

The Cosmopolitical Consciousness of the Female Action Heroine in *BuyBust* and Her Disruption of Drug War Masculine Narratives, the Action Film Genre, and Filipino Martial Arts

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Abstract

This article examines the film *BuyBust* as a catalyst for exploring sociopolitical themes and gender dynamics within Philippine cinema. Informed by Kin-Yan Szeto's concept of "cosmopolitical consciousness," the study analyzes the film's navigation of three interconnected layers: narcopolitics in the context of the Philippine drug war, the evolution of the Filipino action film genre, and the cultural significance of Filipino martial arts (FMA).

Through a nuanced examination of the film's narrative structure, characters, and thematic elements, this article demonstrates how *BuyBust* disrupts prevailing narratives and norms in FMA and narcopolitics, particularly through its portrayal of the action

heroine Nina Manigan. By interrogating themes of femininity, agency, and resistance, the study highlights the transformative potential of cinema as a medium for social critique and cultural representation. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding identity, power, and resistance in contemporary Filipino society by revealing how “BuyBust” uniquely combines narrative and cinematic elements to challenge the maleness associated with the martial arts action genre and the forces at play in the Philippine drug war. Fixed within this context and emerging alongside other female-led action films of the period, “BuyBust” elevates a distinct Filipino identity articulated using femininity.

Keywords: cosmopolitical consciousness, female action heroine, the Philippine drug war, Filipino martial arts, women as agents of change in film, representation of women in Philippine cinema

The presidency of Rodrigo Roa Duterte (2016–2022) is most notoriously remembered for ushering in the drug war in the Philippines, leading to an estimated 6,200 deaths of drug users and drug “pushers” (Sarao, 2022). Many of these deaths have reportedly been unlawful killings, with policemen planting evidence or claiming that the suspects fought back, or more colloquially described as *nanlaban* in Filipino (Human Rights Watch, 2017). These fateful years echoed familiar ghosts of extrajudicial killings from the Martial Law era under then-President Ferdinand Marcos Sr., drastically marred the national reputation of the Philippine National Police (PNP), and created an aura of fear and uncertainty that tore the country apart (Lozada, 2021).

In 2018, *BuyBust*, directed by Erik Matti, was released at the height of the drug war (Matti, 2018). The title itself immediately exposes the setting and context: a police drug enforcement squad caught in the aftermath of a compromised “buy bust” mission, or an entrapment operation. Although the film delves into the intricacies of the realities of the drug trade in the Philippines, the film should also be understood as the juncture of two other political and cultural layers in a resurging

Filipino action film genre amid more successful counterparts from East and Southeast Asia, as well as the use of Filipino Martial Arts (FMA) in the action film genre as a bastion of Filipino national identity. The film also takes a jab at woeful social realities in the Philippines during the drug war; in doing so, it also wiggles its way into a struggle for cinematic dominance worldwide through the instrumental use of national martial arts (and sports). These junctures illustrate how *BuyBust* is located amid a cosmopolitical consciousness—what James Clifford (1998) would refer to as a process of identity construction that “creatively engages with multiple and often conflicting sociopolitical sensibilities” (367–369).

This article holds that these layers are conventionally regarded as predominantly male spaces. Firstly, discourse around Duterte’s drug war tends to send women to the backstage, often relegating and marginalizing them as grieving victims or collateral damage in a generally masculine affair, with their voices and faces seldom heard and seen and their plights ignored by the government (Dionisio, 2020, p. 1; Mendoza, 2020, pp. 186–188). Dionisio and Mendoza’s works have lent credence to the complexity of women’s roles during the drug war, which are really multifaceted, as they have been employed and deployed on both sides of the fence in the war. In fact, some curious cases have been featured in news articles: female assassins who use their non-threatening aura to close in with their victims (Head, 2016), or women who capitalize on their “moral authority” as mothers of a neighbourhood to patrol and impose curfews on their husbands and children (thereby removing would-be victims of drive-by assassinations) and adopt community care for drug rehabilitation and community protection (Marcaida, 2022). Both examples operate along the premise of female vulnerability, which has three aspects: first in which women are unlikely violent assassins; second, in which women are far-fetched targets for assassinations; and a possible third, in which Filipino mothers are accorded enough political and social capital in communities so that they can legitimately “police” their husbands and sons. For the most part, cases like these lesser-known and are nevertheless still integrated in the framework of women as victims and secondary figures in the

male-on-male violence that permeated during the drug war. As a fantasy that reflects imaginings about women's experiences during the drug war, *BuyBust*'s female protagonist, Nina Manigan (henceforth referred to as Nina) is a fascinating figure because she becomes the catalyst to cinematically engage with narcopolitics—not only as a victim but also as her own liberator. With this, Nina breaks through the confines of victimhood and helplessness ascribed to women amid the Drug War by assuming a space located between victim, perpetrator, and redeemer.

Secondly, Altman (1999) argued how genre, apart from being defined solely as a category of film, is actually also a form of contract derived from a social process of meaning-making between the film industry and its audiences. In a content analysis of 391 cop films in the United States, King (2018) expanded this definition by considering the Hollywood professionals who sold films to audiences for status and profit (p. 239 and 242). In this regard, a genre, like the action film genre, is socially produced. Representations of gender within genres are therefore reflective of norms and biases among societies that consume films.

Some works have conveyed the idea that the action genre is predominantly, if not exclusively, a male space (Tasker, 1993), which female characters have to navigate, often defining their femaleness along (Brown, 1996) or in opposition to male—sometimes even hypermasculine—characters (King, 2008). Brown (1996) argued that female characters in action films are often strategically inserted to simply affirm the male hero's heterosexuality (p.52). Meanwhile, Basinger (as cited in Johnson, 1994, 153) took this further, arguing that many female action heroes who served as main characters (such as Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* film series and Sarah Connor of the *Terminator* franchise) were problematic because they did nothing but perform male roles in women's bodies in some perverse act of "cinematic crossdressing," thereby failing to be reconstructive figures in defining women in action films.

Certain works have used action films as a platform for reading emancipatory or transformative storytelling in terms of race, such as Szeto (2008) on Asian masculinity and Tyree and Jacobs (2014) on reconstructing perceptions of black men using the superhero fantasy. Although these examples sought to subvert dominant principles of race

using film, they are nevertheless still male-centric. Some works analyzing female characters in action films have alluded to their “fleeting” emergence in the genre (Kac-Vergne, 2016). The supposed liberation in the film’s narrative also remained incomplete or unresolved because they are articulated by male directors who resided in the patriarchy (Chen, 1–2). Therefore, to borrow Gayatri Spivak’s (1994) “idea of double displacement,” this reading of a Filipina lead finds significance because her character crosses two displacements in the action film genre—being a woman and being Filipino. By analyzing Nina’s character development and cinematic presentation in *BuyBust*, this study analyzes the film’s attempts to break through the action genre from two levels of marginalization.

Finally, based on Matthews’ (2016) analysis of boxing and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), the realm of martial arts (and consequently, martial arts film as an action genre too) is a “male preserve.” Matthews’ work delved into discourse on how social enclaves, such as gyms for boxing, weightlifting, and martial arts, serve as spaces governed by and produce ideas about gender (312–313). In particular, Gonzales (2015, pp. 54–69) presented ways through which traditional FMA (before the rise of martial arts clubs) was generally transmitted among men by male teachers, and self-defense was predominantly a male practice that sought to protect and defend female figures, such as Filipino women or even the Philippines itself, which was romanticized as being feminine (pp. 188–192). As such, this article holds that FMA maintains itself as a male preserve by defining itself against effeminization. As Matthews (2016) argued, gyms are examples of gendered spaces where social power is rearticulated, reiterated, and reified (p. 313). More than just serving as a site for knowledge transmission, these spaces are produced and shaped by gendered social relations.

These gendered notions about sports and martial arts are carried over to filmic representations of them. Several works have used martial arts in film as a discursive platform for analyzing various themes such as anti-imperialism (Prashad, 2003), decolonization (Kato, 2005), diasporic nationalism (Klein, 2004), transnationalism (Feng, 2008), and nationalism (R. C. T. Gonzales, 2015). However, Chen’s (2012) work on women in martial arts films argued that such films are often male-

centric and male-directed. Much like how martial arts serves as a tool for discursive intervention, this article's analysis of Nina—as a female FMA protagonist—is interesting and unique in that her character disrupts a male preserve.

If Nina's character emerges at the Y-junction of these layers, the articulations of feminine and national identity exude and embody what Szeto (2008) terms as a "cosmopolitical consciousness." Taken from Clifford's (1998, pp. 366–367) analysis of the cosmopolitical—where identity construction that takes place in a "postnational" space involving the appropriation, cutting, and mixing of cultural elements that transcend, merge, overlap, and, sometimes, even contradict each other—Szeto's work reads Jackie Chan in his film projects as a cosmopolitically conscious agent. He takes not only the lead acting role in his films but also the director's seat, even in the formulation of the fight choreography and the narrative. At the same time, Chan's polymathy on film emerges from his long personal history from being a Hong Kong stuntman to a Hollywood actor, reflecting on film his real-life experiences of marginalization, anti-imperialism, decolonization, racism, and so on.

In the same manner, Nina, played by Filipino-Australian actress Anne Curtis, is a critical narrative figure in locating and navigating through the three layers discussed in this article. Where Jackie Chan uses comedy to subvert global or Hollywood concepts of Asianness and masculinity, Nina's femininity is mobilized as a narrative tool in the navigation and disruption of more established notions and depictions of Philippine society, the action film genre, and national identity expressed in FMA—all of which are strongly associated with masculinity. *BuyBust*, whose actors and producers are comprised of Filipino nationals, transnational, and diasporic Filipinos, thereby illustrates a visible cosmopolitical consciousness in navigating these layers.

Borrowing from Szeto's (2008) reading of Jackie Chan's "cosmopolitical consciousness" in navigating and disrupting fixed concepts of Asianness and masculinity in film, this article argues that these three layers consequently, respectively, and yet cohesively, disrupt three sociopolitical notions in the Philippines: (1) the grim conditions in the country amid the drug war; (2) the Philippines' attempt to claim

a place in the global arena of action cinema; (3) and the elevation of FMA as a beacon of national identity against similar uses of other Southeast Asian martial arts in the action genre (229–261). Furthermore, this article argues that Nina in *BuyBust* is a cosmopolitically conscious figure emerging from the juncture of these three sociopolitical layers, cleverly disrupting these traditionally masculine spaces using the very femininity of the character. These disruptions are manifested in the film's plot, narrative, location, and choreography.

Following Szeto's merging of Prashad's (2003, pp. 51–90) reading of kung fu as a form of anti-imperialism and Morris' (2005, pp. 1–19) understanding of cosmopolitanism in "global cinema from local contexts that are neither 'centered' by Hollywood nor excluded or disavow its influence," this article seeks to further explore the sociopolitical layers that *BuyBust* disrupts, and how it does so, particularly in its use of the film's heroine as a narrative tool for these cosmopolitical disruptions.

Methodology

As articulated by Szeto (2003), this article employs the concept of "cosmopolitical consciousness" to analyze *BuyBust*. This methodological approach draws from Prashad's (2003) and Kato's (2005) analyses of Bruce Lee films, which interpret fight sequences as decolonizing instruments. Prashad's and Kato's works critically analyzed how the Asian body and its movements were utilized to articulate Asian masculinity and anti-colonialism. For instance, Kato, illustrated how Chinese patriotism was overtly displayed in Bruce Lee films, which pitted Bruce Lee's Chinese masculinity against traditional Chinese notions of the Chinese foreign and colonial other—represented by a host of foreign martial arts practitioners that included a Japanese katana wielding villain-boss or an American karateka played by Chuck Norris (Kato, 2005, pp. 64–81). Here, the more fluid and adaptive movement of Bruce Lee's fighting style—what Kato refers to as "kinetic narrative"—subverted the more rigid and structured forms of the foreign, colonial other.

Additionally, this article borrows from King's (2008) research on how women are portrayed in cop action cinema. King argued that the

genre should be understood as a construct of a “collective common sense” in the film industry (p. 238). Essentially, this common sense crafted a pattern of depicting men as being limited by their professional ethics, whereas women were limited by their professional achievements. King introduced several categories for reading women’s portrayal in cop action films and employed statistical data to argue the nuances of gendered depictions of women. These categories include the nature of women’s collegiality, the types of cases they take on, the extent of their investigative skills, how they fare in combat, the kinds of plot structures their narratives adopt, or how they relate to their families in the story (pp. 242–245). These categories are particularly interesting tools for reading *BuyBust*, because, apart from the last category on families (which does not seem to apply in the *BuyBust* narrative), and as this article shows, Nina’s character is a departure from the trends that King argued for. Nina’s ethics and her physical endurance again located her somewhere outside of King’s dichotomy.

King’s categories and Prashad’s and Kato’s critiques of fight choreography as narratives are helpful tools to read *BuyBust*. This article examines the film’s narrative, characters, and thematic elements to analyze how Nina’s portrayal disrupts traditional gender roles and societal norms. The setting, along with Nina’s props, costume, and martial arts choreography in *BuyBust* can be read as sites for decolonization and disruption, hanging over the three layers explored in this article.

Following five viewings of the film, the author sought out pertinent features of Nina’s character, such as her professed personal principles, her reactions to getting beat up, her fighting style, her opponents, her battlefields, and her survival strategies. The author also paid special attention to gendered elements in the film, such as how Nina fares in a fight against male assailants or even how male and female cadets were billeted in the same barracks.

To illustrate, Nina’s portrayal as the “last man standing” in a predominantly male squad is an explicit and deliberate narrative element with gendered overtones. This is on top of details in the fight choreographies—analyzed as a kind of martial stylistics—that visibly illustrate her frailty or physical disadvantage against her male

opponents. In this regard, gender and gendered elements in the film are plot devices moving the story forward and reconstructing or regenerating notions about women. The fact that Nina is a woman is essential to how *BuyBust* unfolds. Its emphases about her as a woman in a predominantly male environment serve as strategically placed tools to disrupt the conventionally male-dominated layers discussed in this article.

Findings and Discussion

Nina's Disruptive Layers

The Innocent and Frail

Figure 1

Nina Manigan



Note. Played by Svelte Filipino-Australian actress, Anne Curtis. From *BuyBust* (Matti, 2018), Reality Entertainment. Copyright 2018 by Viva Films and Reality Entertainment, Inc.

Nina is played by the attractive Filipino-Australian Anne Curtis, whose filmography would not conventionally regarded her as an action star. Her physical features are probably the opposite of what Brown (1996) classified as “hardbodied,” as she is the smallest and leanest member of the police squad. The difference is most apparent in portions where Nina pairs up with Rico Yatco, another team member played by Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) veteran athlete Brandon Vera, whose 6’2” frame towers over Nina and reflects a hypermasculinity contrasting with her smaller frame.

Figure 2

Nina visibly smaller when juxtapositioned against Yatco



Note. From *BuyBust* (Matti, 2018), Reality Entertainment. Copyright 2018 by Viva Films and Reality Entertainment, Inc.

Nina is portrayed as the lone survivor of a failed mission in her previous squad, a fact that her current squad holds against her. In an opening scene, Nina gets reprimanded for breaking protocol at a training exercise, which she argues was merely a display of thinking outside the box. This is a recurring theme in the film, which film locates Nina at the crossroads of her desire of redemption from losing her previous squad and of approaching challenges in a more creative manner. Often, the two paths clash. For instance, Nina disobeys orders from her wounded male commanding officer to leave him so she could escape and survive, revealing another of her characteristics: having compassion. In this respect, her disobedience is often premised around acts of compassion intended for the greater good: She pushes a teammate aside who hesitates but places the squad at risk, earning her a painful reproach from her commanding officer; sets free a minor after he had attempted to hit her with a hammer; or hesitates to attack a woman, only to be severely injured because she paused.

There are a few moments where the camera lingers on Nina's seemingly contemplative episodes, such as when she refuses to leave her commanding officer behind or when she discovers a teammate's brutally mauled and mutilated corpse. These subtle moments—exclusive to Nina, as no other characters have these—offer reminders of humanity amid the incessant chaos unfolding throughout the film.

BuyBust, then, seemingly highlights Nina's innocence and purity vis-à-vis the chaos and sin she has thrust herself into. In one of the film's most significant plot twists, Nina finally reaches their mission's main target, local drug lord Biggie Chen (played by Arjo Atayde), only to discover that he operates alongside Nina's higher-ups in the police force. Although many viewers would have already found the revelation obvious, the camera emphasizes the disbelief and shock in Nina's face, reflecting a genuine innocence from the corruption that has consumed her.

Figure 3

Nina's look of shock upon realizing that the betrayal comes from someone higher up within their ranks



Note. From *BuyBust* (Matti, 2018), Reality Entertainment. Copyright 2018 by Viva Films and Reality Entertainment, Inc.

Survival and Disruption

It is important to mention that Nina is often counter-positioned against masculine tropes in the film (e.g., frail against heavy, pure versus evil, or righteous against corrupt). A secondary category that can be raised is how Nina navigates around the challenges posed by these masculine tropes she is juxtaposed with. In the previous subsection, it was discussed how Nina often approached challenges unconventionally, thinking outside the box, which is often framed around noble intentions but also often do not follow more rigid protocols.

In *BuyBust*, it is solely Nina who does this; the rest of the characters—especially the male ones—have little or no opportunity to display their own creative approaches. On one hand, it may be construed as the film's lack of depth in writing or designing the other characters. On the other hand, it is difficult to ignore how this feature of Nina's is simply underscored in the film.

There are several scenes in the film illustrating Nina's subversion of the male characters, as well as her creative navigation around their conditions. When a male teammate fumbles a room clearing, Nina shoves him aside to complete the exercise—all for the good of the team. When her commanding officer gives her a direct order to leave him bleeding on a rickety roof, she complies but first implores the scared residents (who are hiding and noncompliant, fearing for their own safety) to call 911 for a downed officer, consequently breaking noise discipline.

Perhaps her most iconic subversion is in *BuyBust*'s final scene, where she discovers that a high-ranking officer who has come to rescue her was actually her executioner, all along in cahoots with the drug syndicate. Nina shoots him and his crooked escorts instead, then promptly shoots her own leg to play the weak victim, which she has *just* stubbornly proven not to be just the previous night. Moreover, she cleans herself up by using the very excuse of *nanlaban*, which her corrupt supervisor would most likely have used to conceal her assassination. Thus, one critical feature of the narrative is how the feminine character is portrayed as unable to stand in direct opposition to masculine characters or tropes, navigating around them instead using creative or fluid approaches to overcome or displace them.

Figure 4

Nina shoots the corrupt officers before turning the gun on her leg, playing them at their own game



Note. From *BuyBust* (Matti, 2018), Reality Entertainment. Copyright 2018 by Viva Films and Reality Entertainment, Inc.

Other Film Elements

When read as kinetic storytelling through orchestrated fight choreography, *BuyBust*'s many action sequences exhibit similar instances showing how Nina subverts or destabilizes the masculine tropes antagonizing her. When out of ammunition, she uses a laundry tub and a kettle to beat enemies. When overpowered, she equalizes with a knife. When out of the room, she parkours to the roof. These alternative approaches to combat are particularly clear in the *kuyog* [to be mobbed or mauled by a crowd] scene where Nina fought to survive alongside the hulking Yatco who relied on his size and brute force. Nina's fighting style employing FMA is reminiscent of Kato's (2005) description of Bruce Lee's fluid fighting form. Briefly, FMA (specifically the *Pekiti Tirsia Kali* school Anne Curtis took lessons in for the film) does not rely on meeting force with force, but rather going around such force to disable it.

In a scene showing the final confrontation between Nina and drug lord Biggie Chen—, music—Max Surban's famous *Turagsoy*—was used to comically emphasize the disparity of male physical power and female vulnerability. This comic insertion is suspended when Nina, having spent most of the scene being thrashed about on the floor, manages to pick up a shard of broken glass, which she promptly stabs Biggie Chen with. This scene is intriguing because of how the song was played—as if to revel in Nina's weakness, only to be rudely awakened by her creative interjection.

Finally, the story's main location—a slum area called Brgy. Gracia ni Maria—is an interesting element in the film for several reasons. Firstly, it reflects people's imaginings about the drug war in the Philippines—where it happens, what happens, who it happens to, and who allows it happen. Secondly, inasmuch as Nina, by virtue of her subversions of masculinity (and that amid the drug war) is a regenerative character for the female martial arts hero caught in an environment constrained by the war's harshness in the corrupt Philippines, the film portrays Brgy. Gracia ni Maria's people not just as collateral victims and criminals involved in the drug trade but also as tired and angry humans who merely want peace in their community. In other words, in the context of the drug war, *BuyBust*'s Brgy. Gracia ni Maria is emancipatory.

Finally, Brgy. Gracia ni Maria is the physical obstacle that Nina symbolically hurdles. Every sewer, garbage dump, cramped alley, wobbly house wall, or unstable roof act as a character in the film's kinetic narrative. Every step of Nina's navigation through Brgy. Gracia ni Maria articulates and asserts the female protagonist's negotiation with more abstract concepts, such as crime and poverty.

Figure 5

An aerial view of Brgy. Gracia ni Maria with dead bodies strewn everywhere in the aftermath of the buy bust



Note. From *BuyBust* (Matti, 2018), Reality Entertainment. Copyright 2018 by Viva Films and Reality Entertainment, Inc.

On their own, it is difficult to explore these categories as manifestations of some form of cosmopolitical consciousness. To further understand how they are cleverly woven into the tapestry of gendered discourses in film as a disruption emanating from a certain cosmopolitical consciousness, it is crucial to grasp two key points (which the next section elaborates), but they are also essential to mention here to contextualize the observations above: *first*, the female martial arts action hero surfaces from an earlier gendered disruption by Asian female villains—if they can be called as such—in horror films over the last two decades; *second*,

within the last two decades, the martial arts hero in Southeast Asian action films serves as simulacra for national identity as these films try to penetrate global cinema audiences.

The Avenging Female: From Horror to Action

In the Hollywood-dominated realm of global cinema, the action genre is a space where gendered notions prevail. Yvonne Tasker (1993) and Jeffrey Brown (1996) argue that female action heroes often navigate within frameworks established by hypermasculine narratives. This was evident in the male action narratives of the 1980s, such as those featuring Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claude Van Damme. They were so hypermasculine that Brown referred to them as depicting “hysterical” masculinity, in which female action heroes that surfaced in the 1990s (i.e., “*Aliens*” and “*Terminator 2*”) had to navigate within the framework of the hardbodied male (1996, p. 52).

Philippine cinema, generally heavily influenced by Hollywood frameworks, also followed similar patterns of hypermasculinity in its action films. The 1980s and 1990s action genre were dominated by household names such as Fernando Poe Jr., Lito Lapid, Rudy Fernandez, Anthony Alonzo, Philip Salvador, and Ace Vergel. The characters they played were depicted in similar fashion as the “hysterical” masculine—often portrayed as one-man armies who take on several female lovers, perform superhero-like feats, and survive grievous, even fatal, injury. Alfred McCoy’s (2001) analysis of masculinity in the Philippine Military Academy even referenced how the stoic, reserved masculinity of World War II-era soldiers was replaced in the 1970s by a “Fernando Poe Jr.” kind of contrasting masculinity: that of the hot-headed, violent, never-turn-the-other-cheek kind (p. 258). The action genre of that period was dominated by hypermasculine tropes, such that only the likes of Japanese actress Cynthia Luster (Yukari Oshima) could only be fathomed as a female action star in the Philippines. It had to take a foreign woman depicting masculine prowess for the Filipino audience to wrap their heads around a female action star.

The 2010s, however, saw a gradual shift in the genre toward female-led action films. During the later part of the 2010s, a plethora of female-

led action films (of which *BuyBust* is one) mostly dealing with the contemporaneously relevant theme of narcopolitics, came into the fray, with films such as Richard Somes's *We Will Not Die Tonight* in 2018; T. A. Acierto's *Watch Me Kill* and Pedring Lopez's *Maria*, both released in 2019; and Ben Rekhi's *Watch List* in 2022. Some directors, such as Mikhail Red, even released numerous movies with the same theme, such as *Neomanila* (2017) and *Arisaka* (2021). Female-led action dealing with narcopolitics was also not confined in the cinemas; with *The General's Daughter*, directed by Emmanuel Palo, Mervyn Brondial, and Darnel Joy Villaflo, broadcast in ABS-CBN in 2019.

This shift from the hypermasculine male action hero of the 80s and 90s was not outright and can probably be best explained by looking at a different genre—the Asian horror—in the early 2000s. Asian horror at the start of the new millennium broke off from the Hollywood tropes of male villains (i.e., Freddy, Jason, Ghostface, Chucky, and Jigsaw) and jump scares.

Films such 2002's *The Ring*, 2003's *The Grudge*, 2004's *Shutter*, and 2005's *The Maid* all featured the vengeful female ghost as a novel trope for Hollywood audiences (Nakata, 2002; Pisanthanakun & Wongpoom, 2004; Shimizu, 2003; Tong, 2005). Some critics have observed the misogynistic nature of Asian horror films, such that they are far removed from demonstrating actual feminism (Nhu, 2017; Putri, 2020). Critics have also pointed out that this is possibly because most Asian horror directors are men (Zelen, 2021). At the same time, however, the vengeful female ghost in Asian horror films have also been interpreted as a gendered interruption of the male-dominated Hollywood horror genre (T.T., 2014). Although male Hollywood horror villains traumatize audiences with jump scares, the vengeful female is more subtle and psychological—almost feminine—in its very nature of delivering horror. The blueprint of the vengeful female ghost is not novel, since female ghosts, beasts, or beings are already present in Philippine culture, such as the female *aswang* (viscera eater) or *mangkukulam* (witch). However, the formula was novel for American audiences, and the commercial success of these early vengeful female ghost films elicited Hollywood remakes—such as with *The Ring* and *The Grudge*—that delivered box office earnings.

The Asian horror genre paved the way for female leads to be more accepted among Philippine audiences. Moreover, the idea of the avenging female outside the scope of the horror genre began to appear.

For instance, *Darna*, broadcasted by GMA Network in 2005 and portrayed by Angel Locsin, lasted for 170 episodes (Zapata & Quizon, 2005). The show was unique in that it was a female-led action TV series and broke from the usual limitations of female roles in melodrama and soap operas. Although *Darna*, as the stereotypical and somewhat parodic “Wonder Woman” of the Philippines, understandably had to be played by a woman, Locsin would go on to star in the action series *The General’s Daughter* (an avenging female character), which displayed a more vibrant role not confined to the proverbial *Bracelets of Submission* of a Filipino Wonder Woman (Palo et al., 2019). That is to say, whereas *Darna* could never be transposed to a male version, doing so in *The General’s Daughter* would not affect the storyline as significantly—the story can still be told. *The General’s Daughter* outpaced *Darna*, ending its run with 183 episodes. In that sense, the latter series may be perceived as putting forward a female lead for Filipino audiences to showcase the female action star—not because the role had to be played by a woman.

This is not to say, of course, that the female-led action films were not nuanced by feminine narrative plots. In fact, in films like *Maria* and *Watch Me Kill*, the plot drives forward precisely because of an intervening maternal instinct (Acierto, 2019; Lopez, 2019). This emphasizes that, by then, the action genre has begun to open up to female leads, when they had almost exclusively been originally reserved for men only. It is from this strand of cinematic DNA that *BuyBust*’s Nina surfaces as an avenging female in the Philippine action genre.

Philippine cinema’s portrayal of women has evolved significantly over the years. Belinda Aquino (1991) refers to this narrative as one filled with passive and aggressive portrayals of women, highlighting a kind of sexism and sexualization richly discussed by both Patrick Flores (2000) and Rolando Tolentino (2010). Flores highlights how sex and the female body have been regulatory ideals in Philippine films, shaping gender roles and societal norms (2000, pp. 1–12), whereas Tolentino’s concept of the “vaginal economy” examines the persistence of sex-oriented (*bomba*) films

in reflecting broader socio-economic trends, particularly the feminization of labor. (2010, pp. 4–6). Tolentino further argues that these *bomba* films have been a consistent feature of Philippine cinema, especially during times of economic and political crises, thus not only sustaining the film industry but also providing a platform for covert political commentary on the periods in which they are produced. In this context, *BuyBust* refreshingly offers up an alternate narrative by presenting a female lead who embodies a cosmopolitical consciousness, challenging traditional gender roles and societal norms. The succeeding discussions will delve deeper into how *BuyBust* achieves this disruption, as well as the implications it has for Philippine cinema and gender representation.

Busting through Sociopolitical Layers

Narcopolitics

Szeto's analysis of Jackie Chan's cosmopolitical consciousness intervenes in the debate by offering alternative processes by which "multicultural, polycultural, and transnational theories regarding local, ethnic, and national identity" are articulated in mainstream cinema (2008, pp. 230–231). Szeto draws his understanding of the cosmopolitical from Clifford's argument on how a sense of identity at "national and transnational levels" are not just homogenized and normalized but can also involve "appropriating, cutting, and mixing cultural forms" (Clifford, 1998, pp. 367–369; as cited by Szeto, 2008, p. 230). Szeto brilliantly exhibits how Jackie Chan's use of martial arts action choreography displaces traditional Hollywood notions of Asians and masculinity in action films. Chan's interjection of "patriarchal discourses" is drawn from his complex persona shaped by experiences of displacement in Hong Kong, international stardom, "British colonialism, Chinese nationalism, and Western Orientalism and imperialism" (2008, p. 230). He describes Chan's cosmopolitical consciousness in his films as always being able to adapt—"sometimes confronting, sometimes cooperating to achieve strategic goals"—almost often in comical fashion (Szeto, 2008, p. 230). In this sense, and because Chan is often involved in other roles aside from acting (i.e., writing the narrative, directing the film, or choreographing the sequences),

his films are just as much expressions of this cosmopolitical consciousness as the characters he plays and how he portrays them.

It is along these lines that this article reads *BuyBust*. In the similar manner that Chan's films confront themes like the effeminizing of Asian masculinity, Western imperialism, or even racism, *BuyBust* traverses the complexities of the Philippine drug war of the late 2010s. This agenda becomes even more evident once one realizes that narcopolitics is a recurring theme of many Filipino films in the decade—from Brillante Mendoza's 2016 *Ma' Rosa*, to Ben Rekhi's 2022 *Watch List* (Mendoza, 2016; Rekhi, 2022). Both Mendoza and Rekhi's films interestingly tell the stories from female perspectives and illustrate a reality of the drug war: women having to subscribe to the very systems of oppression endangering them in the first place to circumvent danger. In contrast, as this article shows, *BuyBust*'s Nina meets the danger directly, confronting the system head on.

BuyBust exposes the complex intricate relationships and corrupt politics woven together in Philippine narcopolitics. Set in Brgy. Gracia ni Maria, a fictional slum area within the notorious real-life Tondo, Manila, the film works its way from the ground up in revealing the different actors in Philippine narcopolitics. Using the chaos of the shanty town is explicitly metonymic to the usual sites of extrajudicial killings in the drug war. Brgy. Gracia ni Maria may be fictional, but as Iris Gonzales notes, it is a "cartographic reality; it's just a setting of a movie, but fiction it is not—the desperation of the people here is as real as it can get" (I. Gonzales, 2008).

The film is seen from the perspective of a drug enforcement rookie—belonging to the very agency widely believed to perpetrate extrajudicial killings during the period. It starts by showing police trainees, eventually graduating to their first (and unfortunate) mission in the form of a buy-bust, which is itself the usual scenario where extrajudicial deaths occur. Nina is thrust into the mess of the slums, controlled by stereotypical drug gangs and drug lords. They are betrayed by other corrupt policemen and spend the duration of the film trying to survive by exiting the labyrinthian Brgy. Gracia ni Maria. She becomes the only survivor and returns to relative safety, only for her to realize that the drug network wiggles its way back to the very people who sent her team into the slums to make drug arrests in the first place. Moreover, her own senior officer,

Director Alvarez (played by Nonie Buencamino), which she ends up having to shoot in self-defense, has a mysterious “Sir” he answers to over the phone.

To a large extent, perpetrators of extrajudicial killings in the drug war have not yet been held accountable for the murders, with former President Duterte himself even hurling expletives at European Union (EU) human rights groups that called for an end to the killings (Saavedra, 2016). *BuyBust*’s plot, characters, and setting all confront the seemingly obvious: that state forces and state actors killed people during the drug war, and that they are themselves involved in the trade. Although none of the war’s real-life opponents and critics have managed to prove culpability and dislodge state forces for the murders, *BuyBust*’s narrative disrupts the untouchability of the perpetrators.

Most police actions during the period have been directed toward the urban poor, with Amnesty International even labelling the drug war as a “war on the poor” (Wells, 2017). Although widespread drug use has been widely attributed to economically marginalized sectors in the urban areas, *BuyBust* presents the poor—residents of the slums—in a more ambivalent fashion. The poor are bifurcated between gang members and their victims. At one point in the film, many residents of Brgy. Gracia ni Maria confront the gang members about to execute the remnants of Nina’s squad and attempt to throw them and the policemen out of their community, resulting in a free-for-all clash between the three parties. Here, the film presents a more intricate political landscape in the slums, instead of the widely held notion that the urban poor are drug users.

It is also important to note how the film puts a shroud over the real mastermind of the operations—not the mission’s target Biggie Chen—but an invisible one, unseen and unheard of and only affirmed through Director Alvarez’s “Yes, Sir” and “No, Sir.” The insinuation is obvious: who but more senior officials in government agencies could compel Alvarez to “clean up the mess”?

Like a scene from a Hollywood conspiracy film, former President Duterte himself has been accused of involvement in the drug trade, with his son, who is himself Davao City vice-mayor, appearing before the Philippine Senate to deny accusations that he was involved in trafficking

drugs from China to the Philippines (BBC News, 2017). Although a vast majority of the targets neutralized in the drug war were either urban poor drug users or runners, the proverbial big fish remained intact. Critics have even lamented that the status quo remained, placing current President Marcos Jr. at a loss in the drug war (Simons, 2023).

The film addresses the drug war in a way that the academe, newspaper, or even human rights groups have not managed to present more liberally. In some way, *BuyBust* challenges Philippine politics and society as well, in contempt of their pretenses in how they have handled the drug war.

The film's portrayal of the Philippine drug war also offers a critical lens through which it engages with the conflict's gendered implications. Traditionally, women in Philippine drug war narratives were depicted as victims or secondary characters, often marginalized within the broader sociopolitical discourse. However, *BuyBust* manages to subvert this trope by positioning Nina at the forefront of the action, challenging both the corrupt systems and the gender norms perpetuating violence and inequality.

Nina's character actively disrupts the traditional narrative by embodying a role typically reserved for male protagonists. She is not merely a passive observer or collateral damage in the drug war. Instead, she takes an assertive stance against the corrupt systems perpetuating this cycle of violence. In Philippine cinema, where hypermasculine heroes have historically dominated the action genre, this subversion is significant—if not solitary.

By placing a female lead in such a central and active role, *BuyBust* challenges the audience's expectations and critiques the gender dynamics of the drug war. Nina's journey through *BuyBust* mirrors the struggles of many women who, despite being caught in the crossfire of sociopolitical conflicts, assert their agency and fight against systemic oppression. Her resilience and determination highlight women's often-overlooked perspectives in these narratives, providing a more nuanced understanding of the human impact of the drug war.

Furthermore, the film's portrayal of Nina as a complex character with both strength and vulnerability disrupts the essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity. Unlike the hypermasculine heroes of the 1980s and 1990s, Nina's resilience is rooted in adaptability and resourcefulness, traits that align more closely with a feminist reimagining of heroism. This character portrayal aligns with the feminist critique of traditional gender roles, emphasizing the importance of diverse and balanced representations of women in media.

Action Film and Martial Arts

One of the most interesting features of *BuyBust* is a long-shot (one take) sequence, about two-and-a-half minutes long, involving Nina having to do a parkour run of about a kilometer-and-a-half around narrow streets and rickety rooftops—all the while disabling every single attacker that comes her way blanketed by everyone else around her fighting in a kaleidoscopic orgy of violence. Although it is possibly a first in Philippine action cinema, it is reminiscent of a blueprint laid out by an older Thai martial arts action film, director Prachya Pinkaew's *The Protector*, released in 2005. *The Protector* (Pinkaew, 2005) revolves around Kham (played by Tony Jaa) a young Thai from a lineage of royal guards tasked with protecting the war elephants of the king of Thailand. The animals are stolen and shipped to Australia, with Kham tasked to recover the elephants. Obstructing his way are criminal syndicates and formidable foreign practitioners of other martial arts. Kham must use his Muay Thai skills to smash through his enemies to recover the elephants. The plot is reminiscent of Bruce Lee's *Game of Death*, where Hai Tien (played by Lee himself) also has to navigate a tower with various martial artists on each floor he has to defeat (Lee & Clouse, 1978). In *The Protector*, the filmic symbolism is obvious: Kham's Muay Thai skill is metonymic of Thai masculinity utilized to overpower the villainous foreign others equipped with various martial arts from around the world—all to recover the surviving of the two kidnapped elephants, emblems of Thai history and culture.

Figure 6

Scene from rooftop fight sequence (long shot – one take)



Note. From *BuyBust* (Matti, 2018), Reality Entertainment. Copyright 2018 by Viva Films and Reality Entertainment, Inc.

Another noteworthy point is that *BuyBust*'s plot—a police squad entering an area of operation and then having to survive exfiltration—is also parallel to the highly successful 2011 Indonesian film *The Raid*, which grossed USD \$9.3 million at the box office on a USD \$1.1 million budget. Directed by Gareth Evans, the *Raid*, an Indonesian SWAT team, much like *BuyBust*'s Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) strike team, has to secure a high-value target in a tenement, before the team realizes that it has become the prey instead of the predators. Like *BuyBust*, *The Raid* also navigates the theme of corrupt public officials and the Indonesian police hierarchy, with regular grunts caught in the middle as oblivious pawns of the criminal machinations between the two.

BuyBust's similarity to *The Protector* and *The Raid* is important as it seemingly reveals the former's imitation of the narrative and cinematic formulas that made the latter two films highly successful internationally. Much like *The Protector*, which juxtaposed Thai-ness with the foreign and cultural other, *BuyBust*'s employment of FMA—for which Anne Curtis had to meticulously train in Pekiti Tirsia Kali for—also seeks to confront themes of crime, the clash between the rich and the poor, and the intricate

web of power and corruption, which are all associated with broader discourses of neocolonialism and the patriarchy.

FMA, generally perceived as a poor man's art, is adopted in *BuyBust* as a cultural tool for subverting the elite and masculine hegemons in these discourses. When the policemen run out of ammo, it is FMA that keeps them alive. The setting displaying these action scenes also reflects FMA's origins and prominence in the gutters of the Philippines. The use of the knife, in place of high-powered firearms, similarly recall the poor man's weapon's subversion of the Western firearm.

Moreover, one glaring difference with *The Protector* and *The Raid* is that *BuyBust*'s heroic "defender" or "survivor" is a woman who had to resort to displays of martial prowess to survive, similar to the male protagonists of the two earlier films. It is this difference that serves as a disruption of the martial arts action films of other Southeast Asian countries. Le-Van Kiet's 2019 *Furie*, a Vietnamese martial arts film that also features a female protagonist, uses the notion of motherly instinct to drive the story forward, thereby *resembling* *BuyBust*'s disruption. However, *Furie* was released only a year after *BuyBust*, making the latter a bit more original in the Southeast Asian martial arts action genre.

Although it appears that *BuyBust*, with its flamboyant displays of FMA, was a local and, arguably, formulaic response to the popularity of *The Protector* and *The Raid*, the long-standing history of Philippine action films which involve strong assertions of national identity that proves otherwise (R. C. T. Gonzales, 2015). At the height of Bruce Lee's popularity, Florentino Garcia and Solano Gaudite's *Enter Garrote* (parodying the title of another Bruce Lee film, *Enter the Dragon*) was released in 1974 as a Filipino showcase of FMA, echoing Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry as a means to disrupt the popular cultural hegemony of Chinese kung fu in global cinema (Clouse, 1973; Gaudite & Garcia, 1974). Films starring Roland Dantes, such as *The Pacific Connection* and *Arnis: The Sticks of Death* in 1974 and 1986, respectively, were made in similar fashion and even used English as the medium, intending to sell the FMA action genre internationally (Caparas, 1986; Nepomuceno, 1974). Beyond the sociopolitical critique of *BuyBust*, its

mobilization of FMA in an action film is geared toward two other trajectories that aim to internationally elevate both the Filipino action genre and the cultural uniqueness and supremacy of FMA.

This elevation is also a transnational project, considering it involves transnational and diasporic Filipinos in its cast, such as Filipino-Australian Anne Curtis and mixed-martial arts (MMA) sensation Filipino-American Brandon “The Truth” Vera. Crossing borders was present not only in who were in *BuyBust*’s but also in where FMA had been used. By the time *BuyBust* was released, FMA had already enjoyed its feature in various Hollywood films, such as *The Bourne Identity* in 2002, *The Hunted* in 2003, and *300* in 2006 (Friedkin, 2003; Liman, 2002; Snyder, 2006). By then, FMA was already internationally renowned, and *BuyBust*’s appropriation of the art was more of a localized display of an already transnational articulation of Filipino identity, compared to earlier assertions made in the 1970s. At this point, Filipino identity in FMA had already transitioned from a mere national assertion to a transnational one. The main difference with FMA’s Hollywood appearances is that *BuyBust* was predominantly a local production. Rather than reading it as the employment of FMA in an action film to showcase FMA internationally, *BuyBust*’s instrumentalism leans more toward highlighting the Filipino action genre by using an already internationally renowned martial art from the Philippines. These displays of elevation of the Filipino action genre and FMA exhibit how *BuyBust* comes from other levels of cosmopolitical consciousness, which seek to articulate Filipino identity from a multicultural setting.

The film’s use of FMA also adds a significant layer to its exploration of gender dynamics. Historically, martial arts have been associated with masculine prowess and dominance, reinforcing traditional gender roles within the action genre. However, *BuyBust* disrupts this narrative by employing FMA as a tool for Nina to assert her agency and challenge patriarchal structures.

Nina’s mastery of FMA is not just a demonstration of physical skill but also a subversion of gender norms. By excelling in a traditionally male-dominated domain, she redefines what it means to be an action hero. Thus, her use of FMA becomes a powerful narrative device

emphasizing adaptability, intelligence, and resilience—traits often underrepresented in female characters within the genre.

This subversion aligns with broader feminist critiques of gender representation in martial arts films, questioning the exclusivity of masculine narratives. Nina's portrayal as a competent and formidable fighter challenges the traditional associations of martial arts with male heroes, offering a fresh perspective on female empowerment in action cinema.

Disrupting the Narrative: The Action Heroine in BuyBust

The previous section presented the three locations from which the cosmopolitical consciousness in *BuyBust* are located. Although the film navigated around the harsh social and political realities of the drug war, on one hand, it is also an intervention into longstanding undertakings in Filipino film and society to elevate the Filipino action genre; and, on the other, the Filipino martial arts as a cultural tool used in such films. The film cleverly reflected the painful truths otherwise silenced in real life, taking filmic jabs at censored or repressed discussions about the brutality of state forces or their complicity and involvement in the very narcotics industry they wish to dismantle. At the same time, the film also disrupts—with a degree of both imitation and uniqueness—cinematic blueprints from the more commercially successful martial arts action films of its Southeast Asian neighbours. This section discusses how Nina's femininity is a significant plot driver applied throughout these various layers and is an efficient tool for subverting more conventional notions about Philippine society, film, or martial arts.

At first glance, *BuyBust* appears to be a gender-neutral narrative—her as a woman has no bearing in the way the story plays out. For instance, at the start, Nina, as a rookie in training, matches the performance level of the other trainees in the police camp. Male trainees fight female trainees, regardless of their difference in size and strength. Like the few other women in the barracks, Nina bunks with male trainees in a desexualized space. Of course, this is contrary to the common practice of separating male and female cadets in military and police barracks in the Philippines. More significantly, the film does not at all mention the obvious: that she is a woman in a predominantly male environment. Nina is called by her

last name (Manigan), and there is no reference in the dialogue about any of her feminine qualities, such as her frailty compared to the other more muscular team members, or even her sheer beauty. Additionally, the camera never caresses Nina's physical features in the seemingly fetishist manner that women are sexualized and objectified on film. Possibly, this is *BuyBust's* way of disrupting convention. Police barracks depicted in film and media are often portrayed as exclusively male spaces, reinforcing stereotypes about law enforcement as a male-dominated profession. By presenting Nina in a co-ed barracks, the film reveals how it challenges existing stereotypes and subverts audience expectations.

In any case, this sense of gender neutrality is shattered soon enough. Nina is revealed to be the only survivor of a previous squad in a botched mission. Instead of being perceived as strong enough to survive, she is instead unfairly labelled as *Hudas* (Judas) for doing so. Although it is not mentioned whether her being a woman had anything to do with the botched mission, her femininity is underscored by the fear that she might jinx her new squad.

In a breaching and clearing training session, Nina breaks protocol by overtaking a male squad mate whose nervous state in the training session made him inefficient at clearing rooms. While exhibiting her ability to make quick decisions on the spot, Nina's squad leader, Bernie Lacson (played by Victor Neri) admonishes her. The principle here is that taking someone else's arc of fire leaves a gap in the squad's defense, possibly resulting in a teammate's death. When asked why she broke procedure, Nina voices her sense of individuality, challenging Lacson's wisdom and authority by telling him—"with all due respect"—that people also die from following orders (a reference to how her last squad followed orders and died out). Lacson chastises her violently by shooting her body armor with a live round as her back is turned, with a warning, "That's what happens when you don't care about the squad." This display speaks to themes of power and control within the police force, highlighting the authoritarian nature and the consequences of challenging authority. Additionally, it also serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of disobedience and sets the tone for the power dynamics that will unfold throughout the film.

Nina's decision to act on her intuition is instantly reeled in by a man who outranks her.

Lacson would again later confront Nina to remind her that he was the only squad leader to accept her because no one else would. Then, in essence, he told her that she had to play by the rules if she ever wanted to be part of the team. This has a more subtle subtext: that Nina has to conform to established systems to be accepted in the police force's masculine world, and that her career's salvation lay in a man's hands.

As a female officer in a predominantly male environment, Nina's outsider status is exacerbated by gender dynamics within the police force. She very obviously faces additional scrutiny and skepticism from her boss and her colleagues because of her gender, contributing to her sense of isolation and alienation. The fact that nobody wants her on their squad could potentially be influenced by gender biases or stereotypes about women's abilities in law enforcement.

Nina's shocked reaction to being shot by her superior and her subsequent decision to remain with the squad and "follow orders," despite the betrayal, foreshadows her resilience and determination to prove herself. This incident becomes a catalyst for her character arc, driving her to overcome obstacles and assert herself within the squad. It also establishes her as a protagonist willing to confront adversity directly and challenge the status quo. Although her insubordination may initially be construed as a weakness or a character flaw associated with her femininity, subsequent events begin to suggest otherwise. Rather than being a liability, Nina's independent streak and refusal to blindly follow orders become strengths that distinguish her from her colleagues and, ultimately, leave her as the "last man standing"—even though, ironically, she is a woman.

Later in the film, her squad leader, Lacson, is severely wounded and orders her to retreat. She refuses and implores anyone within earshot to call emergency responders instead. Although Lacson's fate is left ambiguous—though it is more likely he had succumbed to his injuries—Nina's refusal to "play by the rules" and obey his orders leave audiences to imagine his possible survival. This subversion of traditional stereotypes challenges audience expectations and reinforces her role as a complex

and multidimensional protagonist whose femininity and female-driven choices propel the narrative forward.

Nina's journey toward redemption can also be viewed through a gendered lens, as she navigates societal expectations and stereotypes associated with women in a traditionally male-dominated profession. Her past mistakes may be scrutinized more harshly because of her gender, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward women in positions of authority. Her determination to prove herself and earn acceptance within the police force can also be seen as a defiance of these gendered expectations, highlighting her resilience and strength as a female protagonist. In the context of the action genre, where male protagonists often prevail in the narrative, Nina's portrayal as a female lead challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. Her outsider status and quest for redemption subvert the trope of the flawless, hypermasculine action hero, offering a more nuanced and realistic depiction of a woman in law enforcement.

The film is laden with feminine symbolisms apart from Nina's character arc and portrayal. The setting of the film, Brgy. Gracia ni Maria in Tondo, Manila, evokes religious and cultural connotations, as it combines the Spanish word *gracia*, meaning grace or favor, with the name *Maria*, often associated with the Virgin Mary in Catholic traditions. This name carries layers of meaning, suggesting notions of divine protection, mercy, and redemption. In the context of the film, it may symbolize the hope for salvation and justice in a community plagued by corruption and violence.

In many ways, Brgy. Gracia ni Maria takes on a life of its own within *BuyBust*, becoming a character in its own right. The oppressive and claustrophobic atmosphere of the slums permeates the narrative, shaping the characters' actions and motivations. It acts as a crucible, testing the characters' resilience and moral integrity as they navigate its treacherous terrain. By depicting the slums as a living and breathing entity, the film underscores the cyclical nature of poverty and violence and the systemic forces that perpetuate them.

The slums also serve as a potent symbol of social inequality, economic hardship, and systemic injustice within the film. As the ground zero for the drug trade, it represents the marginalized and

disenfranchised members of society often overlooked or exploited. The fact that most of the characters spend their time navigating out of the slums reflects the pervasive struggles faced by residents in these areas to escape poverty and violence. Brgy. Gracia ni Maria becomes a metaphorical trap, swallowing up individuals and perpetuating cycles of poverty and despair.

Amid this turmoil, we see Nina struggle as she faces the slums' denizens. She sways between violence and pacifist negotiations with the residents she encounters, with her femininity influencing her approach to resolving conflicts. Nina slogs through the slums, fighting and killing residents to support her own freedom. At various points, however, her tactic shifts and changes. Rather than relying solely on force or aggression, Nina also employs negotiation tactics and seeks peaceful resolutions whenever possible. Her ability to de-escalate tensions and find common ground with residents also reflects her femininity—one that challenges traditional notions of masculinity associated with law enforcement. This approach humanizes Nina's character and highlights the importance of empathy and understanding in addressing the root causes of social inequality and violence within marginalized communities. In fact, the dialogic reference to "saints and sinners" within Brgy. Gracia ni Maria highlights the complex moral landscape of the setting. Just as there are victims and perpetrators within the drug trade, there are also individuals who are both victimized by and complicit in the cycle of violence and corruption. This moral ambiguity underscores the film's exploration of moral relativism and the blurred lines between right and wrong in the drug war. Brgy. Gracia ni Maria's residents, who are themselves victims of systemic oppression, may resort to violence and retaliation as a means of survival, further complicating the ethical dilemmas faced by the characters.

At one point, when the residents become fed up with the clash between the drug syndicate and the police forces, they instigate a riot directed against both the criminals and the police. Their desperation is emphasized by women wailing over the dead because of collateral damage, and their anger is pronounced by a gang of angry women and camp gays who proceed to mob the policemen in the Filipino style of *kuyog*. Toward the end of the film, when Nina secures the high-value target, it is the

inhabitants that remain blocking her way. The confrontation de-escalates when the inhabitants express that they just want to be left alone. Here, the crowd is composed predominantly of women rather than men, compared to the earlier more chaotic scenes of the film. Further, in this portion, the use of women instead of men emphatically reveals the exhausted vulnerability of the community in Brgy. Gracia ni Maria over the drug war.

Figure 7

Still from the kuyog scene



Note. From *BuyBust* (Matti, 2018), Reality Entertainment. Copyright 2018 by Viva Films and Reality Entertainment, Inc.

Another aspect *BuyBust* that disrupts conventional action movie tropes is its use of music. At critical action sequences in the film where violence or utter chaos is graphically portrayed, the film—somewhat comically—switches to classical music in one instance, and in another, a traditional folk song (*Turagsoy*) about food, of all things. By incorporating classical music into the fight scenes, the film embraces artistic expression

and subversion, challenging the conventions of the action genre. Rather than relying solely on adrenaline-pumping soundtracks or typical action cues used in traditional action genres, *BuyBust* uses classical music to create a unique and memorable cinematic experience.

Classical music, particularly the serene yet comical tones of songs like *Turagsoy*, creates a stark contrast to the film's intense and violent fight scenes, thus adding layers of irony to the action and highlighting the drug war's absurdity and brutality. By juxtaposing the animated tones of classical music with the chaos of the confrontations, *BuyBust* subverts audience expectations and challenges traditional portrayals of violence in action cinema. Nina's presence in these scenes further reinforces this subversion, as her femininity and grace contrast with the brutality of the situations surrounding her.

A final example of feminine disruption is kinetic in nature, which can be seen in how Nina performs her martial skills. The phrase, "*Kukuyugin tayo*," holds significant weight when Nina warns her teammate Yatco of an imminent attack. "*Kukuyugin*," which means to be swarmed or ganged up on, resonates deeply in the context of the slums, symbolizing the predatory nature of the environment where individuals constantly fend off threats from within and outside their community. The residents turning against the characters, ostensibly there to protect them, underscores the deep-seated mistrust and resentment toward authorities and outsiders in marginalized communities and highlights *BuyBust*'s critique of systemic oppression and institutional failures to address the root causes of social inequality and violence.

Moreover, the action sequence where Nina and Yatco confront the angry mob illuminates the stark contrast between Yatco's hypermasculinity, evidenced by his physical dominance in the fight scenes, and Nina's struggle to engage in combat, ultimately needing rescue from Yatco. This gendered juxtaposition between Nina and Yatco is further emphasized in the "*kuyog*" scene, where Yatco is attacked mostly by women and camp gays, whereas Nina is assaulted by more powerful men. Where Nina is often brutally pinned or bashed about by male assailants, Yatco unashamedly performs wrestling moves and full-on Muay Thai kicks the more feminine attackers. While Nina's frailty hovers over the action

sequences, Yatco manages to endure everything from stab wounds to electrocution in almost godlike fashion, succumbing only to the inescapably fatal gunshot to the head.

Despite this juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity, Nina's character remains resilient and strong, her femininity adding depth as it navigates the interplay between vulnerability and inner strength. In the harsh landscape of Brgy. Garcia ni Maria, Nina's femininity exposes her to additional risks, yet it also serves as a wellspring of determination and compassion. Her ability to maneuver, endure, and prevail over the dangers of the slums while maintaining her humanity is a testament to her courage and resilience as a female lead.

In *BuyBust*, violence, corruption, betrayal, and everything else around work against Nina. Her survival stems from the very perceived feminine weaknesses attributed to her at the start of the film. Her inability to comply, her sense of compassion, and her oblivious innocence to the treachery around her are narrative instruments that lead her to become what Carol Clover (1992) called the "Final Girl" in a slasher film. However, while Clover argues that the "Final Girl" is often cinematically coded and attributed by audiences to be masculine—which explains why she is able to endure the beating—it is Nina's delicate frailty, purity, and innocence rather than her manly prowess that allow for a vivid depiction of the masculine weaknesses of corruption and treachery in the drug war (p. 37).

This masculine weakness is capped at the end of the film by how Nina is forced to subscribe to the corruptive tactics employed by her enemies to survive. After Nina realizes that she was going to be killed off next as a loose end after her boss, Director Alvarez, executed the high-value target Biggie Chen while in police custody, she steals his pistol with an FMA move and shoots him dead, along with his cohorts in the vehicle. She then proceeds to injure herself to avoid suspicion. When other policemen rush toward the patrol car to find out what was going on, Nina weakly explains that the suspect was killed because he fought back or "*nanlaban*". The film's ending is reminiscent of the beginning when Nina is forced to "play by the rules" by her male squad leader. It is an

ironic twist to how Nina used her femininity to subvert maleness in the film. The humor here is that, in the end, Nina adopts a corrupt masculine practice to subvert itself in some kind of final subtle extension of defiance before the credits roll.

Conclusion

BuyBust stands as a testament to the transformative potential of cinema in disrupting fixed concepts of identity and society. By positioning Nina as the central figure in the narrative, the film not only engages with the sociopolitical realities of the Philippine drug war but also provides a critical commentary on the gendered implications of this conflict. Nina's character disrupts traditional gender roles and offers a fresh perspective on women's role in action cinema and sociopolitical narratives.

Furthermore, *BuyBust* uses FMA not only as a means of advancing its plot but also as a vehicle for challenging and redefining gender roles. Nina's character exemplifies how martial arts can be recontextualized to support feminist narratives, providing a more inclusive and balanced representation of strength and heroism in Philippine cinema. By weaving together themes of femininity, agency, and sociopolitical critique, the film offers a compelling exploration of power dynamics and cultural representation. Through its cosmopolitical consciousness, *BuyBust* transcends the confines of the action genre, emerging as a thought-provoking reflection on contemporary issues and cultural identity in the Philippines. As audiences continue to grapple with the complexities of the human experience, films like *BuyBust* serve as invaluable tools for fostering dialogue, understanding, and social change.

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