

PERSONAL TRAVAILS FROM CDs TO DIGITAL SPACES

Written by Celine Jao

As I was rifling through secondhand books in Tokyo, I sought out foreign film magazines about Asian auteurs to little avail. The tiny space crammed full of film fan magazines, relics of a long-forgotten past and Hollywood-centric bubble dreams, were somewhat alien to me. Reams of ink and paper stuff were spent on the likes of Tarantino and Polanski while there were rows upon rows of Hollywood actors. It was hard to come by even a whisper of a European director even though there were shelves dedicated to the bottom-of-the-barrel Hollywood actors of the 90s. Perhaps what I sought was indiscernible to me, buried behind walls of impenetrable Japanese texts.

But where is the ink spent on Southeast Asian filmmakers? The truth is that if you're not an "insider" or an avid follower of the film scene, plenty of Southeast Asian films can pass through your fingers. The writing in newspapers or magazines can be sparse or perfunctory, focusing only on independent productions that make it to mass audience interest or mainstream films.

As an outsider to the scene, word on the Filipino film industry is scant. The posters sometimes make it on my social media feed before more relatable short-form content. Memes push the film ads out of sight and out of mind.

Even in my childhood, that interstice that forms everything after, the Hollywood blockbusters and strange B-list films that somehow wormed their way into Filipino cinemas and through the funnels of pirated CD baggies are the films that populate the highways and expressways of my psyche.

Pirated films in their shadowy and blurry covers and flimsy plastics are things that I'd thought to be relics of the 90s and late 2000s. Ivan Gentolizo's *Last Full Show* (2023) recaptures the early aughts through a love letter to cinema—in the vein of *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) but with the inclusion of Filipino piracy culture. The film solidifies yearning, cleanly and smoothly hitting its boyhood beats revolving around the protagonist Teban's unquenchable thirst to see films in all their variegated forms.



A shot from *Last Full Show* by Ivan Gentolizo, imagining film piracy in the early aughts.

Although he's surrounded daily by flimsy plastic-wrapped DVDs, the cinema becomes an idealized, dreamlike place for him to see his beloved movies on a large screen, and to be enveloped by the world of films. These pirated videos become a gateway to cinema, becoming not only a little boy's livelihood but a place for his fanciful dreams and ambitions as well. Teban's life is undoubtedly difficult as he and his mother struggle to make ends meet. They cannot afford to go to the movies and watch the films that they sell. The very idea of nurturing a love for cinema, even if he is surrounded by it, is a troublesome notion that can only endanger him and skew his priorities in life.

Nowadays, we've upgraded our piracy techniques from burning movies onto CDs to smoothly streaming or downloading them. Instead, we have the diaphanous tactility of digital archives and folders full of raw, cam, or web-ripped films.

It's only after abruptly messaging Ivan Gentolizo, a former classmate, that I was able to view his film at all. His film's strong narrative made me wonder how long the idea had been nestling inside his head and how his mentor at the time, John Torres, had helped shape this. *Last Full Show* is Gentolizo's work under John Torres' narrative film class, which naturally progressed to the Black Beret film competition that is continually held by the University of the Philippines film department.



Scene from *Last Full Show* by Ivan Gentolizo

John Torres is a filmmaker in his own right with a belt full of feature-length and short films. It was through sheer luck and the curatorial mind of the MARGIN editors that I even noticed the works of these two filmmakers who hit so close to home. Although Torres is also a professor at UP Diliman and mentored several students through their narrative film productions, it was

fascinating nonetheless to delve into the oeuvre of a filmmaker that I only knew as a name and an idea.

I haven't watched Gentolizo's nascent filmography, but his tightly wound narrative film indicates an excellent grasp of film principles and a quick mind intent on telling stories. John Torres' video shorts come across as dreamlike and silken, like gossamer. Rather than specific stories created to unfold, his films meander and twist their paper-thin narratives overlaid across the media.



Stills from *Salat* (2004)

Through the Objectifs Film Library, I watched eight John Torres films, giving me a rudimentary understanding of Torres' visual poetry and experimental style. His earlier works play with monologue and text, rendering minimalistic text onscreen. A lot of them, such as *Salat* (2004), *Tawidgutom* (2004), and *We Don't Care For Democracy, This Is What We Want: Love And Hope And Its Many Faces* (2010), are intimate and highly personal depictions of love and normal life. The romance and yearning present in the everyday is recognized and crystallized into little grainy films full of quiet moments and dark nights.

Of course, John Torres ends up experimenting, playing with the angle of the shots or perspectives with ease. Music jangles in tune with his film frames.

Sometimes it is the startling silence, the mundanity of the scene and sound, that shocks us. He collects the entrails of footage that he's gathered from other projects or his feature films into a multi-textual play on narrative. What we see is a twisting of the material into an entirely different story, a lot of which is implied or can only be gleaned from reading the descriptions beforehand. The best examples of John Torres elevating his footage with fictional verve are *We Still Have To Close Our Eyes* (2019), where footage from film shoots takes an ominous turn as he brings up avatars and some miasmic digital power; and, *Hai, They Recycle Heartbreaks in Tokyo so Nothing's Wasted* (2009), a little film where a woman salvages someone from the recycling bin and the audience takes on his voyeuristic perspective of the woman and her memories. This act of lifting from and combining his projects feels subversive and secretive, a personal act between creator and viewer. The stories themselves are farfetched sci-fi or mythology applied to otherwise ordinary images, which add a layer of mystique and absurdity to the films.



A snapshot from *Tawidgutom* (2004) by John Torres



A scene from Torres' *Hal, They Recycle Heartbreaks in Tokyo So Nothing's Wasted* (2009)



A snapshot from *Tawidgutom* (2004)

I was at first mystified by his short video work. I watched them in no particular order throughout the scattering of days. The much-needed loglines deepened my confusion. Yet over time I could grasp a chronology of how John Torres had developed his style. His earlier films had the hallmarks of a poet translating his work to film. His overlay of text over images was a little more simplistic before it evolved to abstraction and began to play with jarring images against urbane, sparse lines. There is an added layer of complexity in his works. Torres is constantly referencing not just his own, but also the works of other artists such as in *After Nony Estarte, a certain Orpheus, and those flowers in Dahilayan that accompanied this other sense they told me about* (2017), which references the titular Cagayan de Oro artist, Nony Estarte. The shorts available in the Objectifs Film Library convey a narrative of a highly personal artist utilizing film to convey slivers of himself and his dialogic relationship with the world around him. John Torres is immersed in context, consumed by his own little world.

The curation of the library sequesters the archived works into a rarefied stratosphere. If the Torres collection is anything to go by, many of the films in the library are little experimental shorts of varying intensities of intimacy and narrative. Take Daniel Hui's low-lit documentaries or Petersen Vargas' festival hit, *How to Die Young in Manila* (2020). Another fan-favorite, *Che Tagyamon's Lola Loleng* (2016), and Jerrold Chong's experimental animations like *Ways of Seeing* (2016), and *What Has To Be* (2018) also fill up the library.

We are on the hunt to look for an online user who makes use of Philippine citizens as avatars to live vicariously using a driving app that simulates riding a motorcycle on actual roads in real time.

我們正在追捕一名網路用戶，他透過一個駕駛APP

A scene from *We Still Have To Close Our Eyes* (2019)



Eclipse by Jerrold Chong



Nascent by Jerrold Chong



Ways Of Seeing by Jerrold Chong



What Has To Be by Jerrold Chong



Piece of Meat by Jerrold Chong and Huang Jiansang (PIT)

Screenscaps of Jerrold Chong works in Objectifs Library

Digital archives nowadays differentiate themselves by the quality of their curation and the exclusivity of their sheer number of materials. Although the web has flattened much of our intellectual landscape and opened up the flues of culture to unwind and unravel to just about anyone, there are gaps in our knowledge, particularly now that our algorithmic consumerism of content has transformed how we deal with images and information online. Artists' works can fall off the deep end or simply not worm their way into the shared consciousness simply because they do not quite fit the ideal mold for mass consumption.

A stronghold or complete archive of Southeast Asian filmmakers is perhaps a pipe dream, given how our society is hurrying along and dropping content just as fast as it can absorb it.

The likes of Objectifs narrows the gap and brings more of these obscure works by Asian filmmakers to a wider audience.

The act of watching films that are no longer in circulation, like Gentolizo's and Torres', is a prized and increasingly rare moment. It took nerve and all the brazenness I could muster to just get around to asking the right people to see these films. It is an unfortunate reality that many do not have the privilege or free time to ask all the filmmakers they are interested in for copies of their work, which is why the breadth and depth of digital archives are so vital to maintaining artistic communication beyond the monolithic "global" culture that we find ourselves swimming in today. It is a tough world out there for a former pirate with interests that fall through the cracks. Now if only more people could trawl the interweb, come across these lesser-known films, and imbibe them, as conversations from one human to another.

John Torres' short films discussed above were especially accessed via Objectifs Film Library.