes about them as listless, criminal, and violent.[65] Nonetheless, tourists expect to witness residents in action, performing ordinary activities commonly associated with urban poverty, including children rummaging through trash and delinquents loitering as a gang.[66] Guides oblige them by pointing out visible

63 Glendora Meikle, "Poverty Porn: Is Sensationalism Justified If It Helps Those in Need?," The Guardian, July 5, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/jul/05/poverty-porn-development -reporting-fistula.

64 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "porn."

65 John Lancaster, "Next Stop, Squalor," Smithsonian, March 2007, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places /next-stop-squalor-148390665/.

66 Amelia Gentleman, "Slum Tours: A Day Trip Too Far?," The Observer, May 7, 2006, http://www.theguardian.com /travel/2006/may/07/delhi.india.ethicalliving.

markers of third-world squalor such as hanging wires, open drains, and uncollected garbage.[67] These tours try to enhance their shock factor to be able to communicate more powerfully the prevailing situation of scarcity and misery.[68]

As shown in Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," film as a medium lends itself to an equivalent tourist gaze because it historically allowed spectators to discover new, unfamiliar surroundings, especially those of the rapidly modernizing urban environment.[69] Disclosing the urban environment to the gaze of the spectator entailed suspending parts of the narrative so that the camera could devote more time to revealing details about the setting, which would otherwise fade into the background. In the case of slum voyeurism, these details are extraneous not only to the narrative coherence of the film but also to its depiction of everyday life. In the realistic cinematic representation of a setting, physical details are included within the frame as visual information, which would establish the characteristics of the setting. Such details become excessive when their characteristics are exaggerated through their shocking sensory depiction.[70]

According to its definition, voyeurism derives perverse pleasure from observing normally private, hidden realities to the gaze.[71] Critics of slum tourism such as the Kenyan aid worker Kennedy Odede lament how its voyeuristic practices reduce poverty to an act of leisure, which offers a momentary diversion that tourists can easily forget about once their vacation has ended. Meant to satisfy the curiosity for exotic realities, it affords individuals a safe adventure into the unfamiliar.[72] The movie screen analogously acts as a window that reveals events unfolding without subjecting the spectator to their necessities. Laura Mulvey explains how this condition of exposure is facilitated by the darkened anonymity of the movie theater, which allows voyeurs to gaze on the basis of the illusion that the gazed at are unaware they are being observed.[73] Film voyeurs can continue to observe the events unfolding on the screen without their gaze being interrupted by characters returning their gaze. Without the fear of being caught and punished for their act of voyeurism, spectators can gaze free of the physical consequences of this act. While slum voyeurism may succeed in creating awareness of and sympathy for the plight of the poor, its images do not necessarily demand that their viewing be accompanied by concrete action which would improve the prevailing situation.[74]

The act of voyeurism instantaneously transforms realities into a fixed object of knowledge when it subjects them to its domineering gaze.[75] From their vantage point,

67 Peter Dyson, "Slum Tourism: Representing and Interpreting 'Reality' in Dharavi, Mumbai," Tourism Geographies 14, no. 2 (2012): 262, doi: 10.1080/14616688.2011.609900.

68 Eveline Dürr, "Urban Poverty, Spatial Representation, and Mobility: Touring a Slum in Mexico," International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 36, no. 4 (2012): 711, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01123.x.

69 Benjamin, "Work of Art," 19–55.

70 Thompson, "Cinematic Excess," 130–142.

71 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "voyeurism."

72 Dürr, "Spatial Representation," 707.

73 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16, no. 3 (1975): 9.

74 Kennedy Odede, "Slumdog Tourism," New York Times, August 9, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/10/opinion/10odede.html.

75 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 8.

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voyeurs can impose their own meanings on the realities that they are observing without having these realities contest the imposition. For Barthes, the private domain withheld from the domineering gaze of the voyeur is a sphere of autonomy, where realities are sheltered from the operations of objectification and commodification.[76] As in the case of the poverty tour, its voyeuristic disclosure conveys the impression that the realities being discovered are authentic when they are actually manufactured. Exposed to public view, especially in a film that is circulated as a commodity in the global cultural marketplace, these realities are liable to be congealed into a coherent set of legible details for easy comprehension, dissemination, and consumption.

The process of voyeuristic discovery, however, is complicated by an irresistible preoccupation with the unfamiliar and prohibited realities that are unveiled. Contrary to Mulvey, slum voyeurism is animated by a desire not so much to reproduce or possess these realities, as their sordid, degenerative existence is understood to be repugnant and threatening. The spectator could be said to encounter their strange allure in a manner that more closely approximates Gaylyn Studlar's conception of voyeuristic surrender to an overpowering fascination with the object of desire.[77] The source of this fascination is less the object's projection of its radical difference than its refusal of its complete apprehension.

In Mendoza's films, the exposure to sensory overload is part of the workings of slum voyeurism, which turns the contents of its visual representation into hidden realities to be imposed on the vision of the spectator. From the opening scene of *Serbis*, which, set in a movie theater, is concerned with cinematic exhibition and reception, the spectator is immediately drawn into the narrative as a voyeur. The camera restlessly lingers on fragmentary parts of a young female character's naked body while she fixes her appearance in front of a broken, unpolished mirror. Positioned as a voyeur, through its typical depiction of voyeurism of the sexualized body, the spectator is then subjected later in the film to unflinching scenes of filth and depravity.

To draw its audience further into the private, interior, self-contained world of the movie theater, the film includes no external establishing shots of the building in its first half. Using a documentary effect, *Serbis* reveals what unfolds behind the scenes in the daily operation of a soft-porn movie theater, from how the movie theater is run as a business to how the film reel is installed on the projector. With its Tagalog slang title connoting an illicit form of commercial exchange or service, *Serbis* discloses on the screen what is normally kept private and invisible. Sexual activities and anatomical parts not typically shown in mainstream commercial movies are presented in full view. In spite of *Serbis*'s explicit imagery, the libidinal exchanges that transpire in the movie theater are not the actual focus of the narrative. Instead, they provide a glaring backdrop to the financial and moral decay experienced by the family who runs the theater. The cinematic device of voyeuristic disclosure heightens the uncompromising authenticity of the realities being displayed on the screen.

76 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 15.

77 Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 9, no. 4 (1984): 275, doi: 10.1080/10509208409361219.

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Figure 5. The camera lingers as Alan (Coco Martin) cleans a filthy toilet in *Serbis* (Centerstage Productions / Swift Productions, 2008).

In its exposure of private realities, *Serbis* resembles other Brillante Mendoza films because of its preoccupation with the sordid and hopeless aspects of third-world poverty. In the urban environment of *Tirador*, most of which is situated in a slum, residents can be seen accidentally stepping on mud, waste, or shit. Mendoza's films seem to be fascinated with filth and squalor. When a character's new dentures fall into a gutter close to her home, the camera does not pan away while she digs desperately through the thick sludge to recover them. In *Serbis*, one of the protagonists is shown wading in a pool of piss while he cleans the clogged drainage of the movie theater's public toilet (Figure 5). He limps throughout the film because of a large, painful boil on his buttocks that the camera lingers on in one vivid scene, in which blood oozes out when he attempts to burst it with burnt paper and a soda bottle. Other films would have left the viewer to infer these details through the scanty information discernible from their images. With their aesthetic of slum voyeurism, these works offer lingering glimpses of these normally hidden realities less to establish their truth than to fixate on their materiality. Their cinematic representation strives to immerse the spectator in its world with the ultimate aim of communicating the extent of its remorselessness.

According to the logic of slum voyeurism, the filthiness, depravity, and brutality of third-world reality can be authentically conveyed only when the sensibilities of the viewer are uncompromisingly provoked. Its aesthetic seems to resemble that of avant-garde art. Like sensationalist entertainment, the primary goal of avant-garde art is to shock.[78] The shock is achieved through the inclusion of salient fragments which would resist easy comprehension by conventional frameworks of understanding.[79] In Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950) and *Viridiana* (1961), for example, the shock comes from

78 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.

79 Ibid., 80.

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surrealistic touches that abruptly depart from the narrative economy, such as animals that suddenly and irrationally appear out of nowhere. Diverging from avant-garde art, Mendoza's films do provoke the spectator but without avant-garde art's principal objective to transform the established order. Based on the ideals of avant-garde art, they feature not so much the ordinary raised to the level of the extraordinary with the aim of political action as the ordinary pushed to its basest extreme for the sake of sensory immersion.[80] Instead of simply relying on the realistic atmosphere of the ambient urban backdrop, they strive to produce an acute visceral reaction in the viewer such that the viewer becomes fully immersed in the realistic experience of the diegetic world.

The Cinematographic Unconscious. Despite the uncompromising authenticity that it strives to infuse into its evocation of third-world reality, film carries the potential for its own undoing in its effort to create this reality. Its evocation of reality incorporates details that might contradict the coherence of its narrative. In his seminal essay, Benjamin argues that cinematic devices such as montage, close-up, and slow motion reveal what he calls the optical unconscious. This visual apprehension of the spatial environment ordinarily remains invisible to dominant norms of perception and understanding. To uncover the optical unconscious is to map "the vast and unsuspected field of action," the range of realities and possibilities that are often disregarded in the routine of everyday life.[81]

Siegfried Kracauer asserts that a seemingly trivial yet singular detail in the background of a cinematographic image can open up a wealth of meaning which is not necessarily congruent with the main narrative.[82] For Kracauer, however, the texture of everyday life that this detail reveals leads to an awareness of the commonality of experience, which enables individuals to overcome their alienation and dislocation. The excess of details found in Brillante Mendoza's films performs a different, recuperative function.

Expanding on the concept of the optical unconscious, filmmaker Raúl Ruiz describes how involuntary details in a particular scene can flee the attempt to incorporate them under the overarching coherence of a film narrative: "All these unnecessary elements have a tendency, curiously, to reorganize themselves forming an enigmatic corpus, a set of signs that conspires against the ordinary reading of the picture, adding to it an element of uncanniness, of suspicion."[83] Ruiz explains that viewers are able to follow the narrative of a mainstream movie because they are familiar with the rules of storytelling, which guarantee clarity, coherence, and plausibility. This default mode of comprehension fails when they encounter an excess of details lurking in the background, which constitutes the potential for a divergent trajectory of meaning.

According to Ruiz's concept of the cinematographic unconscious, each film is a palimpsest that contains the embryonic traces of other films. A single sequence of images can become the map for multiple patterns of meaning in which constellations

80 Ibid., 65.

81 Benjamin, "Work of Art," 37.

82 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 303.

83 Raúl Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema 1: Miscellanies*, trans. Brian Holmes (Paris: Dis Voir, 2005), 57.

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of images are superimposed atop one another. Ruiz asserts that films, even without the discernible aspiration to do so, feature "ghosts which hover around mechanically reproduced images and sounds, yet do not actually touch the audiovisual object. Sometimes they surround it, they transfigure it, they literally kidnap it, and can even transform it into a story."[84]

Similar to Ruiz's idea of the cinematographic unconscious, Barthes's concept of the *punctum* involves a perceptual violation, which extends beyond an image's normative scope of comprehension.[85] Barthes opposes the *punctum* to the *studium*, the predetermined, "polite" response to images suggested by established social and cultural norms: "The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right.'"[86] The *punctum* often assumes the form of an involuntary, unnecessary detail that imposes itself on the viewer. Emphasizing its contingency and singularity, Barthes characterizes it as an "accident that pricks."[87] As the excess that "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me," it contests the default comprehension of an image.[88]

For Barthes, the concept of the *punctum* is more suited to photography because the intimate connection between an image and a viewer that is crucial for the *punctum* to arise tends to be lost amid the continuously shifting images of film. Nonetheless, the *punctum* could arise in a montage sequence as an unanticipated point of intensity whose perception lays bare the cinematographic unconscious. Departing from Ruiz's idea, however, Barthes's *punctum* has no tendency toward even the precarious wholeness of a narrative. Incapable of being assimilated into conventional frameworks of understanding, its intensity derives from its unsettling quality, which is disconcerting and subversive because it resists comprehension.

In works of slum voyeurism, the effort to capture in vividly realistic cinematic terms the bustling complexity of the urban environment yields an excess of details, which refuses the rational coherence of conventional frameworks for understanding. Akin to surrealist art, an element of contingency escapes the structured totality of the film narrative. Unlike surrealism, however, the filmmaker does not willingly surrender his or her complete control over the work to chance.[89] Slum voyeurism is intentional in its construction of a visceral and provocative sensory experience.

Through the duration of Brillante Mendoza's three films, a recurring detail becomes noticeable in the background of the frame. Particularly in scenes set on the bustling streets of the metropolis, marginal human figures can be glimpsed staring at the actors who occupy the foreground of the scene even if the action unfolding is supposed to be inconspicuous and private. Because works of slum voyeurism strive for an authentic depiction of their urban milieu, they are shot on location without a closed

84 Ibid., 65.
85 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 59.
86 Ibid., 27.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 26.
89 Ibid., 67.

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set, in the style of cinema verité. Although the background tends to be blurred as a result of the narrow depth of field, the faces of bystanders can nonetheless be seen looking in the direction of the actors. Their heads visibly turn as they follow the movement of the actors through the street (Figure 6). According to the logic of the narrative, these bystanders should be oblivious to the personal activities of the characters. Incorporated into the mise-en-scène as background details, such inadvertent extras end up disrupting the coherence of the fictional reality being created when they refuse to abide by the norms of cinematographic representation.

Figure 6. Bystanders on the street watch the actors in the unfolding scene in *Serbis* (Centerstage Productions / Swift Productions, 2008).

In producing a credible depiction of reality, film actors typically do not stare at the camera. Part of their performance as characters in the fictional world of the film narrative is the pretense that their actions are not being observed.[90] The extras in the scene act accordingly, following the demands of unfolding events in the narrative. The overall artifice of a private sphere of activity helps convey the plausibility of an on-screen fictional world, in which spectators can engross themselves without any self-consciousness about their gaze being returned. Through this norm of cinematographic representation, spectators are able to apprehend narrative events as cognitive objects, which cannot resist their act of comprehension. The realities that unfold on the movie screen before their eyes are supposed to be disclosed to them as consumable facts.

On a few other occasions in Mendoza's films, the eyes of bystanders in the background are noticeably fixated on the camera. As the protagonist walks along a busy street in the direction of the camera, a man can be glimpsed standing next to a food stall. A passenger hunched in the open-air carriage of a public utility vehicle stares straight at the camera while the vehicle runs perpendicular to its sightline. A woman lowers the window of her passing car so that she can have a clearer, unobstructed

90 Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 40.

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view of the camera. Instead of allowing their materiality to be transformed into an image that is beyond their ability to control, these gazes contest the camera's terms of representation. In each example, the gaze fails to comply with the consistency of the other details within the frame in constituting the reality of the diegetic world. It poses an unnecessary, discordant detail, which unravels the pretense of authentic realism by disrupting the plausible coherence of the scene.

This gaze is unlike that in films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (*2 or 3 Things I Know about Her*, 1967) or *Tout va bien* (1972), in which the characters directly address the camera to speak as if being interviewed. It differs as well from the direct address in Godard's early works, notably *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960) and *Band à part* (*Band of Outsiders*, 1964), in which the protagonists abruptly stare back at the camera with a clever look of complicity as though both character and spectator shared an awareness of the artifice that needs to be maintained. In contrast to the faces of "photobombers," who brazenly intrude on the private poses of foregrounded bodies, the gazes of these bystanders stay peripheral to the frame. Their gaze is not meant to wrest attention from the main objects of focus but instead to assume a momentary stance of curiosity toward the cinematographic representation under production.

The operation of this gaze may resemble that of the Brechtian estrangement effect in its disruption of the illusion of the fictional world.[91] The Brechtian estrangement effect would undermine the enthrallment of this illusion by revealing the film's character as representation through the inclusion of details that would highlight the process of its production. Whereas in Brechtian epic theater such details are intrinsic to the design of the work, the gaze in Brillante Mendoza's films is accidental. Departing from the principal purpose of Brechtian epic theater, it carries no motive to transform the established order. By staring back at the camera, the gaze calls the spectator to account.

The gaze is conscious of the ongoing process of film production but remains indifferent to the necessity of ensuring the validity of its artifice. Oblivious to the norms of authentic realism of the diegetic world, it insists on its autonomy and singularity as a gaze. In a sense, the gaze could be interpreted as an entreaty by what is often left disregarded and marginalized. Instead of submitting to the film's spectacle of ordinariness, such peripheral realities act to reclaim their material presence in the diegetic world on their own terms. Returning the camera's gaze challenges its reductive fixation with the sordid circumstances of their urban milieu. Denying the closure of any overarching portrayal of third-world reality, the returned gaze frustrates their assimilation into normative knowledge by reminding the spectator of its artifice.

Through their evocation of authentic realism, works of slum voyeurism from the Global South are complicit in transnational discourses of urban poverty, which diminish their value as autonomous voices. Their critical success depends on the congruence of their cinematographic representation with the dominant perception of their geographical areas, which circulates through images and narratives in the global cultural marketplace. Their legible portrayal of the sordid and hopeless aspects of the slum

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91 Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 179–205.

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ends up being resisted by the accidental realities of the urban setting. While resonant with the unsettling and subversive quality of Barthes's *punctum*, these fragmentary details never assert their primacy over the totality of the entire work.[92] They remain peripheral to the coherence of the diegetic world, almost like divergent trajectories that run parallel to the duration of the film while departing from the progression of its narrative. Pursuing their own contingent temporality against the discursive cyclicality of third-world reality, these trajectories form the conditions of possibility for a new, more inclusive narrative, upon which a new form of community could be founded. *

92　Bürger, *Avant-Garde*, 84.

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