

# Transient Spaces, Transitory Relations: The *Accesoria* in Peque Gallaga's *Scorpio Nights* (1985)

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In the city, there are characters and stories that are often overlooked. From placid mornings to the midday chaos, lethargic afternoons and nocturnal calmness, the urban ambience sets the tone for its residents. In Metro Manila, some citizens occupy dwelling spaces temporarily, while others become long-time residents in the city. The changing times show the division in urban living: from bungalows in old residential areas, gated villages to the tenements in the inner city. Dwelling spaces are oriented according to our preferences, reflecting parts of ourselves. An individual's inclination for homing—a movement towards a favorable environment—is inherent. However, a transient is displaced from his/her preferred or original household. Despite the occupants' attempt to personalize the space, apartments represent the transitory state of habitation.

This paper explores the notion of transitory habitation, represented by a selected string of activities in Peque Gallaga's *Scorpio Nights* (1985). In the film, the *accesoria* and its inhabitants exhibit a sense of responsiveness to the space. The tenants' interaction with each other displays how experiences and memories co-constitute an attachment to the domestic space. In addition, there are encounters in the *accesoria* that revisit the indeterminate events in society at the time. Looking at the turnover of tenants and the apartment's condition, in what ways do the *accesoria* reveal the nature of its inhabitants?

Armed with experiences in theatre and film as an occasional actor, producer, writer, and production designer, Gallaga has been lauded for his

artistry. Working with Laida Lim-Perez in the production design for Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (1976) earned him awards from the Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF) and Gawad Urian in 1976. In the same category, he won a second Gawad Urian for Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980) in 1980 (Jocson, Pareja, & Zafra). Although Gallaga has done works with varying themes, some of his films of similar nature include *Scorpio Nights*, *Virgin Forest* (1985) and *Unfaithful Wife* (1986).

While *Scorpio Nights* leans on the “*bomba*” tradition, Gallaga's film remains an outstanding work in Philippine cinema because of its notable cinematography and refined editing. For Bienvenido Lumbera, the film demonstrates Gallaga's rebellion against the orthodox methods of local filmmaking and displays skillfulness in his art as “a director against the strictures of censorship by government and producers” (“Peque Gallaga” 90). Under the stringent atmosphere of the Martial Law years, Gallaga circumvented the red tape on permissible subjects and themes. The Paco-born filmmaker expresses that “the artist is never fully in control of his material” and continues that “it is the nature of art that once the art is put out for the audience, the work of art becomes the property of the public and they begin to recognize and adopt qualities of the work of the artist may not have originally intended” (qtd. in Malonzo & Pangalanan). For Gallaga, a successful work of art effectively depicts the essence of human nature, one that can never be entirely captured because of its protean quality. As a recurring theme in cinema, human nature is often understated. However, it is more intricate, acting as a universal bond.

### **The Accesoría in the City**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw Manila undergoing rapid urban development. One of the effects of industrial revolution necessitated a larger workforce, leading to the downpour of migrant workers to the commercial and industrial districts—Binondo, Quiapo, Sampaloc, Santa Cruz, and Tondo. With this influx, the demand for low-cost urban housing was filled in by the *accesoria*. Similar to tenement housing characterized by congested living spaces, these apartment dwellings were a chain of one to two-story units enjoined by parting walls, fitted with a separate doorway directing inhabitants to the communal areas, whose central area was a patio that greets the residents as they enter the apartment. Gerard Lico notes that

the floor areas of a unit would range from 40-45 square meters per storey, with a ceiling entrance of 2.7 meters and a narrow façade at an average of 3.5 meters. By tradition, Lico adds that one of the reasons of this skewed measurement was because the front area was of greater value compared to the ones whose entrances were farther from the street (168). Inside are one-room units called *viviendas*<sup>1</sup> rented out to lower-middle and working-class occupants who live in spaces with little to no privacy. Each *vivienda* has its own *zaguán*<sup>2</sup> (lobby) *sala*<sup>3</sup> (living area) and sleeping quarters. To economize on the finances, amenities such as the *cocina* (kitchen), *latrina* (bathroom) and *azotea*<sup>4</sup> (service areas) are centralized and open for the *accesoria*'s residents. These facilities are located on the ground floor along with spaces for laundry, drying, and lounging. Some apartments have a separate kitchen, including bathroom sheds, while those who live in larger apartments have a small yard at the rear of the house. While the structure of an *accesoria* was largely similar to the *bahay na bato*<sup>5</sup> (stone house) of the elite. However, one feature particularly distinguishes the two houses.

The *accesoria* is devoid of an *entresuelo*<sup>6</sup> (mezzanine)—the half-way point between the ground floor and the upper storey. Looking at the wood-and-stone combination of the *bahay na bato*, the former had noticeably scant ornaments. Lico relays that in some cases, the aesthetics would “appear only in the exterior grillwork, and occasionally, in decorative woodwork” (169). The resemblance between these houses reflects the degradation in taste according to Nick Joaquín, who laments the changes in Manila’s domestic architecture between the 1900s and the 1930s. The grand homes of the Spanish period were characterized by its lofty rooms, the ornate furniture and designs, in contrast to the rickety structure and the soiled interiors of the *accesoria*, where the neglect seemed to echo the outlook of its transient occupants. Joaquín also mentions:

The change in our character shows in the shift of emphasis from the showplace sala (which, in today’s houses, has all but melted into the dining room) to the more vital areas of bedroom, bath and kitchen. When we build now we build for our own convenience; we don’t stint on the space we really use (like bedroom and bath) just to have as much space as possible for a sala that will stagger visitors, which was the basic principle of prewar architecture (232).

Following the war, urban reconstruction was one of the main undertakings of the government, starting from civic spaces such as administrative buildings and academic institutions. Alongside this restoration, homes of varying kinds became visible all over the city, as some dwelling spaces attempted to mirror the grandness of their predecessors. However, with the exodus of the old inhabitants out of Manila and into newer cities like Makati and Quezon City, among others, a few of these houses were quickly converted into transient homes. In this vein, the government's housing projects produced one-story dwellings of cement blocks connected to other houses, while others stand as single-detached cubic quarters. But the availability of lands continued to diminish.

The demand for alternative mass housing led to the construction of multi-story tenements which are elevated and expanded rowhouses. One of the most recognizable housing projects of the post-war period was ordered by the Marcoses for the construction of The Bagong Lipunan Sites and Services (BLISS) dwellings in Diliman, Quezon City. While these dwelling spaces follow the orientation of the *bahay kubo* (nipa hut) with an elevated ground floor and a communal area below, the industrial and generic look of these residences left out a sense of individuality for its residents. Rodrigo Perez remarks that “with the Filipino penchant for remodeling, many of these pitiable plain units have metamorphosed into charming examples of personalized architecture” (27). Such efforts in housing demonstrate one's innate sense of home even with transient habitation. But this reduced view for security and dwelling are also portrayed in another medium.

### **The Bomba Wave**

In Philippine cinema, the “collapse” of the studio system in the late 1950s heralded a change in local productions as independent outfits stepped in. With their amassed net worth and network, some of the stars became producers. Without the fixed mills of the major studios, the immediate years produced films with lackluster technicals and kitschy stories. Continuing on to the 1960s and the 1970s, an influx of foreign films made an impression on the production values at the time. The spaghetti Western became the “Pinoy cowboy” while the “secret agent” films took pages out of the James Bond series. However, these were seen as poor

adaptations. Among these appropriations, the most popular were sex-oriented dramas, colloquially known as *bomba* films. Some of the major precursors to the Filipino variation include the films of Marilyn Monroe and pictures from the European sexual revolution in the 1960s featuring screen bombshells Brigitte Bardot, Sophia Loren, Anita Ekberg, Raquel Welch, among others.

Moreover, sex education films from Sweden, Denmark, and sex comedies from France, Italy, and London helped paved the way for pornography to cross the threshold onto mainstream cinema around the globe (Matilac and Lanot 84). In the Philippines, Ruben S. Abalos' *Uhaw* (1970) is credited as the first *bomba* film,<sup>7</sup> which featured 10 sexual encounters and a long shot of a nude Merle Fernandez running. While these *bomba* films were seen as substandard works, they had a transcendent appeal, raking in AB and CD crowds. In terms of revenue, the formula to produce *bomba* films was an idyllic set-up. Nestor Torre remarks, "it did not take much money to make them—the only requirements were a camera, a room, a bed, and bodies willing to strip and clinch on it" (51). The quick turnover of these adult-themed dramas marred the caliber of films from the postwar studio system years. As the *bomba* wave expanded, there were a few differentiations as Rolando Tolentino maps out:

The genre can be categorized and periodized as follows: the *bomba* film (1970-Sept. 1972); bold film, wet look stage (1974-1976); bold film, daring stage (1976 to 1982); FF (fighting fish) films and pene films (1983-1986); ST or sex-trip films (1986-1992); and the TT or TF (titillating films) (1992-present) (237).

The deviations in the genre was because of the progression in showing nudity and depictions of sex—from drenched blouses ("wet look") to alleged full-on intercourses in *penekulas* (a portmanteau of penetration and pelikula). The Marcos administration was firm in keeping their view of a "New Society" immaculate. Through the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (BCMP), there was a strict monitoring of films with critical subjects. Some were deemed acceptable for screening and those

that were considered seditious were subjected to ludicrous cuts. However, the BCMP's interference was not able to deter the audience's gusto for sex-oriented dramas.

Within the same period, there was an emergence of “socially-conscious” works from directors and screenwriters who were exposed to the aesthetics of “New Wave” cinema from European arthouse films which underscored the “film as art” movement. Some of the more prolific writers include Ricardo Lee, Raquel Villavicencio, Clodualdo del Mundo, and Mario O'Hara, while the works of the following filmmakers marked the “Second Golden Age” in Philippine cinema<sup>8</sup>—Eddie Romero, Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Marilou Diaz-Abaya, Laurice Guillen, Celso Ad. Castillo, Mike de Leon, and Peque Gallaga. These artists stood out from their peers by taking formal film studies and consequently mentoring the next generation of film artists. In conducting their workshops and classes, they reiterate the need to cultivate an understanding of Philippine society, social consciousness and to immerse themselves in the nationalist struggle.

The year 1985 was a turning point in the Marcos administration as the political and economic crises of 1983 (notably the Aquino assassination), became an “inescapable and eloquent context for the rapid proliferation of erotic representation” in film and in print (Parel 46). The institution of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP) in 1982 intended to promote local works. However, the ECP was criticized for producing sex-oriented films as Martial Law came to a close in 1986. In its short existence, the ECP produced works which became classics such as Gallaga's *Oro, Plata, Mata* (1982) and Bernal's *Himala* (1982). Similarly, Lumbera notes how the establishment of the ECP permitted the Marcoses to “buy time” by offering pictures of pleasure and at correspondingly, exercising control on the masses and the local bourgeoisie (“Scorpio Nights” 222). While *bomba* films were included in the clampdown, these works became a significant vehicle for the administration in attempting to divert the public's attention from the tension-filled atmosphere.

## The Cinematic Eye

This paper leans on phenomenology, defined as “the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Smith 305). In *Scorpio Nights*, the *accessoria*'s rooms, features, and

its effects on the characters are emphasized through this lens, by way of two specific strains. First, phenomenology in architecture integrates how the materiality of a structure and the atmosphere reveals the characteristics of a space. Condensing a premise from architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa, the senses are needed in experiencing both architecture and cinema, albeit visuality remains a priority.<sup>9</sup> Working on the combination of one's sense and images, the second strand on the phenomenology of film puts forward that filmic images doubly function as the subject and the object of viewing, recognizing the audience's presence. In this vein, the works of media theorist Vivian Sobchack and cultural critic, Laura Marks similarly highlight that multi-sensory experiences in cinema allow the audience to engage with the film's components: from the sound to the production design.<sup>10</sup>

In cinema, the camera isolates certain images through framing, which enables the audience to focus on features that drives the narrative forward and those that bear much more significance than being mere spectacle. On this note, Gilles Deleuze mentions that the camera functions as "a mechanical consciousness in its own right, separate from the consciousness of the audience or the hero" (22). Yet the camera's eye also acts as a mediator between the film and the audience, portraying a reality on celluloid, where the two elements share a form of consciousness. Deleuze posits the existence of a filmic body that functions as a presenter of sort. Through this body, viewers are able to switch between perspectives of different characters, sometimes finding themselves and the film in unconventional locations and strange positions. Following the narrative as the systematized phenomena, the audience's point of view fuses with the camera's vision. In turn, this "eye" witnesses character development in various situations within. While there are limitations in how the cinematic eye recognizes a view, other production elements such as sound and set design assist in emphasizing the environment.

Looking at the opening sequence of *Scorpio Nights*, a full shot of the granite Binondo Church obstructed by power lines sets the atmosphere of the narrative. The succeeding intercuts show the interiors of a rundown *accesoria* and its immediate exterior: a woman pulls back her thin curtains as a *calesa* (carriage) in vivid red is pulled by an emaciated horse; a security guard in a blue uniform fixes himself on a small mirror, cutting to a person

walking past a murky *estero* (estuary)<sup>11</sup> as a welder toils away on a stack of iron while a couple of residents order a meal from an eatery on the trash-ridden sidewalk; a man frustratedly pries off a coin from his acoustic guitar and a delivery boy hauls an empty pushcart towards an off-screen neighborhood store. This rapid exchange of exterior and interior shots creates a symphony illustrating how urban residents characteristically start their day. In addition, the interior reflects the feverish energy of the industrial district with the inhabitants' constant movement.

On this note, Gaston Bachelard mentions that a domestic space and the energy of its inhabitants are able to merge as the house reflects the 'psychic state' of an occupant. Whether it's a single detached home or a congested apartment, the environment affects the inhabitants in their private moments as one's home projects the notion of "intimacy" (72), including privacy. Occupants tend to mimic the ambiance of the space they are in. Calmer spaces encourage a placid attitude while a frenzied environment produce harried individuals. In one's moments of solitude, the atmosphere continues to be influential, since an occupant is able to switch from one mood to another. In *Scorpio Nights*, there are a number of spaces inside the *acesoria* which define the characters' behaviors. In addition, these rooms and shared areas embody the collective consciousness of the occupants, witnessing their private lives and looking at their public selves.

### **The Foyer**

The camera pans to the right and back, featuring the apartment's entrance hall filled with different activities—a clothesline hangs above the neighborhood teenagers playing basketball on a half-court area, a group of welders in one corner, two friends marveling at a new motorcycle, someone taking an item from the corner store/communal kitchen and joins a group of men playing *pusoy* while a man strums "The Boxer." This communal area allows the tenants to interact with each other at various times of the day, whether they choose to while away an idle hour by gossiping, doing chores, or acknowledging one another as they make their way to their own units.

In the film, the student boarder Danny (Daniel Fernando) is frequently seen descending the aged staircase from their dormitory to converse with Genio (Eugene Enriquez), the welder, or play cards with the

boys. Looking at this act, the descent indicates a detachment from privacy and deciding to commune. In the foyer, he sees the wife of the security guard (Ana Marie Gutierrez) who occupies the unit below their dormitory. One of the boarders (Pen Medina) expresses his annoyance for a fellow tenant, Elton (Carlos Balasbas), a drug user who constantly plays his guitar and seems to be unaware of his surroundings. But Elton calls out Danny on his alleged desire for the security guard's wife, which he quickly denies. Despite the number of tenants in the *accesoria*, the inhabitants follow a social order in a fundamental form. Some take on the persona that others perceive them to be while others do not follow the role ascribed to them. In one scene, an argument arises between a student boarder named Mike (Mike Austria) and a usurper, who quickly leaves the place. In an instant, the people in the lobby return to their activities, seemingly untroubled by the brief commotion (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Business as usual in the foyer; *Scorpio Nights*, Regal Films, 1985.

In an environment where people are used to seeing the spectacle vanishing as fast as it occurred, the occupants either extend the scene through questions, stories, or at times, overlook what happened by going on with their businesses. However, the foyer becomes a place where Danny relays his initial act of voyeurism to Genio who refuses to believe him. Their talk is interrupted by the wife who calls Genio, asking him to fix the hole in a metal basin. The sense of community is evident in how the occupants are amiable towards each other. Danny is entranced by the wife, but when Fely (Amanda Amores), arrives, Danny's attention is now on her. With the number of people in the foyer, it is customary to be constantly distracted by the other inhabitants. However, for Danny, his preoccupation with the wife occupies a significant part of his mind.

In Danny's string of visual intrusion on the downstairs couple, he is able to tread into their quarters. With the security guard (Orestes Ojeda) on his night shift; the wife is left alone, giving Danny the opportunity to sleep with the wife. Following his conquest, Danny proceeds to tell Genio about the act episode refuses to believe that Danny committed the act. He warns the student to be careful, but it seems that his word of caution vanished within the grimy perimeter of the foyer. In another scene, Danny's interaction with the security guard takes place in the lobby when he mindlessly steps on the hose that the husband is using and gets reprimanded. The husband is further annoyed when Fely who thinks he is conceited, snorts. But the husband is seen hosing off the children's feet, revealing his playful nature towards children. The husband is preoccupied and Danny approaches the corroding window of the ground floor unit where the wife is looking out. Seeing this contact, Genio bumps into Danny to subtly warn him.

The foyer witnesses a rather comical and fairly violent incident, when a scream from Fely's mother reverberates throughout the apartment, calling out for help to catch a Peeping Tom, who stumbles down the staircase as he escapes. The male tenants corner him and among the clothesline, they start beating him down. Genio joins the frenzy and confuses the men, giving the alleged voyeur a chance to pick up a wrench and swings at his attackers. The ruckus wakes the security guard, who gets his pistol and shoots the peeper in the thigh. The events turn around as the men stop their pursuit to get the boy bandaged. Among the audience, Danny is petrified by the security guard's act.

Looking at these events, the lobby has a multi-purpose function—as a source of news and entertainment, a lounge, a workplace, and as a silent trysting area (for Danny and the wife). As a mute spectator, it is in the foyer where Danny asks his roommates how much a ticket costs at the time because the price is hiked every month. This question is a jab at the inflation during the 1980s, while the other layer points to the clampdown of films by the administration. In this scene, we are reminded of the ECP which represents the government's series of projects to produce their own works that they find acceptable. Reflecting the suppression, Danny's inquiry is left unanswered.

There is a cautious tone in the foyer when Danny reminds his roommate, Romulo, of his anonymous visitor (a police or an agent by his manner of dressing), whose neutral expression can be read as either contemplating or apprehensive, indicating that Romy's participation in the demonstrations will leave his fate uncertain. On this note, as one of the student-characters, Romy represents the anti-establishment movements of the time, and those who are accused of being a member of the resistance often go underground. The boarders retire to bed, one of them expresses his excitement at getting to peep at the downstairs couple again. Another roommate castigates them for spying all the time, when their country is in disorder. Albeit quite sudden, this direct announcement is another critical point in the film since in the bulk of the narrative, only a few characters note their current struggles that mirror the turbulent Marcos times outside the apartment.

While the foyer looks at amiable interactions and hushed conversations, the walls beyond the lobby contain grim truths. On the other side the walls, the security guard practices pointing his gun with frenzied eyes, his location unidentified. Inside the ground floor unit, Danny and the wife are having rough sex. Returning to the lobby, the women gossip while doing their laundry, and a corner of the lobby is turned into a basketball court as the others bathe, oblivious to the imminent slaughter.

### **The Dormitory**

As a pivotal space, the communal quality of the boys' dormitory acts as a screen to Danny's voyeurism. *Scorpio Nights* teases the viewer with parts of the apartment before entering a unit on the second floor. Inside,

a group of male student boarders are headed home for the summer break and Danny will occupy the room by himself. Before leaving, Romulo tells Danny that if anyone asks for him, he must not say anything. The dormitory now turns into a private room and Danny pleasures himself. However, he is interrupted by a loud knock on his door and an official-looking man is looking for his roommate, Romulo. Following through with the reminder, Danny replies that he has no idea of Romy's whereabouts. When Danny asks for the man's name, he does not reply. With tapered security measures, the space can easily be accessed by strangers. Moreover, tenants who are in good terms with each other are free to go inside other units (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The dormitory, nearly empty and occupied; *Scorpio Nights*, Regal Films, 1985.

Inside the dormitory, Kale (Carlos Abresia), Genio's lover who tends the *sari-sari* store in the foyer, asks for a tablet from Danny to ease Genio's headache. Remembering Danny's birthday, Kale relays to the boy that those born under the Scorpio sign are lust-ridden characters. Kale ends

his visit by reminding Danny to be careful, but the boy remains skeptical about the warning. Despite being a marginal character, Kale reveals the encompassing theme of the film, delivering the most powerful line which illuminates the excessive sexual drive of Danny, the security guard, and his wife. This revelation occurs in the space which bears a semblance of home and projects a sense of privacy.

In another scene, Danny's roommates return and see the kettle he left burning on their bedside table while he spends a heated moment with the wife downstairs. Alarmed, they start putting out the flames and the entire compound panics. The poor condition of the apartment is susceptible to such accidents and the flammable materials (mostly aged wood and unfurnished concrete), stands as fuel to the potential conflagration. The fear of the inhabitants for their lives is instinctively followed by their fear of displacement. From their cramped dormitory, the distress expands throughout the apartment.

### **The Ground Floor Unit**

Located directly under the boys' dormitory, the ground floor unit occupied by the security guard and his wife becomes a central space in the progression of events (see Fig. 3). In the opening scene, the security guard asks his wife if there will be a change in their diet of canned food, indicating their scarce income. This inquiry hints at the citizens' lack of necessities such as food, apart from decent living quarters. Every night, when the security guard leaves their unit for his duty, the wife is left alone and Danny repeatedly spies on her through a crack on his room's floor. The boy's initial observation of the downstairs couple fornicating becomes an obsessive habit, directed to the wife. As she paints her nails in dim lighting, Danny's eyes merge with the camera, traveling from her petite toes to her plump chest, and methodically observing her as she sensually takes a bite out of unripe mangoes. Is the wife if aware of the silent observation? But it becomes apparent that even in the privacy of their units, sexual tension remains thick.



Fig. 3. The ground floor unit, cramped but well-kept; *Scorpio Nights*, Regal Films, 1985.

Halfway through the film, the cracking of thunder and lightning sees a soaked Danny arriving at the apartment, who stumbles into the room of the downstairs couple. Hearing the door creak, the wife thinks that it is her husband entering and utters a reminder. Danny moves into the domain of the subject, physically intruding on the couple's domestic space, which the wife is oblivious to. Danny sees his object of desire up close, enclosed in a crimson mosquito net. A tracking shot follows, focusing on the supple body of the sleeping wife. Danny deceives her by mimicking the husband's routine before climbing into bed with her. Danny lifts the wife's dress and proceeds to enter her; in a similar manner as that of the security guard as she lies half-asleep. Within moments, Danny finishes and the wife turns over. He quickly heads back to his room, surprised at getting his hands on the wife. Danny wakes up as the security guard comes in and does his usual business, while Danny looks at them from the fissure. After turning

off the light, the husband makes love to his wife, who actively participates this time.

The changes between day and night, the presence and absence of noises specify moments of transitory pleasure. Looking at risks, Danny embodies a person who disregards any caution to pursue his addiction. Once more, Danny beds the wife and as he was about to leave, a hand grabs his wrist from under the mosquito net. Danny is initially surprised but gamely joins the wife back in bed. From feasting on her toes to picking her up and spinning inside the net, the tryst becomes rougher when the wife uses his belt to initiate their exchange of saliva, before ending their encounter.

As heavy rains seep through the apartment one night, Danny tries to keep the water out. Downstairs, the wife sits on a bare wooden bed, garbed in a thin robe among their drenched furniture. Danny comes in wearing a clear, plastic raincoat. They start fornicating amid the flashing and booming. In this scene, Pallasmaa's notion comes to mind that "the strongest and most pleasurable experience of home occurs during a heavy storm when rain beats against the roof, magnifying the feeling of warmth and protection" ("Identity" par. 61). The domestic space fulfills its primary role of providing shelter from the elements and the characters similarly find warmth in each other. In the morning, the husband tries to fix their ceiling with a tarpaulin while complaining to his wife that the house should be replaced with a new one. The husband's sentiment reflects how domestic spaces need to be reinforced to sustain the purpose of dwelling. However, with the limitations in one unit, the tenants need to be creative in using the space.

When Fely and Danny are invited to the ground floor unit to look at a dress, the wife uses this chance to get her hands on the student. As Fely tries on the wife's dress, she closes the curtains on the girl. In that window of a minute, the wife kisses Danny torridly and starts rubbing his crotch. But the act is cut short when Fely finishes getting into the dress and her husband returns. In a limited space, solid partitioning is not practical and the use of curtains allows a slight physical division, projects an occasional sense of privacy and is used as a mental separation.

Later that night, the wife loudly expresses her pleasure at Danny going down on her, but silences herself when the husband arrives. She hides Danny under their bed and pretends to be asleep as the guard moves

around their unit. Moments later, the flimsy bed creaks under the weight of the copulating pair. As the couple starts to doze off, the wife relays to the husband that someone was caught stealing the other day. She asks him what he would do if he catches a burglar, to which the security guard replies that he will shoot the bastard. The wife turns over with a devious smile on her face. Under the bed, the boy winces. This scene depicts Danny's helplessness, trapped inside the space of another tenant, where the danger lies in the discovery of an intruder in their unit.

The wife remains affectionate towards her husband. In one scene, as they laugh in between soft kisses and caresses, the security guard senses something is different with his wife and tells her not to cheat on him. When he comes home drunk, the security guard breaks down and repeatedly asks her why they cannot conceive a child. The husband's depressing realization points to the irony of guarding other people's houses and important establishments but is unable to sense the danger in his own. This interaction suggests that when opportunities are presented, the need for financial survival outweighs personal choices. In this scene, the oversexed characters are revealed to have empathy for their significant others, but lack the concern and assurance for themselves. In their vulnerable state, they disclose their worries and fears inside their private space. After a moment of vulnerability, the husband discovers their affair. Towards the end of the film, he opens the door to their unit and sees them in the act. He observes them before emerging from the shadows with a pistol. The camera closes in, revealing the malevolence in his eyes, and he shoots them while they are in the middle of rapid pumping.

### **In-Betweens: The Bathroom and the Staircase**

Majority of the rooms within the *acesoria* are shared or collapsed to maximize available space. In this vein, certain areas underscore the occupants' state of mind. While the bathroom allows solitude for the user, in the film, it is a communal space. Fely takes a bath, and Danny enters. They proceed to have sexual intercourse while covered in suds. While a comfort room is primarily a private space, the bathroom becomes an "in-between" space where despite being occupied, privacy is not retained. Instead of providing the occupants privacy, the user remains cautious. In the film, it becomes a trysting space, where there is no exchange of words.



Fig. 4. The staircase, the bathrooms, and the tenants; *Scorpio Nights*, Regal Films, 1985.

The steep, wooden staircase is also a transitional space—prompting a change in the mood or the sentiment on the tenants (see Fig. 4). Going upstairs indicates retreating into one’s private space while going downstairs shows openness to others. When Danny first watches the downstairs couple copulate, he sets himself halfway on the staircase, where there is a slice between the old beams and the walls inside the couple’s unit. While this area has poor lighting, it becomes a suitable way of concealing a peeping Tom. Also, the partitions between the rooms do not provide complete privacy. As the husband penetrates his wife, who is half-awake, Danny masturbates to the scene. Finishing in moments, Danny gets himself together and comes across an off-screen cat, who screeches at his kick and shakes him out of his stupor. The boy heads upstairs and returns to his reality. This sequence renders the staircase as an interlude to his sexual awakening. As the film progresses, it is on the staircase where he comes to a realization.

At one point, the boy continues his shadowy observation on the downstairs couple but quickly discovers their firm union. Next to the crack on their wall beside the staircase, Danny witnessing the saccharine exchange of the couple, as Genio observes him from a corner. The distraught boy starts crying and pounds his head on the grimy banister. Genio runs up to the boy and asks if he is jealous. Danny denies this and is left weeping on the staircase, prolonging his agony in the transitional space.

### **Two-as-One: The Ground Floor Unit and the Dormitory**

With the ground floor unit and the dormitory being parallel to each other, the physical barriers are inefficient in fully enclosing their spaces in privacy. The high points in the film illustrate how the characters transcend these barriers. In Danny's first peeps on the couple's lovemaking, he catches the security guard entering the unit through a crack on the floor and the camera merges with Danny's viewpoint. The guard joins his sleeping wife, whose dress is askew several inches above her midsection. When the bedside lamp is turned off by the husband, Danny's surveillance on the couple is cut short.

In another sequence, the wife is seen lying on the bed, then puts on her robe haphazardly. She then caresses herself—from her legs to her stomach, shoulders, from her chest and to her neck. The wife stands up on the bed, gets a metal hanger and begins to search for the crack on their ceiling. In their dormitory, Danny sees the metal hanger jutting out from his floor and peeks. Seeing the wife touch herself, the boy gets aroused and pries off part of the wooden floor, large enough for his arms to stretch through. The wife reaches out then gorges on his fingers while pleasuring herself as Danny humps the floor. The physical boundaries between them are now removed and their repeated trysts led to heightened sexual games—a carnal circus—as demonstrated in their disregard for the structural limitations of their fragile units to satisfy their physical hunger.

Their physical contact is cut off at the husband's arrival, where Danny returns the cover on the gap and the couple proceed to copulate. The wife turns her gaze towards the crevice, to which Danny returns. He starts touching himself while holding a lamp in his right hand. The physical distance between Danny and the couple is non-existent, suggesting a three-way sex (see Fig. 5). The light on Danny indicates that the wife wants

to convince herself that the boy is her partner. But she asks for the light to be turned off. The wife's choice exposes her recognition of the extramarital affair. As a central element in the film, we see the tactile sense sustained in the narrative as seen in the continuous touching of one's body and grabbing another's. Recalling how Pallasmaa contends that "the eye collaborates with the body and other senses. One's sense of reality is strengthened and articulated by this constant interaction" ("The Eyes of the Skin" 41), as viewers, our eyes fuse with the camera, allowing us to switch between the filmic characters' viewpoints—from Danny to the couple and parts of the apartment as an omniscient viewer.



Fig. 5. An implicit *ménage à trois*; *Scorpio Nights*, Regal Films, 1985.

However, when the husband learns of their affair, the dormitory is no longer frequented by Danny, indicating his detachment from being a boy and into the ground floor unit, where he asserts his development. The security guard steps out of the shadow as his wife and Danny climaxes,

ending their affair with a blast (see Fig. 6). He finishes off Danny with another shot and touches himself before penetrating his wife, who is lying in her own pool of blood, half-dead. The wife takes her last breath as the husband thrusts into her. Moments later, he puts the gun to his mouth and pulls the trigger. The gunshot sends Genio running to the unit, screaming for Danny. There, he discovers a bloodbath. Genio's cry pierces the night, echoing throughout the dark alleys of Binondo.



Fig. 6. A gunshot is heard in the *accesoria*; *Scorpio Nights*, Regal Films, 1985.

### **The *Accesoria*: The Transient Space**

Over time, the condition of the *accesoria* deteriorates with the constant turnover of tenants. While others maintain the quality of the space, some remain indifferent with their awareness of temporary habitation. In addition, the lack of financial resources and the landlord's unresponsiveness to the living conditions elevate the effort of preservation. In *Scorpio Nights*,

the apartment is occupied by marginal characters living in an unforgiving city: university students from a lower financial stratum, conmen, sexual deviants, and alleged substance abusers. Despite the periodic arguments, most of them look out for each other. The domestic space serves as their ground for their social consciousness, where their behavior and attitude are structured by the environment. The apartment projects a sense of home by fostering community spirit among people who are not tied by blood relations. In this line, I recall a remark from Pallasmaa, that:

Home is a projection and basis of identity, not only of an individual but also of the family. But homes, the mere secrecy of private lives concealed from the public eye, also structure social life. Homes delineate the realms of intimacy and public life (“Identity”).

The boundaries between public and private lives are underscored by the rooms, whereas the communal areas and the congested units are partitioned with fragile plywood. As if facing their visitors and neighbors, the corroded wrought-iron window grilles offer a lean sense of aesthetic. Living in an *accesoria* becomes similar to living in a shantytown, where privacy becomes a luxury, and the surroundings underline the inhabitants’ disregard for proper decorum as the structure is located in an unkempt district. While the house is seen as the world where people are able to create their own consciousness, the *accesoria* remains open to wear and tear. The apartment reflects a part of society often neglected, where timeworn structures are left to decay.

On another note, Sobchack’s assertion that the sense of touch transcends its meaning reflects how tactility is embodied in the film as an extension of one’s eye. As the camera’s eye goes through the lobby, the area is showcased through the number of people in the space, the coarse pavement drenched by washerwomen and the assortment of items (e.g. a *sari-sari* store and a welding shop), make it appear more packed. Without having to physically touch the areas of the house, one recognizes the tactile, olfactory, and auditory components of the film through these images. The eye is able to access more spaces and intrude on private moments. In addition, Marks puts forward that “voyeurism relies on maintaining the

distance between viewer and viewed [...] eroticism closes that distance and implicates the viewer in the viewed” (184). In particular, Danny’s constant voyeuristic act demonstrates how the act of viewing is doubly carried out in the film because seeing is performed similarly by the film and the viewer.

### Transitory Relations

Looking at the turnover of tenants and the apartment’s condition, in what ways do the *acesoria* reveal the nature of its inhabitants? Even with its origins in the *bomba* tradition as a tool to dissuade the masses from martial law, *Scorpio Nights* has elevated itself by projecting a hint of neorealism by framing the story in Manila. In the film, there are instances where sex is highlighted as man’s proverbial nature. However, as a central event in the narrative, sex was isolated from other realities. For Nicanor Tiongson, “the whole situation was actually crying out to be interpreted, but instead it showed sex as a phenomena, not as a symptom of larger, deeper structures” (qtd. in Parel 46). In observing the lack of connection between sex and societal struggle however, it can be argued that the excess in copulation performed by the characters was also a pretext for diverting themselves from the callous times outside. Looking at the *acesoria*, the structure functions as a shell where the transients find a respite from the feverish social order and turbulent political climate at the tail end of the Martial Law period.

Despite the polluted environment, the space has a sense of community where strangers look out for one another. While there are numerous tenants, only two quarters are featured regularly: the couple’s room and the boys’ dormitory. The downstairs room is partitioned with curtains to create a psychological division within the limited space while the interior of the dormitory projects masculinity through the posters of scantily-clad calendar girls promoting liquor. These aesthetics reflect the administration’s repressive attitude towards sex (Cruz) by curtailing its presence to keep the Marcoses’ immaculate concept of the “New Society”—a movement urging its citizens across social classes to work on mutual objectives in order to attain emancipation.

At street-level, the *acesoria* is decaying. The second floor is enclosed in old timber, the entrance to the apartment is a dreary double door and the outer stone walls are cracking. The foyer’s walls are soiled concrete and the untidiness lessens its charm. Some parts have been painted over while

the exposed areas are covered with years of grime. In the film's rendering, the sordid combination of sweat, damp concrete, cigarette smoke, cooking oil, detergent powder, smoldering metal, and dust are familiar odors. A inhabitants' perception and experiences within domestic spaces are filled with particulars such as surfaces, colors, familiar sounds, and people. In *Scorpio Nights*, the camera functions as the audience's eyes in infiltrating the inhabitants' moments of privacy, and similar to Danny, the viewers now stand as voyeurs.

The characters used the rundown apartment as a stage for their deceptive games, which led to their grisly demise. With manslaughter as the film's exclamation point, it becomes a piercing depiction of some episodes in the city, where degradation is entwined with the rise of transgressive acts, from minor to heinous crimes. Cities are typically built to embody a nation's progress, but there are persisting challenges in urban planning (or the lack thereof). There is an overflow of transients, lack of adequate dwellings, disregard for city rules as well as authority figures and haphazard constructions.

A significant part of the narrative in *Scorpio Nights* illustrates the inhabitants' casual attitude in maintaining the space, until a storm and a fire nearly displaced them. Only then did they show any concern. The characters' sense of home is shown in their attempt to preserve the space. Regardless of the dreadful state of the *accesoria*, there are people who try to create a sense of home by putting in personal touches. With transient habitation, people are able to project their images of home by orienting it with their preferred colors, through spraying a room with familiar scents, and acquiring a few mementos. The attachment to one's home is co-constituted by decent and unkind experiences, by pleasant memories and unpleasant ones. More importantly, a semblance of home prompts a connection to the domestic space by recalling particular experiences, sensations, and remembering people who offer a sense of comfort, regardless of one's present location.

## Notes

1. The term “vivienda” literally translates into “living place.” The Spanish usage denotes several meanings such as house, home, stay, room, floor, apartment, and dwellings.

2. In domestic architecture, a *zaguan* is a covered space near the entrance.

3. The living room of an *acesoria* and similar transient spaces are sometimes used simultaneously used as a dining room, a lounge area, and even sleeping quarters.

4. Traditionally, an *azotea* is the structure’s rooftop or a flat platform. In the *acesoria*, the function of an *azotea* changes at various times of the day. See Harris (2013).

5. Directly translates as “stone house,” a two-story structure which uses stone or masonry for the ground floor, while the upper story is enclosed in walls hewn from Philippine hardwood.

6. During the Spanish colonial period, the household help directs a visitor to the *entresuelo* who waits for the homeowner to allow him/her to proceed to the *sala* by way of the grand staircase.

7. See Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.’s (1970) full review of the film *Uhaw* as compiled in Nicanor Tiongson’s (ed.) *The URIAN Anthology 1970-1979* (1980).

8. In the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Film* (1994), the latter part of the 1960s until the 1980s was considered the “Third Golden Age” and lists down the aforementioned filmmakers. The preceding decades, 1950s-1960s were the “Second Golden Age” while the nascent years of Filipino cinema in the 1930s-1940s were already dubbed as the “First Golden Age.” This paper follows Joel David’s assertion as mentioned in *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema* (1990).

9. A detailed definition can be read in Pallasmaa’s *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (1996).

10. In Sobchack’s *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (2004), the influences of images on one’s senses correlates with Marks’s statement regarding how filmic images contribute to the representations of lives in *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000).

11. In populated districts, an *estero* is an inlet or tidal channel which functions as a drainage canal.

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