

LANGUAGE, SEDITION, AND CENSORSHIP:

Personal Notes Towards an Essay

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“A shared lie is an incomparably more effective bond for a group than the truth.”
Slavoj Zizek, *The Seven Veils of Fantasy*.

I was fifteen when Marcos declared martial law, a high school senior, editor of the school journal, and director of the English club. I was in the midst of two ambitious projects: an all-poetry issue for the journal, which was about to be released that week, and a production of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*.

On the morning of Sept. 21, 1972, I went to visit my mother to pick up my allowance, and found her fiddling with the TV and radio. There was nothing on the air. My mother told me and my siblings that it seemed like Marcos had finally declared martial law. At that time she was the arts and culture editor of the *Manila Times*, the paper most critical of Marcos. Minutes later, her senior editors called to warn her not to go to the office, as most editors were being rounded up and detained.

When I went to school later that morning, my teachers told me that my journal was being withheld from distribution, and that my production was cancelled, because, as my English teacher said, it sounded too close to home.

My initial experience of martial law, therefore, was censorship. And throughout the next 15 years it was this censorship that would dominate, and sometimes even directly affect the course of my life. It would influence my entire philosophy of writing and resistance.

FABRICATING THE SHARED LIE

Marcos and his cronies were skillful in creating a lie that could be effectively shared by his people. We know of course that he used the communist bogey as his main excuse, even though in September 1972 there were only a few hundred communists in the Philippines, mostly young students who had read Marx and Mao and wanted to put their learning to practice. But the so-called communist threat was important in order to ensure the military and economic protection of the United States, which would prop up the dictatorship until a popular uprising 14 years later would make it impractical to do so.

Marcos invented a specific scenario to declare martial law. Communist guerrillas allegedly ambushed his defense secretary, Juan Ponce Enrile. Enrile miraculously escaped, having providentially decided that evening to ride in his bodyguard's car, rather than his own. But, as Enrile later confessed in 1986, when he jumped fence and joined the people power movement, the ambush was orchestrated by himself and Marcos to create an atmosphere of imminent threat.

Marcos lost no time in instituting a new system of signs to dissociate his regime from the bygone era. Slogans crammed the government controlled media, as well as billboards. Perhaps the most ubiquitous of these was the slogan, "Sa Ikauunlad ng Bayan, disiplina ang kailangan" (For the nation's progress, discipline is needed). Seemingly innocuous enough, it was a constant warning to the populace: "Disiplina" quickly came to be understood to refer to the numerous political camps Marcos had built all over the country. Everyone knew what the slogan meant: You must follow Marcos' law, or you will be disciplined. An unfortunate petty drug dealer, a Chinese drugs dealer named Lim Seng, was used as an example of the "selective violence" Marcos employed to show he was serious about "discipline." Lem Seng was publicly executed by musketry and,

lest the public still didn't get it, "the event was splashed on the front page of the Daily Express. There was no mistaking its message." (Conrad De Quiros, "Dead Aim")

Marcos flooded the media not just with slogans but with promises, chief among them land reform. "Several years later, the 'cornerstone of the New Society' would become, in the worlds of the World Bank, the 'stone in the corner.' None of it would matter to Marcos. He had," says De Quiros, "everybody fooled."

Equally ubiquitous were Imelda Marcos' counter-slogans to balance the strong arm of discipline. Calling herself the "mother of the nation" (Video interview, Batas Militar) she declared her twin philosophy of love and beauty, creating centers that controlled the creation and dissemination of the arts. The most absurd manifestation of this bizarre philosophy came in the form of the Love Bus, over-priced air-conditioned buses emblazoned with Imelda's equally ubiquitous heart logo, and the Metro-Aide street sweepers, whose yellow and red uniforms were allegedly designed by Pierre Cardin.

The Office of Civil Defense and Relations screened media and the performing arts for signs of subversion. Newspapers were crammed with columnists whose daily outpourings were based on what came to be known as "praise" releases. Perhaps the epitome of the Marcos media creation was a certain Ronnie Nathanielz, a Sri Lankan who was granted special citizenship by Marcos, and who devoted his entire career to blatantly praising Marcos and chastising his critics in his own government-funded TV program.

Marcos instituted a censors office that initially monitored the print media, and later fixated on cinema. During the early months of martial law, censors would require magazines and journals to strike out, with permanent markers, passages

that may be perceived as critical of the government. I remember seeing magazines with pages of blacked out text, and wondering how awful it must be to have that job. Pictures of rock stars with long hair were also altered with markers or white outs. Long hair was declared a sign of the decadence of the old society, and the military was rounding up young men and giving them military crew cuts in the camps.

Not that editors wouldn't later try to test the censors. Late in the regime, the government held one of its annual Independence Day parades, a grand spectacle blaring Handel's Messiah. Letty Magsanoc, then editor of the Inquirer Magazine, published photos of the Marcos family using a line from the Messiah as a caption: "He will reign forever and ever..." She was soon dismissed from her post.

The censors eventually focused on cinema, banning or mutilating films, mostly foreign, that they decided would erode the morals of the New Society, and even incarcerating local directors who refused to tow the line. Interesting enough, behind this façade of righteousness, the Marcos years, because of increasing poverty, also encouraged the growing sex trade, with many military officers and crony families investing in the red light district and even controlling the traffic of new and fashionable drugs from Japan and Hong Kong.

If people evaded censorship, there were other ways to silence them. Primitivo Mijares bolted from the Marcos cabinet and fled to the United States, where he published a book called the Conjugal Dictatorship, in which he revealed the excesses of the first couple. "Soon after, Mijares disappeared. It is widely believed he was killed by Marcos agents in the U.S." (video, Batas Militar). In Manila, agents called up his young son, informing the boy that his father had come home and wanted to see him. The body of that boy was later found,

grotesquely mutilated, 33 icepick wounds all over his body, his fingernails all yanked out.

Marcos' justification of martial law manifested itself in monumental expressions of power. He and Imelda pockmarked the capital with white elephants, specialized hospitals, centers for the arts, and lavish palaces including the Coconut Palace. I saw this palace only once, before it was publicly opened, when my brother was commissioned to help paint a fresco in one of the rooms. Marcos had hoped Pope John Paul II would stay in the palace specially built for him, but the pope chose to stay in the more modest Papal Nuncio. Marcos was obsessed with his own omnipresence, a desire expressed in a sudden proliferation of Marcos avenues and Marcos highways all over the country. Nowhere is this megalomania more monumentally expressed than in the Marcos bust along the Marcos highway leading up to the resort city of Baguio. Expropriating sacred tribal land, Marcos' self-centered version of Mount Rushmore would dominate that landscape until recently, when tribal guerrillas finally managed to dynamite it.

But more monumental than any edifice was Marcos' long-term project to rewrite Philippine history. Following an earlier biography, *For Every Tear a Victory*, written by American journalist Hartzell Spence, in which he fabricated valorous exploits during the resistance against the Japanese in World War 2, he commissioned the best scholars in the country to create a multi-volume series that aimed to mythologize the political evolution of the Filipino race, which would reach its pinnacle with his regime.

CENSORSHIP THROUGH THREE ERAS OF REBELLION

Censorship is nothing new in Philippine colonial history. The Spanish colonial government restricted publication to catechetical materials to ensure the indio's education on Christian doctrine. The first book published in the Philippines, *Doctrina Christiana* (1593), was a tri-lingual collection of prayers and catechism, paving the way for a colonial literature rooted in Christian dogma. Towards the end of the Spanish era, the Spanish governors would likewise ban Jose Rizal's incendiary and anti-clerical *Noli Me Tangere*, copies of which nonetheless found their way to Manila, and inflamed the revolution.

The American colonial government imposed censorship as well. Not only did it ban the Philippine flag and national anthem, the Sedition Law of 1901 prohibited any criticism of the American government. Filipinos still advocating a sovereign republic circumvented this law through the phenomenon of the seditious plays, allegorical dramas that predicted the fall of the United States and the resurrection of the young Philippine Republic. Not surprisingly, many of its authors were periodically thrown in jail. The American colonial newspapers were particularly virulent or condescending towards these plays. One critic, Aldice Gould Eames, writing in the *Pacific Monthly* (16 September 1906), focused her criticism not only on this phenomenon but on the entire race as well, saying that drama "is the form of literary effort that appeals to the least civilized mind" and that the productions were "interminable and insufferably boresome" but nonetheless gave pleasure to the "furtive eyed Malay," the "house muchacho," the "barnyard cocher," the "cock-fighting, betel-chewing grandsire" and the "cigarette-smoking, penny pinching urchin."

With great relish, she recounts the Americans' reaction to one controversial production of *Kahapon, Ngayon, at Bukas* (Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow) at La Teatro Libertad, in which a character named Freedom would hoist down the American flag:

“At the end of the next act the time came for Old Glory to be hauled down. Down it came and, in order to make the victory of the Filipino people more realistic, the hombre who hauled on the halyards set his vandal brown foot on the sacred bunting. Simultaneously, twenty vengeful Americans, their faces set with grim purpose, arose as one man, started for the stage and leaped up over the footlights. The heavy tragedians scattered and fluttered like a flock of hens, as the storm broke upon them in wrath. The leading light who had set foot on the flag was impelled by a sturdier foot, head first into the audience, which now began to betake itself to the street as if fleeing from the day of doom. The properties of the play were reduced to convenient size for souvenirs.... A figure of the grim god Bathala which had uttered oracles...was hurled down this (the exit stairs), and at the bottom it broke open and out popped one of the actors, who had furnished the voice for the oracle.”

If that sounded brutal, the next generation, now sufficiently amicable with the Americans, would suffer even greater repression under the Japanese. During the occupation, the kempitai prohibited the use of English and instead enforced Nihonggo and local dialects, particularly Tagalog. This was the nascent years of electronics, and one means, however dangerous, of circumventing the news blackout the Japanese imposed was to tune in to the Voice of America. To illustrate the danger and tension radio brought on, here is a fascinating vignette from *Mysteries and Memories*, a book by poet and journalist Doris Trinidad:

The silong (downstairs) was where we learned to rollerskate. At first we went through the flops and tumbles, bruised knees and buttocks of a skating neophyte. Later we could whirl and twirl and skate on our toes. Toward the end of the year, a young Japanese corporal from the school-turned-barracks a block away came to skate with us, signifying his desire through sign language.

Through the din of the wheels and our laughter, the sounds of radio static floated from an upstairs room. My uncles were listening to a contraband broadcast of the Voice of America saying, "Be brave, people of the Philippines, be strong. Soon we will come back, we shall return..." All radios were banned by the Imperial Army and it was a crime to listen to broadcast from "the enemy." My sister and I heard the telltale static, were breathless with fright and glanced surreptitiously at the Japanese soldier skating with us. If he had heard the incriminating sounds, he gave no sign that he did. We went on skating. The afternoon wore on and soon it was time for him to bow in thanks for a few hours of innocent fun. He was hardly more than a boy after all. He waved to us in the gathering twilight. Very soon the tide of war turned and carried him away.

One last example: Grooming Philippine Defense Secretary Ramon Magsaysay for the presidency in 1951, CIA agent Edward Geary Lansdale fashioned his candidate to defeat the communist Huks through "psywar" tactics preying on native superstition, particularly the Filipinos fear of the dead and the asuang (vampire). He broadcast Huk "voices" from tombs and at some point even had the necks of assassinated Huks punctured with two holes, to signify that communists were being targeted by the asuang. This, by the way, is not Lansdale's original creation: the Spanish friars employed the same tactic to ostracize the powerful babaylan of the pre-Spanish matriarchal tribes in the archipelago. (Herminia Menez, Explorations in Philippine Folklore)

CENSORSHIP AND SEDITION DURING MARTIAL LAW

It was Marcos, largely with the support of the American government, who perfected the art of censorship. The United States had pressured Marcos to employ Low Intensity Conflict, a military tactic that encouraged domestic governments to fight their own insurgents, which not only spared American

lives but also American money. This relationship is important to note when we look at the words of resistance used against the Marcos regime. Perhaps the most visible anti-Marcos slogan were these four words: “Marcos Hitler Diktador Tuta.” It began as a radical leftist slogan, and became the trademark exclusive to the left, for a simple reason. The last word didn’t appeal to the mainstream, which would persistently deny the connection between the dictatorship and the United States until the mid-1980s -- not even when George Bush Sr. came to Manila to praise Marcos’ “adherence to democratic principles.” Mainstream protest against the United States only grew louder when President Ronald Reagan, a personal friend of Marcos, charged Corazon Aquino of cheating the 1986 elections.

This was one of the various responses to Marcos’ and the US’ low intensity conflict, a movement that could best be described as low intensity resistance. Activists and artists used subtle means of sedition, in some instances to reach their intended audience, the masses, but in some ways merely as signals shared with one another to indicate that such resistance existed, thereby fortifying and affirming the larger, increasing movement.

In the language war against the dictatorship, single words assumed entire systems of meaning. The word “ibagsak” (bring down), for instance, was commonly seen and heard in rallies. The most common slogan was “Ibagsak ang Imperyalismo” (Down with Imperialism), which managed to neatly tie the dictatorship with the US, and the economic subservience that came with that relationship. The word “ibagsak” is innocuous in itself, but during those years it took on such a loaded meaning that playwrights using political drama and street theater to get their message across had to refrain from using it, lest they be issued the dreaded ASSO (arrest, search and seizure order) by the Office of Civil

Defense. Incidentally, “aso” is the word for dog, which poetically associates with “tuta” – and the inadvertent consistency of image was not lost on Marcos’ critics.

I learned the word “salot” during those years. Part of a usually larger phrase, “salot sa lipunan” (pestilence to society), it was one of many forms of graffiti often left hastily splattered on walls after a rally. Obviously, in many instances, the phrase proved too long and posed for its author the risk of being caught by the military, hence only “salot” often came to be painted, a word distilled to contain the entire gamut of dissent, and later on applied to former defense secretary Enrile himself during the Aquino presidency, when Enrile plotted to overthrow Aquino in a series of coups.

SUBVERSIVE ART

It is no accident that the best art of the late twentieth century came from repressive and underdeveloped societies. The irony in authoritarian governments is that it engenders a flowering of underground art, and the combination of explosive energy and constraint produces the best artists. (I do not, however, recommend that societies be repressive in order to produce artists – it doesn’t work that way.)

Drama continued to express the Filipinos’ resistance. Using various forms of indirection to criticize the government, plays of this era turned to historical themes, and later to the news, government statistics, social work surveys, and economic analyses – facts that were hard for the government to deny – to portray current events. (Doreen Fernandez, Palabas). Perhaps the most ingenious protest dramas were staged during “lightning rallies,” demonstrations carried out in a few minutes, just enough time for protesters to voice their dissent and disappear into the crowds before the military came to arrest them.

The 1980s saw the golden age of Philippine cinema, despite stringent restrictions against it. “Grim problems that existed in the country were given the drama they deserved; social and economic reforms were advocated. The films illustrated an urgent need to changes in Filipino society, too long controlled and manipulated by the greed and power of old families and their customs, traditions, insecurities, and superstitions, and by landlords, politicians, and the restrictive influence of religion.” (Mel Tobias, 101 Acclaimed Tagalog Movies).

The films of Lino Brocka, whose themes dealt with the economic privations of the common Filipino, consistently displeased Imelda Marcos, who in the early 80s unsuccessfully tried to transform Manila into the Asian Cannes with her own film festivals. Brocka’s films won raves from the real Cannes, even though his penultimate film, *Bayan Ko*, had to be spirited out of Manila because the censors banned it. The 80s was studded with stellar directors, the likes of whom have not been seen since: Mike de Leon, Ishmael Bernal, Marilou Abaya, Lupita Concio, Peque Gallaga, Laurice Guillen, Mario O’Hara, and Eddie Romero, are just a few of the names that captured the era’s angst and imagination.

Popular music took a curious turn, largely because radio was wholly owned by cronies, strictly monitored by the censors and consistently employed by the propagandists. Many of these bands started in clubs in Olongapo, where the US military naval base was located. Starting out by mimicking American rock, they began to write their own material and created a trend to be called Pinoy Rock. Pinoy Rock may actually be said to have begun before martial law, but martial law created some kind of hothouse music, a mutation of what might have been. Whereas seminal bands like Juan de la Cruz initially gave voice to the dissatisfaction of the youth, during martial law rock bands were required to tow the line, and although many rock stars still imitated the punks who were

becoming fashionable, their messages were almost always dogmatic, echoing admonitions of discipline that the New Society required.

Not surprisingly, underground music took root among the protest rallies. Bands unapproved for radio play found their most receptive audiences there. The music was mostly a combination of folk, ethnic and rock. The lyrics were strongly anti-Marcos and anti-US. Joey Ayala and his band, Bagong Lumad, exemplifies this underground. Using the concept of “new native” or “alternative,” Ayala wrote that “blending the old with the new, presenting artistic and cultural alternatives, encouraging a tribal attitude in modern man, an attitude of respect and oneness with the world – we aim to spread the idea that we are all natives.” (Eric Caruncho, “Punks, Poets and Poseurs: Reportage on Pinoy Rock n Roll”). Using themes like environmental degradation, military bombings, political assassinations, and economic hardship, he and musicians like him provided a counterpoint to the hidden evangelization of, to use a contradiction in terms, the mainstream underground.

Needless to say, the use of metaphor and indirection made poetry the medium of choice for protest. It is safe to say that, not unlike many countries with repressive governments, the Philippines witnessed an unprecedented amount of poetry being written in English and the native dialects and published in underground journals during those years. Many poets were persecuted and many others killed, not as much for their poetry as for their political associations. Among these one could cite Mila Aquilar, Jose Maria Sison, and Emmanuel Lacaba, whose assassination by the military at the age of 27 turned him into a mythic figure among his peers and a new generation of poets. I still believe that in general, unless a poet was politically visible, the military left poets alone simply because they couldn't understand the language of poetry.

I would like to cite one instance in which poetry managed to achieve what I would call the slyest, most cunning form of sedition during those years. Remember the slogan, “Marcos Hitler Dicktador Tuta”? The slogan somehow found its way into the Marcos media, when Focus magazine unwittingly published an acrostic poem entitled “Prometheus Unbound,” whose lines began with the letters of the slogan. The pundit was never caught, and only recently did poet and journalist Jose Lacaba, brother of Emmanuel, own up to the act.

I would like to end by saying that, being a poet myself, poetry helped me cope with the frustration and helplessness censorship made me feel. Indeed, although censorship forces the artist to find more creative ways of expression, it does make an entire population sink into inertia and despair, as I had seen happening in the Philippines until Benigno Aquino’s assassination in 1983. As a freelance reporter, I was once assigned to cover the wake of a Menonite nun, Sister Filomena Asuncion, who had been sent by her order to practice her vow of charity and help the poor in the barrios. Seeing how hopeless the situation had become, she joined the communist underground, and was shot to death during a military encounter. My paper, one among the many that would soon be derided by Marcos as the “mosquito press,” decided that it would be too risky to publish my report. Frustrated by my inability to express what I felt was a moving and important story, all I could do was write a poem about Filomena Asuncion. The poem, of course, would not be published until after 1986, when the People Power revolution finally drove the Marcoses out of the country.

One final point. The dictatorship employed all the classic means of repression to perpetuate itself. Total control of the media, accusations of unpatriotism when one expressed dissent, hijacking the economy and apportioning businesses to cronies, no freedom of information, arrest and prolonged detention without access to legal counsel upon mere suspicion of subversion, and a tendency to

coach all these repressive actions in the name of moral goodness and righteousness – I find it alarming to see the same things happening in America today. We let Marcos get away with it, believing that sooner or later things would turn out all right. They didn't. I hope that by studying the machinations of dictators like Marcos, Americans will prevent a similar historical catastrophe from destroying their own democracy.

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