

Maid in Malacañang (2022)

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Sorry, Junior. It's not about you. In fact, you look better in this photo than in the film.

At first look, *Maid in Malacañang* has the makings of a hugot film that it is easy to mistake the film being directed either by JP Habac or Jerrold Tarog due to its dullness and dumb dialogues. If we speak strictly about its director, Darryl Yap's past works at least were interesting spectacles that oftentimes lag either due to production restraints or the limit of his Wattpad imagination that often forces an exposé of his sense of morality (which is what a film needs the least). But his films were never a bore. He made a brand for himself by shitting on his fellow liberals for clout. *Maid in Malacañang* should have at least lived-up to its controversy and deliberately revised history all over in sacrilegious levels like the usual visceral effect of a Vincentiments short, but unfortunately the film was nowhere as interesting as that.

What *Maid in Malacañang* captures from Vincentiments was not the temperament of its videos, but the cringe of its facebook posts which takes its own opinions too seriously. What made Yap's earlier works tolerable to watch is the way humor was expressed through the protagonists: that they are flawed human beings and it's fine to laugh at them as much as you can laugh with them. The sense of humor in *Maid in Malacañang*

is limited to having the actual maid characters play as comic relief on most sequences, because it needs to take the protagonist-family seriously. Presenting the film as “historical” was its first mistake (how it frames “history” is of another issue), since it forces itself in the realm of “serious” filmmaking. This approach made the film an extended version of the cringe “life lesson” sequences in Yap’s other films.

The actual maids in the film, aside from being comic relief, often act as expositors of narrative. They are trusted confidantes of the protagonist-family. Their lives of servitude is their *raison d’être* in the film. However, they were never who was referred to in the title of the movie, and clearly, the movie is not about them, but about the protagonist-family. Even the post-credit tribute to the actual maids plays as tokenistic considering that they were never really the focus of its whole narrative.

If *Maid in Malacañang* is what its pre-screening critics say – that it is indeed a political propaganda film (of a liberal connotation) – then, by the very standards of propaganda filmmaking, it’s bad. Our own cinema history was never a stranger to propaganda films that served the political status quo of their time – and this is part of the reasons why the first National Artists in Cinema during the Marcos Era (Lamberto Avellana and Gerardo de Leon) were also great propagandists that served the state (and imperialists) well. While the elements of a political propaganda narrative are all in this film – a sense of mission, a perceived enemy, and an appeal for humanism – they all just played in an odd way that just didn’t work for the film.

In the first place, the sense of mission that the protagonist-family in the film has was something hard to sympathize with. The escape as the family’s mission at least was portrayed interestingly – having the maid and servants use yellow pieces of cloth from Imelda’s dress to blend with the raiding masses. But like most of the film, the escape scene is so unspectacular that it never really invited any sense of fear or excitement. Even the highlight of the film, the raid of the masses – which has been complained as historically false – was done blandly that the archival footage they cross-edited it with looks exciting and inviting than it is condemning. The whole set up of the escape and the raid they were trying to escape looks the same that they do not exude any sort of emotion that even its dramatic musical score did not help. How am I suppose to sympathize with the family if their escape does not seem to have any sense of danger? And

how am I going to sympathize with their escape if the actual footage of the raid they chose to include in the film to “condemn their violence” looks fun?

Besides, there are very few families in this archipelago that have been in a situation where they must live inside the presidential palace and, later on, were in danger of getting maimed by an angry mass. In fact, they might be the only ones. The Marcos family sticks out too much as a particularity that it's hard to generalize them in human sentiments. We can't possibly sympathize with what they've gone through, their situation was just too particular to them and it can't possibly happen to any of us, ordinary citizens. If as its critics say, that the intention of the film was to re-establish the Marcos family back into mass consciousness with reconsideration, the Marcos camp is off to a bad start with this movie.

A constant appeal to (bourgeois) humanity was played out as an attempt to resolve this problem of the Marcos family's particularity. But this appeal is often betrayed by the context of their setting. Like the Marcos family, Malacañang sticks out too much as a particularity that the palace is hard to generalize as if it can be any other house. In telenovelas, at least, the houses of rich people are too alienated to us that it erases itself from our consciousness allowing us to focus on the drama. But the Malacañang in the movie calls too much attention to itself that it adds ideas to you on who you were watching. The palace was depicted as a cave for a family that is so enamored of themselves that they have portraits lined up in every wall of their house. Whether or not that was historically accurate, it was a maligned absurdity and its filmmakers do not seem to have the capacity to capture how unusual those large portraits are. If this was not done by an openly partisan filmmaker, *Maid in Malacañang* would have worked as a great satire of the Marcos family's vanity just by having the camera tour around the palace citing huge portraits of the family and its members on every corner of the house.

What *Maid in Malacañang* played well – in the sense that it captures its place in history – is the depiction of its enemy. For a film that featured a politician, it does not handle politics well. The film only understood the conflict surrounding its protagonist-family in the sense of loyalty-betrayal in a semifeudal bipartisan way, like most dumb semifeudal telenovelas in local TV. A family versus a family, and everyone else are either servants, “tools,” or “cult followers” in the film's point of view. But this point of

view is so shallow that Pro-Marcos youtube vloggers may have presented this film's perceived enemy as evil way better. *Maid in Malacañang* is a ruling family's narrative from a tunnel vision. Its place in history is a place where people have stupid understanding and imagination of politics and history.

The question that is left to ask is, who is this movie talking to? It's a film about very particular people, with an out of touch problem (which is often irrelevant to a common audience), with a conflict very few people would have experienced due to wealth disparity (and between us, regular movie audiences and the Marcos family, that wealth disparity is wider than we can imagine). Sure, we all want to escape our lives since we are living in constant danger of living in this wretched semifeudal and semicolonial society working tirelessly for bureaucrat capitalists, but none of us has a wide array of options as the Marcos family did and there are no bodyguards to protect us from getting stabbed or shot.

What about its claim for history? Is *Maid in Malacañang* teaching us something new? In this field, the film is in limbo. If we think that the film was speaking to the non-believers of any claims it made, it won't convert anyone and will continue to receive the criticisms it received even prior to its showing. If we think that the film was speaking to cynics, the undecided, and those who were still weighing things, it won't really help them much since its own set up often betrays itself and it's hard to take every sequence seriously. If we think that the film was speaking to the loyalists and supporters, by this point of their lives they probably have learned most of the film's "historical" talking points through various sources online and offline that what remains with seeing this film is merely confirmation bias. What it has for any claim for history at the very least, were autobiographical trivialities which oftentimes were not particularly interesting to know.

Both a failure as a spectacle and as propaganda (and to fail as a spectacle is to fail as propaganda), is there anything where the film succeeded? *Maid in Malacañang* works mostly as a vanity project. It's a film that does not please anyone and even failed to make the Marcos family appear better in their critics eyes. But it does make Imee Marcos, who acts as both "creative producer" and executive producer of the film, look better. Imee, after all, is also the main protagonist of the film. Christine Reyes playing

as Imee only makes sense in this conclusion: that the film was made to make Imee Marcos look better in our eyes (by looks alone, that was a far stretch). Even the title, *Maid in Malacañang*, refers to Imee, in a dialogue said by Ferdinand Senior (“you are the best maid in Malacañang”).

But if critics of the family would insist that this is a politically motivated propaganda to shape the masses on re-embracing the Family, perhaps we need to calibrate our understanding of propaganda in the temperament the film has that is more attuned to the age of social media’s self-validation. What makes *Maid in Malacañang* ideologically skewed is not just its attempt to “revise” history (which it failed horribly), but the way that its approach can be validated as autobiographical “expression” in the same manner that social media posts are. It confuses a social media timeline with history; mere personal conflict and opinion with politics. Like social media, *Maid in Malacañang* only provides a tunnel vision towards a mirror where the looker only sees how they present themselves in the timeline. And the film is not even meant for you to see and appreciate, even if you are the family’s supporter. It’s only meant for Imee Marcos’ pleasure. And all the commotion around the film is just her vanity speaking.

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Philippine Cinema



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