
Social Realism: The Turns of a Term in the Philippines

– Patrick D. Flores

Somewhere in the Philippines, in the 1970s, the Coca-Cola logo bleeds across the image and becomes the proscenium arch of a theatre of everyday life. In the watercolour *Itak sa Pusong ni Mang Juan* (*Dagger in Old Juan's Heart*, 1978), Antipas Delotavo depicts a man, slightly stooped, passing by an overwhelmingly large billboard advertising the archetypal product of the United States. The artist seizes on a moment when the multinational and the proletariat inhabited common, contentious ground in the Philippines. The serif of the letter 'C' appears to nearly touch the fatigued figure, as if ready to cut into his flesh, to shed blood that is both always-already flowing and foretelling fate. Delotavo explains that he was drawn to the Coke icon because for him it incarnated the ubiquity of the US in the Third World; its internecine interventions in Southeast Asia; and its support for the Ferdinand Marcos regime in the Philippines, which hosted two of the US's largest foreign military bases. Also crucial here is advertising as a vehicle of imperialism, in guaranteeing the US's hegemonic presence in the economy and culture of the Philippines even after it gained independence in 1946, following nearly fifty years of US rule and three centuries of Spanish occupation.¹ The Coke logo is concomitantly a cipher of capitalism and, in Delotavo's own words, of 'cultural enslavement'.²

In 2012, this work was shown in 'ReCollection 1081: Clear and Present Danger (Visual Dissent on Martial Rule)', an exhibition that commemorated the imposition of Martial Law by Marcos in 1972,³ one of a series of measures aimed at quelling the communist tide rising within and beyond the Philippines, and with which the regime ultimately tore apart the civil basis of the modern democratic republic — the first to be established, in 1898, in

Looking at the legacy of 1970s social realist painting in the Philippines, Patrick D. Flores reflects on the intersection of postcolonial discourse, historical imagination and political art practice.

either Asia or Africa. It was surprising to see Delotavo's and other politically charged works from the 1970s gathered together at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila. After all, this had been the premier edifice of culture that Imelda Marcos, wife of the strongman, had built in 1969 as the 'sanctuary for the Filipino soul' and 'shrine of the Filipino spirit'.⁴ The former beauty

queen turned urban planner of the 'City of Man', as she christened Manila, had to recover around 77 hectares of foreshore land to realise her vision, a project unparalleled in the region at that time. She proclaimed loftily:

*It shall be our Parthenon built in a time of hardship, a spring-source of our people's living conviction in the oneness of our heritage ... It is highly symbolic that this Center whose mission it is to reclaim from the past the things that belong to our present and our future should stand here on land reclaimed from the sea ... [so that] our works in stone and story ... may remain, for all time, a testament to the goodness, the truth and the beauty of a historic race.*⁵

1 The Philippines was the first European and the only US colony in Asia. Spanish colonisation began in the mid-sixteenth century and lasted until 1898, when the US seized control of the country, leading to the Philippine-American War (1899–1913).

2 Conversation with the author, 25 March 2013.

3 'ReCollection 1081: Clear and Present Danger (Visual Dissent on Martial Rule)', Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila, 14 July–30 September 2012.

4 Imelda Marcos, quoted in Ileana Maramag (ed.), *The Compassionate Society and Other Selected Speeches of Imelda Romualdez Marcos*, Manila: National Media Production Center, 1973, pp.14–15.

5 *Ibid.*

It was at the Cultural Center that various types of high-modernist and Conceptual art exhibitions and events were presented under the auspices of a government that staged spectacles of democracy, development and national identity, constructing the country as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* — one in which a new world was deemed to be ‘suddenly turning visible’.⁶ Ferdinand Marcos was inspired by the same ideal, ordaining the Center as ‘a place where the Filipino can discover the soul of his people, and relate the saga of his race to the vast human experience that begins in the past and advances into the limitless future’.⁷ Under Imelda’s directorship, the Center strove for a certain ‘world-class’ status for Philippine talent based on an understanding of modernism as an aspirational discourse of equivalence.⁸ Its programme reflected a cultural policy anchored in an identity at once archaic and contemporary — with native and national provenance on the one hand, and modernist inclinations on the other — which largely rested on Imelda Marcos’s notion of ‘the goodness, the truth and the beauty of a historic race’ that necessarily excluded the unsightly ferment or the socio-economic asymmetries of the present. The latter were embodied in turn by ‘social realism’, an aesthetic movement that emerged in the Philippines in the late 1970s. Resisting the idealisation of progress, social realism articulated a dissident cultural imagination, one wrought throughout centuries of colonialism, and that in many ways persists in postcolonial discourse and practice in the Philippines today.

The Kaisahan

The belligerence of Delotavo’s work is in line with his coterie of artists in Manila, who formed the collective Kaisahan (‘Solidarity’) in 1976: Papo de Asis, Pablo Baens Santos, Orlando Castillo, Jose Cuaresma, Neil Doloricon, Edgar Talusan Fernandez, Charles Funk, Renato Habulan, Albert Jimenez, Al Manrique and Jose Tence Ruiz; later joined by Vin Toledo. The Kaisahan emerged from a history of efforts by the Left to mobilise the youth as part of a wider struggle against what art historian Alice G. Guillermo has identified as the ‘exploitative forces of US imperialism and its local agents’ in the Philippines, and which can be understood in the context of the radicalised international student movement of the late 1960s and 70s.⁹ The collective has a precedent in the politically motivated Nagkakaisang Progresibong Artista at Arkitekto (‘United Progressive Artists and Architects’, NPAA), a group that officially formed in 1971 but started to coalesce as early as 1969, when the Kabataang Makabayan (‘Nationalist Youth’) first gathered artists amongst their ranks. Informed by the doctrines of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung, the NPAA was clearly fired up by the rousing rhetoric of Jose Maria Sison, Chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines since 1968 and foremost ideologue of the national democratic movement — an assemblage of fronts involving parliamentary and armed struggles under the aegis of the Communist Party. In his message to the founding of the NPAA — an acronym quite close to that of the armed wing, the New Peoples Army (NPA) — Sison gave unequivocal marching orders: ‘Any piece of art bears the stamp of a definite class ... Grasp the truth that proletarian politics is in command of revolutionary aesthetics.’¹⁰ It is in the crucible of this radicalised student movement, with clear socialist leanings, that the Kaisahan was forged, and their activities played out within a revolutionary context.

In 1976, the Kaisahan circulated a manifesto that broadly followed the doctrine of the NPAA. As Guillermo points out, however, it also encapsulated the artists’ attempt ‘to reformulate the aesthetics of political art to give it more breadth and room for creativity’.¹¹ Crucial to Kaisahan’s polemic is an understanding of ‘national identity’ as a necessary step to posit a differential relationship with the West, and to critique the process of westernisation, which, they argue, has obscured or suppressed the ‘true condition’ of Philippine existence and therefore the ‘reality’ of its history:

6 Raymundo Albano, ‘Developmental Art of the Philippines’, *Philippine Art Supplement*, vol.2, no.4, 1981, p.15.

7 Ferdinand Marcos quoted in I. Maramag, *The Compassionate Society*, *op. cit.*, p.16.

8 During the opening, the precocious and ever-ludic David Medalla held a blitzkrieg protest, unfurling a banner within striking distance of the First Lady, and enacted performative gestures both from his seat at the gala and later in front of the fountain outside. In an interview years later, Medalla spoke of the extreme fragmentation of society during Martial Law. See Guy Brett, *Exploding Galaxies: The Art of David Medalla*, London: Kala Press, 1995.

9 Alice G. Guillermo, *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970–1990*, Manila: University of the Philippines Press, 2001, p.51. As a gauge of the agitated atmosphere at the time, Guillermo mentions that when US President Lyndon B. Johnson visited the country in 1967, demonstrators carried confrontational posters with queries such as: ‘Hey, Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?’

10 *Ibid.*, p.248.

11 *Ibid.*, p.63.

Pablo Baens Santos,
Piket (Picket), 1979,
 oil on canvas,
 68.58 × 91.44cm.
 Courtesy the artist



We, the artists of the Kaisahan, commit ourselves to the search for national identity in Philippine art. We believe that national identity is not to be found in a nostalgic love of the past or an idealised view of our tradition and history. It cannot be achieved by using the common symbols of our national experience without understanding the reality that lies within them. We recognise that national identity, if it is to be more than lip service or an excuse for personal status seeking, should be firmly based on the present social realities and on a critical assessment of our historical past so that we may trace the roots of these realities. [...] We shall therefore develop an art that reflects the true conditions in our society. This means, first of all, that we must break away from the Western-oriented culture that tends to maintain the Filipino people's dependence on foreign goods, foreign tastes and foreign ways that are incompatible with their genuine national interests. [...] We shall therefore move away from the uncritical acceptance of Western moulds, from the slavish imitation of Western forms that have no connection to our national life, from the preoccupation with Western trends that do not reflect the process of our development.

Moving on from the critique of the West, the manifesto asks ‘for whom’ should art be, a question that resonates with Mao Tse-Tung’s seminal speech on the role of art and literature in China, at the Yan’an Forum in 1942. Here the Kaisahan commit themselves to creating an art for the ‘mass’ — that is, an art that contributes to the creation of a collective subject that heeds the obligations of the historical imperative of revolution. Finally, the manifesto addresses the question of form, the generative structure of art as mediation of everyday life, so that it may cohere into a total vision:

Our commitments to these objectives need not mean that we limit ourselves to a specific form or a specific style. We may take different roads in the forms that we evolve and use but we all converge on the same objectives. The only limitation to our experimentation, to the play of our creative impulses, is the need to effectively communicate social realities to our chosen audiences.

To be true works of imagination, our works of art should not only reflect our perception of what is, but also our insights into what is to be. We grasp the direction in which they are changing, and imagine the shape of the future.¹²

12 Ibid., pp.243–44.



Throughout the 1970s, kindred initiatives across Southeast Asia would shape a critique of the modern, its institutions and its relation to the social formation of which they were a part. In Indonesia, the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia ('Indonesia New Art Movement') made its mark through an exhibition and manifesto called Desember Hitam ('Black December') in 1974. In the same year, in Malaysia, artists Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa organised the exhibition 'Towards a Mystical Reality', which laid out the basis for thinking about the kind of art that might originate outside of the West, animated by non-empirical or non-humanist ways of knowing. In 1975, the Sinlapin heng pratheet Thay ('Artists' Front of Thailand') was formed, motivated by the concept of 'art for life' and Buddhist values, in a renewal of tradition. The Kaisahan, therefore, needs to be seen against a wider background of political and artistic movements across the region, taking into consideration the strength of socialist realism in Vietnam and the role of the Communist Party in early Indonesian modern art.¹³

Social Realism

The Kaisahan manifesto advocates a 'critical assessment' of the 'present' and the 'historical past', stressing the need to always integrate the details of the 'ethnographic present' and

¹³ For excerpts of these manifestos and a more in-depth discussion of this subject, see Patrick D. Flores, 'First Person Plural: The Manifestos of the 1970s in Southeast Asia', in Hans Belting et al. (ed.), *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012, pp. 224–71.



Benedicto Cabrera,
*A Page from an
Officer's Diary*,
1975, oil on canvas,
122 × 244cm, from
the series *Larawan*,
c.1972—ongoing.
Courtesy Benedicto
Cabrera Art
Foundation

the ideological structure of the vast 'historical imagination'.¹⁴ It is only at this juncture, they argue, that an aesthetics true to the social and the real may crystallise. In the late 1980s Guillermo coined the term 'social realism' to define the work of the Kaisahan, subsequently broadening its scope to include similar practices in the Philippines, and distinguishing them from the largely doctrinaire and exclusively statist socialist realism that was in vogue at the time in neighbouring countries such as Vietnam. According to her, 'rooted as it is in a commitment to social ideals within a dynamic conception of history, social realism in the visual arts grew out of the politicised Filipino consciousness' shaped by the Philippine revolution against Spain in 1896 and the struggles against an authoritarian state in the 1970s.¹⁵ Inasmuch as the Kaisahan cast its lot with the national democratic movement, it envisioned the future of transformation through a particular ideological programme. Inevitably, then, the issue of ideological instrumentalisation became increasingly salient, as artists sought to achieve a relative autonomy from political strategy in spite of their ideological sympathies — a tension difficult to overcome.

Guillermo argues that social realism in the Philippines 'stresses the choice of contemporary subject matter drawn from the conditions and events of one's time', and 'is essentially based on a keen awareness of conflict'.¹⁶ Whereas realism may be construed

14 See Jean and John Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.

15 See A.G. Guillermo, *Social Realism in the Philippines*, Manila: Asphodel, 1987, p.1.

16 *Ibid.*, p.43.

as a merely stylistic term, social realism is a ‘shared point of view which seeks to expose or lay bare the true conditions of Philippine society’.¹⁷ Realism, here, is both a pedagogical and polemical modality through which the truth about a condition and its urgency are brought into the open so as to elicit spirited engagement and partisan action. The assumption here is that such a truth is knowable and that it may be cognitively mapped through material means based on an ‘artist’s keen observation of reality’. But the social requires more; it spurs the artist to advance ‘alternatives’.

Early examples of social realism invoked a revolutionary continuum sparked by a long history of colonial struggles in the Philippines. Images depicting historical movements of resistance were freely cited and recombined with contemporary imagery and graphic codes referencing muralist practice and ideological iconography. Representations of the worker and the mass, for instance, are mingled with visualisations of abstract concepts such as imperialism and accessible symbols of struggle such as the clenched fist.

In Delotavo’s watercolour, realist depiction is deployed to grapple with the abstraction of capitalism, and its particular incarnation in the Marcos regime. Its criticality is articulated through the dialectics between distance and proximity at play in the image: by collapsing the depth of field of the scene represented, the artist manages to bring into focus the economic and political relationship between background and foreground, the sign and the body, advertising and portraiture. The gap between the blade-like curve of the Coke logo and the chest of the man walking by, with his sunken shoulders mirroring the curve of the serif, points at the productive nexus between the US corporation and the Filipino worker, and by extension the interval between social context and visual form.

In the Philippines, from the sixteenth century onwards, images played a crucial role in the process through which the indigenous peoples were converted to Catholicism. One of the first gestures of Spanish colonisers upon setting foot on the archipelago in 1521 was to offer the gift of a statuery of the Child Jesus as Salvador Mundi to the wife of the local chieftain during the first mass in the islands.¹⁸ It is thus not surprising that, for artists working in the Philippines, the prospect of salvation is embedded in the image, which performs a redemptive act, simultaneously an assimilation of Catholic doctrine and an appropriation of the colonial.

One of the earliest manifestations of the interest in the intersection between the image and the historical in contemporary art practice can be found in the work of Benedicto Cabrera, whom Guillermo identifies as a precursor of social realism. While living in England in the early 1970s, Cabrera came across nineteenth-century photographs of the Philippines and was drawn to the cultural history embedded in them. As Guillermo explains, ‘using these photographs as primary material’ in the painting series *Larawan* (c.1972—ongoing), ‘he transformed and enriched them semantically by creating montages, juxtaposing, cropping, multiplying and reversing them like playing cards in order to elicit meanings’.¹⁹ This work exerted a strong influence in the making of social realism, given its ability to draw links between the precolonial past and the postcolonial present through the appropriation of images. The portraits reveal types of Filipinos, like the mestiza woman or the petty politician in colonial finery, as well as ethno-linguistic communities in the north of the island and scenes of revolution such as a march of soldiers and a public execution. The way in which characters and scenes are juxtaposed indicates a clear awareness of historical contradictions (for instance, the shift in the attire of a native who wants to become a coloniser and the native carrying the coloniser on a chair).

In the series of drawings and paintings *Bandit and Gentleman*, mostly made in the mid-1970s, Cabrera appropriates a historical photograph of a certain Faustino Guillermo, who was to be hung by the Philippine Constabulary under the supervision of US colonial authorities, and shows the handcuffed bandit (the outlaw and ungovernable) next to a member of the political elite, umbrella in hand (representative of the emerging cacique class).²⁰ The entanglement of the photographic and the graphic and of image and historical

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.50.

¹⁸ See R.A. Skelton (ed.), *Magellan’s Voyage: A Narrative Account of the First Circumnavigation by Antonio Pigafetta* (1524, trans. R. A. Skelton), vol. 1, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969; and Julius Bautista, *Figuring Catholicism: An Ethnohistory of the Santo Niño de Cebu*, Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 2010.

¹⁹ A.G. Guillermo, *Social Realism in the Philippines*, *op. cit.*, p.165.

²⁰ Some of the works in this series were shown in Benedicto Cabrera’s exhibition ‘BenCab New Works’, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila (27 November—14 December 1973).

Alfredo Esquillo,
MaMcKinley,
2001, oil on canvas,
122 × 91.4cm.
Courtesy the artist
and Tin-aw Art
Management, Inc.,
Makati, Philippines



context by means of strategies of reframing and repetition allows the artist to experiment with formal, conceptual and historical contrasts. From his curiosity with *Filipiniana* (the corpus of literary and visual works on the Philippines), Cabrera developed a distinct artistic language that was highly influential for a younger generation of artists interested in fusing the archival and the contemporary and conjuring the historical imagination.

If we look closer at the social realism of Delotavo and Cabrera, we may glean aspects of abstraction amid diligent, perspicacious figuration. In Cabrera's work, figures are placed within geometric frames such as boxes and grids, reminiscent of hard-edge abstraction. The repetition of these frames can be seen to allude to Philippine geometric abstraction; the calibration of tonality that mimics the effect of stains or patina, as if to configure colour fields, further attests to the importance of this visual reference. Social realism is therefore considerably nuanced. It is not antithetical to the attacks of abstraction but a mediation of it — perhaps an index of a vexed relationship with the US. After all, these devices may well have come from the gamut of US inspirations: Josef Albers, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and Pop art in general. Delotavo, for instance, explains that in the absence of art books in school, it was his visits to the Thomas Jefferson Library of the American State Department

in Manila that introduced him to US modernism. This flitting in and out of registers finds a similar dynamic in the multiple codes (both Western and non-Western) within which social realist artists briskly moved, formulating a kind of aesthetic that allowed artists like Delotavo to re-inscribe the social in a work imbued with pop references. In his hands, the typographic and the photographic merge in the portrait of the Coke sign and the Filipino, who is painted from a photograph and set against a verisimilarly reproduced reality that is the logo. Hence the definition of social realism broadens to encompass the possibilities of highly mediated experience, practice and form.

Aware of such a diversity of practices, Guillermo has attempted in her more recent writing to cast a wider net that might account for all the repercussions of social realism since the 1970s. She has used the term ‘protest/revolutionary art’ in order to accommodate a more ample array of expressions that are critical of the system, unveiling in compelling ways the inhuman aspects of social and political structures while at the same time denouncing the very basis of such inhumanity. Protest/revolutionary art does not partake, then, in a struggle for ‘a mere change of regimes within the traditional political/economic system’ but rather works towards a ‘dismantling of the system itself which institutionalises and perpetuates exploitation and inequality’.²¹ This subsuming of the term ‘social realism’ under the rubric ‘protest/revolutionary art’ has enabled Guillermo to amplify the implications of artistic expression in Philippine social life, enlarging the front of political action to enlist more sympathies. It also perhaps allows her to recover the elusive reflexive autonomy of art in the context of direct political action, and to mediate the always-present possibility of a robust artistic ecology being instrumentalised by ideology.

Even so it is important not to underestimate the lasting influence of social realism in Philippine contemporary art, in part due to the permanent political and economic crisis. While the term continues to be used today, even if somewhat loosely, it is no longer associated with a specific ideological programme. The interplay between the historical and the contemporary that is at the centre of social realism, for example, has remained a crucial concern in the production of political paintings in the Philippines. While the work of both Cabrera and Delotavo gives full play to the virtuosity of depiction, both artists also demonstrate their mastery of *mestizaje*, as it were, in their defilement of the settled, official image of the country. A similar dynamic may be seen in Alfredo Esquillo’s oil painting *MaMcKinley* (2001), in which the portrait of a mother and child takes on several layers of history. The first layer is a ‘white’ woman in Victorian attire, with the customary ribbon and bonnet. However, if we look attentively at her features, it transfigures into a portrait of the US President William McKinley, who annexed the Philippines in 1899 following Spain’s defeat in the Spanish-American War. McKinley was also responsible for constructing the rhetoric of Benevolent Assimilation. In Esquillo’s recent painting, integration into *Pax Americana* is both infantilising and lethal – lovingly fatal – as McKinley’s hand has an eagle’s talons, while the child he cradles, with Filipino facial features, is wrapped in ivory-coloured garments that resemble the US flag. Finally, on the sleeve of the cross-dressing hybrid trickster-figure is the nozzle of a gun. Catholicism’s mother-and-child iconography becomes an unstable palimpsest of freak beings coming to life. That in Filipino the title of the work reads like a stutter joining ‘mother’ and ‘imperialist’ further complicates the discourse. Once again, belief is bedevilled, as if the colonial imagery embodied not only a history of repression but also a potential for redemption.

Sharing Delotavo’s sensibility, Esquillo’s painting is proficient in its realism and conversant in the language of portraiture and historical discourse, or rather in the historical discourse of portraiture. When it was shown in 2003 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York as part of the exhibition ‘The American Effect: Global Perspectives on the United States, 1990–2003’, curator Lawrence Rinder contextualised it within the US’s extensive military operations worldwide in the past century.²² Indeed, even if largely forgotten, the Philippine–American War (1899–1902) is exemplary of the violence of US imperialism; suffice it to say that it resulted in the death of one out of ten Filipinos. Coincidentally, in 2003, President George W. Bush came to Manila and in reference to the Iraq War spoke to the Philippine Congress:

21 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

22 The exhibition was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York from 3 July until 12 October 2003. See Lawrence Rinder, ‘The American Effect’, in *The American Effect: Global Perspectives on the United States 1990–2003* (exh. cat.), New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2003, pp. 15–47.



Juan Luna,
Spoliarium, 1884,
oil on poplar,
400 × 700cm.
Photograph:
Benigno Toda III.
Courtesy National
Museum of the
Philippines, Manila

*Democracy always has sceptics. Some say the culture of the Middle East will not sustain the institutions of democracy. The same doubts were once expressed about the culture of Asia. These doubts were proven wrong nearly six decades ago, when the Republic of the Philippines became the first democratic nation in Asia. Since then, liberty has reached nearly every shore of the Western Pacific. In this region of the world, and in every other, let no one doubt the power of democracy, because freedom is the desire of every human heart.*²³

His words recall those of Mark Twain, who, in the earlier but no less incendiary time of the Philippine-American War, sketched out a triumphalist America:

*We have pacified some thousands of the islanders and buried them; destroyed their fields; burned their villages ... subjugated the remaining ten millions by Benevolent Assimilation, which is the pious new name of the musket ... And so, by these Providences of God — and the phrase is the government's not mine — we are a World Power.*²⁴

Allegory

One way to look at Esquillo's painting and to understand the impulse behind social realism more broadly is through the notion of the allegorical image. Allegory is deployed here in its unique ability to grasp an ever-slippery reality, stemming perhaps from its own provisionality or elision — 'seeming to be other than what it is. It exhibits something of the perpetually fluctuating, uncertain status of the world it depicts.'²⁵ This precarious balance between appearance and truth foregrounds a 'likely story', arguing for a kind of interpretation that 'encourages its readers not only to aspire towards some world of perfect fulfilment, but to direct attention to the limited world of which they are a part'.²⁶ On the one hand, allegory pushes viewers to see through what it says and to try to read what it really means; on the other, 'it does not need to be read exegetically; it often has a literal level that makes good enough sense'.²⁷ Or, as Walter Benjamin writes, it is both 'convention and expression'.²⁸

23 George W. Bush, 'Remarks to a Joint Session of the Philippine Congress in Quezon City, Philippines', 18 October 2013, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=63501> (last accessed on 10 June 2013).
24 Mark Twain, quoted in L. Rinder, 'The American Effect', *op. cit.*, p.30. See also Jim Zwick (ed.), *Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire: Anti-imperialist Writings on the Philippine-American War*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992.
25 Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, p.13.
26 *Ibid.*
27 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964, p.7.
28 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925, trans. John Osborne), London: Verso, 1998, p.175.



Esteban Villanueva,
Basi Revolt, 1821,
fourteen oil
paintings,
91 × 91cm each,
detail. Courtesy
National Museum
of the Philippines,
Manila







Imelda Marcos visits an exhibition at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila, 1970s. Courtesy Cultural Center of the Philippines

The use of allegory can be traced back to a long history of Philippine political painting, which sought to articulate a response to colonialism, the allure of civilisation and modernity and the unconscionable violence they inflict. Allegory enables Juan Luna’s *Spoliarium* (1884), for example, to evoke a multitude of meanings beyond the anecdote that it depicts; most significantly, the sublime. Awarded the gold prize at the Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes in Madrid in 1884, the painting portrays a scene in the cellar of the Roman coliseum, where dying gladiators were despoiled of their armour and all their worldly possessions flung into a furnace. Filipinos exalted the triumph of their compatriots in Madrid, and linked the scene depicted to an inexorable sequence of revolution. Albeit staged in another time and place, the humiliation and abjection depicted is so tangible and urgent that Luna’s fellow revolutionary Graciano López Jaena was stirred to proclaim:

*For me, if there is anything grandiose, sublime in the Spoliarium, it is that through this canvas, through the figure depicted in it, through its colouring, floats the living image of the Filipino people grieving over their misfortunes. Because, gentlemen, the Philippines is nothing more than a Spoliarium in reality, with all its horrors. There rubbish lies everywhere; there human dignity is mocked; the rights of man are torn into shreds; equality is a shapeless mass; and liberty is embers, ashes, smoke.*²⁹

Sixty years prior, in a series of fourteen paintings known as *Basi Revolt* (1821), Esteban Villanueva narrated the rebellion of natives in the Northern province of the Ilocos against the regulation of the sugar cane wine *basi*, which was intimately yoked to ritual and everyday custom. The paintings, which chronicle the revolt from the formation of troops to the decapitation of the rebels, uncannily converse with the iconography of the Stations of the Cross, and thus articulate the trope of salvation and execution through the dramaturgy of the Passion of Christ. The use of the visual language imposed by the Spanish colonisers to represent the construction of a Philippine national identity is typically allegorical insofar as its meaning is rooted in the interval between both forms; that is, in the third image that emerges from the juxtaposition of the two supposedly antithetic responses to colonial domination: assimilation and appropriation.

Reflecting on the relationship between the national and the allegorical in the formation of modernity beyond the so-called West, art historian John Clark notes:

29 Graciano López Jaena, quoted in *Zero In: Private Art, Public Lives* (exh. cat.), Manila: The Lopez Memorial Museum, The Ayala Museum and Ateneo Art Gallery, 2002, p.78.

At what point does the viewer who has accepted some level of symbol and scene, figure and ground ambivalence, decide or epiphanously realise the secondary meaning, that this image is of 'us', the nation in becoming? ... Possibly this moment of interpretive economy comes when the first level of meaning is saturated by its extreme legibility in an iconographic scheme, or, as a dense symbolic character encompasses both a figure, its social functions and the grander purpose of the implied narrative.³⁰

If in Luna's and Villanueva's nineteenth-century paintings allegory is deployed to construct a postcolonial identity – and eventually a national one – allegorical representation has also been extensively used by colonial powers to subsume a complex set of ethnicities and identities under the notion of the 'primitive', the 'typical' and the 'popular'. Discussing the ideology of primitive art through the colonial exhibitions in Paris in the 1920s and 30s, for example, Gordon Teskey asks:

How is a highly traditional, originally medieval mode of expression, allegory, put into the service of the ideology of global, colonial power in the modern age? What is at work in the allegorical representation of the bodies of colonial subjects?³¹

In that context, the construction of the national entails a discrimination of the global (the worldly, the universal, the international) as exemplified in the 'pavilions and the colonial museum itself, as something picturesque, exotic, teratological and allegorical' – in other words, materially spectacular, ethnographically compelling and otherworldly at the same time. Such colonial construction, Teskey notes, is decidedly entangled with economic imperialism:

In modern, capitalist societies, however, ideology and capital power become entirely blended in the presentation of commodities in circumstances like those of the Paris arcade; more broadly, in what we call advertising.³²

Advertising would then bind the local to the transnational through the rhetoric of the popular, thereby spanning the totalising discourses of both imperialism and nationalism. Such is the social reality that Delotavo endeavoured to depict: the social type of the Filipino immersed in the ubiquity – the liquidity – of Coke. An allegorical image that severely unsettles the much-contested conception of the popular and its political and economic connotations.

This discussion comes full circle in the intersection of allegorical painting, postcolonial discourse and social realism. In a country witnessing a socialist revolution in the countryside, coordinated by a national democratic movement, the social realist aesthetic persists to recall the necessity – the untranscendability – of the political as a horizon in contemporary art. What does it really mean to politicise the image, to radicalise painting in the sudden vicinity of global things? The insights gleaned in the turns of the term and the practice of social realism in the Philippines may be able to inflect the contemporary by animating the possibilities of (socialist) political struggle and elucidating the way they enticed artists seeking to produce both sociality and reality as well as abide by a liberating historical image. This image is, however, fraught, and prone to the reification of ideology in the name of essential biopolitical survival. It is also vulnerable to the questioning of the avant-garde's ability to enact real change. In the Philippines, Imelda Marcos's Cultural Center favoured conceptualism and largely excluded the social realism of the Kaisahan collective, not seeing in the aesthetics of the avant-garde any disjuncture with her family's dictatorship. It is at this fissure of 'art' and 'change' that the edge of the historical is sharpened and brought into focus with an urgency that we might recognise in our contemporary condition.

30 John Clark, 'Allegories of the National', paper presented at the colloquium 'Histories of Art History in South East Asia', University of the Philippines, Manila, 21–23 March 2013.

31 Gordon Teskey, 'Colonial Allegories in Paris: The Ideology of Primitive Art', in Brenda Machosky (ed.), *Thinking Allegory Otherwise*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010, p.127.

32 *Ibid.*, p.125.