

**THE
SENSATION
OF LOGIC**

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On the Cinema of Isiah Medina
Arta Barzanji

The importance of this retrospective lies not in confirming Isiah Medina as a fully formed figure, but in allowing his work to be seen *in motion*: as a practice that coheres, fractures, regresses, and clarifies over time. Medina is a filmmaker who prefers to jump in – to think through cinema rather than about it in advance – and whose films repeatedly probe how ideas acquire form and how form, in turn, reshapes thinking. What emerges across his shorts and features is not a settled position but a set of tensions, chief among them the uneasy relation between discourse and sensation, sincerity and irony, declaration and experiment.

Medina's cinema can be discursive, even didactic. Ideas are foregrounded, statements voiced directly, references named rather than alluded to. Yet discourse here does not function as a guarantee of sincerity. Rather, it operates as a volatile engine whose direction remains uncertain: it may draw the work into genuine experimentation, or harden into posture. What ultimately matters is not the presence of ideas, but how they are put under pressure – whether they are exposed to image, sound, and duration, or left to circulate as declarations.

This tension comes to the fore most explicitly in *Gangsterism* (2025), whose tagline, *DEPICTION = ENDORSEMENT*, declares the film's wager with blunt force. The slogan collapses a distinction cinema usually relies on: between showing and agreeing, quotation and belief. In doing so, it forces discourse into a dangerous proximity with sincerity. If depiction truly equals endorsement, then irony can no longer function as an alibi.

Gangsterism leans conspicuously into cinephilic and theoretical reference points: a pitching session in which a judge advises, "You need to read Tag Gallagher and Hasumi"; a shot of Armond White's book on Steven Spielberg; a ticket for *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (Lav Diaz, 2004); echoes of *The Rise and Fall of a Small Film Company* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1986); Godardian aphorisms voiced aloud. Medina positions himself inside the frame, at a desk, with a poster for *In Praise of Love* (Jean-Luc Godard, 2001) behind him, as if staging the scene of cinema thinking itself.

The film repeatedly invokes moral and political discourse – around racism, white supremacy, Filipino identity – often through characters who one-up each other in outrage or provocation. The effect is frequently abrasive, even cringe-inducing. Yet if the film demands that discourse be taken literally, it also raises a question it cannot fully resolve: what, audiovisually, is placed in opposition to that register?

When statements proliferate without sufficient material counterforce, discourse risks becoming self-sufficient, its provocation enacted instead of reworked.

This problem becomes clearer when *Gangsterism* is viewed alongside Godard, not as a lineage to be affirmed but as a method to be measured against. In his essay 'The Terrorized (Godardian Pedagogy),' Serge Daney describes Godard's practice as one that takes the discourse of the other *at its word*: words treated as things, utterances as objects. But for Daney, this literalism is inseparable from a second operation: the immediate search for another image, sound, or utterance

that can oppose, contradict, or destabilise the first. In this account, Godard is less an author of positions than a blank space where materials encounter and fight each other. The pedagogical impulse lies not in demonstrating what is correct, but in asking, relentlessly, *what can we oppose to this?*

Medina often adopts the first half of this pedagogy – taking discourse literally – without always completing the second. The result, in *Gangsterism*, is a film that exposes the violence and absurdity of discourse by amplifying it, yet sometimes stops short of forcing it into a dialectical struggle with form. The aforementioned tagline thus becomes ironic in a structural sense: a rule the film announces but cannot consistently obey.

Medina has described his practice as one organised around contradiction and self-revision: a process in which each work rethinks, undoes, or reorients the assumptions of the previous one, and in which the meaning of a film often becomes legible only retroactively, through the next attempt. This self-understanding aligns closely with what the retrospective makes visible in terms of form. Across his shorts in particular, cinema functions less as the demonstration of positions than as a site where ideas are exposed to material resistance – image, sound, duration – allowed to falter, mutate, or remain unresolved. Yet the same claim to contradiction also sharpens the critical stakes of the features. Where ideas arrive already articulated, already framed as positions to be enacted, the space for self-revision narrows. The films then risk staging contradiction rhetorically rather than working it through form. Seen in this light, Medina's cinema does not oscillate between success and failure so much as between two modes of thinking: one in which contradiction is generated by the struggle between materials, and another in which it is declared in advance, its outcome foreclosed by the very utterance that names it.

Medina's early short films establish cinema as a site of immediate encounter rather than declaration. *Semi-Auto Colours* (2010) communicates affect through texture, movement, and presence, allowing experience to register before it is organised into meaning. Reality appears less metabolised than *moved through*: images carry the artefact of lived experience in place of its explanation. The filmmaker's presence is not a wink but an integrated part of how being is mediated through craft.

In *Idizwadidiz* (2017), formal experimentation becomes both subject and method. Shapes traced by a hand, abrupt shifts in image format, the absence of sound, the final gesture of a blank page awaiting a new form – all suggest cinema treated as a plastic art, a material to be stretched, tested for viscosity, thickness, resistance. Here, images do not synthesise into meaning; they evoke the process that generated them.

This orientation is also seen in his first feature, *88:88* (2015), a dense collage of digital images, saturated colours, multiple aspect ratios, home movies, and documentary textures. The film's accumulation of references and surfaces can feel like dilettante intellectualism – but one rooted less in superficiality than in speed and sampling. Medina shows a genuine fascination with texture, pattern, and volume, privileging self-expression over self-assessment. Discourse here becomes another surface among others, its sincerity suspended between irony and belief.

The distinction between Medina's shorts and features is not so much one of quality as pressure. As projects scale up, ideas are increasingly asked to justify themselves as positions, rather than remain open to testing through form. Features, by contrast, often arrive under institutional and conceptual expectations that encourage announcement and synthesis. Positioning itself as an intervention into left-wing organising, *Inventing the Future* (2018), marks a point at which discursive intention begins to outweigh formal risk. Based on a 2015 book of the same name by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, the film voices critiques of neoliberalism, automation, and labour. Here, images and sounds are tasked with illustrating ideas already decided elsewhere. The result is not a struggle with cinematic matter so much as an enactment of positions.

This tension could also be contextualised in relation to a broader cultural environment shaped by grants, workshops, and festivals, where projects must be conceptually metabolised in advance, and production becomes the translation of plans into inert matter. Medina's practice resists this logic at its strongest. It is, in this sense, anti-hylomorphic: it permits image and sound to push back, to contradict, to exceed intention. Where his films falter is not in their ambition or intelligence, but when theory precedes practice in a one-sided fashion, foreclosing the very experimentation they seek to defend.

Seen across this retrospective, Medina emerges as a filmmaker animated by a genuine commitment to thinking through cinema. His unevenness, instead of detracting from the work, adds to the intrigue of his oeuvre. At its most sensuous, his films allow logic to be felt rather than explained. Overlapping images dissolve the boundary between sense and concept; sound traverses contradictory terrain as opposed to unifying it. At other moments, the pull of discourse hardens into posture.

What this retrospective makes visible is not a trajectory toward mastery, but a set of recurring questions that remain open. Medina's cinema asks how ideas live in images, how sincerity survives irony, and how form matures through resistance rather than resolution. The value of his work lies less in the answers it offers than in the risks it continues to take. The sincerity of his practice emerges precisely from that capacity to take risks.

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