Hitchcock goes to the dogs

By Murray Pomerance
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ONE TAKE, MANY (HI)STORIES

Notes for an appreciation of Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria

By Stefano Ciammaroni

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In Remton Zuasola's first feature-length film, Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria (2010), the titular 'Teria' (as she is amicably nicknamed in the film) is a young woman, presumably in her late teens, who is about to be uprooted from her native Filipino island and flown to Europe. There, she will marry a much older German man, Hans — a name so emptily typical that its function is undoubtedly synecdochical — indenting to convey not a person but a general sense of arid northern European-ness to be contrasted with the southern vitality of the Filipino culture. Teria is being forced to leave behind. Indeed, this shall not be a marriage of love, but a business transaction of sorts arranged by Teria's mother with the help of an agency 'recruiter' in the hope that the girl's union with a wealthy European man will help the family cope with their pressing debts.

During her last day on the island, the hesitant Teria will have to face a whirlwind of emotions and outside interpellations, all taking the form of characters that alternatively crowd the profilmic space next to Teria, trying to swing her opinion in one direction or another, as she makes her final walk to the port where she is supposed to set sail. There is the usually inattentive boyfriend who now wants Teria to stay; there is the older aunt who wants her to go, despite the fact that her own arranged German marriage resulted in an early divorce and in her premature return to the island; there is the cynical recruiter, who admonishes Teria against sentimentalizing 'third-world' genuineness, by
Zuasola manages to tell this complicated tale of competing psychologies, agendas and emotions in real time and by means of one continuous, uncut shot. Conversely attempting to lullaby her into embracing the thought of an (alleged) financial wellbeing in Europe, however contrived the terms of this marriage may be. And, most centrally, there's Teriа's own tribulations, as she tries to settle her grudge with a mother responsible for having 'sold her out', while having to also come to terms with an unmanly father sceptical towards this European deal but unable nonetheless to upset the mother's plans.

Exerting a great deal of control over the cinematic apparatus, the actors' work and the malleable space of a highly choreographed mise-en-scène, within which characters move with the discipline and precision of a ballet-like performance, Zuasola manages to tell this complicated tale of competing psychologies, agendas and emotions in real time and by means of one continuous, uncut shot. For roughly ninety minutes. One would expect a film so radically committed to one stylistic gesture (and a very catalysing one at that, since it obviously stands out for being such a rarity) to be readable only in the light of that one, attention-grabbing directorial decision. Yet, it is arguable that 'onesty' is not at all the most productive motif to invoke when trying to analyse and appreciate Zuasola's film. More specifically, although the ambition to conceive of one, feature-length shot may suggest a penchant for purity and the workings of an inflexible strategy of refusal (in this case, the total refusal of cutting, namely one defining aspect of cinematic specificity), what the film ultimately displays is a highly inclusive, highly democratic and fragmented stylistic universe. Zuasola's film presents a story told in one, very long take. Yet, in a manner that makes viewing the film all the more stimulating, this one take pays complicit homage to and house at its core a plurality of narrative traditions, not all of which fall within the rubric of cinematic experimentation. In fact, these traditions range from classical (Hollywood) dramaturgy to Italian neo-realism and the conventions of what one commonly refers to as 'art cinema' narration. So, just as the catalysing story of Teriа's departure is but the core of a universe from which other stories are extricable (that of the relationship between Teriа's parents, that of Teriа's aunt and her failed German marriage, that of the relationship between the Europeanized 'recruiter' and everyday Filipino life and culture), the film's defining feature-length take is just one story to tell here with respect to film style, in that a varied corpus of film (histories) inhabits Zuasola's single shot, appearing to be the acknowledged patrimony of a film artistry that is everything but monomaniacal.

Since the early theorizations of a 'film art' by the thinkers and practitioners of French film Impressionism in the early 1920s, film criticism and historiography have always tended to define the narrative and stylistic ambitions of national cinemas outside the United States in virtue of their opposing the paradigm of continuity cutting, psychological plausibility and gradual dramatic unfolding, as they were conceived in Hollywood in the late 1910s and would become the standard mode of transnational cinematic narration with the introduction of sound around 1930. Then, whether by taking the cue from the editorial experiments of the Soviet film-makers of the 1920s, or by the loose, digressive narratives typical of Italian neo-realism and European 'art cinema' from the mid 1940s through to the 1960s, a pivotal notion of 1960s film academia was to couch non-American film-making within an effort to create aesthetic and narrative paradigms that were alternative to those pursued by and applied in Hollywood. This is true of the ways in which film analysts approached the study of the 'new waves' that had come out of Europe and Japan in the years following World War II, for instance, but most ostensibly of the ways in which emerging national cinemas in developing countries were tackled, especially with the proliferation of local film manifestoes (in places like Brazil, Argentina and Cuba) that called for the development of indigenous 'Third Cinemas' alternative to both Europe's pretense of 'art' and Hollywood's concessions to 'commerce'.

Leaving aside the arguably no longer practicable dichotomy between 'art' and 'commerce', but acknowledging the fact that, at least in the United States and Europe, the critical approach to the films that periodically emerge from developing countries has not changed significantly since the heydays of film culture in the 1960s, it is worth reflecting on whether Ang Dammo ni Eleuteria can still be studied by measuring the extent to which it is committed to resist a mode of narration asso-
Zuasola's camera shares with Italian neo-realism the tendency to remain at a distance, so as to never part character from environment...
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of dramaturgy, they are, as we have said, embedded in a structure typical of classical narrative, whereby the event of the climax (in this case, Teria's definitive disappearance beyond the horizon, as she finally sets sail), has to be repeatedly foreshadowed and suggested throughout the arch of the narrative. At the same time, Teria's frequent excursions into the off-screen space are evidentiary of the other tradition in which the cinema of Zulasola appears to sink its roots. Italian neo-realism, and its tendency to have the private tribulations of a character go in and out of focus, so as to alternatively bring to the fore predicaments that are not just private, but collective. From Roberto Rossellini's Germany Year Zero (1948) to Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves (1948), it is typical of the neo-realist camera to stalk the characters as they roam the cityscape, their experience becoming paradigmatic of a collectively experienced condition. In Zulasola's film, the stalking nature of the camerawork appears similarly predicated upon an effort to pit character against the particulars of a spatio-temporal conjuncture. Unlike, say, the aesthetic strategies of the Dardenne brothers, who constantly place the camera above the shoulder of a character, thereby constructing a purely 'private' vision of the world (in a way that, yet again, seems much obliged to the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative, despite the Belgian brothers' being practically synonymous with a certain tradition of European 'art cinema' realism), Zulasola's camera shares with Italian neo-realism the tendency to remain at a distance, so as to never part character from environment, private from public, subjective from collective desires. In Ang Dumgo ni Eleuteria, technique never drives the narrative, never suffocates the dramatic exigencies of an empathetic tale of private and collective tribulations. In fact, despite their impact (especially the resolution to tell the story in one continuous shot), both technique and dramaturgy feel so unobtrusive to become almost entomological, dispassionate tools to observe and reveal the relationship between a specific sociocultural terrain and its troubled inhabitants.

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