

# FLOODWATER GHOSTS AS SOCIAL CRITICISM

## A horror film and Tropical Storm Ondoy

[Received March 23rd 2021; accepted September 2nd 2021– DOI: 10.21463/shima.166]

Hazel T. Biana

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines <hazel.biana@dlsu.edu.ph>

**ABSTRACT:** Typhoon Ketsana, known in the Philippines as Tropical Storm Ondoy, hit the nation's capital more than a decade ago. Metro Manila and its neighbouring rural areas were submerged in floodwaters up to 20 metres high resulting in 921 fatalities and \$1.15 billion in damages. Most of those who survived the extreme weather event have various Ondoy stories to tell. In 2011 the popular Philippine horror anthology film series *Shake, Rattle & Roll* portrayed Ondoy victims as *floodwater ghosts* in a narrative included in instalment 13, in an episode entitled *Rain, Rain, Go Away (RRGA)*. The floodwater ghosts are chilling reminders of various intersecting issues plaguing the country such as child labour, poor infrastructure, graft and corruption, the lack of proper weather forecasting techniques and equipment, and many others. The ghosts also represent how the most vulnerable sectors suffer from such water disasters, and invite possible discourses on actions that need to be taken against the detrimental effects of extreme weather events on the Philippine islands.

**KEYWORDS:** Typhoon Ketsana, flood, Philippines, social criticism, *Shake, Rattle & Roll*, floodwater ghosts

### Introduction

*In the ant's house, the dew is a flood.*  
- Old proverb

Typhoon Ketsana, known in the Philippines as Tropical Storm Ondoy, hit the nation's capital more than a decade ago. Metro Manila and its neighbouring rural areas were submerged in floodwaters up to 20 metres high resulting in 921 fatalities and \$1.15 billion in damages. While archipelagic peoples, such as the Filipino people, are used to being surrounded by waters, and see these waters as integral to their livelihood and culture (Baldacchino, 2012), the typhoon Ondoy, its volume of rainfall and the unprecedented surge of floodwaters still came as a surprise. Ondoy affected everyone in the capital. Most of those who survived the extreme weather event have Ondoy stories to tell. A popular Philippine horror anthology film series *Shake, Rattle & Roll*<sup>1</sup> has even fictionally portrayed Ondoy victims as *floodwater ghosts* in the third sequence of episode 13 (2011) entitled *Rain, Rain, Go Away (RRGA)*. *RRGA* won the Best Original Story award in the 2011 Metro Manila Film Festival, and critics have lauded the instalment for its distinct elements, themes and performances. *RRGA*'s storyline features spirits that return to the world of the living to seek

---

1 The series commenced in 1984 with a single film and was then revived in 1990 by Regal Entertainment with 14 more features following until the series went into hiatus in 2014.

retribution for their suffering and untimely deaths like most portrayals of fictional ghost stories. Film reviewer Abby Mendoza (2012) writes that this type of plot delivers “a truthful story on injustice and the iniquity of those at the bottom of social stratification.”

This article analyses *RRGA* as a social commentary on human behaviour, the magnifying effects of the climate, and how the Philippines, despite its geographical significance, has yet to improve on its laws, warning systems and disaster-risk management. Like a “hybrid” film, *RRGA* is a type of production that reveals actual conditions and socio-political issues to audiences in an engaging and persuasive way (Hayward, 2019, p. 184). This article, therefore, begins by looking at the Ondoy phenomenon, *RRGA*'s synopsis, key themes, and dominant representations. *RRGA*'s floodwater ghosts are imaginaries that present chilling reminders of various intersecting issues plaguing the country such as child labour, poor infrastructure, graft and corruption, the lack of proper weather forecasting techniques and equipment, and many others. These ghosts also represent how vulnerable populations such as factory workers, the poor, the homeless, and those living and working near dams and rivers suffer the most from such water disasters. The ghost also invite consideration of actions that need to be taken to ensure the protection of various groups against the detrimental effects of extreme weather events like torrential rainfall and *baha* (floods) on the Philippine islands.

### Tropical Storm Ondoy

On September 24, 2009, Ondoy (international code name Ketsana) entered the Philippine Area of Responsibility as a low-pressure area. For the next two days, Ondoy moved closer to Central and Northern Luzon and eventually made landfall as a tropical storm on September 26, 2009. (It is important to note that more than half of the Philippine population lives in the island of Luzon.) The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA)<sup>2</sup> highlighted that the storm might cause flash floods and landslides. According to the Final Report of the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC; 2009), there were 1,786 *barangays*<sup>3</sup> flooded in 154 municipalities and 30 cities of 26 provinces of Regions I, II, III, IV-A IVB, V, VI, IX, XII, Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and National Capital Region (NCR). Furthermore, 239 *barangays* in Metro Manila were heavily flooded as well, with floodwaters ranging from knee, to neck, to rooftop height. Three landslides occurred, and 57 road sections were rendered impassable at the height of the storm. The same report stated that Ondoy affected 993,227 families or 4,901,234 persons, and damaged 185,004 houses (NDCC, 2009).

While Filipinos are used to tropical storms, typhoons, floods and the like,<sup>4</sup> Ondoy was unprecedented in terms of rainfall intensity. NASA (2009) claims that the record of 13.43 inches of rainfall dumped by Ondoy in six hours was equivalent to a month's worth of rain

---

<sup>2</sup> The acronym PAGASA, when verbalised as a word ('pag-asa'), means 'hope' in Filipino.

<sup>3</sup> *Barangays* are the smallest unit of local administration in the Philippines, with the country having over 42,000 of these.

<sup>4</sup> The Philippines is located in the Circum-Pacific Belt, which is a zone prone to tropical cyclones (Nakasu, 2011).

in Manila. Since the typhoon was declared a mere Public Storm Warning Signal Number 1,<sup>5</sup> citizens were not prepared as they did not anticipate heavy flooding. People recalled how they were caught off guard by the typhoon, with their emotions ranging from shock to awe (Green, 2019). They expected no damage to houses and infrastructure at all. With rivers and dams overflowing to the metropolis, houses were submerged in water and this eventually led to the destruction of many properties and belongings. Some people were stuck in office buildings, and on roads and roofs for days. Disaster experts considered Ondoy as an “extreme event,” and “the biggest flood of all previous floods of a similar scale” (Seng, 2014, p. 218); some people also claim that it was like “the end of the world” (Seng, 2014, p. 221). Ondoy was a “great urban flood disaster,” a “once-in-30- years flood” (Sato & Nakasu, 2011, pp. 63, 71).<sup>6</sup>

Through specific interviews, it was found that the social construction of disasters in relation to Ondoy include natural calamity or *sakuna* (disaster), *trahedya* (tragedy) or *bakwet* (evacuation) *tulong* (assistance or aid from others), *sipag* (struggle or hard work) and *paghahandang ispirituwal* (spiritual preparation) (Cafe, 2010). While some survivors saw the storm as a plain ‘natural disaster’, others also pegged it as a spiritual experience (Cafe, 2012). These concepts are embodied by the social context of the communities affected by the disaster, those who experienced it, and the framework of specialists analysing the phenomenon (Cafe, 2012). Although there were various meanings attributed to Ondoy and its aftermath, tragedy was the common meaning articulated by various communities (Cafe, 2012). The type of tragedy was configured by the experience of other people’s deaths, property and infrastructure damages, and livelihood and work disruptions. Ondoy exacerbated the extent of human suffering of Filipinos which has been said to be somewhat similar to the case of Americans when Hurricane Katrina hit the South East of the United States in 2005 (Nakasu, 2011). The way media and experts framed the disaster also influenced conceptions of the storm. Media coverage magnified the terror of families waiting for rescue, and showed footage of houses and cars being swept away by massive floods (Adviento & de Guzman, 2010). In a study by Akiko Watanabe et. al. (2011), media representations of Ondoy portrayed the storm as a ‘great equalizer’, a circumstance in which both the rich and poor have suffered equally. Newspaper columns and video footage show how gated communities of the rich were affected just as much as the shanties of the poor. Watanabe et al. (2011, p. 84), however, argue that such portrayals are inaccurate, or even a “mythical conception of the disaster.”

### *Rain, Rain, Go Away*

As opposed to the said mythical conception of the disaster, the popular Philippine horror anthology film series *Shake, Rattle & Roll 13* (2011) featured Ondoy and the injustices and marginalisation suffered by the poorer social classes. In its third episode, *Rain, Rain, Go Away (RRGA)*, Ondoy victims were fictionally portrayed as floodwater ghosts seeking revenge for their untimely deaths. Set before, during, and a year after Ondoy hit the country, *RRGA* highlights Marikina, an actual city with a river which usually overflows

---

<sup>5</sup> There are five Public Storm Warning Signals, with Number 1 as a storm with the least damage and Number 5 as very heavy to widespread damage. These signals are based on wind speed and the wind’s impact on structures.

<sup>6</sup> Super Typhoon Yolanda (international codename Haiyan), however, struck in 2013. It was one of the strongest cyclones ever recorded.

every time there are strong rains. Because of this, the height of the Marikina River is closely monitored whenever there are typhoons. It even has its own alarm level system wherein level 1 means 'prepare', level 2 means 'evacuate', and level 3 means 'forced evacuation' (Seráfica, 2017).

*RRGA*'s plot revolves around the family of Cynthia and Mar, a married couple about to have a new child. In the opening scene, Cynthia and Mar are celebrating their anniversary in a hotel during the onslaught of Ondoy. On their respective phones, Mar is having an argument with his mother about his employees and the lack of rubber lifeboats, and Cynthia instructs their house helper to go to their home's second floor because the floods have reached knee-deep. Due to the stress, Cynthia suffers a miscarriage. The next day, when the storm cleared, news reports were told of youth workers who died in a factory near the Marikina River.

A year after the storm, Cynthia is pregnant again and visits Mar, who has a new company that manufactures plastic. Mar's family is trying to sell their old factory and land, but it does not seem to be attractive to buyers because it is located in a flood-prone area. When Cynthia leaves the new factory, Nante (Mar's brother) drives Cynthia home to their new condominium unit. While stuck in traffic, thunder roars and a huge downpour follows. Cynthia is shown to have ombrophobia (fear of rain) and astraphobia (fear of thunder, lightning, and thunderstorms). When she gets home, Cynthia is haunted by a broken faucet and random drops of water. To some extent, Cynthia is shown to be extremely aquaphobic, as she is even scared of water droplets. When Nante parks in the basement, his car is suddenly filled up with water and he dies by drowning. When Cynthia and Mar go to the parking lot to check on Nante, three young, bluish ghosts appear outside their window. After Nante's death, Cynthia has nightmares about the Ondoy tragedy and Mar's drowning. In one scene, Mar wakes up and vomits water, plastic and trash elements. In a visit to her doctor, Cynthia sees three kids singing while chalk-drawing a huge eye within a sun on the street. Later on, a new storm brews. When Mar is about to go home from work, he locks his workers inside the factory. When Mar gets home, the elevator he is riding in also floods and he drowns like Nante. Simultaneously, Cynthia escapes drowning in her bathroom and is haunted by three bluish, sodden, young ghosts. Cynthia eventually gives birth to her baby while mourning the death of Mar.

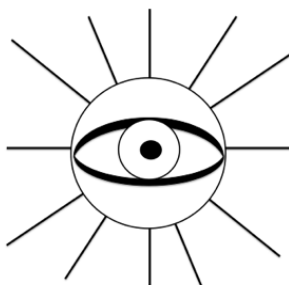


Figure 1 - Illustration of the 'eye in the sun' chalk-drawing depicted in *RRGA*.

After Cynthia gives birth, Cynthia's mother-in-law Maritess reveals that their family was responsible for the youth workers that died in the old factory during the storm. Cynthia's family locked the young labourers in the warehouse after their work shift. When the family was about to leave, the children begged them for help knowing that the storm was about to

arrive. Flashbacks show young workers trying to save themselves from the flood and dead children covered in mud. As a result of the tragedy, the floodwater ghosts began haunting and killing Cynthia's family members by drowning them. When Maritess leaves the hospital, she sees three of the floodwater ghosts singing and drawing the 'eye in the sun' on the pavement. Maritess is then accidentally hit and killed by a truck carrying plastic drums of mineral water. In one of the scenes, the living grandmother of some of the young workers talks of how spirits never rest if they are not saved. The end of the film shows Cynthia visiting the old factory and paying her respects to the departed workers. She hears the children singing and it begins to rain. Cynthia is scared but accepts her fate. Water courses around Cynthia, the doors are locked and the space floods. The last scene shows the floodwater ghosts.

### Floodwater ghosts

Films and TV programs depicting floods are not new. Such depictions occur in representations of the Biblical myth of Noah and his ark, and the Great Flood (such as *Noah's Flood* [Richard Smith, 1997] and *Noah* [Darren Aronofsky, 2014]), or in the end-of-the-world floods that occur after the polar ice caps melt (such as *Waterworld* [Kevin Reynolds, 1995]) or more localised flood events (such as the UK TV series *Flood*, 2007). Similarly, films and television programs about ghosts are hardly new.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one of the most famous Hollywood movies portraying ghosts is *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990) which stars Patrick Swayze as the ghost character Sam Wheat. A common theme in these types of movies is a character's abrupt or accidental and tragic death and their reappearance as a ghost. Apparently, ghosts come back to haunt the living as they cannot cross over to the light (or to whatever exists after life on earth) unless they complete their unfinished businesses. In the *Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) ghosts even ask the help of the living to complete their tasks. Most often than not, ghosts appear to the living wearing the clothes they wore during their deaths, and making obvious the circumstances of how they died. For example, a stabbing victim would have a knife stuck in them, and a flood victim would be drenched in water. In the South Korean TV drama series *Hotel de Luna* (2019), based around a hotel for ghosts waiting to cross over, the ghost of a person who drowned in the water was portrayed eerily with blue-like hues and sodden hair. The same ghost, like the rest of the ghosts in the hotel, had to deal with unfinished duties and other matters holding her back from crossing over.

Although ghosts in various shows are not uncommon, film and television portrayals of floodwater ghosts have been rare. One of the few includes an episode of Netflix's series *Unsolved Mysteries* entitled *Tsunami Spirits* (2020), which is an investigation of the legend and mystery of Japan's tsunami ghosts that supposedly appeared after the Tohoku earthquake in 2011. *Tsunami Spirits* tells of chilling stories of people who have had encounters with ghosts soaked and drenched in water. Marco Margaritoff (2020) states that the alleged existence of these tsunami ghosts affirm the suffering, trauma, grief and pain of the survivors. In another instance, an episode of the UK Science Fiction TV series *Doctor Who* entitled *Before the Flood* (2015) showcases the haunting of ghosts (who drowned because of a breaking dam) set against a time-traveling plot. The same haunting themes can also be found in the movie *Ghost Lake* (Jay Woelfel, 2004) and Scott Carson's novel *The*

---

<sup>7</sup> In this context, ghosts are souls or spirits of individuals that have detached from the physical bodies of the deceased. These types of ghosts, although interactive, are different from poltergeists or orbs.

*Chill* (2021). In *Ghost Lake*, restless ghosts, who drowned when a dam was built, haunt the living. In *The Chill*, the construction of a reservoir angers resident ghosts of a drowned town.

Myths about creatures that emerge from waters are quite common. In fact, the Philippines has its own water creatures, such as the *sirena* and the *siyokoy*. The sea, after all, has been referred to as a “treacherous realm” that is “monster-breeding” (Tran, 2018, p. 82) as far back to the time of the Olympian Gods. When it comes to the sub-classification of water spirits, however, some are mentioned in stories and myths of Highland Scotland (water spirits) (Young, 2018) and Japan (the folkloric sea spirit *Umi Bōzu*) (Greenland & Hayward, 2020). The ghosts of the Christmas Island, on the other hand, are referred to as “hungry ghosts” (Hayward, 2019) because spirits would bring the living ill fortune if offerings were not made to them. Poveglia, supposedly the “world’s most haunted island” (Cavallo & Visentin, 2020), an abandoned island in the Venetian lagoon, also has stories about ghosts. As represented in media, more specifically television and the internet, the Poveglia ghosts are said to be spirits of Black Plague victims, and mentally ill patients who were sadistically tortured (Cavallo & Visentin, 2020, p. 201). The Poveglia ghosts were supposedly haunting the island because they were “abandoned” (Cavallo and Visentin, 2020, p. 202) to suffer and die, some stories even tell of the ghosts screaming and crying for help.

Water spirits are not necessarily the same as water ghosts or ghosts that do not emerge from the water. Floodwater ghosts, as water ghosts, specifically emerge from floods or tsunamis, and they return because of their untimely deaths by natural water-related causes, in the case of tsunami spirits, or due to humanity’s greed and disrespect for others. In the case of *RRGA*, both causes are brought to light, wherein the child labourers died due to both Ondoy as a natural cause and due to the neglect of authorities. The floodwater ghosts in *RRGA* then haunted the living because they were seeking retribution for their untimely deaths. The ghosts died due to the floods but mainly because of the family’s inhumane practices. It was the ghosts’ unfinished business – or duty, so to speak – to call for justice. The ghosts show the blameworthiness of Cynthia’s family with regards to the deaths of the flood victims. While the Ondoy floods were brought about by a ‘natural disaster’, their tragic deaths could have been prevented. Looking closely, the flood victims’ deaths were caused by a system that neglects the marginalised and the oppressed.

### Social criticism

*RRGA* shows that the floodwater ghosts’ deaths could have been avoided, if only people were not cruel and greedy. The episode represents all those who perished during Ondoy because of the greed of the few and the authorities’ neglect and incompetence. It also depicts the experts’ lack of foresight and planning given the country’s geographical location and its susceptibility to tropical storms and typhoons. *RRGA*’s ghosts embody the effects of the class stratifications and systemic oppressions in Philippine society. Philosopher Sally Haslanger (2020, p. 221) attributes these types of oppressions to a broad social order, to “a system that somehow embeds and integrates these multiple forms of subordination.” The revenge of the floodwater ghosts illustrates the demand for social justice from a system that has failed so many. For a country that is frequented by typhoons at least twenty times a year (five of which, on average, are destructive) (Asian Disaster Reduction Center [ADRC], 2020), government systems have disregarded the need for smarter infrastructure and proper disaster responses. Nakasu (2011) specifies that the inadequacy of such local

government responses can be seen in insufficient equipment (sirens and alarm systems), lack of community and financial resources, and a deficit in the training of responders. In terms of infrastructure, Klippe (2021) states that modernising is not enough; the flood-management systems in the country should be protected as well. This situation has also been portrayed in *RRGA*, wherein Maritess tells Mar that the mayor only had two rubber boats, and will therefore not be able to help the flooded.

On a national scale, there has been no unified office or position in the government that took care of such disasters. It was only after Ondoy that the Republic Act No. 10121 (the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act) was created, which thereby led to the formation of Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) offices (Reysio-Cruz, 2019). The National Disaster Risk Reduction & Management Council (NDRRMC), formerly known as the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), also became in charge of the approval of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan 2011-2028 (NDRRMP). In 2014, Republic Act No. 10639 (The Free Mobile Disaster Alerts Act) was passed. The Act mandates telecommunications service providers to send free mobile alerts in the event of natural and human-made disasters and calamities. In relation to such policies, some headway has been made. For example, NDRRMC issues rainfall warnings via text message to indicate what actions the community must take.<sup>8</sup> These advisories indicate whether communities should begin to evacuate due to the level of rainfall.

The lack of rainfall warnings was also one of the reasons why people were unprepared during Ondoy (Zoleta, 2021). Despite these newer measures, however, ten years after Ondoy, communities and residents have continuously taken matters into their own hands. Citizens have embraced “the challenge of leading their community to prepare for disasters, partly driven by their own experiences during Ondoy and even up to this day” (Reysio-Cruz, 2019). This situation is reminiscent of floodwater ghosts taking revenge on Cynthia’s family to prevent further deaths in Mar’s new factory. The floodwater ghosts could also be regarded as taking care of the unfinished business of saving others who might suffer the same fate.

The floodwater ghosts also represent distrust in authorities. The haunting in *RRGA* illustrates the restlessness of the spirits, their unhappiness and dissatisfaction. It has been a year since the deaths of the child workers, after all, but the law has yet to persecute the guilty (in this case, Cynthia’s family). Two themes emerge here: the rampancy of child labour in the country, and graft and corruption. First off, the youth workers should not have been hired, given the nature of the working conditions. In 2011, the Philippine Statistics Authority reported that there are 2.049 million child labourers doing hazardous labour (Department of Labor and Employment, 2021). The ghosts are like zombies (or the drowned undead) as well, or “metaphors for the working classes who have been dehumanised by brutal working conditions, hunger, and poverty” (Fahy, 2010, p. 9). Incidentally, this type of dehumanisation and illegal labour practices may also be triggered by water disasters. After Super Typhoon Yolanda hit the country in 2014, child labour victims increased in number (Salarda, 2015).

Although Ondoy’s rainfall intensity was unprecedented (causing the Marikina River to rise 23 metres above sea level), other factors, besides poor infrastructure, were said to have

---

<sup>8</sup> There are three rainfall warning levels: yellow, orange, and red. Yellow means ‘heavy rainfall’, orange ‘intense rainfall’, and red ‘torrential rainfall’.

contributed to the devastating effects of the storm. Those who do not have houses, for one, have been said to exacerbate the floods. Seng (2014) attributes makeshift settlements on riverbanks, garbage disposal in rivers, and obstruction of waterways to informal settlers. The urban poor and homeless populations have been blamed for worsening the floods by inhabiting these prohibited areas. What should be pointed out, though, is that the government lacks proper programs for relocation and employment outside the metropolitan area. Furthermore, architects, planners and geologists have also revealed that many city officials (due to corruption and/or incompetence) have ignored zoning ordinances and planning rules and the Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 (Lagman, 2009).<sup>9</sup> As such, John Francis Lagman (2009) argues that those living where they are have no choice but to do so. For example, Philippine indigenous communities are forced to resettle in dangerous areas due to political and civil conflicts (Biana & Rivas, 2021). A study by Laurice Jamero et al. (2017, p. 4) finds that certain small-island communities in the Philippines distrust relocation programs offered by the government, considering the negative effects that such relocation could have on their livelihoods. Just like the child labourers employed by Cynthia's family, poverty forces the urban poor to accept harsh working and living conditions.

Aside from the ghosts, there are other significant representations in *RRGA* that provoke social awareness. In one scene, Mar wakes up from a nightmare after which he choked, vomited and spat out plastic and trash. There is a popular saying in the country, *ang basurang itinapon mo ay babalik din sa'yo* ('the trash you irresponsibly threw away [or littered] will return to you'). The trash may 'avenge' itself through floods or other means, because trash clogs waterways and drainage systems. The fact of Mar having a factory that manufactures plastic is relevant as well, considering the type of pollution and waste that factories produce and dump in Philippine waters. 4,609 tons of plastic waste is generated in the Philippines daily and such staggering amounts have "choked" Philippine seas (Sarmiento, 2018). Although the lack of people's discipline has been said to be the reason for the magnitude of plastic trash (Benosa, 2020), looking at the bigger picture, multinational corporations and big factories, and government policies, are to blame as well. For example, the 2020 Philippine Brand Audit report reveals that only three firms are responsible for nearly half of the country's plastic waste (Macaraeg, 2021). Furthermore, laws that should supposedly curb the plastic pollution crisis in the country are weak (Alegado, 2020).

Aside from the environmental damage caused by some factories, there are also hazards that factory workers face in day-to-day operations. In the case of the 'eye in the sun' illustration drawn by the ghosts in *RRGA*, it could very well symbolise the actions of Cynthia's family that affected most of their workers and put them in a difficult circumstance. Like the eye of the storm in idiomatic expressions, to be in the eye of the storm is to be deeply involved in a difficult situation affecting a lot of people. While the eye of the storm is the calmest, it is the most hazardous because of the eye walls (massive swirling storms) that encircle it.<sup>10</sup> The 'eye in the sun' is also similar to the Eye of Providence or the Illuminati symbol, and could mean that the all-seeing eye witnessed all the abuses and misdoings of Cynthia's family. It could also be a reference to Provident village, a village in Marikina that was submerged in flood during Ondoy.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 mandates a city budget for social housing. If the government followed the strictures of the Act, there would have been less people residing on riverbanks (Lagman, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> The air located in the eye wall moves faster than any other part of the storm.



Although the media has portrayed Ondoy as a ‘great equaliser’, *RRGA*’s floodwater ghosts have symbolically shown that the most vulnerable sectors, such as the poor, suffer the most from water disasters. The affluent classes have access to more resources. In the case of Cynthia’s family, they had a lifeline to the mayor, simply moved to a condominium to avoid flood-prone areas, and established a new business. *RRGA* also reminded its audience that infrastructure problems and lack of proper policies cause these types of vulnerabilities in times of extreme rainfall and floods. The poor are affected more severely because they have more material damage and less assets. A Water Series report completed by the Asian Development Bank (Fox, 2003) confirms that poverty and water disaster vulnerabilities are interrelated; this is not only the case in the Philippines but in other developing countries as well. In terms of the negative impacts of flood, death or severe injuries, loss of possessions/livelihood, and water borne diseases mostly affect poor persons living near rivers, floodplains, and low-lying coastal areas (Fox, 2003). Furthermore, because of the spaces that they inhabit, the homeless and informal settlers have also been unjustly blamed for worsening water disasters.

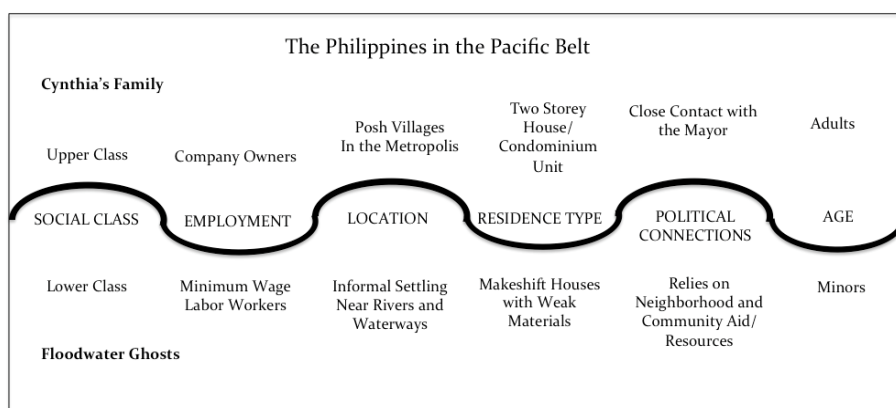


Figure 2 – Intersecting factors that contributed to the Ondoy experience.

Being poor is not only what makes these groups vulnerable though. The intersecting factors of social class, age, employment status, place of residence, geographical location, citizenship, educational attainment, all contribute to one’s negative experiences of Ondoy (Figure 2). These factors play roles in the systems of marginalisation of people in the flooded communities (Biana, 2020). These differentiating factors may predict whether one’s experience will be like the floodwater ghosts, or like Cynthia’s family members, etc., in the *RRGA* narrative. They also provoke discussions about the type of community or policy interventions are needed to avoid similar water disasters in the future. These include labour laws, infrastructure development and technology advancements, and disaster responses. In terms of location and place of residence, for example, river systems, bay areas and flood prone areas must be examined by specialists. Housing concerns and labour laws also contribute to the type of experience that one would have when it comes to flooding. Disaster risk research suggests that a substantial area of the Philippines is at risk of flooding due to the rise in sea levels and extreme weather-related events related to global climate change. Mega-cities in Asia are expected to meet “greatly expanded geographical exposure to flooding, large increases in the numbers of people who will experience flooding

incidents” (Williams, et al., 2020, par. 1). The experience of these floods, however, would vary unevenly depending on local and human vulnerabilities, such as being part of disadvantaged groups like those who live in informal settlements. These are just some of the existing challenges that should be solved given the geographic location of the Philippines in the Pacific Belt, which makes it always prone various disasters. Lindy Williams and colleagues (2020, par. 4) confirm that the Philippine island of Luzon, due to “environmental, geographical, and social factors,” exposes its population to “an especially elevated risk of future flooding from storm events.” Furthermore Williams et al. (2020, para. 4-5) also tackle the long history of natural disasters in the country, and how frequent typhoons wage destruction not only to the Luzon but to other islands located within the Philippine area of responsibility and the Southeast Asian region as well:

*With a long history of exposure to natural hazards and disasters, the nation is among those most prone to a variety of disasters globally. By some estimates, the Philippines ranks third among the world's countries most vulnerable to weather-related risk; and media outlets have recently labelled it the 'Baha (flood) Republic'.*

*The archipelago experiences five typhoons, on average, each year, some of which have caused considerable harm. In 2013, for example, super-typhoon Haiyan (known locally as Typhoon Yolanda), claimed over 6000 lives and destroyed much of Tacloban, the capital city of the province of Leyte. Other typhoons that are less well known to those living outside of Southeast Asia have also caused significant damage to coastal and near-coastal areas in recent years, where approximately 60% of the population resides.*

Recommendations for adaptation to these disaster risks, therefore, should include unique perspectives on conceptualisations, representations and critical analyses of what it means to live in the Philippine group of islands (Baldacchino, 2012). After all, the intersecting factors mentioned above are part and parcel of the archipelago as “fluid cultural processes dependent on changing conditions of articulation or connection” (Baldacchino, 2012, p. 24).

## Discussion and conclusion

While the impacts of films and representations on society, its audience, and their sentiments are continuously being studied (Gorham, 1999; Milne et al., 2021), it is undeniable that films and media representations more generally reflect the audiences' situations and affect society as a whole (Perse & Lambe, 2016). Horror films, for one, are said to mirror society's fears and concerns and make societal issues easier to digest or think about (Fiveson, 2021). Whether these films are about unhappy spirits or floodwater ghosts, horror narratives showcase topics of fear and suffering, justice, the meaning of life, accountability, morality, and danger (Fahy, 2010). In the case of *RRGA*, it is more than an entertaining horror film that makes its viewers “shake, rattle, and roll.” *RRGA* includes various themes traditionally touched upon in the genre and particularly brings to light conversations needed on government policies, and community and societal and cultural interventions. *RRGA* comments on a system that has failed its constituents in times of natural disasters. With the topological circumstance of the Philippines, the islands are more susceptible to extreme rainfall conditions. It should already be obvious that disaster preparedness be a permanent staple in governance. Furthermore, public awareness about impending natural disasters should be second nature for Filipino people. Japan, an

archipelago likewise located in the Circum-Pacific belt, has an effective disaster management system that does not only include mere emergency responses but is supported by a general culture of unity among Japanese people. Ecuador, a country also prone to storms, floods, landslides, has implemented innovative disaster risk strategies in the light of climate change. These disaster management systems are not limited to training but also entail the enhancement of financial instruments to help support the unique, intersectional experiences of the Ecuadorian population (Agosti et al., 2021). In the case of the Philippines, *RRGA* makes evident some Filipino cultural idiosyncrasies and overlapping social identities which can further perspectives toward Philippine disaster strategy and management.

In an interview, Hwang Dong-yuk, director and writer of the 2021 Korean TV thriller series *Squid Game*, talks of how his films are reactions to “unsolved social issues” (Kim, 2021) and hopes that they may change the world (one movie at a time) by stirring public emotion and encouraging proactive discourses. Like Dong-yuk’s series, *RRGA*’s floodwater ghosts (although less famous) are chilling reminders of various systemic and socio-cultural problems, and unsolved intersecting issues plaguing the Philippines. These issues include child labour, poor infrastructure, graft and corruption, the lack of proper disaster response efforts, and poor weather forecasting techniques and equipment, and many others. The floodwater ghosts represent vulnerable sectors such as the urban poor, who suffer the most from water disasters like 2009’s tropical storm Ondoy. While the Philippine authorities have *tried* to address the obvious, interventions do not seem to be enough. Floodwater ghosts from other storms after Ondoy are increasing in number, and they will continuously haunt society. *RRGA*’s function as a social commentary *scares* its Filipino audience into thinking that this is not the last of the disasters, given the situation of the archipelago as one of the most vulnerable group of islands that could be hit by climate change. In the last decade alone, the Philippines has been hit by Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest tropical cyclone ever recorded to make landfall. Furthermore, a forecast for the year 2050 estimates that approximately “6,040–13,850 ha of urban land conversion is likely to be located in flood prone regions... affecting approximately 2.5–5.8 million additional (Filipino) urban residents” (Johnson et al., 2021, para. 1). This means that “climate resilient land-use plans should be developed/enforced, and flood mitigation infrastructure protected (in the case of “nature-based” infrastructure) or constructed” (Johnson et al., 2021, para. 1). In line with this, *RRGA* provides speculative but realistic interventions concerning the adverse effects of poor disaster management and the pervasive problem of class and social inequality. *RRGA*’s floodwater ghosts may be dismissed as simply fiction, but the issues they raise are relevant and real, and they should not be watered down.

## References

- Adviento, M. L. G., & de Guzman, J. M. (2010). *Community resilience during Typhoon Ondoy: The case of Ateneoville*. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 43(1), 101–113.
- Agosti, A., Rubiano, D., & Maldonado, S. P. (2021, April 17). *Ecuador’s innovative disaster risk financing strategy, an essential tool for responding to disaster risks and climate change*. World Bank Blog. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/latinamerica/ecuadors-innovative-disaster-risk-financing-strategy-essential-tool-responding>
- Alegado, J. (2020). *Philippines: Banning single-use plastics at the national level and strengthening existing laws needed to curb plastic pollution crisis*. Heinrich Böll Foundation, Southeast Asia Regional Office.

- <https://th.boell.org/en/2020/01/20/philippines-banning-single-use-plastics-national-level-and-strengthening-existing-laws>
- Asian Disaster Reduction Center. (2020). *Information on disaster risk reduction of the member countries - Philippines*.  
<https://www.adrc.asia/nationinformation.php?NationCode=608&Lang=en>
- Baldacchino, G. (2012). Getting wet: A response to Hayward's concept of aquapelagos. *Shima*, 6(1), 22–26.
- Benosa, S. E. (2020, July 31). *Plastic waste: Beyond 'lack of discipline'*. Inquirer.net.  
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/132270/plastic-waste-beyond-lack-of-discipline>
- Biana, H. T. (2020). Extending bell hooks' feminist theory. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(1), 13–29.
- Biana, H. T., & Rivas, V. A. (2021). Intersectional environmentalism: Toward an Indigenous peoples-inspired planetary ethics. *Journal of Dharma*, 46(2), 183–198.
- Café, D. P. (2010). The social construction of disaster: Typhoon Ondoy in the context of Sagrada Familia and Inquirer.net. *4th Asian Rural Sociology Association Conference Proceedings II*.  
[https://www.academia.edu/3660461/4th\\_Asian\\_Rural\\_Sociology\\_Association\\_Conference\\_Proceedings](https://www.academia.edu/3660461/4th_Asian_Rural_Sociology_Association_Conference_Proceedings)
- Café, D. P. (2012). the social construction of disaster: Ondoy (Ketsana) in the context of Sagrada Familia and Inquirer.net. *Asian Social Science*, 8(10), 45–57.
- Carson, S. (2021). *The Chill*. Simon and Schuster.
- Cavallo, F. L., & Visentin, F. (2020). "The world's most haunted island": Ghost narratives and practices around Poveglia, an abandoned island in the Venetian Lagoon. *Shima*, 14(1), 194–211.
- Department of Labor and Employment. (2021). *DOLE vows to free .5M children from illegal labor*. <http://www.dole.gov.ph/news/dole-vows-to-free-5m-children-from-illegal-labor/>
- Fahy, T. (2010). *The philosophy of horror*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Fiveson, H. (2021). *Horror and society*.  
<https://spiral.lynn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1064&context=studentpubs>
- Fox, I. B. (2003). *Floods and the poor* [Water for All Series, 11]. Asian Development Bank.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/watsan2005/annex\\_files/ADB/ADB1%20-%20Floods%20and%20the%20Poor.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/evaluation/watsan2005/annex_files/ADB/ADB1%20-%20Floods%20and%20the%20Poor.pdf)
- Gorham, B. W. (1999). Stereotypes in the media: So what? *Howard Journal of Communications*, 10(4), 229–247.
- Green, J. (2019, September 26). Remembering Ondoy: Stories when the typhoon hit PH 10 years ago. *Philippine News*. <http://philnews.ph/2019/09/26/remembering-ondoy-stories-when-the-typhoon-hit-ph-10-years-ago/>
- Greenland, F., & Hayward, P. (2020). Ningen: The generation of media-lore concerning a giant, sub-Antarctic, aquatic humanoid and its relation to Japanese whaling activity. *Shima*, 14(1), 135–151.
- Haslanger, S. (2020). Why I don't believe in patriarchy: Comments on Kate Manne's 'Down Girl'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 101(1), 220–229.
- Hayward, P. (2019). The dark side of Christmas: Incarceration and alienation in Gabrielle Brady's film *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (2018). *Shima*, 13(1), 182–190.
- Jamero, L., Onuki, M., Esteban, M., Billones-Sensano, X. K., Tan, N., Nellas, A., Takagi, H., Nguyen, D. T., & Valenzuela, V. P. (2017). Small-island communities in the Philippines prefer local measures to relocation in response to sea-level rise. *Nature Climate Change*, 7(8), 581–586.
- Johnson, B. A., Estoque, R. C., Li, X., Kumar, P., Dasgupta, R., Avtar, R., & Macandog, D. (2021). High-resolution urban change modeling and flood exposure estimation at a

- national scale using open geospatial data: A case study of the Philippines. *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*, 90, 101704.
- Kim, Y. J. (2021, October 19). How South Korean society (unfortunately) inspired *Squid Game*. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/apple-day/202110/how-south-korean-society-unfortunately-inspired-squid-game>
- Klippe, A. (2021, January 25). The need to protect flood-management infrastructure from floods. *BusinessWorld Online*. <https://www.bworldonline.com/the-need-to-protect-flood-management-infrastructure-from-floods/>
- Lagman, J. F. (2009, October 20). The poor, scapegoat for the greed of a few. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. <https://www.pressreader.com/philippines/philippine-daily-inquirer-1109/20091020/282707633125059>
- Macaraeg, P. (2021, March 20). Only 3 firms responsible for nearly half of PH's plastic waste – Report. *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/environment/firms-responsible-nearly-half-philippine-plastic-waste-report>
- Margaritoff, M. (2020, October 17). *The eerie true story behind the “tsunami spirits” that allegedly haunt survivors of Japan’s 2011 disaster*. All That’s Interesting. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/tsunami-spirits>
- Mendoza, A. (2011, July 17). Review: “Shake Rattle & Roll 13”. *Pep*. <https://archive.ph/vniK>
- Milne, G. R., Kaplan, B., Walker, K. L., & Zacharias, L. (2021). Connecting with the future: The role of science fiction movies in helping consumers understand privacy-technology trade-offs. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 55(3), 737–762.
- Nakasu, T. (2011). *The exacerbation of human suffering and disaster response caused by Tropical Storm Ondoy and Typhoon Pepeng disasters - Cases of NCR and Baguio City* [Natural Disaster Research Report of the National Research Institute for Earth Science and Disaster Prevention, No. 45]. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1506.7927>
- NASA. (2009). *Hurricane season 2009: Typhoon Ketsana (Western Pacific)*. Hurricanes/Tropical cyclones: Latest storm images and data from NASA. [https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/hurricanes/archives/2009/h2009\\_Ketsana.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hurricanes/archives/2009/h2009_Ketsana.html)
- National Disaster Coordinating Council. (2009). *Final report on Tropical Storm “ONDOY” and Typhoon “PEPENG”*. <https://ndrrmc.gov.ph/2-uncategorised/1543-final-report-on-tropical-storm-ondoy-and-typhoon-pepeng>
- Perse, E. M., & Lambe, J. (2016). *Media effects and society* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Enano, J. O., & Reysio-Cruz, M. (2019, September 26). ‘Ondoy’ 10 years after: Marikina volunteers rise from trauma. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/MarikinaPIO/photos/a.555509487796691/3080613735286241>
- Salarda, L. (2015, August 18). Child labor in the Philippines fueled by poverty, disasters. *Earth Journalism Network*. <https://earthjournalism.net/stories/child-labor-in-the-philippines-fueled-by-poverty-disasters>
- Sarmiento, B. (2018, October 9). Plastic trash from the ‘sachet economy’ chokes the Philippines’ seas. *Mongabay Environmental News*. <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/10/plastic-trash-from-the-sachet-economy-chokes-the-philippines-seas/>
- Sato, T., & Nakasu, T. (2011). 2009 Typhoon Ondoy flood disasters in Metro Manila. *Natural Disaster Research Report*, 45, 63–74.
- Seng, L. K. (2014). Typhoon Ondoy and the translation of disaster expertise in Barangay Banaba, Marikina Valley. *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 62(2), 205–231.
- Serafica, R. (2017). *Guide to Marikina River’s alarm level system*. Rappler. <http://r3.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/disasters/181894-guide-marikina-river-alarm-level-system>

- Watanabe, A., Nakasu, T., & Inokuchi, T. (2011). *Representations over a tropical storm disaster and the restoration of everyday lives for urban poor victims in the Philippines* [Natural Disaster Research Report of the National Research Institute for Earth Science and Disaster Prevention, 45].  
[https://dil-opac.bosai.go.jp/publication/nied\\_natural\\_disaster/pdf/45/45-05E.pdf](https://dil-opac.bosai.go.jp/publication/nied_natural_disaster/pdf/45/45-05E.pdf)
- Williams, L., Arguillas, M. J. B., & Arguillas, F. (2020). Major storms, rising tides, and wet feet: Adapting to flood risk in the Philippines. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 50, 101810.
- Young, S. (2018). The Reay mermaids: In the bay and in the press. *Shima*, 12(2), 24–36.
- Zoleta, V. (2021, September 20). Know the meaning of NDRRMC alert for rainfall warning. *Moneymax*. <https://www.moneymax.ph/government-services/articles/ndrrmc-rainfall-warning>