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CHERISH AILEEN A. BRILLON

Darna Movies in the Time of Martial Law National Trauma and Historical Memory

Although superhero stories used to be seen only as vehicles for entertainment and profit, contemporary studies see them as metaphors for understanding social and political issues. This article analyzes two films made in the 1970s that revolved around the female superhero Darna, using trauma and memory as frameworks. The selected movies provide insights not only on how their production was partly shaped by martial law rhetoric, but also on how they contribute to discussions of trauma in local movies. This article presents an alternative way of interpreting Darna texts that locates them within a larger historical experience, both real and imagined.

KEYWORDS: DARNA • MARTIAL LAW • MEMORY • SUPERHEROES • TRAUMA

Despite their enduring popularity and success, superhero stories still cannot shake off their reputation as “infantile subliterature” (Taylor 2007 cited in Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013). Given their omnipresence in the contemporary entertainment industry, they are so often dismissed as commodified products whose sole reason for existence is to rake in profits from its various adaptation platforms and commercial ventures. In local literature, these stories are discussed mostly from the perspective of localization (Flores 2005; Reyes 2009) and their impact on children (Badillos 2006), and they are subsumed under the fantasy genre (Campos 2009; Landicho and Mirandilla 1999; Lucero 2001), which tends to gloss over their unique features.¹

However, superheroes’ adaptability to various platforms and their generational appeal make them ideal time capsules of a society’s history, even as they make possible various ways of interpreting gender and bodies as well as ideologies on capitalism, history, and power (Gray and Kaklamanidou 2011; Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013; Walker 2009). According to Alex Boney (2013), superheroes have always made their presence felt during uncertain times. For example, Western superheroes were a direct response to the rapid, dizzying forces of early–twentieth-century modernism that saw industrial growth, the shifting of economic activity from the countryside to the city, and the development of various print and visual media. These superheroes allowed ordinary people to imagine that they had control and could resist the forces of modernity that overwhelmed them and threatened their previous way of life.

The idea that superhero stories can be used to articulate issues and concerns in society has led me to look at selected movies revolving around the female superhero Darna that were produced and shown during the martial law period. Darna’s first postwar appearance also mirrored Boney’s observation as she symbolized a nation searching for order and stability after experiencing patriarchal violence and aggression (Reyes 2009).

Darna in Philippine Popular Culture

Written by Mars Ravelo and illustrated by Nestor Redondo, *Darna* was first published in *Pilipino Komiks* (Ace Publications) in May 1950 (Lent 2009). Her character has also appeared in thirteen movies, excluding cameos in other films; in three live-action television series in 1977, 2005, and 2009;

in two ballet productions in 1997 and 2003; in a short-lived animated series in 1986, plus a number of television advertisements. In her long history of movie adaptations that started in the 1950s, the martial law period produced five Darna movies, four of which starred Vilma Santos.

Despite the many changes to her story over the decades, a few general elements remain. Darna's alter ego is an orphan girl named Narda, who is given a stone that she needs to swallow for her to be transformed into Darna—a tall, powerful, warrior woman that is not of this world. As a superhero, her mission is to defend the planet from the forces of darkness and hatred.

Darna remains one of the most popular sites of analysis in the academe due to her longevity and far-reaching effects on local culture. Soledad Reyes (2009, 1991, 1985) has written continuously about her power to embody Filipinos' deep-seated dreams and desires. However, the context of Reyes's discussions of Darna are always rooted in her stories in *komiks* (comics) and often subsumed with other popular characters. Studies focused solely on Darna are done mostly from the perspective of gender and always seen within a dichotomy between an empowered woman and a product of male fantasy (Escobar 2010; Mabanglo 2003; Lucero 2001). Contemporary studies analyze Darna as a commodified figure, facilitated by adaptation and merchandising opportunities, in an increasingly sophisticated integration of media platforms (Brillon 2007a, 2007b; Gerona et al. 2009). However, a focal point of these studies is the business aspect of Darna texts, thus ignoring her symbolic value in society.

So while Darna has been analyzed from a literary, gender, and political economy standpoint, the idea that superhero movies can articulate a nation's trauma has not yet been fully explored in local studies. In this light, this article is concerned specifically with the role of selected Darna movies in making the trauma of the martial law period visible through its filmic representations. Informing this study are Soledad Reyes's (2009, 18) assertion that fantasy, or so-called escapist literature, also has the power to articulate what "has been rendered invisible" and Roland Tolentino's (2014, 26) claim that movies can function as a cognitive map for grasping the affects of the Marcos regime. Toward this end, this article seeks to widen the scope not only of Darna studies by connecting it to trauma and memory, but also of the evolving role and possibilities for disruption that popular culture offers that go beyond their entertainment and profit functions.

Darna Movies in this Study

Specifically, this article analyzes the films *Darna and the Giants* (1973) and *Darna vs. the Planet Women* (1975), two films produced and shown in the early period of martial law. These films were selected for analysis based on the following considerations: (a) availability, since analysis and transcription required repeated viewings; (b) the casting of the actress Vilma Santos (fig. 1), since she starred in four out of five movies that came out during the martial law period and her portrayal became one of the most iconic among Darna fans; and (c) the focus on a single plot and villain, which allowed for a full exposition of the narrative. Other movies that starred Santos such as *Lipad, Darna, Lipad* (1973)² were excluded not only because of the absence of a commercially released copy that would allow for multiple viewings, but also because it featured three short episodes of Darna facing different villains; similar to those of *Darna at Ding* (1980),³ which featured two episodes. This episodic feature made analysis of these movies difficult as the motives and backstories of the villains were not as fleshed out as those that delved in a single plot and villain. Meanwhile, other Darna adaptations that did not star Vilma Santos and that came out in the latter part of martial law were also excluded, such as broadcast station RPN-9's short-lived Darna TV series in 1977 (which had no available copies for viewing) that featured Lorna Tolentino, Dolphy's *Darna Kuno* (1979), and Rio Locsin's *Bira, Darna, Bira* (1979).⁴

The two films were analyzed following Douglas Kellner's (1995, 121) diagnostic critique, a method that involves the interpretation of the text and the context of its production, helping to uncover hidden and subliminal meanings. Diagnostic critique describes the relationship between social realities and media texts, allowing a movie to be read politically to see whether it supports or contradicts a particular ideology. To do this, I had multiple viewings of the films, paying attention to their stories, characters, issues, and ideologies. I also consulted komiks-magazines (*Liwayway*, *Darna Komiks*, *Kampeon Komiks*, among others) containing news articles that came out at around the same time these films were made and other related literature on martial law in order to understand the events surrounding the production of these movies. News of Marcos's population control and migration programs were covered in these

next page:

Fig. 1. Vilma Santos in the role of Darna

Source: Video48 2008



komiks-magazines, while accounts from martial law survivors were culled from contemporary sources.

Interestingly, Celeste Landicho and Kate Mirandilla's (1999) undergraduate thesis explains how two Darna movies, which are analyzed in this study, functioned as an allegory of the fear and violence that pervaded the Marcos regime, although their focus was on the values of patriotism and nationalism in *Giants* and the crippled sense of nationalism in *Planet Women*. I deviate from their analysis and dwell instead on how these films reflected the rhetorics of Marcos's New Society, while also showing the trauma of living in a world controlled by authoritarian villains.

This article starts with a brief history of martial law in the Philippines and how it was represented in social-realist cinema; it then defines trauma and memory as analytical concepts. This section is followed by an analysis of the two films. The article closes with a discussion of the possibilities offered by early Darna films to become what Birgit Neumann (2008 cited in Campos 2016, 491) calls vehicles or "fictions of memory"—"narratives that depict the workings of memory and imaginative (re)constructions of the past in response to current needs." Within this context I locate the value of looking at Darna movies as they can provide insights not only on how their production was partly shaped by the rhetoric of martial law, but also on their contribution to the discussion of trauma in local movies.

Martial Law and Its Filmic Representations

Near the end of his second term as president, Ferdinand Marcos subjected the country to martial law, which he declared officially on 21 September 1972. He justified this declaration as the solution to growing social unrest, the threat of communism and Muslim insurgency, and the alleged assassination attempt against a high-ranking public official (Hamilton-Paterson 1998). Upon declaring martial law, Marcos ordered the closure of the judiciary and the legislature. He directed the military to arrest his most prominent critics that included, among others, senators and journalists such as Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr., Jose Diokno, Francisco Rodrigo, Joaquin Roces, Teodoro Locsin Sr., Maximo Soliven, and Amando Doronila (Pinlac 2007). In addition, youth activists like Lean Alejandro, Lilia Hilao, Archimedes Trajano, Edgar Jopson, and Lorena Barros were tortured and killed (Francisco 2017).

Marcos encapsulated his vision in the creation of a New Society (Bagong Lipunan). He promoted the Philippines heavily as a tourism site and laid

down the fundamental institutions for labor migration to ease the country's unemployment problems and reap its economic benefits (Goode 2012; Brillo 2008). His efforts to liberalize the economy resulted in transnational companies exploiting cheap (Filipina) labor in manufacturing industries (Oliva et al. 2013).

Media companies came under heavy censorship. Those that were allowed to operate were given explicit instructions to write favorable stories about Marcos and the country. The government required all print media organizations to get permits from the Mass Media Council (MMC), and it created a stricter Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (BCMP), which banned any negative movie and content. Movie producers were also required to present a film script before shooting a movie (Lumbera 2011; Encanto 2004).

Despite these repressive conditions, this period also became known as the “second golden age” of Philippine cinema due to the appearance of a group of young, idealistic, and socially conscious filmmakers such as Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mike de Leon, Behn Cervantes, and Marilou Diaz-Abaya. In fact, their movies have become the canon for discussing the power of movies to reflect or critique prevailing societal conditions (Lumbera 2011; Reyes 1989).

Cinema's relationship with martial law has been a popular subject of academic inquiry. For example, Campos (2016) explains how Lino Brocka's *Maynila: Sa Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975) and Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980) codified the idea of the city using Marcosian signifiers and how the inhabitants moved within and against these spaces, with results both tragic and liberating. Jose Gutierrez III (2016, 2017) writes about the power and influence of Brocka's social-realist dramas and the politics of his activism both during and after the period of martial law. Meanwhile, Joel David (2012) and Robert Diaz (2012) explore the usefulness of queer theories in reading *Manila by Night*, especially as it went against the image of the city that the Marcoses wanted to project. Lastly, displacing the focus from representations of martial law to how stars can articulate possibilities for disruption, both Patrick Flores (2000) and Neferti Tadiar (2000, 2004) look at Nora Aunor's mass popularity as setting the stage for the people's performance of power that helped depose the Marcos regime (Tadiar 2004, 24).

While there is obviously no dearth in the discussion of cinema and martial law, these analyses mostly privilege the social-realist cinema and the melodramatic genre that are associated with well-known auteurs to

the exclusion of movies in genres associated with the entertainment of the masses, mainly comedy and fantasy. Reyes (2009) has already bemoaned the tendency of scholars to not take these genres seriously because of their general market appeal, profit orientation, and tendency toward escapism. This exclusion puzzles Reyes because fantasy authors are also situated within a historical, social, economic, and political milieu that gets reflected in their work, no matter the genre.

Further, the common themes of analyses in martial law movies have been limited to spaces (both physical and representational), gender, poverty, and oppression. However, in the discussion of martial law and cinema there is another less explored area—that of trauma and memory, especially in its relation to the fantasy and superhero genres.

Trauma and Memory in Cultural Studies

In both the psychoanalytic sciences and humanities, a traumatic experience is characterized by the disruption of the normal flow of memory and cognition (Pollard 2011, 83). As opposed to ordinary misfortunes, traumatic events involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or close personal encounters with violence and death that make the person feel helpless, terrorized, numbed, and paralyzed, all the while eroding one's conception of the self as capable, sufficient, and independent. Further, since the body and the mind take a while to process these negative experiences, there is a delay in the processing of and moving on from trauma (Muller 2011; Kansteiner 2004; Lim 2000; Caruth 1991).

Harriet Earle (2018) and Jennifer Pollard (2011) trace the “post-traumatic” turn in cultural studies and the humanities around the time post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was codified in the 1980s in popular media.⁵ Pollard (2011, 82) observes that this direction provided scholars of cultural studies a “language with which to talk about such catastrophic events in the press and elsewhere.”

Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (2006 cited in Pollard 2011, 87) note that “the formulation of trauma as a discourse is predicated upon metaphors of visibility and image as unavoidable carriers of the unrepresentable.” Seth Feldman (1986 cited in Lim 2000), referring to horror movies, explains the satisfaction derived from communal sharing and exposure of social anxieties. This satisfaction is made possible by confronting history, by retelling the familiar horrors of historical violence,

through aesthetic representation (*ibid.*, 148). Simply put, through mass media texts trauma can be articulated and transformed from a purely individual experience to a social one.

Yet trauma is not just limited to violence inflicted on the mind and body, but also and more so on the obsession of the person to relive and remember the experience long after it has happened—hence trauma’s connection with the concept of memory and a historical past. Campos (2016) broadens the personal nature of remembering to a more collective and societal nature by linking history and trauma with cinema’s power to create Neumann’s fictions of memory.

Trauma and historical memory have not always figured much in the analysis of the superhero genre, except when talking about Bruce Wayne, also known as Batman (Muller 2011; Brody 1995), and Frank Castle known as The Punisher (Earle 2018). Both of their trauma come from watching their families die at the hands of criminals, which leads them to create separate personas to deal with their painful pasts. In Batman movies⁶ the trauma is not only personal, but also political and collective as the stories and visuals evoke the trauma of the Americans on issues like terrorism and corporate greed (Muller 2011). Meanwhile, the rebooted comic-book stories of Castle show him as a Vietnam War soldier suffering from trauma. Earle (2018, 169) notes that it became necessary for “creators of conflict art to set their stories within the context of America’s larger historical experience, both real and imagined.”

In the same vein, “trauma” in this study refers to representations of violence, both physical and psychological, in Darna movies but located within the specific historical condition of martial law. Trauma results from the brutality on the characters’ physical body or psyche inflicted by authoritarian figures who disrupted their private and public lives, rendering these characters powerless and without memory. In this regard, Jocelyn Martin’s (2018) and Mary Grace Concepcion’s (2018) discussions are helpful because they not only characterize Marcos’s martial law as a national trauma, but also emphasize the importance of remembering and writing, through memoirs and autobiographies of the survivors, as a way to come to terms with the past. These two articles also point to the importance of looking at trauma not just from the psychological but also from the literary and cultural perspectives.

HERE COMES THE BIG ONE!
Tagalog ILANG-ILANG Productions Presents **DIVINA VALENCIA**
HELEN GAMBOA * **LORETTA ROSANNA**
(as X-3-X) * **MARQUEZ MARQUEZ**
ROMEO MIRANDA * **DESIREE FLORENCE** and **IKE LOZADA**
DESTREZA * **AGUILAR**
PEPITO CESAR ZANDRO and **MAX** & **SURPRISE**
RODRIGUEZ * **RAMIREZ** * **ZAMORA** * **ALVARADO** * **BIG NAME STARS**
 FEATURING: **KATY dela CRUZ** - **DONDON NAKAR**

VILMA SANTOS
(as DARNIA)

DARNA AND THE GIANTS
in Full COLOR

RENATO ROBLES • **PROTACIO DEE**
CRIS BUDHA CRUZ • **JING CAPARAS** and **THE SOS DAREDEVILS**
THE PLANET MEN:
GREG LOZANO • **RICKY VALENCIA** • **DAVE ESGUERRA**
ROBERT MILLER • **KARLO VERO** & **SURPRISE BIG NAME STARS**
THE PLANET WOMEN:
LORELEI • **CARINA ZAWALSKY** • **LORNA LOOSIN** • **NITA LINCOLN**
ELIZABETH VAUGHN • **CHRISTIE SORIANO** • **DANNY ROJO** STUNT COORDINATOR

SPECIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC EFFECTS: **TOMMY MARCELINO** / **RIGHT SCENES DIRECTED BY:** **LEODY** and **ROMY V.**
2nd UNIT CAMERAMAN: **FERMIN PAGSISIHAN** / **M. DIAZ** **SUSARA** | **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** **BEN LOBO**
SCREENPLAY & DIRECTION: **EMMANUEL H. BORLAZA**

Fig. 2. Promotional poster for the film *Darna and the Giants*

Source: Video48 2008

The Violence of Martial Law in *Darna and the Giants*

Darna and the Giants was a follow-up to *Lipad, Darna, Lipad*. The film was directed by Emmanuel Borlaza and Leody Diaz and also starred Dondon Nakar as Ding, Katy dela Cruz as the grandmother, and Romeo Miranda as Romy, Narda's suitor (fig. 2). Helen Gamboa played the ruthless villain X3X, while Ike Lozada, Max Alvarado, Zandro Zamora, Cesar Ramirez, and Divina Valencia played the giants. The story revolves around X3X, an autocratic alien, and her quest to rule the country by terrorizing people and turning them into subservient giants. According to long-time *Darna* and *Santos* fans Mar Garces (2005–2006) and Eric Cueto (2005–2006), this film was considered a box-office hit when it was released in the Christmas of 1973, a year after the declaration of martial law.

Similar to all films that came out during the period, *Giants* was covered by government restrictions on motion pictures, which meant that it had to reflect the values and programs of the New Society. The rural community, where the movie was set, and agriculture, the community's primary means of livelihood, were presented as ideal. The rural area was a place where people lived simply, knew each other, and where Filipino tradition persisted. The romanticized agricultural community recalls Marcos's land reform program and his administration's drive to encourage people in the urban areas to go back to their provinces to decongest Metro Manila (Kerkvliet 1974). There are also several scenes where Narda, Ding, their grandmother, and Romy, are shown working happily and contentedly in the rice fields, even singing a tune almost reminiscent of the Bagong Lipunan anthem, with lyrics like "basta masipag ka, pwedeng umunlad ang buhay mo" (As long as you are industrious, your life could improve).

However, Narda's peaceful and idyllic community is disturbed when an unidentified flying object (UFO) lands in the village. When news of giants attacking and killing the people from nearby villages reach Narda, she and Ding set out to investigate. They find X3X's army of aliens knocking on doors and rounding up innocent villagers. They witness how those who resist arrest are killed on the spot, much to the terror of everyone in the community. The aliens push, kick, punch, and even hit people with weapons when they refuse to follow orders. Afterwards, the prisoners are taken to an underground camp, a secluded, cave-like structure with no ventilation, where X3X's soldiers subject them to various forms of torture, such as physical beating, psychological threats, and getting injections of a serum that transforms them into mindless giants.

For these prisoners, transforming into a giant is a fate worse than death because it means losing control of who they are and what makes them human. Romy, Digna, and Francisca, who all transform into giants as punishment for questioning X3X, despair about their future. Francisca wails, “In a week’s time, our minds will become subservient” (Maaring hindi lilipas ang isang linggo at ang aming utak ay sunod-sunuran na din).

Contemporary narratives of real-life survivors of martial law indicate a similarity with the kind of violence and trauma that pervaded the scenes in *Darna and the Giants*. For example, the scene where alien soldiers violently round up the villagers resembled the way the authorities arrested Pete Lacaba (2016), a critic of Marcos:

At dawn of April 25, 1974, on the second year of martial law, I was awakened by shouts of: “Open up! We are the authorities!” I looked out and saw that the house was surrounded by armed men taking cover behind jeeps and cars that had their headlights on.

As soon as I opened the door, the first man who came in shoved the barrel of his rifle into my stomach. Then somebody spun me around and forced me to lie face down on the floor. In that position, I was stepped on, kicked in the ribs, hit in the back and on the back of the head with rifle butts.

Felix Dalisay (2016), former leader of Kabataang Makabayan (Nationalist Youth) and another martial law survivor, also recalled his experiences with the various torture methods employed by the military. Dalisay narrated how he was kicked so hard that his ribs almost broke, how the soldiers pressed bullets against his fingers and clapped him hard on the ears. Meanwhile, Lacaba (2016) shared his experience of a method known as San Juanico bridge:

At another point I was made to lie down with the back of my head resting on the edge of one steel cot, both my feet resting on the edge of another cot, my arms straight at my sides, and my stiffened body hanging in midair. This was the torture they called *higa sa hangin* (lying down in air), also known as the San Juanico Bridge, named after the country’s longest bridge, built during martial law and dedicated by Marcos to his wife Imelda.

There is also a scene in the movie where X3X orders her soldiers to tie a prisoner to a block of stone, all the while torturing him with the threat of being crushed by another block of stone suspended from above. Even Narda and Ding are not spared from this kind of torture.

The despair and sense of hopelessness that engulf Romy, Digna, and Francisca during their time in X3X's prison reenact the sense of despair that Dalisay and his fellow prisoners endured, especially those who lost their minds because of the trauma of being tortured.

For her part, X3X does not tolerate defiant prisoners, and those who fight back end up dead, as in the case of this one prisoner:

Prisoner: Di n'yo 'ko maaring ikulong. Di ako papayag. (You cannot imprison me. I will not allow it.)

X3X: Hindi ko pakikinabangan ang isang rebeldeng tulad mo. Kailangan siyang iligpit. (I don't have use for a rebel like you. He needs to be disposed of.)

The movie also characterizes X3X as a leader who wields absolute power using modern technology (spaceships, ray guns, and serum that turns people to giants) and surveillance equipment (television screens monitoring the movement of the giants and the prisoners are scattered all around her camp), invoking an Orwellian Big Brother presence, creating a sense of fear for the villagers, and inducing compliance in both the giants and the prisoners. Lastly, these giants are only let loose in the hours of darkness to sow terror and destruction, making the villagers fear the coming of night. Alvin Yapan (2009) notes how darkness and night during martial law was associated with danger as parents warned their children not to go out lest they get apprehended and never return home.

Reading this movie now also illuminates some interesting points that might have been missed the first time it was screened. First, a number of scenes in the movie frame Ding as consistently urging Darna to act against the violence perpetrated by X3X and her soldiers. In one scene Ding grudgingly asks his sister, "What, Darna? How many more people will you wait to die before you take action?" (Ano ba, Darna, ilan pa ang hihintayin mong mamatay bago ka kumilos?). In both cases Darna tells him to be patient because they need more information. In this interesting exchange it is a child, Ding, who exhorts an adult, Darna, not to look the other way. Ding

could have symbolized the youth activists during the martial law period who insisted on the need to fight an authoritarian ruler.

Narda's wait-and-see attitude toward goings on in her community, despite news of disappearances and deaths, can be interpreted as similar to many Filipinos' attitude toward martial law, who might have viewed it as needed for the safety of the people. Perhaps Filipinos thought that it was a temporary solution—not lasting nine long years—that, by the end of Marcos's twenty-year regime, had resulted in almost 70,000 jailed, 34,000 tortured, and over 3,000 people killed (Hapal 2016).

Second, the movie might have foreshadowed the coming of a savior, a woman, who would help free the Filipino people from the villain's autocratic grip on power. Reyes (2009) has explained that Darna's popularity stemmed from the community's symbolic desire to have a savior rise up against a tyrant. This strong belief in a hero provides hope for the characters who believe that they would soon be free. One of the Giants (played by Deborah Sun) articulates this hope right before being killed by X3X for fighting back:

Giant: Kahit mapatay mo 'ko, X3X, ako, ang daan-daan, ang libo-libo at ang iba pa, hindi maaring maging lubos ang iyong tagumpay. May mas higit ang kapangyarihan kesa sa 'yo.

Giant: Even if you get to kill me, X3X, me, hundreds, and thousands more, your triumph will never be complete. There is someone who has greater power than you.

The savior in the movie is, of course, Darna, who helps the people overthrow an authoritarian ruler. Having a woman as a savior is not surprising, in light of the fact that a number of women became highly politicized and joined the nationalist movement to demand freedom from fascist rule and work toward progress during the time of martial law (Encanto 2004; del Rosario 1995).

Giants does not shy away from showing violence and trauma under an authoritarian ruler. It shows communities being subjected to nightly terrors from the giants, people dying at the hands of alien soldiers, and when Darna visits a town ravaged by the giants, she sees various expressions of pain, suffering, and anguish. People are crying desperately for their missing loved ones; some go crazy with grief, while others are in shock. Whether or not the

movie's scriptwriters and directors were conscious of their movie's parallelism with real-life events pertaining to the disappearances and torture of political activists, this movie reenacted an image of the violence and trauma of living in a society ruled by an authoritarian leader, who used coercion and force to impose his will.

Control of Bodies and Memory in *Darna vs. the Planet Women*

Another two years passed before *Darna vs. The Planet Women* was released (fig. 3). In this film Narda is a person with disability (PWD) who wants to help people. She is granted Darna's powers when Ramon (Zandro Zamora), her boyfriend, is hit by a paralyzer beam from an alien spaceship. The main villain in this movie is Elektra (Rosanna Ortiz), who has her army of literally colorful female aliens played by Eva Linda, Lita Vasquez, and Diana Villa. They are from Arko Iris, a distant planet on the brink of destruction due to overpopulation. They come to Earth to kidnap scientists and cultural leaders and harness the planet's resources and energy for their survival.

Evident, once again, are shades of Marcos's New Society rhetoric in this film. While *Giants* shows the simplicity and tranquility of living in the rural areas and the value of agriculture, *Planet Women* capitalizes on the idea of a progressive city and the value of science and technology. Darna's fight scenes with the female aliens are set against the backdrop of modern transportation, tall buildings, socialite parties boasting of material affluence, and an ever-present police and military. This setting not only provides a backdrop for the movie's plot of an advanced alien race actually coveting the Philippines's resources and manpower through its scientists and cultural experts, but it also affirms, through its representations in the movie, Marcos's fantasy of progress and modernity. More importantly, *Planet Women* weaves Marcos's programs on population (decreed in 1972) and overseas migration (formalized in 1974) into its storyline. Just like *Giants*, it also reflects the role of an authoritarian state in controlling memory and disciplining women's labor and reproductive capacity.

Even before this movie was shown, population had been one of Marcos's central concerns as the country experienced an intense social and economic crisis, resulting in the implementation of various austerity measures (Africa 2016). One strategy that Marcos implemented to address this problem was through a state-sponsored family-planning program (Presidential Decree

Tagalog **ILANG-ILANG Productions'**
CHRISTMAS & NEW YEAR offering

VILMA SANTOS **ROSANNA ORTIZ**
EVA LINDA
LITA VASQUEZ
LIEZA ZOBEL
DIANA VILLA

AND
ZANDRO ZAMORA
BENTOT Jr.
in MARS RAVELO's character

DARNA vs THE PLANET WOMEN
in FULL COLOR

BOARD OF CENSORS
[Signature]
 MOTION PICTURE

CINEMATOGRAPHY: **Botong de Guzman** | MUSIC: **Carding Cruz** | SCREENPLAY & DIRECTION: *Armando Juncos*

Fig. 3. Promotional poster for the film *Darna and the Planet Women*

Source: Video48 2008

79).⁷ As part of a broad educational campaign, various media outfits heavily promoted the population program of the government and even used celebrity endorsers to get the message across.

In the movie the female aliens of Arko Iris use the issue of overpopulation to justify their violent conquest of the planet and the kidnapping of the Philippines's scientists and experts. In her conversation with Darna, Elektra vividly describes the impact of overpopulation on the quality of life:

Elektra: Ngayon ay may apat na bilyong tao na rito, marami na ang namamatay sa gutom, malnutrisyon at sakit, at sa bilis ng pagdami ninyo sa loob ng limang taon ay aabutin kayo ng sampung bilyon. Dyan na darating ang pagsisiksikan ng mga tao hanggang sa pinakamataas na bundok, kasunod pestilensya, at ang panghuli, ang pagkaubos ng kasariwaan ng hangin na kailangan ninyong langhapin upang kayo ay mabuhay at pangwakas, ang kamatayan.

Elektra: Today there are now four billion people here. Many are already dying from starvation, malnutrition, and disease, and at the speed it is growing, your population will reach ten billion in five years. By that time, there will be congestion among people, occupying even the highest mountains, followed by pestilence, and lastly, by the depletion of fresh air which you need to breathe in order to live; and in the end, death.

In the same year the movie was released, 48 percent of the country's population could not meet the minimum requirements for food, clothing, and shelter. Infant mortality rate was also one of the highest in Asia and, by the following year, 76 percent of preschool children suffered from various degrees of malnutrition (Tolentino 2014, 164). As an entertainment movie meant for the whole family, *Planet Women* seems to be the perfect vehicle for Marcos's population campaign. However, while the movie talks about the dangers of overpopulation, it also inadvertently portrays the government of Arko Iris's control of the female body, as the aliens are punished and forced to suffer for their reproductive capacity and made to bear the brunt of the social and economic trauma of overpopulation. Elektra and her army of aliens are the ones tasked to find a solution because women share the blame for their capacity to reproduce. Tolentino (ibid.,

163) has noted how family planning and population control were central to Marcos's authoritarian rule because they connoted disciplinary actions largely dictated and inflicted not on a man's but on a woman's body. Unlike contemporary perspectives on reproductive health that accorded to women agency over their bodies, this insistence on state intervention was premised on the idea that allowing couples to exercise their own decision was inconsistent with the common good because it affected the resources reserved for other families (Herrin 2002).

The aliens are also forced to find a radical solution by traveling to and occupying another planet, at the expense of their own safety and security. Notwithstanding their being a superior and highly advanced race, the female aliens are made to fight with and eventually lose to Darna. The aliens' desire to find another planet to serve as their new home shows how women's lives are in danger when the state strips them of their agency in favor of survival. Their bodies become a contested site as the state has power over the deployment of their bodies and their "personal choice" is not prioritized due to survival considerations.

In a similar manner, the movie illustrates the phenomenon of women leaving the country to find other means of supporting themselves and their families. For instance, Marcos's institutionalization of labor migration resulted in around 50,000 migrants leaving the country in 1975, 12 percent of whom were females (Orbeta and Abrigo 2009). Tolentino's (2014) and Campos's (2016) observation that Filipina bodies increasingly carried the weight of the Philippine economy since the time of Marcos resonated with how the female aliens had to find a solution to their planet's problem. These aliens, much like Filipina overseas migrant workers, become part of the global movement of labor where their vulnerabilities are exposed and exploited.

Similar to *Giants*, this movie also shows the workings of trauma, whether inflicted on or by the protagonists, antagonists, and even secondary characters. Although these female aliens cause trauma to the country in their violent attempt to colonize the planet, these actions are also caused by their own physical and psychological trauma of being sacrificial lambs in order to save their planet from destruction. In this sense, the aliens are both victims and oppressors. They are not only victims, who, being women, are controlled and exploited by their own people, but are also oppressors since,

as advanced beings on Earth, they are in a privileged position to use their power to get what they want at all costs. Thus, they are considered villains despite their seemingly “noble” intention of saving their planet.

Lastly, trauma is inflicted insidiously, and perhaps more profoundly, on one of the characters in the film as encapsulated by Elektra’s violation of Ramon’s mind. In the early part of the movie, Elektra captures Ramon to gather information about the country’s experts, but she achieves this goal by invading his mind, leaving him in a catatonic state until Darna rescues him. Near the end, Elektra seduces Ramon after he offers her temporary shelter from heavy rains. After consummating their desire, Elektra once again desecrates Ramon’s mind by erasing his memory of what transpired on the previous night.

Elektra’s invasion of Ramon’s mind and her erasure of his memories constitute psychological abuse. This kind of trauma, while not fully explored in the film, has deeper implications because it prevents Ramon from processing what has happened to him, thus resulting in a kind of amnesia. Toward the film’s end, Narda asks Ramon what transpired between him and Elektra. He cannot remember anything and does not know that Elektra is carrying his child, which is ironic, given that the movie is supposed to warn viewers about overpopulation. As a result, Narda and Ramon’s relationship will never be the same again as this “missing memory” will continue to haunt them. Darna might have saved the world from the brink of catastrophe, but she fails to save Ramon because he will never recover a part of his memory that has been taken from him.

In this regard, *Planet Women* conveys not only the control of women’s bodies through their reproductive capacity and labor, reflective of Marcos’s own population and migration programs, but also the machinations of a person in power to manipulate the memory and induce an amnesia that prevents the victim from fully processing and moving on from trauma. The latter is a message worth revisiting as it echoes the country’s contemporary dilemma regarding the Marcoses’ legacy. Martin (2018, 474) has pointed out that the trauma of martial law lingers because it still resists being talked about, which has resulted in the Marcoses’s return to power. To this end, *Planet Women*, like *Giants*, can serve as a frame of reference for understanding what happens in the absence of (historical) memory, which is needed to process and move on from trauma.

Conclusion: Darna Texts as Fictions of Trauma and Memory

Both Reyes (2009, 5–6) and Kellner (1995) emphasize the importance of popular culture texts in interpreting societal conditions as these texts are rooted in particular processes in a nation's history. The production processes of *Darna and the Giants* and *Darna vs The Planet Women* were mediated by the politics of Marcos's martial law, specifically policies dealing with the production of media-related products.

This analysis also borrows from the idea that superhero texts can articulate various forms of trauma, whether personal or collective. *Giants* articulates the violence, fear, and the resulting trauma from living in an authoritarian society, while *Planet Women* explores a society where women's bodies are controlled by the state through their labor and reproductive capacity. It also shows the trauma of being mentally and psychologically violated, enough to render a person (Ramon) catatonic and without memory.

Admittedly, this article's approach to trauma and its relationship with Darna movies and martial law has the benefit of hindsight and is also just one of the many possible interpretations of these texts. As it was not possible to interview the filmmakers and scriptwriters of these films to determine whether there was a conscious intent to embed these meanings, the analysis presented here can be taken as a gesture to start a conversation on the possibilities offered by local superhero texts as possible frames of reference or cognitive maps in communicating and understanding specific events in society. Thus, this study's alternative way of looking at Darna texts locates the stories within the larger historical experience of martial law.

Indeed, this study argues that the Darna movies that came out of the early martial law period can be regarded as a part of the nation's fictions of memory. For us at present, these movies provide a way to reimagine a historical event that can help us respond to current needs, specifically, the need to address the trauma of martial law triggered by the historical revisionism surrounding the Marcoses. This practice of reconstructing memories to serve a contemporary function is not only similar to Marita Sturken's (1997 cited in Campos 2016, 481) explanation of the complex negotiation and mediation of different stories to create a slice of history, but also to Concepcion's (2018) and Martin's (2018) point about the delayed nature of processing trauma. Hence, there is a need to continue telling stories about martial law not only through various creative means but also through different media and platforms.

As fictions of memory, Darna texts may be accessible in ways that other social-realist movies about martial law are not. This assertion is timely because of the global popularity of superheroes. What better way to teach the younger generation than in a language they know and understand? If superhero texts are the narrative currency of this generation, it makes sense to use them as another lens to view, inform, and remind them of the country's history.

Notes

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- 1 These generic textual features include a prosocial mission to always fight for justice, the possession of extraordinary powers, and having secret identities expressed through the use of costumes (Coogan 2006; Duncan and Smith 2009; Reynolds 1992).
- 2 The movie is a trilogy that pits Darna with three of her earliest *komiks* villains: Impakta, played by Gloria Romero, is a schoolteacher who transforms into a monster at night and terrorizes and feasts on her students; Valentina, played by Celia Rodriguez, is a model by day and a snake priestess by night; and Babaing Lawin, portrayed by Liza Lorena, terrorizes villages together with her partner, Agila, portrayed by Rod Dasco (Cueto 2005–2006, 19–20).
- 3 *Darna at Ding* (1980) has two episodes featuring two new villains: Dr. Vontesberg (performed by Marissa Delgado), a German doctor who goes back to her hometown to exact revenge by turning people into zombies; and Lei Ming (acted out by Celia Rodriguez), a sorceress who kidnaps children, including Ding, with a plan to offer them to the devil in exchange for powers. Ding, played by Niño Muhlach, also plays a more prominent role in this movie than in previous ones.
- 4 *Bira, Darna, Bira* (1979) was directed by Tito Sanchez with Romnick Sarmenta playing the role of Ding. The film played out like a detective story that had Narda and Ding solving the murder of several female models who fell prey to a serial killer. It was the first time that Darna's main villain was neither a freak of nature, mythological creature, nor a visitor from outer space, but criminal syndicates who victimized the poor and helpless.
- 5 According to Earle (2018), the Vietnam War was intimately tied to the history and development of trauma in cultural studies because this conflict gave rise to the most number of case studies, serving as impetus for research. This war and its trauma were also the subject of several movies such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), which facilitated the cultural turn of trauma studies.

- 6 These films were directed by Christopher Nolan and includes *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).
- 7 During martial law, Marcos issued Presidential Decree 79 (PD 79), known as the Revised Population Act of the Philippines, on 8 December 1972, which amended Republic Act 6365—An Act Establishing a National Policy on Population, Creating the Commission on Population and for Other Purposes—or the Population Act of the Philippines, which was passed in August 1971. PD 79 focused on the importance of birth control through education and the use of contraceptives.

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