Imitation, Indigenization, Assimilation? No, Globalization!: The Cinema of Bobby Suarez

*Tilman **Baumgärtel** / University of the Philippines Film Institute*

Abstract

In my presentation I would like to define a post-colonial theoretical framework for reading the films of Philippine director Bobby Suarez. While virtually unknown in his home country, he has produced Quentin-Tarantino-certified cult movies such as *They Called her Cleopatra Wong*, and most of his productions have been commercially distributed in Europe, the United States, the Middle East and South East Asia. I want to locate the cinema of Bobby Suarez vis-à-vis a post-colonial and predominantly local cinema as that of the Philippines on the one hand and a "glocal" cinema as that of Hong Kong on the other hand. Philippine cinema has indigenized influences of the Spanish Zarzuela, Hollywood film and other world cinemas to create a cinema that caters predominantly to the local market. Hong Kong cinema on the other hand is the product of a region that has been de-colonized only recently. Its post-war cinema never catered exclusively to the local audience, but also to the Nanyang (south of mainland China) community in South East Asia, and has increasingly reached audiences beyond that group. It amalgamates Chinese cultural traditions with international influences in a way that – according to critics like Stephen Teo – created a transglobal cinema. The cinema of Philippine director Bobby Suarez is a quite different animal altogether. Schooled in the film business of Hong Kong of the 1960s, but based in Manila for most of his career, his films were always made for an international market, with English instead of Tagalog dialogue. Most of his films were produced for a specific country/producer, and Suarez tried to accommodate this market, while at the same time catering to an assumed lowest common denominator in the international moviegoers´ taste. In this process, he created a flamboyant parallel universe of female Chinese martial artists, German expats, Philippine thugs, Mexican drug lords and American super cops, who fight their way through an assortment of film genres. It is partly cheerful cock-and-bull story a la Feuillade, but it is also partly postmodern pastiche. The cinema of Bobby Suarez implodes any notion of a national cinema. Coming from nowhere in particular, it turns the concept of national identity into a fun house. His films are examples of a globalization avant-lettre. While trying to emulate international action cinema, he has produced a peculiar filmic account of globalization beyond international business and economics. Only recently art house directors as diverse as Wim Wenders (in *Till the End of the World*), Fruit Chan (in *Public Toilet*) or Wong Kar-Wei (in *Happy Together*) have consciously embarked on a comparable venture. In my presentation I will look specifically at his film *Rose Tattoo*, a Philippine-German co-production, that takes place in the German expatriate community in Manila.

I first encountered a film by Bobby Suarez in the middle of the 1980s, in a video store in Düsseldorf, Germany, when I was a literature student at the Heinrich-Heine-Universität there. On the cover of the VHS tape was a glamorous-looking Asian Woman in a long, floating gown, wearing a turban on her head, and pointing a gun towards the viewer. Left and right of her, forming a fierce triptych, were two other women; one donning a semi-automatic rifle while the other one was about to shoot three arrows from a large bow. On closer examination, these three women seemed to be the same person, wearing different tight dresses, which must have been fashionable in the late 1970s. In the background was a big building exploding and a helicopter crashing – a dynamic, if slightly tacky composition. Its power was only underlined by the title that was splashed across the cover: "They called her… Cleopatra Wong."

The movie seemed to be one of the martial arts flicks from Hong Kong that were flooding the video stores in Germany back then. Little did I know that a director from the *Philippines* shot this film in *Singapore* and in the *Philippines* (and that I would end up in the latter country two decades later*)*. This was not only very probably my first encounter with a film from any of these two countries. I am convinced that this was also the only film from any of these countries (or any other South East Asian Country, expect for Hong Kong, for that matter) in the whole store. I borrowed it, watched it, and found it off-beat and amusing. And for some reason the film, unlike many other b-movies that I saw during this period of misspend hours in video stores and in front of the VCR, stuck with me.

Looking back from today, it is strange fact that I never spend a thought on where this film was made. Seeing it again after twenty years and after having moved to the Philippines, I notice that the protagonists mention city names as "Singapore," "Hong Kong," and "Manila." Back then however, I never thought about these locations. To me it took merely place "somewhere in Asia" and the film might as well have been an American or even European production.

It wasn't, because Asia was so far away for me as a young student (I had already travel to Japan), and I therefore didn't care about geographic details. Rather this film seems to come from a generic action movie country, a parallel university, where people of all races,

nationalities and creeds spend their days hunting each other through narrow alleys or abandoned factories, up and down staircases or through the jungle. In this action movie universe, people constantly chase each other with motorbikes, convertibles, race cars, or beach buggies. They speed through streets, over fortifications and construction sites. They keep shooting at each other with arrows, pistols, machine guns and hand grenade launchers. They break down doors, crash through windows and jump from flying helicopters, all the while cracking smart-ass remarks. When women appear in these movies, they usually are quickly whisked away as hostages to some hideout in a dark basement, a secret laboratory or a remote fort. The men who do this spend a lot of time laughing diabolically, when they are not busy shooting at their pursuers. Sometimes they do both at the same time.

Films from a great many countries have contributed to the creation of this violent never-ever land where everybody seems always to steal something from somebody else (diamonds, wonder weapons, computer disks with the secret for world domination) and than hound each other for it. Of course, most of these plots are generic and are done to death in a lot of movies. What sets the films apart, which I am talking about here, is their geo-spatial vagueness.

These films are usually low-budget productions that simply do not have the money to use spectacular locations. They include European thriller co-productions as well as American B-movies, and the Spanish and Italian cannibal films or horror films, which delight in vaguely exotic locations full of crime lords, sadistic prison guards and cruel jungle tribes. Most of them are from the 1970s, but the recent, international productions of Jackie Chan (such as *Who am I?* or *Armour of God*) take place in a similar parallel universe, that is "somewhere out there" and chock-full of crooks, henchmen and goons.

Often the nameless never-ever land where these films take place is actually the Philippines. In the 1960s and 1970s, American producers such as Roger Corman used the Philippines as an exotic backdrop for formulaic, low-budget action films, which took advantage of the natural beauty of the archipelago, in addition to the cheap, English-speaking labour and the comparatively high film productions standards of the country. The Marcos government that

hoped for both income and international exposure actively supported these American-Philippine co-productions. The Marcoses did not interfere with the making of these movies, (as opposed to their control of the local film industry), and the American film producers enjoyed comparative artistic licence in the Philippines.

The Philippine film history and criticism has so far taken little interest in these productions. Busy with promoting quality films, the major publications on Philippine cinema (Guerrero 1984; Lent 1990, 149-84; David 1990; Tiongson 1994; David 1998; Vera 2005) do not concern themselves to a great extent with the Tagalog action cinema that was a very popular genre during the 1970s and 1980s, much less with this strange episode in the history of local film making. Bobby Suarez does not figure at all in these accounts of the development of Philippine cinema, even though most of his films – as well as most of the American-Filipino co-productions mentioned earlier – were shown in the Philippines and sometimes were quite successful.

Before I address these co-productions in greater detail, I have to return to the subject of this paper, the Filipino director Bobby Suarez. This director, who retired in the late 1980s from film making, is virtually unknown in his home country, even though he has written and directed 12 films and produced five more films, most of which were commercially distributed in Europe, the United States, the Middle East and South East Asia. This is quite a feat for a director from an Asian country that – unlike Japan, India, Hong Kong or recently South Korea – has never made a big international impact with its films. Some of the films of the Philippine social-realist directors of the 1970s and 1980s – such as Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal or Mike De Leon – were screened at international festival such as Cannes or Berlin. And more recently independent films such as *Magnifico* (2003), *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros* (2005) or *Kubrador* (2006) won international awards. But the interest in these films has been limited to a small worldwide audience of art-house film buffs and critics.

Bobby Suarez's movies have little in common with these art films. They were fodder for grind house theatres around the world, late night cable television or the direct-to-video market of the late 1970s and 1980. Most of his productions are action films, *pulp fiction* in the

truest sense of the word. They have simple stories that allow for a lot of fight and chase scenes, they are hard-hitting and fast-paced, and they try to make the most of the limited resources that were available for their production. Just consider the titles of some of his movies: *They Call Him Chop-Suey* (1975), *Master Samurai* (1974), *Asia Cosa Nostra* (1973), *One-Armed Executioner* (1983). Most of his films were made in the Philippines, with the exception of four films, including *Cleopatra Wong,* which were shot in Singapore with the hope to launch a series of films with a pan-Asian appeal. All of them are low-budget productions, and all of them had some international funding.

Meanwhile, there is a new, international interest in Suarez's films by b-movie buffs around the world. An American company recently picked up the DVD rights for *Cleopatra Wong* and two other films, and at least two writers have expressed interest in writing a book on his films. Suarez himself is currently pitching a sequel of *Cleopatra Wong* to different financiers. (Suarez 2006)

His films have been shown at the film festival in Brisbane and at the Singapore film festival, where *Cleopatra Wong* and *Bionic Boy* in particular received a lot of interest, because they were the last film productions from the Lion City, before the local film industry there went into a hiatus of almost two decades. (It was incidentally not the first time that talent from the Philippines played a part in the movie production of Singapore and Malaysia. The Malay classic *Sarjan Hassan* [1955] was directed by Lamberto Avellana, a director that went on to become a National Artist of the Philippines, and the Filipino director Ramon Estela made two of the popular Malay *Pontianak*-horror films in the 1950s.)

On the Internet, there is plenty of fan material and raves especially about *Cleopatra Wong* and *The One-Armed Executioner* in blogs and on sites dedicated to international "trash cinema." Just consider this comment from the Internet Movie Data Base: "This was my favorite movie when I was young (6 or 7 years)," writes an Isabelle Stephen from Québec, Canada. "All I remember of this movie is that the actress is beautiful and that she fights well! I try [sic!] to find this movie for years" (Stephen 2006).

Two things about this entry are remarkable. First of all, that it has been written by a woman, who is usually a non-entity in the universe of martial arts and action-films fan-boys. And second of all, that a co-production between the Philippines and Singapore reached an audience in Canada at all, a privilege for an Asian film of that time that was almost exclusively bestowed upon martial arts films from Hong Kong in the 1970s. This fact speaks to the popular appeal that the movie had all over the world. (Another one is the fact, that a 1980s Australian independent band, a side project of the better known *Go-Betweens*, actually named themselves after the character Cleopatra Wong.)

The comment from the Internet Movie Data Base can serve for me as a starting point to formulate the hypothesis of this paper. In this essay I want to locate the cinema of Bobby Suarez vis-à-vis a post-colonial and predominantly local cinema as that of the Philippines on the one hand and a "glocal" cinema as that of Hong Kong, that is local and global at the same time, on the other hand. I will try to position the films of Bobby Suarez in a theoretical post-colonial background that will take into account how other filmmakers from Asia have dealt with the dominant influence of Western, especially American, movies. These strategies have been characterized as follows: imitation, indigenization, parody, acceptance and resistance.

Both Hong Kong and the Philippines are Asian post-colonial countries. Both had to come to terms with the cinema of their respective colonizers, and more generally with Western, especially Hollywood, cinema. Both were for a certain period very successful in offering its audience a popular alternative to American productions. Yet, apart from that these two national cinemas could not be more different. The Philippine cinema has indigenized influences of the *Zarzuela,* a light comedy of the Spanish colonizers and other dramatic traditions (Tiongson 1983), Hollywood and other world cinemas to create a cinema that caters predominantly to the local market.

Hong Kong cinema on the other hand is the product of a region that has been "de-colonized" only recently. Unlike in the Philippines, the post-war cinema of Hong Kong never catered exclusively to the local audience, but also to the "Nanyang" (*south of mainland China*) community in South East Asia, and it has increasingly reached audiences beyond that group.

Hong Kong cinema amalgamates Chinese cultural traditions with international influences in a way that – according to critics like Stephen Teo – created a "transglobal" cinema (Teo, "Local and Global Identity").

The cinema of Filipino director Bobby Suarez is a quite different animal altogether. Schooled in the film business of Hong Kong of the 1960s, but based in Manila for most of his career, his films were always made for an international market, with English instead of Tagalog dialogue. Most of his films were produced for a specific country/producer, and Suarez tried to accommodate this market, while at the same time catering to an assumed lowest common denominator in the international moviegoers' taste. In this process, he created a flamboyant parallel universe of female Chinese martial artists, Singaporean spies, Philippine thugs, Mexican drug lords, American super cops and German expats, who fight their way through an assortment of film genres. It is partly cheerful cock-and-bull story a la Feuillade, but it is also partly post-modern pastiche. All of his films were released not only in the Philippines, but also in various international markets.

The cinema of Bobby Suarez challenges any notion of a "national cinema." Coming from a vaguely localized, yet highly exotic and at the same time hyper-modern Asia, where Asians, Americans and Europeans are hunting each other through a number of colourful locations, it blends elements from a number of different genres: the martial arts movie, the action movie, mystery, thriller, "eastern," spy and revenge movie. In the process, it turns the concept of "national cinema" into a fun house. Suarez films then are examples of cultural globalisation *avant-lettre*.

Of course, Suarez never wanted to make a statement about globalisation. His films are marked by the opportunistic effort to participate in the success of other Asian and American film genres, that were thriving at that time: *Cleopatra Wong* is an attempt to cash in on the success of the James Bond movies, *American Commandos* (1983) is a Vietnam movie along the lines of *Rambo*, and *Warriors of the Apocalypse* (1985) is a film in the mould of post-apocalyptic movies such as *Mad Max*, that enjoyed a brief spell of success in the middle of the 1980s.

In these films, the all-out combat of the protagonists from Europe, Asia and the US might seem like a metaphorical foretaste of today's globalized market with its brutal, pitiless competition of everybody against everybody else. But at the same time, these films – both in their content as well as in the way they were produced – give a glimpse of another, earlier form of globalisation. It is not the globalisation of multinational corporations and conglomerates that we witness today. It is the globalisation of a number of shrewd businessmen with medium-size film companies that started to collaborate internationally in the 1970s.

Even the fans of these films take notice of this process. An Internet reviewer of Suarez's *Warriors of the Apocalypse* has picked up on the "trans-national" nature of this film. He calls the film "one of the strangest examples" of the "post-apocalyptic genre," and continues:

> For one thing, it's impossible to determine the movie's country of origin. We have a predominantly Caucasian cast (that's dubbed), a director with two names that are English and Spanish, and it's filmed in some country with a lush jungle. (…) My best guess is that WOTA was backed by either a Mexican, Filipino, or Italian production company, using the resources and people of different countries to get the best deals and make the movie marketable in these countries. (Bad Movie Planet Review)

Corny as many of these productions appear today, they provided an alternative to the dominance of American cinema. Hollywood has since more or less wiped out this type of filmmaking that tried to challenge American filmmakers on their own territory. While most of these action films were made mainly for their respective national markets, some productions of this nature – such as the Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s – actually became internationally successful in a genre that was previously monopolized by Hollywood.

It is highly questionable if film productions like those of Bobby Suarez would still find a niche in the highly risk-adverse and streamlined media market of today. Yet, in the 1970s, Bobby Suarez was able to distribute most of his films around the world. How did a Filipino director get such an international recognition? Since Bobby Suarez is not only virtually unknown in his father country, but also not an internationally recognized director, some brief

biographical background is in order.

Let me quote from the biography that Suarez (1942) distributes with his company profile and that reads like a treatment for a rags-to-riches movie:

> Roberto A. Suarez, commonly referred to as "Bobby," hailed from a poor descent necessitates his living in the temporary refuge known as the "Manila Boy's Town." From being a nobody, he was able to get a Bachelor's degree in Commerce from Far Eastern University, while being employed as janitor-messenger for the Philippine Branch of Arthur Rank Film Distribution, Inc. He was able to prove dependability and resourcefulness, and through sheer labour and persistence, he was promoted to various capacities, until he was given the post of Asst. Sales manager for the company in 1963. (B.A.S. Film, Press Release, 2)

In 1965, Suarez became Sales and Marketing Director for the Philippine Production Company Fortune Films, before he went to Hong Kong. There he produced several versions of Chinese movies, that were dubbed into in English, and sold these movies in the Philippines and later internationally, too. In Hong Kong he encountered a film industry, which – very unlike the Philippines of that time – would have never been able to sustain itself by producing for its "local market," the city of Hong Kong. This "Hong Kong Connection" is very important for the approach Suarez would later develop to make his own films.

While the post-war "Second Golden Age" of the Philippine movies was over by that time, the country still had a thriving film market, and film producers could make their movies with little consideration if they could be sold abroad. Therefore the Philippine cinema in the 1960s was (and still is) is an almost exclusively national cinema, where films are made without thinking about the possibility of international distribution. In Hong Kong on the other hand, no film could have been produced without the budgets that came from pre-sales to other territories such as Taiwan, Singapore and other South East Asian countries with large Chinese audiences. In fact, many of the studios that Suarez worked with, were not even originally from Hong Kong. Both Shaw Brothers and Cathy were originally founded in Singapore, and moved to Hong Kong only in the early 1960s, while maintaining offices and even production facilities in Singapore,

Taiwan and other Asian countries (Wong 2002; Wong 2003; Wong 2006).

In his time in Hong Kong, Suarez also made valuable business contacts in Europe, the Middle East and Latin America, and some of the producers and distributors that he worked with would later go on to finance his productions from the Philippines (Suarez 2006). One of the contacts also served as the introduction to actual film directing for Suarez: the Spaniard Antonio Isasi-Isasmendi, who had produced and directed action movies and thrillers since the 1950s. Some of his productions – such as *The Adventures of Scaramouch* (1963), *That Man in Istanbul* (1965) or *They Came to Rob Las Vegas* (1970) – were big-budget affairs for European standards and reasonably successful in Spain. Suarez garnered his first experiences in actual film production, when he worked as a "gofer" for Isasi's movie *Un Verano para matar* (Summertime Killer, 1972) in Spain (Suarez 2006).

Suarez did not only pick up on the style of Isasi's movies that were often fast-paced, rough action films. Isasi's films from late 60s and early 70s also provided a blueprint for the methods of production and financing that Suarez would later employ in his own movies. Isasi had already made films for the predominantly Spanish market for over ten years, when he began to try and reach out for the European and the international market in the late 1960s. The cast of his films started to include non-Spanish actors to attract audiences from different countries in order to appeal to the audiences in these respective countries: *That Man from Istanbul* featured the German stars Horst Buchholz, Mario Adorf and Klaus Kinski. *They Came to Rob Las Vegas* had German actress Elke Sommer and Americans Jack Palance and Lee J. Cobb. And *Summertime Killer* starred Karl Malden (*The Streets of San Francisco*, *I Confess, On the Waterfront*) and Christopher Mitchum, the son of Robert Michum and later a lead in some of Suarez's productions.[1]

With the know-how in film distribution from Hong Kong and his first-hand experience of film directing from Spain, Suarez set out to produce his first movies: *Asian Cosa Nostra* (1973) and *Master Samurai* (1974), both featuring Christopher Mitchum. With these two

[1] The theme song of *Summertime Killer* was later included in the soundtrack for Quentin Tarantinos *Kill Bill*, a safe way to indicate cult status.…

films he established the production methods that he would later employ in all of his films. They were generally shot in the Philippines (often with scenes filmed in other Asian countries for added exoticism). They are generally action movie with an international appeal and at least one non-Filipino actor, preferably an American. And they were generally shot in English, a practise that was highly uncommon in the Philippine cinema. (While English is the second language in the Philippines, the local movies are almost without exception in Tagalog.)

Bobby Suarez is however not the first or the only producer who tried to cut costs by using the Philippines for shooting films. As mentioned before, at the time, when Suarez made his first films, a number of American producers had used the Philippines as a cinematic sweatshop for almost ten years. These producers took advantage of the English-speaking crews that worked for relatively small talent fees and the fact that the Philippines provided a wide range of locations from tropical jungles and beaches to vaguely European-looking churches and forts to the modern metropolis Manila.

The difference between most of these productions and Suarez's films is that Suarez always was the producer of his own films, while the Americans most of the time commissioned the mentioned American-Philippino co-productions. They were sometimes shot by American directors with a predominately US-American cast, with bit parts as police officers and goons set aside for local actors. (Some of them feature actors that were or still are stars in the cinema of the Philippines, such as Eddie Garcia or Vic Diaz.) Examples of this approach include Jack Hill's women-in-prison films *The Big Doll House* (1971) or *The Big Bird Cage* (1972), both featuring Pam Grier (an African-American actress, that would go on to star in Blaxploitation-films such as *Coffy* [1973] and *Foxy Brown* [1974], and more recently in *Jackie Brown* [1997] by Quentin Tarantino).

But local directors, some of them highly regarded in the Philippines, directed the majority of the Philippine-American co-productions of that time. Eddie Romero, who went on to become a National Artist of the Philippines and made some of the most high-profile nationalist Filipino classics of the late 1970s and 1980s (such as *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* [1976] or *Aguila* [1979]), directed horror films such as *Mad Doctor of Blood Island* (1968), a

take-off from the *Island of Dr. Moreau* movies, and the similarly themed *Beast of the Yellow Night* (1971), the women-in-prison film *Black Mama, White Mama* (1973, again with Pam Grier) and *Women Hunt* (1973), a movie based on Richard Connell's jungle-hunt classic *The Most Dangerous Game* (1930).

Gerardo De Leon, another National Artist for Film and probably the most accomplished filmmaker in the history of Philippine cinema, made *The Blood-Drinkers* (1966), *Brides of Blood* (1968, with Eddie Romero), *Blood of the Vampires* (1971) and *Women in Cages* (1971) for American distribution companies. All of these productions were drive-in-cinema-fare for a thrill-seeking young audience, and are typically full of grotesque violence and gore. Some of them are currently enjoying a comeback as cult films among a younger crowd of trash film buffs, and many of them have recently been re-issued on DVD. (*The Blood Island Vacation*, not dated).

This period also saw the emergence of a group of American expats in the Philippines that were regularly involved in the production of this type of films. One of them is John Ashley, who had started his acting career in the late 1950s in "kids-in-trouble" melodramas, monster movies and in the Beach Party series before carving a lucrative niche for himself as producer-star of a series of Filipino exploitation pictures. (He went on to become the producer of several American TV series, including *The A-Team* [1983] and *Werewolf* [1987]). Another name that frequently comes up in this context is Ken Metcalfe, who was a screenwriter, producer and actor in many of these films. He also worked as a locations scout or casting director for major American war films such as *Apocalypse now* (1979), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) or *Hamburger Hill* (1987), where the Philippines stood in for Vietnam during the war. Metcalfe also worked with Suarez on a number of occasions. For example he co-wrote and acted in *American Commandos* (1985) and *Warriors of the Apocalypse* (1985).

This tradition continued well into the 1980s, with obscure action movies such as *Fireback* (1978) or *Ninja Warriors* (1985). Many of these films were produced by K.Y. Lim's Silver Star Film Company (called Kinavesa in the Philippines), and typically directed by the Philippine directors Teddy Page (who is now directing television shows under his real name

Teddy Chiu) or John Gale (also known as Jun Gallardo). Silver Star was a notorious but prolific producer of extremely low-budget action films, characterized by very low production values, poor screenplays, technical shortcomings and bad dubbing. Many of them feature the same recurring set of European and American expatriates in the Philippines, who often also acted for Bobby Suarez, for example the former mall-owner Mike Cohen, James Gaines, Mike Monte and occasionally even the former Spaghetti Western stars Richard Harrison and Gordon Mitchell.

Many of the American-Filipino films I have mentioned above might have been standing right next to the copy of *They Called Her…Cleopatra Wong*, which I discovered in the video store in Düsseldorf in the middle of the 1980s. What made these films different from *Cleopatra Wong* however was that films such as *Black Mama White Mama* or *Big Doll House* were financed by American companies such as Roger Corman's American International Pictures. These companies distributed them internationally, and that's why they ended up in my neighbourhood video store.

Cleopatra Wong however was a production from Singapore, by a producers and director from the Philippines. That it ended up in the said video store in Germany nevertheless is quite a triumph considering that the majority of Asian action movies – with the exception of HK martial arts films – had not the slightest chance to make it into any European market. The process that is termed "globalization" today was starting to garner momentum at this time, and *Cleopatra Wong* is a strange filmic ricochet of this process. Therefore I would like to focus on this film and on *The One-armed Executioner* to flesh out some characteristics of the cinema of Bobby Suarez.

Cleopatra Wong

"She purrs like a kitten, makes love like a siren. This side of the Pacific, she is the meanest, deadliest and sexiest secret agent," reads the tag line of *Cleopatra Wong*. Starting with the title, the film is a strange pastiche of very different influences and inspirations. The name of the protagonist has obviously been lifted from the *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), one of the most successful Blaxploitation films of the 1970s that starred Tamara Dobson as an African American

"Special Government Agent."

The story itself tries to take advantage of the growing socio-economic interdependence between the countries of South-East Asia, and is heavy on the attempt to give the movie a pan-Asian appeal. Cleopatra Wong is an Interpol agent whose mission in this film is to crack an illegal counterfeiting group who aims to destabilize the currencies of ASEAN countries Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. During the credits we see Cleopatra Wong first on the dance floor of a discotheque, then in bed with her lover, when she gets a phone call from her superior.

She is assigned to investigate counterfeit money that has been appearing all over South-East Asia. Her mission takes her to Singapore, where she has her first encounter with the criminal organization that has been faking currencies of various South-East Asian countries. Needless to say, that these encounters include the first lengthy chase and fight scenes, that will continue throughout the film. In the harbour of Hong Kong, her next stop, Cleopatra Wong encounters another clue about the counterfeiting ring: A jar of strawberry jam filled with counterfeit HK dollars (!) that comes from the Philippines.

The region where the film was supposed to be released therefore figures from the beginning of the film less as a cultural, but rather as an economic and political unit. Both Singapore and Hong Kong are shown as modern metropolis' with shopping malls, motorways, high rises and international hotels, that do not look particularly "Asian." This perspective on Southeast Asia might have actually been much more unusual to its anticipated audience in the region than the highly exoticized perspective of most of the American and European films shot in the region in the 1960s and 1970s.

Movies as diverse as Richard Quine's *The World of Suzy Wong* (with location shots done in Hong Kong in 1960), Robert Wise's *The Sand Pebbles* (partly shot in Hong Kong in 1966) or Peter Bogdanovich's *Saint Jack* (shot entirely in Singapore in 1979), the various James Bond films and the European soft-sex *Emmanuelle* movies, which take place partly in the region, take an inevitable delight in the more "bizarre" aspects of their South East Asian locations. *Saint*

Jack, for example, documents the nightlife and a seedy underworld that has since more or less disappeared from Singapore. *The World of Suzy Wong* and also Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* use locations such as the Aberdeen harbour with its female *bargees*, the old squatter areas and the temples of Hong Kong as colourful backdrops.

Nothing of this nature in the first half of *Cleopatra Wong*! Only when the story finally moves to the Philippines, Suarez starts to make use of exoticism of his locations. Cleopatra Wong investigates a strawberry farm in the Cordillera mountains on the Philippine main island Luzon. The viewers are treated to a scene in the strawberry fields where farmers in traditional Ifugao dresses (an anachronism even in the late 1970s) draw Wong's attention to a convent where the majority of the strawberry produce in the area is made. The convent is built in a Spanish baroque style, which appears highly unusual in an Asian country, at least to viewers not familiar with the specific culture and the colonial history of the Philippines.

As Cleopatra Wong finds out, the nuns of the convents are being held as hostages by the criminal ring, which uses the convent as a place to print counterfeit money. That all the leaders of the gang dress in dark-brown cowls as disguise might serve as a memento. They look like the Spanish friars that were the main agents of colonial suppression in the Philippines during the almost 400 years of Spanish colonization.

A shootout ensues, and eventually Cleopatra Wong and a group of Interpol agents manage to kill or arrest the whole gang and free the nuns. As if the whole plot was not bizarre enough already, the platoon of Interpol agents has to dress up in nun's habits during the final showdown, while firing automatic weapons and blowing up half of the building. (Eddie Romero in *Black Mama, White Mama* also got some mileage out of the fact that nun habits were still quite a common sight in the Philippines at that time.)

The whole film is full of references to the James Bond movies that were doing very well at the box office in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Bobby Suarez was not the only Asian filmmaker who tried to cash in on this fad. Especially the Hong Kong film industry with its knack for quick ad-hoc-replications has produced its own subgenre of Eastern spy movies. The

Hong Kong ersatz-007s include Ryo Chiao, Jimmy Wang Yu or the "James Bond of Hong Kong," Paul Chang Chung, who starred in the action movies *The Golden Buddha* (1966) (complete with a theme music eerily similar to John Barry's famous 007 theme) and *Black Falcon* (1967). Even Bruce Lee's international breakthrough *Enter the Dragon* (1973) contained some references to the genre of international action and spy movies.

In 1977 Suarez, in search of new business opportunities and trying to capitalize on the Asian action-flick craze of the 1970s, took the initiative for the Southeast Asian regional collaboration, which resulted in *Cleopatra Wong* and three other films. He partnered with Malaysian Mohamed Ashraf, director of Zahraine Films, and with Singaporean Sunny Lim Peng Hock, from Intercontinental Distributors. They incorporated a new company, B.A.S Films International, the "B.A.S." referring both to the initials of Suarez's name and the first names of the partners.

The company intended to produce only English language films – a first in Singapore film history, where Malay- and to a lesser extent Chinese-language films had been the norm. With these English language films they wanted to reach out to an international audience. The company produced a series of B-movies, starting with *Bionic Boy* (1977). The film starred the nine-year old tae kwon do black belt, Johnson Yap, from Singapore. Suarez had read about him in the newspaper, and believed that there would be the commercial potential in a child with martial arts skills. The film was loosely based on the TV action series *The Six Million Dollar Man*. The film has the nine-year old martial arts master taking revenge for the death of his parents by taking on an international group of gangsters (Millet 2006, 180ff).

In 1978, the company went on to produce two films: *Cleopatra Wong* directed by Bobby Suarez under the screen name George Richardson, and *Dynamite Johnson* directed by Bobby A. Suarez under his real name. *Cleopatra Wong* featured the nineteen-year old Singaporean Doris Young, who answered a newspaper ad by the producers. Young, was had no experience in either acting or martial arts, was christened Marrie Lee – a name Bobby Suarez had invented to cash in on the international Bruce-Lee-fad. After one month of acting and martial arts lessons, she played the lead in the movie, which was shot in Singapore, Hong Kong

and various locations in the Philippines for a micro-budget of 70,000 US dollars. *Cleopatra Wong* became the most successful of all the Singaporean productions of B.A.S Films. Not only was the film sold to and distributed in Germany, the USA and a number of other territories: *Cleopatra Wong* became a minor phenomenon across Asia.

Dynamite Johnson, the next film from B.A.S. Productions, is in a sense a sequel to both *Cleopatra Wong* and *Bionic Boy*. In *Dynamite Johnson*, Bionic Boy Johnson Yap joins forces with Cleopatra Wong to track down and defeat a Nazi named Kuntz. Cleopatra Wong's final appearance was in the film *Devil's Angel* (1979) where she is sent on a mission to Manila. The young daughter of a gangster from Hong Kong is kidnapped by his former goons, who take their hostage to the Philippines. The crime lord is forced to ask Cleopatra Wong for help. After that film, B.A.S. Films International stopped producing movies in Singapore, because the venture ultimately did not prove to be as financially rewarding as the founders had expected.

The One-Armed Executioner

The One-Armed Executioner was produced in Manila, five years after *Cleopatra Wong*. The experiment with the Singapore-based actions films had come to an end, and it was the second movie that Suarez – with his relocated company B.A.S. film – made in the Philippines. Unlike some of his other films, this production does not feature any American star, but a number of Caucasian expats, some of whom Suarez had supposedly discovered in the bars of Manila's nightlife district Malate.

The star of the film is Filipino Franco Guerrero, who acts in most of Suarez's movies. Here he is Interpol agent Ramon Ortega, who runs afoul a group of drug smugglers. The criminals make him watch when they kill his wife, and then chop of his arm with a Samurai sword. This causes Ramon to slide into a deep alcoholic depression. Only after his friend Wo-Chen takes him through a rigorous training program, where he learns to defend himself and to fight with only one arm, Ramon finally finds the courage to take on the criminals that mutilated him.

Again, the film is an obvious pastiche of Western and Eastern sub genres of the action movie. It blends story ideas from American revenge movie such as Michael Winners *Death Wish* (1974) – featuring Charles Bronson – and his sequels with motives from Hong Kong martial arts films. The movie *Death Wish* stirred considerable controversy both in the US and in Europe at the time it was released, because many saw the movie as a thinly disguised call for vigilante justice. It has been read as the beginning of a reactionary backlash in the relatively liberal United States of the 1970s. Despite its pronounced political incorrectness and its disregard for the law, the film gave rise to a whole sub genre of revenge films, and *One-armed executioner* is an example of that.

The other obvious inspiration for the story is Cheh Chang's Hong Kong classic *One-Armed Swordman*-series: *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), *Return of the One-Armed Swordsman* (1969) and *The New One-Armed Swordsman* (1971). In these films, a Chinese Swordsman has his arm cut off during a fight with some of the disciples of his martial arts school, a result of an intrigue among the students.

The reoccurring motive of intrigue and revenge in the Hong Kong action and martial arts movies of the late 1960s and early 1970s has been read as a cinematic reflection of the uncertain and chaotic situation of Hong Kong in this period, when a number of riots disturbed the city and both government corruption and general lawlessness peaked. It has been called "a period that did not provide a consensus for commonly accepted moral standards or social order" (Tai-lok/Wai-hung 2003, 171). The repeated defeat of the hero of the film in *The One-Armed Swordsman*, including the loss of his arm, signifies the impossibility of a principled individual to survive unscathed in an anarchic world:

> Chang [the director of all the *One-Armed Swordsman* movies] depicts a turbulent chaotic world which provides no sense of security. There exists in this social condition a grey area where the world of the martial arts is fractured, giving rise to power struggles in the *wuxia* world and exploitation of the weak.… In traditional Chinese society, the unique rank of knights-errands is closely related to turbulences, chaos, political turmoil, and corruption. Knights-errands are worshipped by the people because they express the needs and social

> ideals of the people themselves. The stirring solemnity of heroism in Chang Cheh's films stands in strong contrast to the corrupt system and temperament of the bad and evil. The climatic episodes where the heroes sacrifice their lives are solemn displays of heroism but at the same time, they mock the system that allows villainy to subvert goodness and justice. Under such a system, no one dares to guarantee that one's strength is one's merit. (Tai-lok/Wai-hung 2003, 171)

David Bordwell has pointed out that the topic of dismemberment and mutilation is a reoccurring motive in most of Chen Chang's films (Bordwell 2000, 249f). For example, his later film *Crippled Avengers* (1978) revolves around a group of handicapped martial artists, who turn their weakness into strengths: the legless fighter uses his steel legs to fight etc. In many others of his films, suicide or murder by disembowelment is a frequent motif. This killing method is used to an extent that the topos of disembowelment has been discussed in a number of essays on Chang Cheh's film (Lam 2003, Teo 2003), either as having a subtext of castration or repressed homosexuality. The director himself talks about the subject in his autobiography (Cheh 2004) in a way that suggests that there is more at issue here than the disenchanted heroism of the protagonist. I will return to this topic in my final remarks on *The One-Armed Executioner*.

Formal Traits of Suarez's Films

Done on shoestring budgets, both *Cleopatra Wong* and *The One-Armed Executioner* are not sophisticated films. Their scripts, the dialogues are often corny, the acting is poor, the martial arts scenes are mediocre compared to many Hong Kong productions of the same period. But they make up with wit and with ingenuity for what they lack in production values and in technical polish. Bobby Suarez himself has pointed out that he feels that his films are formally superior to the Philippine action films of the same time, because he avoided the master shots of action scenes that were prevalent in these productions (Suarez 2006).

Rather he adhered to the montage techniques that had started to emerge in the Hong Kong martial arts cinema, where – starting with King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1967) – action scenes were chopped apart into sequences of brief close-ups and medium shots for greater visual impact (Bordwell 2000, 199 – 247). Similar techniques can be observed for example in the training scene in *The One-Armed Swordsman* or in the opening sequence of *Cleopatra Wong*. So

apart from the production methods, there is also a formal influence of Hong Kong cinema in Suarez's films.

His films take the clichés they employ to often-absurd extremes. It would be far-fetched to read any coherent message into both films discussed here. Whatever they say, they say in the murky and impromptu way that is typical for this type of B-movie. They are, first and foremost, exploitation films, which show and say the things they show and say, because they try to appeal opportunistically to the assumed expectation of a mass audience.

That these films were made for an either all-Asian (*Cleopatra Wong*) or even international audience (*The One-Armed Executioner*) – and not for the Chinese Diaspora community, as the Hong Kong films of the same period – is part of their fascination. These films say a lot about the notions of the cultures of the respective target markets that their makers held. These films were not international phenomena like the films of Bruce Lee a couple of years earlier. Their comparative success in the international market is less a symptom of them touching a nerve in Asia, the US or in Europe, which can account for the triumph of *Enter the Dragon* or the *Chinese Connection*. It might be attributed more accurately to the appearance of new distribution channels for movies that emerged with the proliferation of home video and cable channels in the USA and in Europe – and their demand for new product.

Then again, the films of Bobby Suarez made it into the international market, not the many Tagalog action films of the same period. How do we account for that? First of all, Suarez's connections with international distributors – that he formed during his time in Hong Kong – played an important part. Unlike most Philippine producers he not only had these contacts, but also saw the opportunity to cater to the markets, that these distributors had access to. And he tailored his movies to the perceived requirements of this international market.

This was very close to the methods of the big Hong Kong studios such as Shaw Brothers and Cathy. For example, these studios would create lavish Huangmei Opera films in Mandarin for the Taiwanese market, while producing Cantonese melodramas and comedies for the audiences in Hong Kong. At the same time, they would ideally make those films attractive

for their other markets too, for example by adding drawn-out fight scenes to the opera film. Suarez describes a similar strategy: "Sometimes I think: Can I sell this (film) to Europe? If I can sell this to Europe, they might not like it in the Middle East. So it got to be in-between. Therefore I prefer this Latino-Central-American style: love-story, drama, action, because I can sell this to Europe, and I can sell this to the Middle East and to Africa" (Suarez 2006).

Imitation, Indigenization, Assimilation?

How do we situate the films that were produced by Suarez in Singapore and the Philippines in the framework of a post-colonial cinema? They are clearly not product of a national cinema, yet they did not emerge in a cultural vacuum.

The emerging literature on Hong Kong cinema has time and again pointed to traditional Chinese values and aesthetic concepts that inform Hong Kong films – even films that are on the surface as "Westernized" as John Woo's action films. For the Philippines, the situation is quite different. There seems to be a consensus among many critics that influences from the Spanish colonizers (Tiongson 1983, Deocampo 2004) and the European movies that Spanish business men imported into the Philippines made an important impact on the local film culture in its early days. In addition to that, the cinema of the American colonizers started to make a dent in the 1930s and after World War II started to dominate the local cinemas, and has continued to do so until the present. Even in its "Golden Period" in the 1950s, Tagalog cinema always had to compete with Hollywood productions, and in many instances indigenized or localized the genres that US-American films put forward.

Considering this background, where can we place the films of Bobby Suarez? Post-colonial theory has come up with a number of different concepts to look at post-colonial cinema. Teshome H. Gabriel, a noted theorist of a "Third Cinema," has outlined three "phases of Third World Cinema." According to him, there is a first phase, where colonial cinemas show an "unqualified assimilation" or identification with the "Western Hollywood film industry" (in itself a highly questionable concept).

Needless to say, he does not approve of this tendency: “Aping Hollywood stylistically, more often than not, runs counter to Third World needs for a serious social art” (Gabriel 1989, 31). This phase of uncritical imitation of Western movies is followed by “Phase 2: The remembrance phase,” when Third World cinemas start to indigenize these influences. While they do not come up yet with a style distinctively their own, they start to control their own film industry and begin to address indigenous folklore and mythology, the clash between urban and rural live, tradition versus modernity etc. Ideally this leads to “Phase 3: The combative phase,” when filmmaking has become a “public service institution,” where the film industry “is also managed, operated and run for and by the people” (Gabriel 1989, 33).

Frankly, I have yet to see a national cinema of any Third World country which adheres to these neat categories and I am not sure a lot of people would enjoy films that come out of “public service institutions” run by “the people.” Especially the history of the Philippine cinema provides ample material to counter this simplistic account of a Hollywood-infested early period, that later gets replaced by a national cinema for and by the people. Therefore I am not mentioning these ideas, because I subscribe to them. They are lacking in concrete examples and they do not justice to the multi-faceted reality of the film history of a country such as the Philippines. I only mention this concept because this kind of thinking has provided the theoretical underpinnings for discarding many highly original and immensely popular movies from Third World countries. In Gabriel’s terms, Bobby Suarez’s films would be a mere “aping” of Hollywood standards, a reading that does not do them justice.

Other critics such as Nick Deocampo have provided a more nuanced approach to colonial and post-colonial cinemas (Deocampo 2004, 288-95). He puts forward the categories of imitation, indigenization, parody, acceptance and resistance towards Western cinema as a framework to read the cinema of post-colonial countries such as the Philippines. Without the moralizing and elitist approach that Gabriel is taking, this methodology allows for a much greater theoretical flexibility towards the exploitation movies of directors such as Suarez. They clearly indigenize international influences – not just the “Western” influences that Gabriel is so concerned with. Suarez’s films are clearly indebted to the Hong Kong martial arts movies of studios such as Shaw Brothers or Golden Harvest. In turn, these films from Hong Kong are

clearly influenced by concepts and cinematographic techniques that stem from the Italian Spaghetti Western, the Japanese Samurai films and even the US American thriller – even if they were on the surface pre-occupied with genuinely "Chinese" subject matters such as Kung Fu or court intrigues in ancient Chinese!

From a contemporary, post-modern perspective, Suarez's films might appear as mere parodies of genres such as the spy movie, the revenge movie, the action movie or their "Eastern" counterparts, the *wuxia* film or the more contemporary *Enter the Dragon*-style productions of Golden Havest. His films would then be an all-out plundering of all the clichés that these films put forward, a tongue-in-cheek camp-appreciation fest a la Tarantino.

Of course, this perception would be a grave misreading that relies on our contemporary perspective. What makes Suarez's films unique is precisely that they still take the clichés they are making use of seriously to some extent. Suarez's protagonists are pastiches of various influences, but paradoxically at the same time, they truly embody these influences. On the one hand, Cleopatra Wong is a pop-culture product and *The One-Armed Executioner* yet another remake of Eastern and Western revenge movies. On the other hand they are for real.

If there is a characteristic achievement in Suarez's films, it is his capability to make the influences, the power struggles and the conflicts that have moulded his films his own – before selling them back to the rest of the world with some sort of success. His films amalgamate Western spy movies, American action films, a Bruce-Lee-style pan-Asian nationalism and Hong Kong martial arts into a jittery concord. *Cleopatra Wong* combines the black-chick superhero power of *Cleopatra Jones*, the gadget-laden internationalism of James Bond films, and the popular antics of Hong Kong martial artists. *The One-Armed Executioner* pooled the vigilante-attitude of Charles Bronson with genuinely Hong Kong movie protagonists such as the *One-armed Swordsman* and a very vaguely nationalist message of rediscovering one's own roots – a stance that is so vague, that every almost everybody should be able to identify with it. (Jackie Chan uses very similar transcultural strategies in his newer films such as *Who am I?*) Yet, a gang of thugs that is lead by a Caucasian boss carries out the severing of the arm that can be read as a metaphor for castration and certainly means permanent disablement.

His revenge can therefore also be read as a getting back against a "Western" bully (the national origin of the thugs is never disclosed).

Conclusion

Their bearings catapulted Suarez's films out of the trappings of a "national cinema" and into the borderless, never-never land of international action movies without a defined "country of origin" or a proclaimed "national identity." This in turn launched his films into the international media distribution channels of the world outside the Philippines – including the video shop not far from my university in Düsseldorf and other similar shops all around the world. These establishments carried *Cleopatra Wong* without any interest in the circumstances under which this film was produced, or even where it came from. All that mattered was that they provided some escapist and thrilling entertainment.

These films are not mere imitations of Hollywood cinema, because they invade and exceed the convention of Western and Asian genres at the same time they are trying to mimic them. They are also not an indigenization of Western film formulas, simply because they do not stem from a particular national culture that could be used to assimilate those "foreign" influences. If any of Deocampo's categories applies here, it is the category of acceptance. Bobby Suarez's films are among the first films from Third World countries, which accepted the fact of an increasing globalization of world cultures. They do it both the level of story and production, but they never preach it. They leave "national culture" and local market behind, and search for new markets for their idea of a transglobal cinema.

Again, these films are not product of the globalization of the multi-nationals that we experience now, but rather a prelude of today's globalization, when the process of globalization still provided nooks and fissure for non-corporate players. The rag-tag teams of good and bad guys of all races in his films can be read as one metaphor for this phase of globalization. Just look at the bad guys in *Cleopatra Wong*, who want to manipulate the currency markets: With their cheap suits, their bizarre '70s-style haircuts, their moustaches and their pouches, these "international crime lords" and their henchmen seem quotidian and ordinary. They are a far cry

from the bad guys of today's action cinema where even the lowest villain looks like he came straight from the gym. While these athletic gangsters seem to signify the frictionless, globalized capitalism of today, the clumsy, awkward crooks – with their failed ambition to make good with currency manipulations, among all things! – look like the embodiment of a globalization that was not yet as smooth and perfected as it is today. Most likely, these crooks – as well as heroes such as Cleopatra Wong or the One-Armed Executioner – would not stand a chance on today's market anymore. When we see them now, we do it with a sense of nostalgia. Globalized capitalism has left these movie characters behind that were among his earliest promoters.

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Tilman Baumgärtel lives in Berlin and Manila.

He is an art and media critic and curator. He contributes to German and international reviews, newspapers and magazines, and his writing has appeared in *Die Tageszeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Die Woche*, *Intelligent Agent*, *Telepolis*, *Kunstforum International*, et al. He studied German Literature, History and Media Studies at the Heinrich-Heine-University in Düsseldorf and the State University of New York in Buffalo. His Ph.D. thesis was a monograph of the German avant-garde film director Harun Farocki. He has taught media aesthetics and media history at the University of Paderborn; Technische Universität, Berlin; the Mozarteum in Salzburg (Austria); and is currently teaching at the University of the Philippines. He has lectured internationally, and gave presentations at the Palais Tokyo in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and at the Goethe Institüt in Moscow, Barcelona, and Montevideo (Uruguay).

He was a founding member of mikro e.V. <http://www.mikro.org>, an organization for media culture in Berlin, and co-founder of rohrpost, a German-language mailing list for digital culture. He has curated a number of exhibitions focusing on media art, including “Games,” a presentation of computer games by artists, at Hartware (Dortmund 2003), "Install.exe," the first solo exhibition of the net art group Jodi (Basel, Berlin, New York 2002), and a section of the Seoul Media City Biennale in 2004. His recent publications include: *Games: Computerspiele von KünstlerInnen* (Games: Computer Games by artists; exhibition catalogue, Frankfurt, 2003); *net.art 2.0 – Neue Materialien zur Netzkunst* (net.art 2.0 – New Materials towards Art on the Internet, Nürnberg, 2001); *net.art – Materialien zur Netzkunst* (Nürnberg, 1999), *Vom Guerillakino zum Essayfilm: Harun Farocki – Werkmonographie eines Autorenfilmers* (Berlin, 1998).