Depicting Development Issues: Thematic Trends of Documentary Films of Mindanao-Based Filmmakers

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Mindanao is the Philippine's second largest island in the south. Identifying Mindanao-based documentaries that have development themes remain unknown or unacknowledged. Using Phenomenology as theoretical framework and method, as a result, the researcher found out that similar to other documentary films in other parts of the country and the world, the themes showed by Mindanao-based documentaries reflect on agriculture, health, women and children, environment and population. However unlike its other foreign and local counterparts, a number of Mindanao-based documentaries anchor the mentioned development themes under the context of peace and conflict situation, human rights, indigenous peoples and their ancestral domains.

Keywords: Mindanao issues, documentary films, development themes, filmmaking, phenomenology, development communication

As an evolved form of communication, films in general, are viewed as the most recent form art, with a potential or unexplored possibility to do what words usually failed to do; in addition, films are multi-modal, multi-sensual, sensual (in its allied sense), and universal (Gross, 1996). Furthermore, films are often times considered as cultural artifacts made by certain cultures by reflecting these certain cultures and in one way or another, affected them. That is why films are likely be considered to be an important, if not critical, form of art and at the same time a source of entertainment in popular culture, as well as a powerful medium for educating - even to the point of indoctrinating citizens. Thus, the visual basis of film gives it a universal power of communication (Rampal, 2001).

The same applies to non-fiction films otherwise known as documentary films, or videos, as Gross (1996) pointed out that the documentary genre the is also another way students can learn to "see," through a process by which they enhance or train themselves in finding a meaningful visual imagery in relation to a particular concept which is often philosophical or literary in nature.

Documentary films are perceived to be as pictures in motion with a primary purpose to document a particular reality or truth (Nichols, 1997), and at to some point it has a strong connection to reality (Raijmakers, 2007). Paculdar (2007) added that documentary films were meant to mobilize the needed support in addressing issues that were critical, and yet, often taken for granted; as such that it required passionate and urgent response from the public, and must succeed in evoking appropriate sentiments to solicit or rally commitment behind particular advocacy objectives.

Various researches (Bernardo, 2011; Barbash & Taylor, 1997) have shown that allowing students produce documentary films can be invaluable learning experience for them. The exercise gives them the opportunity to explore and engage a variety of issues and realities. There is also greater likelihood of which they will be prompted to find possibilities in advocating movements for change as to act individually or collectively. Moreover, films have the potential of reaching a vast audience coming from different economic classes and social statuses, than most academic writers, as these can be regarded and evaluated by all diversified communities to which no one had the access, thus implying that this can be a two-way learning experience.

Documentary films can be contributing factors in the fortification on the core concepts of development communication's Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) approach. This approach embodies a systematic process of learning by making people empowered, to decide for themselves, dramatically change behaviors over time (or the possibility of it), and alter social conditions over a certain period of time. In addition, according to UNFPA (n.d.), there were activities within the IEC that were developed according to the needs assessments, sound educational principles, and periodic evaluation using a clear set of goals and objectives. Hence, documentary films can contribute to development work.

The role of documentary films as tools in development communication may not be as popular as its fiction counterpart but nonetheless essential in sending an important message to audiences by government and non-government organizations. In fact, documentary films are one of the core medium propagated by Centre for Communication and Development Studies (CCDS, 2007) through film festivals and other road shows and resource materials. CCDS is a non-government organization based in India which is a resource center focusing on social change by working at the grassroots level to empower civil society and citizens' action for human rights, social justice, accountable governance, and sustainable development and accountable governance.

Flor (2007) also emphasized the importance of documentary filming by documenting the participatory project by the United Nations Development Program-Food and Agriculture Organization (UNDP-FAO) on sustainable development themes through direct cinema/ cinema verité genre. He suggested that an approach to documentary films are more appropriate to development communication (DEVCOM Quarterly, 1984).

In the Philippines, Flor (2002) extensively discussed the relevance of documentary filmmaking in development work through "Ethnovideography," a research method and approach of which researchers study and analyze groups or representatives from groups with the use of small-format video documentation techniques. In short, it is a form of ethnography that is primarily documented or recorded through digital video.

Mindanao is the Philippine's second largest island in the south. It is home to diverse populations with different culture and traditions. There are over a hundred ethnicities but it is grouped into three: the Moro (Muslim ethnic groups), Lumad (indigenous peoples) and the Settlers (who are mainly Christians). Based on the researcher's experience and knowledge so far, there have been quite a number of documentary films and video materials locally produced by Mindanao-based filmmakers. These showcase diverse stories the island of Mindanao, in the Southern Philippines, and they offer an artistic or development perspective on social issues.

Even that the general film landscape has changed and that the regional film movement in the regions, that includes Mindanao, is increasing or growing strong in the mainstream (Babiera, 2013), however, many of these documentary films are largely yet unknown by the general public even to the majority of the people of Mindanao. It can be likely that a number of these films were made for development work and as major tools in various IEC programs made by both government and non-government agencies.

Study Objectives

The purpose of this study is to get the overall picture of what are the independent documentary films or video materials being produced by Mindanao-based filmmakers and/or organizations and to surface their development themes. This may be considered a pioneering work as few researchers have analyzed documentary films, much more so independent films and commentaries produced by Mindanao-based filmmakers. Also, this is also a pioneering study on analyzing their development contents.

As to the objectives of the study, it is aimed to identify the overall topics as well as underlying themes depicted in the independent films/videos made by Mindanao-based filmmakers and/or organizations within the five-year period from 2010 to 2014. Specifically, the objectives are the following:

(i)   To identify the sectors and organizations that produce documentary films / videos with development themes in Mindanao

(ii) To identify the overall topics depicted in these independent films and videos

(iii) To determine the underlying development themes of independent films and videos.

Literature Review

There are already quite a number of filmmakers, media workers, communicators, or journalists who have also contributed to development works either directly or indirectly. This section will focus on those that deal with poverty, development work as well as development communication.

Among the film makers is Alfonso Gumocio Dagron who was born on October 31, 1950). He is a writer, filmmaker, journalist, photographer, and 'development communication' practitioner. He has made a number of documentary films associated with development work among NGOs and later at the UNICEF (Bittacle, n.d.). His recent film was about community media in Colombia where he documented the community media's role in information dissemination in the middle of conflict zones. He also did social work among the communities, tackling local, cultural and educational issues (Deep Dish Waves of Change, 2010).

In an interview from an online media platform, Dagron said that a real community station is owned and managed by the community democratically. In addition, it has local content, and he suggested that this can be used as a criteria or basis in branding radio stations as "community" radio stations (Deep Dish Waves of Change, 2010).

Philippe Diaz's documentary film, *The End of Poverty?* (2008) made an attempt to dig deeper on the intricacies on poverty around the world and its causes by highlighting statistics and figures that mostly affect the Third World countries. Moreno (2011) noted that the film gave a satisfactory insight of the causes and problems of worldwide poverty, of which a high number of NGOs that worked on these issues offered solutions that all resulted into advocating reforms. However, he lamented that many of the experts cited as main resource persons were Western academics who gathered the data, and were all reduced to only advocate temporary remedies or "band-aid solutions." Yet in conclusion he recommended the film to explore the issues presented under the lens of a "Third Worldist perspective;" taking consideration on its presentation of worldwide poverty, since it gave a rich history of the policies that has led to poverty on a global scale, and the policies that continued and increased poverty even today.

Meanwhile, in the Philippine setting, Ditsi Carolino's documentary film, *Bunso* (The Youngest) (2005) exposed the realities of "children in conflict with the law" inside a crowded prison populated by male adults. This film has churned out the need for intervention from government and non-government sectors on the welfare on children. Paculdar (2007) opined that Carolino had been successful in presenting voices and faces of child prisoners in the country by exposing the harrowing plight of juvenile offenders or children in conflict with the law, who were incarcerated together with adult inmates in the same prison facilities. The film made a stunning visual statement on the consequences of poverty intensified juvenile delinquency and children's rights violations.

Meanwhile, a personal essay written by this researcher for a film journal-magazine partly shared some themes of Mindanao documentary films. These tackled a socio-political issue, involving the indigenous peoples (IPs) or locally called as the "Lumad."

This is not the first time that the Lumads in Mindanao have been featured in documentaries, both in film and television. In fact, most of the materials produced concerning the Lumads usually have narratives dealing with their culture and tradition treated in some exotic way amid a modern definition of society along with its many issues (this author, 2014).

But there is also a consistent voice in showing another narrative in Lumad documentaries – the ceaseless struggle of reclaiming their ancestral domain from the people whose prophetic ambitions brought promises of development for Mindanao but ended up exploiting the natural resources and the people of the region.

This particular theme was explored through the researcher's documentary film, *Tindoga* (2014) or the Tribal Indigenous Oppressed Group Association. The film was selected in the sixth edition of Pandayang Lino Brocka Film and New Media Festival in August 2014. *Tindoga* is mainly composed of ethnic Manobo-Pulangihon members in Bukidnon and their attempt to get their ancestral domain from a wealthy businessman who has converted their lands into a sugar cane plantation under the guise of renting them for a meager price. The struggle of the Lumads in Bukidnon is a shared reality among all indigenous groups in Mindanao who face development aggression and violence, land conversion, displacement, and loss of their culture and tradition that one should understand are first and foremost rooted in the land that they have the inalienable right to inhabit. The struggle to reclaim the ancestral domain of the Lumads is not new anymore, but it is a continuing process. It is only befitting that as a documentary, crude and raw as my cinema is, the researcher must remain unwavering in giving a voice and an image that is sincere to the lumad narrative.

As to the growing regional film movement in Mindanao, Filmmaker and writer Gutierrez "Teng" Mangansakan II said that films by Mindanao filmmakers has sought to establish a better understanding of their grassroots culture, as he noted the negative depiction of Mindanao by other filmmakers and writers who are not based in Mindanao (Babiera, 2013). Mangansakan added that as a writer and filmmaker from Mindanao, the films made by Mindanao filmmakers were written from the context of the filmmakers' experience, further explaining that some filmmakers who originated from Mindanao were quite apprehensive in writing about their own cities. Thus saying, that there have been a number of writings already, not only in film but also in other media, that discussed about Mindanao, that were done to diminish the Mindanao narrative in order to make it bad and be viewed in a negative way (Babiera, 2013).

Lastly, Cabagnot (2012) stressed that the Filipino viewing public still preferred feature (fiction) films over documentaries. However, when one has already had too much "fantasy/escape," he said, non-fiction films can be a better alternative in experiencing the art of cinema as there were fare that can lead the Filipino audience back to the state of

things as they were. "Un-production-designed. Unadorned. Un-Photoshopped." These were the documentary films that re-situate a person back into the Here and Now. Films that reaffirmed a person's place as a true "Being-in-the-World," as such being part of the dharma of documentary films.

Theoretical Framework

Since the study mainly revolved in the discourse of documentary films, Corner's (1996) in-depth focus on Theories of Documentary/ies (or Documentary Theory/ies as used by other scholars) served as the main theoretical framework of this study. This presents general ideas about documentaries that have been subject to critical debates about particular films or programs. Yet, there also exists a body of commentary, which seeks to address the overall genre of documentary films. In addition, it indicated a set of propositions that was said to be interconnected, as well as concepts regarding the socio-aesthetic origin of documentary practice (Corner, 1996).

Nichols (2005) made it specific in the exploration a specific "voice" in documentaries, in addition that the film's structure relied heavily on narrative procedures that were classical such as (1) establishing an apparent causality through a chronology that revealed the uniqueness of different characters; (2) shot lists organized into dramatically unfolding scenes, that were considered revelatory, that only acknowledged the camera as participant-observer towards the film's end; and (3) the excellence of character performances "play themselves" without showing self-consciousness. As Nichols further explained, the phenomenon of filming different individuals who played themselves as if their performances were of those professional actors in fiction or feature films, could be a subject of an extended study in its own right.

The discourse on Documentary Theories found its roots on the person who first coined the term "documentary" to a non-fiction film: John Grierson (1898-1972). Grierson set the definition that film should be used for social purposes, as it is intended to bring about social change (Mohamed, 2014). This is actually one of the core purposes on the practice of development communication.

In addition to that, Grierson stated that documentary was opposed or likely an anti-thesis to the "illusions" of the Hollywood dream factory. Although he often stressed the importance of social objectives of the documentary rather than its aesthetic values, he was well aware of the need for the development of creative techniques as a form of convincing interpretation of actuality (Mohamed, 2014).

Methodology

The researcher chose Phenomenology as a method in data gathering since other than a methodological tool, it is also another theoretical framework that aligns with the study. This framework and methodology was first conceptualized by Edmund Husserl (1964) as a philosophical approach that focused on the conscious experience of phenomena contextualized within sphere or world that all individuals inhabit.

Orbe (2009) highlighted the importance of pphenomenology based on five ontological and epistemological aassumptions, of which each were can able to explain the foundations of this approach to philosophy by understanding social phenomena.

The method of this study was anchored on the first assumption of Phenomenology, which stated that the idea of which researchers can be objective is dismissed or rejected. With this premise, phenomenologists have come up with a process called "bracketing

epoche," of which the underlying principle was that knowledge of essences can only become possible by bracketing preconceived assumptions (Orbe, 2009).

Further explanations to epoche, and also bracketing, was discussed by Bednall (2006) which he stated that Phenomenology is concerned with specifying that which is unchanging and inherent in the definition of an idea or item under scrutiny. As to the essence of this study, the documentary films and video materials produced in Mindanao, the connection between the researcher and respondents, in terms of shared data and the film materials being studied, certain experiences can be recalled from the shared connection and within the ambit of proposed research objectives, this can be extolled in the literature as being potentially of heightened significance to the data (Crotty, 1996; Schulz, 1994). However, the entirety of the method can be governed by the success (or even failure) with which a researcher both applies and designs the procedures for the operation of epoche and bracketing.

The method suggested that the relationship of this researchers towards the documentary films of Mindanao, especially on the depiction of development issues, it was already put in place at the very beginnings of a phenomenological inquiry. Bednall (2006) suggested that this can become a primary challenge for a researcher on how to allow the voices of subjectivity to emerge authentically in drawing to an understanding of what essentially the research subjects or respondents, and how it can be interpreted based on their personal accounts expressed through the data collection instruments.

Epoche and bracketing were highly useful in determining the results indicated in this study's second objective which was to determine the underlying development themes on development in independent films and videos; while the first and third objectives of this study can be determined later on which is dependent to the results of the second objective. The researcher began gathering relevant information especially in acquiring and reviewing documentary films and video materials that have significance on this study. The researcher searched in the Internet for titles; sent personal correspondence to filmmakers, government and private organizations, through e-mails and personal messages in social media; at times, he used text messages and calls, which led to the acquisition of the said materials. The criteria used to choose the documentary films/videos were the following: (i) they were produced from 2010 to 2014; (ii) they must be produced/directed by filmmakers or organizations, both in the government and private sectors who are based in Mindanao; (iii) materials shot and directed by filmmakers who were not residents or holding offices in Mindanao may be considered as long as they were commissioned, produced and/or funded by organizations/individuals which/who were based in Mindanao; and (iv) they were professional or commissioned work and not student works.

The researcher took eight months, in between the period of October 2014 to June 2015, to finish retrieving the materials for study. The researcher set time frames and deadlines in viewing and retrieving the films and sometimes made consideration in order for the requested films will be acquired for viewing.

The researcher then catalogued/grouped the documentary film and video materials from sources and matched. The materials according to their years of release or when they completed production. The researcher then designed an instrument that is aligned with the Phenomenological approach of epoche and bracketing, but limited to the study's objective.

The following are the descriptions for the entries to the research instrument:

(i)   Year, Title, Length, Director and/or Organization/s that produced this Film: This indicates the film's title, what year it was produced, and who directed the film as well its producers.

(ii)   Brief Synopsis: This pertains the summary of the film/video's storyline.
(iii)   Prevalent/Central Development Theme: This indicates the thematic trends of the films/videos subjected in this study that is are related to development communication.
(iv)   Researcher's Past Experiences: How the researcher's past experiences co-relate to the film's theme as a filmmaker and development communication student/ practitioner.
(v)   Reintegration and Interpretation: Encapsulates the film's theme and researcher's experiences and integrate it to development work and studies, explaining why these films were produced as well as its purpose other than as a development communication material.

The above instrument was a custom-made to address the study's main objectives with adaptations from the model created by Gearing (2004). Gearing originally used the variables or keywords such as the researcher's past experience, reintegration, and interpretation.

Results and Discussions

The documentary films/videos acquired by the researcher were produced between 2010 and 2014 had diverse genres and topics ranging from crime, travel, and even personal documentaries. Through bracketing and grouping, the researcher was able to finalize the list of the films, which had mainly development themes.

In most cases, when discussing themes about development communication, it was common for people to be familiar in the field to likely relate it to agriculture, environment, health and nutrition, and population in the Philippine setting (Librero et al., 1997). Results showed a similar trend but with the addition of special themes related to the Mindanao conflict, peace and development. These issues were similar to those faced by Dagron's development communication work in Colombia (Deep Dish Waves of Change, 2010). There were also development themes that were "progressive" in nature that highlighted human rights, ancestral domain of indigenous peoples, and environmental issues that called for social action through activism similar to the researcher's 2014 documentary film, *Tindoga*. Considering the ethno-socio-political history of Mindanao, common development themes in the documentary films/videos produced were associated, directly or not, in these special themes. For example, a filmmaker or organization dwells on the universal issues on children like the film Children of Mindanao's Hidden War (Boyle, 2010). But in addition to that, the film positions the theme under the premise of Mindanao backdrop and more specifically, how these development themes about children molded a unique case or scenario in connection to the on-going armed conflicts.

The researcher also noted that majority of documentary films/video producers came from non-government organizations (NGOs) or civil service organizations (CSOs) that were based in Mindanao. Most of these NGOs were focused on the fields of peace and conflict resolution, environment, indigenous communities, health, and women and children. There were some government agencies or organizations involved but most of them were partners or supporters to the main producers of the films and videos and not as direct producers of the said materials. It can also be noticed that all of the films in this study were short-length films, and only a few surpassed the 30-minute mark.

Another factor that the fast-growing production of Mindanao peace-and-conflict-context on development themes in video or film materials were also due to the emergence

of internationally funded agencies and NGOs that are willing to sponsor or even fund film materials for the promotion of Mindanao peace process and understanding the root causes of conflict. Although not limited to documentary films, these were done by the Canadian-funded program that supported local governments in the autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao (Mindanao Examiner, 2007) and with forum ZFD's "Long Reach of Short Films" program (Estremera, 2016).

Past Experiences

As far as the experiences with the researcher in making documentary films, it was not uncommon for organizations and individuals, based in Mindanao, to highlight Mindanao's conflict peace and conflict situation as a center-piece or backbone in telling stories. This held true whether it was for feature or documentary films, regardless if its genre was related to development communication works or not.

It was likely because such situation, which has been rooted deeply in the past four decades, the Mindanao peace and conflict situation through its depictions in films in general, has a strong connection to reality. This reality was meant to the mobilization of needed support in addressing issues that were critical but were often taken for granted. The support can bolster the call for urgent and even passionate response from the public, and may succeed in evoking the appropriate, if not necessary, sentiments to crowd source or rally commitment under certain advocacy objectives (Paculdar; Raijmakers, 2007). The common denominator is achieving long lasting peace in order for Mindanao to truly move on and start the positive changes even in development work.

Although the researcher also delved on other themes or topics not related to peace and conflict, the researcher understood the importance of stories related to such issues. This was because as long as there remain unsolved armed conflicts, especially with the deaths of some Philippine Special Action Force members in January 2015 and its implication to the ongoing Peace Process and the Bangsamoro Basic Law, people need to be more informed and guided to the very contexts and nature of all of these conflicts. Such is vital especially now that there have been widespread misinformation and mis-communication about the issue coming from the media and even public opinion.

The Mindanao conflict is no longer exclusive to the Moro struggle but also to the Communist idealism, with the existence of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines with partners from the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army; not to mention issues involving the indigenous peoples who were fighting for their ancestral domains. That was why from these emerging trends in Mindanao, development stories within those situations were also important to give a closer look from people not only in Mindanao but also around the world.

Government agencies/organizations directly produce less documentary films/videos with development themes compared to their NGO/CSO counterparts. The researcher believed that instead documentaries, government agencies/organizations tended to make Audio-Visual Presentations or similar to promotional videos more rather than making documentary as a film practice. This can be attested since the researcher is also involved in the production of these materials being a third-party contractor.

Reintegration and Interpretation

Even if many documentary films/videos made by Mindanao-based filmmakers and/or produced by Mindanao-based organizations have themes surrounding Mindanao's peace

and conflict situation, the narrative did not depict in such a point that it was presented in a bad light or sinister end. These films did not necessarily reflect the negative side of the conflict situation to the point that the audience would feel doomed or hopeless, but in fact, it was the opposite.

The films/videos presented the realities Mindanao up to the grassroots level. Despite the stories of war and its casualties, the films evoked hope and solidarity to achieve peace and understanding amidst all the adversities and shortcomings. This means that the films were telling the audience that "this is the situation now, it is sad, but we need to act on this so it will not happen again in the future." Some films/videos showed the best practices. Peace could be achieved by featuring a community that works together despite the diverse traditions and beliefs. If peace was possible in these model communities, then it was also very possible for large-scale implementation.

Additional Notes on Visual Treatment and Film Language

As stated by Nichols (2005) on the exploration of a specific "voice" in documentaries, or the social-political statement that the film is projecting as a whole, most of the documentary films/videos that were subjected for this study's analysis can be pillared into two: 1. The Collective Voice (ColVo), and the 2. The Diversified Voices (DiVo).

On the surface, the ColVo presents the films to project or portray a distinct "Mindanao" identity. That is, by integrating visual and audial semantics as such as depicting or integrating traditional or cultural elements to the film, and then again presenting the film under from these elements.

However underneath the package that is presented by the ColVo, these films begin to present the DiVo through sequences and scenes, and carried mostly by the characters in the stories.

From Chu's (2007) discourse, these "voices" can be employed in the further analysis of cinematic documentation as well as its tele-visual variants. In addition, these voices will give individual speakers (the characters) a recognition as persons who can present opinions, observations, judgments, explanations; this is in order to clarify their social positions or political leanings, and as well as their cultural alliance, gender views, including their agreements and disagreements. In the films/videos being analyzed, the DiVo have been grouped mostly on: women, human rights, agrarian reform and the indigenous (lumad) voices.

Both DiVo and ColVo played a role in structuring the visual treatment of the films/videos even if these were presenting development themes. In fact, this researcher has noticed that Mindanao documentary films/videos often manage to create a convergence of development themes to socio-political or cultural themes, thus making it as a hybrid. Thus, the visuals often presented by these films/videos tend to focus on vivid actions of people and yet with an atmosphere of mysticism and "indigenous-ness."

Conclusion and Recommendations

The themes and topics were similar to common Philippine trends: agriculture, environment, health and nutrition, and population. However, what separated the works from Mindanao was that the special themes that directly or indirectly underlie independently or not, were conflict resolution and peace development.

As far as the researcher's experience as a filmmaker and development communication student/practitioner who is based in Mindanao is concerned, these "special themes" are not uncommon from the works of other filmmakers/organizations that are
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also in Mindanao. The films with this theme did not necessarily sow fear among the audience but instead challenged them to work in achieving peace.

Majority, if not all of the sectors and organizations in society that produced documentary films/videos with development themes, resulted to NGOs that were also based in Mindanao. Some government agencies or organizations showed support and cooperation; however, these organizations did not directly produce documentary videos/films, because the government agencies/organizations tended to make Audio-Visual Presentations or similar to promotional videos.

With these findings, the researcher recommends the following:

The audience build-up remains a key strategy in order for these documentary films/videos to be disseminated. This can be done through film festivals focusing more on documentaries with development themes. The government can also pursue partnerships with the different sectors of society. Tertiary schools that offer development communication degree programs must also encourage its students to produce or pitch documentaries with development themes to organizations especially in the government.

Lastly, there should be more database of documentary films/videos to be established, not just materials with development themes, for easy access and cataloging. This may not only keep stories within Mindanao but also throughout the country or globally as a form of future linkages/partnerships.

In other matters, it is also interesting to note to explore DiVo and ColVo as separate discourse in identifying voices in documentary films supporting the earlier discussions made by Nichols and Chu.

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