

Capturing and Challenging the War on Drugs in the Philippines: An Ideological Criticism of Brillante Mendoza's *Ma'Rosa*

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examined how Brillante Mendoza's *Ma' Rosa* functions as an ideological critique of the Philippine War on Drugs, a campaign defined by Duterte-era "law-and-order" rhetoric and the *nanlaban* (those who resisted arrest) justification for extrajudicial killings.

While independent Philippine cinema has increasingly foregrounded marginalized narratives, scant scholarship has applied ideological criticism to national films that directly engage the drug-war discourse.

Addressing this gap, the article answers the question: How does the rhetorical construction of *Ma' Rosa*'s narrative subvert or uphold the hegemonic War on Drugs discourse in the Philippines? Through ideological criticism and close film analysis, this study demonstrated how the film subverts dominant "law-and-order" narratives and the *nanlaban* justification for extrajudicial killings. Rather than framing drug-related offenses as products of personal moral failure, the film situates them within the broader structures of economic desperation and institutional abuse. *Ma' Rosa* dismantles the binary between criminals and enforcers by highlighting coerced survival tactics, fabricated narratives of resistance, and the quiet strength of familial bonds.

This fusion of ideological criticism

with close reading offered a replicable framework for decoding power relations in visual texts. By situating a Filipino feature film as a site of rhetorical inquiry, the article contributes to rhetorical studies in the Philippines, expands the discipline's scope to include cinema, and underscores rhetoric's potential as a tool for social critique and transformative public discourse.

Keywords: film, ideology, rhetorical construction, war on drugs, hegemonic discourse

Introduction

Philippine cinema, once dominated by escapist narratives, has undergone a significant transformation in its engagement with social realities. No longer confined to romance, slapstick, or action franchise, contemporary films have begun to confront the systemic inequalities that shape everyday life. This evolution signaled a stylistic shift from entertainment to intervention.

Responding to the atrocities during the Martial Law period in 1972 under Ferdinand Marcos Sr., social commentary films emerged in the Philippines through filmmakers such as Lino Brocka who used

their art to critique government oppression and expose the struggles of marginalized communities (Santiago). Fast forward to the early 2000s and intensifying throughout the 2010s, the global audience has become increasingly attentive to narratives that depict the realities faced by marginalized communities that shed light on systemic issues (Flaviano). To illustrate, Southwest Asia experienced a surge of “New Wave Indie” movements that challenged the old studio formula. The impulse of independent cinema to represent the Filipino experience as Flaviano describes it made its way to the Philippines by the 2010s. This emergence of independent cinema in the Philippines shifted not only the artistic focus but also the negotiation of ideologies within the nation’s socio-political landscape.

Mainstream Philippine cinema, particularly from the postwar period through the 1990s, largely favored escapist genres such as romance, slapstick comedy, and action movies, often reinforcing commercial entertainment formulas that distracted from social critique. However, critics observe that by the late 1990s, it had become a “huge profit-producing machine turning out formulaic and inane offerings” (Labiste 138). Thus, in response, a fresh cohort of filmmakers explicitly foregrounded poverty, crime, and social injustice. As Campos puts it, independent film began to contribute much precisely because popular studio films had fallen short of their promises. This counter-hegemonic turn, then, provided a long-standing counterpoint to the mainstream media we once grew accustomed to.

A key institutional catalyst was the *Cinemataya Philippine Independent Film Festival*, which was founded in 2005. *Cinemataya* was conceived explicitly to “invigorate Philippine filmmaking” and nurture fresh, socially incisive works (Tiongson). This legacy of resistance found renewed urgency in the 2010s, particularly during the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte. Duterte’s election in 2016 marked a pivotal moment in Philippine socio-political history with his administration launching a brutal and highly controversial “War on Drugs” that normalized extrajudicial killings under the guise of law and order. Using rhetoric centered on *nanlaban* (those who resisted arrest), the state justified thousands of deaths, often targeting the urban poor without due process. This campaign created an atmosphere of fear, impunity, and moral ambiguity that profoundly shaped Filipino life. It is within this evolving cinematic landscape that Brillante Mendoza’s critically acclaimed film *Ma’ Rosa* stood as a powerful example of socially engaged filmmaking. Set against the gritty backdrop of Mandaluyong, the film unflinchingly explores the harsh realities of drug trade, poverty, and systemic corruption within the urban environment.

Released amidst the intense sociopolitical climate of then-President Rodrigo Duterte’s controversial war on drugs, *Ma’ Rosa* offers a raw and uncompromising portrayal of the squalor, economic disparities, and moral ambiguities that permeate the lives of its characters. Focusing on the struggles of Rosa and her family, the film exposes the devastating consequences of poverty and corruption in an urban setting, prompting crucial questions about social justice, morality, and the fundamental human condition within the context of the drug war.

Mendoza’s use of *cinéma vérité* techniques such as handheld camera movements, long takes, and diegetic sound anchors the film in hyperrealism, placing the viewer directly into the lived experience of its characters. This stylistic choice not only reflects an aesthetic decision but also serves a political function. As Campos argues, independent cinema frequently deploys cinematic techniques that mirror the social and ideological fractures they seek to expose. Mendoza’s obsession with hyperrealism disrupts the dominant “criminal vs. enforcer” narrative often invoked in Duterte’s war on drugs, particularly through the state’s use of the *nanlaban* justification for extrajudicial killings. In resisting this dichotomy, *Ma’ Rosa* acts as a counter-discursive text that challenges

hegemonic portrayals of justice and criminality (Campos; Tolentino).

Under this thematic umbrella, Mendoza's work epitomizes Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientization*, which refers to the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. *Ma' Rosa*'s presentation of a layered depiction of systemic oppression invites viewers to recognize their own roles within societal structures and to question the status quo (Freire). This pedagogical function places the film within a tradition of Philippine social realist cinema that transcends beyond reflecting reality as it seeks to transform it.

Expanding upon this, the very act of documenting such narratives in independent cinema engages with broader struggles over cultural memory and representation. As Lim suggests, in a country where state archiving is fragmented and underfunded, the survival of politically significant films often relies on decentralized, community-led efforts. *Ma' Rosa*, like many other independent films, thus participates in a kind of cinematic archiving of the present, preserving counter-narratives that might otherwise be erased from the national consciousness.

From this vantage point, *Ma' Rosa* denies being reduced to a mere film and asserts its potency as a rhetorical act. Through its form and content, Mendoza critiques the conditions that give rise to systemic violence and highlights the capacity of cinema to intervene in public discourse. It stands as a vital cultural artifact that exemplifies the ideological power of independent Philippine cinema in shaping both memory and resistance.

Brief Overview of *Ma' Rosa*

This section provides an overview of the film *Ma' Rosa*, highlighting its creation, critical reception, and the controversies it sparked, particularly concerning the War on Drugs in the Philippines. The film follows the grim realities of poverty and corruption in the Philippines through the life of Rosa (Jaclyn Jose), a mother of three who operates a small sari-sari store in a Manila neighborhood. Rosa's desperate circumstances lead her to engage in illegal drug trade, specifically selling crystal meth, underscoring the dire consequences of systemic poverty in the country.

Ma' Rosa visualizes the intersections of moral ambiguities, economic disparities, and squalor that define the life of those who relate to Rosa, shedding light on the harsh consequences of poverty and corruption in the country. Mendoza, known for his discomfiting cinematography and directorial technique, presents this film as another entry in his tradition of showcasing the corrupt side of society and its persistent problems. His unyielding commitment to realism driven by his desire to expose societal issues plaguing the nation allows Mendoza to consistently create cinema that tackles the persistent problems of poverty, corruption, and vulnerability, of which this film was no exception (see fig.1). As Mendoza himself vocalized, the auteur has consistently focused on films that tackle social issues from the very start of his career (Scott).

Mendoza painstakingly crafted a narrative that would capture the struggles of a poverty-stricken family embroiled in the drug trade. This attention to detail pays off brilliantly, immersing viewers in a world where vulnerability and corruption intertwine. This is evidenced with the film's critical acclaim upon release with audiences and critics alike praising its unflinching exploration of the social condition.

Although *Ma' Rosa* had been celebrated in festival circuits, it was not without controversies. The film's portrayal of the country's drug problem and the corruption within law enforcement ignited heated discourse. Some hailed Mendoza for fearlessly addressing these pressing issues and providing a platform for discussion, while others accused



Figure 1

The official Cannes Film Festival poster of *Ma' Rosa*, directed by Brillante Mendoza.

Festival de Cannes, 2016.

the film of having a political agenda. The diverse opinions surrounding the film is an evidence of the complexity of its themes and its ability to elicit passionate responses.

Critics' assessments of *Ma' Rosa* were as diverse as the film's subject matter. Some celebrated Mendoza's masterful storytelling, praising his ability to create an immersive experience that resonates on a visceral level. They applauded the film's gritty realism, applauding Mendoza's unapologetic exploration of the darker aspects of Philippine society. For instance, a review from *The Guardian* highlighted the cinematic control and clarity of *Ma' Rosa*, a narrative purpose that is held on to despite an apparently aimless documentary style (Bradshaw). Another critic from *Rappler* also noted that the film's authenticity allows viewers to feel as if they have spent a night in Manila, highlighting its immersive quality and storytelling (Cruz).

Others, however, expressed reservations about the artistic merit of the film, questioning its bleak narrative and unconventional visual style. While acknowledging Mendoza's commitment to realism, these critics found themselves yearning for a more uplifting or nuanced approach.

Amidst the diverse responses to *Ma' Rosa*, its significance clearly extends beyond aesthetic appraisal. In her essay "Development at a Cost: Ignoring Human Rights in the Philippines' War on Drugs," Bea Manlapaz documents how the Duterte administration normalized extrajudicial killings, weaponized the nanlaban narrative, and systematically marginalized the poor. Although she does not analyze Mendoza's film directly, Manlapaz's human-rights account provides the critical context for an ideological reading of *Ma' Rosa*. By applying ideological criticism to the film, we can trace how its narrative and visual strategies expose institutional corruption, police extortion, and moral failings within Filipino society. In this light, *Ma' Rosa* emerges as a powerful cinematic

critique of the dominant War-on-Drugs discourse, revealing its ideological underpinnings and inviting viewers to question and resist official justifications for state violence.

Moreover, the film's exploration of poverty, corruption, and vulnerability resonates powerfully with the sociopolitical climate that emerged following Duterte's rise to power in 2016, characterized by his administration's aggressive approach to eradicating the drug trade. Although *Ma' Rosa* was created before Duterte's election, its themes foreshadow and expose the already-present anxieties, abuses of power, and societal tensions that would become prevalent during his administration.

We argue that by studying *Ma' Rosa* through ideological criticism, this article unpacks the ways in which the film supports, maintains, challenges, and subverts dominant narratives to offer critical and alternative perspectives in exposing the inherent flaws and contradictions within the system. We aim to invite scholars and viewers to critically engage with the power dynamics, moral complexities, and social injustices depicted on screen. Through such critical analysis, this article deepens the understanding of the film's message, society's impact, and its potential for inspiring social change.

This article analyzes how the film rhetorically constructs its narrative, mainly asking the following questions: How does the rhetorical construction of *Ma' Rosa*'s narrative serve as an ideological criticism of the hegemonic discourse surrounding the War on Drugs in the Philippines? This article specifically examines the hegemonic discourse promoted by the Duterte administration, which frames the drug war as a moral and necessary crusade to cleanse society of criminality and disorder. This dominant narrative positions drug users and small-scale pushers as primary societal threats, legitimizing state-sanctioned violence, extrajudicial killings, and systemic oppression under the guise of restoring law, order, and national discipline.

Regardless of when one engages with *Ma' Rosa*, the film's critique remains vital, particularly in light of Mendoza's complex position as an internationally lauded humanist filmmaker who nonetheless publicly endorses Duterte's War on Drugs. Far from mere entertainment, *Ma' Rosa* delivers a trenchant social commentary on state-sanctioned violence and the erosion of civil liberties. By exposing how the rhetoric of "law and order" is co-opted to legitimize personal and political agendas, the film unmask the manipulation at the heart of punitive campaigns. With ongoing debates about extrajudicial killings and possible International Criminal Court proceedings, this analysis underscores the enduring relevance of Mendoza's work and the imperative for sustained critical scrutiny and institutional reform.

The first section seeks to identify and analyze the rhetorical strategies used in the construction of *Ma' Rosa*'s narrative. It will then evaluate how the film's storytelling aligns with or departs from the dominant ideological frames that have come to define the Philippine War on Drugs under the Duterte administration. These hegemonic discourses include the portrayal of drug use as (1) a moral panic that criminalizes poverty and casts small-time pushers as irredeemable threats; (2) the articulation of law-and-order nationalism that legitimizes militarized policing and authoritarian governance; (3) the normalization of extrajudicial violence as necessary for societal protection; (4) the binary opposition between "good citizens" and those labeled *salot sa lipunan* (menace to society); and (5) the systematic silencing of dissent by branding human rights advocates as enemies of the state. Through identifying how *Ma' Rosa*'s narrative moves against these interlocking ideological frames; this section aims to show how the film either reinforces or subverts the sanctioned rhetoric of the drug war. The film presents an ideology that contests the use of state-sanctioned violence as a remedy for drug-related issues and questions the efficacy and morality of such policies. The film shows how systemic injustices funnel people into the drug trade through the portrayal of its protagonists disadvantaged realities such

as but not limited to poverty, scarce economic opportunities, and unequal access to education. In turn, its critique of the government's reliance on punishment over prevention delivers a pointed ideological challenge to the status quo.

The second section applies ideological criticism—in other words, a systematic analysis of how *Ma' Rosa*'s storytelling practices expose, contest, or reinforce the power relations embedded in the Philippines' War on Drugs discourse—to four interrelated dimensions of the film. First, it examines characterization: How are Rosa, Narding, and their children portrayed in terms of motivations, family dynamics, and survival strategies? How does presenting the characters' struggles, motivations, and family dynamics challenge the simplistic and dehumanizing narrative often perpetuated in the context of the War on Drugs? Second, it analyzes the form and aesthetic choices of the film such as cinematography, sound design, editing rhythms, and *mise-en-scène*, to show how *vérité*-inspired techniques and strategic framing work rhetorically to challenge simplistic “law-and-order” narratives. Third, it considers Mendoza's own statements about *Ma' Rosa* to assess whether the film's ideological interventions were consciously intended or emerged organically during production. Finally, it explores the distribution and marketing strategies of the film to determine how these elements shaped audience expectations and reinforced or complicated the film movie's critique of state-sanctioned violence. In doing so, the section clarifies what “ideological criticism” entails in this context, i.e., a close reading of narrative and formal choices that reveals how *Ma' Rosa* rhetorically dismantles hegemonic drug-war discourses and invites viewers to imagine more compassionate, systemic responses to addiction and poverty.

The third section comprises the synthesis of the findings from the analyses of characterization, cinematography, director's statements, production, and marketing. This in-depth knowledge enables a nuanced analysis of the movie's influence on public discourse, its potential for social and political participation, and its role in undermining the widely held opinion of the War on Drugs.

This article's ideological critique specifically targets the Duterte administration's War on Drugs discourse as it is dramatized in *Ma' Rosa*. Such a critique is inevitably shaped by the critic's historical context, prior knowledge of the drug war, and cultural perspective, factors that influence how one reads the film's rhetorical devices, from its character portrayals and cinematography to the director's stated intentions and marketing strategies. Viewers bring their own experiences and convictions to any analysis, which means interpretations will vary. Far from weakening its argument, this subjective stance actually enriches the article: by exploring how *Ma' Rosa* constructs, reinforces, and subverts the state's portrayal of drug users as existential threats, this article offers a nuanced, authoritative examination of the film's ideological examination.

Method of Criticism

The use of ideological criticism is well-established in analyzing the rhetorical value of films. Scholars such as Reyes have utilized this method to uncover the underlying messages in the Disney classic, *Beauty and the Beast*. Meanwhile, earlier works by McGee have laid foundational insights into how ideological criticism can expose dominant ideologies in media texts. These studies illustrate how the method has been instrumental in unpacking social and political messages across various films. While the application of this lens in *Ma' Rosa* is not novel, this article contributes to the evolving use of the methodology. Specifically, it aims to examine how the film critiques the hegemonic discourse surrounding the War on Drugs in the Philippines, adding to the broader body of scholarship on ideological analysis.

Ideological criticism acknowledges that all texts emerge from specific socio-political contexts, shaped by prevailing ideologies and institutions (Foss). In this light, a “text” refers to any rhetorical artifact, including literature, film, artwork, and media, that functions as a system of symbols whose meanings can be “read” by observers equipped with appropriate interpretive frameworks. Focusing on the ideas these symbols convey rather than on their physical form or medium, ideological criticism, then, provides a systematic method for uncovering how cultural artifacts uphold, contest, or reshape prevailing ideological constructs.

Applied to film, ideological criticism probes how these signs—visual, auditory, or narrative—either reinforce or subvert dominant ideologies, sometimes consciously, but often unconsciously. The analysis moves beyond the surface-level messages of the film to examine the assumptions, attitudes, and values embedded within it, which shape both its creation and reception. In doing so, ideological criticism allows the recognition of not only the dominant narratives but also the potential for alternative viewpoints and resistance to hegemonic ideas. This process fosters a deeper understanding of how cultural texts, like films, participate in the maintenance or disruption of social power structures, encouraging critical reflection and opening possibilities for social change.

In examining how the film portrays the War on Drugs in the Philippines, ideological criticism offers a valuable framework for assessing how the film engages with the dominant, or hegemonic, narrative surrounding this issue. The hegemonic narrative in the Philippines presents the War on Drugs as a necessary and justified effort to restore peace and order, often portraying state violence and extrajudicial killings as acceptable methods of maintaining public safety. This narrative, propagated by the government and mainstream media, typically marginalizes dissenting voices that question the human rights abuses and social inequalities exacerbated by the campaign.

Under President Duterte’s leadership, his violent drug war gained significant attention and popularity, making him a prominent figure in Filipino politics (Thompson). To appeal to the masses, he promoted the narrative that the country is under siege from a drug-related threat. For Duterte, this is one of the key issues that, if not addressed, will impede the country’s growth. However, this narrative is not without its biases and vested interests. According to Foss, “when an ideology becomes hegemonic in a culture, certain interests or groups are served by it more than others—the hegemonic ideology represents experience in ways that support the interests of those with more power.” In the context of the War on Drugs in the Philippines, the hegemonic narrative aligns with the government’s agenda and is supported by key institutions like the Philippine National Police (PNP), which leads the campaign, and the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB), which frames it as essential for public safety. Local government units (LGUs) across the country have adopted this narrative, implementing local anti-drug initiatives. Civil society organizations such as *Mamamayan Ayaw sa Droga* (MAD) (citizens against drugs) also backed the campaign, advocating for its continuation to protect communities from drug-related crime. Mainstream media plays a significant role in reinforcing this narrative by framing the War on Drugs as a necessary solution to the country’s drug problem. Public figures, including former President Rodrigo Duterte, have championed the program, emphasizing its importance in restoring peace and order. Various political allies and even celebrities have publicly supported the campaign, legitimizing the state’s violent methods. However, this hegemonic narrative is met with strong resistance. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have condemned the extrajudicial killings associated with the campaign, calling for accountability. Opposition figures like Senator Leila de Lima and Vice President Leni Robredo have been vocal critics, drawing attention to abuses of power and the lack of due process. Independent media and journalists have also challenged the mainstream portrayal of drug dealership and poverty, giving voices to victims’ families and communities disproportionately

affected by the violence. This ongoing clash between the hegemonic narrative and its challengers creates a complex and contentious discursive landscape.

In analyzing *Ma' Rosa*, this article uses ideological criticism to examine the scene where Rosa and her husband are arrested in a police raid, which pushes their children to raise the money the officers demand for their release. The scene foregrounds the everyday effects of the drug war, rendering visible both the routinization of state violence and the institutionalized corruption within law enforcement. Placing the family's struggle in the context of poverty and weak legal accountability, the analysis argues that *Ma' Rosa* both reflects and questions the dominant story that presents the drug war as a necessary path to "peace and order."

Discussion of the Findings

In this section, the article will discuss the findings uncovered by applying ideological criticism to the following elements of the film: film narrative, characterization, film techniques and aesthetics, directing and director, and production and marketing. These elements were chosen because they provide a holistic understanding of the film's ideological message. The film narrative illustrates the overall story and context, crystallizing the themes and messages conveyed not only through the storyline but also through the dialogues. Characterization emphasizes the personalities and motivations of the characters to reflect the ideologies embedded in their decisions. Meanwhile, film techniques and aesthetics contribute visual and stylistic dimensions that enhance the viewer's experience and reinforce the film's message. Lastly, production and marketing refer to the strategies employed to introduce the film and highlight the ideologies underlying its creation to the general public. The combination of these elements allows for a more in-depth analysis and a nuanced understanding of the ideological statements presented in *Ma' Rosa*.

Film Narrative

Ma' Rosa unapologetically challenges the notion of a clean and just drug war and exposes the socioeconomic struggles, corruption, state-sanctioned violence, and systemic inequalities that contribute to the cycle of the victims' poverty. In the film, director Mendoza visualizes an alternative narrative that opposes the government-endorsed story propagated by the Duterte administration and state media. To further illuminate this, Duterte framed the drug problem in the country as "crucial to the survival of our nation" (Espenido). This narrative was consistent in his speeches and that people involved in drug use and trade are the "others" that threaten the future and safety of the Filipino people, i.e., the "good" us. Instead of portraying the war on drugs as an effective change or a necessary evil, *Ma' Rosa* offers a critical perspective that sheds light on the experiences of the marginalized communities impacted by this policy.

The film presents the audience with a nuanced portrayal of poverty in trying to emphasize the horror, complexities, and struggles faced by families caught up in a drug trade. The film begins by highlighting the desperation and limited options that lead Filipino to engage in the illegal act. *Ma' Rosa* begins with the protagonist, Rosa, being compelled to leave a taxi after failing to cover the entire fare of the ride home, to spotlight her financial status. As she walks on her way home, she is further subjected to the elements, walking through the rain in a tight and crowded alley to portray the socioeconomic hardships that permeate her everyday existence. The opening sequence establishes a tone of struggle and survival, foreshadowing the narrative's exploration of systemic poverty and its impact on individual agency. Through this lens, the film challenges the reductive narrative that frames drug-related issues solely as matters of personal choice or criminality.

What is more important is that *Ma' Rosa* confronts the issue of corruption and abuse of power within the institutions tasked with enforcing the "clean" and "just" war on drugs. In the first act, Rosa was given a proposal by the police to offer them the name of the drug lord in exchange for her and her husband's freedom. The arresting officer bluntly states:

Aminin niyo na lang ang kasalanan niyo. O ganito na lang, dalawang libo para mapabilis ang proseso. Di ba sabi namin magtulungan tayo? Kung wala kayong pera, ituro niyo source niyo. Tingnan natin, baka mamaya mabigyan ng paraan. Sige, tawagan niyo. Sabihin mo, kukuha kayo. Gawan niyo ng paraan para makalaya kayo.

Just admit to your wrongdoing. Or here's another option: P2,000 to speed up the process. Didn't we say we'd help each other? If you don't have the money, name your source. Let's see.. maybe later we can work something out. Okay, call them. Tell them you'll get it. Figure out a way so you can be set free." (*Ma' Rosa* 00:34:45–00:39:04.)

With the information given by Rosa, the police successfully arrested the drug lord, extorting the man a hundred thousand pesos for his freedom. Since the alleged drug lord cannot pay half of the requested amount, the corrupt policemen changed their proposal and had Rosa and her family complete the rest of the amount. This sequence in the film exposes how corrupt police officers exploit their positions for personal gain as they engage in bribery and extortion. This critique of systemic corruption challenges the notion that the War on Drugs is a purely noble endeavor and raises questions about the integrity of those in power and those who are tasked to execute the bloody campaign. The film's unveiling of an alternative perspective pulls the audience not only to question and challenge the dominant narrative that surrounds the drug war, but also to interrogate a one-size-fits-all approach to curbing the drug problem in the country. The film's narrative persuades the audience that the drug problem in the country consists of other complex factors that must be recognized and acknowledged. Furthermore, the film provides a vivid critique of the notion that all police officers uphold justice and protect the welfare of the people when in reality, they maintain the *status quo*.

As we witness the story progress, the film then provides support for the argument that the drug war disproportionately affects the underprivileged and marginalized, reinforcing the fact that the war perpetuates a cycle of oppression among the marginalized. At the climax of the film, Rosa is forced to betray her drug source in exchange for her freedom, only to discover that another source has already turned her over to the authorities to secure their own (*Ma' Rosa* 1:27:02-1:28:15). This showcases how the lack of resources and opportunities in impoverished areas often forces individuals into drug-related activities as a means of survival. While Pulse Asia's survey found that "82% of Metro Manila residents feel safer" as a result of the drug war, this perception often casts the poor as the source of insecurity, positioning them as a threat to the wealthier classes (Bondoc). However, the film challenges this by offering an alternative perspective: a narrative that advocates for a more compassionate and holistic approach to addressing the country's drug problem. Such an approach would take into account the socioeconomic conditions that drive drug use and offer a deeper understanding of the realities faced by marginalized communities, as opposed to policies that only serve to exacerbate the root issues.

After Rosa pointed out the man distributing the drug to her, the scene showed a deeply troubling portrayal of police violence and the manipulation of truth to justify excessive force. The incident in question involves the police beating a man who was

allegedly responsible for distributing drugs. The following exchange captures the tense interaction:

Wife: *Gusto ko na makita uli ang asawa ko.* (I want to see my husband.)

Police Officer: *Oh sige. Halika. Ganito po kasi nangyari. Nanlaban po siya.*

Ayusin po natin to. Pag-usapan natin, magtutungan tayo. Halika. (Come here.

Here's what happened: he resisted arrest. Let's sort this out. Let's talk it over and help each other.) (*Ma' Rosa* 58:08-59:45).

What makes this scene particularly disturbing is that the alleged drug dealer did not fight back, yet the police, when speaking to the man's wife, claim that he resisted arrest. The use of the *nanlaban* narrative by the police in this scene is a clear example of how power structures attempt to legitimize their actions by manipulating public perception. During his administration, Duterte justified this by exaggerating the security concerns presented by the illegal drug trade and utilized this fight to assimilate the national police into his power structure. This *nanlaban* narrative has continuously been used to explain the extrajudicial executions committed by police personnel (Thompson). By falsely asserting that the man fought back, the officer shifts the blame to the victim, effectively justifying their excessive use of force.

Furthermore, this scene highlights the broader issue of police impunity and the lack of transparency surrounding law enforcement actions. The police, in this instance, not only employ physical violence against an unarmed suspect but also resort to lying to the suspect's wife, and the *nanlaban* narrative thereby shields from any responsibility (*Ma' Rosa* 1:00:36-1:02:21). By distorting the truth, the police reinforce their position of power and authority, eroding trust between law enforcement and the community they are meant to protect. Hence, this scene serves as a call to action, urging us to question and challenge the prevailing narratives used by the state to justify abuses of power and advocate for systemic change in the pursuit of justice and human rights. An unexpected admission happened when then-Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra in a speech before the Human Rights Council acknowledged systemic corruption and institutional negligence. He revealed that the police frequently neglected to examine recovered firearms, verify weapon ownership, or conduct ballistic analyses—key procedures for ensuring accountability. In a more chilling report, he reveals that the Department of Justice found that law enforcement officials often disregarded standard protocols for coordinating drug raids and processing crime scenes. These revelations are the exact thesis of the film despite being released before Duterte's election: that his drug war would inevitably have deep flaws in its implementation, resulting in a lack of accountability within police operations.

Another significant rhetorical aspect in the film is the examination of family dynamics and the importance of blood ties in a society devoid of options. The central characters, Rosa and her family, are driven to desperate measures in order to protect and provide freedom for their family. The second act of the film focuses on how the children found desperate ways to contribute to the remaining amount of the extorted money, ethically or not. This emphasis on familial bonds and the sacrifices made within the family unit reflects an underlying ideology that values solidarity and resilience in the face of adversity. The film asserts that impoverished individuals are not simply criminals or numbers in a report, but complex individuals driven by circumstances beyond their control. The film rhetorically insists that people who resort to illegal drug trade, especially those from an underprivileged socioeconomic status, are forced to take dangerous and unethical paths to survive. It also shatters the state's narrative that these drug pushers are criminals by choice. Rather, they are people who have limited to no opportunities in fulfilling financial stability, which drive them to engage in illegal activities as a means of

survival.

Where the film falls short, though, is structuring the narrative where it seeks to unpack the underlying ideological forces that perpetuate, maintain, and legitimize these reductive and binary thinking on the drug war. The film failed to explore the structural and systemic factors that contributed to the persistence of the drug trade in the country, namely: social, economic, and political forces. Consequently, the film depicts the Reyes family stereotypically, casting them in roles that do not fully challenge the prevailing societal prejudices and biases associated with drug involvement. More importantly, no wealthy people associated with the drug trade or use are presented in the film, which problematizes the situation further as the film implicitly covers the role of the wealthy and powerful in the drug problem of the Philippines. In 2022, the PDEA dismantled a clandestine methamphetamine laboratory located in Ayala Alabang Village, which is home to “some of the country’s wealthiest and economically and politically powerful families” (Cabalza), demonstrating that drug manufacturing and distribution cut across all socioeconomic strata.

Lastly, *Ma’ Rosa* has been critiqued for romanticizing the resiliency of impoverished Filipinos, thereby reinforcing the hegemonic ideology of self-sufficiency that politicians often weaponize to excuse systemic failures. The film shows Rosa’s children turning to prostitution, civilian altercation, high-interest loans to bail their parents out of police custody, yet it never interrogates the state’s responsibility for social welfare. This omission has prompted what Filipino critics call “poverty porn.” Although Mendoza has defended his approach, insisting that his intent is to catalyze social change rather than sensationalize suffering, this prevalent debate among Filipino film critics highlights a key question: Does *Ma’ Rosa* merely aestheticize poverty for festival glory, or does it genuinely subvert the dominant discourse by exposing the state’s abdication of its social obligations?

Characterization

At the heart of *Ma’ Rosa* lies a profound critique of the one-dimensional narrative often associated with the War on Drugs. The film goes beyond surface-level judgments and offers a detailed exploration of its characters as it sheds light on the complex reality influenced by poverty, corruption, and inequality. A comprehensive analysis of the film’s characterization uncovers how it challenges and undermines prevailing narratives surrounding individuals involved in the drug trade, with both the material and gendered dimensions of poverty, labor, and control, leading to a more nuanced understanding of their circumstances within the context of the War on Drugs.

The Philippines has long maintained a punitive stance on drug-related offenses, with deeply entrenched societal attitudes that predate Former President Rodrigo Duterte’s administration. While Duterte’s violent War on Drugs campaign amplified these sentiments, negative perceptions of drug dealers were already widespread. Research by Maricel Labor and Cecilia Gastardo-Conaco illustrates that Filipino public opinion historically distinguishes between drug users and drug dealers, with the latter vilified to a greater extent. Their findings reveal that drug pushers are frequently dehumanized, often described with animalistic traits, which reinforces their status as perceived threats to societal stability (Labor and Gastardo-Conaco). This entrenched demonization contributes to the moral justification for harsh punitive measures, shaping both public support for violent policies and the ideological narratives presented in mainstream media and cinema.

However, *Ma’ Rosa* boldly confronts and subverts these prevailing stereotypes and perceptions associated with drug dealers in the country. One of the most impactful ways in which the film challenges the hegemonic discourse surrounding the War on Drugs is

through the humanization of its characters involved in the drug trade.

The protagonist, Rosa, embodies the struggles and resilience of marginalized communities affected by poverty and corruption. Throughout the film, we witness Rosa not as a passive victim of circumstance but as a proactive and resourceful mother navigating the harsh realities of her environment. A poignant scene depicts Rosa desperately seeking a loan of PhP 4,000 from an Indian money lender to reveal her unwavering determination and the lengths she is willing to go to in order to free her husband from the clutches of corrupt officials. *Ma' Rosa* powerfully encapsulates the experience of living in poverty within a corrupt society, characterizing Rosa as an active protagonist who defies the odds. Over and above that, Rosa is not merely a drug pusher or a victim of systemic corruption; she embodies the intersection of class and gender-based oppression. Rosa can be analyzed as emblematic of the “invisible labor” performed by women in poverty, where caregiving, emotional support, and economic survival are expected without recognition. Throughout the film, Rosa is burdened with the dual responsibilities of being a mother and an economic provider, reflecting how women are often forced to navigate both the public and private spheres under patriarchal capitalism. Furthermore, Rosa's interactions with male figures—whether with the police, or moneylenders—underscore her powerlessness in negotiating her family's survival within a male-dominated society. Even though Rosa appears resourceful and determined, her agency is ultimately constrained by the patriarchal structures that dominate the spaces she navigates and her decision to engage in the illegal drug trade is not a choice of empowerment but one of desperation, a means to provide for her family amid limited opportunities.

The characterization of Rosa's children further contributes to countering prevailing narratives. While they are entangled in the illicit drug business, the film avoids judgment and condemnation. Instead, it explores the intricate dynamics of familial love, loyalty, and survival within a context of limited options and systemic oppression. Through foregrounding the humanity of these characters, everyone in Rosa's family urges the audience to empathize with their predicament rather than simply labeling them as criminals.

A manifestation of this is in the scene through which Rosa's children scramble to raise the extorted money through loans, pawning items, and prostitution illustrates the Marxist concept of alienation. Here, labor is not only degraded but becomes a tool for survival, reinforcing the idea that poverty is perpetuated by economic systems that commodify both bodies and relationships. Even the children's emotional labor (such as sacrificing their dignity and personal well-being for their parents' release), becomes the film's revelation of how capitalism extracts value from every available resource.

To further illustrate this claim, a detailed exploration of the characters' motivations and the structural causes of their actions showcases the film's commitment in dismantling the reductive narrative that frames the War on Drugs as a simple confrontation between law enforcement and criminals. In one pivotal sequence, a police officer corners Rosa in a dim precinct hallway and coldly demands a PhP 2,000 bribe or the name of her supplier, before even beginning the release process: “*Dalawang libo para mapabilis ang proseso... Kung wala kayong pera, Ituro niyo source niyo.*” (Two thousand pesos to speed up the process... If you don't have the cash, tell us who your source is) (00:34:45–00:39:04). Later, when both parents are jailed, Rosa's eldest daughter, Estela, is shown pawning her school uniform's necklace in silent desperation to scrape together bail money (00:52:10–00:53:30). Their teenage son, Junjun, then joins a midnight street brawl just to earn enough for legal fees (01:02:10–01:04:00). In dramatizing these acts of improvised resourcefulness like extortion, pawning personal belongings, and even participating in an act of violence, the film depicts how systemic poverty, scarce employment opportunities, and entrenched police corruption function as structural engines of the local drug

economy. Rather than presenting a division of moral agents versus deviants, the film rejects such binaries and foregrounds the intersectionality of social, economic, and political forces that sustain the drug trade, such as systemic poverty, limited employment opportunities, and institutional corruption. This nuanced portrayal challenges and subverts hegemonic discourses that depict drug users and small-scale traders as isolated perpetrators of crime, and instead reveals how such actors are products of broader societal inequalities and structural violence. In doing so, the film unapologetically destabilizes hegemonic discourses that prioritize punitive violence over social support when it comes to solving the drug problem. This compels audiences to reconsider why rehabilitation and state-led welfare are so often sidelined in public debate.

The film's layered characterization serves as a subversive rhetorical tool in confronting state-sanctioned ideologies that justify punitive responses to drug-related activities. In doing so, it invites viewers to engage in critical reflection and question how these ideologies serve the interests of those in power while disproportionately harming marginalized communities. This narrative complexity fosters empathy and encourages a more compassionate understanding of the individuals ensnared in the drug trade, shifting the discourse from criminalization toward social justice and systemic reform. The film, thus, becomes a platform for interrogating the efficacy and morality of punitive drug policies, challenging the audience to consider how such policies exacerbate inequality rather than address its root causes.

Through its critical examination of the drug trade's social, economic, and political dimensions, *Ma' Rosa* provides viewers (including individuals, communities, and policy-makers) with essential frameworks for questioning prevailing narratives and advocating for meaningful reform. The film compellingly demonstrates the inadequacy of superficial solutions, emphasizing the necessity of addressing deep-rooted systemic inequalities rather than resorting to punitive responses. By doing so, *Ma' Rosa* positions itself as a powerful catalyst for dialogue, fostering conversations that inspire collective action and encourage policy transformation. Moreover, the film underscores the urgency of cultivating societal responses rooted in empathy, accountability, and restorative justice, thereby promoting more equitable approaches to public safety. With its realistic aesthetic and complex narrative structure, *Ma' Rosa* ultimately challenges audiences to reconsider the foundations of the War on Drugs and imagine a future where systemic change replaces repressive policies as the cornerstone for confronting social issues.

Film Techniques and Aesthetics

Ma' Rosa employs a range of film techniques and aesthetic choices to support the narrative treatment further. The film's gritty and immersive style, coupled with its intimate and observational camerawork, contributes to its authentic portrayal of a marginalized family trapped in a cycle of survival. While the film effectively captures the chaotic and oppressive atmosphere of Metro Manila's streets through lighting, production design, and *mise-en-scène*, its aesthetic choices and film techniques also serve as a double-edged sword, occasionally hampering the narrative impact and clarity.

One parent aspect of the film's aesthetic is its use of handheld cinematography, especially in intense scenes, which highlights the chaos of Rosa's life in the illegal drug business. In the last scene of the film, Rosa approaches a fish-ball stand, totally disrobed of her pride. The handheld camera follows her without respite, almost reflecting her convoluted thoughts. Rosa is the only subject of the occasionally shaky camera as she devours the skewered *kwek-kwek* (hard-boiled quail eggs) (see fig. 2). Her eyes grow larger, and tears begin to fall with each hurried bite. The jittery and documentary-like cinematography immerses the audience in the characters' lives, implicitly reflecting the unsteady and uncertain nature of the underprivileged actors in the illegal drug trade.



Figure 2

Ma'Rosa. Directed by Brillante Ma. Mendoza, Center Stage Productions, 2016.

In this scene, the filmmakers deliberately used this technique to effectively convey the constant struggle and the pervasive atmosphere of danger and desperation of the underprivileged sector in the country, forcing them to consider illegal acts for survival. The film, then, with its conscious implementation of handheld camerawork, persuasively projects the drug world in the country as a world of disorder, conflict, and uncertainty and does not romanticize the economic opportunities of the illegal drug business.

The immersive aesthetic of *Ma' Rosa* plays a crucial role in conveying the disorienting experience of life under systemic poverty and corruption. This aesthetic choice mirrors the disorienting and destabilizing effects of the anti-drug campaign itself, which created a climate of fear, unpredictability, and anxiety among marginalized communities. In this way, shaky cinematography becomes not just a stylistic choice but a thematic device, reflecting the fragmented and precarious nature of the characters' existence.

However, while this aesthetic serves to intensify the emotional and psychological impact of the film, it also introduces potential distractions that complicate narrative engagement. The persistent shakiness of the camera captures the instability and disorder of the world Rosa inhabits, but it can also be visually overwhelming for viewers, reducing their ability to connect with the emotional subtleties of the characters' experiences. The constant movement emphasizes realism, but at times, it risks obscuring important narrative elements and character development, shifting focus away from Rosa's internal struggles toward the chaotic environment surrounding her. This creates tension between immersion and accessibility, as the very techniques designed to immerse the audience in the story can unintentionally alienate them through sensory overload.

The strength of the cinematography lies in its alignment with the film's themes with the disorienting camera mirroring the destabilizing effect of the war on drugs on the lives of ordinary Filipinos. This stylistic choice illustrates how individuals are caught in an unpredictable system where power and control are constantly shifting which echoes the moral ambiguity and uncertainty that define the characters' decisions. This visual instability emphasizes the fragility of life under oppression, where survival often depends on quick, unpredictable actions. The intent of the cinematography to make viewers feel unsettled and uncomfortable compels an experience of discomfort that the characters endure daily.

At the same time, undeniably, the relentless handheld style can be distracting, as it occasionally detracts from the emotional gravity of key scenes. For example, in moments where Rosa's internal despair or her interactions with family members require close emotional engagement, the camera's erratic movements detract from the intimacy and focus these moments demand. The technique, while we acknowledge its effectiveness in heightening the atmosphere of chaos, risks reducing narrative clarity by forcing viewers to constantly adjust to the visual turbulence. This tension exemplifies the trade-off between realism and narrative coherence, where the pursuit of authenticity through disorienting visuals may limit the audience's ability to fully connect with the characters' emotional journeys.

Odyssey Flores, the cinematographer of the project, uses shaky cinematography that reflects the complex dynamics of survival under the world Duterte built to capture both the chaos and emotional fragmentation experienced by those on the margins of society. However, the film also illustrates the challenges of balancing aesthetic immersion with narrative accessibility, as the same techniques that draw viewers into the story can alienate them by emphasizing external chaos over internal emotional resonance. This dual effect underscores how the immersive aesthetics of *Ma' Rosa* align with the themes of the anti-drug campaign; just as the War on Drugs leaves individuals disoriented and powerless, the film's visual style leaves audiences grappling with the discomfort and instability that define the characters' world.

Directing and Director

Brillante Mendoza has built a reputation as a filmmaker devoted to gritty, socially conscious narratives that focus on marginalized communities. His stylistic approach, marked by handheld camerawork, naturalistic sound, and documentary-like aesthetics, exemplifies a commitment to realism, often immersing the audience in uncomfortable, chaotic environments. Films such as *Kinatay* and *Ma' Rosa* center on bleak realities like violence, poverty, and moral ambiguity, which align Mendoza with the tradition of *cinéma vérité* and Italian neorealism.

However, Mendoza's auteur voice complicates interpretations by walking the line between humanizing his characters and reinforcing voyeuristic tendencies toward poverty and suffering, often labeled as "poverty porn." *Ma' Rosa* exemplifies this tension, exposing the desperation of a family entangled in the drug trade while simultaneously evoking criticism for presenting stereotypical depictions of poverty. When approached by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* about critics labeling *Ma' Rosa* as "poverty porn," Mendoza replied, "I will continue making films like this because things haven't changed. This is the reality that surrounds me. If my neighbors [in Mandaluyong] suddenly become rich, I will stop making docu-drama movies like this" (San Diego Jr.).

Additionally, Mendoza defends *Ma' Rosa* as he admits that this film is "based on real people" and that "someone actually borrowed money from [him], to bribe a policeman" (San Diego Jr.). While *Ma' Rosa* critiques the War on Drugs by portraying systemic corruption and the abuse of marginalized families, Mendoza's alignment with Duterte complicates the ideological reading of the film. Mendoza worked with Duterte during the 2016 and 2017 State of the Nation Address (SONA) and expressed support for the president's drug war policies. In his exclusive interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Mendoza explains, "With the State of the Nation address, I just wanted to shoot the president as he is, as a human being rather than a president. But that is all I have done for the administration, and I have moved on" (Scott). Not only that, but Mendoza has consistently defended the Duterte administration, insisting that "foreign critics have misunderstood Duterte and his leadership due to a culture clash" (Gabrillo). This collaboration signals ideological convergence, raising the question: Does *Ma' Rosa* challenge or reinforce the



Figure 3

Mendoza directing the State of the Nation Address of Former President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016.
Presidential Communications, July 25, 2016.

very narrative it critiques?

Mendoza's depiction of corruption in *Ma' Rosa* shows an uneasy negotiation with dominant narratives. On the surface, the film critiques the failure of the state to provide for the poor, but it also subsumes itself under mainstream ideologies by leaving structural critique incomplete. The absence of wealthy figures caught in the drug trade and substance abuse, for example, implicitly reinforces the state narrative that the poor are the primary participants in and victims of the drug economy. This aligns with the hegemonic view promoted by the Duterte administration that the marginalized are both the source of the drug problem and its casualties.

To further deepen this claim, the portrayal of the family's resilience risks perpetuating the romanticized notion of Filipino poverty and survival, which is another narrative weaponized by politicians to excuse government inaction. Instead of advocating systemic change, the film leaves viewers with a sense of inevitable suffering and endangers itself by reinforcing the fatalistic ideology that poverty is an unavoidable reality rather than a fixable problem.

When viewed through an ideological lens, *Ma' Rosa* appears to challenge dominant state narratives by portraying systemic police corruption and the economic precarity of marginalized Filipinos. However, this reading is problematized by director Brillante Mendoza's public endorsement of President Duterte, especially his administration's brutal anti-drug campaign. Mendoza's vocal support introduces a dissonant layer of ambiguity: Is *Ma' Rosa* a sincere *exposé* of social injustice, or does it operate as an aestheticized depiction that benefits from critical discourse without overtly confronting state violence?

This ambiguity mirrors what film scholar Bliss Cua Lim refers to as "archival after-lives," where cinematic texts inherit ideological contradictions depending on the political alignments of their creators (Lim). Similarly, Patrick Campos argues that contemporary Philippine cinema often negotiates "complicity and resistance" in narratives that toe the line between critique and spectacle (Campos).

The text of *Ma' Rosa* reflects the tension between resistance and complicity. While it presents the human cost of the drug war, it also avoids direct confrontation with the state. Mendoza's auteur vision thus negotiates between critique and acceptance, reflecting a complex engagement with power structures. His realism, while brutal and evocative, refrains from overt political opposition, rendering the film open to interpretation as both a critique and a subtle endorsement of the *status quo*.

Mendoza's work exemplifies the complexities of auteurism within politically charged contexts. *Ma' Rosa* showcases the harsh realities of Duterte's drug war but stops short of explicitly condemning it, mirroring the director's ambivalent stance toward the administration. Mendoza's realist style creates an immersive experience that engages with societal ills, but his personal alignment with Duterte blurs the line between critique and complicity. Finally, Mendoza's auteurism operates as a site of ideological negotiation, where narratives of resistance coexist with subtle reinforcement of dominant ideologies. His films invite audiences to confront uncomfortable realities, but their interpretive openness risks perpetuating the very structures they appear to critique. As such, *Ma' Rosa* exemplifies both the power and the limitations of cinema as a tool for ideological intervention in a politically charged environment.

Production and Marketing

The production and marketing of the film *Ma' Rosa* warrant a rhetorical ideological criticism that reveals intriguing aspects about its market perception, reception, artistic choices, and potential impact on audience understanding. *Ma' Rosa* is a product of the film industry, which operates within a capitalist framework. The film was produced with the intention of generating profit and appealing to audiences who seek entertainment and emotional engagement. This commercial aspect can be seen as a compromise with the capitalist system, as the message of the film may have been diluted or manipulated to cater to market demands and ensure financial success. Regrettably, despite being a thought-provoking film, *Ma' Rosa* received limited attention from the mass media, which tends to gravitate towards more sensationalized and attention-grabbing content. This critique highlights the challenge faced by independent filmmakers who strive to depict harsh realities and social issues, as they often struggle to compete with commercialized and mainstream productions. The lack of media coverage for films like *Ma' Rosa* perpetuates the dominance of a narrow range of narratives in public discourse.

The production and marketing of the film are worthy of criticism for its potential commodification of the struggles of marginalized communities. Some critics argue that films like *Ma' Rosa* fall into the category of "poverty porn," portraying poverty-stricken communities in a way that may appeal to voyeuristic audiences. While the film's commitment to realism and exploration of social issues is commendable, a rhetorical critique reveals areas where it falls short. There is a risk of perpetuating simplistic representations of poverty and inadvertently normalizing corruption without addressing systemic causes. In a capitalist system, there is a risk of transforming stories of oppression and social injustice into marketable products that can be consumed without actively addressing the underlying issues. By packaging the struggles of the characters into a film, there is a possibility that the film industry benefits from the exploitation and voyeuristic consumption of their suffering without contributing to substantial change or addressing the root causes of inequality.

The film's marketing and its reception at international festivals are essential factors to consider. While the film gained recognition and acclaim abroad, there is a critique that such films tend to cater to a widespread perception of the Philippines as a place of slums, corruption, and drugs. This critique underscores the need for a balanced representation that acknowledges the country's complexities and diverse narratives beyond these

prevailing stereotypes. The assertion that Mendoza caters to the Western palate by depicting the negative aspects of the Philippines raises questions about the filmmaker's intent and the film's reception. While it is essential to address the social issues within the country, there is a risk of perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing a particular narrative that may align with Western preconceptions. This critique calls for a more nuanced exploration of the complexities of Filipino society beyond the surface-level portrayal of its struggles.

Implications

The article's critique of *Ma' Rosa* advances rhetorical studies in the Philippines by demonstrating how a local film can expose and contest hegemonic discourse. Through unpacking the film's narrative and aesthetic strategies, the article reveals the ideological underpinnings of the War on Drugs debate and shows how *Ma' Rosa* disrupts dominant assumptions, thus illustrating the capacity of rhetoric as an instrument of social critique and transformation.

First, the film's *cinéma vérité* approach (such as handheld camera work that lingers on unguarded expressions, diegetic soundscapes of street noise and police radios, and long, uninterrupted takes) makes visible the structural forces driving its characters. In one extended sequence, the camera follows Rosa as she counts tiny sachets of *shabu* (crystal meth) beneath a rain-beaten roof, a visual metaphor for how systemic poverty permeates every aspect of survival. In another, a single, unbroken shot captures a police officer demanding "*Dalawang libo para mapabilis ang prosesong, kung wala kayong pera, ituro niyo source niyo*" (PhP 2,000 to speed up the process... If you don't have the cash, tell us who your source is) (00:34:45–00:39:04), underscoring how institutional corruption both catalyzes and reflects deeper social neglect. By interspersing these moments with scenes of Rosa's children pawning personal belongings and joining street brawls for bail money, *Ma' Rosa* reframes drug-related activities as responses to collective abandonment rather than isolated moral failings. This careful attention to everyday detail challenges the reductionist "law-and-order" narrative and invites audiences to question the limits of punitive policy while considering the urgent need for restorative social support. At the same time, the film cautions viewers against aestheticizing suffering, reminding us that bearing witness demands ethical vigilance to avoid slipping into voyeurism.

Secondly, *Ma' Rosa* directly confronts the *nanlaban* (resisted arrest) narrative or the claim that suspects always resist arrest to justify extrajudicial violence by depicting officers who fabricate resistance as cover for beatings. This exposure of truth manipulation highlights the vital role of media literacy, independent fact-checking, and civic vigilance in countering propaganda. An informed and discerning public, equipped to question official accounts and demand transparency, becomes a necessary counterbalance to unchecked state power. Yet the film also skirts an ethical edge: its stark portrayal of a family forced into criminalized survival tactics risks veering into poverty-porn territory if viewers fail to maintain critical distance and engage with the structural roots of marginalization.

Methodologically, this study underscores the power of pairing ideological criticism with close film analysis. Examining *Ma' Rosa's* narrative strategies, visual style, and character arcs, from shot composition that normalizes authority to editing rhythms that valorize resilience, reveals the precise rhetorical devices through which hegemonic ideologies are encoded and contested. This dual approach offers scholars a robust framework for decoding ideology in cinema and other media, mapping broader patterns of power and resistance, and equipping audiences with analytical tools for critical engagement.

Finally, by centering a Philippine feature film as a site of rhetorical inquiry, this article broadens the field's scope in three ways: (1) it incorporates visual narratives into ideological critique; (2) it provides a context-specific model for analyzing how national cinema engages pressing socio-political issues; and (3) it affirms rhetoric's potential to spark public debate, shape policy discourse, and inspire structural reform. In summary, *Ma' Rosa* not only challenges dominant drug-war discourses on screen, but also offers a blueprint for how film can serve as a catalyst for social critique, civic engagement, and institutional transformation.

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