

## A Body in Permanent Transit

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### José Rizal's Exile as Spatial Performance

by Lorna Israel



*Screenshot Rizal sa Dapitan (source VCD Vina Vide)*

#### Summary:

As conceptual viewing device, the body can take the (stationary) spectator experience to a cinematic voyage. The body's movement is a space-creating force that opens up other worlds, other possibilities. From this viewpoint, exile is not a state of confinement but a place of space production. It is in performance, acting it out, that space's invisibility becomes evident.

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A man suited in European clothes and gazing into the beyond is the iconic image of Jose Rizal, Philippines' national hero. It is some imagery conveyed in the monument erected on the site of his execution by the Spanish colonial regime in 1896. It is the sculpted transformation of Rizal's photographs that were taken while he stayed in Europe. These pictures were reproduced and circulated in the Philippines. The monument also contains his mortal remains.

In viewing Rizal in such imagery, one is either on a sight-seeing or site-seeing mode. The first is a "voyeur whose gaze is fixed" while the second is a "voyageur" attuned to space, body, and motion (Bruno 1997). A voyeur would likely see Rizal "consistently out of place in a tropical setting" (Rafael 1997:153). A voyageur would still find him out of place but not consistently in a tropical setting. For the voyageur, consistently on the move, originates space from the body, the foremost basis of space production. As Lefebvre (1991:184) contends, "space is first of all my body," which moves based on what it encounters and on the presence of other bodies.

As a national landmark, the monument is watched over by a ceremonial guard. He appears like someone who is waiting to escort Rizal while the statue is standing still and standing by as if waiting for something that would finally make him move. In figurative terms, Rizal's monumentalised body is in a state of permanent transit, that is, ready to arrive and ready to depart.

The film *Rizal sa Dapitan* (Philippines 1997, Tikoy Aguiluz, engl. Rizal in Dapitan) is yet another replication of Rizal's iconic image.<sup>1</sup> Its opening scenes would make one feel as if Rizal has finally stepped down from his monument. The film tells the story of his exile in Dapitan 1892-1896 and his execution.<sup>2</sup> Tikoy Aguiluz interprets Rizal's exile as a prelude to his execution by a firing squad at his



*Rizal Monument, ©photo Mike Gonzales*

age of 35. He let Rizal perform his own departure to his place of exile in a body that has already departed.

The plot is composed chronologically thus the viewer is probably searching for the theme of exile, which seems to be reinforced by the fact that the film's title does not make it explicit.<sup>3</sup> Exile, performance, and cinema are no stranger to each other. To act in front of the camera is to re-enact the "skene/tent," the Greek word for the scene in which the tent serves as the primal setting of a wandering, homeless, and returning exile.

### **Life in exile**

The film's title is evocatively exilic. *Rizal sa Dapitan* shows a figure in transit, merely passing by, which will eventually depart. It conveys Rizal as an isolated outsider, which Edward Said posits as producing a "narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts of amelioration, acculturation and community." Indeed, the film endeavours to make Rizal distinguish himself as an outcast. It is an effort that echoes Said's observation that exiles tend to "insist on their right not to belong" (2000:145-146).

It is this refusal "not to belong" that Rizal, while in Dapitan, is a space-builder by virtue of his own body and movement, and occasionally by being motionless. The notion of motionless is relevant to Rizal's figuration as a body in permanent transit. "As we become motionless, we are elsewhere," according to Gaston Bachelard (1964:184). This "elsewhere" is a deep and unlimited dream world. With these conceptual-viewing devices, a spectator can approach the film as a voyager on a site-seeing mode. Giuliana Bruno (2002:55-56) emphasizes this site-seeing approach:

*There is a mobile dynamic involved in the act of viewing films, even if the spectator is seemingly static. The (im)mobile spectator moves across an imaginary path, traverses multiple sites and times. Her fictional navigation connects distant moments and far-apart places.*

Bruno's viewpoint is relevant because *Rizal sa Dapitan* is situated in a context generally viewed in stasis: national history and a dead man hailed as foundational to the Philippines' anti-colonial movement and nation-building. The film adopts the stasis mode but positions Rizal in a state of balance between contending and oppositional elements.

On arrival, Rizal (Albert Martinez) is formally and graciously welcomed by the political commander Captain Carnicero (Roy Alvarez). The captain tells him that he is surprised to be the host of such a “famous guest.” His voice barely edgy, Rizal politely corrects him: “I am not a guest. The government threw me out here as a punishment; in short, a prisoner.” The captain has no chance to counter Rizal immediately. Later on in the film, he magnanimously tells Rizal that he is a friend, not an enemy. The also present parish priest Father Obach (Chris Michelena) immediately begins to blame Rizal as a subversive and a heretic. Rizal does not rebut him. Positioned in a standoffish way, Rizal impassively listens to the priest’s words, which symbolically sanctify his prisoner status.

Rizal tells Carnicero that Dapitan is “probably the loneliest place I have ever seen in my life.” The officer tries to soothe him: “what you see is not loneliness but peace and tranquillity.” Rizal refuses to be placated. Dismissing the captain’s words and in a gesture that magnifies the silence, Rizal stands up and declares “there’s just too much silence.” In this scene, silence becomes a space, which Rizal suggestively occupies. He is no longer in the presence of the political commander because he is there, at the homes of the residents praying, their voices audible only in Rizal’s ear.

The next morning, Rizal is cutting down grass, branches of tress and bamboo shafts with a machete in the forest. His mentor-priest approaches him. His mission is to persuade Rizal to renounce his writings deemed heretical by the clerics. He points out, that with clean water, fresh air, and a scenic landscape, Rizal is in paradise. Rizal restrains his sense of aggravation by momen-



*Screenshot Rizal sa Dapitan (source VCD VinaVide)*

tarily stopping his cutting and pointedly tells the priest that this paradise is a prison.

Rizal's insistence to be treated as a prisoner is the reinterpretation of Dapitan as a penal destiny and destination of the innocent. Its complexity as a place of penalty is covered with its bucolic and serene ambience. Its paradisaical or heavenly attribute is tainted by an ecclesiastical rule, which assumes that guilt is prior to an actual commission of transgression. When Rizal points out to Captain Carnicero that the excessive silence pervades the people's prayer, he is telling him that his jurisdiction is carried by offenders. Dapitan, in Rizal's conception, becomes a transcendental space for those who are loaded with transcendental guilt. This is his inaugural spatial act, which he achieves by reclaiming his innocence. It is a performance set before Rizal's entry to the grounds of Dapitan.

### **Life and death**

In this performance, Rizal is alive and dead at the same time. He carries the weight of a rigor mortis as if he exaggerates the punishment which is meted out by the Spanish colonial regime. The pictures of Rizal show him in his burial clothes before he was shot dead. The shoreline leads him to his graveyard to which he walks slowly and steadily. The nocturnal surrounding makes his presence spectral. Briefly, he stops walking, as if bidding the rain that begins to pour. No longer at sea, he stands in the pouring rain. He moves his face upward, his eyes acknowledge the vaporous space of descending luminous light. The light conveys a simultaneous welcome of Rizal's death and arrival in Dapitan. He removes his derby hat and slightly bows his head as a gesture of respect. He just made his entrance a consecrated act, which symbolically absolves him of the criminality that led to his execution. Rizal, therefore, enters Dapitan like an innocent man.<sup>4</sup>

Only as an innocent person, Rizal is able to make his moral superiority as a prisoner transparent. The scene where Rizal is informed that he can choose between Captain Carnicero's residence or the convent for his lodging is set in a suggestively triangular shape. Rizal is at the apex while the base is taken by the captain and the priest who face each other. Rizal does not look at them. His face is hardly concealing an inner rage. He needs the full attention of his ears

to understand the men talking in front of him. Clearly, there is no escaping for Rizal, which makes it absurd to choose either the captain's residence or the convent. To choose one is fundamentally to decide his own prison cell.

A man of letters, Rizal realizes that all writers are exiles or expatriates as if "great writing" is synonymous with staying away (Mukherjee 1999:68). Rizal wrote his two novels that incurred the wrath of the church when he was in Europe.<sup>5</sup> In *Rizal sa Dapitan*, he writes to his friend and European publisher. Once again, Rizal displays his sense of moral superiority:

*My mind is unable to erase from its memory the happy days I've spent in Europe. Those days are gone. The wings of the butterfly have been burnt by the brightness of light. At the moment, the butterfly has collapsed to the ground; it is thinking about the flowers [...]. But the prevailing wickedness will generate righteousness [...]. The faecal stink will make the flowers bloom [...].*

This letter showcases Rizal as an abject outcast. As such, he is a "hybrid subject" who is living in "ideas rather than in places, in memories as much as material things."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, *Rizal sa Dapitan* materialises Europe in Rizal's body.

From his grave in Manila to the shore of Dapitan, Rizal does not change his clothes except for the hat, which serves as a transitional device. Rizal wears a dark cloak coat, a waistcoat, and a white turn-over shirt with a floppy bow tie. The film's scenery conveys a tropical setting in which a Philippine body is dressed in European clothes who is striding with an immense awareness of formality and firmness. Shots of bamboo shafts and a lizard disappearing into a tree trunk highlight this impression. In the film, Rizal proves the pliability of nature by transforming its elements into enclosed spaces. The open source of water becomes a waterway using bamboo poles. The forest becomes an orchard, and the ground beneath a tree becomes a "tree of knowledge" as he conducts his first lesson for the young boys of Dapitan.

Rizal is visibly pleased and proud of his feats. He is no longer found in the archetypal site of exile where the goal is deprivation "from the source of civilized life as the exile had known it" (Jerzak 1998:183). The "wild" draws back into the background to emphasise the spatial civilisation that only exists in Rizal's mind. This is effectively established by showing most of the enclosed spaces he created. The orchard, the trading company, a dormitory, a hospital

and a rice mill are only present by Rizal's declaration that it is there or over there.

Similar to his insistence that he is a prisoner, Rizal repeatedly asserts that he is the sole creator of these enclosed spaces. Significantly, Rizal enacts the process of repetition to his mentor-priest and his mother. The film spatially divides these two protagonists. To his mentor-priest, who symbolises the role of the church, Rizal lays out the trade and agriculture zones of his "prison." To his nearly blind mother, who assumes the symbolic "blindness" of "mother Spain" to reforms needed in her colony, Rizal describes the school, the hospital, and the dormitory he has constructed. The film establishes these spaces as not visible for his mother's eyes. But for him this does not matter at all. The mother recognises the son's achievements with pride and satisfaction. It symbolises Rizal's efforts to secure the attention of the "colonial mother" for the reforms he wants to implement in the Philippines.

### **Imaginary spaces**

Rizal's construction of imaginary spaces for his reformist agenda is the proper body to conduct these spaces. Once again, Rizal is fit in the same European clothes while his surroundings have already shifted to Dapitan's "naturalness". Rizal casts his black coat aside while he settles down. This shows his transition to his new naturalness. But later he appears in the same waistcoat. Occasionally, he puts on a bow tie. Thus, his lifestyle is not modest but modish. It projects him as a fashionably dressed guest, even in his own house.

In keeping with his provisional stay in Dapitan, Rizal's accommodation is not really a house but rather a hut, made of light and local materials. Later on, Rizal torches his hut. His hut is in contrast to the stone-built residence of the military officer and the parish priest. Here, Rizal's European outfit appears congruent. He looks suave and elegant while having tea with the captain and his mentor-priest.

In his hut, the character of Rizal is arranged to make another contrast by maintaining the same elegance and dignified appearance. It is not really possible to interpret him as being-out-of-place, because he is already out of place. When his mother and sisters finally get the visitation-rights by the authority,



*Screenshot Rizal sa Dapitan (source VCD VivaVide)*

they are allowed to meet him at Dapitan. To welcome them, the table is laden with local fruits and local delicacies. But this turns out to be another performance. The local food is just for show because no one actually eats. Everybody's attention is fixed on Rizal who starts inquiring about his father, his brother and his former fiancée. Rizal does not know that she is already dead.

They become mourners. In such an occasion, everybody barely eats. As if to mark the purity of the death of his former beloved, Rizal takes off his dark waistcoat. He sits on his white covered bed, wearing his white undershirt, grieving in solitude. This is a spatial device, one that hides emotion altogether. Rizal's grief is displayed by emptiness and coldness, which enhances his scrupulous and detached attitude. In that attitude, Rizal stands in contrast with the indulgent military officer and the sullen parish priest. With a cultivated sense of dignity, Rizal does not show his emotion when the priest ascends himself in his defamatory attacks against Rizal.

### **Teaching reason**

In another scene, Rizal attends a holy mass when the priest warns the parents not listen to the “false promises of heretics.” On cue, the worshippers turn their heads to where Rizal is standing. In a display of defiance of the priest's warning, the scene shifts to Rizal teaching mathematics to young boys. The “purity” of intention of both teacher and students is demonstrated by their white clothes.

Wearing the same white shirt, Rizal is visited by some parents who ask him to take their son Joselito (Junell Hernando), Rizal's namesake, as a student.



Rizal is initially testy. He asks the parents “are you not afraid that your son might not reach heaven?” The parents inform him that the priest has threatened them with excommunication. But they feel confident that only the priest would get upset, “but we know that god would not get angry at us.” The young man changes his tunic from a brown one to a white one to signify his studentship.

Rizal reveals an example on Joselito of how reason can prevail over fear. He hides his walking stick in an eldritch tree, wherein supernatural beings may live. When night comes, he gives Joselito the order to retrieve his stick. Joselito's classmates mock him for showing fear. Despite being scared, Joselito manages to realise that he should not allow fear from accomplishing his mission. The maestro Rizal is duly pleased and proud of him. In this scene, Rizal no longer claims self-attribution for accomplishing something, but he still maintains the distance. He leads his students in applauding Joselito, but he stays himself a few steps away from them. It is his implied way of detaching himself from a community that has already accepted and recognised him.

Joselito, the “little Jose” is a transitional figure for the “big Rizal” and the “female Jose,” Rizal’s common law wife. Indeed, it is Joselito who introduces all the three Jose in *Rizal sa Dapitan*. The female Jose is the English Josephine Bracken (Amanda Page) who travels to Dapitan to seek Rizal’s expertise in ophthalmology for her visually impaired foster father. Josephine is Rizal’s “sweet stranger” and the two of them become the priest’s object of defamatory scheme. The priest’s refuses to marry them unless Rizal retracts. The couple decide to marry each other under the grace of an unseen god, suggestively in the same spot, which Rizal has previously proclaimed as a prison-paradise. This is a reversal of the Biblical paradise where Adam and Eve are expelled. Rizal and Josephine make a return to the prison/paradise. This does not only confirms their outsider status but also appears to have instigated a turn-around against the priest on the part of the residents.

Once again, Joselito mediates. He leads both students and parents in visiting Rizal one evening to remind him that classes are to start the next day. With Josephine standing beside him, Rizal asks “are you not afraid of hell?” Replying, Joselito quotes the teacher’s own words “Maestro, we are not afraid;

as you said, knowledge is useless to those who are afraid.” His classmates concur, reiterating that they are not all afraid. Rizal then asks the parents who reply “Senor, we consider it an honour that you are the teacher of our children.” The children agree with the parents. This scene ends with a highly familiar gesture: the parents and children raised their fist and proclaim “Long live Senor Rizal!” The nocturnal surrounding endows this scene with a clandestine aura. It seems Rizal’s conception of Dapitan as inhabited by transgressors had finally materialised, performed no less in front of him and Josephine. Their guilt is no longer transcendental. At this point, Rizal’s solitariness is on the brink of an end. He is, thus, impelled to start anew.

### **Wounded pride**

In a suggestive scene, the suspicious and sullen stance of the priest towards him is the same like Rizal’s enactment - to his fellow stranger, offender, and namesake Josephine. In an advanced stage of pregnancy, Josephine rouses Rizal’s suspicion by virtue of the equally doubtful information from one of his sisters. She interprets Josephine’s frequent meetings with a high-ranking church official in Manila as an act of infidelity. This seems evident because Spanish colonial priests are known for maintaining sexual affairs with local women. Josephine denies Rizal’s accusation and claims that she met the priest in Manila to get his mercy for him.

Outraged and refusing to listen to her explanations, Rizal pushes Josephine who falls down to the floor. Josephine begs to be heard and tries to touch Rizal, but he refuses. He harshly tells her to leave him. Once more, Rizal is alone. He turns his back on Josephine who is crying in pain on the floor. Motionless and absorbed by his own aloneness, Rizal does not realise that Josephine has a miscarriage. It would take the same sister and another one to rouse him from his scrupulous solitude. The baby dies. Turning his bloody hand after performing birth delivery to Josephine, Rizal seems to realise what just happened. Weeping, Rizal buries the baby’s body on the ground and names him Francisco. The baby could have been another “little Jose” but in naming him after his father, Rizal seems to have ended the repetitive predisposition of his name. He says goodbye to his son and wishes him to “reach a world where there are no oppressors.” In repeating the shot of luminous light descending

from above on the son's burial ground, Rizal is pardoned once more. Thus, he reconciles with Josephine.

### **Journey to the end**

Rizal continues with his daily medical and teaching routines and apparently no longer interested in creating spaces. Once again, he turns his attention to writing letters to friends at home and abroad. To the same European friend, he expresses misgivings about his impending freedom at that time when his term of exile is about to end. He rejects the offer of one of the leaders of the underground revolutionary movement to help him escape. Rizal tells him to proceed with the revolution and not to look back on his account. Upon receiving Spain's permission for his request to serve as a doctor in Cuba, Rizal is inexplicably disappointed and indisposed to leave. This is the scene that approaches the film's ending but *Rizal sa Dapitan* does not seem to know how to enact that ending.

The people know that he will depart. They sing him a farewell song, which Rizal acknowledges with some measure of remoteness. The people escort him to the sea where a boat waits to take him away from Dapitan. Wearing the same burial/arrival clothes, Rizal stands out in the midst of his escorting public, which includes a marching band. The entire scene looks like a funeral service, which brings the audience back to the film's beginning. Before reaching the shore, Rizal waves goodbye till he is on the boat. He disappears into the off-screen. Without Rizal's body, the film stops being spatial. The film, therefore, does not end but figuratively stops.



*Screenshot Rizal sa Dapitan (source VCD VivaVide)*

The next shot is an explanatory note about Rizal not making it to Cuba because he was arrested, sentenced, and executed, about Josephine joining the revolution, about Joselito becoming a governor and about America succeeding Spain in colonising the Philippines, and about how the revolution lives on. This non-diegetic insert, or events that actually took place beyond Rizal's lifetime, brings the audience to a sight-seeing mode.

*Rizal sa Dapitan* starts from a voyeur position. The imperatives of history and nationalism compel it to adopt a fixed position, thus, rendering the audience a voyeur. At this point, Rizal actually becomes out of place. His explicit opposition to an armed revolution against Spain continues to be a matter of discussion. The nation would have wanted that liberation was obtained by an organised armed force. His selection as the country's national hero by the American remains a matter of contention. The nation would have wanted a "locally" selected hero, preferably one who believes in the use of force. In that contention, Rizal is quintessentially an exile, an alien and alienating figure. The debate for or against him becomes his exilic space.

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### **Filmography:**

*Rizal sa Dapitan: Philippines* 1997, dir. Tikoy Aguiluz, Filipino, transl. Rizal in Dapitan.

### **Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Rizal’s life is a genre by itself in Philippine cinema. For those familiar with his life and death will notice how the celluloid Rizal generally follows the composition of his Europeanised photographic images. According to Rafael (1997), these photographs have “remained largely un-commented by Filipinos.”
- <sup>2</sup> Dapitan is located at the northwestern coast of the island of Mindanao.
- <sup>3</sup> Philippine contemporary historiography no longer makes an explicit reference to Rizal’s exile. This may have been borne out by the rustic and pastoral landscape of Dapitan where Rizal seems to be on a holiday.
- <sup>4</sup> In a rereading of Althusser’s *Ideology*, Butler (1995) clearly demonstrates that the law operates in the same punitive manner as religion and requires the repetition of rituals that obligate the subject to unremittingly proclaim its innocence. Claiming innocence, however, is premised on a prior act of transgression.
- <sup>5</sup> His first novel, *Noli Me Tangere* (The Social Cancer) was first published in Berlin, Germany in 1887. Its sequel, *El Filibusterismo* (The Reign of Greed) was first published in Ghent Belgium in 1891. Compulsory readings for all students in the Philippines, the protagonists of both novels are Rizal’s doppelgängers. Both have returned to the Philippines after being away.
- <sup>6</sup> Salman Rushdie, cited in Lovell.