Forbidden Memory: Reflection on Trauma, Memory, and the Question of Justice[1]

Darlene Machell Espeña✉
Southeast Asian Studies at Singapore Management University (SMU)

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Abstract

This article examines the film *Forbidden Memory* (Philippines, 2016) as an act (and art) of political work and activism through its radical memory work documenting collective trauma in pursuit of social justice. Directed by Gutierrez "Teng" Mangansakan III, the film revisits the tragic events of September 1974 when men, women, and children were killed in the southern provinces of Mindanao. Known as the Malisbong Massacre, the plot was sanctioned by President Ferdinand Marcos as part of the counter-insurgency campaign during the early years of Martial Law. Despite the extent and severity of the collective trauma and loss experienced by the predominantly Muslim community, this episode is mainly absent in the broader national narrative of the country. Taking inspiration from Alison Landsberg's (2004) notion of "prosthetic memory" and Walter Benjamin's (2003) contention that the work of memory goes beyond mere interweaving of facts and events that are buried in the past, but an active work of finding the truth, and that cinema serves as a mass cultural technology that conjures political and historical consciousness, this article explores the ways in which *Forbidden Memory* performs radical memory work amid collective forgetting and exclusion. Foregrounding both the emotional and painful testimonies of victims (ordinary people) and the landscape of trauma (ordinary sites), the film navigates incoherent and, at times, contradicting personal stories yet offers a compelling glimpse into labyrinthine public memories interpellated by the power that structures Philippine society. In doing so, it affords survivors a platform to share their stories and prompts the audience to seek a deeper understanding of the truth and legacy of Martial Law and what justice would be like for those who survived.

Keywords: Collective memory, Malisbong massacre, Martial Law, Social Justice, Documentary film

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✉ darlenee@smu.edu.sg

Introduction: Cinema as Radical Memory Work

In the past two decades, memory has increasingly been reframed beyond simply a psychological and cognitive process but as a social phenomenon, inevitably embedded in and influenced by societal frameworks (see Fentress & Wickham, 1992; Guha, 2019; Climo & Cattell, 2002). Halbwachs (1992), a pioneer in social memory studies, highlighted the concept of collective memory and argued that human memory is a function of society and that remembering unravels within unique and dynamic social contexts. That is to say, we remember in the immediate social framework, and through remembering, we make explicit references and connections between the past and the present. In the process of remembering, we shape who we are, our actions, attitudes, and inclinations. Collective memory, therefore, extends beyond the contours of the mind (psyche) and is constructed and reconstructed within present social and political frameworks. It is an active process that is as much about the present as the past. It is a realm that is politically charged and highly contested. But what of things we forget or that are erased from the collective memory? How do we recover suppressed or silenced narratives, should we, and why? More importantly, in today's age of mass cultural productions and technological disruptions, what is the place of cinema in collective remembering, particularly in remembering traumatic historical experiences of a community at the margins of the nation?

This paper probes into the film *Forbidden Memory* (Philippines, 2016) as an act (and art) of political work and activism through its radical memory work documenting collective trauma in pursuit of social justice. Drawing inspiration from Alison Landsberg's (2004) contention that popular films and television have the potential to elicit "progressive politics based on empathy for the historical experiences of others" and produce what she calls "prosthetic memory," the formation and reproduction of public memories to be felt and experienced in private, this paper examines the aesthetics and politics of remembering in and through a film about a neglected chapter in Philippine history. Directed by Gutierrez "Teng" Mangansakan III, *Forbidden Memory* revisits the atrocious events of September 1974 when men, women, and children were killed in the southern provinces of Mindanao. Known as the Malisbong Massacre (also known as the Palimbang Massacre), the plot was sanctioned by then-President Ferdinand Marcos as part of the national government's domestic counter-insurgency campaign during the early years of his authoritarian rule. Set against the larger history of the extensive collective trauma experienced by the predominantly Muslim community of Mindanao, this occurrence is mainly absent in the national narrative of the Philippines and symptomatic of the violent form of exclusion and othering that Muslims have experienced throughout history and that peaked during the Marcos regime (Campos, 2021; Castillo, 2022; Majul, 1988).

I also build upon Walter Benjamin's (2003) contention that the work of memory goes beyond mere interweaving of facts and events buried in the past but is an active work of finding the truth and that cinema serves as a technology that conjures political and historical consciousness. *Forbidden Memory* performs radical memory work as it intends to expose the discontinuities or gaps in the coherence of the nation-state. The film serves as an important artifact or an archaeological remain – a trace or evidence of human existence that reveals forgotten history – through which to view and scrutinize the effects of state-sanctioned tyranny and violence on the individual and collective identities of the victims. This pursuit to remember, to weave together the fragments of collective memory, to craft a truthful narrative of a distant and obscured past is evoked cinematically in two distinctive ways. Foregrounding both the emotional and painful testimonies of victims (ordinary people) and the landscape (site) of

trauma (ordinary sites), the film navigates incoherent and, at times, contradicting personal stories yet offers a compelling glimpse into the realm of the labyrinthine public memory interpellated by the power that structures Philippine society. In doing so, it serves as a "prosthetic memory," raising the potential for audiences to empathize with the marginalized Muslim survivors, experience traumatic events that were not their own, and seek a deeper understanding of the truth and legacy of Martial Law. Ultimately, the film questions what justice would be like for those who survived.

Center-Periphery: Nation, History, Cinema and its Exclusions

Wide-ranging debates have scrutinized the connection between nationalism/nation-building and history as inevitably complex and often laden with tropes of homogenization and exclusion, of monological chronicles and subversions (Foucault, 1971; Gellner, 1983; Giddens, 1985; White, 1998, and Marx, 2002). History is often rendered as a means of locating the nation as a means to attribute meaning and contours to an otherwise opaque and amorphous collectivity or imagined community (Anderson, 1983). That is, one could look at the work of history as a calculated process of narrativization imbued with the politics of subject formation, similar to what Joan Scott said about history being "in the paradoxical position of creating the objects it claims to discover" (2001, 85). More importantly, cinema plays a crucial part in this homogenization. Wimal Dissanayake writes that "[t]he concept of national cinema…privileges ideas of coherence and unity and stable cultural meanings associated with the uniqueness of a given nation. It is imbricated with national myth-making and ideological production and serves to delineate alterities and legitimize selfhood" (1994, xiii).

The recent rise of decolonial and memory studies and the emergence of new methodologies of tracing history where former colonies purportedly "write back" provides a poignant rethinking of Eurocentric and colonial discourses on nation and history. This rethinking, in a way, is a reframing and relocating of historical sources to reconstitute the recent past in the present. Within the nation's boundary, this reframing also entails a refocusing on the often silenced and forgotten peripheral communities at the subnational level, once suppressed in favor of the dominant national narrative. Such is the case of Mindanao. Specifically, such is the broader critical discourse within which *Forbidden Memory* can be situated. The film represents an effort to "write back" and challenge a homogenized Philippine nation and delegitimize the colonial discourses that have shaped what is deemed national.

Nick Deocampo laments that Philippine cinema is dominated by Tagalog-language films and that little attention is given to regional cinemas (2023). Writing about Filipino regional films, Katrina Ross Tan staunchly opposes the default notion that "Tagalog cinema is the only one that constitutes the filmic heritage of the Philippines" (2017, 141). Tan views regional filmmaking as a present-day practice of heritage production that foregrounds the use of regional languages, shot on location, by filmmakers from the region, who may also speak the language of the locals. Casts and crews are primarily locals as well, not from Manila. Collectively, the regional cinema movement decentralizes national cinema by representing (and preserving) a myriad of the nation's experiences, cultures, and languages. Tan asserts that regional cinema is essential as it democratizes filmmaking practices, creates a more inclusive national film culture, preserves the linguistic and cultural diversity of the nation, challenges Tagalog-centric narratives, and contributes to contemporary heritage and cultural production.

At this juncture, it is important to note that even when regions or peripheral communities are represented in Tagalog-based films, the hegemony of the capital permeates them. In the case of Mindanao cinema, Quintos (2020) notes that despite successful and

critically acclaimed film productions such as Lamberto Avellana's *Zamboanga* (1937) and *Badjao* (1957), "rendering Mindanaw and Sulu, visible in the national imagination," these productions remain centered from and entrenched within the colonial gaze, and subsequently, the center of power, Manila (4). This makes for a more compelling push to develop and promote regional cinema, which has grown in the last two decades. For Mindanao cinema, we have seen an increasing number of regional films capturing Mindanao's peoples, histories, and geographies, such as Sherad Anthony Sanchez's *Huling Balyan ng Buli* (The Woven Stories of the Other, 2006), Sheron Dayoc's *Halaw* (Ways of the Sea, 2010), and Arnel Mardoquio's *Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim* (The Journey of the Stars in the Dark Night, 2012), among others. These films have explored topics ranging from the *lumad* (indigenous people) struggle to the Moro armed conflict, folklore, urban stories, and histories. Mangansakan's *Forbidden Memory* is a key piece in this emergent regional film from Mindanao.

Regarding the potency of regional cinema as a historical source, Patrick Campos suggests that "few Mindanao films...function as primary historical artifacts when they open up spaces for grassroots accounts of historical events" (Campos, 2021, 166). He asserts that *Forbidden Memory* "exposes Duterte's preposterous claims" denying the human rights violations, land marginalization, violence, and injustices experienced by the people in Mindanao as a result of Ferdinand Marcos' policies (Campos, 2021, 166). In other words, given the persistent erasure and the present-day denial of the Malisbong Massacre in the national chronicle, Mindanao films such as *Forbidden Memory* are a potent way to reconstruct and rewrite history. *Forbidden Memory* is an attempt to "talk back" and capture the voices and silences of the communities of Mindanao, empowering them to articulate their identities, beliefs, and memories. As Campos accurately notes, reframing "Philippine cinema with Mindanao as its figural center foregrounds historical wrongs committed against marginalized subjects. Recognizing them, one can only hope, could lead to cultural literacy and a film practice that is sensitive to identity claims and, ultimately, oriented toward achieving social justice" (Campos, 2021, 166).

The Malisbong Massacre and a Long History of Violence

Before the Spanish colonization, Mindanao was home to sovereign Islamic sultanates and indigenous communities with vibrant trading relations with neighboring Southeast Asian polities. However, the anti-Muslim policy of the European colonizers stripped them of their rights to self-governance (Majul, 1973). Spanish colonizers planted their base in Manila and, from there, expanded to the neighboring regions, reaching the Muslim sultanates of Mindanao in the late 16th century. What followed was a long history of intermittent military campaigns to convert the Muslim population to Christianity that continued until the end of the 19th century. Even though only the coastal areas of Mindanao and Sulu were subsumed under Spanish authority, the entire region was included in the Treaty of Paris in 1898, when Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States for $20 million. Under the American occupation, Mindanao succumbed to imperial tools of subjugation.

Among the region's leading scholarly voices, Patricio Abinales (2000) writes about the place of Cotabato and Davao in Mindanao's political history and offers critical insights into the unique state formation in Mindanao from the early American colonial period until the 1970s. He argues that the integration of Mindanao into the Philippine nation was not inevitable. Filipino political elites and the American military administration were initially content with keeping Mindanao autonomous from the capital. However, at the end of American military rule, with the Filipinization of the colonial government, Filipino political officials began to

view Mindanao as a critical component that needed to be incorporated into the nascent Philippine nation. They promoted the pacification of the "backward and wild tribes" in Mindanao and implemented policies to subsume the territory within Manila's control (Abinales, 2010, 2-3). Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon staunchly advocated this subjugation. He initiated an extensive campaign for the settlers from Luzon and Visayas to occupy lands traditionally owned by local indigenous peoples (*lumad*) and Muslim communities, displacing the latter groups in the process. This resulted in escalated tensions and violence between Christian settlers and the indigenous inhabitants of Mindanao, setting the stage for future conflicts.

This is an important note because it locates the events in Malisbong within the long history of injustice that the Bangsamoro (Moro nation) people have experienced since the Spanish colonization up to the present. The report published by the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission (2016) acknowledged that there had been historical injustice against the community and that it took many forms – as experienced, perceived, and imagined. The perpetrators come from the government and its institutions, civilian organizations like educational institutions, Christian immigrants from Luzon and Visayas, and armed groups such as the Ilaga[2]. The report also indicated that throughout the colonial and post-colonial history of the Philippines, Mindanao has been the target of assimilation achieved through harsh policies, including resettlement programs and militarization that caused the displacement of the Moros and indigenous people. The report concluded that the "systematic nature of the harm done" intimates that the "historical injustice is structural and is embedded in political policies and state institutions" (25).

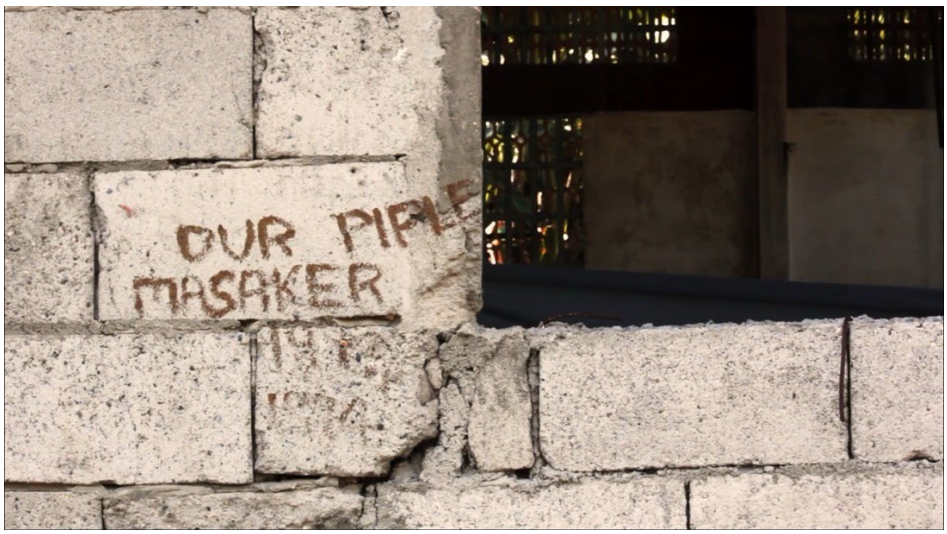

Figure 1. 'Our people massacred' inscribed on a wall

During Martial Law, atrocities against the Moro people and the indigenous communities in Mindanao only escalated. One of the earliest examples of Marcos's brutalities was the infamous Jabidah Massacre[3], which involved the killing of young Moro soldiers by the

[2] Ilonggo Land Grabbers Association was a paramilitary group, consisting mainly of Ilonggos from the Visayan region.

[3] The massacre served as a catalyst for the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), spearheaded by Moro leaders with the backing of various Islamic nations. Nur Misuari, who was then a political science instructor at the University of the Philippines Diliman, played a pivotal role in founding the MNLF. The organization engaged in a full-scale war against the Philippine state. For further details, see: Rommel Curaming. (2017). From Bitter Memories to Heritage-Making? The Jabidah Massacre and the Mindanao Garden

members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines on March 18, 1968, in Corregidor Island, near Manila. The young soldiers were purportedly recruited to conduct a covert military action called 'Operation Merdeka' aimed at destabilizing and taking control of Sabah, Malaysia. Based on the stories that emerged after, the soldiers lived in harsh conditions and were not paid well. It was also alleged that when the soldiers realized that the operation included killing fellow Muslims in Sabah, they attempted to desert, and for that, they were executed.

The Malisbong Massacre occurred a few years later; this time, the killings took place in Mindanao. It was the morning of September 22, 1974, two years after Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law in the Philippines. This atrocity took place on the third day of Ramadan, a sacred period for the Muslim community, who were fasting and praying. According to a survivor, soldiers arrived unexpectedly and began the killings. Some attempted to escape to the mountains, seeking refuge from the violence. However, the military deceived them and convinced them to return to their village, guaranteeing their safety. Upon their return, the men were forcibly tied up and taken to the Tacbil mosque, where they endured starvation and brutal torture. Deprived of food, they were forced to drink water tainted with urine and eat small pieces of coconut. Some men were taken outside and executed, and women and children were rounded up. None of them had any clue what was going on. The extent of these atrocities was primarily concealed from the rest of the country due to the Marcos regime's tight control over the media. As a result, many Filipinos remained unaware of the violence unfolding in Mindanao during the Martial Law years.

These widespread and systematic abuses highlight the severe repression experienced by the Moro population and the indigenous people of Mindanao during the Martial Law period, underscoring the need to remember and address these dark chapters of Philippine history. The very act of remembering the traumatic past and injustices a collective had experienced is an act of justice in itself. In *Forbidden Memory*, the filmmaker is an active agent who advocates for the histories of trauma and injustice to be remembered in contemporary society. That is to say, the film produces a powerful and alternative history that goes against the official narrative produced and perpetuated not just by Marcos' authoritarian regime but by regimes after, including former President Rodrigo Duterte and current President Bong Bong Marcos (Ferdinand Marcos's son).

The film *Forbidden Memory* bridges the gap between past atrocities and present consciousness by weaving together powerful testimonies and evocative landscapes. As the narrative unfolds, the voices of survivors resonate with haunting clarity, offering first-hand accounts of the brutality endured during the Malisbong Massacre and other violent incidents in Mindanao. Raw and unfiltered testimonies serve as a crucial link to the past, ensuring that the horrors of history are neither forgotten nor dismissed. Simultaneously, the film's use of serene and scarred landscapes provides a visual backdrop that enhances the emotional weight of the stories told. The barren fields and desolate ruins become silent witnesses themselves, symbolizing the lingering pain and unresolved trauma that continue to shape the collective memory of the Moro people. In the following sections, I offer critical insights into how *Forbidden Memory* employs these elements to bring a horrific past into sharp, present-day focus.

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People's Memories: Remembering is Such a Sorrowful Act

According to the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission, an estimated 1,500 people were killed by the military in Malisbong.[4] A survivor recounted to the commission that around 1,000 people were rounded up and confined to the mosque; many were never seen again. There are testimonies about victims buried alive, nailed to the cross, and others stripped of their clothes, brought to the beach, and asked to dig their graves. These eyewitness accounts resembled the stories of people interviewed in the documentary. A year before the release of *Forbidden Memory,* the Commission on Human Rights of the Philippines produced a documentary (2015) about the massacre. It contains more eyewitness accounts and offers a glimpse into these harrowing events in Malisbong. The resonances of their stories reinforce the terror they witnessed.

Within this context, cinema performs the cultural (and political) work of memory assembling and arranging temporal experiences, affording the spectators a means of making sense of past experiences, which, in this case, are traumatic experiences that they themselves did not endure. It generates a "fellow-feeling" and an acute understanding of the collective historical narrative that has been erased, forgotten, or subdued. Drawing back from Landsberg (2004), *Forbidden Memory* acts as a "prosthetic memory" by creating or generating a visceral connection, somewhat of an experience and knowledge transference, between the memories of the survivors and the "memories" of the Filipino audience, allowing the latter to take on memories of the trauma they did not experience personally. *Forbidden Memory* achieves this by juxtaposing the present-day image/scenery of the village and its land/seascape, incorporating contemporary news footage of Marcos' influence in Philippine politics, and featuring survivors sharing their personal stories.

In *Forbidden Memory,* the witnesses are captured speaking out, revealing their truths in public, compelled by the camera to carefully navigate the contours of their memory, provoking the viewers into self-reflection and monologue. One interviewee remembers when a high-ranking political officer ordered the murder of all the men detained at a mosque and told her not to give them any food. She laments that they were being treated that way and asks, "What have we done to deserve this?" This innovative cinematic approach undeniably affects the viewer, who is obliged to listen to her speak. The uncertainties and signs of pain are inscribed on her face and her body. As "a metaphor for the kind of mental processes that constitute us as individuals, including our memories and sense of self as unique individuals" (Bergstrom, 2015, 2), the film prompts viewers to question their epistemological, ethical, and political groundings. Cinema becomes an opening to a new perspective and a new way of knowing, remembering, and feeling.

Describing a shift in Russian cinema in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin (2003) identifies actors who are not necessarily actors, but appear on film as themselves in their "own work process" (262). He then suggests that cinema has the power and, to a certain extent, the obligation to open up spaces for the participation of ordinary people in cinema as a means to legitimate reproduction of themselves. In Teng Mangansakan's *Forbidden Memory,* ordinary people whose memories and stories have been suppressed, whose bodies have carried the

[4] The TJRC is an autonomous body appointed by the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace panels to investigate human rights abuses, rectify historical wrongs, and foster healing and reconciliation among communities impacted by the conflict in the Bangsamoro region.

wounds of a long history of violence and atrocities, are given a platform to represent themselves. They bare their souls. They tell their stories. They lament.

One of the interviewees showed deep emotional turmoil before she could even recount her experiences. She confessed, "We haven't even started, and I am already emotional." The viewers can hear Mangansakan giving directions, and she mumbles but unintelligibly. The incoherent clamor resounds. Then she declares, "I am ready." She proceeds to tell her story. She was married to the barangay captain of Palimbang and recalled a comfortable life before the attack. There were a few houses; people worked as farmers and fishermen, and some worked in coconut plantations. The loggers came later, she said. The Christians followed, too. She offered a glimpse into a somewhat serene and idyllic village that would be destroyed by what was to come. The spectators are encouraged to imagine a place of calmness about to be disrupted by carnage.

A collective story develops in the documentary from private memories as individual stories are repeated, reinforced, and translated as a public experience. The interviewees collectively recalled when the 19th Infantry Battalion arrived and started shooting civilians and burning houses. Out of fear and confusion, many of them ran to the mountains and hid there. One shared that as early as September 21, gunfire in nearby villages was heard, and her father told them to pack their bags and leave. They recounted seeing naval ships out in the sea and jetfighters and helicopters in the sky – the machinery of the state. There was an announcement, but they were puzzled by it. They had no idea what was to come and why. One of the survivors recounted that while she was giving food to the men detained inside the mosque, Governor Siongco arrived, and she asked him, "…why he was doing this…what have we done to deserve this?" An American in Malisbong confirmed, "It was not anything that people really understood." Indeed, throughout the documentary, there was a recurrent idea that the community was caught off-guard and could not fathom why the operation was initiated in the first place. These questions put spectators in an uncomfortable position, unable to provide any answer that would suffice.

The documentary also captured stories that reveal the community's resilience and formidable efforts to survive. One woman recounted how she even brought a goat onboard the naval ship as a gift for the marine officer, but when they arrived on board, four people were killed. Others remembered how they were made to believe that if they came out of hiding, the soldiers would only get their names, and they would be free to go back to their homes. The soldiers lied. In those moments, one can hear and see anger in their stories. And tears. Another survivor put up a brave face, went directly to the governor, and told him, "We are not rebels. We are ordinary citizens." Acknowledging that she would die anyway, she put up a valiant effort.

Another theme from their stories is a compelling picture of the state's objective. The survivors shared that the soldiers were clear that the order from Manila was to kill them all. One of the officers told them, 'Say your last prayers. You're all going to die.' The same story was said about Governor Siongco, who visited the mosque, and whom one of the survivors described as a "tyrant" and "bloodthirsty" who announced that all men would be killed. One colonel asked the American priest who visited the village during this period, "Is it better to feed them or to kill them?" The American responded that they needed to feed them and take care of them because if they killed the men, their children would remember, and they would want revenge. Through these recollections, the state materializes as the villain.

In the documentary, photographs were incorporated artistically and strategically. They played a dual role in corroborating the accounts of the victims and, at the same time, prodding the memory of the interviewees. The photographs were of civilians rounded up and soldiers casually guarding them, many of whom were not regulation soldiers, taken by the (former) American priest, who the filmmaker managed to interview in New Jersey. In the photos, there were no men; they were all in the mosque. Mangansakan showed the locals pictures from the American as if to jog their faded and painful memories. One woman confided that her memory was evading her. She sighs, "Who could remember things in that frenzy?" The plot is reinforced by integrating authentic photos from a foreign eyewitness and juxtaposing them with eyewitness accounts.

Ultimately, Benjamin's notion of *eingedenken* (remembrance) is realized in *Forbidden Memory* as it actively engages the past and reconstructs it to destabilize national historiography by bringing to light a traumatic past that is, in fact, not studied or part of the national narrative discussed in primary and secondary school texts. Through the juxtaposition of survivor testimonies with Mangansakan's cinematic techniques, such as the use of photos, the film challenges Mindanao's historical relationship with the center (Manila), questioning the implications of the Marcos government's actions.

While the film serves as a medium for storing, documenting, and propagating collective memory, it also clarifies its positionality by acknowledging that it is not a substitute for what historians would recognize as "historical text." In fact, the film begins with a disclaimer: "This film is not a historical text. It contains actual and reconstructed memories of the witnesses and survivors of the genocide in Malisbong. This film is an act of remembering." However, in the absence of answers and acknowledgment, of justice and peace, the film charts a brave and arduous task of remembering by foregrounding survivor testimonies that challenge official history. It serves as an embodied and exteriorized memory in which the spectator's life and the film's plot intertwine. This entangled relationship also occurs in historical films as we associate the film's historical ambit, which has been constituted for us to observe, with embodied memories in our present everyday experiences.

The process of collecting such stories was not easy. Mangansakan expressed the challenges he faced in interviewing survivors for the documentary. The difficulty was not only rooted in the survivors' fear and trauma but also stemmed from a deep sense of mistrust. Many organizations had previously visited the area, exploiting the inhabitants' suffering for profit by creating materials that commodified their tragic stories (Castillo, 2015). According to him, this exploitation left the survivors wary and hesitant to share their experiences again. Mangansakan also revealed the emotional toll that making the documentary took on him as a filmmaker. He noted that the intense pain and sorrow of the key informants had a profound impact on him, creating a challenging atmosphere where the trauma seemed to permeate the filmmaking process itself. The transfer of this emotional burden made the creation of the documentary not just a technical endeavor but a deeply personal and emotionally taxing journey for Mangansakan, as he sought to honor the survivors' experiences with sensitivity and respect.

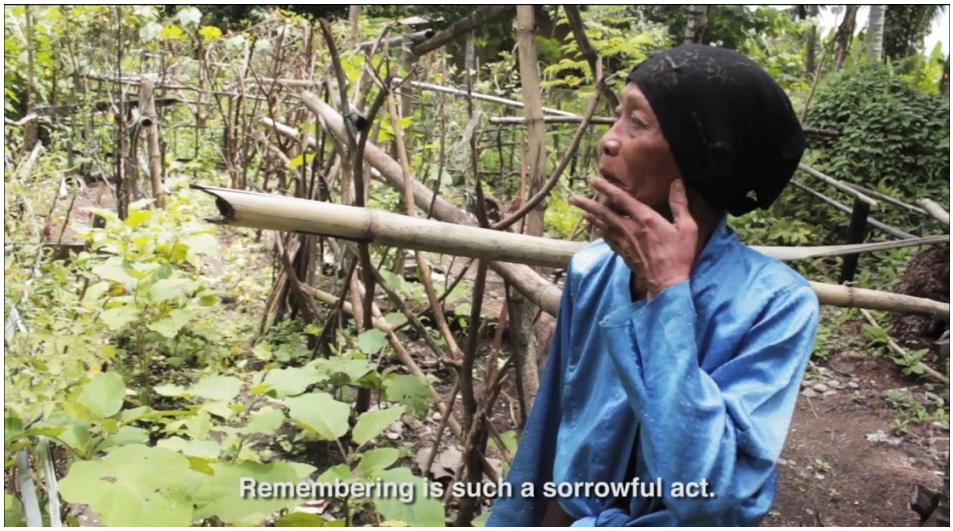

Figure 2. Remembering as radical memory work

It is essential to note that in cinema's cultural and political work as a form of radical memory, the positionality and relationship of the filmmaker relative to the survivors are crucial. The filmmaker serves as an arbiter for the truth, offering the cinematic space to memorialize what has been expunged from memory and to ascribe responsibility somewhere. In an interview, the filmmaker confessed that this was a particularly difficult film to make because the stories he uncovered and the memories he prompted them to talk about are memories that they would rather forget. Born in Cotabato, he grew up in Maguindanao, and his family has been deeply involved in politics. His grandfather founded the Mindanao Independence Movement in 1968 as a response to the Jabidah Massacre. He was telling the story of Mindanao and the Moro people, his people. The positionality of the filmmaker is compassionate and personal, and he also discovered things about himself and his people. Mangansakan admittedly grew up sheltered and noticed that many from his generation had left for the city and did not want to return to their hometown. There were so many questions and theories of why the genocide occurred. What he produced is a documentary that privileges and honors what ordinary people remember about who they are and what pain they endured.

Landscape's Memories: Silent (?) Witnesses to a Forgotten Past

Beyond the collective retelling of the stories of trauma and pain, the film followed an effective cinematic methodology employed by other filmmakers, such as Rithy Panh and Joshua Oppenheimer, who worked on sensitive topics like genocide (see Barnes & Mai, 2021; Espeña, 2024), by filming at the locations and sites where the trauma occurred. Mangansakan chose to film in Palimbang, at the mosque turned prison, by the beach, and at the victims' houses. The gravity of the atrocities is featured alongside the banality of the spaces, the idyllic village, the simplicity of the built environment, and the ordinariness of the sea. The landscape was teeming with memories, and the memories were embedded in the landscape. Mangansakan compels the audience to acknowledge how Martial Law infiltrated a small village that looked like any other village in the Philippines and demonstrated its power. It is by walking along the unpaved alleys, the unfinished (or destroyed) mosque, the beach, that the narratives of the victims can be recovered. This conjuring of trauma on and from the landscape was accomplished in several ways.

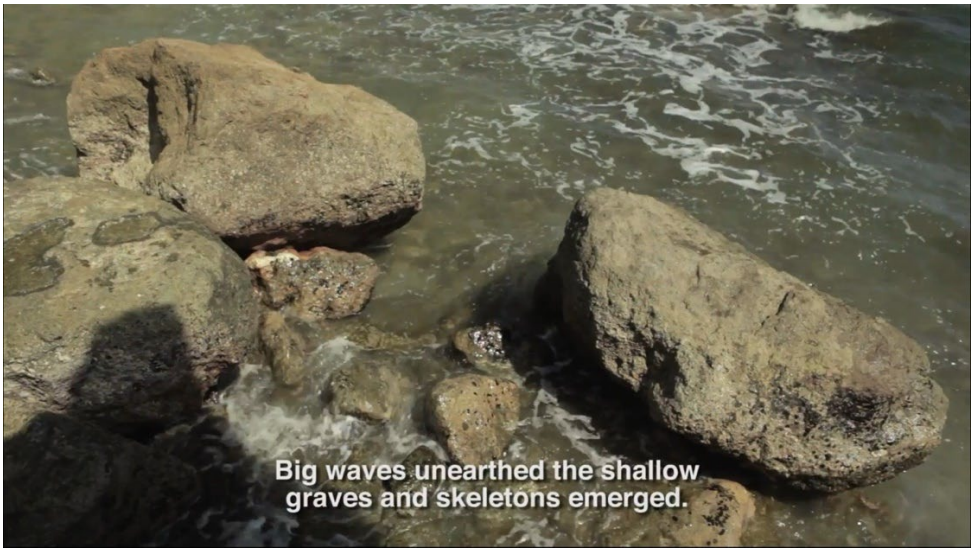

Figure 2. The sea exposes the dead, the truth

One of the key features of the film is the sea. The sound of the waves crashing into the shore, layered with the presence of innocent children swimming and playing on the beach, is a contrast to the harrowing accounts of torture and killings that the older generation has described. In some sections, the sound and image of the sea exude a reprieve in between painful stories. The stretch of soft, golden sand kissed by gentle and rhythmic waves creates a calming scene. The water is clear, though not quite turquoise blue, shimmering under the sun, with a refreshing, serene calmness, albeit temporarily. When the residents went back to the village, they realized that waves had uncovered the shallow graves, and the bodies of the dead were exposed. From the sea, truth emerges.

In certain sections, the film also evokes that trauma can be depicted by beautiful things, such as a flower and a garden. One of the survivors recalled that before the attack occurred, two policemen were killed by the leaders of Ilaga and were buried in a garden of flowers in the middle of a plaza. “The garden was a cover for their gruesome fate,” he said. How exactly can something so beautiful hide something so painful? A simple sign nailed by the road says: “Curfew Hour 10 pm-4 am.” It blends seamlessly with the serene background of a seaside village with wooden houses, a mix of paved and unpaved roads, and different types of trees. Through these depictions, the unspeakable truth about Malisbong is made visible. The military operation was shaped by the landscape, and the landscape was subsequently altered by the violence.

It is also salient to point out that the process of recollection happened in intimate places, inside their homes, in their backyards, or in front of their doors. We not only hear them divulge their nightmares, but we see them in their present living conditions surrounded by everyday objects – a chair, a jar of sugar, a plastic cup. What Mangansakan focused on was personal and intimate – the embodied experience of the survivors recounted in the warmth and privacy of their homes, in their village, where the trauma lingers. Through this cinematic practice, the audience transforms from a stranger to someone who is given a key to a house and is allowed to enter. The key is both a privilege and a responsibility.

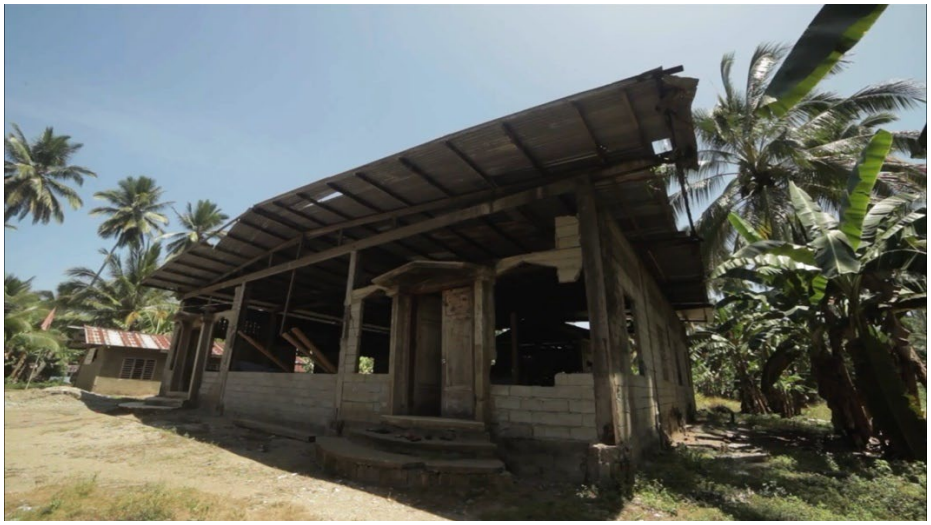

Figure 3. Tacbil mosque as a site of trauma

In Rithy Panh's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, the atrocities took place inside a school-turned prison. In Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, it was on the rooftop of an office building that suspected communists were killed. In *Forbidden Memory*, the site is the local mosque, where the men were detained for several days. The mosque seems in limbo, between unfinished and in ruins. There are no windows; the roof is wrecked. One wonders if it still serves its purpose or only stands as a relic of the past. One can see decaying pillars and rusty metals, but at the same time plants seem to grow in obscure parts of the roof and the cement wall. The mosque still stands. It remains a central structure in the village, a constant reminder of lives lost and suffering endured. The camera moves closer, focusing on the nooks and crannies, as if a piece of the past is ingrained in those bullet holes. The walls of the mosque still bear the marks where gunshots were fired. The stains on the wall looked as though they were bloodstains. In one scene inside the mosque, a woman points to the floor and says, "Every time it rains, blood would emerge from these holes." She asks, "Do you see the handprints?" The walls and floor carry the gravity of what happened.

Hadji Muhamad Fauzt Piana was 40 years old at that time and was already an Imam. He was among those who were detained inside the mosque. His story corroborates the eyewitnesses in the film:

> I was one of those tortured inside the mosque. I was lucky I wasn't selected to be killed. I remember that all captured Muslims were brought into the mosque… I overheard Governor Siongco ordering his men to kill everyone. When he left, the massacre and disappearance of the men started. Each was tied and dragged out. From inside the mosque, one could hear gunshots. This would happen daily, five to ten Muslim men at a time… Chopped coconut and ube were thrown at us. We would scramble to feed ourselves. The water we drank was from a drum mixed with guava leaves, spit and urine of the military. We had no choice but to drink from it, otherwise we would die of thirst (*Mga Kwentong Malisbong*, 2015).

Years after the massacre, the villagers continue to discover new remnants of the crime. One victim recalls, "In 1979, I went to the fishpond. The waves became big. The big waves ate away the fishpond dike and exposed the skeletons. They had been tied with steel cables, buried beside the tree there. So I ran and told everyone about the skeletons I had seen" (*Mga Kwentong Malisbong*, 2015). In another account, one of the survivors recalled that the soldiers asked the

locals to dig graves near the well. Today, she does not drink from that well anymore. Some were buried near the mosque. The seemingly ordinary place, the beach, the tree, and the sand, are both silent and screaming witnesses to the past. This cinematic approach lends itself more readily and powerfully to political immersion and engagement of the spectators and of radical political work because it situates narrative and trauma in banal spaces, places, and the environment.

The Question of Justice

The cinematic practice commands the attention of the viewers. In its ability to confront the viewers directly, *Forbidden Memory* puts the question of justice and responsibility at the forefront of its function. The embodied experience of the victims and survivors of the violent state-making in the Philippines during the Martial Law period is made visible. It generates the potential to elicit empathy for the historical trauma they experienced. The journey towards healing and justice for Mindanao has begun, but there is still a long way to go. In 2013, the Human Rights Victims Reparation and Recognition Act was signed to "recognize the heroism and sacrifices of all Filipinos who were victims of summary execution, torture, enforced or involuntary disappearance and other gross human rights violations committed during the regime of former President Ferdinand E. Marcos covering the period from September 21, 1971 to February 25, 1986 and restore the victims' honor and dignity." The victims and survivors of the Malisbong Massacre finally obtained formal recognition. The following year, the Human Rights Victims' Claim Board Source of Reparation was established and allotted ten billion pesos for the victims. The money came from the funds transferred to the government of the Republic of the Philippines by virtue of the Order of the Swiss Federal Supreme Court that adjudged this fund as ill-gotten wealth by the Marcos family. The claims board received a total of 75,749 applications for recognition and reparation between 2014 to 2018 and approved 11,103 claims. Was it successful? Was the reparation sufficient? The struggle for justice and reparation continues.

In the realm of cinema, the same struggle prevails. Mindanao filmmakers are taking on the craft of integrating politics and aesthetics with the production of films with a deep sense of social responsibility. Like Mangansakan, they pay tribute to their cultural heritage through filmmaking while experimenting on the frontiers of narrative and form, contributing to the dynamism of Mindanao and Philippine cinemas. Through their work, they are poised to redefine the landscape of the country's film industry, balancing innovation with a commitment to authenticity and cultural integrity. Representation is a fundamental component of this endeavor. This not only enhances the richness and accuracy of the stories told but also ensures that a broader range of voices and experiences are brought to the forefront and "makes present on the screen images of the past, blurring the lines between presence and absence, alive and dead" (Bergstrom, 2015, 2).

Forbidden Memory is Magansakan's contribution to the corpus of cinematic productions that challenge the boundaries and methods of documentary, following the likes of Rithy Panh and Joshua Oppenheimer, who produced innovative documentaries on Cambodia's Khmer Rouge genocide and Indonesia's anti-communist purge in 1965, respectively. The film capitalizes on personal stories, kept in private for so long, to render a semblance of a collective narrative that is not unproblematic or unblemished. It harnesses the power of shooting at real locations where history of the trauma had happened, mixing it with archival images and footage and staging a montage of reenactments. It is a documentary because it attempts to document the traces of memories and places of human catastrophe. He documents the subjectivity and

malleability of memory by assembling what is known or what remains through a deliberate effort to corroborate memories.

Towards the end of the documentary, one of the survivors recalled how the mayor, just when they were about to be set free, admonished them and reminded them to be "good citizens." The mayor allegedly said, "You should consider yourselves lucky. The order was to kill you all." But, aren't the lucky ones the spectators? Whose bodies are free of wounds and scars from the past? Perhaps. In watching the documentary, we are all brought into the fold. We now share the knowledge and bear witness. The man remarks, "I always ask why it happened to us…We went through hell. Nobody deserves what we experienced. We were unarmed, innocent civilians. We were law-abiding citizens. It is hard talking about this. And I hope this story serves its purpose. We are innocent. But this is what the government did to us." Mangansakan's *Forbidden Memory* offers a unique and critical contribution to the Philippines' enduring reflection and critical analysis of the legacies of Martial Law. It provides an alternative but equally compelling way to frame Philippine history with the margins at the center of inquiry. But, more importantly, the film performs radical memory work that is in itself an act of social justice. As one of the survivors mentioned, "Remembering is such a sorrowful act." I would simply add – to remember is to be free.

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