

Tondo as a mythic urban space in real and reel: The Tondeños' point of view

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ABSTRACT

This research locates heroism in a cultural context and offers insights into the Filipino concept. It introduces the "FPJ Hero Arc," a novel framework for analyzing cinematic heroic performances that is applicable to both Philippine and non-Philippine contexts. This framework draws from Edward Soja's *Trialectics of Being* and André Bazin's *Cinematic Realism*. Through in-depth interviews, the researcher explored how Tondeños perceive their personal and communal identity in Tondo and its representation in cinema. The portrayal of Tondo as a place of danger and poverty reflects the real experiences of its inhabitants. It is seen as challenging yet resilient, shaping values such as *pakikisama* (harmony) and *katapangan* (courage). For Tondeños, Tondo and the late Filipino actor Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ) symbolize Filipino identity. Tondo is a reminder of the challenges faced by Filipinos, while FPJ symbolizes hope and inspiration. This message of hope and empowerment resonated with Tondeños and helped them overcome the challenges of their daily lives. Meanwhile, the construction of FPJ as a hero reflects the people's need for a protector; he embodies Tondo's best qualities: courage, righteousness, and willingness to help those in need. The study emphasizes addressing real problems with practical solutions, recognizing the role of fictional heroes like FPJ's characters in inspiring communal success in addressing societal challenges.

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Introduction

One way to choose a film set is to select an already existing locale, either fictional or real, to stage the action (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Corrigan & White, 2012). Action heroes are often associated with places (or spaces), as places are believed to give birth to the hero's character and serve as the stage or platform for the movie hero to deliver a cinematic performance. The symbiotic nexus of the hero and the place manifests when setting the mood and experience for a particular scene (Liu, 2008), conveying the theme and story atmosphere (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008), providing an arena for conflicts (Schatz, 1981), and serving as an essential component in the creation and communication of literal and symbolic meanings (Lethbridge & Mildorf, 2004). For Baker (2014), the use of settings or locations is a requirement. Geography, political and constitutional circumstances, and social norms and customs all contribute to a location's depiction and give great insight into the location on film by using a particular setting.

Filipino action movie actor Fernando Poe, Jr. (commonly known by the abbreviation of his name "FPJ") has become one of Philippine cinema's icons, has risen from matinee idol status to urban legend, and finally to myth and icon (Santiago, 2009) that earned him the moniker "Da King" (King of Philippine cinema). Way before FPJ's death on December 14, 2004, his long career as an action film star earned his status as the action movie hero found within the Philippine landscape through the characters he portrayed.

Social conditions and urban grittiness are common archetypal geographies in the city or urban films. Like FPJ's Tondo films (e.g., *Ito ang Maynila*, 1963; *Tundo: Isla Puting Bato*, 1977; *Tatak ng Tundo*, 1978; *Iyo ang Tondo*, *Kanya ang Cavite*, 1986; *Dito sa Pitong Gatang*, 1992; *Eseng ng Tondo*, 1997; and *Pakners*, 2003),

urban movies in the Philippines epitomize a hero who selflessly lays his life to eradicate social realities and other societal injustices. While there is undeniable attention to the FPJ hero myth in Philippine cinema, Tondo's spatiality serves as a platform and medium for the FPJ hero to exhibit his heroic acts. Thus, the hero's acts would not be justified as heroic without Tondo's spatiality. Therefore, the hero and place's interrelationship are a critical concept and element in developing and exploring mythic images in a film space, where the myth of the hero is the myth of the place and vice versa.

Filipino films that emphasize geography and space stress two issues: First is the abject poverty as the new space of Philippine cinema, and second, the transcendence of space over time that anchors the present time as a juncture for social realities (Tolentino, 2012) where the possibility of an exit against the helplessness of their condition are impossible for the masses (Tolentino, 2010). Morawski (2016) mentioned that the city could be analyzed politically and aesthetically to determine the meaning and intention of the film. Often, a city is a recurring production construct, a sign, a motif, a metaphor, and an experience in many action movies, where social conditions and urban grittiness are common sights. Chandler (2014) explains that myth acts as an extended metaphor that helps people make sense of experiences within a culture.

In FPJ films, Tondo's district in Manila has been a perennial setting stimulating the "real" urban experience that manifests the presence of social illnesses such as crimes, vices, and poverty. And for the hero to showcase his might, the city is in a "damaged condition" (Gutierrez III, 2016). To interrogate the realism of Tondo as a livable space, performance site, performative construct, and mythical place in movies, the researcher drew from the propositions of Edward Soja's (1996) Triad of

Space or Being, which sees space or place as a collaboration of all spatial constructs that are seen or felt (Firstspace), imagined (Secondspace), and fully lived (Thirdspace).

When watching a film, the audience sees some connection to some recognizable reality; whatever he sees, listens to, and reads will make him understand the text and its meaning (Baker, 2014). And to showcase the essence of reality, André Bazin argues that a film or scene interpretation should be left to the audience or spectator. Affirming Baker's (2014) claim, this article also argued that the interpretation of 'real' can become subjective, as what one person believes may be seen differently from another perspective. And as cinema encodes reality, gaining first-hand, direct experience of the world is also subjective.

Through this study, the researcher articulated how select Tondeños (Tondo locals) perceived their identity as locals and how they perceived Tondo as an urban setting and a performative construct in cinema, including FPJ movies. Specifically, this article and the author: (1). described how the participants perceived their personal and communal identity as Tondeños; (2). evaluated how Tondo figures as a supporting trope of place and space in real and reel settings; (3). identified how Tondo's spatiality functions as semiotic signs to (re) present social realities in urban spaces; (4). identified how Tondo's spatiality functions as constructs in developing the hero myth and the mythic space.

In this article, the author also introduced a pioneering framework termed the "FPJ Hero Arc," aiming to adapt a universal character arc framework to a local context. This innovative framework is inspired by the journey portrayed in the Tondo films of the late Filipino actor, Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ). The researcher had previously analyzed FPJ's Tondo films in her master's thesis titled.

Method

Anchored on Soja's Trialectics of Being and Bazin's Cinematic Realism, the researcher ideated an alternative character arc framework, labeled as the "FPJ Hero Arc" (see Figure 2), wherein elements represent the hero image and character transformation of FPJ in the following Tondo films: *Ito ang Maynila* (1963); *Tundo: Isla Puting Bato* (1977); *Tatak ng Tundo* (1978); *Iyo ang Tondo, Kanya ang Cavite* (1986); *Dito sa Pitong Gatang* (1992); *Eseng ng Tondo* (1997); and *Pakners* (2003). The researcher successfully formulated the "FPJ Hero Arc" from the results of her previous study to localize a universal character arc framework like Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey."

In the researcher's previous study, the parallelism between the movie hero and the place's transformation was observed, prompting the present study. The present study argued that the symbiotic nexus of the space and the hero are semiotic signs and co-existing performative constructs. Character transformation (personal change) correlates to a transformed community (communal change) and vice versa.

Within the context of the "FPJ Hero Arc," the process of personal change initiates through *personification*, characterized by the attribution of human-like qualities, emotions, actions, or behaviors that resonate with an individual's experiences. Such attribution fosters a relatable connection between oneself and the depicted qualities. *Transformation*, in this context, signifies a profound alteration or advancement that individuals undergo through comprehensive reconfiguration. Conversely, *glorification* involves the act of extolling, revering, or venerating an individual due to their inspiring actions or mere existence. This admiration then serves as a catalyst, motivating individuals (or an audience) towards transformation.

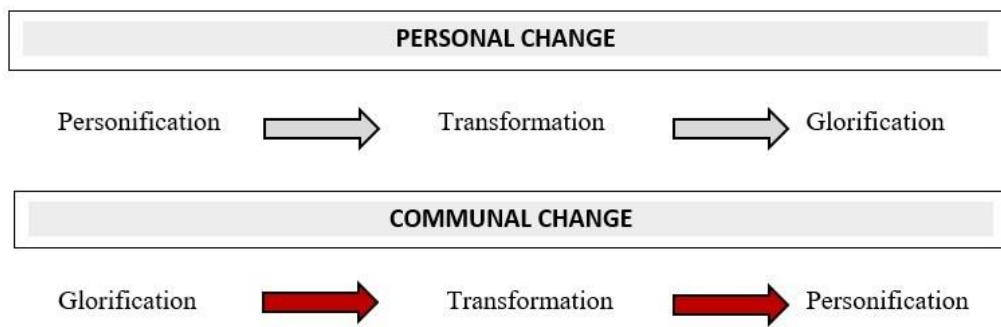


Figure 1. The “FPJ Hero Arc”

Note: The researcher has formulated this framework based on the findings of her earlier study titled “Hari ng Tondo: The Convergence of Hero and Place as Depicted in Fernando Poe, Jr.’s Tondo Films.”

Table 1. Interview Instrument

Tondo as a Mythic Urban Space in Real and Reel: The Tondeños’ POV			
Research Objectives	FPJ Hero Arc Primary Elements		
	Personification	Transformation	Glorification
<p>Objective 1</p> <p><i>To evaluate how Tondo figures as a supporting trope of place and space in real and reel settings.</i></p>	<p>Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe yourself as a Tondeño. • How do other people describe you? • What have you experienced in this place growing up? • What are your experiences while living here? 	<p>Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think of Tondo as a place? • Are you proud of Tondo? If YES, why? If NO, what are the areas to improve in this place? • Can you recall an instance where being a Tondeño helped you in any way? 	<p>Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think makes a hero? • Can you recall a movie about Tondo? • Can you describe the hero in this movie? • What do you think of the hero’s experience in Tondo? • Can you tell any similarities between you and the Tondo hero?
<p>Objective 2</p> <p><i>To identify how Tondo’s spatiality functions as semiotic signs to (re) present social realities in urban spaces and as constructs in developing the hero myth and the mythic space.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have qualities that make you different from others? From those outside Tondo? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do others you meet/you know see Tondo as a place? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does having a hero help Tondo?

Note: This researcher designed the interview instrument.

This inclination to transform becomes increasingly personal, especially when resemblances or shared traits are identified between the audience and those who serve as inspirational figures.

Meanwhile, communal change unfolds by identifying a revered persona (*glorification*) recognized within the community. Such an emblematic figure serves as a template, guiding community members on their path towards the sought-after *transformation*. However, the transformation only attains authenticity when an individual not only acknowledges the glorified persona but also internalizes and embodies (*personification*) the commendable attributes associated with them.

Guided by the interview instrument (see Table 1), the researcher implemented semi-structured Zoom- and audio-recorded in-depth interviews with two Tondeños (Tondo locals) who have been residing in Tondo for more than fifteen (15) years. A semi-structured approach is an interview in which the interviewer asks only a few predetermined questions while the rest are not planned. While the interview questions were initially written in English, the researcher conducted the interviews using Filipino, enabling a free-flowing, casual

conversation. Then, interview responses in Filipino were transcribed into English.

The interview questions and responses were classified according to the primary elements of the FPJ Hero Arc: personification, transformation, and glorification. For this study, the researcher subscribed to these elements' basic definitions and indicators (see Table 2) to operationalize the proposed framework.

The researcher analyzed the data from the lens of Soja's Spatiality and Bazin's Cinematic Realism inscribed in the "FPJ Hero Arc" framework. As the researcher proposes a framework for analyzing the hero's performance and place as co-performative constructs, the framework analysis method is suitable to achieve the study's objectives. Framework analysis is a versatile qualitative data analysis method that can be adapted to various research questions and data sets, especially when the objective is not only to answer research questions but also to evaluate theories and develop a new understanding of an existing theory (Spencer et al., 2003).

The FPJ Hero Arc elements of personification, transformation, and glorification served as the code frames. Coding is the process of assigning labels

Table 2. *Elements and Indicators of the FPJ Hero Arc*

Elements	Personification <i>On being a Tondeño</i>	Transformation <i>Tondo as an urban setting</i>	Glorification <i>Outcomes of transformation</i>
Definition	Personal nature, human characteristics, and attributes	Change in form or appearance	The action of describing or representing something as admirable
Indicators	Identity, traits, qualities, characteristics, attributes	Personal experience/ encounter with the place	Image(s) associated with someone perceived as a better person

Note: The researcher created the table containing elements and indicators and provided definitions for the concepts within the study's context.

to pieces of data so they can be sorted and analyzed (Hassan, n.d.). While there is a more detailed process constituting the framework analysis: (1) familiarization, (2) identifying a thematic framework, (3) indexing, (4) charting, (5) mapping and interpretation (Iliffe et al., 2015), the present study, however, implemented a simplified version of the methodology that encapsulated all these stages.

Results and Discussion

Only two Tondeños agreed to participate in the interview among the ten (10) invitations sent in December 2022 via email and Facebook Messenger. Women were invited to participate in the interview, but a few refused as they believed that their husbands or partners knew the subject better or that their husbands/partners could give better answers. To quote one response, "*Pasensya na wala akong masyadong alam diyan, 'yung asawa ko baka mas makatulong.*" (I apologize, as I am unfamiliar with [the topic]. Perhaps my husband could help you better).

Interview texts were coded into concepts according to the "FPJ Hero Arc" primary elements: personification, transformation, and glorification. The concepts derived from the interview responses provided an overview of how the informants perceived the Tondeños, Tondo as an urban setting, and the hero image.

The researcher generated a table (referred to as Table 3) summarizing the concepts derived from the in-depth interviews, which are further elaborated upon in the following sections of the paper. The *personification* cluster sheds light on the individual qualities, human traits, and characteristics associated with being a Tondeño. In contrast, the *transformation* cluster examines alterations in the shape, appearance, or features of Tondo as an urban environment. Meanwhile, *glorification* refers

to the portrayal or depiction of something as praiseworthy, frequently stemming from a positive transformation.

The Tondeños' perceived identity

The research informants described two images when asked about the Tondeños in Tondo. *Pagiging matapang*, or showcase of strength, can be viewed as either a show of aggression (being *sigá* or bully) or having the courage to overcome life's challenges.

They have regarded Tondo as a place and experience of chaos, crimes, riots, gang violence, *basag-ulo* or *basagulero* (troublemaker or rowdy), and poverty (e.g., *mainit* (not well-ventilated), crowded, *maingay* (noisy or loud)). Amid the urban chaos, the place serves as a *tahanan* (home) of friendly, sociable, and humble people. The interview informants are aware of the connotations attached to the image of Tondo, but they hope that outsiders can see Tondeños in their real characters. In the words of Marlon,

"Sa mga tagalabas na hindi nakakaalam sa lugar ng Tondo o sa mga taong naninirahan [dito]... 'yung mga Tondeño, mga totoong tao 'yan... mga tunay na matatapang, alam 'yung kanilang mga responsibilidad, kayang mabuhay kahit sa kalsada o sa kalye, hindi nahihiya para mabuhay ang pamilya... magaling makisama. Tapos na 'yung mga panahon ni Asiong Salonga na mga sigá-sigá. 'Yung mga taga Tondo palakaibigan 'yang mga 'yan kung uunawain mo lang sila, iintindihin ang kanilang kalagayan o situasyon."

(For those who are not familiar with the place called Tondo or the people living here... The people of Tondo are true individuals... They are genuinely brave, they know their responsibilities, and they can survive even on the streets without shame in providing for their families... They are good at getting along with others. The era of Asiong Salonga and gangsters is already over. The people of Tondo are friendly, and they can be understood and empathized with regarding their situation.)

Table 3. *Concepts Derived from the Interview Responses*

Elements	Personification <i>On being a Tondeño</i>	Transformation <i>Tondo as an urban setting</i>	Glorification <i>Outcomes of transformation</i>
Definition	Personal nature, human characteristics, and attributes	Change in form, appearance, or attributes	The action of describing or representing something as admirable
Indicators	Identity, Traits, Qualities, Characteristics, Attributes	Personal experience/ encounter with the place	Image(s) associated with someone perceived as a better person
Concepts that emerged during the interview with Andy (<i>Informant 1</i>)	<p><i>Matapang</i> (brave or courageous), <i>mas marunong mag-ingat</i> (more cautious or careful), <i>nakikisama</i> (sociable or accommodating), <i>nakikipagkaibigan</i> (friendly or amicable), <i>hindi suplado</i> (not aloof or unapproachable)</p> <p><i>Basagulero</i> (troublemaker or rowdy), <i>minsan walang disiplina</i> (sometimes lacks discipline), <i>sigá</i> (tough guy or bully), <i>sigá-sigaan</i> (engages in bullying or thuggery)</p>	<p>Riot, <i>magulo</i> (disorderly or chaotic), <i>tahanan</i> (home), <i>babalik at babalik ako</i> (I'll keep coming back), <i>napagtripan</i> (became a target of mischief or teasing), <i>suntukan</i> (fistfight or brawl), <i>nangungursunada</i> (bossy or domineering), crowded, <i>maingay</i> (noisy or loud), crime-ridden</p> <p><i>Matututo ka na makisama</i> (You will learn to get along with others), <i>matututo ka na maging matalino</i> (You will learn to be smart or intelligent), <i>matututo ka na maging maingat</i> (You will learn to be cautious or careful), <i>matututo ka na protektahan ang sarili mo</i> (You will learn to protect yourself)</p>	<p><i>Tumutulong kahit na walang hinihinging kapalit</i> (helps without asking for anything in return), <i>mabait</i> (kind or nice), <i>malalapitan</i> (approachable), <i>lumaking mahirap</i> (grew up poor), <i>malakas ang loob</i> (brave or courageous)</p> <p><i>Walang kinatatakutan</i> (fearless or courageous), <i>inspirasyon para gumawa ng tama</i> (inspiration to do the right thing), <i>kinukumbinsi ka na gumawa ng tama</i> (persuades you to do the right thing)</p>

<p>Concepts that emerged during the interview with Marlon (Informant 2)</p>	<p><i>Matapang na ginagampanan ang mga responsibilidad</i> (brave in fulfilling responsibilities), <i>araw-araw na lumalaban sa hamon ng buhay</i> (faces life's challenges every day), <i>naghahanap-buhay para sa pamilya</i> (earns a living for the family), <i>nakikisama sa mga kapitbahay</i> (gets along with the neighbors), <i>nakikibagay</i> (adaptable or flexible), <i>palakaibigan</i> (friendly or sociable)</p> <p><i>Kayang mabuhay kahit sa kalsada o sa kalye</i> (able to survive even on the streets), <i>hindi nahihiya para mabuhay ang pamilya</i> (not ashamed to provide for the family), <i>sig-a-siga</i> (tough or rough), <i>hindi madadamot</i> (not stingy or selfish), <i>nagtutulungan</i> (helpful or cooperative, street smart), <i>may angas</i> (confident or assertive)</p> <p><i>Nakatapak pa rin sa lupa kahit na umuunlad sa buhay</i> (grounded even while achieving success in life)</p>	<p><i>Representasyon ng buong bansa</i> (representation of the entire country), <i>maraming tao</i> (crowded), <i>magulo</i> (chaotic or disorderly)</p> <p><i>Madaling makisama o makibagay</i> (easy to get along with or adapt to different situations), <i>may corrupt na lider</i> (has a corrupt leader)</p>	<p><i>Inuuna ang kapakanan ng mga nasasakupan niya at hindi ang pansariling interes</i> (prioritizes the welfare of his constituents and not his own interests)</p> <p><i>Tumatayong</i> (serves as a leader), <i>ordinaryong tao</i> (ordinary person), <i>lumalaban nang patas</i> (fights fairly), <i>nagtatrabaho nang maayos</i> (works well)</p> <p><i>Ginagawa ang responsibilidad sa pamilya at sa komunidad</i> (fulfilling responsibilities to the family and community), <i>matuwid</i> (upright or just)</p> <p><i>Nakakapagprovide sa pamilya</i> (able to provide for the family), <i>mabuting ama</i> (good father), <i>mabuting asawa</i> (good husband), <i>mabuting halimbawa</i> (good example)</p>
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The relationship between the hero, the setting, and the audience in film narratives is a multifaceted one, reflecting the complexities found in the Tondeños' perception of their own identity. Just as in film, where the hero's character is intertwined with the chosen setting (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Corrigan & White, 2012), the Tondeños' identity is shaped by the physical space of Tondo, as well as the social and cultural forces at play (Tolentino, 2010). This interplay mirrors the symbiotic connection between the hero and the place in cinema, where the setting serves as a stage for the hero's performance and contributes to the narrative's mood and thematic elements (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Liu, 2008).

Much like the portrayal of Filipino action movie icon Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ), who became synonymous with the hero archetype within the Philippine context (Santiago, 2009), Tondo's spatiality is essential in shaping the hero's acts and the perception of heroism itself. Tondo represents both adversity and resilience, much like how Firstspace embodies danger and hardship, and Secondspace signifies resilience and hope (Soja, 1996). FPJ's heroics in Tondo films resonate with the Tondeños, who face challenges like those depicted on screen, emphasizing the intertwined myth of the hero and the place (Chandler, 2014).

Furthermore, just as in cinematic interpretations where reality is subjective (Bazin) and open to audience interpretation (Baker, 2014), the Tondeños' perceived identity is multifaceted. They acknowledge the external perception of Tondo as a place of chaos and poverty but emphasize the authentic, resilient, and sociable nature of its residents. This mirrors the idea that space is not a singular entity but comprises Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace (Soja, 1996). The Tondeños' identity is shaped by these interplaying spatialities, where the physical space reflects challenges (Firstspace), the

community's resilience and unity defy those challenges (Secondspace), and the hope for a better future exists (Thirdspace). Just as cinema encodes reality subjectively, the Tondeños' identity is a dynamic construct, constantly evolving and negotiated within the complex spatialities of Tondo.

Tondo as a semiotic sign representing social realities

The experiences of Tondeños living in Tondo illuminate the challenges they face daily, which require them to be cautious and self-reliant due to the perceived danger of their environment. Their experiences in Tondo mirror the broader societal issues faced by the Philippines, with corruption and neglect by leaders being common themes. These challenges underscore the need for government intervention to address poverty and societal injustices, emphasizing the role of the government in improving the lives of Tondeños and addressing root causes of poverty in the community. Tondo, as a Firstspace characterized by poverty and corruption, becomes a microcosm of the broader societal struggles that resonate with the Filipino collective experience.

The interplay between heroes and their locales, exemplified by FPJ's iconic roles in Tondo, highlights how cinematic narratives and real-world social realities converge. This convergence underscores the symbiotic relationship between hero and place, where the hero's actions gain significance through the portrayal of their environment. The experiences of Tondeños in Tondo further illuminate the challenges faced by the community and the broader Filipino society, emphasizing the role of government intervention in addressing these issues. This scholarly dialogue and integration underscore the complex interplay between cinema, social realities, and audience interpretation.

The challenges they face daily include being able to protect themselves from any danger, pushing them to be more cautious or *mas makisama* in a chaotic place like Tondo because not every day that you can be helped off your situation.

As Andy recalled his experience:

“Kung paano ako lumaki na naging maingat... Kunyari may mga balita na sa kabilang barangay [na] may nilooban, syempre kayo praning kayo, ilolock niyo ‘yung pinto... Parang matalino ka na protektahan ang sarili mo.”

(How I grew up and became cautious... For instance, when there are reports of a burglary in a nearby barangay, of course, you become paranoid and lock your doors... It’s like you have become smart enough to protect yourself.)

They believe their experiences in Tondo reflect the Philippines’ collective experience as a nation.

“... Kahit saan may mga corrupt na leader... ‘yung leader hindi magawa kung ano ‘yung dapat gawin...” “... Kasi ngayon nangyayari, gagamitin ‘yung posisyon para kumita, para umunlad sa pansariling interes, tapos ‘yung nasasakupan pababayaan. Kapag medyo napuna, magpapapogi, kunyari may project.”

(...There are corrupt leaders everywhere... Leaders who cannot do what they should do... ... Because what’s happening now is that they use their positions to profit and develop their own interests, while neglecting their constituents. When they get called out, they try to show off, pretending to have projects.)

Poverty is one of the urban problems they cannot solve independently, hence they need for government intervention.

“Mahirap ‘yan kasi kailangan ‘yung mismong gobyerno na ‘yung kumilos para magbago. Hindi kaya ng mga Tondeño lang na kami-kami ‘yung gagawa. Siguro tulungan na lang ‘yung Tondo,

lalo na ‘yung mga Tondeño na hindi nakaaangat sa buhay, ‘yung mga hirap. Kasi alam naman natin, hindi nila kayang tulungan ang mga sarili nila, [baka] ‘yung mga anak nila ganun din ang mangyari.”

(That’s difficult because the government itself needs to take action to bring about change. It’s not something that the Tondeños can do on their own. Maybe we can just help Tondo, especially those Tondeños who are struggling in life and in poverty. Because we know that they cannot help themselves, and their children might end up in the same situation.)

Tondo is represented as a Firstspace, a physical space characterized by poverty, crime, and corruption. The people of Tondo live in this space and experience it daily. They have developed strategies for coping with the challenges of living in this space, such as being cautious (or *mas makisama*). However, they also believe that their experiences in Tondo reflect the Philippines’ collective experience as a nation. They see the same problems of poverty, crime, and corruption in other parts of the country.

The informants’ responses also raised important questions about the role of government in addressing the challenges faced by Tondo. Poverty is one of the urban problems they cannot solve independently. This suggests that the government has a responsibility to help improve the lives of Tondeños and to address the root causes of poverty in the community.

In examining the relationship between cinematic heroes and their locales, scholars like Bordwell and Thompson (2008), Corrigan and White (2012), Liu (2008), Schatz (1981), and Lethbridge and Mildorf (2004) underscore how places, whether real or fictional, become integral to hero narratives. These settings not only shape the hero's character but also serve as stages for their cinematic performances, setting the

mood, conveying themes, and providing arenas for conflicts. Similarly, Baker (2014) emphasizes that a locale's portrayal in film is influenced by geographical, political, and societal factors, offering insights into the represented location.

In the context of Filipino cinema, the iconic action hero (FPJ), epitomizes this connection between heroism and place, particularly Tondo, a district in Manila. As Santiago (2009) notes, FPJ's enduring status as an action movie hero is inextricably linked to the characters he portrayed within the Philippine landscape. Tondo, characterized by social ills such as crime, vice, and poverty, serves as a backdrop for FPJ's heroic acts, lending authenticity to his roles. Gutierrez III (2016) emphasizes that for the hero's actions to be perceived as heroic, the setting often needs to be portrayed as "damaged." Thus, the symbiotic relationship between hero and place emerges as a critical concept, where the myth of the hero and the place are intertwined.

Tolentino (2012) and Morawski (2016) highlight how geography and space in Filipino cinema spotlight issues like urban poverty and societal realities, while Chandler (2014) underscores the role of myth in helping audiences make sense of cultural experiences. Tondo, as depicted in FPJ's films, symbolizes urban hardships, reflecting broader societal challenges. This spatiality serves as a platform for FPJ's heroic acts, and the intersection of hero and place aligns with Edward Soja's *Trialectics of Space* (1996), where space encompasses the seen, imagined, and lived experiences.

Furthermore, the audience's interpretation of film texts is influenced by their understanding of reality, aligning with Baker's (2014) perspective. André Bazin's view of film interpretation as a subjective process reinforces this notion, as individuals may perceive 'reality' differently. The encoding of reality in cinema thus becomes

a subjective experience, with the audience's understanding shaped by their unique perspectives.

Fernando Poe, Jr. as a Tondo hero

FPJ's portrayal as a Tondo hero resonates with the informants, who perceive him as a transformative figure, embodying selflessness, and righteousness, despite his characters being fictional compared to real-life Tondo figures like Asiong Salonga. For them, FPJ serves as a role model, showcasing how to navigate adversity and uphold virtuous values. This perception is rooted in the realism of FPJ's films, which authentically depict Tondo's harsh realities, while also highlighting the resilience of its people. FPJ's movies, including those set in Tondo, have created a *Secondspace*, a representation of Tondo in his cinematic works, influencing the way Tondo residents perceive themselves and their community. These films have fostered a *Thirdspace*, a space of lived experience, where individuals see themselves as heroes capable of overcoming challenges in their impoverished, crime-ridden neighborhood. Thus, FPJ's cinematic realism contributes to a sense of pride and identity among Tondo's inhabitants, blurring the boundaries between myth and reality.

The informants regarded (FPJ) as a picture of a transformational leader or hero. Even when not deliberately mentioned in the questions, FPJ is the first thought in mind when asked about Tondo heroes in general.

"Mga FPJ, mga Erap... Hari ng Tondo... Ang dami kasing pelikula ni FPJ eh... ang alam ko nga may mga Tondo, hindi ko lang alam 'yung title," said Andy.

(FPJ, Erap... 'Hari ng Tondo'... There are many films by FPJ; I know there are some about Tondo, but I don't know the exact titles).

On the other hand, Marlon shared:

“Actually, ang mga alam kong pelikula sa Tondo, [ang] napanood ko ‘yung bida si FPJ. Habang ako, ‘yan ‘yung paborito ng mga tiyuhin ko, pati tatay ko... ‘yung pinakaluma na tungkol sa Tondo, ‘yung alam ko, Tatak ng Tundo... Eseng ng Tundo... Dito sa Pitong Gatang, [Iyo] ang Tundo, [Kanya] ang Cavite.”

(Actually, the movies I know that are set in Tondo, the ones I’ve seen, have FPJ as the lead. While I was growing up, those were my uncles’ and even my dad’s favorite movies. The oldest one I know about Tondo is ‘Tatak ng Tundo’... ‘Eseng ng Tundo’... ‘Dito sa Pitong Gatang,’ ‘Iyo ang Tundo,’ ‘Kanya ang Cavite’.)

Despite the awareness that FPJ’s characters in movies are fictional compared to Tondo’s real-life gangster Asiong Salonga, FPJ is still regarded as a hero worth emulating because of his selfless, righteous traits. As Andy mentioned:

“[Kung ikukumpara sa karakter ni ER Ejercito (as Asiong Salonga) sa Hari ng Tondo], mas gusto ko ‘yung FPJ kasi mas mabait, mas malalapitan. ‘Yun nga lang kasi ‘yung karakter ni FPJ hindi siya totoo, pero ‘yung Hari ng Tondo, ‘yung Asiong Salonga, totoo ‘yun eh.”

(If we compare the character of ER Ejercito as Asiong Salonga in ‘Hari ng Tondo,’ I prefer FPJ because he is kinder and more approachable. However, the character of FPJ is not real, while the Hari ng Tondo, Asiong Salonga, is real.)

Meanwhile, Marlon said:

“Sa Pitong Gatang, si FPJ gumanap siyang kapitan ng barangay, maayos ‘yung pamumuno niya, lalo na sa katahimikan at kapayapaan ng barangay nila. Para sakín hero siya dun. Sa Eseng ng Tundo, isa naman siyang matuwid na pulis, kalaban niya dun ‘yung masasamang loob, para sakín bayani rin siya dun. Sa [Iyo] ang Tundo, [Kanya] ang Cavite, matuwid din siya dun at bayani rin siya kasi... although yung

past nila ni Ramon Revilla hindi maganda dahil nakulong sila, after naman nun naging maayos siya, sinusugpo naman nila ‘yung kriminalidad, nagtulungan sila. ‘Yung Tatak ng Tundo naman, although nagkahiwalay ‘yung landas Erap, nasa tama [si FPJ], nasa hustisya siya, nasa tama siyang landas para sundin ‘yung batas.”

(In ‘Pitong Gatang,’ FPJ played the role of a barangay captain. His leadership was good, especially in maintaining peace and order in their barangay. For me, he was a hero in that movie. In ‘Eseng ng Tundo,’ he played the role of an honest police officer fighting against criminals. For me, he was also a hero in that movie. In ‘[Iyo] ang Tundo, [Kanya] ang Cavite,’ he was also a hero because he was righteous and fought against criminality with Ramon Revilla despite their past mistakes. Although their paths diverged in ‘Tatak ng Tundo’ and Erap’s was not good, FPJ remained on the right path, following the law and justice.)

At some point, one participant sees himself and his life represented in how FPJ lived his life in his movies. Marlon said:

“Sa pagkakapareho [namin ng hero], masasabi ko para sa pamilya ko. Sa komunidad hindi naman ako masyadong aktibo katulad nung [karakter ni FPJ], kasi hindi naman ako palalabas masyado dito sa Tondo... hindi ako aktibo pagdating sa mga gawain dito sa komunidad. Masasabi ko na lang para sa pamilya ko since nakakapagprovide naman ako, mabuting ama ko sa mga anak ko, mabuti rin naman akong asawa... para sakín ‘yun ang kontribusyon ko [sa] pagiging mabuting halimbawa.”

(As for similarities between me and the hero, I can only say it’s for my family. In the community, I’m not that active like the character of FPJ because I don’t go out much here in Tondo... I’m not active when it comes to community activities. I can only say that for my family, since I am able to provide for them, I am a good father to my children and a good husband as well... for me, that’s my contribution to being a good example.)

FPJ films, including his Tondo movies, can be seen as a form of Secondspace, a representation of Tondo created by his thoughts, ideas, and images. These films have had a profound impact on the way that people in Tondo see themselves and their community. They have created a Thirdspace, a space of lived experience, in which people can see themselves as heroes, as people who can overcome the challenges of living in a poor and crime-ridden community. The realism of his movies is evident in the way that they portray Tondo. The films do not shy away from the rampant poverty and crime in Tondo, but they also show the strength and resilience of the people who live there. The films are a realistic portrayal of Tondo, and they have helped to create a sense of pride and identity among the people who live there.

The informants see FPJ as a hero because of his selfless, righteous traits. They also see him as a representation of their community, Tondo. FPJ's movies often feature characters struggling to survive in a difficult environment. The informants identify with these characters and see FPJ as a role model who shows them how to overcome adversity. The selection of film settings, whether fictional or real, is a critical aspect of filmmaking, often influencing the hero's portrayal and the overall cinematic experience. These settings serve as a stage for heroes to perform and convey their characters (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Corrigan & White, 2012). Liu (2008) notes how settings shape the mood, atmosphere, and storytelling in a film. They become arenas for conflicts (Schatz, 1981) and contribute to the creation of literal and symbolic meanings (Lethbridge & Mildorf, 2004). Baker (2014) underscores the significance of settings influenced by geography, politics, and social norms, offering insights into a location's portrayal in films.

To analyze the realism of Tondo as a filmic space, the study adopts Edward Soja's *Trialectics of Space or Being* (1996), acknowledging the layered spatial constructs of seen, imagined, and fully lived spaces. Cinema, as Baker (2014) suggests, provides audiences with a connection to recognizable realities, leaving interpretation to the viewer, aligning with André Bazin's stance on allowing spectators to interpret filmic scenes. Within Philippine cinema, (FPJ) has emerged as an iconic figure, transitioning from a matinee idol to a legend and myth, earning him the title "Da King" of Philippine cinema (Santiago, 2009). FPJ's enduring legacy is rooted in his portrayal of heroes in the Philippine landscape, particularly within the gritty urban milieu of Tondo, Manila (e.g., 'Tatak ng Tundo,' 'Eseng ng Tondo'). Tondo, marked by social ills like crime, vice, and poverty, serves as a canvas for FPJ's heroic acts, where the hero's deeds derive their significance from this spatial context. The interplay between the hero and the place becomes a pivotal concept, blurring the lines between myth and reality (Tolentino, 2012).

Filipino films often emphasize geography and space to highlight societal issues, particularly urban poverty, portraying the present as a juncture for addressing social realities (Tolentino, 2010). The city itself is a multifaceted construct in action films, symbolizing social conditions and urban challenges (Morawski, 2016; Chandler, 2014). FPJ's Tondo films depict the district as a site of genuine urban experiences, reflecting the presence of these social problems, which are integral to his hero's narrative.

The hero image as personal motivation

The hero image in Filipino cinema, as exemplified by FPJ, serves as a personal motivator, inspiring viewers to do good and champion noble causes. This image offers

a pattern for righteous living, instigating personal and communal change (Marlon's perspective). In the face of daily struggles, heroes emerge in various forms, such as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) (Andy's view). Yet, the cinematic hero image must be complemented with practical solutions to real-world problems like poverty and crime, which may necessitate collective efforts, even involving government intervention (government as hero).

The hero's relationship with their environment is a fundamental aspect of cinema, and in the case of Filipino cinema, it's exemplified by FPJ's iconic hero image. This image serves as a powerful motivator, inspiring individuals to make positive changes in society. However, the hero image alone is insufficient to address complex real-world issues, and practical, collective solutions are often required, possibly involving government intervention.

A hero possesses the courage to move when others are afraid to commit, *"kaya sila tinuring na bayani, ginawa nila 'yung isang bagay na kinatatakutan o inaayawan ng iba, kaya dahil dun, tinitingala sila"* (heroes are considered heroes because they did something that was feared or disliked by others, and because of that, they are respected.), said Marlon.

The hero inspires and motivates you to do good, *"'Yung inspiration para gumawa ng tama... Nakukumbinsi ka na gumawa ng tama"* (The inspiration to do what is right... It convinces you to do what is right), stressed Andy. Having a hero image provides a pattern of how life is lived righteously, not only for personal gain but for the greater good. Communal change begins with personal change on a collective scale. For Marlon,

"Nakakatulong 'yung [pagkakaroon ng hero] kasi kung icoconsider mo 'yung sarili mo bilang isa kang hero o bayani, o dadalhin mo 'yung mga katangian ng pagiging isang bayani, magiging maganda at maunlad ang komunidad. [Kung] magsisimula sayo bilang isang indibidwal,

dadalhin mo sa pamilya mo, tapos mayroon ka pang leader na may ganun ding katangian... mangyayari niyan 'yung buong komunidad magiging maayos. Kung isasapuso nila 'yung pagiging hero."

(Having a hero helps because if you consider yourself as a hero or bring the qualities of being a hero, the community will become better and more prosperous. If it starts with you as an individual, you bring it to your family; then you have a leader with those same qualities... the whole community will be improved. If they embrace the idea of being a hero.)

Amid daily life struggles, heroes appear in different forms and images every day. Andy believes:

"Kahit naman siguro sino pwedeng maging bayani, [gaya ng] mga OFW (Overseas Filipino Workers), mga modernong bayani."

(Anyone can be a hero in their own way, like the OFWs, our modern-day heroes.)

While the hero image in cinema like FPJ motivates people to be good and forward good causes, real-world problems like poverty and crimes must be paired with realistic solutions that do not only rely on a single hero. In this sense:

"mas kailangan ng Tondo [ng] tulong mula sa gobyerno. Siguro kung gobyerno 'yung magiging bayani."

(Tondo needs more assistance from the government. Perhaps if the government becomes the hero.)

The hero image in cinema can be seen as a representation of Thirdspace. The hero image is a powerful motivator that can inspire people to do good and strive for a better world. The hero image is a figure of possibility, a reminder that we can all be

heroes. The hero image can inspire us to act, do good, and make the world better.

However, the hero image is not enough. The hero image is just a representation of reality. It is not a substitute for real-world action. A single hero cannot solve real-world problems like poverty and crime. They require realistic solutions that involve the cooperation of many people. In this sense, the government can be seen as a hero. The government has the power to make a difference, improve its citizens' lives, and create a more just and equitable society.

The relationship between heroes and the places they inhabit is a key element in cinema, often shaping the character's identity and providing a stage for their heroic performances (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Corrigan & White, 2012). The hero's symbiotic connection with the setting is evident in how it influences the mood, conveys themes, sets the stage for conflicts, and adds depth to the film's symbolic meanings (Liu, 2008; Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Schatz, 1981; Lethbridge & Mildorf, 2004). This interplay between the hero and their environment is crucial in exploring mythic images within film spaces (Chandler, 2014).

In the context of Filipino cinema, the legendary actor Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ) personified the action hero who stood against social injustices, often within the gritty urban landscape of Tondo, Manila (Santiago, 2009). Tondo's spatiality provided a platform for FPJ's heroic acts, making the hero and place inextricably linked (Gutierrez III, 2016). Tondo, as depicted in FPJ's films, embodied the harsh realities of crime, vice, and poverty, setting the stage for his heroic interventions.

Filipino films often emphasize geographical and spatial aspects, reflecting the abject poverty and societal challenges (Tolentino, 2012). The city itself has become a symbol and a canvas for political and aesthetic analysis (Morawski, 2016).

However, it's essential to recognize that film interpretations are subjective, and the hero's portrayal as a representation of reality can vary from one perspective to another (Baker, 2014).

Indigenizing a universal character arc

Joseph Campbell (as cited by Voytilla & Vogler, 1999) argues that many common patterns run through hero myths and stories worldwide, including media texts, thus discovering several primary stages that almost every hero quest goes through. He calls this structure the Monomyth or "The Hero's Journey." These patterns narrate repetitive archetypes, conventions, and stories throughout heroic tales.

The selection of film settings, whether fictional or real, plays a crucial role in the portrayal of action heroes (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008; Corrigan & White, 2012). These locales provide the stage for heroes to perform cinematic feats and are intrinsically linked to the hero's character development (Liu, 2008). The synergy between the hero and the setting is evident in mood setting, conveying thematic elements, framing conflicts (Schatz, 1981), and imparting literal and symbolic meanings (Lethbridge & Mildorf, 2004). As Baker (2014) notes, the choice of settings is a necessity, influenced by geography, political circumstances, and cultural norms.

Within the Filipino context, Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ) emerged as a cinematic icon, evolving from a matinee idol to a legendary figure known as "Da King" (Santiago, 2009). FPJ's action films, set in places like Tondo, epitomized heroes who confront social injustices and poverty (Tolentino, 2012). The relationship between the hero and Tondo's spatiality is essential; FPJ's heroism gains significance within this gritty urban backdrop, where his acts become heroic through their contrast with the challenging

environment (Gutierrez III, 2016). Drawing on Edward Soja's *Trialectics of Space* (1996), the study explores Tondo as a complex space – seen, imagined, and lived – in FPJ's films. In film viewing, audiences seek connections to familiar realities (Baker, 2014), but André Bazin suggests that interpreting a scene is subjective, allowing spectators to find their own meaning. This article agrees with this view, acknowledging that cinema encodes reality subjectively.

The study aims to indigenize the universal character arc, challenging Joseph Campbell's Western-centric Monomyth. It introduces the "FPJ Hero Arc," a framework derived from the researcher's previous study titled "Hari ng Tondo: The Convergence of Hero and Place as Depicted in Fernando Poe, Jr.'s Tondo Films,"

emphasizing the interconnectedness of hero, place, and audience (Figure 3). This symbiotic relationship extends beyond personal change; it impacts communal transformation, providing a localized perspective on heroic journeys in Philippine cinema.

The present study not only highlights the symbiotic relationship between hero and place but also introduces a pyramidal relationship involving the hero, audience, and space (Figure 2). In this dynamic, the audience identifies with the hero's transformation, using it as a model for their own personal growth, ultimately leading to communal change. This multifaceted relationship deepens the understanding of heroism in a localized context, enriching the discourse on cinematic storytelling.

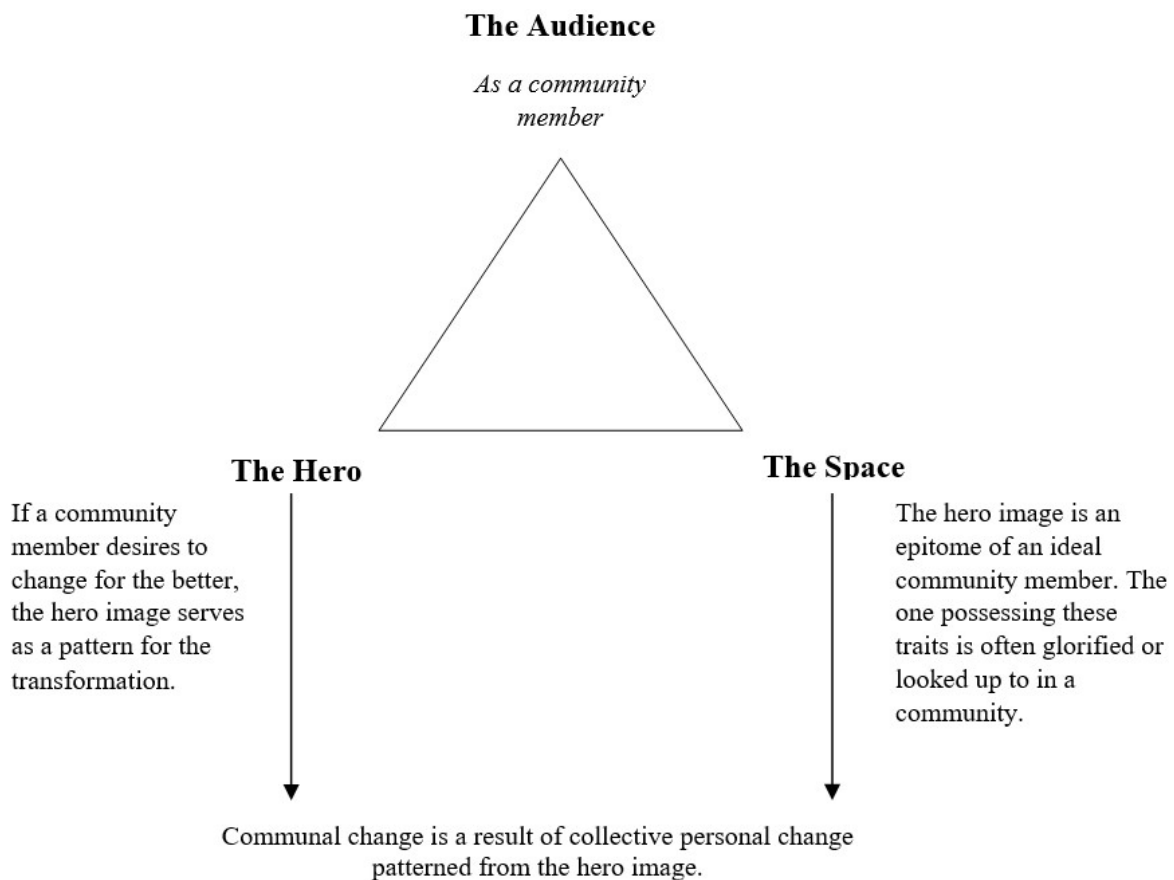


Figure 2. *The Pyramidal Relationship between the Audience, Hero, and Space*

Note: This representation is the researcher's depiction of how the audience, hero, and space mutually exist as performative constructs.

Conclusion

The author's interviews with Tondeños aimed to delve into their perceptions of Tondo as an urban landscape and how these perceptions sculpted their comprehension of heroism and the role of heroes in their lives. The findings unveiled a multifaceted portrait of Tondo, seen as both a crucible of danger, poverty, and daily struggles, and a symbol of resilience and hope. In navigating life in Tondo, caution and self-reliance emerged as pivotal values, exemplified by the principles of *pakikisama* (fostering harmonious relationships) and *katapangan* (embracing bravery). Tondo's depiction as a realm beset by adversity mirrors the genuine experiences of its inhabitants. Meanwhile, the portrayal of FPJ as a hero mirrors the populace's yearning for a guardian figure — one embodying Tondo's finest attributes, including courage, righteousness, and an unwavering commitment to aiding those in need. Both Tondo and FPJ stand as significant symbols of Filipino identity: Tondo signifies the persistent challenges faced by Filipinos, while FPJ represents an emblem of optimism and motivation.

This study contends that FPJ's films introduced a new archetype of heroism for Filipinos, contrasting the conventional Western hero archetype, which is often portrayed as affluent, white, and male. FPJ's hero characters, on the other hand, typically hailed from impoverished, working-class backgrounds, and were distinctly Filipino. This innovative hero archetype struck a chord with Tondeños and Filipinos alike, cultivating a profound sense of national identity. Furthermore, the study posits that FPJ's films addressed the hardships encountered by Tondo and other marginalized communities. FPJ's heroes consistently battled against injustice and corruption, championing the rights of the underprivileged. This message of hope

and empowerment deeply resonated with Tondeños, offering them solace and strength in the face of daily trials. FPJ's films have thus become an integral facet of Filipino culture, reshaping the Filipino understanding of heroism, and conveying a message of hope and empowerment to marginalized communities.

This research has made notable contributions to the realm of film studies. Firstly, it demonstrates the localization of the heroism concept within a distinct cultural backdrop. Secondly, it offers a profound exploration of the Filipino interpretation of heroism through the lens of film. Thirdly, it introduces a groundbreaking framework, the “FPJ Hero Arc,” for scrutinizing hero portrayals in cinema. This framework holds relevance not only for dissecting hero performances in Filipino cinema but also for comprehending heroism across a diverse array of cultural representations.

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Declaration of Ownership

This article represents the author's independent research. This article is a follow-through to the author's unpublished master's thesis titled *Hari ng Tondo: The Convergence of Hero and Place as Depicted in Fernando Poe, Jr.'s Tondo Films*, with the aim of extending the study's scope. The preliminary version of the mentioned study has been posted on [researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net).

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

The study received approval from the course instructor at the Graduate School Department of the University of the Philippines, Diliman, as the concluding task for the course *Comm 301 Communication Theories, Models, and Frameworks*.

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