

Bontoc Eulogy

Marlon Fuentes

60 minutes, black and white, video, 1995

Cinema Guild

Description

Bontoc Eulogy opens with its on-screen narrator (and director) Marlon Fuentes sitting in front of a gramophone, in a pose familiar to viewers of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, listening silently and meditatively to old recordings. Three times he returns to play them, setting the gramophone carefully while the camera concentrates on the turning record. Bontoc Eulogy begins.

The narration begins over images of traditional Asian origami boats floating in water. Footage of kids swinging, and playing on a deck alternates with old family photos of a boy's college graduation and sendoff at the Manila airport. In a pensive voice-over, the narrator tells us that he left Manila for America more than 20 years ago, "carrying dreams from a past I now barely recognize. In all these years, he has not gone back once." As the camera focuses on the playing kids, he says, "These are my children. They were born here in America. It is their home and the only life they know. Perhaps they are fortunate because they do not have to forget what they have never known." The camera turns to the narrator, sitting on a bench contemplating what the lens does not see, as he takes the story from circumstances to emotions. "In the beginning I lived in two worlds, the sights and sounds of my new life, and then the flickering afterimages of the place I once called home." The camera offers some newsreel footage of the Philippines depicting the typical scene that a tourist would imagine: a busy market, huts, boats and buffaloes in the water. Fuentes confides that his memories of home have faded to the point where "it is sometimes difficult to know where reality ends and imagination begins. Dreams of landscapes persist in his memory," he says, and "back home is what I call it, though it isn't that anymore. Home is what you try to remember, not what you try to forget."

The camera cuts to images of a public ritual of self-flagellation watched by a group of kids. We are invisible, except to one another, the narrator says and quotes an ancient Philippine saying that he who does not reach into the past will never ever reach his destination. As the camera follows a raft which a few men try to navigate along a river, the pensive voice-over, accompanied by the sober music of the soundtrack, says that to survive in the new land, they had to forget. "But the stream changes course and their ghosts slowly catch up; now to survive, they have to remember."

With the camera back to the shot of him sitting on the bench, Fuentes says that one day he will be gone and these memories will be lost but the questions will remain: "Why did we leave our home? Why have we come to America? Why have we chosen to stay?" Grainy footage of a Filipino boy bathing buffaloes in the water by his hut alternates with images of American life, symbolized by an inauguration. "What stories define us as a people? What has made us the way we are?"

The camera cuts to the two children previously seen, playing at being magicians, while he tells a (Philippine) fairy tale. "One day the Moon Woman accidentally cut off the head of the Sun God's son. He was not there and did not see that but knew instantly. He put the head back where it belonged and the boy was alive. The Sun God then said to the Moon Woman that because she had done that, the earth people would cut off each other's heads through the end of time." Meanwhile, the child magicians take a rabbit out of the hat and pose for the camera to document the magic.

A young Filipino boy under a mosquito net is dreaming. The narrator says that growing up he heard many stories of his two grandfathers. One of them, Emiliano, died in the war against Spain in 1896. The camera illustrates that with images of a battlefield and soldiers imprisoned, wounded or killed, juxtaposed to shots of the dreaming boy waking up startled. The war ended in 1902, the narrator continues, but the fighting continued in the countryside, where heavy casualties on the Philippine side were the result not only of gunfire but also of hunger and disease. His grandfather's body was never found, the narrator relates, as the camera follows the opening of a mass grave in the outskirts of Manila.

As we are taken to the hill lands of a Filipino tribe where tribesmen dance to the music of drums, Fuentes says that his other grandfather, Markod, proved to be the greater mystery. "He was a young Bontoc chief and warrior who was taken to the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, never to return home." The narrator recalls being taught lessons in history about the primitive Igorod tribes on the islands and knowing that some of his relatives lived there. As images of an Igorod boy dancing and the boy asleep under the mosquito net alternate, the narrator recalls wondering as a boy how his life would have been different if Markod had returned to the mountains. But, he says, "I never even met an Igorod in my whole life."

Over images of the gramophone record turning and village life unfolding, in a voice-over Fuentes tells the story of Markod's life. "He lived a quiet life in his mountain village by the river, where for centuries his people hunted and worked the land isolated from the rest of the islands. They were initially afraid of the Americans who came to their village offering to take them to America to build a new village and show their ways of life. Many of the men had wanted to find out what was behind the river and the mountains, and so had brave Markod. He was promised that if he went to America, he would be back on time for the birth of the child his wife was expecting." The sequence ends with silent footage of a group of Igorods leaving their village.

In his letters, Markod wrote about the trials of the voyage, like two men dying in a boxcar on the way to St. Louis, the narrator tells us as images of a half-naked man writing with a plume alternate with the images of the origami boats we have seen before. Newsreel footage of the World's Fair and its opening ceremony, and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and "Meet Me at the Fair" on the soundtrack accompany the story Fuentes tells from off-camera. The Filipinos built an authentic village on the grounds of the largest international exposition the world had known. Images of his children taking old-fashioned photos serve as a signal for a slide show of old photos to begin depicting the Fair with its swarms of people and numerous expositions. In incorporated authentic footage, a "complete inventory by tribe and village of the Filipinos is read." The narrator continues the story: "tribes that did not know of each other's existence now lived side by side on the reservation. Their faces looked familiar but their languages and costumes were incomprehensible." A guard of uniformed Filipinos was set up to prevent the tribes from fighting. But Markod had no respect for the men marching around under the command of the white man, and always thought that one of their skulls would make a good decoration for his hut.

The documentary is turned over to newsreel footage from the Fair, as the narrator continues the story in voice-over, in an engaging and compassionate tone. Markod toured the Fair grounds and admired the performers and exhibits. He rode on the huge Ferris wheel. All along, he says, the Filipino did not stop thinking of home and his wife. When the tribesmen were ordered to wear shirts and trousers, he felt sorry for the fair people who had to hide from the sun and the wind. Later, they were ordered to return to their traditional dress: the fairgoers had paid money to see them as they were and wanted their money's worth "to gaze at the simple ways of the

little brown people.” The Filipinos competed in athletic matches organized by the authorities and performed their daily routines and ritual ceremonies time and again for the fairgoers.

The camera cuts back to the image of the man with the gramophone record as the narrator reveals its story. Markod agreed to talk to the machine that would record his voice, for a small sum of money he used to buy gifts for his wife. He had heard of the machine that would save his voice forever and would let it travel across space, and over several months told the story of his people and their experiences of the Fair. This image is juxtaposed to the image of a warrior playing a flute on display, in a 360-degree rotation, as if sitting on a turning gramophone record.

When a sickly baby girl was born to a Negrito tribe couple, the Americans took her away to an infirmary but she died, the narrator says, as the camera takes us inside a hospital. The authorities feared revolt among the tribe and posted more guards in the village. “Markod,” the narrator says, “thought that the Christian god was strong but that their medicines were weak.” He also thought of his wife and if the authorities would have taken away their baby if she had come with him. The tribes’ rituals were repeated endlessly, and there were people everywhere. There was no silence until late, and no place to farm or hunt; the houses were as tall as trees, but there were no mountains. “Markod,” the narrator says, “lost his sense of time.” He also grew worried because the Filipinos never saw the bodies of the Bontoc men who had died on the way. Over footage from the Fair of women crying and singing in traditional death ceremonies, Fuentes relates how the families grieved, and fairgoers watched them mourn, cold and impassive to this personal pain. “Markod,” the narrator says, “became afraid that he would die before the end of the Fair and disappear like the other Bontoc,” the narrator tells us, as the camera focuses on a white sheet slowly slipping off a dead body.

The camera follows Markod as he runs and hides in a forest. “One day,” the narrator says, “Markod found a place beyond the Fair grounds where the sounds were familiar, and it was quiet, and there were no people. He walked for hours alone in the forest, until he fell asleep. The guards of the Fair, who had found him, woke him up and beat him until he lost consciousness.” The camera illustrates that for us through the image of a traditional cockfight under the fast and anxious beating of a drum.

Markod was confined and guarded in a hospital, which became his jail. The brave warrior, not afraid of death if it was honorable, dreamed of revenge and winning back the respect of the elders of his clan. He planned to attack and take the head of his guard, a man for whom he felt pity and contempt, since the white men had broken the law of his people by not returning the dead Bontoc bodies. Over the images of a decapitated body being carried to a grieving woman, which Markod saw, the narrator tells us that the warrior knew the story of his courage would live on. “In the thunder of the white man’s fires, he heard the sound of the forest,” Fuentes concludes and turns the last seconds of the sequence over to silent images of fireworks.

The camera cuts back to Fuentes sitting on his bench. In a voice-over, he explains that the ending of his grandfather’s story eludes him and his traces disappear shortly after the closing of the Fair in 1904. We follow him to the National Archives as he recounts the story about a mysterious accident that happened shortly before the closing of the Fair. “One night, a man climbed to the top of the Ferris wheel,” he begins as we see it together with footage of the beautiful city lit up at night and hear gentle music and birds singing. “In the morning, when the wheel was started, the man’s body was caught in its machinery, decapitated, and mangled beyond recognition. But it was the body of a Filipino.”

Over images of Igorods performing their rituals in front of audiences, Fuentes tells the last bits of Markod’s story that he knows: “It is possible that Markod never went home. He might have

joined other Igorods who toured other exhibits around the country and made money for their promoters.” As the narrator concludes the story, the camera focuses on a close-up of an old photo of an Igorod man, and studies it slowly and carefully, as if to find if that was Markod.

“For months I haunted the dark halls of medical anthropology and museums,” Fuentes says as the camera follows him to the Smithsonian collection where he takes pictures of exhibited skeletons and brains. “His research indicated,” he explains, “that by the spring of 1905, three Igorods were still interred in a private morgue in St. Louis, awaiting a decision by the federal government.” Is one of the Smithsonian-exhibited brains his grandfather’s, Fuentes wonders as we see him look at the skulls and eyes of anonymous people: “So many objects, identities unknown, labeled but nameless, an anonymous story permanently preserved in a language that can never be understood.”

The final sequence of the film takes us back to the deck where the children are playing. “After all this, I once again have gone back in the hiding place of everyday life. This story has ended but my search has just begun. If I don’t find Markod, perhaps my children or my children’s children will. If they see him, I wonder if they would recognize him.”

End title: Inspired by actual events. Any similarity to actual persons not intentional. The children, it is revealed in the credits, are actors, not his own children.

Style/Structure

Bontoc Eulogy is an example of mock documentary, or “mockumentary,” constructed by adroitly mixing historical data from the Library of Congress and the National Archives, old photos, 90-year-old archival footage, and seamless recreations. Fuentes borrows the framework of actual historical events and fills it in with fictional details. Thus, he weaves the story of the missing Markod with his own reflections on the fate of his ancestors and his present plagued with memory lapses. As Gary Dauphin said in the Village Voice, “The film’s main gamble is not in the faux-biographical details it offers but in its use of the same newsreel footage that the colonizers once used to create the bogus category of the Anative. The images are heavily aestheticized through the use of repetition and slow motion. Thus, the questioning is directed not only toward the anthropological gaze creating the Other but also toward the filmmaker himself who has to use this same gaze as a starting point.”

The film’s gambit is suggested in its very beginning by the narrator himself, who uses old photos of his college graduation and sendoff at the Manila airport to illustrate “back home” but then declares that what he calls “back home” is a mixture of reality, memory, and imagination. Having subtly made this contract with the viewer, he can start using newsreel footage to represent his memories and fictitious recreations to represent reality, in order to tell the story not of his researching his grandfather’s life but of his experiencing living between two worlds. He lacks a narrative that explains the place of a Filipino in America; there is one, but it is spurious, represented by the native imagery of newsreels. The creation of the fictional character, Marks has suggested, challenges that falseness and the falseness of all “totalizing schemes of knowledge.” She borrows the term of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, “intercessor,” to describe the character created to articulate these issues, a character who can faithfully represent the filmmaker’s point of view and his distrust of hegemonic ideology.

The seams of the images in the collage are sometimes obvious: we can tell that the Filipino college graduate, the Filipino boy dreaming, and the Filipino boy bathing buffaloes in the river are not the same person. Nonetheless, we accept the fiction of the film because it uses these

illustrating details to create larger categories. These are the categories of Filipino and American, native and foreign, savage and civilized, represented and representing, among which the film will navigate telling the story of a man who broods over experiencing them. Following the almost mythical story of Markod at the World's Fair becomes one way to start answering the questions of why Filipinos are in America, why they have chosen to stay, and what narratives define them as a people.

Commenting on the formal choices he made for *Bontoc Eulogy*, Marlon Fuentes told Mia Blumentritt in 1997 that he wanted to create "an anti-illusionistic film, in the Brechtian sense of the word." He wanted the seams to be obvious, and the viewers to be conscious of the film unfolding as a film. Watching *Bontoc Eulogy* was going to be like watching an optical illusion. "In the film," Fuentes told Blumentritt, "the oscillation between the 'fictionality' of the story (as clued in by liminal references or subtle sleights of hand) and the historical authenticity of what was transpiring was a formal tension that was necessary to the theme of history as memory and vice versa." This effect was achieved by juxtaposing the archival footage and photographs with the recreated footage of the children playing and of the actor playing Markod. An example, Fuentes explained, was the jump cut in the scene of the children's hat trick with the rabbit. This was an obvious reference to Méliés, a "fair warning to the viewer that this was after all, a bungling Méliés incapable of tricking the audience." The oscillation between implausible and authentic, between present and past, was the path Fuentes wanted the viewer to follow. Thus, the film was directed toward a bimodal audience: the Filipino-American audience with its historical and political interest, and the cineaste audience with its interest in ethnographic representation, early cinema, and formal issues of the documentary form.

Fuentes uses the details he has made up, about Markod's everyday life on the Fair grounds and about his thoughts, to attach human value and significance to the history lessons he talks about in the film. The details are clearly fictional (how did Markod learn to write and how did he send his letters?) but we accept them as a personal attempt to envision and enliven history lessons about the narrator's past. The film is an illustration of the search for meaningful and usable history of every person who learned about his roots through assigned histories. In this search, Fuentes said, "Markod represents the necessity and triumph of the imagination; the Narrator, the reconstitutive potential of an archeology that is never finished." In using this approach, Fuentes has made the choice not to disrupt the "ethnographic" surface of the story by revealing the fictional devices he has used in the film, so as not to dissipate "the emotional momentum generated by the historical gravity of the actual story."

"What does the film reveal of the search into the past?" Asked by Blumentritt about the parallel between the "narrative machinations in the film and his comments on Philippine history and the Filipino psyche," Fuentes said that Philippine history is a continuing process of identity formation in the context of colonial history. Philippine-American, and Philippine diaspora, history is marked by interactions like "love-hate, stranded identities, mutant longings, self-flagellations, cultural camouflage, serendipitous belongings, defibrillating communities, phantom pain, social anesthesia, cultural amnesia. The absence of true north." Constantly divided between these spatial, temporal, and emotional realities, the Filipino in America embarks on the quest for usable identity that Fuentes' film is.

Background on Director/Film

Marlon E. Fuentes is a Philippine-born filmmaker, photographer and conceptual artist whose work has been shown in over 60 individual and group exhibitions over the last 15 years. (He had no children at the time the film was made.) Films he has made before this one include *Sleep with*

Open Eyes, Tantalus, Arm, and Crikee. Fuentes studied Behavioral Science and Anthropology at De La Salle University in Manila and did graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania and at Temple University's Film and Video Program.

Bontoc Eulogy was produced for Independent Television Service (Independent Television Service) in association with National Asian-American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) and with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Fuentes told Blumentritt, "On a personal level, I wanted to locate myself within the historical narratives that define the Filipino in America." He used art as "an orienting device" and film as a medium capable of capturing "the process of passage through the various membranes that we seek to navigate through." Fuentes said that it is only in retrospect that events make sense to us, and that in this context narrativizing fragments of our memories gains tremendous importance as a way of knowing where we fit in the grand scheme of things. "Film has the power to impose a sense of order, purpose, and interconnectedness amidst this vortex of events," Fuentes said.

Production Context

This work was produced and eagerly received within a film studies and anthropological environment that recognized the category of "postcolonial." That term, which came in vogue in the early 1990s in higher education and critical circles, posited a shaping effect of colonialism and imperialism on later history, and on the cultural patterns and movements that later marked a globalized capitalist culture. The term "postcolonial" reflected an evolution both of independent production and scholarly analysis from "revolutionary" and "third cinema" of the 1970s. It also reflected an evolution in identity politics, since it was a category that embraced differences rather than essentializing difference.

The Philippines have been a trading crossroads for millennia and a valued platform of evolving capitalism from the time of Magellan, with every European power having an interest in it. Formal U.S. involvement dates from the time of the Philippine independence movement from Spain, which the U.S. aided only to supersede Spain as imperial ruler until formal independence was finally granted in 1946 (with close U.S. ties continuing). The history of this independence battle against the U.S. is referenced in the episode of the grandfather's death and the mass grave. Other Filipino film work has also portrayed the syncretic culture of the Philippines, most notably that of Kidlat Tahimik. In the early 1980s, his wry personal mockumentary/fantasy film *The Perfumed Nightmare*, an allegory of underdevelopment, was distributed in the U.S. by Francis Coppola after Werner Herzog noticed it in Europe. *The Perfumed Nightmare* takes the filmmaker-persona from his life in a rural Philippine village, where he heads the local NASA fan club, to Paris, where he comes to see that the First World is not paradise but has lost its heart; more important, that his "backward rural village" and this "modern city" are intimately connected. (He went on to make several other films, none so well-distributed.) Manny Reyes' *Dreaming Filipino* (1990) also dealt with the conflicts of Filipino cultural identity, in a fictional story of a boy who wants to go to the U.S. to get an education.

Fuentes also addresses the myth of the primitive in his re-use of newsreel images that stereotype natives, and his choice of the story of the Igarod, who within the Philippines are a distinct cultural category. The stereotyped imagery of the native had of course been a staple of early documentary, particularly boldly in Robert Flaherty's work. The repositioning of familiar stereotypes of the primitive was by that time well established in experimental and art documentary. For instance, *From the Pole to the Equator* (1986), an Italian documentary, was composed entirely of repositioned footage from the turn of the century by a society photographer

in Rome, who had traveled throughout the world with diplomats and aristocrats.

Reception/Distribution

Fuentes' critically acclaimed film has been awarded a number of prizes, many of them within the category of documentary: Gold Apple, National Educational Media Network (1996); Silver Medal, San Francisco International Film Festival; Juror's Citation Award, Black Maria Film Festival; Honorable Mention, Ann Arbor Film Festival; Best Historical Documentary, Chicago Asian American Film Festival; Distinguished Achievement Award Nomination, International Documentary Association (1996). The film was shown at the Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival in 1996 in the context of films concerned with ethnographic exploration, discovery, the estrangement of the familiar, as well as with constructing a critique of these same terms. It exemplified the festival's theme of the Afake documentary. Other featured mockumentaries included the work of Shani Mootoo and *Diary of a Poster*.

Why do you think the filmmaker invented characters and stories? Why didn't he just call it a fiction film? What makes you interested in the problems of Markod? Would it be different if the narrator didn't claim any relationship to Markod?

Further Reading

Blumentritt, M. "Bontoc Eulogy, History, and the Craft of Memory: An Extended Conversation with Marlon E. Fuentes." *Amerasia Journal*. 24.3 (1998): 75-90.

Knaller, S. (1999). "Scattered Voices. Some Remarks on a Narrative Theory of Postcolonial Storytelling." *The Germanic Review* 74.2: 99-115.

Marks, L. (2000). *The Skin of the film: intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the sense*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

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