

Lav Diaz: Lifting the Veil on the Monster Filmmaker from the Philippines

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He is a filmmaker who has won renown overseas but for whatever reason has yet to be introduced in Japan. But when all is said and done, Lav Diaz, who will serve as a juror at this year's YIDFF international competition, is a leader in the cinematic world. In August, Diaz conspicuously served as the head juror at the Locarno International Film Festival competition, where Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Real: A Perfect Day for Plesiosaur* and Aoyama Shinji's *The Backwater* earned nominations. He has won several awards at film festivals in Venice, Singapore, Europe, and Asia and is earning high praise as an auteur — all evidence of his standing. Nevertheless, only his short film, *Butterflies Have No Memories* (2009), has been shown in Japan when it was screened at the Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF) as part of an omnibus film, while none of his feature-length films have been screened here. Why has it taken so long for him to be properly introduced in Japan? For one thing, his films are long. Really long. Unbelievably long. Confronted with the exceptional length of his films, those of us doing the screenings have continued to miss out on the timing.

Born on Mindanao in 1958, Diaz set his sights on the film world after being shaken by Lino Brocka's *Manila: In the Claws of Light* (1975), which he saw during the Marcos dictatorship. He made his debut as a director with the "conventional" film, *The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion*, a 1998 production from the major film studio Regal Films. But Diaz became the filmmaker he is now in 2001 with *Batang West Side*. The six-hour and 15 minute film astonished audiences in the Philippines with its story built around the murder of a young Filipino immigrant in New Jersey and the subsequent investigation by a detective who is also an immigrant. After that, there is the ten-hour and 43 minute film, *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004), about the lives of an impoverished rural Filipino family from 1971 to 1987, the nine-hour long *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007) which is divided into two halves — the first half being a documentary, the second half a dramatic film — and depicts the aftermath of a village that has been obliterated by a major typhoon, and the seven-hour and thirty minute *Melancholia* (2008) which was honored with the Horizons prize in Venice. He and Wang Bing have fired off a number of extremely long features.

Diaz started off as a musician and his entire oeuvre overflows with a riveting poetic sensibility. By writing and performing his own guitar pieces and infusing them with his own poetry, he has shown himself to be a masterful artist whose range reaches beyond

the cinematic form. Moreover, his work directly and indirectly analyzes the current conditions of his home country, the Philippines. For example, *Evolution of a Filipino Family* attempts to summarize the turbulent final days of the Marcos era through the daily lives of one family. Indeed, the four-hour documentary, *Why Is Yellow Middle of the Rainbow?* (1994), by fellow Filipino and acquaintance to Yamagata, Kidlat Tahmik, similarly etches out final days of the Marcos era. It would be nice to see these two films as a double feature at the next Yamagata festival, but they would run for a total of fifteen hours!

This year the YIDFF and TIFF are screening *Norte, the End of History*, a four-hour and ten minute film, which, it's fair to say, is relatively short for a Diaz film. But really it's the content that matters. In a Filipino village, a murder occurs. The real perpetrator gets away, while the wrong man is imprisoned. The film depicts the aftermaths for these two men forming a parallel. The former gradually goes insane with feelings of guilt about living a free life. The latter gradually gains a sense of inner freedom while in prison. Inspired by Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the film is more about the *crime and punishment that comes afterwards*. It was screened in May at the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival, and although it failed to win a prize, audiences were quick to call it "amazing" and "the real Palme d'Or film." This writer found it an astonishing four-hour cinematic experience, making it the most electrifying film since Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991). It's Dostoyevsky south of the equator. It is a masterpiece in which the problems of faith and crime and punishment unfurl before the shimmering sun and seas of the Philippines — the polar opposite of Russia. I'd contend that this film alone makes coming to Yamagata worthwhile.

In addition to introducing Diaz, it needs to be said that Filipino film is starting to truly flourish right now. Nothing symbolizes this more than the fact that the Cinemalaya Foundation, run by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), is supporting productions of independent films. The idea of the nation backing indie films is a new concept. As a result of this, young filmmakers have made Cinemalaya their home base, and major stars who once had no connection to the indie film scene whatsoever have taken notice of the superior quality of these films and are now lining up to perform in them.

It feels as if a third golden age has arrived following the 1950s and 1970s. Significantly, over the past several years, numerous

awards for best actor and actress have been given to Filipino performers every year in March at the Asian Film Awards (AFA — the Asian academy awards held in Hong Kong). Eugene Domingo (the Izumi Pinko of the Philippines) in *The Woman in the Septic Tank* (2011) and Eddie Garcia (an actor reminiscent of Mikuni Rentaro) in *Bwakaw* (2012), the Philippine entry at the American Academy Awards, won prizes. Both of these films have been screened at TIFF. Additionally, Nora Aunor in Brillante Mendoza's *Thy Womb* (2012), which hasn't been released in Japan yet, won this year. And, Vilma Santos, who was the major actress of the

1970s and is now serving as governor for the Province of Batangas, is also making appearances in indie films. This previously unthinkable honeymoon for major stars and indie film in the Philippines is taking Asian award competitions by storm.

Indeed, although his film, *Captive* (2012), has been released just recently, Mendoza is one filmmaker whose introduction has been a long time coming. However, unlike Diaz, Mendoza's films offer intense depictions of splattering gore (complete with internal organs and carnage), which might make the opportunity to screen his films limited. (Translated by Thomas Kabara)

■ Screening

Norte, the End of History 【JF】 10/16 10:00- [A6]