

BATANG WEST SIDE: THE SPACE OF ABSENCE AND THE SITE OF RESISTANCE

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“Cognition, like culture, is organic, where meaning can flow without imposing manipulative forces or elements. Humankind’s capacity to grasp meaning is organic too. Cinema can create this culture. But the real power of cinema comes when there is honesty in the work. You can use or discard all the theories, philosophies and verities that have sprung out of this great modern art but I believe that its greatest value will be that of honesty. And qualifying honesty must always be on the level of responsibility. The search for the truth must always go hand in hand with responsibility.”

Lav Diaz

A deserted night street, covered with a few inches of dirty snow, showered with the cold light of the street lamps ...; and there at the very bottom of this image a human figure arises from afar, wandering in its long and slow arriving past the patient eye of the camera ... This scene, so saturated with loneliness and emptiness that it hurts to the bone, represents not only the initial but also the most frequently used image Filipino director Lav Diaz confronts us with in his in-depth and extensive investigation into the unenviable reality of his people’s diaspora in the North American Jersey City: *Batang West Side* (2002). The film, which aroused the interested film public with its epic structure and monumental design, starts out as a classic whodunit – with a body found lying on the pavement of West Side Avenue and a detective handling the case in a committed and meticulous manner. The victim of an unknown perpetrator is Hanzel Harana (Yul Servo), a barely 21-year-old Filipino immigrant who had but two years before come to stay with his mother in “the promised land”. The detective is his countryman, Juan Mijarez (Joel Torre), who is not in the least left indifferent by the suffering, the lack of perspective and the tragic fate of his kinsmen. The death of this young man, in a deserted street late at night with no credible witnesses, turns out to be a complex, Rashomon case, whose investigation is with every new actor ever more removed from the rules of the genre and is slowly turning into a complex psycho-sociological drama with the main – symbolic – protagonist becoming the Filipino man himself.¹ Namely, in his fourth feature film Lav Diaz concentrates above all on the question of the (lost) identity of the Filipino man. He is our contemporary, placed in the now, which spares but the few wealthiest people in the world, and in a diasporal environment, in a kind of paradigmatic community where its inhabitants’ basic identity problems crystallize in a concentrated form. Namely, an individual abroad is never only a bearer of the subjective social role but is always also a representative of his people. Through the investigation procedure we together with Mijarez come to meet with Hanzel’s family members living in the USA; with his mother (Gloria Diaz), his grandfather (Ruben Tizon) and – only by the way – his father, who comes utterly distort from the Philippines only to collect his son’s body. Besides the mourning, frustrated representatives of the divided family the detective’s interrogations introduce us to Hanzel’s girlfriend, his closest friends and a number of individuals, be they Hanzel’s acquaintances and allies or his enemies – the key suspects of the case. The colourful collection of actors and companions of the tragical death soon proves to be a precisely conceived matrix of typical characters by which Diaz carefully sets up a paradigmatic structure of Filipino society as a whole. The selected protagonists, their relationships and their role and positioning in the unfolding of this complex narration bear evidence that nothing is left to chance and that the director exercises control over the extensive subject-matter of the five-hour film narration with incredible ease, certainty and confidence in himself and the medium of his expression. In this narration Diaz’ subjective *auteur* vision comes to its full expression alongside his unflinching belief that an endeavour to restore the severed link between man and world is the pre-

condition of creativity and the overcoming of the manipulative nature of the film medium itself: “... in creation, you will have a thousand and one options that represent the truths of your process assuming you, the maker, are the one who makes the decisions. It is a process that would culminate in an eventual dynamic between the film and the viewer, and the viewer and the world. And if you believe that your work can truly be elevated in an aesthetic domain and that it can sustain itself, then its potential for meaning is vast and limitless so that it would be complete.” (Diaz in conversation with Wee)² In his awareness of a film’s self-existence Diaz comes very close to those conceptions in modern discussions of creativity that assign to a work of art a privileged place of the only thing in the world that sustains itself: “[Art] preserves and is preserved in itself (quid juris?), although actually it lasts no longer than its support and materials – stone, canvas, chemical colour, and so on (quid facti?). /.../ The work of art is being of sensations and nothing else: it exists in itself.” (Deleuze, Guattari 1994: 163–64) In Diaz’ case the aspect of self-positing is at the same time a principle of an entirely concrete creative process – by letting the shot scenes come alive in all their greatness, a film rises above its subject-matter, is established as a whole and stands up on its own – independently and necessarily: “I couldn’t do anything anymore, that’s the work, that’s it.” (Diaz)³ The feeling of the necessity of the sequence of events is the driving force of the inner dynamics of *Batang West Side*, where the nature of police work itself reveals a network of relations running much deeper and entangled more fatally than it first appears in view of the seeming outer pragmatic looseness. In such a consonant composition the only “dissonant element” of the film seems to be Mijarez’ – accidental – meeting with a documentary filmmaker who, with his camera, is on the lookout for the truth of the Filipino people’s life in diaspora. “The camera will catch plenty of stories. Some even true, I hope”, is his motto in decisively opposing the detective’s initial aversion, which at the end of the film – when the two meet again and at first glance surprisingly bond – brings us to the revelation of one of the key enigmas of the film. But the afore mentioned tight composition, based on Diaz’ efforts to search for truth according to the valuation criteria of an artist’s honesty and his unflinching responsibility for man and world, is of the kind that is not supported by “the laws of physics” or – in our case – by the normative controls of the established ways of film production. It is held together by the effort to become authentically cinematic; to bring into accord the inner means supporting the work of art and that binding notion of “the ultimate cinema”, put forward by Diaz’ great role model Andrey Tarkovsky: “I see chronicle as the ultimate cinema; for me it is not a way of filming but a way of reconstructing, of reconstructing life.” (Tarkovsky 1994: 64–65)⁴ And in accordance with life itself the basic conception of *Batang West Side* – its need to reconstruct the life of the murdered young man – is permeated by the tragic determinations of death and bitter memory. Its key sound dimension is therefore a collection of cries, sighs, shivers, (self-)accusations and whispers ..., its predominant emotional dimension is a combination of the feelings of grief, fear, loss, desperation and solitude ..., its elementary spatiality is a claustrophobic series of ghetto streets and temporary housings suffocating one even in the case of a lavish rich suburb villa ..., its central temporality is the momentariness of the opening letting the past emerge – both recent (the last two years of Hanzel’s life) and, above all, the time of Martial Law as one of the most traumatic periods of Filipino history ... The various dimensions of Diaz’ accomplished narration continuously flow into each other in a permanent ellipsis and, at the same time, a constant – narrative – superimposition. Ellipsis, as the actual characteristic narrative method of *Batang West Side*, as well as double exposure (which does not figure directly but as a specific form of double encoding, giving expression to the dramatical

function specifying the essential determiners of Diaz' narration: the co-existence of two levels of reality – concrete physical and imaginary, non-material) is a figure that besides its primary narrative function always conveys also the heterogeneity of film time.

This pervasion of time can be clearly seen already in the prologue of *Batang West Side* – the starting ten-minute exposition ending with a murder of a young Filipino as the initial plot set-up ... “I grew without a father. I have a father, but my memories of him are all from when I was only seven years old. His image remains incomplete in me save for the rare picture my mother kept and for brief memories of him taking care of me. When I was seven, he left. My mother wept for a long time waiting, than looking for him. It almost drove her mad.”

These are words in the off field underlying the introductory sequence of the film, in which from the depth of the frame, along a deserted night street, an at first barely noticeable figure of a staggering, evidently “absent” young man slowly approaches. In the scene, filmed as a patient long take in full shot, which is one of the most typical ways Diaz shoots exteriors, we follow the protagonist – in whom we shall recognize Hanzel Harana, a soon-to-be victim and subject of a police investigation – up to the immediate vicinity of the spot, about to become the place of his death. A cross cut takes us to a dream-like, breath-taking black and white scene in the Filipino countryside where grief consumes both a child and his desperate mother as well as a grown up man sobbing on the shoulders of a young man, collecting his falling teeth into his hand ... Cutting back to a man dozing off in a parked car and the sound of a far off shot waking him, reveals that it was him we have just seen in the dream – i.e., detective Juan Mijarez, who obviously dozed off while on a stake-out. Mijarez diligently writes down his dreams and then checks whether his nightmare (teeth falling out in a dream supposedly foretell death) harmed anyone. He calls the hospital where his mother is lying, connected to machines keeping her alive. Learning she is fine, he calls his wife, who he lives separate from and has not called in two years, to check on his two sons. Before leaving the stake-out scene he receives a message from his partner about a murdered Filipino youth on West Side Avenue. When he arrives at the scene of the crime he recognizes in the victim Hanzel, whom he did not know personally but who was familiar to him from the indispensable “inventory” of the streets. (“I’m familiar with Hanzel Harana. I always see him at West Side Ave. One time I bumped into him”, the detective recalls in inner monologue.) It is exactly this inner monologue as a particular kind of voice-over – proving to be a standard method of Diaz’ introspection – and the visual reconstruction of the moment when the policeman and the young man bump into each other that give the whole its specific meaning of a crucial scene. Not only because of the fact that this is the only scene in the entire film in which Diaz, as an emphasis, uses both slow-motion and re-play at the same time, but also because it introduces the principle of retrospective reconstruction as the key narrative strategy of *Batang West Side*. It is clear now that the introductory monologue did not speak of Hanzel’s childhood (though his situation was exactly the same save him growing up without his mother), that it was detective Mijarez stressing his father’s absence and it is therefore he who at the very beginning proves to be the central (individual) protagonist of the film. It becomes clear also that the shot waking Mijarez from his nightmare meant the moment of Hanzel’s death. “Dissonance” between the visual and acoustic dimension of the scenes, on the one side, and on the other, the stressing of elements explicitly talking about the nature of film time – the sound of the shot for example has the function of a kind of acousmatic quilting point – are factors indicating that the passing between different time levels is the basic stylistic bravura of *Batang West Side*. At the same time the images of the sketched prologue material acquire a characteristic saturation with meaning, at first coming off more or less as one-dimensional, because of their ascetic visualization, but in the – subsequent or retroactive – contextualization within the whole they reveal all their multiplicity of meaning. Such a complex structure, with all its registers of multiplicity, coming to its full the very first few moments, is a sign of an ambitious aesthetic conception giving itself over to organicity wherein the key emphasis crystallizes through aspects of temporality.

As mentioned before, one of the fundamental aesthetic elements of Diaz’ film articulation is the long take, i.e., the sequence shot, and specifically, as he himself points out, the long take in real time.⁵ Between its two

most common variants, the stationary or quasi-stationary long take and its mobile counterpart, the author favours the first. This is quite understandable if we take as a presupposition that it is the principles of the first that give the director an opportunity for “*integrity and patient intensity of his gaze*” (Le Fanu). These are precious elements of liberating the gaze, embellishing Diaz’ endeavours for an authentically cinematic image – such as abides in the binding principle of Andrey Tarkovsky: “*The image becomes authentically cinematic when (among other things) not only does it live within time, but time also lives within it, even within each separate frame.*” (Tarkovsky 1994: 68) With the patient arranging of everyday scenes in their basic time/space determinations – as a kind of observation “*of life’s facts within time, organised according to the pattern of life itself*” (Tarkovsky) – the author takes up a committed task of according the viewer’s film experience to the immediate experience of his own ordinariness. In putting everything on the presence of time as the fundamental “tension” of the shot, steadily persisting in its slow pace, putting forward the feeling of duration even when the “narrative logic” of a whodunit would dictate a dynamical build up of the visual pyrotechnics of lightening montage cuts, a specific relationship with the viewer is being established. Submitting to duration, necessary in order to establish the tension of the gaze that in his artistic integrity Diaz strives for, is a (pre)condition for opening up the viewer’s perception – for his letting the filmmaker captivate him with his gaze. Such a mobilizing of the gaze – attainable through different film techniques – is intensified with the stylistics of long takes mostly when this is a means of those aspects of essentialization that reflect in a tendency towards presence as such.⁶ With the strict intensification of screen existence in the scenes of the simple moments of everyday life (where narrative time is usually prolonged and diegetic nullified), the reactualization of the interest in the ordinariness of life comes to its full expression, wherein the merely apparent banality of man’s everyday experience deservedly comes under a detailed investigation ... His conscious and uncompromising focus on life in its immediacy places Diaz in a constructive dialogue with some important stands of contemporary film art: On one side, he comes close to elements of contemporary minimalism, which carefully exposing the social emptiness of a common man’s everyday and focusing on the here and now, reveals above all aspects of individual desolation – the consequences of catastrophic social “development”. With re-directing its interest to immediate experience, minimalist art comes to clear stands on the nature of reality. Its essentialization is reflected in its apparent simplicity, as a result of a strict focus – the elimination of all superfluous factors. It is a process of careful distillation and concentration wherein “*a sort of crystallized abundance*” (Motte) is expressed. Minimalist art is not simplified and obscured but it actively transforms the very centre of current values: “*it locates profound experience in ordinary experience*”. (Serota, Francis) In view of the correspondence between Diaz’ creative efforts and certain minimalist elements, we cannot talk about his visual asceticism as a reductionism or nihilism, on the contrary, it can be considered as a principle of substantialization bringing to its full expression above all the in-depth interest in presence as such. With its artistic activity turns again towards the questions of perception, which means there also comes to a reconsideration of the subject. On the other side, a resonance of the current new realistic initiatives all over the globe, most notably perhaps the creative approaches of French new realism, can be sensed in Diaz’ coming close to the throb of reality. The most prominent place in French new realism belongs to the so called realism of proximity (“*un réel de proximité*”), reflecting above all in the “*documentary style of the observation*” (Powrie) and in the thought-through selection of a film’s subject matter: individuals or social groups the director knows thoroughly. The film treatment itself is not an indirect rendition of an imagined experience, but rather the reality of an individual being endangered by the “achievements” of brutal capitalism coincides with the activity of the author who is himself often explicitly engaged in identifying and actualizing the pressing problems of socio-cultural reality. The characteristic new realistic elements of *Batang West Side* can be considered in view of the Brechtian conception of realism as an uncompromising “probing of reality”, originating from a need for the reconstruction of phenomena, penetrating the mere surface of things as a kind of speculum allowing us to probe the world. In doing this, it takes no notice of the set rules, “chlichés” of opinion; Brechtian “*... idea of realism is not a purely artistic and formal category, but rather governs the relationship of the work of art to reality itself, categorizing a*

particular stance towards it.” (Jameson 1980: 205). At the same time the radical rejection or even undermining of conventionality presents an obvious manifestation of progressive film. Progressive in the context of a definition by Robert Philip Kolker, who stresses it is all about “... *cinema that invites emotional response and intellectual participation, that is committed to history and politics and an examination of culture, that asks for the commitment of its audience; a cinema that offers ways to change, if not the world, at least the way we see it.*” (Kolker 2001: 2) This illumination gives a wider contextualization and with it an “outer” argumentation to the director’s statement, which we dare take as a universal “programme declaration”, as his creative *credo*, wherein he decidedly emphasizes: “... *that the foundation of a truthful work should be honesty and responsibility. My struggle lies here: my so-called vérité or aesthetic stand.*” (Diaz in conversation with Wee)⁷ Even in view of Diaz’ exciting concurrence with the most actual of present times it is by no means surprising that in his “programme guidelines” there echo many principles from renowned chapters in film history, e.g., the postulate of “the artist’s responsibility” as conceived by Andrey Tarkovsky in the homonymous chapter in *Sculpting in Time*, where he emphasizes that: “... *the more he [the artist] aspires to a realistic account, the greatest his responsibility for what he makes.*” (Tarkovsky 1994: 184) In line with the committed correspondence to certain characteristics of contemporary film searchings, defined above all by the awareness of the mutual responsibility of us all in the world and to the world – which is the precondition of an active partaking in the shaping of its structure – we can consider Diaz’ conception and expression of film time also as an opposition to certain tendencies in the “modernizing” conception of temporality caused by a massive progress in new media technologies. It is exactly the specifics of the long take with reference to the question of real time aesthetics that have been decisively reactualized due to the concord with some of the important current discussions raising the questions of change in the treatment of the real (time) conditioned by new technologies.⁸ The notion of real time, moving first from cinematic perception of continuity to the TV conception of “liveness”, had culminated in the computer time of instantaneity, and is now through digitalization coming back to film in the universal form of special effects. In the unconstrained process of technological progress, in which the question of reality moves right along the temporal axis, the insistence on articulating time such as is made possible by the long take is perceived as a kind of an oppositional praxis. It is a form of resistance to the present which, placing everything on the presence of time (in pure form), opposes the new-technology tendencies towards “an erasure of memory and history”.⁹ It is exactly history and memory (as we have already mentioned and will see later on) that are among the key factors of Diaz’ artistic enlightenment project; his organic tendency towards the redemption of the Filipino soul, accurately captured in the form of his binding principle: “... *I formulated my thesis that true cinema can redeem the Filipino soul.*”

Though we assigned to the long take in real time a primary place in the aesthetic conception by which Diaz establishes inner continuity and quality of a particular scene – “*For it is the continuous time, the real time in the long take which allows for the possibility of contingency, the unforeseen, the unexpected, in the cinema.*” (Doane) – we must point out that *Batang West Side* is in a chronological sense a most non-continuous and non-linear work. The present of its diegesis is suspended throughout with longer or shorter time jumps (as indicated by the above description of the key points of the prologue). The central narrative line of the police investigation into Hanzel’s death – representing the temporal anchor of diegetic present – is subject to constant digressions with which Diaz explores the possibility of accessing the truth about the young man’s life. This is then also supposed to help reveal the truth about his death. The story of a short-lived “diasporal experience” of the young Filipino man comes to life in a certain narrative stratification of different time levels taking place parallel to the investigation into his death. The dispersed fragments of truth thus return to their original moment in a form of concentric undulation. And at the same time death itself opens up aspects of the past: on one side, in way of mourning, which in the memories of loved ones conjures up time past, and on the other, in a colorful series of manifold truths left by Hanzel’s presence on the face of the earth, among his fellow man. Diaz does not focus merely on the grieving family members and those closest to Hanzel, who with his death

immerse in memory and self-interrogation looking for their share of the responsibility, an equally thorough investigation is also directed at the main suspects as well as the detective himself in whom the death of his countryman arouses a series of painful remembrances of his own – obviously traumatic – past. Each protagonist Diaz introduces into the whole not only brings his individual “story” but is also the bearer of a certain period or (is the victim) of tragical events in the history of the Philippine people. “*The story, its presence, is only a reason for memory and reflection. On the history of the Philippine people in the years covered by Batang West Side: it is hidden in the characters – firstly as an individual, secondly as a collective memory/fiction –, who are projected into epically extended spaces of time in almost every scene; the memories as well as the speculations on the murdered young man always – be the road ever so winding – lead (back) to the Philippines in time of the Marcos’ regime, which turned the richest nation of South Asia into the biggest poorhouse of the region, its only export goods now being people.*” (Möller 2005: 6) First among the narrative strategies enabling the author to conjure the past and materialize it in the present is the elliptical loosening of logical connections of ordered time sequence, the connections of cause and effect, successions or the linear sequence of events. The basic stylistic approach with which Diaz subverts the established logocentric connections is retrospective reconstruction opening up time rifts and enabling a free transition between factual and remembered. But even in these transitions, in the modes of the reconstruction itself there is no inner logic, no causality. There are three predominant modes of reconstruction: sometimes it is parallel, when with the help of cross cutting, we at the same time follow the talked about events, but more often “classic” retrospection, wherein the reporting on an event melts into a visual reconstruction of the reported, and “anticipatory” retrospection, where the reported event is only later placed in the order of the whole, alternate. In-between the pointed out narrative levels there sporadically intrude Mijarez’ dreams and occasional reminiscent flashbacks triggered by a certain situation in the present. These scenes of imaginarity have their counterpoint in film fragments the viewer shares in either directly – when the protagonists watch the film on TV, or indirectly – when he is himself “addressed” as a firsthand witness or even as a “camera-man” of the film within a film ... Through the development of narration gradually the situations of unexpected or “unexplained” transitions come to predominate in which the sequence of scenes is in complete “accord” though the scenes may be taking place on different time levels. Ever more often what is factual and what is reconstructed in memory seems to merge into a kind of punctured whole conveying the coexistence of different levels of reality – physical and imaginary. And the more the laws of “logic” are undermined the deeper are the punctures through which the past comes flooding, the one that the author is trying to redeem in order that through its “active introspection” he contribute his share to the redemption of the Filipino soul¹⁰ – according to “III. thesis on the philosophy of history” by Walter Benjamin: “*To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.*” (Benjamin 1940: 1) The viewer in this manifold yet extremely fragile composition – which is never in danger, though, due to its valuable bond being on one side, the author’s full responsibility and on the other, a strong emotional charge – gradually loses his firm footing. Due to such time “inconsistency” he is in a way stuck floating in a time loop; yet it is exactly this subversion of a firm chronological support that makes him search more intensively for some other hold, which Diaz offers in the narrative’s emotional dimension. The viewer thus becomes more susceptible to the *emföhlung* in the manifold film dimensions ... By this we of course do not mean the aspects of a viewer’s identification, but have in mind the element of the “creative spirit of the audience” in the sense of Kiarostami’s “unfinished cinema”, believing in art as a – possible – factor in “changing things” and presenting new ideas: “*Art gives each artist and his audience the opportunity to have a more precise view of the truth concealed behind the pain and passion that ordinary people experience every day.*” (Kiarostami 1995: 1)¹¹ This principle not only directly corresponds to aspects of free creative activity (as a kind of a form of resistance to the present), advocated by contemporary film thought headed by Gilles Deleuz, but it shares its conviction about the engaged viewer with the author of *Batang West Side* himself: “*Give the audience real cinema so they can react and reassess their lives, make them aware that they have choices and responsibilities.*” (Diaz in

conversation with Romulo) The reaction is actually possible only when a pledge is established between the film and the viewer which – as in any relationship – is based on trust. One of the key factors in attaining the viewer's trust is the awareness of the free gaze: “... if people were allowed to see freely they would see truly” (Vaughan). The seeing itself is determined by far more than the eye can reach, for in it there is encompassed the whole of an individual's experience, which the gaze of the filmmaker faces. The authentic gaze stimulates registers of seeing that are not subject to conventions of a certain mode of representation encoding the meaning of the images on screen, but are open to the awareness of the gaze itself; the gaze in which its representational aspect is accounted for in the “sum total” of the film act. Such cinematic authenticity, attainable only through the possibility of a confrontation as a fact of actuality, wherein the filmmaker's gaze and the viewer's seeing coincide, is the precondition of the free gaze. In it the fundamental time relations reactualize, wherein the need for impressions of reality declines while the need for impressions of presence intensifies. “*What film archives, then, is first and foremost a lost experience of time as presence, time as immersion. This experience of temporality is one, which was never necessarily lived, but emerges as the counter-dream of rationalization, its agnostic underside – full presence. Hence, time's reality in the cinema is both that of continuity and rupture.*” (Doane 2004: 272)

Diaz takes great advantage of the awareness of the double nature of cinematic time reality in his treatment of the third, in the context of *Batang West Side* probably most important, aspect of time – history. With a characteristic time articulation the director strives towards such forms of “conjuring the past”, or the presentation of its absence, as are not based only on narrative “digressions and subversions” but, as already mentioned, on opening passages through which history emerges in the narrative. Again we are not dealing here with a matrix, with a universal principle of “conjuring”, but there is once more at work here a heterogeneous series of ways of “activating the past”. Above all in Diaz' treatment of history it is almost never (but for the rare exceptions of dream sequences, reminiscent flashbacks and film clips) a matter of direct representation or enactment of past facts and actions but merely of their transmission. When there is talk about a concrete individual experience of one involved in a historical event, Diaz most often uses the form of memory narration; when for example, the subject under consideration is the question of conflicting ideologies, the author metaphorically focuses on rival groups pushing shabu (crystal meth – specific “social” drug of the Filipinos which is exported out of the Philippines), religiously announcing their base “calling” as the vision of a new prosperity for the Filipino man ... The complex series of aspects of history actually shows that *Batang West Side* as a whole is the particular way of historical articulation; namely, the essential elements of its structure are representations of the traumatic facts in Filipino history, as is also stressed by the author himself.¹² The characteristic of historical time in Diaz' visual treatments is at first sight in an interesting harmony with Walter Benjamin's “dialectical concept of historical time”. We have in mind his notion of the concept of history – from his prominent *Theses on the Philosophy of History* –, arising from the opposition to its evolutionist variant, based on the concept of progress, as a form of “*progression through a homogenous, empty time*” (Benjamin). “*The 'dialectical concept of historical time' aimed not to preserve the past but to activate it. Benjamin's theory of 'dialectical images' which flash up at the moment of danger was explicitly conceived as a historical pedagogy – a means of transmitting the past while drawing attention to the particular way in which the past is seen in the present.*” (McQuire 1998: 178) The presupposition of the “moment of danger” in the context of *Batang West Side* refers to the treatment of certain parts in the film as the crucial scenes. These are on one side, the “intensified” situations in which the viewer's interest is more strongly mobilized than in most others, on the other, the scenes wherein certain points of the story are meaning-wise and emotionally clarified. The example of the first, and by no means only, is in *Batang West Side* certainly the – already initially pointed out – sequence of Hanzel's death.¹³ Aspects of the second can be seen, for example, in the representation of Mijarez' reminiscence (late in the second half of the film), aroused by him touching the victims gun and culminating in a hallucination where it is him who fires the bullet into Hanzel's brain. In this horrifying scene (the only one, despite the horrifying amount of violence in *Batang West Side*, we can consider in light

of the definition of the so-called ultraviolence), Diaz not only points out aspects of collective guilt when he shouts at us: “*We killed Hanzel Haryana*”, but with his blasting the inner continuity of the scene – with which he throughout the film so patiently built the feeling of the presence (of time) – he also reveals the fundamental nature of his aesthetics and ethics: his aesth-et(h)ic stand, which he shares with the binding stand of permanent human responsibility: “*We are not responsible for the victims but responsible before them.*” (Deleuze, Guattari) The individual enactments, or better yet the intrusions of the imaginary, as a kind of Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, are contrasted with a massive material of voluntary memories. On closer view, the persistent methodology thus offers another aspect in considering Diaz' conception of history: not to ascribe to the crucial scene a privileged role but to, despite its greater intensity, consider it as equal to the others. We thus return to the initial presupposition that the structure of the film stands up on its own exactly because of its compositional “imbalance” ... In the imbalance of the relationship between the concrete and the imaginary we can sense an echo of the subtle nuancing of Benjamin's difference between two premises in V. and VI. philosophically historical theses. In the fifth Benjamin says: “*The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.*” The sixth begins: “*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.*” (Benjamin 1940: 2) In this duality, which of course does not presuppose difference but an important complementing, we can sense also the key “values” of Diaz' treatment of history. Diaz succeeds in merging Benjamin's presupposition of the evasiveness of the image of the past and its irretrievability, threatening to disappear every time it “is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns”, with his awareness that “*in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest the tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it*” (Benjamin). The key means allowing for such a merging is a network of “parallel presents” erasing the transitions between different narrative levels. This network is also a net Diaz' camera not only uses on the look-out for the present in which the image of the past will be recognized as one of its own concerns, but with the strengthening of the role of “individuals' presents” in the film – when the focus on the events after Hanzel's death predominate over the reconstruction of his life – the centre of gravity shifts towards the here and now, towards presence as such. But this does not mean a subversion of historical perspective – quite the opposite. It is only through the tension of presence, in which the moments of danger (or crucial scenes) are not pointed out but considered equal to the rest in the entire complex structure of “conjuring the past” – saturated “only” with duration, emptiness or feeling of loneliness, loss and suffering –, that another, perhaps the most committed gaze can open up. It is a gaze most uncompromising in the sense that the author does not hesitate to treat the present – which finally prevails on the diegetic as well as narrative level of the film – and with it himself as the actual stage where the past generations of his people “*retroactively resolve their deadlocks*” (Žižek). This is a conception that is as a reflection of Benjamin's “dialectical notion of historical epoch” exposed by Slavoj Žižek in his paper *The Fragile Absolute*. In sharpening the opposition to the naïve evolutionist approach to historical development Žižek puts forward a thesis that the presupposition “that the present redeems the past itself”, is not only a historically relativistic assertion, but that a characterization of a past era always encompasses also our present stance. “*What we are claiming is something much more radical: what the proper historical stance (as opposed to historicism) 'relativizes' is not the past (always distorted by our present point of view) but, paradoxically, the present itself – our present can be conceived only as the outcome (not of what actually happened in the past, but also) of the crushed potentials for the future that were co-contained in the past. In other words, it is not only – as Foucault liked to emphasize, in a Nietzschean mode – that every history of the past is ultimately the 'ontology of the present', that we always perceive our past within the horizon of our present preoccupations, that in dealing with the past we are in effect dealing with the ghosts of the past whose resuscitation enables us to confront our present dilemmas. It is also that we, the 'actual' present historical agents, have to conceive of ourselves as the materialization of the ghosts of past generations, as the stage in which these past generations retroactively resolve their deadlocks.*” (Žižek 2000: 90–91)

The pragmatic reality allowing Diaz' specific film structure in *Batang West Side*, where both his "proper historical stance" as well as his "aesthetic stand" comes to its full expression, is diaspora. Its socio-cultural determinations are in the present context not important so much because of its characteristic of being "a nation in miniature" but above all because of the "concentrated" form of the identification manifold from which Diaz picks out only those nuances he needs for the desired result. Therefore it would be difficult to call *Batang West Side* a diasporic film. Even if we refer to the monumental research on "exilic and diasporic filmmaking", *An Accented Cinema* by Hamida Naficy, we can see that *Batang West Side* can be placed somewhere between both conceptions, for it moves away from the strictness of both definitions.¹⁴ Even though Lav Diaz himself has an individual diasporic experience, having for quite some time (between the years 1992 and 1996) lived and worked in the USA, we cannot declare him a "diasporic filmmaker". Namely, all his films, except *Batang West Side*, are labeled Filipino and he presents himself as a Filipino artist on a committed mission to "redeem the Filipino soul". "To seek the truth, to cast doubt and, ultimately, to redeem the soul are the goals of Diaz's art and he manages this in particularly spectacular fashion in his fourth film *Batang West Side*." (Romulo) Therefore, in the present constellation it is above all the marginal status of the Filipino (or any other) diaspora and the pure fact of the dislocation of Filipino man that are of key importance to us. Both refer in a metaphorical sense to his "historical fate"; they represent both the authentic historical state of a Filipino man's permanent struggle for his identity and integrity as well as his present unenviable reality. Marginality, a specific "state of being" not only of diasporic communities but any kind of minority group (fundamentally defined by a difference in race, nationality, religion, sex, disease, age, culture, politics, ideology, ... because of which their basic freedoms are under threat), is constituted above all as the place of resistance. In it the struggle against the dominant ideological practices and the (self)awareness of the need for a – retroactive – consolidation of one's own identity is of the same importance as the resistance towards concrete oppression and oppressors. "Understanding marginality as position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost. Truly the mind that resists colonization struggles for freedom and expression. That struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin within one's segregated colonized community and family." (hooks 191: 342) The gradation of social actors in *Batang West Side* – from an individual, family and household community to (symbolically) the whole nation proves that Diaz is well aware of the different levels of oppression and reification. But still the emphasis that at the end is shifted to the individual and the regaining of his lost identity as a form of self-identification is the historical key to solving the "difficult" questions posed by *Batang West Side*. That is why the fact of dislocation as a form of identification through absence, lack, representation ... is of great importance to Diaz as a filmmaker. And that is why the essential "recognitions" take place as film acts – a form of the film within the film.¹⁵ On one hand, there are the documentaries of Taga Timog – a documentary filmmaker Mijarez looked upon unfavorably during the investigation, but whom he befriended after leaving the police force – on the fate of Filipino women driven abroad by the need to secure their children's existence in the homeland (also the story of Hanzel's mother). On the other, there is Mijarez' self-exposure before the objective of the film camera obviously inspired exactly by the watching of the mentioned documentaries. Mijarez' confession, which reveals his "historic" identity of a denunciante, regime's deep penetration agent, torturer, rapist and executor who had with the help of a plastic operation changed his identity after coming to the USA, speaks of a "concealed fact of his past" accompanied by concrete empirical data. With the film within the film method Diaz literally asserts film as the truth exposing medium thereby bringing a concrete film act into accord with his enlightened convictions: "I want the audience to see the truth and to discover their truths by experiencing the realities that I am presenting or re-presenting. I respect the audience's capacity to understand, think, be open to a broader view of life, embrace different milieus, cultures, new principles and philosophies; or at another

er extreme, to confront them, create an atmosphere of discourse, introspection and criticism; or at yet another, to be simply immersed in what they are watching." (Diaz in conversation with Wee) Respect that Diaz points out here – the respect towards the viewer as well as the main subject of his film investigation: the Filipino man – is one of the basic conditions keeping the whole together before the viewer's gaze. Especially in the case of such a monumental and extensive work. And it is exactly the immense respectfulness reflecting even in the smallest detail that proves that the complex structure of this film venture, we have throughout considered above all in view of its social engagement and its dialogue with the current film trends, is not a work of a cold, analytical, calculating mind. Its standing-up-on-its-own is due mostly to Diaz' refined feeling for "telling a story" and setting the mood. Every sequence of *Batang West Side*, the structure of every frame, the conception of every film gaze ... prove that Lav Diaz is in his essence an insightful "storyteller" and above all an unsurpassable poet. But in his poetic vision Diaz, despite his commitment to history, acts from an oppositional stand towards "the totalizing quest of meaning" (Minh-ha), rooted in the established conception of poetry as a fulfilment of historical narration: "Poetry improves on historical narration because it creates order and thereby reveals meaning, which seems to remain hidden in ordinary lives." (Barnouw) Diaz' poetics on the contrary, is in its wager on presence and in its surrendering to dis-order and the principles of self-positing identified as the poetry of ordinary life. This is, among other things, in accord with the binding presupposition of Vlado Škafar (Slovene director and film activist), who discovers universality exactly in ordinariness: "If you seriously devote your attention to the ordinary man, you always come to know how exceptionless he is. It is herein that universality lies." And so in light of the poetry of the ordinary, echoing the profoundest of experience, Diaz' famous principle of an active comprehension of the world: "Read poetry, man!", receives in *Batang West Side* its visual counterpart: "Watch poetry, man!" •

Notes:

1. In an (as yet unpublished) interview by Erwin Romulo Lav Diaz thus describes the development of the script: " ... I initially wrote a story that deals with the struggle and guilt of a mother and the death of her son whom she brought to America. Then it grew and grew until I made it into a Diaspora of Filipinos living abroad – the struggle of our countrymen detached from their homeland while at the same time using as a backdrop the Filipino struggle as a whole. The more than 300 years of Spanish colonization wherein our ancient culture was erased, the 100 years of American intervention that further confused our culture, the 4 years of Japanese rape during World War II and the 20 years of Marcos terrorism were the things I wanted to tackle in one unified work. That was the vision: even if you had individual characters struggling with their individual lives, you can still see the whole Filipino struggle from the very start."
2. Although the above quotation – as well as the motto of this article and most of Diaz' thoughts that follow – comes from an interview Brandon Wee made with Lav Diaz for *Senses of Cinema* on the presentation of his latest film, a more-than-ten-hour-long epopee *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino, 2004), his discussion seems equally relevant to the film under consideration in this article. On one side, because it lucidly recapitulates in a concise form the thoughts from some of his previous talks (e.g., with Erwin Romulo or Alexis Tioseco for *Indiefilipino.com*), and on the other – and above all – because of the fact that this time Diaz asserts his creative credo and his "aesthetic stand", as he puts it, in an almost manifesto fashion.
3. The following description of the making of *Batang West Side* as Diaz' "first fulfilled work", can be read as a particular kind of articulation of the free creative activity principle: " ... it's the first work that I was able to push for what I wanted to do – my vision, the length, and the kind of aesthetic. I threw away all the theories and I just did it very organically. Especially during the shoots, we are not using lights and we're just pushing things. And then during the post-production I didn't go for the warp factor editing, like doing fast cuts, no, no way. We just keep putting things together and the work just showed itself. It's like a canvas; it just grew and grew and grew, and came out that way. I couldn't do anything anymore, that's the work, that's it." (Diaz in conversation with Tioseco)
4. In Diaz' case the definitions of a cinematic image go hand in hand with the concept of "pictorial possibility": "There is pictorial possibility that has nothing to do with physical possibility and that endows the most acrobatic posture with the sense of balance. On the other hand, many works that claim to be art do not stand up for an instant. Standing up alone does not mean having a top and a bottom or being upright (for even houses are drunk and askew); it is only the act by

which the compound of created sensations is preserved in itself." (Deleuze, Guattari 1994: 164)

5. "I avoid close-ups when treating the characters I create in my films. I prefer long and oftentimes static takes, just like stasis – long, long takes in real time. My philosophy is I do not want to manipulate the audience's emotions." (Diaz in conversation with Wee)

6. In his radical investigation of the renewal processes of new world cinema, inspired by the *oeuvre* of Abbas Kiarostami, Jean-Luc Nancy assigns the principle of "mobilizing the gaze" a privileged place of key changes in "cinema becoming the art of looking": "It is not a matter of passivity much less of captivity; it is a matter of tuning in with a look so that we too may do the looking. Our gaze is not captive, and if it is captivated it is because it is required, mobilized. This cannot occur without a certain pressure acting as an obligation: capturing images is clearly an ethos, a disposition, and a conduct in regard to the world." (Nancy 2001: 16)

7. Besides the already mentioned "kinship" to actuality we cannot ignore a surprising "agreement" between some of Diaz' self-analysis and the reflections of Chinese director Wang Bing who is, with his nine-hour debut – dealing with the horrifying effects of the demise of heavy metal industry and the uncertain fate of thousands of workers in Northeast China – *Tiexi District: West of the Tracks* (Tie Xi Qu, 2003), an author of a similar monumental film venture as *Batang West Side* and *Evolution of a Filipino Family*. "In *Evolution*, I am capturing real time. I am trying to experience what these people are experiencing. They walk. I must experience their walk. I must experience their boredom and sorrows. I would go to any extent in my art to fathom the paradox that is the Filipino. I would go to any extent in my art to fathom the mystery of humankind's existence. I want to understand death. I want to understand solitude. I want to understand struggle." (Diaz in conversation with Wee) "What I discovered is that the search for truth is always characterized by a certain revelation. The revelation is that truth is not something you can search for. Truth is something already out there, repeated by people every day. /.../ And that constitutes a life cycle. And that life cycle is what I mean by a certain speed and rhythm. Once you're in that cycle, you're with them [people]. And then you don't feel time passing slowly, but you feel time just passing, and time passing on both sides." (Wang 2003: 24–26)

8. "The concept of real time seems to be ubiquitous at the moment – used primarily to convey a sense of the capabilities of new media, of new computer technologies with specific and distinctive relation to temporality. These relations hinge on the concept of 'instantaneity'. Television news anchors frequently exhort their viewers to keep up with the news in real time by visiting the station's or network's website. 'Real time' here connotes immediacy, continuity, an intolerance for delay, and most of all, a certain solidity associated with the guarantee of the real. It would seem that only remaining residence of the real, in an age of simulation, the virtual, and the artificial, is the time." (Doane 2004: 264)

9. "Why is the real no longer a matter of being there, but of being then? And why is it so crucial that this 'then' is in fact a 'now'? Such an erasure of memory and history would be the zero degree of the logic of innovation, a form of commodification in which the commodity itself, always already out of date, would be superfluous." (Doane 2004: 281)

10. The psychoanalytical method of "active introspection", which Mijarez's psychiatrist explains to him, is in fact very close to Diaz' own film "introspection": "I believe a man will be stronger emotionally, psychologically, even spiritually if he analyzes his dreams, his memories. He acquires what I call 'active introspection'. Like an exorcism. We are possessed by dreams and memories and we have to confront them so there is a cleansing within."

11. "I believe in a type of cinema that gives greater possibilities and time to its audience. A half-created cinema, an unfinished cinema that attains completion through the creative spirit of the audience, so resulting in hundreds of films. It belongs to the members of that audience and corresponds to their world. /.../ If art succeeds in changing things and proposing new ideas, it can only do so via the creativity of the people we are addressing – each individual member of the audience." (Kiarostami 1995: 1)

12. "I want Filipinos to treasure and embrace history, to examine it no matter what one's ideology is. We must learn to grasp the significance of these events. We must have a historical perspective if we want to be able to move forward progressively as a people and as a nation." (Diaz in conversation with Wee) cf. also note 1.

13. "What happened to Hanzel is the same thing that is happening to the Philip-

ines. Everything has no direction. The efforts of our heroes have gone to waste." This tragic insight of Hanzel's grandfather is in accord with some of the key interpretations of *Batang West Side*. "The specific identity of the murderer ceases to be the key question in the film and Hanzel's death becomes a powerful metaphor for the attack on the Filipino soul." (Ramani) "The investigation, undertaken by a Filipino detective is then used as a bold metaphor to mount an admonishing attack on the collective Filipino anima when the dead man's family is introduced and its unflattering history unveiled." (Wee)

14. "People in diaspora, moreover maintain a long term sense of ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness, which is consolidated by the periodic hostility of either the original home or the host societies towards them. However, unlike the exiles whose identity entails a vertical and primary relationship with their homeland, diasporic consciousness is horizontal and multisited, involving not only the homeland but also the compatriot communities elsewhere. As a result, plurality, multiplicity, and hybridity are structured in dominance among the diasporans, while among the political exiles, binarism and duality rule." (Naficy 2001: 14)

15. At the same time all other forms of film reference perform their "historical role": *Batch '81* (Mike de Leon, 1982), which we see on TV, and the posters from movies on the fate of Filipino women signed by the giants of Filipino cinema Lino Brocka, Mike de Leon, Ishmael Bernal. "If photographs, films or video tapes do preserve a past, it is the trace of a past which was never simply present, but was always already heterogenous, discontinuous and forking: a time which reversed (deferred) some portion of its 'being-present' for unspecified future." (McQuire 1998: 173)

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