

Rigid Recounting: Martial Law Memories

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Ferdinand Marcos Jr.,
martial law,
historiography of oblivion,
komik.

On 30 June 2022, the Philippines inaugurated Ferdinand “Bongbong” Romualdez Marcos Jr. as the 17th president of the Philippines. This came as a disappointment as it coincided with the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law by Bongbong Marcos’ father. While political pundits looked at the ubiquity of “fake news” in the information space, I argue that this is a result of what Morris-Suzuki posits as the “historiography of oblivion” particularly on how popular culture narrates contemporary history. There were several komiks, animation and children’s books focused on re-telling the events of Martial Law. However, unlike academic articles or history textbooks, the advantage of such creative media is that they are not bound by the rigid rules of formal educational materials. This means that the medium’s creators could creatively tell their stories. Despite the truthfulness of narratives, the results of the elections show the rejection of 31 million Filipinos towards this history. This paper will study the samples and try to understand the gradual loss of affect from Filipinos who have consumed the narratives to explain the results of the recent elections.

INTRODUCTION

On 30 June 2022, supporters of former Vice President Leni Robredo felt disappointed when she lost her Presidential run to Ferdinand “Bong Bong” Romualdez Marcos, Jr., son of the former President Ferdinand Marcos became the 17th President of the Philippines with 31,629,783 votes. Equally disappointing was his running mate, Sara Vicenta Zimmerman Duterte-Carpio, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, became Vice President with 32,208,417 votes. The latter’s victory can be attributed to the populist platform of her father, who ended his term with an unprecedent 73% approval rating (Montemayor, 2022). This was despite criticism to his administration’s policies such as the controversial drug war, the pivot to China with his Build Build Build! Infrastructure Program (BBB), and the poor handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. What is far more surprising is the victory of Marcos, whose family was once ousted from power through the EDSA revolution of 1986.

The legacies of Marcoses and Martial Law include human rights abuses including 3,257 recorded extrajudicial killings, 35,000 cases of torture, 70,000 arbitrary incarcerations (McCoy, 1999). Despite the historical experiences of the Filipinos who lived through Martial Law and fought during the EDSA Revolution, including extensive memorial work in the Philippine landscape, it came as a shock that Marcos’ son was elected president, 50 years after his father inflicted Martial Law to the Filipino people. Most pundits and scholars would explain that his success was due to years of strategic disinformation campaigns which was honed by social media such as Facebook, Youtube, and Tiktok (Feldstein, 2021; Ong & Cabañes, 2018). Trolls and disinformation campaigns would not be enough to reconcile the tarnished image of the Marcos family. Furthermore, digital activism in social media platforms were not as sophisticated as anti-establishment protests ousting then President Joseph Estrada was still limited to crude forms of social messaging services or texts in the EDSA revolution of 2001 (EDSA Dos), while an online petition pressured then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to rescind a decision to impose taxes on imported books in 2009 (Santos & Cheng Chua, 2023).

DISCUSSION

Historiography of Oblivion

What I would rather posit is that Marcos’ success is a result of the failure of Philippine history. It becomes a problem for the younger generation who are looking at a historical event such as Martial Law and the EDSA Revolution as something to be learned and commemorated, having not personally experienced it. With the advent of popular culture that supplemented formal education in teaching their consumers, Morris-Suzuki (2005) suggested that more and more,

popular media has shaped the imaginative landscape of our past. This has resulted in a form of historiography of oblivion or forgetting resulting from the political economy of both formal and informal education.

Hence this study aims to analyze several *komiks*, animation and children's books focused on re-telling the events of Martial Law. Unlike academic articles or history textbooks, the advantage of such creative media is that they are not bound by the rigid rules of formal educational materials. This means that the medium's creators could creatively tell their stories. Despite the truthfulness of narratives, the results of the elections show the rejection of 31 million Filipinos towards this history. This paper will study the samples and try to understand the gradual loss of affect from Filipinos who have consumed the narratives to explain the results of the recent elections.

Future Fiction

Komika reflects the interpretation of the literary genre of "future fiction" or more commonly known as speculative fiction which is roughly defined as a genre that freely explores possibility and impossibility alike. It became an apt space for expression from Filipinos who had survived the harsh realities of the Martial Law period which they considered a historical "dark age". Komiks reflected survivors' experiences of being liberated from that harsh reality, that they are now able to dream about a bright future for themselves and their country. It also reflected a lot of post-Martial Law and post-EDSA literature where authors expected their readers to understand their memories as a shared experience being a Filipino. Thus, there is no need to explain or contextualize the experiences. Furthermore, as this was a fictional work, readers have the capacity to believe and doubt at the same time, as the creators maintained and broke conventions through interweaving of fact and fiction.

Commemorating Memory

The informal education sector recognized the limitations of formal education, particularly when learners must grapple with a 400-year Spanish Colonial History, a 40-year American Occupation History, a 3-year Japanese Occupation Period, and the histories of five previous presidencies from Manuel A. Roxas (1946 – 1948) to Diosdado P. Macapagal (1961 – 1965). To supplement this, several forms of media, predominantly visual, have been created to tell the history of the Martial Law period. As previously mentioned, the advantage of popular media is that they are not bound by the limitations imposed by the Department of Education's guideline, which allows them to creatively tell their stories in whatever media they think would be effective in communicating their message.

The 2-minute animated shorts by Arnold Arre present a comparison to their young viewers between the freedoms lost during the Martial Law period and the freedoms enjoyed in the present day. Furthermore, the animations nuanced the meanings and repercussions of the lost freedoms via the laws which were supposed to “protect” but in reality, also abused the restrictions.

The post-EDSA media is not limited to animation and komiks, children’s books authors have also involved themselves in Martial Law memory making. They also follow the same patterns as the media previously discussed. The Bookmark series, similar to Lorna Mapa’s graphic memoir, tells the story of real people who have not only lived through the Martial Law period, but have also fought against the dictatorship. The strategy not only humanized the characters, but allowed the readers to empathize with them. Through such strategy, not only did readers recognize them as individuals but elevated them to the status of nationals who fought for the rights and freedoms of fellow Filipinos. This affective strategy was an important and effective tool especially to the Filipinos who lived through the Martial Law period and the EDSA revolution. The diversity of the individuals featured in the stories allowed readers and their own diverse backgrounds to imagine themselves and their own unique contributions in ousting the Marcos dictatorship.

Rejecting the Truth

Media concerning Martial law is quite extensive. This creates the impression that the reading populace would be well equipped to know their history. That is why scholars and pundits were more focused on the successes of fake news and disinformation (Coronel, 2022; Ong, 2022), particularly with the observed shifts to social media spaces concerning political discourse, as well as campaigns. However, what the same scholars and pundits have not seen is that the same media has been used by supporters of the Marcoses. The piece presents the various accomplishments of Marcos during his presidency such as infrastructure development. The piece also referred to the exile as a kidnapping by the United States and how heartless the people were for forcing the Marcos family to leave their ailing matriarch, Doña Josefa, at the Philippine Heart Center to die. It also highlighted the failures of the post-EDSA government such as being plagued by a series of Coups, society’s safety was endangered with the strengthening of the Communists whose Sparrow Unit would bring their conflict to the cities, as well as the wanton hypocrisy of government officials living in opulence and embroiled in corruption. While such publication could be dismissed as mere propaganda by a fringe group, what is important about this piece is that it is not new, but rather has been in the space competing for affective readership.

Nostalgia politics and propaganda would fare poorly as the Philippine mediascape was filled with fact checkers which would constantly counteract the fake news. Yet, it is observed

that fact-checking may no longer work in this environment, as Morris-Suzuki (2005) states “in concentrating on particular errors and omissions, the energies of critics were often dissipated, rather than addressing the underlying issues of historiography”. This is referring to the problems of fact checkers using the problematic narrative of Martial Law and EDSA information which still presented the promise of a better Philippine Society.

Rigid Recounting

The strategies of encouraging Filipinos to continue remembering the tragedies of the Martial Law period and the triumphs of the EDSA revolution, though highlighting the sufferings of the Filipinos who experienced the period as well as the hopefulness of EDSA was an effective mode of narration for history from the immediate post-EDSA period as the memories are fresh in the minds of the Filipinos who would narrate these experiences to their own children hoping that a better Philippines could be built.

However, as almost four decades have passed since event, the history of Martial Law and EDSA in formal education has not changed despite scholars, historians observing that removing the Marcoses was not the only solution to solving the complex problems which plagued the Philippines. Furthermore, the trajectory of Philippine history narratives still focused on nationalist anti-colonial narratives which didn’t take into consideration the post-Independence history of the Philippines where fellow Filipinos were the “enemies.”

CONCLUSION

This study understands that the difficulty of revising a national history proves to be difficult and does take time. That is why the study focused more on popular culture such as komiks and animation which are not bound by the socio-cultural taboos of formal education and the discipline of history. As a form of fiction, the “artistic license” allows them to creatively weave their stories as the creators can maintain and break conventions of the piece to encourage the readers to both believe and doubt (Morris-Suzuki, 2005). The relationship of the readers with the past is not only forged through the factual knowledge of what actually happened, but also involves the convincing of the readers of their belonging to a certain group, either as a citizen of the nation, as part of an ethnic minority or a religious group (Morris-Suzuki, 2005). Yet most of the creators in this study opted to continue to maintain the narratives which have unfortunately lost affective support from the Filipinos who have not only experienced EDSA fatigue but are now willing to immerse their affect in the counter narrative.

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