

Viewing Notes for *Nervous Translation* (2017)
written and directed by Shireen Seno, Philippines

Background

Filmed on location in Quezon City, Manila, starring Jana Agoncillo as Yael. (The very young Agoncillo had several film and television credits under her belt before carrying this performance.)

This is Shireen Seno's second feature. Her first was *Big Boy* (2012). *The Guardian* calls her two films "precious treasures, a pair of precise, compelling memory exercises that utilise a child's perspective to represent the sensory experience of being in a large and senseless world over which you have little control."

The character of Yael is based on a composite of Seno and her sisters, who, like the cousins in the movie, were raised in Japan. Yael is a "what if" character, an exploration of the self-that-might-have-been were they raised in their home country. Though they grew up in Japan, their parents immersed the girls in Western culture, spoke English in the home, and sent them to North America for college.

While she was in college Seno saw the 1977 film *Perfumed Nightmare*, directed by Kidlat Tahimik, and began to notice how hard it was to access Filipino films in the West. She started looking into the independent film culture in the Philippines and was inspired by the sense of community and DIY creativity there. Eventually, she moved back to the Philippines and now runs Los Otros films with her life and artistic partner John Torres. Los Otros fosters the experimental film community in Manila through screenings, workshops, residencies, artist talks, and filmmaking resources. Before Los Otros Seno was part of an artist's collective that did photography and experiential installations—artistic practice that has clearly influenced her narrative film style. Seno is sometimes referred to not as a filmmaker but as a "lens-based artist."

Looking

- The 1980s is not just the setting for the time of the film—the look of the film intentionally employs an '80s aesthetic. Consider how the visual technologies of the 1980s are used artistically within the framing of scenes.
- Seno studied architecture in college in Canada, and we can see, too, the influence of her training on the way shots are framed around architectural detail, and in the fascinating model of the neighborhood at the film's end.
- In the camera work, notice the steadiness of the shots when filming Yael in her home, contrasted with the unsteady hand-held camera that tracks her movements when she's out of the house.
- Contrasts are used in the editing, too: deliberately paced scenes juxtaposed with quick-cuts
- In the acting, note the body language of the mother, and her face while she watches Yael, which conveys a simultaneous comfort and discomfort in their relationship.
- Pacing and character development: the story is deliberate in its pace and often framed very closely on Yael's activities so that we get engrossed in those activities along with her. This tight, relatively long focus along with the fascination with miniatures and the patience with tedious processes (like rewinding a loose cassette tape) all serve to mimic Yael's tendency toward perfectionism.

Listening

Sound is used throughout the story to punctuate or agitate otherwise very quiet scenes.

Notice:

- the aural physicality of the analog technologies, the CLUNKS of the pre-digital devices like boom boxes and the channel dial on the television
- high-pitched electrostatic noise (such as the whine of the TV after it's turned off) juxtaposed with high-pitched natural ambient sounds (crickets)
- suddenly higher volume 1980s pop music, that shifts between non-diegetic (soundtrack) and diegetic (music in the room, coming from the boombox)
- the sound motifs of voices being cut off mid-sentence and Yael's phonetic recreations of sounds like telephone rings or fans whirring

Thinking

The historic setting: the story takes place in 1988 at a time of great instability for the Philippines, shortly after the end of the oppressive political regime of Ferdinand Marcos and at the beginning of a second major natural disaster in two years, Typhoon Unsang (AKA Typhoon Ruby). The setting speaks directly to the lasting legacy of the decades-long Marcos regime in Filipino culture. Consider the relationship between the mundane routines of the child's life and the major events on a national level.

The historic placement of the story also indirectly ties to the fact that the Philippines has not yet established a film culture that preserves and archives, despite the growth of the independent film scene there in recent decades. The contemporary encapsulation of a historic moment may be read as an attempt to archive through art.

In a brief scene we see Yael's mother at work, in a shoe assembly manufacture. This is a small detail that actually speaks volumes when we later see a television depiction of the famous thousands of shoes owned by First Lady Imelda Marcos. The director notes that the Marikana neighborhood, where the film is set, was the main site of shoe manufacturing in the Philippines and the majority of residents in that part of town worked in the industry—essentially making Imelda's shoes.

The film also intentionally explores the down-side of the Philippines government program to export labor as a way to bolster the national economy (often men to international construction, mostly in the Middle East, and women to domestic service in Europe), since the Philippines has little of its own profitable industry. Yael's father is only present in the cassettes he sends from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The story depicts a very common scenario of a family fractured by these state programs.

In mainstream films, the narrative goes where we think it ought to, toward fulfillment of the protagonist's goals. This film doesn't resolve Yael's quests the way we think it might. What do you make of the lack of resolution at the end of the film? How might it be symbolic?