

## **Marlon Fuentes. ethnography and primitivism - the "other" speaks back**

**(An excerpt from the book *Unsettled Visions: contemporary Asian American artists and the social imaginary*, by Margo Machida. Duke University Press)**

Marlon Fuentes, a Philippine-born photographer, filmmaker, and conceptual artist, arrived in the United States in 1974 as a twenty-year-old eventually settling in California. He comes from a nation with long-standing connections to the Americas through common histories of Spanish domination. In the wake of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European voyagers seeking ocean routes to East and South Asia, the Philippines and California found themselves (beginning in 1521 and 1542, respectively) under the centuries-long sway of Spain, only to be absorbed and doubly colonized in turn (a situation that could best be described as serial colonialism) by a United States expanding ever westward in the nineteenth century.

Fuentes was born in Manila in 1954; his youth was marked not only by economic hardship (owing to his father's early death) but also by the rise of Ferdinand Marcos, an elected leader who assumed dictatorial powers. In the late 1960s, while photographing an anti-Marcos demonstration for his high school newspaper, Fuentes witnessed the gruesome death of a close friend at the hands of the military. Following this traumatic event, he began to pursue writing and photography as a way of coming to grips with a situation in which politically motivated violence was always close at hand. Because his family disapproved of his interest in art, Fuentes was, by necessity, initially self-taught. Although the Filipino firm in which Fuentes worked after college sent him to the United States to further his education, it would take several years before he found the emotional freedom to enroll in photography classes. The longer the artist remained in the United States, the more aware he was of how distanced he had become from his homeland. Wrestling with feelings of cultural instability, Fuentes came to view his growing involvement in art making primarily as a means to confront the "internal schizoidness of carrying the cultural baggage of East and West."

Born in the decade after the Philippines officially acquired independence in 1946, Fuentes is, like many people whose countries achieved nationhood after World War II, deeply immersed in issues of postcoloniality. Like others of his generation, he is concerned with what it means to be Filipino in the wake of centuries of religious conversion, cultural collision, cross fertilization, and miscegenation among indigenous peoples, Spaniards, and others (primarily Chinese) that have produced a creolized, hybrid society. Underneath the multiple overlays of imported customs, beliefs, and languages, there is no single "authentic" pre-conquest Filipino identity that one can call on in this Asian Pacific territory forcefully consolidated out of numerous distinct island cultures. As Fuentes remarks, attempting to untangle the braided strands comprising such a cultural crazy quilt would be the equivalent of "unscrambling an egg." Further, as a diasporic Filipino who now lives in one of the nations that colonized his homeland, he finds himself unable to draw on a single, overarching narrative that would provide a solid point of reference. As a result, to paraphrase the artist, he finds it necessary to improvise, or "cobble together," a provisional contemporary Filipino identity he can take as his own. In constructing such an

identity, Fuentes is centrally concerned with revisualizing the past in relation to its effects on the present. His earliest art photography focused on evidence of the historical scars of oppression (whether Spanish, American, or Japanese) on the Filipino psyche, as well as on the postcolonial repression he witnessed under the regime of former president Ferdinand Marcos. In the 1980s, after a decade in the United States, Fuentes began to examine and to (re)establish connections with his heritage. He decided that the way to best summon that hybrid world was to become his own personal shaman," using photography as a ritual to relive those memories. In the extensive *Circle of Fear* series (1981-1991) of gelatin silver prints, Fuentes seeks to recapture the spirit of that complex sociocultural environment by constructing and photographing tableaux combining inanimate objects and disarticulated animal parts. In *Stitches*, the image of a decapitated pig's head with its eyes roughly sutured shut is conjured to symbolize the "history of silence imposed by the cultural domination of Spain in three centuries." In a related work, *Tongue* (1981), Fuentes presents a rotting cow's tongue overlaid with a crucifix and punctured by shards of glass, sardonically mimicking a European coat of arms-therby suggesting a new kind of national emblem for his homeland. For Fuentes, the capacity to "speak" as a nation was figuratively ripped from the Philippine's throat; hence, he devised this painful image as a symbol for a people whose culture he believes has "been amputated." He conceives these lushly disquieting black-and-white images as functioning like *anting anting*, which in Tagalog (a native language of the Philippines) refers to ritual objects infused with magical powers. By their cathartic presence, Fuentes believes, these objects can "imbue the viewer with a freedom to speak."

As his involvement with photography deepened, Fuentes became strongly preoccupied with the history and nature of mechanical forms of visual representation and their central role in the creation of historical memory. In particular, he grew fascinated with the capacity of film to provide seemingly coherent, logical, and "truthful" historical narratives, even when obviously stitched together from a pastiche of disparate and often semi-fictive sources. Applying those critical insights, Fuentes wanted to stimulate audiences to think in more-analytic ways about representations of the Other. Concurrent with a developing interest in film, Fuentes increasingly directed aspects of his wide-ranging artistic production to the critique of cultural anthropology-in particular, Western ethnography-a social science that has been aggressively involved with constructing knowledge about non Western societies and peoples since the nineteenth century. As a vital adjunct to European and American expansionism and trans-Pacific colonialism, ethnographers, frequently in pursuit of fantasies rooted in ancient Western notions of the lives that "barbaric," "primitive," and "tribal" peoples must lead, were often enlisted to justify domestic and foreign policies that served to severely circumscribe and dominate the world of Fuentes's ancestors. Having widely promulgated suspect conclusions about non-Western customs and attitudes that long remained unchallenged inside and outside academe, ethnography not only retains a powerful hold on the Western imagination but also continues to affect the personal and collective ways in which formerly subject peoples, indigenous or not, perceive themselves.

## **Schemas and the Strategy of the image: The work of M. E. Fuentes**

An early effort by Fuentes to address the objectification of non-Western peoples through anthropological discourses is demonstrated in his text based piece *Schemas and the Strategy of the Image: The Work of M. E. Fuentes* (1990). Consisting of a simple, spiral-bound presentation folder, it comprises a seemingly official "case study" by a fictitious researcher, Dr. Mia Blumentritt, examining issues central to the artist's life and work as a self described "ex-native" of the Philippines. This report included the transcript of an imaginary ethnographic interview, invented criticism of the project, and personal medical records that corroborated Fuentes's hearing impairment resulting from the explosion he witnessed as a youth during a demonstration in Manila.

The opening passage of Blumentritt's commentary rather portentously announces, "M. E. Fuentes' work is ultimately about the struggle between illusion and truth.... He aims, he says, of nothing less than 'the unification of theater of the internal with the theater of the infernal, that is, solving for the alchemical function  $T(t) = T(F)$ ." Skirting between dense, pseudo scientific prose, poststructuralist theory, art writing, and biography, it slyly leads the reader on a dizzying journey via linguistic maneuvers that simultaneously provoke and deflect attempts at analysis. Evident in each passage is Fuentes's Dadaesque delight in creating this labyrinthine work that turns ethnographic and psycho-biographical approaches on their heads. In so doing, Fuentes manages to achieve both a high-spirited, knowing parody of the "ethnographic stance" in studies of the other, and a deeply felt form of self-revelation that goes beyond being simply an "experiment in mockery" to function as a "very good psychological and aesthetic map... a device for [an] imaginary platonic dialogue."

By assuming all the roles in these fabricated interactions - actor, director, investigator, interpreter, and teacher - Fuentes aims to disrupt the investigator/subject power relationship implicit in the history of academic research on ethnic or indigenous peoples. In the manner of a trickster, a well-known figure who appears in a host of animal and human guises in cultures around the world, the artist tactically looks to subvert positions like that of the "native informant" in Western anthropology—a prerequisite for social scientists and others who seek singular insight into the unfamiliar and often titillating world of the other.

## **Bontoc Eulogy**

In his 1995 film *Bontoc Eulogy*, Marlon Fuentes calls upon the conventions of visual anthropology and ethnographic documentaries to tell the fictive personal stories of two characters: the Narrator, a contemporary first-generation Filipino American portrayed by the artist himself, and his putative indigenous Igorot grandfather Markod, a tribal warrior. Through a voice-over narrative, he traces the journey of Markod, depicted as one of the eleven hundred Filipinos in the "Philippine Reservation" who were placed on public display, in "authentic" native villages at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904. *Bontoc Eulogy* marks out the Narrator's convoluted search for this invented ancestor, who is envisioned as having left his rural village for the fair,

never to return home. Fuentes devised this countermythic narrative to speak to the ways in which the confluence of nineteenth-century social science and American expansionism (the Philippines became an American territory as a result of the Spanish American War of 1898) not only created the triumphalist conditions in which the fair's organizers could make his countrymen objects for public display, but also set the terms by which such taxonomic-like spectacles informed American notions of his homeland and subsequently circulated back to the Philippines to be internalized by the descendants of indigenous peoples.

The 1904 ethnographic showcase that Fuentes chose to focus on was just one of many presented in European and American cities. Quite popular with the general public, they were a significant attraction in the succession of spectacular world's fairs whose heyday extended from the 1870s through the 1930s. Visited by millions, in these enormous productions objects and peoples from around the globe, including thousands of other "primitive" peoples from North America and Africa, were gathered together and displayed.

Yet, the real purpose of the 1904 fair was to verify America's emergent status as a global imperial power. By including both Native Americans and Filipinos in the exhibition, a strong sense of historical continuity deeply rooted in providential inevitability was reinforced by merging America's westward expansion across a vast, "unsettled" frontier, and the newest Pacific acquisitions beyond its continental boundaries, into a simple, linear story. In order to celebrate a narrative of superiority anchored in unending Western progress, the St. Louis fair was structured to accent disparity by dualistically contrasting displays of the most up-to-date technologies with the natural state of innocence and rudimentary conditions in which "primitive" peoples supposedly continued to live. According to the artist, "science and economics and progress and growth were [combined in a] unified imperial surface." In this, anthropology, in the service of the Western powers, had a significant role in dividing and controlling native populations by codifying differences among non-Western peoples and cultures. Fuentes looks on the St. Louis World's Fair, therefore, as a variety of cultural drama, an "incredibly sophisticated, choreographed operation" whose imposed representations of "primitive" peoples were orchestrated and legitimized by social anthropologists under the rubric of economic and industrial development.

Filled with a high degree of irony based on the supposition that all historical interpretation is fundamentally revisionist, Fuentes, in *Bontoc Eulogy*, fleshes out the "facts" of the fair from the standpoint of the natives who were presented to the Western gaze as domesticated exotica. In this richly imagined film, he combines imagery of his own making with historical footage from a number of sources to give some sense of what might have actually happened among those living in such fabricated environments. Fuentes works from what he terms a "salvage viewpoint" - splicing into his work filmic and photographic fragments culled from materials as diverse as personal snapshots, U.S. military training films, archival still photos, home movies, and early silent films. As Fuentes emphasizes, since film is easily manipulated, it is possible to combine clips drawn from a variety of sources and tie them together with an authoritative-sounding narration in order to create a sense of whatever reality the filmmaker desires. The clear message in such work, therefore, is that anyone, including the "poor native" – with access to the

technology behind contemporary cultural production can construct her or his own version of "official" reality that can be played back to the dominant culture. Where anthropological films produced by Westerners created illusions about Filipinos and Filipino cultures, Fuentes reverses the situation, even drawing on some of the same filmic sources to fashion a pseudo-ethnohistorical film with an implicit antirealist subtext. As he conceives it, the film is simultaneously a detective story and a highly layered meditation of cultural abduction and social voyeurism,... a simulacrum of 'historical' cinema."

*Bontoc Eulogy* opens with the image of an antique hand-cranked phonograph placed upon a mat in the corner of a bare room. An Asian man enters the space and seats himself before it, winds the crank, and then listens attentively to what sounds like a scratchy, early field recording of indigenous Filipino tribal music. As the camera slowly pans in on the rotating record, his action is repeated several times while a solemn narrative commences. Over a subsequent image of paper boats borne away on swirling water currents, the narrator speaks of having left Manila for the United States twenty years before and confesses that as his recollections of the Philippines recede, "it is sometimes difficult to know where reality ends and imagination begins." From this mock-poignant point of entry, the story of his forebear Markod's journey to the World's Fair gradually unfolds. The use of a voice-over is suggestive of a practice common to film noir. According to the artist, who supplies the narration and appears in the guise of the investigator, it is intended to provide an "intimation into the detective story that follows, so that the whole thing becomes a giant flashback - a fabulation - an interpretation of what is encrypted in the records. [It] could have been just a construction in his head, and it's a construction of a construction." Apart from its reference to the well-known RCA Victor trademark of a dog with cocked head listening to "His Master's Voice" on a gramophone, the opening scene mirrors a sequence in *Nanook of the North* (1922), credited as one of the first anthropological films. This silent movie, focused on Inuit life in the Canadian Arctic, depicts a native hunter seemingly spellbound by a phonograph playing popular American music. In contrast to the awestruck expression of this "primitive" intended to entertain Western audiences, Fuentes presents a very different "native," one who is fully capable of using Western technology for his own purposes.

Interspersed throughout *Bontoc Eulogy* are numerous subtle cues and deliberate formal disjunctions meant to indicate that the film is not to be taken as a "real" story. For example, to underscore the ways in which history is reconstituted through visual representation, Fuentes integrates film clips, staged with model warships, of a re-enactment of the Battle of Manila Bay that took place during the Spanish American War. Since the sweep of actual warfare, with all its randomness and unpredictability, was nearly impossible to capture with the technology of the time, such re-creations were staged to compensate for the dearth of actual footage. For Fuentes, the obvious artificiality of the scene underscores the crafted nature of this seemingly historical representation, while simultaneously alluding to parallel methods often employed by ethnographic filmmakers to convey the aura of greater authenticity. At the same time, it also underlines the historical convergence between the first public showing of moving pictures in the waning years of the nineteenth century, the rapid application of this new technology to documentary and ethnographic filmmaking, and a period of significant overseas expansion by

the United States into the islands of the Caribbean and Pacific. Indeed, by justifying U.S. cultural superiority over native societies, such "scientific" films helped to enlist public support for America's new overseas imperial ambitions.

In due course, the narrator-investigator's efforts to reconstruct Markod's fate leads him to roam the eerily darkened halls of a U.S. medical and anthropology museum, where he meticulously photographs human skeletal remains and preserved brains, wondering if any of them might belong to his grandfather. Unable to locate convincing evidence of Markod's fate, the film ends on an ambiguous note, the narration stressing that the search must continue.

Even as he remains profoundly critical of them, Fuentes fully recognizes and seeks to engage the ironies and tensions that adhere to his position as a "native" in the West. To this end, he frames *Bontoc Eulogy* in the highly elaborated fictions and representational conventions of ethnography, documentary filmmaking, and American popular culture, while at the same time providing a corrective to such long-accepted narratives that he knows are equally unreliable. Yet, in taking up historic discourses that were produced and controlled by others, the artist also seeks to rectify imbalances of power by returning agency to himself and his contemporaries. Fuentes's aim, therefore, is not solely to counter or speak back to dominant culture, but also to convey a serious message directed mainly to fellow Filipinos about the contemporary problems they face as a continuing legacy of Western domination. Through his imaginative reconstructions of the experiences of Filipinos put on display at the turn-of-the-century world's fairs, those whose perspectives have long been distorted or absent from Western depictions are made to assume a central role. In calling attention to the constructed nature of modern Filipino identities, Fuentes seeks to "inoculate" his compatriots with a counterknowledge that will enable them to pick apart the monolithic narratives that have long shaped their consciousness. These intertwined motives-speaking back and speaking to-infuse his work with a distinctive sense of doubleness, a Janus-like quality involved in communicating in two directions at once, that blends together an undercurrent of dry, poker-faced humor and penetrating commentary with a sincere desire to generate alternative narratives of his own people and their histories.

It is instructive to note that despite Fuentes's critical intent to expose the artifice involved in the Western construction of images of other cultures, numerous viewers (including fellow Filipinos) were unable to apprehend the intellectual motivation behind its subtly mocking premise and instead believed the story in *Bontoc Eulogy* to be factual. At screenings, audience members would occasionally approach Fuentes to express their sorrow over the fate of his grandfather. While this initially presented the artist with an ethical dilemma, he ultimately accepted that "if they saw the indignity of what happened, and they saw the pain of my construction, that's good enough. So they have the emotional truths, however they bypass the construction. It's a story about cultural loss and exploitation and, in the most fundamental way, the cause of human suffering, which is ignorance."