Discussion between Gary Kildea and David MacDougall about *Celso and Cora*¹

Canberra, May–October 2001

[Note: This discussion is edited from a longer conversation. Asterisks indicate where sections of the conversation have been omitted.]

D: I think our most important objective should be to look at your intentions, because these often don't come out in discussions of films. They don't try to find out what the filmmaker was thinking when he or she filmed a scene, or when including it in the film—the reasons for those decisions.

G: Like you say, a lot of discussions and writings about a film don't take into account the complex intentions behind its making; for that matter, not even the complexities of how it actually played out in the minds of particular viewers at particular screenings.

■ View Opening Sequence of *Celso and Cora*²

D: First of all, beginnings of films are always crucial. They are filled with difficulty and complexity because they have so many functions to perform for the audience. As a filmmaker, you have many objectives that you have to inter-layer or superimpose upon one another as you develop the opening. So let's just take the first shot of the train approaching through the quarter. I noticed one thing: it simply pops on. It is unconventional in the sense that there is no fade-in of sound or picture. Can you say something about that? It's a stylistic principle that I think you follow throughout the film.

G: As an opening, I guess what it has going for it is that suddenly there's this curious thing approaching, ringing a bell and shining a light, all seen through a long lens, then there's the train tracks with all that busy activity; people crossing. I think, as a shot, it has what it takes to grab an audience.

D: So you wanted the shock of being thrown into the midst of this?

1 Kildea, G. 1983, *Celso and Cora: A Manila story*, Ronin Films, Canberra.

2 View associated media files via the ANU E Press website at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012>

G: Yes, something that was both, I guess, kind of confusing but still developing. I think that's what we're always looking for, both as cinematographers and editors. Whatever else the shot's doing, it should continue to develop.

D: Isn't part of the rhetoric here also to establish the kind of pacing we're to expect in the film? In a sense it's like the bullfighter training the bull in the ring, to get the correct passes. You have to train your audience how to look at this film. And if you start with a lot of quick shots then they are going to expect quick shots. It seems to me that your resisting cutting away immediately to something else is part of your design—to train us to see this in a particular way.

G: Yes, that's right.

D: This second shot has a very particular subject, which is children's games in a fiesta atmosphere. What was it about that shot that made you want to have it here?

G: It was just a nice little piece of community interaction and it gives a sense of playfulness and warmth. It says very succinctly 'community'. What I'm interested in here is building on the excitement of the first shot. There is a kind of dramatic metaphor there [in the children's game of *piñata*] of striving and a failing—'Nowhere near it', someone says. But how, being blindfolded, handicapped, can one be expected to succeed? That's the metaphor.

D: That idea was in your mind at the time?

G: Not while I was shooting it, but in the editing.

D: The idea that people—whatever their ambitions—are under constraints and blindness.

G: Yes, I don't mind resorting to a 'natural' metaphor now and then—one that just falls out of the material.

D: The shot also immediately creates a feeling toward the subjects of some sort of affection.

G: Yes, exactly. It sets up a sense of affection and warmth and the support afforded by a community. In other words, it's not a negative set-up [designed] to show a slum as a horror place. It doesn't announce 'poverty'. It announces community, and joyousness.

D: And I think you've said many times before that this was one of your objectives in making the film—not to brand people by their poverty, but to see them in different terms?

G: Yes. Hopefully it attempts to see their poverty more as they see it. It's not as if they are not angry—and right at the end of the film Celso makes his analysis and does show his anger about it. It's just that in any given situation, wherever you live, you live in a given set of circumstances, which you adjust to it—sort of. You have to. There's a nice Tagalog saying, which impressed me when I learnt it: 'You are much better off having a poor person as a friend than a rich person as a friend.'

D: Do you think it's possible to think on different levels simultaneously? Can you be thinking on a very abstract level about the structural circumstances of people's lives and at the same time about the minute details?

G: Yes, those different levels are at play at the same time. As someone interested in pursuing the *cinéma-vérité* way of knowing and telling, it's the dramaturgical sense which I'm hoping will be most actively in play, once you get into it. Because, you know, you're aiming to gather material from which to make a story, a story with universal reach, so any sociological framework tends to drop away. It's like the formwork into which concrete is poured. It can be taken away after the concrete has hardened.

D: I'd like to ask you about a key point at the very beginning of the film, where you say in your narration that the film is a story constructed from fragments filmed over a period of three months. Those aren't the exact words. Would you deconstruct those elements, first of all 'story', and then 'constructed from fragments'? Because 'story' carries a lot of weight here in relation to how we think about fiction and nonfiction. What was your reason for highlighting the story-ness of the film so strongly?

G: Well, I think it was very much in keeping with the tradition of *cinéma-vérité*, which, as a movement, would have peaked at least ten years before this, wouldn't it? Late Sixties, early Seventies. So there was a time there where the construction of a story from fragments was the aim of direct cinema. Rather like what the nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*³ [by Truman Capote] had done for literature. I was very much conscious of these developments at the time, and felt very much engaged in that tradition—the still relatively new tradition of *cinéma-vérité*. So it was, perhaps, an ethnographic film whose aim was not really to find out what was going on in this other culture, but rather to familiarise the situation through 'story', as we understand it, to attempt to make the culture gap transparent.

3 Capote, T. 1965, *In Cold Blood*, Vintage International, New York.

By saying it's a 'story constructed', and making it even clearer by having a still picture up there—the out-of-place-looking white filmmaker—it freed me up to go ahead and make narrative sense. By clearly saying 'This film is constructed from fragments gathered over three months', it freed me up.

D: Did the statement also free you to use material out of chronology, whereas another documentary filmmaker might feel obliged to present the story in its natural chronology?

G: Yes, that's right. That's an important issue. There can sometimes be good reasons to stick to strict chronology. But, on the other hand, a scene being omitted from a strict chronology can easily have a more distorting effect, overall, than scenes that have been reshuffled in time. As it turns out, though, I didn't need to do that very much. Certainly most of the major events, which are chronologically significant, are as they happened.

D: I find that when I try to put things out of chronology I often gravitate back to the chronology, for all sorts of reasons. In the end, there seems to be a coalescence of a dramatic need and the way things were developing anyway. So, taking things out of position often creates more problems than it solves.

G: Yes, one is seeking the strongest, the most effective, form of documentary and that usually means paying due respect to its core nature, its ontology. For example, putting a commentary over a moving picture is somehow weakening it. Not only is an entirely 'other' kind of knowing imposed on the material—on the scene—but it also introduces a contradictory time sense. There's the historical time of the shot itself, then there's this other time of the spoken commentary.

D: Well, it's similar to music laid over images, which certainly for me violates the value of the moving image.

G: Yes, definitely. Because, after all, almost any piece of music will 'take', one way or another, to almost any piece of film. That's a funny thing. And conversely, no piece of music will ever 'take' like that to any kind of slideshow.

D: You also mention quite early on here Rowena's role in the film. Can you say something about your decision not to work alone but to have her with you? Because you did say that you spoke and understand some Tagalog, but you relied on Rowena for language assistance.⁴

G: Yes, I started working alone, actually, just getting by with my basic Tagalog. In fact, this is a case where the chronology of the story is more or less correct. All the scenes up to finding the new house were done by me working completely alone. But by that stage, I realised that I'd benefit from: a) having someone help

4 Rowena Katalingkasan was a local collaborator on the project.

me with sound, and b) having someone who spoke the language properly. But, like finding the right people to be in the film, finding the right collaborator is a really crucial decision.

D: Did you discuss your objectives with her, so that she had a sense of your thinking at any moment?

G: Yes, I think we would have discussed that a lot. I remember she would spend a lot of her time when we weren't filming transcribing from the tapes or, rather, writing out a rough translation in English.

D: Do you want to say something now about how you met Celso, how you felt about that, and at what point you made the decision to follow his life?

G: Celso happened to be sitting, one night, on a pavement, with his back propped up against a light pole. I thought that he looked distressed, so I asked him, 'Are you all right?'

D: Really? He wasn't selling cigarettes at that time?

G: No, no. He was just a guy sitting on a street with his head on his knees. I just happened to walk past him, and I thought, this guy looks sick. So I leant down and said, 'Are you all right?' He just looked up and said, 'Yes, I'm all right. I'm just sleeping.' He was very friendly about it. So then we just had a little chat. I told him what I was doing. He said, 'You must come and meet my wife, she's just a couple of blocks away from here.' She was selling there. So that was the luck of the thing.

D: But you were thinking from the beginning about a portrait of someone or some people, and a story of their lives?

G: Yes, it was definitely going to be a film about a family. I got interested in the Philippines through coming to know the Filipino community in Papua New Guinea where I was living at that time. It was in the mid-Seventies. That's when I started to learn Tagalog without even a thought at the time that I was going to make a film there. I just fell in with the community there. I came to love the Filipino culture and personality. It was 1979 before I finally went to the Philippines and, by then, starting to think about a film. So, by that stage, I'd have had a good five years of exposure and familiarity with Filipino culture.

I was experimenting since the early Seventies with films like with *Belong Living*, *Belong Ol*,⁵ with subtitles and stuff. That's after I'd come to hear about what you [David MacDougall] and Judith had been doing in Africa. That was when the penny dropped for me about the use of subtitles to open up the world of *cinéma-*

5 Kildea, G. 1973, *Belong Living*, *Belong Ol*, Ronin Films, Canberra.

vérité for cross-cultural filmmaking. I immediately started experimenting with that and, of course, also with the long take as opposed to traditional montage. I had been very much persuaded to the view—largely through the writing of Bazin—that the ‘ontology of the photographic image’ was the basis of all that is powerful in the cinema.⁶ So, *Celso and Cora* was the kind of laboratory where I finally got to work all those things out for myself. I recall that the little book of Bresson’s aphorisms [*Notes on Cinematography*]⁷ was like my bible that I’d read whenever I was in doubt. Because, I suppose, he was another of those essentialists in his thinking about the cinema. And, I suppose, since I saw myself as striving to philosophise in an essentially cinematic way, I did cling to those aphorisms of Bresson for guidance.

Anyway, I can remember making a New Year’s resolution that I’d start filming that very day. It was the first of January 1981. I’d been in Manila searching for subjects and procrastinating for a good six weeks by then. I told myself that I’m definitely going to start shooting some film today, for better or for worse, I’m going to do something. I’m not going to ask any more questions. Celso and Cora had already given me their permission so, what the heck, I just decided to take myself and my gear in a taxi right to their neighbourhood. They were living deep inside a rather large squatter area—as you can see early in the film; the shot of the roofs—there are no roads to take you there. The nearest you can get with a taxi is a couple of hundred metres away where there are lots of little alleyways leading inside. But I had so much gear to manage by myself, though I had pared it down as much as I could. I carried three or four 400 ft 16 mm film magazines, spare cans of film, a changing bag, a tripod, the camera itself, separate sound gear—luckily I was using a small Nagra SN—several microphones, including a quite heavy wireless mic system.

So there was I, stumbling along into this squatter area trying to find Celso and Cora, lugging gear boxes and all kinds of stuff. But, for all that, it turned out to be the day on which I filmed everything that ended up being in the first 10 minutes or so of the movie [apart from the pre-title sequence]. Everything up to the point when they arrive at...

D: The new house?

G: Yes, the first scene is in another house, then there’s the walking through the alleyways to their new place, which they were checking out for the first time. So that’s how I finally got launched into the film.

6 Bazin, A. 1967, ‘The ontology of the photographic image’, in A. Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, H. Gray (trans.), University of California Press, London, pp. 9–16.

7 Bresson, R. 1977, *Notes on Cinematography*, Urizon Books, New York.

D: And was there a moment when you said, 'This is my subject. I know I'm going to make a film about these people from now on'?

G: By then I felt that they were the right people but I was more worried about the house they were living in—that is, their old house: it was virtually impossible to film in, one extremely small room, no windows, no nothing. So it actually turned out quite well. When I finally found their place that day, trundling in with all my gear, I was distraught. After all my efforts to get here and get started, I thought I'd missed them—that they were just not at home. But then somebody told me, 'Oh no, they're not here because the landlady told them they can't stay in this place anymore.' But then someone offered to go off looking for them and it wasn't long before they both arrived to greet me. They said, 'We've just been thrown out of our house and we are going to move.' And so I asked, 'Can I come with you, then, to see—and film—the place you're moving to?'

D: What was your feeling about how they would come across to an audience, as people? What was your sense of them? This has to do with a general question of how you cast a documentary, how you choose the people.

G: There's so much luck involved and, I guess, intuition too. I was quite pleased with the kind of rapport we had from the start, a kind of ease of getting along. That's a really important concept among Filipinos. There's a nice Tagalog term, *pakikisama*, which I don't think has a precise English equivalent. It refers to getting along well with people. There are very many words based on *sama* all to do with getting on with others—or not. But anyway we clearly had *pakikisama* between us, which I took as a really good sign.

D: Was the shot where they discuss the cigarettes actually the first shot?

G: Yes, that was the very first shot of the whole shoot.

D: In terms of exposition, it's very useful.

G: Yes, extremely useful. And I always love the detailed discussion you get when professionals talk among themselves. In this case it's the talk of professional cigarette vendors.

D: 'Philip'—and the other names they have for the cigarettes.

G: Ah, yes, yes. Philip Morris, Winston, Saratoga. They talk in detail about those things just as filmmakers talk about shots, cuts, reverse angles and so on.

*

D: So they had a sense of what was interesting to you, as a person?

G: Yes.

D: More than as a filmmaker?

G: Yes, yes I think so. They knew, of course, that my project was filmmaking, that I usually had a large camera on my shoulder, but I don't think they were helping me out with that especially or being conscious of the expository information I might need or anything.

D: Often it's more our presence than the camera itself that's important.

G: And I think, as viewers, we can decode those subtleties fairly accurately. So, all that stuff—the reflexive intrusions, the voice from behind the camera, their references to the camera—I don't see it as any kind of end in itself. In fact, I don't particularly like it—it does tend to throw you out of the story, to rob you of a certain enchantment. These things are operating all at once, these notions of what is real and what is false. There is a kind of enchantment we feel when we watch films whether we identify the characters before us as actors, non-actors, semi-actors or caught by a 'candid camera', whatever status they might have in that regard.

D: Was there still at that time a sense that this reflexivity, or self-reflexivity, was something fresh—that audiences would gain a greater sense of intimacy by being aware of your presence as a filmmaker while they watch what's happening?

G: I guess the best way to get the best of both worlds—that is, to allow the enchantment of falling into a story, whilst also offering some clarity about the actual relationships involved; how these scenes have come to be—is by way of these reflexive interventions. For sure, they're at a cost at the level of enchantment. But I have found that the film quickly recovers from that disturbance, and the enchantment takes over again. This is a very different kind of pleasure than is offered by a fully narrated documentary—that kind of a pleasure born of epistemophilia.

D: Can you say something about the shot in which you walk through the neighbourhood following them to the new house, which obviously accentuates your role? Why was it important to include the whole journey, from the first house to the second?

G: Well, the long take as an ideal was firmly planted in my thinking at the time. Luckily, the walk was just about the right length. It didn't risk getting boring or anything. And what could be a better way of having the geography of the place established? I can't imagine a better way...

D: And the ambience?

G: Yes, the ambience, a feel of place. We'd already, by then, got a feel of them as people, and we'd got a feel of them as professionals, i.e., cigarette vendors, and

also as family, as individual people relating to one other. In retrospect, it was all so lucky. But, as we set off to walk to the new house, the radio mic was on Cora still, as it had been in the first scene in the house. I had only one radio mic and, as I said, I was working alone at that stage. So, I had the radio mic receiver connected to the Nagra SN, in a bag slung over my shoulder, and it was rolling. Actually, when, as she was walking, I heard Cora tell Celso to watch out for me, to 'Take care of Gary', I wasn't particularly happy about it. I figured we'd had enough 'reflexivity moments' for a while! I guess I feared...the enchantment level was dropping unduly at that moment but then again there's that other guy who comes into shot and sort of smiles at the camera, so, in the end, it worked out fine. The very wide-angle prime lens I used for that shot had two added bonuses: 1) it took a lot of the shake out of the walk, and 2) the wide perspective meant that the alley's enclosing walls flew past the edges of frame helping to make it a more dynamic and dramatic shot.

D: In the new house you do a complete 360-degree turn around the room. It's an interesting moment when they suddenly realise that you're filming, or at least Celso does.

G: In that shot he's saying 'Ah, so you're rolling'—as opposed to just checking the frame—but it didn't seem to faze him one way or another.

D: It offers a kind of proof about the difference between someone's behaviour when they're being filmed and their behaviour when they're being filmed but not thinking about it.

*

D: The next segment starts with Cora buying a safety pin and ends with Celso talking about life in the country. This is the next act, in a way, isn't it, after we've been introduced to Placida? Can you talk a bit about this material?

G: Actually that shot was another stroke of luck. I just happened to be filming, hand-held, a wide exterior of the house and through the viewfinder I noticed Cora coming out of the door and starting down the steps. I thought, 'Wow, that's great'. It would establish her around the house area. It was a simple shot I thought I needed but was reluctant to 'direct'. I figured I'd just let her go out of the fixed frame in whatever direction she took. But then she starting coming towards the camera, looking like she...well, I didn't know where she was going. She kept heading right up to the camera but without paying any attention to me at all. I realised that she had to be heading for the little store immediately to my left. So, with nothing to lose, I followed her as she passed, grabbing at the focus and aperture rings and hoping for the best. So the simple wide shot of

the house had developed into a lovely little scene of Cora trying to buy a safety pin—relating to someone else in the neighbourhood—just a few paces from her own house. So that was just one of those lucky things.

But funnily enough, I don't think I'd be up to it today. I was thinking that as I was watching it just now...

D: The folly of youth?

G: Yes, the folly of youth. The role of observational cameraperson is, after all, quite intrusive, even if it doesn't always come across like that. And these people in Manila, I'm sure they didn't, in their generosity, see it as being as intrusive as I would if someone were to do it to me. That kind of filming requires a certain confidence. It's a young person's style, perhaps, a certain assurance that you're fitting in just fine.

D: Do you think that the fact that you were closer to their age meant that you fitted in as just another person they could include in their conversation?

G: Yes. I think that's also true. Older people are not going to fit in as well, if for no other reason than they attract more respect.

*

■ View Celso Vending Sequence⁸

D: So we have just seen the section where we are introduced to the Tower Hotel, and we watch Celso selling cigarettes.

G: Their work life is a crucial part, as it is in anyone's life. So, it was a crucial part of the story.

D: It kicks the film forward when you make a big shift like that, a shift of location or activity. You start off with a new impetus somehow. Is that, in a way, what allows this scene to play out in such natural time? That we have a new interest at this point, and we're willing to sit back—again—and observe?

G: Yes, maybe you wouldn't have the patience to sit through it as willingly if it wasn't a new element in the story. And this is the principle of musical structure, isn't it, to alter the rhythm, to move through several keys, to juxtapose a slow movement with a fast one. Film has a lot in common with music in its sensuality and its sculpting of time.

⁸ View associated media files via the ANU E Press website at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012>

D: Now, there's a point in this sequence at which Celso shifts from talking to other people, and doing business, to talking to you.

G: What I like about the shot, looking at it now, is that it didn't seem to matter to him at all whether we were talking to him on camera or not. You can see that when he returns to chat with us again, after he's done with his various transactions. I think the shot goes on for four minutes or so. I like the way that it just happens to unfold in one shot and the way our question to him is deferred, as it might be in the normal flow of a conversation. But I think our kind of filmmaking has always implied working with people who can regard the filmmaking process as just an adjunct to what's going on in their lives, not the other way around, where someone wanting to buy cigarettes in the middle of an 'interview' might be seen as an unwanted interruption.

D: Another aspect of this, it seems to me, is that at this point the film is shifting toward the kind of special relationship you have with Celso, which develops as the film goes on, and where you really become his confidant. At this point he seems to be taking it upon himself to educate you about life in the Philippines. Whereas before, in the scenes with Cora, it's different—it's more that he's telling you about their lives.

G: Yes. Maybe he's nudged into that by the kinds of questions we were asking. First, he gives us a generalised answer to the general situation—that is, the everyday oppression of street vendors by police. But then, it's nice that he goes on to illustrate the point with his own story about refusing to give a 'special price' for cigarettes to a cop. Then, by way of demonstration, [he] grabs a handful of candies from his selling tray. That's the sort of richness of representation that's peculiar to direct cinema. A unique form of multilayered 'knowledge' available right off the screen.

*

Many people who watch the film have a lot of trouble with the following scene [where Celso appears to run short of money while buying medicine] because what they see in it or read into it is a kind of callousness on the part of the filmmakers for seeming to stand by and let it all happen.

D: They think you should buy the drugs for him.

G: Yes, of course. It's not surprising. These kinds of documentary first of all get lived into existence. Following that they get edited into a movie, but then, as the movie is being watched, it is sort of lived into existence again, within each individual who sees it. This is especially true for films that, in their very nature, actively provoke the empathy of the viewer. It's one's very soul that gets drawn in to them, right then and there at the time of the projection. So that scene, for

instance, is not easily taken as just a detached report of one minor family crisis somewhere in the world twenty years ago...there is personal investment in the moment so the question can easily arise 'Why don't the filmmakers simply pay for all the medicines now and solve the problem?'—and by doing so discharge the narrational anxiety that the film has provoked. I think it comes down to the deep psychology of the viewing experience.

But maybe it doesn't matter so much that some people misconstrue what's gone on outside the 'constructed story'—taking it as a clear case of callous, exploitative filmmakers. It's preferable, I think, to be misunderstood that way than to attempt self-serving explanations within the film. As it happens, of course, we were providing support to the family but it was necessary to find ways to do that as friends, to avoid getting into the role of patron—that's no way to get on with people.

D: The thing that's quite interesting in the hospital scene is how important words become in evoking the sores that Totoy has, because we don't actually see much of what's going on. But the fact that everything is discussed and described—somehow it's even more powerful than if we had been able to see the sores.

G: Yes, there was a blackout just as they were called in so I was forced to shoot the whole scene as a kind of silhouette against the pale light of a window. But anyway, I don't think it would ever have occurred to me to go in to get shots of those sores—it was the interactions, their body language in relation to the doctor, that seemed most relevant.

D: Here the film shifts into the verbal in such a way that it's more powerful than the visual. The visual begins to happen in our minds, not on the screen. I'm just speaking from the viewpoint of one viewer, of course. But it's interesting how films shift back and forth between the evocation of words and the use of images. Sometimes one's more powerful, sometimes the other's more powerful.

*

Would you say something about the connections between these three specific scenes? First of all, Celso talking, and then buying materials, and then the building? Do you see them as connected in certain ways?

G: I think it was a three-part exploration of Celso's character. Perhaps one might have thought of splitting them up. But you wouldn't want to split the buying of the timber [from] the making of the house. Those two scenes naturally go together.

D: The scene of Celso talking to you about being streetwise—it's a very nice combination of toughness and vulnerability. He's swaggering a little, but also

it's true—obviously there's some truth to it. I think that is borne out almost immediately in the next scene where you see him bargaining, and using all the various means to get the price down and then pad the bill up.

G: Now that I come to think of it, it's very rare that you'd find a subject for a film like Celso—Cora too, for that matter—who hardly ever wastes a word or a thought. Their talents in verbal communication, as I see it now, seem quite astonishing. I fell on my feet when I found them, didn't I?

D: There's a moment in the building scene, isn't there, when Rowena is given a plate of food? We've also seen her earlier when Celso has the confidence to borrow thirty-five centavos from her. Again you pan over, and we see her. Throughout the film you're quietly establishing her, and the two of you, as a unit.

G: Yes, I hope it can be seen that the principle in play is neither to make a point of showing the filmmakers nor to make a point of not showing them. So when, in the natural flow of things, Celso brings Rowena into it—and sometimes me (but then it's difficult, because I've got the camera in front of my face)—then I just felt happy to include that in the cut. And I think that happens throughout the film, and just enough times in the final cut. So I hope you get the sense that the reflexivity is not added as a fashionable accessory but integrated as part of the film.

D: It's what I would call deep reflexivity, because it runs right through the film, not only in specific shots like that, but in the way the camera is being handled and its relationship to people throughout. It's constantly there and constantly modulated and expressed in different ways. So it becomes very much an organic part of the film.

■ View Cora's Pig Story Sequence⁹

D: The film goes into Cora's long monologue talking about the pig story and other things. Well, this is a wonderful story and you've kept it intact—the pig story. Obviously it called out to be kept somehow intact in the film.

G: I think that those stories provide so much information at so many levels. Plus, in the whole dramatic shape of the film, there's a balancing of Celso against Cora; Cora against Celso. It's rather nice in this sense that he's there present in that scene but he's asleep. It's a nice touch. She can speak freely about him—even refer to 'him'—even though he is bodily present.

⁹ View associated media files via the ANU E Press website at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012>

D: The pig story, in particular, reflects back on Celso's monologue, because his tenderness toward the pig somehow throws into relief his toughness. This combination of toughness and tenderness is quite well related back and forth, I think, between those two monologues, his and hers.

G: Yes, and that's all the more reason I was lucky to have had that shot of him. We know the layout of that room by now, which is necessary to clearly establish that he is actually there all along, asleep. It's rather a nice narrative device arrived at by accident. If you'd thought of it for a fiction film you'd be quite pleased with yourself. I remember holding on him for what I thought was long enough, even though she'd already started into her story. I had to judge just the right moment to pan around onto her.

D: You don't remind us again that he's there, do you?

G: No. There was no need. I could have done that but only with a cutaway, which I really wanted to avoid, absolutely—in the whole film. But even using a blank space and then a shot of him asleep it wouldn't have worked for me. Had it been anything other than a pan then his presence would have been too 'pointed'. So, as I was taking the shot, getting ready to pan, I remember desperately hoping that whatever Cora was saying as she came into the frame would turn out to be a good beginning for the scene. Because if, for example, I'd decided in the editing that the first minute or even 20 seconds of her talk after the pan was somehow unwarranted then it would have needed a cut to establish Celso sleeping nearby.

D: This indicates the kinds of things you think about when you're shooting, such as, 'How is this going to connect?' 'Is this the right moment to link things?'

G: Yes, this kind of filming is a bit like playing jazz—more, say, than planning out a composition—it's a kind of improvisation.

D: That sort of decision can be very calculated, and I think it is sometimes. I know that I sometimes think in a very calculated way—for example, 'Now, what is the right moment to move?' But it can also be very intuitive.

G: Yes, yes.

D: But it has to have some organic coherence, if it's all-of-a-piece. Anyway, I'd like to go back to the content of those three shots. The first is about the story of the pig and Celso's attachment to the pig. The second is about buying the sticker for the bicycle. And if I'm correct, the third is about Cora wanting to have some sort of fund of money for herself for the things that she cares about. So in terms of content, how do you feel those three things fit together?

G: Yes, they all speak about the relationship between them; her complex attitude towards her husband. Consider the first one—the pig story is all about Celso,

and it's saying something affectionate about him. It makes for a more complex picture of both of them; her telling of his being so soft-hearted that he'd look after a pig so tenderly. He even refused to eat the meat from it in the end. All that provides a kind of counterpoint to what she says later in the argument scene about her fear of his hands, his fist.

D: That's interesting, because you can draw a parallel between her love of decorating her surroundings and his love for the pig. It's two kinds of affection, two kinds of emotion, each particular to each character. So they form a pair.

G: Yes, that's right. But in the end, it hooks around to the fact of her autonomy being very much hemmed in by the exercise of his masculine role. Later on there's that point when he says, 'Would you like me to wear the skirt in the family and you to wear the pants?'

D: For me, it's very interesting that you allow the whole quarrel to play out in its various permutations and shifts, and we see the way in which each of them is trying to apply moral pressure on the other. It's the sort of games people play, how people use the rhetoric of the moment to pressure each other.

G: One thing that struck me about the quarrel scene, seeing it again this time, is how lucky I was to have had both a natural beginning and a natural end to it... the ramping up from zero speed, accelerating to full intensity and then down again to stillness at the end, which was crucial to the way it works. And for me, it's the details such as the way Cora quietly heaves her chest as she sits propped against the wall that remains very moving, very affecting, even as I see it for the thousandth time. The sense of defeat it conveys; despite her best efforts in standing up for herself she can only sit there drained and defeated.

Many people say it's typical of a male filmmaker that he would stay with the man and not follow Cora. But whereas there may be something in that, the real issue, I thought at that stage, was to stay put and not go chasing Cora off to her mother-in-law's with the camera. We were their neighbours, after all—we lived almost next door. Well, I lived next door and Rowena came every day.

D: It also has to do with the way in which Celso claims you as a friend, a confidant. Your relationship with him is very close. It's as much from his side as your side, it seems, especially at this point in the film. He really needs you, I feel. To leave him would have been strange.

G: That's right.

D: One question I'd like to ask you is about the ending as a whole, because in a sense you have two very nice endings. The Manila Bay ending is one, and then you have the scene where Celso and Cora are back together, which resolves the split between them, even if only temporarily. I suppose one could even see that

as a coda to the real ending. I don't know how you thought about that. Did you have questions in your own mind about where the film should end, or was it always meant to be that way?

G: It could have been a possible ending, and quite a cute one—the frame abandoned by Celso leaving, to leave us to stare blankly at the busy traffic and highrise apartments fronting Manila Bay. I think I was thinking that way as I shot it. But I don't think I would ever have willingly ended the film with Cora as just an absence. And it's not like they didn't actually reconcile after that. And maybe it's also preferable, in a dramaturgical sense, that the film finally suggests, if anything, that difficult times can, and do, get muddled through. On the other hand, I was far from wanting to promote the idea that reconciliation—and the comfort of a happy ending—is always the answer.

D: The other thing I would say is that all endings are unsatisfactory, because life doesn't end and there is always a certain sense of artificiality. I think it was E. M. Forster who wrote about this in relation to the novel.¹⁰ He says novels start out wonderfully and develop wonderfully and toward the end they almost always become unsatisfactory because you see the mechanism grinding to the end.

G: Exactly. That is what I was worried about with the ending. You know the scene near the end where Maricel insists on leaning down—Celso is holding her at the time—to kiss Rowena and then the camera...

D: That goodbye moment.

G: Yes, it was very nice that that happened, if only to bring back Rowena—and myself, in a way—back into the picture in the final stage.

D: I think there is a powerful sense of coming back into the light at the end of the film, which has a lot of resonance with other works in which people descend into darkness—you know, Orpheus in Hades. So the shape of the film gains a lot from that ending and the feelings we attach to darkness and light, or being enclosed and being open. It comes very naturally out of the events, but at the same time it gives the film a quality that it wouldn't otherwise have. It's the hope it expresses that Maricel, particularly, can grow healthy and strong—that there's something she can get from the sun and the air.

G: What Celso says, right at the end that 'It's just not equal' is the key. It's a simple thing but it's the key to everything that is wrong. Just before that, trying to analyse why he's been pushed off his prime selling spot by the hotel management, he makes it clear when he says, 'I just don't know why they bother with such small things when they themselves are so rich'. I think ultimately

10 Forster, E. M. 1927, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harcourt, Orlando, Fl.

what persuaded me to go with a rhetorical ending was because it came very much out of Celso's own unprompted analysis. It's a very apt analysis, in the simplicity of his words—'It's just not equal'—in a world that holds to equality.