

Stephanie Syjuco

Artist Cinemas presents

Stephanie Syjuco, *Body Double (Platoon)* | Planet C: Week #2

Monday, June 21–Sunday, June 27, 2021

Join us on e-flux Video & Film for an online screening of **Stephanie Syjuco's *Body Double (Platoon)*** (2006), on view from Monday, June 21 through Sunday, June 27, 2021.

Body Double is a feature-length film of a tropical landscape that appears in glimpses, interspersed with varying durations of a completely black screen, and methodically recut from Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). The scenes of sky, mountains, foliage, and rivers are cropped into slivers, squares, and rectangles and the original cinematic audio track is left intact. By editing out all the visual narrative from the film and cropping the frame to focus on the peripheral landscapes, this work attempts to "search for the Philippines" via negation and reorientation. The overwhelming majority of Hollywood Vietnam war movies—including *Platoon*—were filmed in the Philippines. As a "body double" for Vietnam, the Philippines occupies a strange non-place in the imagination of the American public as being both familiar and yet oddly absent. This video project ignores the original filmic story to focus on the artist's own attempts at discovering her place of birth, through the lens of an American empire that has superimposed its own narratives upon it.

The film is presented alongside an essay by **Charles Mudede** written in conversation with the filmmaker.

Body Double (Platoon) is the second installment of Planet C, a program of films and essays convened by **Charles Mudede**, and comprising the seventh cycle of Artist Cinemas, a long-term, online series of film programs curated by artists for e-flux Video & Film.

Planet C will run from June 14 through July 25, 2021, with a new film and essay released each week.

The set was dream-huge and not far from downtown Harare. A bus or pirate taxi could, within thirty minutes, transport you from the skyscrapers of Zimbabwe's top business district to the propped-up fantasy-fronts for a late-Victorian Zanzibar-like trading center ruled by unscrupulous Arabs. The year was 1984. The film in production at this near-Harare location was the adaptation of H. Rider Haggard's 1885 novel *King Solomon's Mines*. It had two so-so names attached to it: Richard Chamberlain (a star from the past—the 1970s) and Sharon Stone (a star from the future—the 1990s). It consumed a very large number of black African extras.

At that time, Zimbabwe had broken from just over a century of white rule only four years before. With all of this post-revolutionary optimism swelling its chest, the new African country (formerly Rhodesia) and its capital (formerly Salisbury) were quick to promote the production of a Hollywood-scale movie as a sign of progress. The Zimbabwe film industry had a future. And the future was indeed what black rule promised the most: it could do progress as well as, if not better than, white rule. The pledge of the dominant party, Zimbabwe African Nation Union (ZANU), made this message clear: *pamberi ne Zimbabwe* (forward with Zimbabwe).|

But when *King Solomon's Mines* was released in 1985, black Africans experienced a shock. They were portrayed with no sympathy whatsoever. They were white-people eating savages (if they were unlucky) and the faceless slaves of equally faceless Arab traders (if they were lucky). Indeed, in one scene, a village of warrior blacks attempts to cook the stars in a large pot that includes corn, carrots, peppers, chopped onions (all non-indigenous veggies). Hardly *pamberi*.

Twenty years after watching *King Solomon's Mines* (black people stewing pre-*Basic Instinct's* Sharon Stone) at Rainbow theater in

Harare's First Street[1], I entered an exhibit that had opened in Seattle's James Harris Gallery. Its name: *Black Market*. Its artist: Stephanie Syjuco. One part of this show caught my imagination completely. It was a video installation called *Body Double (Platoon)*.

Syjuco, a San Francisco-based and Philippines-born American artist, had downloaded Oliver Stone's award-winning Vietnam film, *Platoon*, and blacked out (or redacted) everything but the geography of the country where it was filmed, the Philippines. And what was left of the work, which I first watched at Rainbow in 1987 (a year that saw two other films that were central to the development of my cinematic imagination, *Aliens* and *The Last Emperor*[2]), was the luxurious beauty (land, sea, skies) of the Philippines.█

Fifteen years after experiencing this soul-changing installation, Syjuco described its source of inspiration and meaning to me in three parts:

“The ‘80s saw a proliferation of Vietnam War-era movies, and director Oliver Stone's *Platoon* was considered an instant classic, along with Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, and a host of others. The narrative arcs of these movies are essentially the same: the young, white American soldier protagonist discovers the horrors of war while being morally tested by both rogue soldiers/colleagues and a largely nameless, faceless cast of Vietnamese ‘others.’ Together these films become a collective national reckoning with the fall of American exceptionalism and a struggle to regain a moral compass as a guiding light in the world. For me, the fact that these cinematic arcs are so similar is an indication that there is something deep about the American psyche's need to revisit, revise, review, and ultimately rewrite what actually happened, and to center the American subjective experience as the primary experience. The violence and degradations that occur to the expendable Asian extras along the way are meant to build character and move the

plot forward, not really to humanize them in any way. These movies are myopic by design.

“Now, many of these Vietnam War films were shot in the Philippines, and the entire country became essentially a stand-in or *body double* for the idea of Vietnam. The irony of this—the restaging of an entirely different war being shot in a tropical-like environment of an ex-American colony (the Philippines having been under American colonial rule from 1898 to 1946)—was not lost on me as a Filipinx American artist interested in the construction and fabrication of history. By watching these films I could examine the peripheries—the backgrounds, margins, and extras who populated this ersatz Vietnam but were actually Filipino locals. By systematically excising and blacking out the portions of the film that focused on the American protagonists, I sought to refocus attention onto the Philippines itself as an actor in a very American reconstruction of narrative history. What the audience winds up seeing are everything from idyllic landscapes, sky, fields, jungles, and mountains, and not the overlaid production of conflict. It's not meant to be a placid film, but one that highlights how the American experience may not be the *only experience*.”

“*Body Double* was one of the first works in which I intervened in the viewer's ability to see a given narrative—in this case a Hollywood film. Interestingly, it feels like there is a resurgence in the demand for artists of color to ‘represent’ themselves in order to counter long-standing omissions or misrepresentations in visual culture. But being visible is not necessarily positive if the ways in which you have been allowed to be visible have amounted to caricatures and tropes, or if the white gaze demands identity be performed in specific ways in order to be legible. I want to highlight the total construction of this gaze and how it works to reinforce systems of power and racial hierarchies.”

In *Syjuco Body Double*, I saw another body double, that of *King Solomon's Mines*. This vision became a music video I directed for a song, “rhodZi” (Rhodes), by Shabazz Palaces's Tendai “Baba”

Maraire[3] in 2012. When the pot with the cooking stars is finally rocked off the firepit and falls and rolls down a hill, all the viewer sees are the large, partially covered and fully exposed rocks that make the Zimbabwean landscape distinct. The story of the black savages is replaced by the story of the people's land. The gaze is reclaimed.

[1] While watching the movie, it dawned on me that its only reason for being in the world (and its ten-month Zimbabwe shoot—which is very long) was to capitalize on the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* mania.

[2] The scene that first exposed me to the real power of cinema: Joan Chen eating a white flower. The scene is in Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987). Chen's character, the wife of the emperor, goes mad when she sees in the future the disaster that will become of her husband's decision to cooperate with Japanese militarism. The weak emperor, who turned to the Japanese for support, is now nothing more than a puppet. Chen sees this fact, sees the emptiness of his power, and as the music plays in a hall celebrating the agreement between the emperor and the enemy of his countrymen, Chen begins to eat a flower, chewing its petals—her red lips, the green stem, the slow and bitter swallowing.
<https://images.app.goo.gl/xYhWV4CPBxAUeWA17>

[3] “rhodZI”: <https://www.gorillavsbear.net/video-baba-maraire-rhodzi/>

Stephanie Syjuco works in photography, sculpture, and installation, moving from handmade and craft-inspired mediums to digital editing and archive excavations. Recently, she has focused on how photography and image-based processes are implicated in the construction of racialized, exclusionary narratives of history and citizenship. Born in the Philippines, she is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and has exhibited widely, including at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art among

others. She is an Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and resides in Oakland, California.

Charles Tonderai Mudede is a Zimbabwean-born cultural critic, urbanist, filmmaker, college lecturer, and writer. He is senior staff writer of *The Stranger*, a lecturer at Cornish College, and has collaborated with the director Robinson Devor on three films, two of which, *Police Beat* and *Zoo*, premiered at Sundance, and one of which, *Zoo*, screened at Cannes. In the fall of 2018, he directed his first film, *Thin Skin*, from a script he wrote with Lindy West and Aham Oluo. He has also written for the *New York Times*, *Cinema Scope*, *Tank Magazine*, *LA Weekly*, *Nest Magazine*, *e-flux journal*, and *C Theory*.

<https://www.e-flux.com/video/402557/stephanie-syjuco-nbsp-body-double-platoon/>