

The Internet Cafe That Died During The Pandemic

by Laurehl Onyx B. Cabiles



here was a well-known internet café in our municipality. Like all other small businesses, it was located at our public terminal since there were no complex buildings in our hometown throughout its existence. In an era when sources of amusement were scarce, it provided ample happiness.

It was typically overcrowded with Dota players. On certain days, however, even when the internet connection was weak, teachers and students would still go there to prepare for school projects and examinations, owing to a lack of resources and alternatives.

I used to be a regular there. At first, I went only for school requirements, but eventually curiosity got the better of me, and I began to enjoy playing Dota a little too much, to the point of skipping classes.

My friend and I had a technique to evade the barangay tanods: we would wear civilian clothes beneath our uniforms, so that we could change out of them before losing ourselves to the screen during class hours. This was also our way of remaining hidden from them. Sometimes the tanods would still suspect that we had cut class, but fortunately, the computer shop attendant was not an informer. He would even conceal our bags and uniforms beneath his cubicle and offer additional explanations to reinforce our alibis.

After missing a considerable number of classes, my teacher recommended that I be placed in a modular class programme at our school. Because of that, I completed my secondary education within the expected timeframe. I no longer remember what our conversation entailed or how it led to that decision. I never quite understood what

she saw in me, for I was not a particularly promising pupil. She did not have to intervene as she did. I suppose she genuinely cared about me.

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As far as I know, the café's name was based on the owner's real name, though I never bothered to investigate. He was not an old man, even though we called him "Angkol". I would guess he was in his late twenties when I met him. By definition, he might not have been a friend of mine, but at that age, it did not matter in the least. I considered anyone who was kind to me a friend.

Angkol had a hobby of downloading shows from pirate websites, which he offered to everyone. Perhaps it was his marketing strategy, since there was not a single cinema in our province.

There are four nearby options for someone who wishes to visit a cinema. First, there is Valencia, a city in Bukidnon situated to the north-northeast. Second, there is Cotabato City, on the western side. Third, there is Digos City in Davao del Sur, to the southeast. Finally, there is the City of Koronadal in South Cotabato, to the south. Commuting to any of these cities would normally take about two hours, requiring at least ₱1,000 for the fare and ₱250 to ₱300 for a cinema ticket.

During my high school days, the only city in our region with an operating cinema was Koronadal. For an underprivileged teenager like me, who was also not permitted to travel alone, opportunities to experience the cinema did not arise as often as I wished.

The first time I witnessed an entire film unfold on the big screen, I was sixteen, accompanied by my whole family. My mother allowed me to choose what we would watch. I chose a Marvel film entitled *Captain America: Civil War*. Tickets at the KCC mall were remarkably cheap, at around ₱120. I believe it remains the cheapest cinema in SOCCSKSARGEN to this day. A few minutes into the screening, I was engrossed by the quality of the sound and the scale of the characters. What struck me most, however, was the communal atmosphere, something entirely new to me. When the audience around me cheered or shouted, I felt as though I had found a language meant for my soul. Ever since, I have craved to feel those emotions that surged within me. Unfortunately, several years would pass before I could enter a cinema again.

I cannot recall the exact date when I decided to watch a film on a computer, but I remember that, after losing several matches in Dota, I began browsing through Angkol's collection. I appreciated his effort; however, like any ungrateful child, I always found something to complain about. I was irritated by his cluttered library, for he simply downloaded whatever was available and never curated the films. At the time, I did not realise that, in a sense, those messy folders were shaping my taste.

There was a sense of fulfilment in the surprise of selecting a good film. Each selection carried its own kind of excitement. It was as though I were exploring a dungeon in search of treasure. Of course, there are moments when one stumbles upon a bad film, but each journey leading to it remained amusing all the same. Perhaps it was much the same feeling my mother experienced whenever we went to the ukay-ukay.

The environment of the internet café was not conducive to watching films. Every so often, even with headphones on, one could still hear the shouts of Dota players. Despite it all, I adapted and eventually found peace amid the chaos.



In senior high school, I learned how to copy a film onto a flash drive and connect it to the television. My friend's parents owned a large-screen television. We would often sleep over and hold a film marathon at their house. I remember watching *The Magnificent Seven* there; it became my favourite. *The Magnificent Seven* follows the story of seven mercenaries attempting to liberate a town from the grip of corrupt bandits. I loved that film because I have always been drawn to underdog stories. I may not usually admit it, but since I was young, I have been an optimist, fashioning myself as a pessimist.



By the time I had delved deeply into the rabbit hole of cinema, I discovered that *The Magnificent Seven* was a remake of Akira Kurosawa's Seven Samurai. It was during that phase of my life that I used to imagine myself amassing classic films from the Criterion Closet, or attending the Cannes Film Festival. But I could only imagine.

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I am well aware that the piracy conducted by Angkol was unlawful. Under Republic Act No. 8293, section 177, copyright infringement is punishable by imprisonment of one to three years and a fine of ₱50,000 to ₱150,000. I acknowledge that pirating films weakens the growth of the film industry, and I also consider the possibility of a decline in support for innovative and original works, since most producers would prefer to rely on what sells. But I would be a hypocrite if I claimed that I would rather have lived in our town without encountering Angkol's pirated films.

According to a YouGov survey, 70% of Filipinos stream content through pirate websites, suggesting that many Filipinos would prefer an illegal site to a legitimate streaming service. I cannot blame them, especially now that subscription prices from non-resident digital providers have risen as a result of the 12% Value-Added Tax.

Similarly, last year I read news about the frustration of filmgoers over the ticket prices for the 2025 Metro Manila Film Festival. Director Jun Robles Lana voiced his concern, positing, "For decades, the MMFF was the "people's festival." It was the one time of year when ordinary workers took their children to the mall to see their idols. But today, a family of four would need at least ₱1,500 just to enter the theater, not including transportation or even a single bag of popcorn."

Come to think of it, I have not watched a film with my family since that Marvel picture.

A film released in the cinema would normally become available online after a couple of months. Since I have not watched a single MMFF entry, I have no choice but to wait. This was not among my worries before. My only worry back then was a bystander, present for the air conditioning and the entertainment, sitting behind me, who would spoil what I was playing; unlike today, spoilers were readily disseminated.

There is a short documentary on YouTube about a bootleg DVD shop in Lima, Peru. It follows Santos, a customer who is also a bootleg dealer. At the beginning of the six-minute clip, he expresses his motivations for resorting to piracy. In his words, “One has to adapt to one’s own economic possibilities. Unfortunately, our economy only allows us to afford piracy.” He continued this argument by saying, “Yes, it is illegal. But in a country that is hungry for access to knowledge, which is also a form of development, we have to embrace illegality.”

The documentary revealed that bootlegs became a popular method of consuming media owing to the scarcity of film releases. Slow internet and high costs were also notable factors. Most of the films in Santos’s collection were bought from a famous shop in PASAJE 18, owned by his friend Chino.

Santos’s supplier, Chino, markets underrated films; his shop holds 4,800 titles. He explains that films by notable directors are rarely seen in their country. Chino takes pride in the effort he puts into his craft, explaining that since some of his clients do not speak English, he creates translated covers for the DVDs. He also meticulously adds subtitles to his stock to satisfy them.

There are times, Chino shared, when collectors or foreigners exchange copies with him because they cannot obtain certain copies in their own country. Even critics, filmmakers, and other important figures in the film industry visit his shop. The late auteur Béla Tarr was one of them.

At the end of the documentary, Santos claims, “Knowledge is made to be shared and spread, not just kept by the elites. When elites have a monopoly on knowledge, it gets corrupted.” As someone who considers himself a promoter of culture, he views piracy as a means of spreading culture and democratising knowledge.

Now that I am earning my own money, I have become aware of how expensive it is to survive from day to day. Even though I live close to a cinema, I cannot justify paying for a ticket priced at almost the same amount as a day's wages. The only rational choice for someone like me, earning a minimum wage, is to maintain a Netflix subscription. Even that, however, is not always a sound financial decision, since I can only watch two or three films a month owing to work commitments. I cannot help but sympathise with cinephiles who cannot afford to watch films legally.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Angkol was forced to close his shop. I thought he would reopen it, but he never did.

After the lockdown, everything changed. Students and teachers learned not to depend on an internet café. Most of the shop's regulars shifted from Dota to Mobile Legends, a more convenient game. Some became preoccupied with their careers. Everyone in our town seemed to have moved on.

Now, whenever I see people who were regulars of Angkol's shop, I simply nod at them. Sometimes they nod back. After these interactions, I wonder whether they miss the shop as well.

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