

## **OUT RUN, JOHNNY SYMONS AND S. LEO CHIANG (2016)**

USA: New Day Films

*Reviewed by Jules Rosskam, University of Maryland, Baltimore County*

Johnny Symons and S. Leo Chiang's *Out Run* follows Bemz Benedito, the leader of Ladlad Partylist, the world's only LGBT political party, as she runs for a seat in the Philippine Congress as an out transgender woman in 2011. In addition to Bemz, the film highlights the work of other members of Ladlad who are running for office alongside her. The film does not offer new aesthetic strategies for nonfiction filmmaking. Yet, it has much to offer contemporary queer scholarship through its presentation of the complex realities that LGBT individuals in the Philippines navigate as they fight for equal rights and mainstream acceptance. Many of the film's subjects could be described as *wilful* and thus engage with Sara Ahmed's (2014) recent work on wilful subjects in the social and political sphere.

The film opens with a night-time parade, where we see highly adorned transgender women walking through the crowded streets of Manila. Their path is lit with strings of electric candles, held on either side of them by groups of young people. Sequined dresses glitter in the sparkling lights as a both melancholic and hopeful music track dominates the aural field. The gauzy pink fabric from a set of butterfly wings worn by one of the parade participants momentarily fills the frame, slowly fading to the film's title. In watching this sequence, I am filled with a sense of foreboding that, like the music here, is somehow accompanied by hope. *Out Run* can be read as a straightforward description of the documentary, which follows the political run of out politicians. But it can also be read, more cynically perhaps, as the subjects' (in)ability to outrun homophobia, transphobia and the violence that too often follows both. From the opening of the film I feel certain that the politicians foregrounded will not 'win' their respective 'runs'. But the documentary keeps me engaged throughout as it adroitly reveals one of the deeper questions at play in the film: 'as outsiders trying to get inside the system, will they have to compromise their political ideals in order to win?' (Chiang and Symons 2016).

As an American trans person who makes experimental documentaries, I view *Out Run* with a specific set of expectations and critiques, which emerge from the type of cross-cultural observational documentary form employed by the cisgender filmmakers. I do not believe that only trans people can make films about trans people or that only Filipinos can make films in the Philippines. However, when a film situates itself within a social justice framework, I do think it is important for the filmmakers to identify themselves so that viewers can understand the nuances of the power dynamics (which are always present between the filmmaker and the subject) at play. Regrettably, the filmmakers do not situate themselves in relationship with their subjects, suggesting a belief in the fallacy of objectivity that observational cinema purports to offer. The absence of the filmmakers' hand(s) is largely congruent with the film. However, there are moments at which the will of the viewer to know or understand more pushes back against the film; in other moments, the film's subjects themselves appear distorted or flattened through the documentary's 'observations'.

One major instance in which individuals appear flattened or distorted is related to the gender identities of some of the film's subjects. Both Bemz and Santy Lain (trans activist/Ladlad campaign coordinator) are identified as trans *by the film* while other characters self-identify as Bakla. In Filipino culture, Bakla refers to an interiorized form of femininity embodied within a male anatomy. Martin F. Manalansan (2003) has written extensively on the permeable boundaries between modern gay identity and Bakla, which can also be read, at times, to encompass transgender identities. Both Santy and Bemz are consistently referred to as 'he' by family members and other straight politicians. As an American trans viewer, I experience each of these moments as a misgendering, when in fact the subjects themselves may not share this experience. This tension could have been resolved by the filmmakers in a number of ways, but it remains unresolved throughout. Since the film's description touts Bemz's dream of becoming the first transgender woman in the Philippine Congress, it feels like a wilful dismissal of both the sanctity of the subject's gender identity and of the predominantly American audience's reading of these moments. (*Out Run* was expressly made for the US-based ITVS.)

In one of the earliest scenes with Bemz, we ride with her in a taxi as she receives a text message from one of her constituents reminding her not to change if she gets elected to Congress. This sets us up to understand one of the primary concerns of the film: how much or how little to compromise (change) to get elected. Bemz takes this moment in stride and throughout the film exhibits an easy confidence in her beliefs and her ability to accurately speak for the community in Congress; other Ladlad candidates seem less certain at times.

The idea of compromise emerges at multiple points throughout the film, exemplifying Sara Ahmed's (2014) understanding of wilfulness as acquired through political struggle and of politics as a kind of craftiness or an art. This craftiness can be seen in many ways, not least of which is the use of beauty parlours as campaign headquarters. When a reporter asks Bemz why Ladlad uses beauty parlours, she responds simply, 'That is where our constituents are'. What she does not overtly say, but can be seen in the film's images, is that their constituents are not just other LGBT folks but rather straight people who use the parlours and are incidentally exposed to Ladlad's political platform. At multiple points in the film, we are told that LGBT people are more accepted in Filipino culture if they stick to stereotypical roles such as entertainer, beauty pageant contestant and hairdresser. Rather than refusing to participate in these accepted roles, some of the Ladlad candidates exert their political will from within these contested sites.

Midway through their campaign, Bemz and Santy travel to the town of Binmaley to attend one of the Miss Gay beauty pageants. Upon their arrival, Santy is introduced to the vice mayor, with whom she pleads to support Ladlad in his city. He responds congenially, reminding her that he is at the pageant for precisely that reason. He goes on to tell her that he speaks with many parents of Baklas who are angry and that he assuages them with reminders that it is 'better than having an addict; better than being a murderer'. In this moment, the usually outspoken Santy turns her head away and stares out at the crowd. We can read this as a fraught moment in which, as a political actor, she must turn away from a fight, turn away from the insult that has been hurled with ignorance, not malice.

The following scene highlights this tension between tolerance and genuine acceptance. When one of the pageant's contestants is asked where she

would move, and why, if she could move anywhere, she answers Thailand because 'homosexuals like me are accepted there'. The MC, seemingly put off by her answer, responds, 'Come on, aren't you accepted here? That's exactly why we're giving you something like this; to boost your confidence and show off your skills'. The camera cuts to a close-up of Bemz's face, looking around nervously. Shortly after this sequence, Bemz gets onstage to make an announcement for Ladlad: 'This evening we entertained you with this contest. But after tonight, I ask you – I urge you – after all the cheering and laughter, please give us back the dignity and respect as human beings'. Bemz looks uncomfortable as she speaks onstage, seeming uncertain about asserting her will to exist as a full and complex human being to this jeering crowd.

While Bemz consistently exhibits more easily recognizable characteristics of 'wilfulness' (e.g. the assertion of her own values and beliefs even when they are in direct opposition to the forces and institutions of power, her ability to continue campaigning in the face of real violence and even her body language in relation to Benny Abante when they meet on-screen), there is another kind of wilfulness that Ahmed explicates. If, as Ahmed asserts, wilfulness arises when one is seen as operating against the interests of those in power or as refusing to submit to the will of those in power, then wilfulness is a kind of disobedience. She explains, however, that

disobedience can take the form of an *unwilling obedience*: subjects might obey a command but do so grudgingly or reluctantly and enact with or through the compartment of their body a withdrawal from the right of the command even as they complete it.

(Ahmed 2014: 140, original emphasis)

Viewers can see this 'unwilling obedience' (Ahmed 2014: 140) when we are introduced to the LGBT-advocacy group, AIDS, that is working for Manila District 6 congressional hopeful Benny Abante. Abante, we learn from members of Ladlad, is a Catholic pastor running on a platform similar to 'hate the sin, love the sinner'. In one of the more striking scenes in the film, AIDS member Bayani Madamba explains that they use the acronym AIDS for their support group 'because the first thing you think of when you hear "AIDS" is "Oh! This guy is gay!"'. Tem Nicolas, another AIDS member, goes on to explain that the group's members receive respect from Abante and others in the Philippines because they are not 'yelling in the streets, having long hair, wearing makeup'. Perhaps the AIDS group members have attached themselves to Abante, in part, to separate themselves from the likes of those in the Ladlad party, who are unabashedly out and proud. But what is most striking about *Out Run*'s portrayal of the members of AIDS is the expression on most of their faces: everyone in the room looks deeply traumatized. Lauren Wissot (2016) of *Filmmaker Magazine* describes them as looking terrified, 'as if hostages in a pro-Abante video'. Here viewers must read into the image for the source of the trauma, which is likely a combination of years of violent discrimination, the complicated nature of the group's 'support' for Abante and possibly even the presence of the camera. A final statement from AIDS group member Ismael Bangayan reveals what may be the real reason for their support of the congressional hopeful: money. In barely coded language, he explains that they believe Abante will provide for their basic needs, that 'he can afford to give'. This touches on the rampant corruption that

is one of the most challenging aspects of running a political campaign in the Philippines.

Throughout the film, the question of whether or not the Ladlad nominees will come out in favour of gay marriage plays out on the periphery of the action. Bemz feels that it is not the right time. Ladlad's main goal is to push forward the Anti-Discrimination Bill so that, as Danton Remoto (another Ladlad nominee) explains, LGBT people cannot be fired from work. A tension builds throughout the film between LGBT activists who desire Ladlad to come out in support of gay marriage and the Ladlad nominee's fear that explicit support for gay marriage will push away straight people with whom they have begun to make alliances. Danton Remoto tells a *Guardian* reporter that they are not supporting same-sex marriage because it will be too controversial. 'I don't want to alienate voters. I'm a politician', he says, laughing. The following scene shows a Ladlad march and a pro-Abante march taking place simultaneously in District 6. Danton Remoto says of Abante: 'When I see him we're like friends. Because it's nothing personal'. In moments like these, it is easy to understand why many LGBT activists and constituents appear reticent to get behind the Ladlad nominees, fearing that they will compromise too much just to get a foot in the Congressional door.

Shortly after this, in a candid moment in his cramped office, an exhausted Raymond Alikpala (also a Ladlad nominee) addresses the camera: 'It's a delicate dance between living up to our ideals and getting down and dirty. [...] I don't think we've sold out [...] at least not yet'. He does not seem to believe what he is saying. To read this moment alongside Ahmed's idea of unwilling obedience is to see Alikpala unwillingly submitting to the gaze of the (documentary) camera. His unwilling obedience is evident in his acquiescence to a reluctant hopefulness at the end of the scene. He knows they have sold out; he also knows that they have already lost the election. But with the camera trained on him, he performs the hopefulness that this kind of political documentary so often requires of its subjects.

A scene in which it is revealed that a transgender woman has been beaten to death for using the women's bathroom follows Alikpala's compulsory hopefulness, highlighting the catastrophic effects of the potential 'selling out' to which the earlier scene points. This scene also highlights how, here and in other areas of the world, the consequences of LGBT compromises will be felt most acutely by transgender women. Although brief, the inclusion of this scene feels necessary. As a trans viewer, I am constantly aware of the fact that there is a real threat of violence following Bemz as an out transgender person in the Philippines. Bemz, however, is never portrayed as expressing real concern for this violence; we mostly see her interacting with older Filipino men who jokingly tell her not to 'cut it off' or with younger boys who demonstrate support and sexual curiosity. Anchoring these representations to an actual moment of violence feels essential as it momentarily halts the campaign/film from moving forward. We see Bemz's distraught reaction to the murder in a prolonged close-up.

Finally, election day comes and the Ladlad candidates take to the streets with renewed energy. Later that day, when results begin to pour in, the numbers do not look good. Although Ladlad loses the elections, we find out that their efforts helped defeat Benny Abante in District 6. As campaign coordinator Bhuta Adelante puts it, 'The LGBT won against the devil'. The election cycle ends with the Ladlad candidates devastated at their losses. A Ladlad Partylist banner blows in the breeze, fading into a wide shot of

the Manila skyline just after sunrise, symbolizing the dawn of a new day. A short montage plays out with on-screen text informing us that two years have now passed. The former candidates appear happy, still working with the Ladlad Partylist, although no longer the candidate in the next election cycle.

The film ends where it began: walking in the parade leading up to the Miss Gay Pageant, the camera just behind a set of pink butterfly wings. Despite the feeling that we are stuck in the same place that we started, Bemz's wilful final words ring in our ears: 'The journey continues, the fight continues'.

## REFERENCES

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jules Roskam is an assistant professor of visual arts at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is the director, producer and editor of *transparent* (2005), *Against a Trans Narrative* (2009), *Thick Relations* (2012), *Something to Cry About* (2018) and *Paternal Rites* (2018). Roskam's work has screened at the Museum of Modern Art, the Queens Museum of Art, Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, The Gene Siskel Film Center, the British Film Institute, Arsenal Berlin and at film festivals worldwide. His writings on the utopian possibilities of hybrid forms, the ethics of representation and queer and transgender subjectivity have been published in *Women and Performance*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* and *Make/Shift Magazine*.

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