

DIRECTOR'S CUT: Honest Conversations with Filipino Filmmakers about Piracy

Written by Jason Tan Liwag

We speak to eight filmmakers from the Philippines about their first experiences with having their work pirated, and how it altered their relationship with piracy.

In the Philippines, piracy is as ubiquitous as air. Pirated copies of Hollywood and commercial fare play in buses, restaurants, and offices on the daily. Families exchange DVDs containing hundreds of local and foreign films on holidays. Film schools show bootlegs and illegally downloaded shorts and feature-length films to educate up-and-coming filmmakers. Before the digital revolution and the advent of internet piracy, physical copies were sold on the streets of every major city, often in areas of high human density such as wet markets, churches, and malls. Despite the crackdowns on physical stores in Quiapo and Greenhills in the early 2000s, piracy was one of the only ways lesser-known works were seen by an average consumer. In the absence of investment in physical releases from studios, piracy distributes and preserves older and independent films.

Most writing about piracy argues against it from a legal, religious, or business standpoint. The Philippines' Optical Media Board has claimed that at its height, piracy in the 2000s and 2010s amassed hundreds of millions of pesos of losses yearly. But for a country as poverty-stricken as the Philippines, the gray areas arise from the affective domain—for both consumers and creators.

How do we preach against piracy in the face of poverty and lack of ways to watch shows legally? How do we condemn pirates when it is their sociopolitical realities that filmmakers turn into fiction and profit from through film festivals and commercial releases? In a country where many of the remaining avenues for filmmaking rely on state-sponsored grants funded by the Filipino taxpayer, can piracy be considered stealing? With a COVID-addled world thrusting people into poverty and ticket prices and streaming platforms soaring, piracy becomes one of the few ways films are still seen locally. How then must filmmakers feel and respond?

Here, we interview eight feature filmmakers—Rod Singh, Irene Villamor, Dodo Dayao, Glenn Barit, Monster Jimenez, Jerrold Tarog, Lav Diaz, and Mac Alejandre—about their personal experiences of having their work pirated, how these have changed their relationship with piracy, and how it affects their work today, if at all. Excerpts of the interviews have been translated from Filipino and edited for publication.

When was the first time you saw your own works pirated? Or what was the most memorable experience of finding out your work was pirated? Where were you and how did you feel? Could you describe the experience?

I can't remember the first time I saw my work pirated. The most memorable was with *Sid & Aya* (2018). It was only a few days after the film's commercial release, but we saw that the movie already had a Facebook link. I engaged by privately requesting the people who posted the link to take it down. Others were okay to do it and realized the effects of their actions. Or at least that's what they said. But one commenter refused to do so and argued about him being an OFW [Overseas Foreign Worker] who didn't have access to recent Filipino films. He said piracy was more democratic. Why would an artist prevent others from seeing their work, especially if the audience can't afford it? There's an argument too about capitalism. So that definitely made me think. Though of course it hurts to see your work pirated.

— IRENE VILLAMOR

Director of *Ulan* (*Rain*, 2019), *Sid & Aya: Not a Love Story* (2018), and *Meet Me In St. Gallen* (2018)

Maybe Mar[io Cornejo] has forgotten about this. But it was in Quiapo or one of the malls in Pasig where they have poker near Greenhills. At the time, they were famous for selling 4-in-1 DVDs. The legitimate copies at the time were only being sold as VCDs. *Big Time* was made in 2005, and we were able to sell it [legitimately] as VCDs in 2006. This was a couple of years after and of course, guilty as charged, we were also looking at stuff, for really hard-to-find arthouse DVDs. Then we saw a 4-in-1 DVD that had *My Sassy Girl* (2001), *Big Time*, *Masahista* (*The Masseur*, 2005), and... I forget the last movie. I wanna say *Kaleldo* (*Summer Heat*, 2006), but I'm not sure. I think we kept that DVD, but I'm not sure where it is.

My first feeling when we got it was that I was flattered. Everybody wanted to watch *My Sassy Girl*, so you know that at some point they were gonna watch our film if you bought it. So I bought it because, in my mind, why wouldn't I? I also hadn't seen *Masahista* anyway. Of course you're thinking about your keep. But as an independent filmmaker, sometimes our objectives are different. If you get down to brass tacks, it's not a huge amount. What you want is for more people to see you.

But then I had my next experience—*Respeto* (*Respect*, 2017). It was a hip-hop film. You know how active they are in the YouTube world. I was hoping that super active hip-hop community would drive them into cinemas because we had a commercial run of *Respeto*. But as it turns out, they don't go to the movies. At least the fans of Abra and Loony [don't]. What they do like doing is pirating the damn thing. I'm not kidding. Especially after Cinemalaya. Treb knew how active they were. It was a cultural thing. So we were very careful. We could trace where the movies were coming from that

were being uploaded on Facebook and YouTube and, almost every day, we had to report them. It almost became a hobby of mine and Treb's.

From there, I think my relationship with piracy changed. It was affecting [us financially]. The film didn't do well at the box office. We did make some money, but even our trailer was pirated [by others]. You could see the movie cut up to their liking. That's when it hits you that people think they can do whatever they want with the movie just because it's been released. Without thought. The funny story there is that it got to the point that Treb got so frustrated about it that he would post them on our Facebook. "*Pirata, wag gayahin.*" ["*Pirate, don't mimic.*"] [Laughs] At first, I told him not to do it. But then he was so frustrated because they were second-timers—people who were already told not to do it, but who would post it again. It's impunity. They did not care.

It still happens. We started tracing where it came from. I'm just going to say it because I hope they read it—it was really from the award-giving bodies. From all of them. You had to give them DVDs because a lot of them didn't want links at the time. Maybe [some members] didn't have fast internet. We put small watermarks on them, so we could tell where they came from. It's not like they return the copies. So that's what I learned. Especially with *Leonor* (2022). If an award-giving body demands a hard copy, we just say we can't. If you don't want to nominate our film, then okay. But there are ways for them to watch it. So we just went out of our way to give them a fast link. That wouldn't be a hassle for the viewer. And I guess everyone should evolve anyway. So far, there haven't been any violent reactions. They were just very...surprised that I was doing that now.

—MONSTER JIMENEZ

Director of *Kano: An American and His Harem* (2010); producer of *Big Time* (2005), *Respeto* (2017), and *Leonor Will Never Die* (2022)



An 8-in-1 DVD with Big Time. Image from Monster Jimenez.

What was your relationship to piracy before the incident(s)? Did having your own works pirated change your relationship with film piracy at large?

I'm pretty ambivalent about piracy, to be honest. On the one hand, I don't think it's my place to crusade against it. The only people who have any right to rally against its supposed ills are people who have never bought a single pirated DVD or never downloaded a single torrent or never had a VPN. All it takes is one act of piracy in your past and you're an automatic hypocrite if you go up on some sort of high-horse pulpit to condemn it.

Here's the quandary, though. I'm a full-time working filmmaker. I'd like my producers to earn revenue from my work. I'd like to make some cash from it, too. But both *Violator* (2014) and *Midnight In A Perfect World* (2020) never got a regular cinema run, never got a physical media release, never got on any streamer because not a single one was interested in picking them up. All the legal mechanisms for distribution tend to be prohibitive when it comes to getting my work out to its potential audiences. And if nothing else, I'd like for more people to see it, too, not least because every time I show it in special screenings, the response has been overwhelming. That's why I tend to agree with [Werner] Herzog and Lav [Diaz] in that piracy may be the most successful form of distribution.

— DODO DAYAO

Director of *Violator* (2014) and *Midnight In a Perfect World* (2020)

Of course, when I was a student, piracy was so helpful in allowing us to watch films that we couldn't find in cinemas. This was during a time when paid streaming services weren't available yet. Even if there were opportunities, I didn't have the money to pay [for them]. But when my works started being pirated, I developed a different take and felt that it was still problematic in a business sense. To me, piracy is inevitable. Even if I know personally we shouldn't pirate films, I settled for an alternative: "It's okay to pirate as long as it isn't locally produced." People need to support [local filmmakers] for opportunities to multiply. With each film that performs at the box office, it gives birth to more films, more opportunities to tell stories.

But when I think about how expensive it is to watch films nowadays—whether in theaters or through streaming—I develop these internal exemptions for those who are unable to pay. In truth, I do think people who can't pay will pay. I find it annoying when people who obviously can "afford" to pay are the ones who are at the forefront of pirating. I think they're the problem. They use those who can't afford it as a human shield, a blanket. I think they're ruining the future of production. They're the ones who are truly stealing from us because it's obvious they can afford it but simply choose to steal. This is different from people whose circumstances ask them to choose between watching a film in the

theaters or eating several meals across several days. We make films for people who cannot always pay. We make films with their stories and experiences. So why should we punish them for pirating the work?

— ROD SINGH

Director of *Mamu and a Mother Too* (2018) and *Drug Den* (2022-2024)

I used to man my brother's old computer shop when I was in high school. I'm the one who looks for music online and burns it on CDs for customers. In Cagayan, there are virtually no music stores and movies [screenings] are delayed for weeks, even months. Piracy was really the access for us, and it was free! So it was natural for me to pirate stuff through Limewire and Bearshare. Later on, it was so easy to rip from YouTube. And when I learned about torrents, the floodgates opened, especially for world cinema. I still download stuff today.

This is a tricky subject for me. I'm sure every film/filmmaker is different. But in my perspective, now that I have a feature-length film, *Cleaners* (2019), which was born out of the help from various people, like my parents who sponsored/cooked our food for our entire crew, my relatives who acted in it for free, my filmmaker friends who took their roles at a huge discount, and even strangers who supported it through crowdfunding. It was hard to see our film be shared so easily in unlisted YouTube links, untraceable websites, and in Telegram links. My film friends and I are now doing these stupid day jobs just to survive, but this thing we poured our hearts out for in 2019 doesn't give as much to sustain us. And we also give bonuses to our crew if we can, it's not all top-heavy.



A copy of Glenn Barr's *Cleaners* available for download on Telegram. Image from Glenn Barr.

The other side of the coin is that we really want our film to be seen. Who doesn't? But our film is having difficulty getting into streaming or having proper distribution. A lot of people want to see our film, but we can't really point them anywhere. One question that usually pops up is: "Why don't you just upload it on YouTube?" My answer is we won't gain much from that. Films have this sort of life, that when they get older, they get less valuable. So as much as we can, we're still trying to sell our film on platforms, before its life/value ends. My timeline is around five years. After that, maybe we can upload it on YouTube for anyone to see. I'm still figuring out how to DIY and self-distribute it after trying the streaming options. But our film is heavily pirated now on different websites and Telegram groups. I watched it once on a site before. [Laughs]

So with these experiences, my personal compromise is to let local cinema breathe. I only download international stuff now. Hollywood especially, since their budgets are so huge compared to us. Piracy may not even be that much of an issue for them. But for local cinema, let them sell their films on streaming. Or let them try screening on big screens, especially for the independent ones. Of course, different films work on different business models too. Not all sales make their way to the makers. But if we have a simple general rule, let Philippine cinema earn a little. Sometimes it's their fuel/energy to make more stuff that might be nice and pay the crew well. Also, a lot of directors give out screeners, if you ask them nicely. Lastly, I think of piracy as the symptom, not the disease.

— GLENN BARIT

Director of *Aliens Ata* (*Maybe Aliens*, 2017) and *Cleaners* (2019)

Do these experiences inform your practice now?

My film *Tagpuan* (*Crossroads*, 2022) was part of the 2020 Metro Manila Film Festival. The screening was online [for the first time] because we were still amid the pandemic. It was a huge risk. Because of the pandemic, there were almost no films being made. Then, as soon as the festival began, several online pages popped up and started selling films that were part of the festival. They were bundled to become cheaper if you watched three of the films. It was so cheap to get the link. It hurt a lot for the producers and everyone who was part of the festival. We were already struggling [because production had halted], and here we were, being robbed. I recall there was a coordinated effort from various agencies to end piracy. But pirates have a different level of strength and resilience. Even now, they're very open on social media. I still see some films being sold for around PHP 10. No film can really escape piracy. I don't know how, but I do hope there's a way to end it soon.

— MAC ALEJANDRE

Director of *Ang Panday* (*The Blacksmith*) franchise, *Selina's Gold* (2022) and *Tagpuan* (*Crossroads*, 2022)

Of course. In Europe, sometimes they see *Engkanto* (2007) or *Melancholia* (2008). They sell my works. I remember walking in one of the Slavic countries [and seeing my works]. But they weren't properly made. Some of them were copied or videoed during a screening and just had a title slapped on and sold on the streets. I saw *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977) by Kidlat there. [Laughs] You'll be surprised. I saw it along the streets of Croatia too. I told Kidlat and he just laughed.

Piracy isn't unique to us. It's everywhere. I remember in Poland, I was with a filmmaker from Ukraine who was surprised to see all of his films being sold on the street. He said: "Wow, these are my films!" Some people are collectors of those kinds of films. If they know that there's a market for your film, if there's a niche, they'll copy it. I think there's an underground market but on the internet. You pay them and they send you a link or a physical copy. Or sometimes a drive that you send over and they transfer it and return it to you.

It's an underground market. The collectors of VHS copies, they still have those. But it's a unique collector system. They look for specific copies. There's a collector of *Godfather* who looks for DVD copies, Beta copies, etc. Hardcore collectors. I slept at a programmer's house once. He's that kind of collector. He has films that he really loves and he'll collect all kinds of copies of that film — from miniDVs, CDs, and DVDs.

Piracy is a consumerist thing. But there are real collectors. They don't care about the discourse on it. They don't care if it's illegal or unauthorized. They want something and piracy provides for that need to collect things, find things. The dichotomy of the seeker and the giver is a very psychological thing. It addresses the human's yearning to see things and have things. If you want larger discourse on piracy, make it about that. Not just about the market, but the human needs. Some pirates who are producers of the unauthorized market...they're not really thinking about these sociological and psychological needs of the person. All they know is that it sells. But if you dig deeper, it's about fulfilling an unaddressed need. Maybe it's even an addiction.

If you still remember Gino Dormiendo, the great critic during the era of Brocka, he was my neighbor in Marikina and he really collects things. His collection was expansive. But he got sick and had to sell things. From scraps of films to DVDs, that's where he'd spend his money. It's hoarding. He wouldn't watch it. He'd leave it in boxes. Films by Brocka, Bernal, Scorsese, Tarkovsky. It's collecting for the sake of collecting. I bought so many things from him then. When he was sick, he started selling them for cheap or even giving them away for free.

— LAV DIAZ

Director of *Batang West Side* (*West Side Avenue*, 2001), *Norte: The End of History* (2013), and *Ang Babeng Humayo* (*The Woman Who Left*, 2016)

If anything, all of this has convinced me that we should find ways to keep the tradition of watching movies in theaters alive. Give the film a window to earn outside of digital platforms. That has the added benefit of resisting the atomized experience of watching films through digital and strengthens the communal experience of cinema. But that brings about the question of what can be shown in theaters these days because the landscape is entirely different from when I started. Something—some movement or some film—has to reignite the filmgoing experience, particularly in local cinema. We need a film experience that stays with us beyond the transitory nature of memes and that can draw out deep emotions and long conversations in public. We need films that can actually change lives again.

— JERROLD TAROG

Director of *Sana Dati (If Only)*, 2013, *Heneral Luna (General Luna)*, 2015, and episodes of the *Shake, Rattle & Roll* franchise