



## REVIEWS

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Deslauriers, Veronique, Jean-Philippe Hughes, Enrico V. Gloria, and Farida Bianca P. Velicaria. 2013. *Minera: The Women Miners of Benguet*. Quezon City, Philippines: Third World Studies Center; Montreal, Canada: University of Montreal. 21 min. and 6 sec. <https://youtu.be/iD121W8wlqk>.

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The Third World Studies Center of the University of the Philippines and the Department of Political Science of the University of Montreal have been conducting documentary film projects since 2011, producing five documentaries intended for teaching and raising awareness. All of the documentaries focus on people consciously exposing themselves to risks while the solutions implemented by the bureaucratic government fail to address their needs. It is a study that comes close to the not-yet-existing discipline of accidentology.

Creation or collapse, the accident is an unconscious oeuvre, an *invention* in the sense of uncovering what was hidden, just waiting to happen. (Virilio 2007, 9)

Despite the existence of risk studies, there is no accidentology—only a process of fortuitous discovery. There is no science of the accident, Aristotle cautioned a long time ago.

A community of volcano dwellers is the focus of *Alas-as: Sitting on a Volcano*. Well aware of the dangerous grounds they chose to reside on, the people of Barangay Alas-as have built a school on Taal Volcano—exposing not only themselves but also their children to a potential and probably lethal accident. The school, which was built in 2012 right in the danger zone, can be seen as willfully exposing these children to a potential catastrophe, turning on its head the threat of the unexpected. It poses the ethical question as to whether awareness of this danger and the willingness to expose oneself to it can be forced on minors who are not aware of the risk they are forced to face daily. The film examines the question of whether people should permanently reside in a designated danger zone. Like a broken mirror, talking head interviews of experts stating the known facts and posing questions for which no answers or solutions are offered against B-roll of idyllic images of the rural village are woven together, closing the film with images of children at the lake looking at the water—powerless in the face of the surging up of expected catastrophes.

*A Tide of Change: Vulnerability in a Changing Climate* explores the connection between climate change and the increasing frequency of typhoons, as well as the mostly futile measures the government takes in attempting to relocate displaced typhoon victims, creating a dependency on government aid. The opening sequence of a house being swallowed by a flood tide, showing the violent force of nature, hooks the viewer in all its brutality. Due to a lack of prospect to earn a living in the relocation projects, typhoon victims often move back into disaster zones. The Canadian and Filipino team filmed for three

weeks, interviewing victims of the typhoon, such as the Yanez family who lost their house and all their belongings. They are grateful for being relocated from a tent city to a permanent home, even though it is too small for the large family and has no electricity. Others are not as lucky and have to stay put in the transition center much longer than the initially projected three months. The filmmakers reflect on how vulnerability could be reduced and document the corresponding attempts, but no solution was in sight in time yet for Yolanda, the deadliest storm on record in the Philippines—with a death toll of 6,300, four million displaced citizens, and USD 2 billion damages—that hit ashore in 2013, shortly after the film was completed. Even though “no build” zones were established in risk areas, many settled back into their old houses. Volunteer groups like Balsa Mindanao believe that those communities could be rebuilt, offering livelihood programs. Given the narrow time frame in case of a typhoon, the preparedness system seems faulty. There are no jobs in the permanent housing camps; dependency on aid is created. Economic dependence on government aid cannot be the answer to this cycle of catastrophes, nor can it be the acceptance of suffering and reliance on prayers alone.

The presence of absence is a topic in art; it defines virtual spaces and is a current theme in urban planning. Spaces are not only created anew but also being reinterpreted. Empty spaces, *objet trouvés*, and leftovers used within a new context gain significance due to the new density of urban spaces. Each society creates spaces according to its ideology. It is secondary to the material quality of the buildings themselves. From the present point of view, the absence of the intended function and meaning as well as the new encoding and mutation of space is of interest. Changes in our living conditions and the lack of options offered by the government force the individual to alter the ways in which spaces are used. The protagonist of the visually stunning *Kadena* (chains) re-encodes one of the city’s chronically congested multilane traffic arteries into a bike lane, pedaling to work amid swiveling jeepneys and buses, risking his life in his personal uproar against the nonfunctioning transport system and chaos of urban planning. With Metro Manila’s current population of more than twelve million that swells to about fifteen million during daytime, the commuters of the metropolis are used to waiting out hours and hours in “carmagedon.” *Kadena*’s opening stylistically follows Nichols’s poetic documentary mode and pays homage to Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982). In the poetic mode, the author delivers a message by attempting to evoke an emotion in the audience through the use of visual stimuli and

editing. While the filmmaker's notion that our current society relies on cybernetics and speed to have a fully functioning socioeconomics is of the essence, the treatment of the cinematic representation of time by accelerating it might be a juxtaposition to the real-time experience of a Metro Manila resident when faced with the topic of traffic. In a time-lapse shot, the chronically congested traffic arteries of Metro Manila still do not move noticeably. Roger Sasua, the forty-three-year-old protagonist, has taken steps to overcome the traffic situation by cycling to work—a distance of about fifteen kilometers. He assigns new meaning to an existing space for his personal needs at the expense of his health, willingly exposing himself to the dangers of pollution and road accidents in order to free himself of the time-consuming and expensive chains of the system.

In the absence of solutions provided by Congress, Filipinos tend to make do with the given. *Minera: The Women Miners of Benguet* catapults us into the harsh reality of Filipina small-scale miners in the Cordillera mountains. The Philippines is one of the top gold producers of the world. For lack of infrastructure and other options to make a living in the rural area, often well-educated women opt to take on the hard and dangerous work of mining underground—seemingly an almost futuristic step toward gender equality in a traditional male work field. They share the dangers of the remote site with their male colleagues, risking their health while playing a double role as heads of household and having to raise families. The filmmakers chose not to follow a main protagonist but portray various female miners, cutting between interviews that hardly scratch the surface. While the visual impressions of the life of these women looking for gold are captivating footage of the *mineras* climbing down into the underground mines showing the physical and geographical dangers of the site, the film has no properly executed central question and lacks the filmmakers voice, especially as it tackles the gender aspect of these soldiers of fortune. The documentary opens with the *barangay* (village) captain Daniel narrating factual background about the village and its living conditions—agriculture and mining are the two main options to earn a livelihood. To open a film that focuses on women miners with an expository male voice appears *patriarchal*. Their answers remain generic, their motivation intangible. The adventurous women miners are given no proper voice. It is only the male district captain Daniel who explains that the lack of infrastructure offers no other career choices, regardless of educational achievements, making it a choice to leave the area or content oneself with hard and dangerous labor and cutting back.

Farming, another hard and traditionally male labor, in the provincial areas is examined in *Choosing Food Sovereignty: Rethinking Agriculture in the Philippines* in a collage of the complex challenges the change toward food sovereignty entails. For each aspect, an expert is interviewed, completing another part of the puzzle. Reminiscent of a classic painting by National Artist Fernando Amorsolo, a farmer walks in the glistening sun next to his water buffalo, pulling a cart full of cut bamboo through a rice field. Farming is a male-dominated profession, making it difficult for women to access and benefit from government programs relating to this industry. Since the Green Revolution under Marcos in the 1960s, scientists took over the manufacturing of patented seeds, and the decision-making power of what to plant turned to the agriculture industry. The wide variety of more than 4,400 types of seeds was reduced to a dozen, taking control away from the farmers and pushing them toward practices exploiting their own grounds, like monoculture or dynamite fishing, to make ends meet. Farmers were marginalized; land was brutally taken away in plots to damnify its indigenous owners. Violent conflicts arise when farmers in provincial areas attempt to democratize land distribution.

Various movements are in progress to shift the power away from corporations and back to farmers to create a sustainable, ecologically sound agriculture, turning farming into a profession of hope. It is an ambitious endeavor. As Masanobu Fukuoka states in *The One-Straw Revolution*, “The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.” (1975, xiv) By giving rights to farmers to own, save, and improve seeds, the aspect of genetic uniformity could be mitigated. This fight of David against Goliath starts locally by organizing farmers, lobbying for local policies, supporting nearby production and sustainable agriculture. The organic market is a niche market—the supply is nevertheless smaller than the demand. Linking produce to the organic market is a step that is in progress. Good farmers contribute to the welfare of society in more ways than society usually acknowledges. The appeal of organic farming is boundless—the mountain has no top, the river has no end. The shift toward a system centered on farmers having access to seeds and input is a big leap.

Hope instead of accessible pregnancy programs is one of the factors that lead to the silent epidemic of maternal death. The high mortality rate during childbirth and pregnancy in the Philippines is caused by inaccessibility of existing medical services due to distance, and the belief in *hilot*, birth attendants who are self-trained or have observed

others in the practice of giving birth. Each *hilot* has different ancient healing methods, mostly opposed to medical practices. In the film *In the Philippines, Giving Birth Kills: Maternal Mortality in the Philippines*, interviews with health workers, government officials, *hilot*, and pregnant women are seen in mostly talking head interviews intercut by B-roll. Its expository, academic approach makes the viewer wish for a closer look into the world of one of these expectant mothers, to create emotional response and greater empathy for the affected persons. Delays in decision-making processes result in a high mortality rate of pregnant women, preventable if the mother could get prenatal care and risk pregnancies could get identified. Women wait to consult a medical doctor until a condition becomes irreversible. Regional attempts have been made to improve the lack of prenatal, birth, and postpartum care. Camarines Sur Mayor Leovigildo Basmayor's "Project Mama" offers a registration to a regional database for pregnant women, a medical consultation service accessible by cell phone, readily awaiting ambulances, and clinics and lying-in facilities supported by pharmaceutical giant *Pfizer*. Even though free clinics are offered in the area, 60 percent of the population still give birth in the house.

The health of a country's population is an indicator of how just and humane it is. Maternal health is a statement of women's worth in a society. Signed into law by President Benigno Aquino III in 2012, after over a decade of battling for its passage in Congress, the implementation of the Reproductive Health Act faced many hurdles: the Supreme Court struck down some of its provisions, and Congress cut its budget. Opponents of the RH law, mostly religious groups and pro-life advocates, questioned its constitutionality, and the Supreme Court issued a restraining order. The RH law's implementation is part of the Duterte administration's agenda. Rural-based doctors underline that the government has to issue not only an order but also the necessary funds so local administrations can implement it. They call for a reduction of overpopulation, as poverty goes hand in hand with lack of sexual education and large numbers of children. Women are dying because society has yet to make the decision that their life is worth saving.

Daily life is becoming a kaleidoscope of incidents and accidents, catastrophes and cataclysms, in which we are endlessly running up against the unexpected, which occurs out of the blue, so to speak. In a shattered mirror, we must then learn to discern

what is impending more and more often but above all more and more quickly, those events coming upon us inopportunistly, if not indeed simultaneously. Faced with an accelerated temporality which affects mores and Art as much as it does international politics . . . surprise becomes a subject for research and major risks a subject for exposure and for exhibition, within the framework of instantaneous telecommunications. (Virilio 2005)

The instrument has disappeared from our collective consciousness. Colloquially, we say that an operation has become automatic. The conclusion of this is that consciousness now exists only for accidents. (Valéry 1989, author's translation)

According to Aristotle, the accident reveals the substance. Filipino society defies this statement by turning the catastrophe into the expected and equaling the threat as the norm. It does not attempt to improve the instrument or alter a condition, but develops a resilience by adapting to the substance, in exposing itself to the risk.

If global awareness is brought about only if a catastrophe occurs, obliviousness of accidents, as well as major disasters, would not only amount to unawareness but to madness—the madness of deliberate blindness to the fatal consequences of our actions and inventions. There is one particularly urgent necessity: to expose the Accident and turn around the threat of the Expected. The substance cannot be changed; it is our actions that have to adapt to finding solutions that do not amount to choosing to be sheer blindfolded.—BARBARA POLITSCH, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, UP FILM INSTITUTE, COLLEGE OF MASS COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES DILIMAN

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