

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Quarantine cinema: Film culture and narratives in the time of COVID-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

Quarantine cinema emerges as a film culture and genre characterized by its offering of alternative film practice and prevalent narratives in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon is a result of necessary adjustments to adapt in these trying times and a critical response to the social, political, and economic issues brought by a public health crisis.

The research questions that this paper sought to answer deals with both the creative process and content: (a) How did the filmmakers of quarantine cinema and organizers of quarantine film festivals, despite the inevitable constraints and challenges, resiliently respond to the imperative need to change in terms of filmmaking and film screening? (b) What are the prevalent themes and patterns in the narratives of quarantine cinema that genuinely depicted the lived experiences based on the overlapping struggles and triumphs of the Filipinos during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The results indicate how quarantine cinema plays its part in sustaining art and culture amidst the virus outbreak by practicing alternative ways of film production that is limited and confined at homes and personal spaces; film aesthetics that deviate from the standardized forms, techniques, and styles; and film exhibition and events that heavily relied on social media and online platforms. Based on the recurring categories of themes in the narratives of quarantine cinema, these audiovisual productions significantly contribute to the data, proof, and collective memories that reveal how the Philippines and its people experienced the virus outbreak intended for cultural and social dialogue, criticism, and discourse.

**Keywords:** *alternative cinema, quarantine cinema, quarantine film festival, pandemic narratives, community quarantine*

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a massive impact to literally all aspects of humanity. Millions of lives are threatened by this infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 or SARS-CoV-2 (Schumaker, 2020; Lai et al., 2020). Those infected with the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) experience either mild, moderate, or serious respiratory illness (World Health Organization, n.d.) which varies depending on the immune response (Aquino, 2021). This public health emergency has become an ongoing saga of everyone in the world with each having their own stories of struggles and triumphs to tell in the time of pandemic.

In the Philippines, the national government initially placed the entire mainland of Luzon under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) as announced by President Rodrigo Duterte, on the night of March 16, 2020; it took effect on the next day in order to quell the spread of the deadly virus (Tomacruz, 2020a; Petty & Morales, 2020). The supposedly short-term implementation of the ECQ extended and continued to become a series of pandemic restrictions in different regions of the country called Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ), General Community Quarantine (GCQ), and Modified General Community Quarantine (MGCQ) based on varying degrees of strictness depending on the conditions of affected areas between the first twelve months and so (Ranada, 2021). This has placed the country in one of the world's longest and strictest coronavirus lockdown (Olanday & Rigby, 2020; See, 2021). Despite all the precautionary measures and policies implemented to contain the virus, the COVID-19 cases in the entire archipelago have already reached 2.8 million and claimed more than 45,000 lives as of November 2021 based on the data of the Department of Health (DOH).

This public health crisis has unfortunately forced many establishments, businesses, and industries to refrain from their regular operations which also include art spaces, film productions, cinema theaters, and film festivals (Bautista, 2020; Atienza, 2021). The film related activities, supposedly scheduled in the year 2020, have been postponed to later dates and many of them were inevitably cancelled (Diño-Seguerra, 2020), gravely affecting the local film and audiovisual workers. Firmly believing that cinema is still essential during this time of pandemic, Rolando Tolentino, the current head of National Commission on Culture and the Arts – National Committee on Cinema (NCCA-NCC), released a statement on the Facebook page of ECQ: Covid19 Filmmakers Diaries that calls the Filipino filmmakers and artists to continue the task of producing creative works:

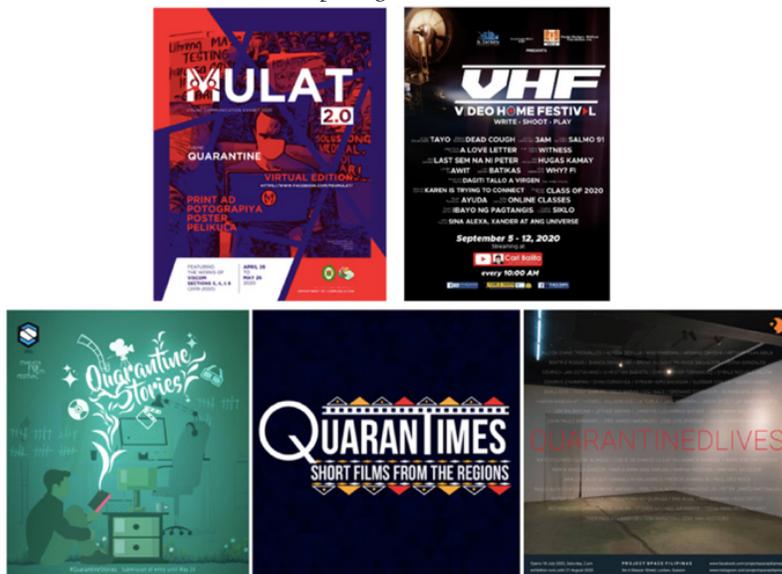
Philippine cinema and other creative endeavors are deemed essentials in the COVID-19 lockdown. Filmmakers

and artists must continue the task of producing works especially in this time of government neglect and the global pandemic. It is our urgent task to represent the anxious time and space of struggle and triumph in the everyday (Tolentino, in ECQ: Covid19 Filmmakers Diaries, 2020).

Continuing the cultural traditions disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, selected institutions and organizations still managed to launch online editions of the major film festivals in the country (e.g., Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival; DaangDokyu: A Festival of Philippine Documentaries; QCinema International Film Festival; Pista ng Pelikulang Pilipino; Metro Manila Film Festival). Shifting to virtual and transactional video on demand streaming platforms (e.g., <https://upstream.ph/>; <https://www.ktx.ph/>; <https://www.gmovies.ph/>; <https://fdcpchannel.ph/>) for film screenings and film events has become a norm nowadays as a response to the restrictions imposed by the community quarantines when the people could no longer go to cinema theaters. While that action is understandably necessary to help in decreasing the cases of virus infections by avoiding mass gatherings, it evidently shows that the pandemic has never stopped the Filipino filmmakers, producers, programmers, and other organizations in finding ways to move forward, to traverse the new directions, and to sustain film culture by adapting, exploring, and taking on new forms of film distribution and exhibition.

Apart from the aforementioned major film festivals, there were also concerned organizations, academic institutions, government agencies, and private groups along with individual artists, filmmakers, cultural workers, students, amateurs, and professionals who produced, programmed, and virtually exhibited audiovisual works in various forms (e.g., short feature, documentary, experimental, animation, and other works in video) that deliberately dealt with the pandemic narratives of the Filipinos from March 2020 to March 2021, the first crucial year of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. This phenomenon brings out an emerging film culture and genre called “quarantine cinema,” as this paper proposes to call it, that aims to represent pandemic narratives based on the lived experiences and collective struggles and triumphs of the mostly vulnerable and disadvantaged sectors of society during the period of the public health crisis. These quarantine films were showcased through virtual editions of “quarantine film festivals.” As the name implies, these are film festivals that bring us narratives or stories in the time of COVID-19 pandemic virtually launched during a series of quarantine periods.

Figure 1  
Sample Digital Posters A



Note. This figure shows the Digital posters of *Mulat 2.0* (Likhang Mulat); *Video Home Festival* (DrCarl Balita Productions); *Quarantine Stories* (Makata Indie Film Festival); *Quarantimes: Short Films from the Regions* (North Luzon Cinema Guild, Inc); and *Quarantined Lives* (Project Space Pilipinas)

The selected quarantine film festivals conducted in the cyberspace of Facebook, YouTube and transactional video on demand (TVOD) streaming platforms while the Philippines was under a series of community quarantines from March 2020 to March 2021 are the following: (a) *Mulat 2.0 Visual Expressions of Quarantine*, a project by Likhang Mulat of the Far Eastern University - Department of Communication; (b) *Quarantimes: Short Films from the Regions* organized by North Luzon Cinema Guild, Inc; (c) #*QuarantineStories*, a film competition conducted by Makata Indie Film Festival; (d) *Quarantined Lives* curated by Project Space Pilipinas; (e) *Buhay-Quarantine* as the theme of the Video Home Festival by Dr. Balita Productions; (f) *Gawad: Quarantimes Chronicles, Documentaries, and Film Essays* as part of the Ligalig: Gawad Alt 2.0 by the Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video; (g) *DokyuBata 2020: Pagbabago't Pagbangon - Mga Kuwento ng Katatagan at Pag-asa sa Gitna ng Pandemya* from the National Council for Children's Television, an attached agency of the Department of Education; (h) *Depicting the Lighter Side of Quarantine Life* exhibited by QCinema 2020: QCShortShorts; (i) *Eksena Cinema Quarantine: COVID-19 Filmmakers' Diaries*, launched by National Commission for Culture and the Arts - National Committee on Cinema; and (j) *Pag-aalay sa Panahon*

ng *Pandemya* as the theme of Pag-aalay: Webxhibition and Festival from the University of the Philippines.

The online film events were selected for this paper as they have been the most visible and active on social media within the community of Philippine cinema in promoting and showcasing audiovisual productions that dwell in the themes on COVID-19 pandemic while the country was under a series of community quarantines especially within its first twelve months. Excluded from the study are other film festivals that adhered to the themes on COVID-19 crisis but screened after March 2021 (e.g., 4<sup>th</sup> Quisumbing-Escandor Film Festival for Health, 13<sup>th</sup> Pandayang Lino Brocka and Political Film and New Media Festival; Video Home Film Festival Year 2) as this paper intended to cover the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic only. As mentioned, while there were also film festivals (e.g., Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival; Pista ng Pelikulang Pilipino; Metro Manila Film

Figure 2  
Sample Digital Posters B



Note. Here are digital posters of QC ShortShorts (QCinema); *Dokyubata 2020* (National Council for Children's Television); *Ligalig: Gawad Ali 2.0* (Gawad Alternatibo); *Eksena Cinema Quarantine* (National Commission for Culture and the Arts); *Pag-aalay Webxhibition and Festival* (University of the Philippines)

Festival) that continued their virtual exhibitions during the first year of the pandemic, they were also not included in the selection because their themes or narratives were different from the topic of this paper that deliberately focuses on the lived experiences during lockdowns.

The research questions that this paper sought to answer primarily deal with both the creative process and content: (a) How did the filmmakers of quarantine cinema and organizers of quarantine film festivals, despite the inevitable constraints and challenges, resiliently respond to the imperative need to change in terms of filmmaking and film screening? (b) What are the prevalent themes and patterns in the narratives of quarantine cinema that genuinely depicted the lived experiences based on the overlapping struggles and triumphs of the Filipinos during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Drawing on the collected data from the online interviews, livestreamed talkbacks and speeches, published statements of the film festival organizers and filmmakers, and participant observation, this paper examined quarantine film festivals that programmed and screened quarantine cinema. Furthermore, a thematic analysis is also employed in order to extract the prevalent themes and patterns identified in the narratives of quarantine cinema that significantly resonate both breakdowns and breakthroughs encountered and experienced by the Filipinos during the first crucial year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following sections of the paper discuss the results by (a) describing the profile background of the ten selected online film festivals that programmed film entries and organized virtual exhibitions of films that adhered to the themes related to the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) analysing how quarantine cinema played its part in sustaining art and culture amidst the virus outbreak by offering alternative film practice; and (c) extracting and categorizing of the recurring themes on the pandemic narratives as depicted in the quarantine cinema.

Moreover, quarantine cinema is scholarly elucidated through Nick Deocampo's assertions on alternative cinema that counters the dominant systems of film production and representations (Deocampo, 1994); Raymond Williams' notion of emergent culture when the new meanings, values, practices, and relationships are continually being created in a society (Williams, 1977 & 1981); and Jürgen Habermas' evolving concept of the public sphere where citizens can form and exchange opinions that matter in the public affairs (Habermas, 1989).

### Descriptive Background of Quarantine Film Festivals

This section of the paper describes the background of the ten selected online film festivals which organized virtual screening of films that adhered to the themes related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines.

*MULAT 2.0 Visual Expressions of Quarantine* was a month-long social awareness campaign through a virtual art exhibit presented by the three combined sections of 2<sup>nd</sup> Year BA Communication students of Far Eastern University Manila (FEU) taking Visual Communication during 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of academic year 2019-2020. A couple of weeks after the declaration of ECQ in Metro Manila on March 16, 2020, selected Communication students of FEU started producing one-to-two-minute short films that showcased their personal experiences, commentaries, and advocacies in relation to COVID-19 pandemic also known as ‘cineminuto’. Through the use of Facebook page of Likhang Mulat, a total of 23 short film entries submitted by the students were uploaded and virtually exhibited from April 26 to May 26, 2020. Likhang Mulat is a social advocacy initiative and online platform that showcases progressive and critical media produced by the students of FEU Department of Communication that promotes “*may alam, may pakialam*” [socially aware and involved] movement actively managed by the author of this paper since 2019 (Sanchez, 2020). This initiative was recognized by the 8<sup>th</sup> Student Quill Awards of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Philippines when it won Excellence Award in the CovidComms2020 category (“FEU made its biggest haul in the Quill Awards”, 2021).

*Quarantimes: Short Films from the Regions* was a project of North Luzon Cinema Guild, Inc. (NLCG) that featured short films from the region during the ECQ through a Facebook page with the same name. Despite the limitations, it still managed to showcase the creativity and resourcefulness of local filmmakers through one- to 13-minute films about the quarantine experiences. Most of the shorts featured were outputs from the “Online Film

**Figure 3**  
*A collage of screenshots from the film entries of Quarantine Stories*  
(Makata Indie Film Festival)



Lab for Regional Stories” on different topics and exercises from the mentors. Aside from a platform for featuring outputs of the student and amateur filmmakers, it also featured the movies from established filmmakers from the regions and advocacy campaigns for COVID-19 (Quarantimes: Short Films from the Regions, n.d.; Mina, 2020).

*#QuarantineStories* was a film competition spearheaded by Makata Indie Film Festival with two categories, the amateur and professional. Among a hundred film entries submitted, there were 18 short films shortlisted for the amateur category and 37 short films for the professional category that all featured pandemic stories during the early months of ECQ. They were virtually screened from May to June 2020 via the Facebook Page and YouTube channel of Makata Indie Film Festival. Ikatlo Correa, the board chairman of Makata Indie Film Festival, realized that it is indeed possible to mount a film competition with no physical presence and mass gathering required (Quarantimes: Short Films from the Regions, 2020).

*Quarantined Lives* was exhibited by Project Space Pilipinas (PSP), an independent artist-run initiative based in Lucban, Quezon that aims to serve as a platform for art and cultural works. This project served as an outlet to creatively express and visually articulate the participants’ personal experiences and frustrations during the quarantine. The open call started one week after the declaration of the first ECQ and continued until May 2020. A total of 70 video entries were uploaded in the Facebook page and YouTube channel of PSP. During the MGCQ, *Quarantined Lives* also had an exhibition in a physical space in Lucban, Quezon from July 18 to August 21, 2020 which was attended mostly by the residents of their hometown. All the guests and audiences wore masks and observed social distancing. Leslie Chavez, one of the founding members of PSP, commented in an online interview with the author of this article:

Ika nga, lahat tayo ay naapektuhan, walang exempted. Kaya hangad ng QL na makalikom ng iba’t ibang tugon, artikulasyon, at translasyon ng karanasang ma-lockdown mula sa iba’t ibang lugar. Hangad din nito na maging maliit na outlet ng creativity habang ang lahat ay nasa kani-kanilang tahanan o lugar. May pangangailangan din ng pagpapalalim sa danas at patuloy na pagdanas sa pandemya. Mahalaga ang mga ganitong gawain o proyekto dahil maari itong ituring o gamitin bilang alalay at gabay sa pagtahak sa hindi pa siguradong masusugpong sakit dala ng pandemya. Ito ay isa ring pagkakataon upang “informally” ay magkaroon ng access ang marami sa atin

sa kabila ng lockdown at distansya na matunghayan ang iba't ibang lugar upang maunawaan kung papaano natin/nila itinatawid ang pang-araw araw na buhay sa gitna ng pandemya. (online interview, Chavez, September 27, 2020)

[As they say, all of us are affected. No one is exempted. That's why QL aims to solicit various responses, articulations, and translations of the lockdown experiences from different places. It also aims to become a humble outlet of creativity while everybody is in their own homes or locations. There is also a need to deepen the encounter and the ongoing experience of the pandemic. This activity or project is important because it may serve as a guide to the uncertain path of encountering the illness brought by the pandemic. This is also an opportunity for most of us to "informally" have an access despite the lockdown and distance to witness different regions to understand how we/they cope with our/their everyday living in the midst of pandemic.]

*Buhay-Quarantine* was the theme of the film competition launched by Video Home Festival (VHF) of Dr. Balita Productions owned by Dr. Carl Balita, an entrepreneur and producer. Filmmakers who participated showcased creativity in the new normal as they expressed their craft despite the limited resources amidst the pandemic. After more than a month from their launch in social media platforms, entries came in from professionals, film students, and enthusiasts. A total of 19 short film entries shot during ECQ from April to May 2020 that delved into the themes of love, education, mental health, horror, existentialism, and political satire were shortlisted. The films were screened virtually on September 2-4, 2020 through Binge Wave, an international festival screening platform. On September 5-11, 2020, they were also streamed via YouTube. The awards night was held virtually via the Dr. Carl Balita Productions Facebook page on September 20, 2020. VHF, a film festival for a cause, was launched for the benefit of the film industry's affected and displaced workers coursed through the Movie Worker's Welfare Foundation (MOWELFUND) (Manila Bulletin Entertainment, 2020).

*Gawad: Quarantimes Chronicles, Documentaries, and Film Essays* was one of the programs launched by Gawad Alternatibo (short for Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video), the longest-running independent film

competition in Asia and now part of the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival by the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP). Established in 1987, Gawad Alternatibo is still committed to its mission in recognizing the excellent alternative films in the categories of short feature, documentary, experimental, and animation produced by Filipinos (Gawad Alternatibo, n.d.). During its 32<sup>nd</sup> year, it has also migrated to the online platform since the pandemic started as it launched “Ligalig: Gawad Alt 2.0” that ran from August 7 to 15, 2020 via CCP Vimeo, FB Live, and KUMU to conduct a series of screenings, talkback, masterclass, and special events. According to Mae Caralde, Chief Culture and Arts Officer of the CCP’s Film, Broadcast and New Media Division, the filmmakers who joined *QuaranTimes* section chose to immerse in the stories of the marginalized sectors of society greatly affected by this pandemic (e.g., jeepney drivers, urban poor community, activists) to cinematically tell their stories (Cinemalaya, 2020).

Figure 4

*A Screenshot of Gawad: Quarantimes Chronicles Documentaries and Film Essays*



Note. Online talkback with moderator Mae Caralde and filmmakers Adjani Arumpac (top row), King Catoy, and JL Burgos (bottom row) during the Ligalig: Gawad Alternatibo 2.0 held on August 15, 2020 (Gawad: Quarantimes Chronicles Documentaries and Film Essays).

*DokyuBata 2020: Pagbabago't Pagbangon - Mga Kuwento ng Katatagan at Pag-asa sa Gitna ng Pandemya* was a video documentary contest spearheaded by the National Council for Children’s Television (NCCT), an attached agency of the Department of Education. Fulfilling its role of promoting and encouraging the production and broadcasting of child-friendly programs for

Filipino children, the council called for video documentaries from August 8, 2020 to October 5, 2020 that worked around the topics related to COVID-19 pandemic such as social changes, information drive, stories of resilience and hope, COVID-19 survivors, frontliners and their heroism, education, isolation and quarantine, self-care and psychological well-being, coping mechanisms among Filipinos, security and survival. It has three categories that cater three divisions: Children Division (12-17 years old) with 3-5 minutes video documentary; Young Adult Division (18-23 years old) with 6-10 minutes video documentary; and lastly, Adult Division (24 years old and above) with the required 10-15 minutes production output. The online screening of a total of 30 video documentaries (10 finalists in each division) was conducted from November 17 to 19, 2020 on the NCCT Facebook page. The virtual awarding was held on November 20, 2020 in the same platform when the winners received cash prizes from Php 5,000 to Php 30,000.

*Depicting the Lighter Side of Quarantine Life* was the theme of the short films selected and exhibited by QCinema 2020: QCShortShorts, one of the film programs of QCinema International Film Festival by the local government of Quezon City. They programmed short films with a minimum running time of three minutes and a maximum of five minutes that creatively and cinematically depicted the lighter side of quarantine life. These short films, produced from September to October 2020, range from narrative or a hybrid of narrative, documentary, animation, or experimental all shot using a smartphone, webcam, or any digital device. From a total of 15 finalists that were screened via [watch.qcinema.ph](http://watch.qcinema.ph), QCinema awarded Php 50,000 cash prizes each to the six winners announced during the awarding ceremony on November 27, 2020.

*Eksena Cinema Quarantine: COVID-19 Filmmakers' Diaries* was a project under National Commission for Culture and the Arts - National Committee on Cinema in collaboration with the University of St. La Salle (USLS Artists Hub) that brought to us an omnibus film composed of 16 short films from some of the prominent independent and alternative filmmakers in the country: *Walang Katapusang Hurno* by Glenn Barit; *Soul Fish* by Zurich Chan; *Lonely Girls* by Pam Miras; *Joy is my Mother's Name* by Carlo Enciso Catu; *Kulayo* by Keith Deligero; *K[u]adrado* by Kyle Ferminadoza; *The Right to Life* by Arbi Barbarona; *From Itogon to London* by Guillermo Ocampo; *Kneading Nothing* by Hiyas Beldemor Bagabaldo; *Random People* by Arden Rod Condez; *Alimungaw: Filming in a Time of Uncertainty* by Bagane Fiola; *Akong Pinalangga* by Julienne Ilagan; *Gunam-Gunam x Guni-Guni* by Khavn; *Mga Bag-ong Nawong Sang Damgo Kag Katingalahan* by Mark L. Garcia; *Hurop-hurop Kan Kapadagusan Kan Agi-agi Kan Gamgam na Adarna* by Kristian Sendon Cordero; and *Count* by Adjani Arumpac. This two-part film omnibus which virtually premiered on January



Figure 5  
 Digital poster of Eksena:  
 Cinema Quarantine  
 (National Commission  
 for Culture and the Arts  
 - National Committee on  
 Cinema)

22, 2021 chronicles the filmmakers’ “struggles and triumphs during the pandemic period in the way they know best to tell their story – film” (Cruz, 2021, para. 3). The films were accessed online for free via the promo code NCCACinema by film enthusiasts and netizens until January 28, 2021, through Vimeo. The two-and-a-half-hour autoethnographic film feast was also coincided with a series of webinars and talkbacks with clustered filmmakers who shared their personal experiences and lessons learned in producing their short films in the time of social unrest.

*Pag-aalaysa Panahonng Pandemya* was the theme of Pag-aalay: Webxhibition and Festival launched by the University of the Philippines with an objective of honoring, remembering, and immortalizing “Filipinos whose stories of selfless acts amid the COVID-19 pandemic reflect our values of heroism (bayanihan) and selfless offering or oblation (pag-aalay)” (UP Media and Public Relations Office, 2020, para. 2). The festival welcomed video entries with 30 to 90 second duration from all filmmakers and multimedia artists in the country “whose works capture stories of resilience, inner strength, and humanity of Filipinos” (Ibid., para. 1). The videos submitted range from

narrative, documentary, animation, experimental, and music video. A total of 76 shortlisted videos were featured on TVUP, the Internet television network of UP, and also streamed on its Facebook page. Judged by the esteemed professors of University of the Philippines Diliman, the winners were virtually presented in the awarding ceremony held on February 28, 2021 via social media livestreaming on the aforementioned online platforms. U.P. President Danilo L. Concepcion explained his thoughts about the significance of mounting such film event:

Committing these stories and experiences to film is not only to honor the subject's heroism but also instill hope and determination in the filmmaker and the audiences it will reach. The global pandemic is a shared experience which no one can come out of unaffected. (Concepcion, cited from "Acts of Kindness, Generosity, and Sacrifice in Pag-aalay Webxhibition & Festival", n.d., para. 3)

### **Alternative Filmmaking and Unconfined Creativity**

The above descriptions provided for the quarantine film festivals evidently show how the series of community quarantines in the country did not deter the Filipino filmmakers and artists from the production of audiovisual works despite the fact that lockdown measures "created a difficult situation for those working in the cultural and creative industries across the world" (Manuel, 2020, para. 2). Amidst the inevitable disruptions, they rose from the bed of restrictions and confinement imposed by the pandemic in its most critical year by practicing alternative ways of film production, aesthetics, and exhibition. The question arises: alternative to what?

Quarantine cinema is alternative to the profit-driven mainstream mode of filmmaking. According to film historian Nick Deocampo (1994), alternative cinema (also known as 'independent cinema', 'other cinema', or 'counter-cinema') is "made without capitalization, machinery, and influence found in the making of commercial films" (p. 58). When the mainstream movie studios (e.g., Star Cinema, Regal Films, Viva Films) have been paralyzed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dumauual, 2020), the short films produced by the independent and alternative filmmakers in the other camp have still continued amidst the public health crisis. The quarantine cinema is alternative in a sense that they mostly came from ordinary citizens without the financial backing of big film outfits and capitalists. It did not require large number of film crew or established film directors and bankable

stars to be produced. They were filmed by mostly independent filmmakers, amateurs, students, and collectives who only used consumer digital cameras, smartphones, personal computers or laptops installed with editing software, and practical lightings in contrast to the high-end technologies and equipment used by commercial film studios.

In terms of aesthetics, the travel and movement restrictions imposed by the quarantine protocols especially during the early months of the pandemic did not confine the creativity of the filmmakers, instead, these constraints were confronted with a diversity of imaginative and unconventional styles and techniques in storytelling and cinematic expressions. Most of the filmmakers filmed their quarantine films at their personal spaces, homes, and hometowns as opposed to movies shot in the unrestricted settings before the pandemic. Instead of producing dominant full-length films that we usually see in the cinema theaters, the alternatives are short films (Deocampo, 1985) that last from 30 seconds to 20 minutes only. These short films in quarantine cinema also offer different aesthetic forms such as short feature, short video documentary, experimental or avantgarde film, video animation, hybrid films, and music video, which do not necessarily conform to the standardized ways of telling stories that require comprehensive three-act narrative structure, technological advancements, continuity and seamless editing, and celebrity-studded imagery. Bordwell and Thompson (2008) also acknowledge these types of films as distinct alternatives to distinguish “documentary from fiction, experimental films from mainstream fare, and animation from live-action filmmaking” (p. 338). Furthermore, alternative cinema according to Laura Mulvey (2012) “provides a space for a cinema to be born which is radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense and challenges the basic assumptions of the mainstream film” (p. 306).

In contrast to the traditional gathering of the moviegoers in the cinema theaters, film exhibition of quarantine cinema heavily relied on social media, mostly Facebook, video-sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo), and transactional video on demand streaming platforms. This also includes virtual post-screening discussions, talkbacks, and online awarding as alternative to film events usually mounted with the physical presence of the people involved. Despite the lack of physical presence, Jürgen Habermas’ evolving concept of the public sphere (1989) is still evident in social media (e.g., Facebook) where the quarantine films are mostly screened. The filmmakers themselves and the citizens (or netizens) during virtual exhibitions and online talkbacks form and exchange opinions about the social, economic, and political issues brought by the COVID-19 pandemic which undoubtedly matter in the public affairs.

The quarantine cinema in the present time also echoes Raymond Williams' notion of "dominant, residual, and emergent" that explains how dominant social structures rule within the culture (e.g. mainstream filmmaking) which becomes the status quo, while at the same time other social groups offer alternative ideas and practices to contradict or subvert those cultures (Williams, 1977 & 1981). The phenomenon of quarantine cinema observed during the COVID-19 pandemic can be argued as an emergent culture where the new meanings, values, practices, and relationships are continually being created in a society considering its mode of alternative film practice that counters the hegemony of the large-scale and studio mode of production. This can be related to how cinematic traditions emerged in the history of world cinema that also offered distinct film practices as alternative to the standards and conventions set by the Classical Hollywood cinema. These films as a cultural text also served as a testament of what occurred during a particular period of time.

For instance, we could make sense the atrocities of the World War I when the German expressionist films in the 1920s depicted the disturbed psyche of the people back then by showing extreme distortions to express emotional reality, a visual representation of what they had been through during and after the war by showing "recurring themes of madness, duplicity, and alienation" (Telotte, 2006, p. 16). Furthermore, the Italian neorealist films that flourished as a cinematic movement in Italy after World War II, focused on the themes of poverty, lives under an authoritarian regime, and conditions of a post-war society from the late 1940s to 1950s (Bondanella, 2006). Meanwhile, the notion of Third cinema in the Latin America advanced anti-imperialist struggles of the peoples of the third world in order to liberate them from the tight clutches of neocolonialism from 1960s to 1970s (Solanas & Getino, 1969). These and all other cinematic traditions in the world (e.g., *Soviet Montage* of Soviet Union, *Cinéma Militant* of France) emerged during the most troubled times in history. They were alternative films that countered the Hollywood's dominant mode of production and hegemonic representations in cinema (Badley, L. et al., 2006).

Here in the country, the second golden age of Philippine cinema showcased the "rise of a new breed of avant-garde filmmakers who, at the time, were making films that presented the state of the human condition, and the ills of Filipino society" (CNN Philippines Life Staff, 2016, para. 1). It occurred in the 1970s to 1980s when the period of social unrest was brought by the claws of dictatorship, oppression, and all forms of injustices. Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, and Mike de Leon were some of the notable Filipino filmmakers back then who sought to capture the atmosphere of unease and resistance despite the threat of censorship from the state.

Alternative film practice, as already occurred in different times in history across the world, could still manage to adjust and adapt by continually finding ways on how it would thrive despite the economic and societal crises. The emergence of quarantine cinema in the time of pandemic, as another illustration of alternative filmmaking, is situated in a certain period when history, as it unfolds, calls for witnesses. Similar to those aforementioned cinematic movements and traditions that flourished within the various contexts of sociopolitical upheaval (Badley, L. et al., 2006), quarantine cinema in the present time took the challenge of chronicling and weaving the stories of the Filipinos during a series of community quarantines to present a big picture of what it was like when life seemed to be in the middle of uncertainty and chaos brought by a COVID-19 pandemic which is discussed in the next section.

### Cinematic Representations of Pandemic Narratives

The proliferation of quarantine film festivals in the time of COVID-19 outbreak contributes to the role of communication and media field through the chronicle and presentation of the pandemic narratives intended for cultural and social dialogue, discourse, and criticism. Professor Rolando Tolentino reminds the Filipino filmmakers that:

It is important to continue the filmmaking process especially in this time (of COVID-19 pandemic) when it is very challenging to do films and art for that matter. If we do not sustain art and culture, we would not have the testament that the pandemic indeed happened. These films will become testaments that we lived this way (now) – just like *Noli Me Tangere* – which gave us a glimpse of what happened during the Spanish colonialism because Jose Rizal wrote *Noli Me Tangere*. That becomes a powerful testament over time even after centuries. (Tolentino, cited from Sevileno, 2021)

This study extracted the prevalent themes and patterns found in the narratives of quarantine cinema to reveal and explore the lived experiences of the Filipinos and the variations of how the most vulnerable sectors of society interpret and cope with the quarantine measures. Narrative is an important component of media texts that also allows us to deconstruct interpretations and representations. Jane Stokes (2003) states that:

Narrative is a component of just about every media and cultural form to a greater or lesser extent. The drive to

narrativize is present in human responses to the world - we can't help ourselves; we interpret the world through narrativization. Narrative also conveys the ideology of a culture, and it is one of the means by which values and ideals are reproduced culturally. (p. 67)

With more than 300 film entries programmed and screened by the virtual quarantine film festivals during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines, the categories of themes and patterns identified in the narratives of quarantine cinema are (a) unemployment and loss of livelihood; (b) hunger and relief goods; (c) threats, violence, and abuse of power; (d) inaccessibility of online classes; (e) sacrifices of the frontline workers; (f) impact of prolonged quarantine to mental health; (g) protests and activism to demand accountability; (h) productivity, hope, and resilience. These themes in the narratives are either self-reflexive or self-reflective. There are films that are directly based on the actual experiences of the filmmakers themselves while some films are based on the personal observations of the artists and filmmakers in their own communities. Each of the narrative theme in quarantine cinema will be discussed by presenting representative or sample films only along with the related literature as supporting data:

### ***Unemployment and Loss of Livelihood***

The first twelve months of the COVID-19 outbreak was a crucial period in the lives of the Filipinos. From March 16, 2020 to March 31, 2021, the entire nation witnessed the grave impact of the series of community quarantines “when it left the country’s economy on its knees and its poorest citizens jobless and hungry” (Olanday & Rigby, 2020, para. 7). This is only one of the massive effects of the pandemic when the operations of most of the businesses and establishments were either suspended or limited except for those providing essential services such as food and health care (Ravelo, 2020).

Temporary closure of offices, factories, markets, and shopping malls has resulted in the displaced thousands of workers especially during the early months of the pandemic (Torres Jr., 2020, para. 2). According to the report released by the national government citing the results from Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), about 4.5 million Filipinos have lost their jobs and 7.9 million suffered pay cuts from shorter working hours (“Philippines suffers worst job losses in 15 years due to Covid-19 and lockdown”, 2020; de Vera, 2021).

The stories about unemployment and loss of livelihood among adult Filipinos are narrated in the short features and documentaries such as

*Paglaum* that tells Vencor Corminal Jr.'s story on how he lost clients for wedding videos because events with mass gatherings during ECQ were already prohibited; *Sulit*, a documentary that narrates how Brylle Estigoy succeeded in his travel agency business but left no choice but to shut it down due to pandemic; *Sawa Ka Na Ba?* by Jeonathan Paul Mania who narrates how the salary of an employee like him is decreased during the lockdown; and *Ang Ating Tsuper* by Sineng Malaya, an award-winning short documentary about jeepney drivers in the cities who lost their capacity to earn an income and forced to beg on the streets to support their families.

Most of the Filipinos who belong in the poor working class are living paycheck to paycheck wondering how they could still manage to survive or at least feed their families. This financial stress worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic is featured in quarantine films like Michael Gayangos' *Tumatanggap Ba Dito ng Barya* and Michael Torres's *Judith: A Pandemic Story*. The former is a stop-motion animation that visually depicts how a wallet is emptied during ECQ while the latter depicts how due dates for bills (e.g., electricity, water, Internet, apartment) still haunt us in the time of crisis. Even in the gradual reopening of the economy, the labor force is still greatly affected as observed in the animation film titled *Obrero* by Bighani, produced by Pitong Gintong Silahis, and the 1<sup>st</sup> place winner in the animation category of the *Pag-aalay Wexhibition and Festival*:

Marami sa ating mga manggagawa na pumapasok sa ngayon. Na-exempt ang kanilang nature of business. Naglalakad sila para pumasok sa kanilang trabaho. Three hours na naglalakad para pumunta sa trabaho at pagkatapos another three hours pauwi sa kanilang bahay. Grabe po talaga ang sakripisyo ng ating mga manggagawa. Sila po ay minimum wage earners lamang. Nagsusumikap talaga ng todo para makapasok sa trabaho, para mabuhay ang kanilang pamilya. Bakit ganoon ang nangyayari? Ang mga manggagawa po ay frontliner kung paano bubuhayin ang bansa at ang ekonomiya ng mundo. Kaya dapat ganoon ho ang pagpapahalaga dito ng kasalukuyang gobyernong Duterte. (Jerome Adonis of Kilusang Mayo Uno, cited from Bighani, 2021)

[Many of our workers rise and go their respective job sites. The nature of their business is exempted. They literally walk just to go to their work. They walk for three hours towards their job sites and another three hours to get

back home. The sacrifice of the workers is extreme. They are minimum wage earners only. They really work hard to do their jobs so they can feed their families. Why is that happening? The working class are in the front line for the sustainability of the country and the economy of the world. So, it is a must that the current regime of Duterte should value them.]

### ***Hunger and Relief Goods***

Joblessness results to hunger which expectedly leads to desperate need for relief goods. For most of the Filipinos who live below the poverty line and rely only with their hand-to-mouth income, a sudden stop of the daily wage results to hunger during the ECQ (International Care Ministries, 2020). According to Social Weather Stations (SWS), the number of Filipinos who were hungry due to lack of available food nearly doubled while most areas were under the COVID-19 lockdowns (Lalu, 2020). The survey also showed that the poor are more vulnerable to lockdown measures.

This unpleasant picture of hunger is the common theme of the quarantine films such as Kent John Desamparado's *Puli Na*, a short film about two brothers who run out of rice and worrying on how they can buy food, to survive during lockdown; JM Alconga's *Tunga*, a short film about a teenager who has no food left to eat until a friend helps him; Ruben Gelio's *Salat*, a short film that depicts the lack of resources of a typical family that results to hunger; Domcar Calinawan Lagto's *Pagkain* that shows how important food are on our table nowadays which we sometimes take for granted before pandemic; and Kate Villones' *Hunger Games: Winner Gets the Crown*, about two ladies eating virtual food on their tablets upon realizing they could not go to restaurants during the quarantine period.

Meanwhile, the film *Lipong* by Armand Dayoha, from Project Space Pilipinas, presents a man who repetitively rotates his camera keeps on uttering “*Di ‘ko mamatay sa corona, mamatay ‘ko sa gutom*” [“I will not die in corona, I will die in hunger”]. These aforementioned quarantine films resonate “the inadequacy and indignity of state responses to crises that trap the poor in cycles of deeper poverty and precarity” (Alvarez & Makalintal, 2020, para. 5). In an experimental film by Karlo Magboo titled *Contrast* that was screened during *MULAT 2.0 Visual Expressions of Quarantine*, its visual metaphors and symbolisms depict how the COVID-19 pandemic exposes an unequal distribution of resources when the less fortunate and the underprivileged would pessimistically not survive.

I decided to give the audience a glimpse of what are being served to the privileged and the marginalized during this quarantine. At these trying times, it is obvious how the former has more access to resources, as compared to the latter. I think showing the difference between them would be a big help for people who still struggle to check their privileges and fail to sympathize for the outskirts of society, who are greatly affected by this pandemic. (Magboo, cited from Likhang Mulat, 2020)

In that regard, the national government enacted law called Bayanihan to Heal as One Act which aims to allocate funds in the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) to support the displaced, the vulnerable, and the marginalized sectors of society by providing cash subsidies (Apostol & Go, 2020). Meanwhile, local governments, nongovernmental organizations, and private donors distributed relief goods targeting those families who live below poverty line and daily wage earners including the people who get trapped in the metro and weren't able to get home in their provinces. Goods usually include 3-5 kilos of rice, 5 canned sardines, and 3-5 packs of instant noodles exactly like what the short films such as Edel Hembrador's *555*, Ruben Timbol's *Ligo ng Biyaya*, and Jordan Briones Prado's *Ayuda* have featured.

### ***Threats, Violence, and Abuse of Power***

The problems that the Filipinos encountered in the early months of the pandemic were worsened by threats, violence, and abuse of power. The highly militarized response of the government to implement lockdown led to an estimated 120,000 Filipinos that were arrested or warned for flouting rules (Nortajuddin, 2020). One instance is the violent police dispersal to the residents of San Roque, Quezon City who staged a protest in EDSA on April 1, 2020 due to the lack of relief support from the government. Twenty-one of them were arrested (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020). It is deeply alarming that President Rodrigo Duterte himself bluntly ordered the police and the military to "shoot them dead" if there is trouble or violation of quarantine protocols that the government imposed, especially to those whom he called the leftists which he blamed for instigating the said protest (Tomacruz, 2020b).

Three weeks after the dispersal of the protesters from San Roque, there was another violent encounter in the street during quarantine which occurred when Winston Ragos, a former soldier who stepped out of their house on April 21, 2020 was "shot by a cop after he appeared to try to pull something from his sling bag while taunting the law enforcers" (Talabong,

2020, para. 2). The abusive methods in punishing those who were accused to breaching quarantine and the violent response to mainly poor people reflect the oppressive approach of the government in handling the public health crisis. This theme on threats and violence is explored in Howell Villacrusis' *Pusila ang Gutom*; Janella Garner's *Blindfold*; Patricia Mae Pating's *Lipas*; Marc Vincent Cosico's *The Quarantine Kid*; Jether Serino's *Ang Pagpanghunaw sa Tampalasa*; Jen L. Balberona's *QuaranTimeZ*; and Neil Juliano's *Ayuda-Me*.

For instance, in Nickey Zacate's *Blue Zone*, the film shows how the character is terrified with the possibility of encountering violence and even death if in case he violates any of the quarantine protocols. Zacate relates that pandemic experience to a video game:

To escape the "blue zone" while fighting the enemies is the only goal to survive and win in PUBG (PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds) which I want to relate in this pandemic. But in our case, we are in the blue zone. We are looking for a way to survive this crisis but as we get closer to get out from this zone, we are risking our lives and most of the people above us are blocking our way. (online interview, Zacate, May 14, 2020)

When the ordinary citizens have breached the quarantine protocols, the order was to detain or shoot them dead, but 'compassion' was freely given to high-ranking officials (Madarang, 2020). These unfair circumstances happened when the controversial "*mañanita*", an early morning birthday serenade, was organized by the cops of National Capital Region Police Office for Major General Debold Sinas on May 8, 2020 (Gavilan, 2020); and a breaching of quarantine protocols of a private hospital in Makati City by Sen. Aquilino "Pimentel" III who received criticism from the netizens (Madarang, 2020). The short film titled *Maghugas ng Kamay Bago Kumain* by Gcay Reyes implicitly critiques the public servants and some police officers who eat up their own words and then just wash their hands to clean themselves from public disgrace, a scenario different if the underprivileged or poor are involved.

### ***Inaccessibility of Online Classes***

The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought inevitable challenges to the educational institutions, teachers, and students. All schools in the country were forced to refrain from conducting the traditional face-to-face classes and shifted to online classes which required digital technologies (e.g., laptop, personal computer, smartphone, tablet) and stable Internet connection. More than 24 million elementary and high school students in both public

and private schools were affected in the opening of classes in October 2020 which had 3 million enrollees less than 2019's 27.7 million students (Magsambol, 2020). In the colleges and universities, there were 3.5 million tertiary-level students enrolled in 2,400 HEIs (Joaquin, et al., 2020). Not to mention that there are about 2.3 million learners in the country who have no electricity access which also stops them to continue distance learning (Baclig, 2020).

During the early months of the pandemic, online classes have also become an issue upon realizing that there are students who would be left behind because of the “digital divide” (Santos, 2020). Not all Filipino students could afford to buy gadgets and subscribe to Internet in order to continue their classes online. This explains why many students are forced to file leave of absence, while others have still continued but suffered from extraordinary stress. The same problem goes for the teachers themselves since not everyone has the capacity to afford the required communication technologies for online teaching. This reveals the unpreparedness of the education sector, government agencies, and telecommunications industry in times of a world-wide crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic that “has disrupted not just the education system, but people’s lives as a whole” (Despi, 2020, para. 16). These are the pandemic narratives of many Filipino students brought to us by short features such as Xylo Pineda’s *Notif*; Mark Anthony Bautista’s *Online Class*; Jamaica Bulandus’ *Signal*; Sofia Jornacion’s *Online Classes*; Robinson Planilla’s *Class of 2020*; Regín de Guzman’s *Karen Is Trying to Connect*; Con Montajes’ *Salugpongan*; and Kevin Leviste’s *Last Sem na ni Peter*, to name a few.

For example, the animated film titled *Saan aabot ang pipti pesos ko?* by Jed Leonard Caasi, exhibited during the #QuarantineStories of Makata Indie Film Festival, narrates the story of a student who is torn between two decisions: if she would spend that fifty pesos that she has to buy load for the Internet data so she can submit an assignment via online, or if she would instead use the money to buy food for her family. The tragic ending shows that the character decides to end her life. This story in the short film is based on reports about students who died from suicide due to education-related problems in the time of pandemic (Recaña, 2020). Here is a monologue from the character in the animation that pictures the unfortunate situation of many Filipino students:

Ma’am, sir baka pwede po kayo mapakiusapan? Kaya ko naman pong tapusin itong mga projects at homeworks na pinapagawa nyo. Ang hindi ko lang alam ay kung paano maipasa sa inyo.... Sa patuloy na pag-extend ng lockdown, patuloy rin ang pangamba ng mga magulang ko. Patuloy

na palaisipan kung paano kami makakakuha ng makakain, kung paano namin masu-survive ang isang araw na may laman ang aming tiyan lalo na yung kapatid kong kailangan pang sumuso ng gatas... Hindi ko na po alam kung yung singkuwenta pesos na natira sa ipon ko ipanglo-load ko para makapasa ng requirements o ipangkakain na lang ng pamilya ko (Caasi, 2020).

[Ma'am, sir if you can do me a favor. I can finish all the projects and assignments you have assigned to me. The only problem is that I can't hand it down to you personally... The lockdown in our city is extended every now and then, our parents are still in fear. They kept wondering where to get food for us everyday, especially that my younger sibling still needs to be breastfed. Not sure if the Php 50.00 that I still have in my pocket will be enough to buy Internet load or maybe use that money to buy food for my family.]

Aside from students who suffer from this kind of set-up in learning and education, the parents are also forced to help their children in the completion of their modules. The short documentary titled *Sigpat sa Paglaum* by Raymark Esteban Estael and Christian Don Melloria, tells the story of Jovy, a mother who teaches and guides her eight children who are in grade schools and high school in finishing their modules while taking care of her toddler and doing her domestic duties. It is not that easy to show such kind of tenacity, but it serves as inspiration to other students to keep going despite the challenges especially if they have the means to continue.

### ***Sacrifices of the Frontline Workers***

Protecting the health workers is a key to saving the lives of millions of Filipinos. The doctors, nurses, and all medical staffers serve as frontliners who work hard day and night to save those infected by the deadly virus. Unfortunately, their own lives are also in danger especially if the government could not provide protection for our pandemic heroes. The DOH for a time has recorded a number of over 5000 health workers who tested positive for the coronavirus (Tomacruz, 2020c). As the numbers continue to rise, it would pose a risk to the country's goal of flattening the infection curve if the health workers themselves could not recover soon.

Moreover, the health sector in the country has been overwhelmed by the continued rise of COVID-19 cases which resulted to increasing number of hospitals that could no longer accommodate COVID-19 patients while "exposing the deeply rooted problems in the country's public healthcare

system” (Nonato, 2020, para. 2) also observed by Jan Carlo O. Natividad in his short film *Virus, Veeerus, Beer Us*. Condemning the government for failing to provide sufficient protection to our health workers, their sacrifices by not seeing their own families, and promoting their safety and welfare are the primary messages of short films such as Imran John Aquino’s *Hirap sa Harap, Harap sa Hirap*; Quin Pacis’s *Burador*; Ferdie Lopez’s *Pamilya*; experimental films like Beatriz Rogas’s *Shift* and Earl Jon Taguinod’s *VC*; and documentary film like Aletheia Paludipan’s *Di Naibalikas A Sapata*. In the short film *Tawag* by Jeff Guab, a character who plays the role of a son is having a phone conversation with his mother to update her of the condition of their family at home. At the end of the film, it is revealed that her mother is a health worker who could not afford to go home because of her responsibilities in the hospital.

Apart from the health workers, essential workers also include the teachers, guards, riders, journalists, to name a few, are also honored in *Dear Frontliners* by Earvic Noay and Sophia Borromeo; *Mighty Teacher* by Anna Ellena Manguera; and *Shooting COVID-19: Media Frontliners* by King Catoy & EngageMedia. In the short animation *Dear Frontliners*, a child (voiceover by Shayla Ann Cid) sends a letter to the frontliners that contains this heartfelt message:

I want people to realize how much you’ve sacrificed, your tireless days and sleepless nights show how you put your own needs aside. I cannot wait to see you again, for a chance to hug and thank you. With every goodbye as you walk out the door, I want to tell you how much I’m proud of you. But for now, this is what I can do, to stand and be strong just like what you told me to. Now, a better and brighter future is in sight. Thank you for taking the frontline. We are one in this fight. (Noay, E. & Borromeo, S., 2021)

### ***Impact of Prolonged Quarantine to Mental Health***

The camera is in locked frame. An aquarium is placed in the foreground with its fish swimming all alone and lonely in that cage. In the clear water of the aquarium, a family is shown. The mother is taking care of the infant, while the father and son are talking about chocolate, all together in the living room. They are preparing to attend a birthday of their son’s godmother while hearing the son asking “where do we go?”. They will not go anywhere but home because it is an online party. Like the fish in the aquarium, they cannot go somewhere. Due to quarantine, they are stuck in one place.

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This particular scene describes the narrative of *Soul Fish* by director Zurich Chan, one of the 16 short films produced and screened for the *Eksena Cinema Quarantine: COVID-19 Filmmakers' Diaries*. The short film vividly shows how this COVID-19 pandemic forced us to stay at home for a long time which lessened our social interactions.

However, more than just staying at home or the immobility of the people, many people who are not used to this kind of isolation suffer from frustration, fear, anxiety, depression, and other negative effects to mental health according to a study conducted by The Lancet (Moreno et al., 2020). Mental health experts warned us “that losing everyday social connections comes with psychological costs” (Gupta, 2020, para. 1). The quarantine films that portray how waiting for the world to be recovered from the deadly virus may exacerbate health-care disparities include Marc Andre Baldo’s *Kapalaran*, an experimental film that visually depicts how the repetitiveness of activities at home lead to absent-mindedness; Princess Maun’s *Hintay*, another experimental film that shows how loss of income, hunger, isolation, and inactivity may cause the people be dead inside; Luke del Castillo’s *Kalawakan*, a short feature that narrates the story of a man whose isolation literally feels like floating mindlessly on space; Miks de Guzman’s *Empty* that shows empty roads and settings that metaphorically implies inner emptiness; Ceona Gonzales’ *Unay*, a one-shot video of a man doing self-flagellation as an act of repentance during the Holy Week that becomes a visual representation of what someone feels during the quarantine period; and Francis Tavas’s *Paghinga*, an experimental film that depicts how we should allow ourselves to breathe despite all these chaotic situations.

Those people who are already diagnosed with clinical depression are the most vulnerable during the period of prolonged quarantine as depicted in the expressionist-inspired short film by Reinalyn Papauran titled *Ani’no* that shows a woman’s nightmare when someone strangles her with bare hands only to find out that she’s the one who does it to herself. Meanwhile, in an experimental film *Lingkag* which literally means “opened with force,” director and actor Serafin Catangay plays a role of a man who’s in severe pain caused by an open wound in his face that visually represents what people with mental health issues feel. Furthermore, Veronica Ramos in her short film *Sleep Paralysis* implies that the psychological impact of pandemic brings us to a feeling of being conscious but unable to move like what occurs during sleep paralysis as the title suggests. But the feeling of a messy and chaotic mind brought by too much stress is even worse like what the short films *Veeruz* by Peter Fantinalgo and *ACID* by Enoc Dee portray.

As a country with one of the most numbers of suicide rates, there is a fear this will get higher if the duration of the quarantine gets longer as

expected (Carey, 2020). That effect of a mental illness leading to self-harm is portrayed in the quarantine films like *Ikot-Ikot* by Alaine Dominique Eslabra and *Ingay* by Melvin Rosetes as a social awareness campaign that this is a possibility to occur. That is why in the short features titled *Logout* by Mong Feliciano and *Pagbangon* by John Remel Flotildes, the filmmakers encourage their audiences to be aware of this serious problem, break the stigma, and never take it for granted.

### ***Protests and Activism to Demand Accountability***

The shutting down of a giant media network has also been an important issue during ECQ especially in this crucial time when the people rely on legitimate news and information. The closure of ABS-CBN on May 5, 2020 was ordered by National Telecommunications Commission due to expiration of legislative franchise (Gregorio, 2020). This occurred “at a critical time when Filipinos need key information about the coronavirus crisis” (Rivas, 2020, para. 9). Such threat to media freedom was followed by the controversy of Rappler, a local news website, when its co-founder and high-profile journalist Maria Ressa and former reporter Reynaldo Santos, Jr. have been convicted of cyberlibel (Barron, 2020).

Meanwhile, the anti-terror bill, that brought dismay to its opponents, was signed into law by Duterte on July 3, 2020 (Lema & Petty, 2020) believing that it will only be used against political dissent and activism. This political repression however does not stop the activists from the progressive groups to voice out their protests against ineffective and incompetent approach in handling the public health crisis by those in power despite of fear that this anti-terror law can be wrongfully used against them.

The experimental film *Bantay* produced by Regina Atenas shows a dog with a mouth tied with rope which symbolizes how the state attempts to silent media institutions like ABS-CBN and Rappler as government watchdogs believing that all these are politically motivated, a huge threat against democracy. Moreover, another experimental film titled *Sining Sandata* by Maricon Montajes, features artist Neil Doloricon, professor and former dean of the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts, known for his politically-aware and social realist themes who believes in the power of art in the time of pandemic. Doloricon shared in the film:

Yung sining makakatulong yan. Nagiging limited ang tulong nya kung yung mga artists hindi lumalahok doon sa isang kilusan ng pagbabago. Kapag lumahok ang mga artista dyan mas lalong nagiging, sabi nga natin, sandata. Isang hindi matitinag na sandata ang ating sining pagka

nilapat natin sa paglahok sa isang kilusan ng pagbabago (Doloricon, cited from Montajes, 2021).

[Art can help. That help can be limited if the artists do not engage with a movement of social change. If the artists engage then it becomes a cultural weapon. Our art becomes an indestructible weapon if we utilize it for a movement of transformation.]

Alternative multimedia collectives like that of Tudla Productions, Kodao Productions, Mayday Multimedia, Film Weekly, RESpond and Break the silence Against the Killings (RESBAK), and Sine Sanyata, to name a few, have been active in documenting the stories from below, or those people who are the most vulnerable in the time of pandemic (e.g., urban poor community, poor working class, indigenous peoples, homeless people). Their videos and newsreels are uploaded in their social media accounts that highlight protests and activism to demand accountability from those who are in control of the situations. Examples are the documentary films and film essays screened on the Facebook page of Gawad Alternatibo on August 15, 2020, by the alternative multimedia collectives and alternative filmmakers. These are *Quarantine Exercise (Your Human Right)* and *#HuwagMatakot* by RESBAK, an alliance of artists, media practitioners, and cultural workers that creatively present the struggles and protests of the marginalized sectors of society while the country was on its early months of the pandemic; the audiovisual works of JL Burgos, a social advocacy filmmaker from Film Weekly, titled *Ano ang aming Kasalanan* that aims to question why the state blames the poor Filipinos in the mismanagement of the public health crisis, *Pagkatapos Nito* that visually interprets the song of the same title composed and produced by Joseph Purugganan, Bong Ramilo and the Village Idiots, and lastly, *Lockdown Journal*, a vertical music video of random images of people during ECQ in the tune of “What a Wonderful World” to remember the generosity, resilience, and camaraderie of the Filipinos (Burgos, 2020); the short experimental documentary *Kontrol* and animated documentary *Yawyawni JP* by Sine Sanyata were also featured as “[embodiment of] the voices of many Filipinos who are at the receiving end of the oppressive measures of the State” (Cinemalaya, 2021); and *Shooting COVID-19: Media Frontliners in Manila* by King Catoy and EngageMedia that follows JL Burgos “as he documents the stories of the marginalized communities in Metro Manila that have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Pacia, 2020, para. 2).

### ***Productivity, Hope, and Resilience***

Living in a country prone to disasters or calamities such as typhoon, earthquake, landslide, flood, volcanic eruptions, among others, Filipinos find it a cliché and toxic positivity when the government repeatedly highlights that the productivity, hope, and resilience never ceased even in the time of pandemic. Such ideology can be seen in some of the quarantine films.

For instance, in *Dagok sa Buhay* by Michael Alo, the film encourages the people not to waste time during ECQ by taking this opportunity to practice and learn new knowledge and skills. This productivity is illustrated in the short films like *Stay Art Home* by Andi Ramdani that shows characters working on their paintings and *Triathlon Quarantine Edition* by Maria Angela Ganzon that shows characters doing physical activities such as swimming, cycling, and running at the backyard. Furthermore, for Ken Magpusao in *Kwentong ASBO (Aliw sa Bawat Oras)*, we can keep ourselves busy and productive even in random and little things that sometimes we take for granted when we are at home which includes simple household chores. The film advises the viewers to be mindful of these seemingly simple things. For Danny Añonuevo, general cleaning of the house can be very productive during the lockdown as shown in his two-part videos *Buhay Quarantine*. These quarantine films imply that making ourselves productive during lockdowns could help us reduce burnout, stress, and anxiety.

Stories of hope and messages of encouragement are featured in Kent John Desamparado's *Behind the Mask*; Angelene Saladino's *Let's Pray for Everyone's Safety and Protection*; Ruby Rose Valdevarona's *Sakaling Tayo ang Bahaghari*; Randy Caliva Gianan Jr's *Away – Namnama bayat Panagsagaba*; Gilliano Salvador's *Kaniya-kaniyang Laban*; Al Nikko John Nagutom's *Buong Pusong Alalay*; Rochel Bernido and Joshua Paradeza's *Pagtitiis*; Russ Joshua Lazarito's *Punit*; and Marife Palmenco's *#WeHealAsOne* – all declaring how we should look for the brighter side amid these challenging times.

Inspirations, good memories, and positive vibes are depicted in Pitt Delcano's *Better Days*. In Domcar Calinawan Lagto's *First of May*, the off-screen characters talk about how rain brings healing until we hear the voice of DOH Undersecretary Dr. Maria Rosario S. Vergeire encouraging the Filipinos that we can beat the COVID-19 together, we will heal as one, as they say. Other short features include Sophia Torres Brillantes' *Homework*; Edward Nikko Cruz's *Regalo*; Mark Putian's *Reminder*; with Guinnevere Decene's *Alab ng Puso*, a music video; Fadly Sabran's *Spread Love Not Virus*, an animation; Elijah Paul Villanueva's *Ang mga Yapak ngayong Panahon ng Pandemya sa Inglatera*, a short documentary – all produced to send a message of hope that depicts the resiliency of the Filipinos, a notion popularized by the government and mainstream media.

In the ten selected quarantine film festivals, two of them called for film entries that deliberately tell stories of hope and resilience in the time of COVID-19 pandemic: *DokyuBata 2020: Pagbabago't Pagbangon - Mga Kuwento ng Katatagan at Pag-asa sa Gitna ng Pandemya* by the National Council for Children's Television of the Department of Education; and *Depicting the Lighter Side of Quarantine Life* as the theme of QCShortShorts by QCinema International Film Festival. Both of these quarantine film festivals are direct initiatives of the national (Department of Education) and local government (Quezon City) respectively. On that note, the "Filipino resiliency" (Mejia, 2020) can be critiqued as a romanticized concept repeatedly utilized by the government to amplify social and cultural ideas that they impose in order to hide their incompetence and inefficient response to the various calamities experienced by the people. Similar to the COVID-19 crisis, the resilience of the Filipinos is being highlighted again without fully realizing how the Filipinos "seem to have been accustomed and desensitized to the calamities and disasters that have occurred in our unique geographical situation and current politico-economic state that we never even bother to question why Filipinos have had to be resilient in the first place" (Mejia, 2020, para. 1). Aware of such ideology, greater number of the quarantine films however critically expose the ineffectiveness of the dominant systems and demand accountabilities from the government.

### Conclusion

Quarantine cinema emerges as a film culture and genre that is characterized by its offering of alternative film practice and prevalent COVID-19 pandemic narratives. This phenomenon is a result of necessary adjustments to adapt in these trying times and a critical response to the social, political, and economic issues brought by a public health crisis. The results indicate how quarantine cinema plays its part in sustaining art and culture amidst the virus outbreak by practicing alternative ways of film production that is limited and confined at homes and personal spaces; film aesthetics that deviate from standardized forms, techniques, and style; and film exhibition and events that heavily relied on social media and online platforms.

The categories of themes extracted from the quarantine cinema are in fact considered as the dominant narratives in the time of pandemic in the Philippines. They are also found even in the daily news programs of the media conglomerates (e.g., ABS-CBN, GMA). However, they become alternative to what we usually see in the commercial films preoccupied with fantasy and fictional stories based on the imaginations of the screenwriters and directors. In the quarantine cinema, these are authentic pandemic

narratives experienced first-hand by the filmmakers themselves or directly observed in their own communities. Being an alternative to the commercial films which productions were mostly paralyzed during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the objective of these creative presentations of the narratives in quarantine cinema is not to entertain or immerse the public to a new dramatic world that allows us to forget or escape from the reality (e.g., Netflix, Star Cinema). Instead, quarantine cinema encourages the public to confront realities exposed by the pandemic. It does not influence the audiences to leisurely watch these audiovisual productions for relaxation or enjoyment, but to rise up, be critical, and take actions. Rolando Tolentino stresses that:

Ang kolektibong tinig at bisyon ng filmmakers ay dokumento, testamento, at manifesto ng pelikula sa panahon ng lockdown at lampas pa rito. Ito ay pahiwatig kung paano ang paglikha ay ang susustina sa ating laban sa pandemiko at iba pang panlipunang problema. (Tolentino, cited from ECQ: Covid19 Filmmakers Diaries, 2021).

[The collective voice and vision of the filmmakers is a documentation, testament, and manifestation of cinema during lockdown and beyond. This indicates how creative endeavors sustain our fight against the pandemic and other social problems.]

Quarantine cinema as a film culture and genre may be *confined* within the limitations and constraints imposed by the community quarantines in the country, however, it is still *unconfined* with the creative expressions and cinematic representations of pandemic narratives. These audiovisual productions significantly contribute to the data and repository of collective memories on COVID-19; and strengthen the proof that reveals how the Philippines and its people experienced one of the worst public health crises known in the world history.

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