

Film Criticism in the Philippines

Introduction to a Symposium

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Abstract

The emergence in the Philippines of film commentary as critical practice is fairly recent, if we go by the evidence of book collections. Hence, the debates on the theory and application of filmic principles can also be dated to the 1970s, when the first organization of film critics began pondering the applicability of principles drawn from earlier art forms such as theater. A measure of the seriousness by which the audience held film as a popular-culture phenomenon is in the fact that once books on film criticism began appearing, they proliferated to the point of resulting in a glut of virtual volumes during the digital-media era, in the form of film blogs. This paper will look into the motives, causes, and tensions that underlay this condition, and provide speculations on further directions that this trend may take.

Keywords

print publishing; internet blogging; reviews and criticism; Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino; Young Critics Circle; foreign trends

Philippine cinema originated as a direct contribution of the country's colonizing powers—i.e., it was introduced by the Spaniards during the eve of the revolution against Spanish rule, and popularized by the American government to assist in its propaganda campaign against the anti-imperialist Filipino rebel army. In both instances the independence fighters were either outwitted (Spain sold the colony to the US for \$23 million in the Treaty of Paris and staged a mock battle in Manila Bay to surrender to the American, rather than the Filipino, forces) or successfully suppressed. A relevant by-product of these political frustrations has been the still-continuing linguistic divisiveness in the country, wherein the constitutionally mandated languages are derided by nationalists as being either foreign (English and, until the 1986 “people-power” uprising, Spanish) or unrepresentative (formerly Manila-centered collaborationists’ Tagalog rather than the numerically superior Cebuano, and since 1986 the still Tagalog-based Filipino). Thus the emergence of cinema can be seen as representing these two sources of tension in national intellectual discourse: on the one hand, it has served as a cultural binding force—a national language, in effect—that has overridden the perhaps unresolvable issue of which among the orally and literarily available languages should take precedence in national applications; on the other hand, its technological nature serves as a clearer reminder than any traditional language can of the country's defeat in the face of foreign intrusions.

Philippine film criticism, like the country's film industry, has exhibited the tendency to emulate the model of the US, its primary colonizing power (other foreign power sources in the country would be Japan, in the economic sphere, and the Vatican State, in the religious sphere). Unlike local movie industry practitioners, however, Filipino film critics have demonstrated an ambivalence toward acknowledging the ascendancy of their models for practice, especially since the rise of the nationalist movement in response to the US's Cold War politics and Ferdinand Marcos's fascistic policies from the 1960s onward. Nevertheless, it is the position of this essay that trends in Philippine film criticism can be outlined according to the general developments of classic, modern, and poststructural schools of approaches in the

West. Both the “poetics of fracture” and metacritical method are ascribable to the project of deconstruction, but it would also be helpful to consider William Ray’s caution not to let go of historiographic significances, since “talking about ‘the past’ (can become) a perfectly ‘natural’ way to talk about ourselves; exposing the belief systems of a former age becomes a reasonable strategy for examining our own” (210). One possible (though definitely still deconstructible) means of providing a historical grounding for this type of metacriticism would be to place the critics under consideration within the context of the institutions with which they identified themselves—either as founders or as members. This resort to a structural approach may appear too rudimentary, but it has proved crucial to Philippine practice, as may become evident later.

Early film criticism, in the Philippines as in the US, was an outgrowth of an essentially journalistic imperative to provide newspaper readers with increasingly expert accounts of a recently opened film’s merits and/or weaknesses. In fact, decades after making declarations as to which productions were the best of their periods (or of all time, up to that point), the country’s most powerful newspaper group, the Manila Times Publishing Company, instituted the first-ever prizes for Philippine movies, the Maria Clara Film Awards,¹ in 1950. Two years later the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences, or FAMAS, was organized to serve as a local award-giving counterpart of Hollywood’s Oscars; interestingly, the founding of the FAMAS was spearheaded and controlled not by the industry, but by the movie press, with the Maria Clara awards dissolved to seemingly give way to the more legitimate group (Lumbera, *Pelikula* 17-18). This would eventually lead to the current redundancy of having the FAMAS and, since 1982, the Film Academy of the Philippines, which actually comprises guilds within the industry, both dispensing annual trophies. Further proof of film commentators’ need to devise a structure for influence is the existence of other (sometimes overlapping) groups—another (apart from the FAMAS) for the movie press, one for television-based reviewers, one for the Catholic Church, two for local governments (through annual film festivals), and two for film critics.

The FAMAS can be regarded as the original organized purveyor of formalist sensibilities in Philippine cinema, with the period of its flourish coinciding with the rise in influence of New Criticism in the US and the Philippines. In fact, the very notion of handing out awards for excellence is itself reducible to the now-problematic issue of formalism—a subject that has had to be grappled with by the critics’ groups in their own awards announcements. Among the leading lights of the FAMAS (and its one-time chair) was the late T.D. Agcaoili, a fictionist, journalist, scenarist, director, and sometime movie teacher and censor; such an agglomeration of grave, even conflicting responsibilities can be traced to the practice of early film practitioners of covering as many fields of specialization as they can, owing to both the lack of trainees then as well as the need to compensate for financially unstable but still necessary functions. Agcaoili, however, became best known as a reviewer-critic, and was at one point considered for an Outstanding Achievement Award by a latter critics’ group, which in the end decided against handing him the prize because of his support for Marcos’s martial law-era cultural policies. Due perhaps to this multiplicity of responsibilities, Agcaoili was unable to venture beyond an unattributed echoing of classicist principles, with such pronouncements as “Proper composition of motion will normally guarantee sound static composition but it must be clearly understood that this will be due not to the direct application of the principles of graphic art, but to the more general canons of esthetics germane to good cinema” and “The film or cinema (and by this is understood the entire body of technique...) is a time-space art with a unique capacity for creating new temporal-spatial relationships, projecting them with the incontrovertible impact of reality” (134, 138).

Outside the Establishment

Alternatives to the ensuing dominance of such ideas were consistently generated in academe, specifically the state-run University of the Philippines, which was founded by the US government during the early years of its occupation. At the forefront of this challenge to establishment-sanctioned aesthetics was the revitalized (pro-China rather than the earlier pro-Soviet)

Marxist movement, whose ideologue was a former UP student and teacher, Jose Ma. Sison. Using the nom de guerre Amado Guerrero, Sison maintained that the malaise suffered by the country was due to a combination of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism, and that a revolutionary struggle must be waged on the peasant front, with the interests of all other forces including the proletariat and bourgeois intellectuals subordinate to this main task (276-86); because of his organizational activities in founding the Communist Party of the Philippines and linking up with the New People's Army and the National Democratic Front, Sison had to engage in his theorizing underground, on the run from then already emerging Marcos fascism. The so-called Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zhedong movement found aboveground expressions in student activism, as well as on the cultural front; interestingly, a simultaneous experiment in the libertarian lifting of film-censorship controls, which resulted in the proliferation of graphic sex movies, was imputed by Guillermo de Vega (who was later mysteriously assassinated) to Marcos's martial-rule game plan (see *Film and Freedom*).

Guerrero's anti-imperialist critique of Philippine culture was paralleled in the aboveground texts of Renato Constantino, who virtually dismissed Filipino films as "reflective of a Westernized society" (31).² A more extensive analysis was proffered by Bienvenido Lumbera, who was imprisoned during the early martial law years for alleged subversion. In proposing a revision of Philippine film history from a nationalist perspective (in "Problems in Philippine Film History," *Revaluation* 193-212), Lumbera was first to point out the exploitation of film as an adjunct of colonialism and its eventual acceptance by the masses as a primary medium of communication and entertainment; he posed the decline of the studio system during the 1960s (following the collapse in Hollywood during the '50s) as a threat in the production of quality projects, and heralded the founding of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, of which he was member and occasional chair, as a step toward assisting the practitioners of what he termed the new Philippine cinema. The MPP succeeded in breaking the stronghold of the corruption-ridden FAMAS by introducing the Urian awards, distancing itself from the earlier body by emphasizing both the thoroughness of its nomination and delib-

eration processes, and its modification of formalist criteria in social-realist terms thus:

In the case of two films which are equally well-made, the film with the more significant subject matter is to be preferred...

Accordingly, the content of a film is considered superior if it is a truthful portrayal of the human condition as perceived by the Filipino, and if it deals with the Filipino experience to which the greater number of moviegoers can relate. (qtd. in Tiongson "MPP Criteria" *Urian Anthology 1970-1979* 3)

The MPP for the most part provided a refuge of sorts for critics of various orientations and persuasions, including formalists who obviously felt that association with the FAMAS would affect their credibility; the most prolific among these was Isagani R. Cruz, who prescribed the three elements of technical excellence, literary value, and cinematic sense (3-10) as his criteria for dispensing ratings from zero to five stars. Lumbera, along with his UP-based colleagues Nicanor G. Tiongson and Petronilo Bn. Daroy, devised a proto-modernist means of approaching films as cultural products, with a then-pioneering consideration of spectatorial activity, first articulated in *Revaluation* and affirmed in *Re-Viewing Filipino Cinema*. This consisted of pinpointing elements shared between film genres and traditional theatrical forms, thus implicating the former with the outmodedness and backwardness of the latter (see Tiongson, *Urian Anthology 1970-1979* 94-137; R. Guerrero 83-108). The net result of such efforts was not so much the arrival at reader-response analyses, as in the rejection of what was merely popular, as the FAMAS did, with the additional benefit of replacing the FAMAS's bourgeois formalism with a more progressive canonical build-up. A dissenting opinion was expressed, still from within the UP and, for a time, the MPP circles, by Alice Guillermo, who described as problematic "the insistence [by Lumbera et al.] ... on the role of the theater, which may give one the mistaken impression that cinema is to be considered as an extension or development of the theater" (97).

The MPP would continue publishing decadal anthologies and would dominate the *Philippine Film* volume of the *Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*, all edited by Tiongson. A final category of MPP membership would be one comprising critics who have been considering questions of the applicability of cultural studies frameworks and practices in the Philippines. The more active among this group have found it necessary, for some reason or other, to break away from the MPP, with a number reorganizing and inviting other active practitioners to form an organization openly critical of the older group. Perhaps as befits those who venture onto multivalenced and even contradictory contemporary directions, the originally unified MPP and post-MPP renegades have also found themselves divided into two main argumentative camps, with the promise of further divisions in store for the future.

Emmanuel A. Reyes can be taken to have represented the MPP member who conducted his critical practice with contemporary, specifically structuralist, suppositions, within the limits imposed by the MPP's awards practice (winning in turn an Urian prize for one of his short films). Using David Bordwell's concept of the classical Hollywood narrative as a springboard, Reyes attempted to redefine Philippine films as reliant on a number of factors in relation to Hollywood practice: scenes rather than plots, overt rather than subtle representations, circumlocutory rather than economical dialog, and the centrality of the star rather than her or his performance (*Notes on Philippine Cinema* 15-25). Aside from the possibility that his grasp of Hollywood classicism may be challenged alongside his confusion with it of certain properties that more properly belong to the New American Cinema, Reyes winds up sounding not very different from Isagani R. Cruz where it matters most for local readers—i.e., in his reviews. Both individuals reduce their responses to either liking or disliking the product in question without offering up an inspection of their respective subjective positions, then justify their pronouncements by taking a quick opinionated rundown of elements apparently based on the MPP's awards categories—direction, screenplay, performances, cinematography, production design, editing, and sound and music. Such a methodology became the routine framework of a number of other MPP members who reviewed films on television, where they gave out

not just five-star-maximum ratings but also yearend awards that may be read as a means of lobbying for certain choices within the larger group. (Reyes subsequently published a second anthology, *Malikhaing Pelikula*, which included the screenplays of his films, *Dreaming Filipinos* and *Suwapings*, as well as an interview where he described the latter as an art film.) Reyes's mentor, Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., has published a scriptwriting manual and a collection of scripts, as did another former MPP member, Ricardo Lee; in addition, del Mundo, along with Shirley Lua as co-editor, came out recently with *Direk*, an auteurist evaluation of Filipino directors; this was in effect a more narrowly focused indie-specific study than Bibsy M. Carballo's *Film Directors Up Close*. An invaluable one-shot would be the project initiated by Agustin Sotto for the Cultural Center of the Philippines, titled *Unang Pagtingin sa Pelikulang Babbakan* and co-written with Zeus A. Salazar and Prospero Reyes Covar.

The "Other" Critics

Qualitative improvements in the output of MPP-identified critics include a number of book-length studies by Rolando B. Tolentino on film (see *Contestable Nation-Space*, *Indie Cinema*, *Richard Gomez at ang Mito ng Pagkalalake*, the e-book *Vaginal Economy*, and the edited volume *Geopolitics of the Visible* and the co-edited *A Reader in Philippine Film*) as well as the personal anthology published by the newest member, Patrick F. Campos, titled *The End of National Cinema*. (A similar academe-based publication was a Festschrift in honor of the late Nicasio D. Cruz SJ, coedited by Tolentino with Serverino R. Sarmenta, titled *Movies that Matter*.) A historically urgent collection on Lino Brocka is the eponymously titled anthology edited by Mario A. Hernando. Among the members of the breakaway critics organization, the Young Critics Circle, only Patrick D. Flores has been able so far to publish a personal collection of reviews and criticism in the now-rare *Sites of Review*. (Flores is also preparing a second such volume, after several books on art criticism.) The other YCC members have been able to publish in-depth studies on such related topics as female stardom (Cesar D. Orsal's *Movie Queen*), digital filmmaking (Eloisa May Hernandez's *Digital Cinema*

in the Philippines), and Imelda Marcos's cultural aspirations (Gerard Lico's *Edifice Complex*), all more salient works than Tiongson's old-line auteurist *The Cinema of Manuel Conde*.³ In terms of anthologies of critical output, the YCC also has its MPP-counterpart publications—*Sampung Taóng Sine* and *Sining ng Sineng Filipino*.

A logical consequence of this flurry of film-book anthologizing is an increase in the publications of non-affiliated members: Joel David⁴ and Alice Guillermo were no longer with the MPP when their volumes appeared. Other notable authors of books of film criticism were foreign-based Mel Tobias, with *One Hundred Acclaimed Tagalog Movies*; Johven Velasco, whose *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.* came out posthumously; Jessica Zafra, whose compilations of her articles included one on cinema titled *Twisted Flicks*; and Richard Bolisay, the most recently published author, with *Break It to Me Gently*, an anthology of mostly blog posts. Like the MPP and YCC, Tolentino, David, Vera, and Bolisay all maintain internet blogs devoted primarily to film and film commentary. In fact, it is on the internet where film commentary has proliferated: among blogs that feature a collective of authors are *Cinetactic*, *Film Police Reviews*, *New Durian Cinema*, with other blogs such as *Cinema Bravo*, *Cinephiles!*, and *Philippine Cinema Forum* migrating to *Facebook*. In the present collection, Jeffrey Deyto, whose essay precedes the collection of personal statements, also has a blog of his own, titled *Missing Codec*. Former MPP member and YCC founding chair and current director of the San Francisco-based Filipino Arts & Cinema International's annual film festival, Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr., contributed his vision for Filipino film criticism (subtitled "A Personal Testimony"); Paul Alcosoba Castillo, who runs the *Kung Sine Sine Lang (With Only Film)* blog, delineated how he learned how to read movies; Noel Vera, whose *Critic after Dark*, like Tobias's volume, was foreign-published, explained his approach by answering interview questions to himself; Libay Linsangan Cantor, known for the long-running *Takilya ni Leafless (Leafless's Box-Office)*, advocated for her concept of the intersectional reviewer; and last, but also possibly a first in Philippine journal publishing, Ricardo Espino Lopez explains, in his trademark queer lingo, how he became the *Knee-Jerk Critic* of his blog.

The importance of blog coverage cannot be demeaned, contrary to an MPP official's contention (posted on his film blog, ironically) that film bloggers cannot be counted as qualified film commentators. The variance in writing competence and analytical ability veers wildly, from embarrassingly unformed (or excessively informed by ideological convention)—qualities for which print editors could have served to upgrade or reject; to adequately accomplished, at least enough to confute the aforementioned MPP official's assertion. The function of blogs has been superseded by social networks led by *Facebook*: where once one had to check several critics' blog updates, the combination of website options and socnet algorithms enable these individuals' postings to appear on one's wall. Blogs and their *Facebook* counterparts, in fact, have virtually overtaken the several specialized publications, including those devoted to cataloguing releases, publishing fan appreciations, and espousing specific causes. The overload of information has led to what new-media describe as a numbing of netizens' responses to new output and a complacency in the seeming (though essentially false) permanence of digital material.

One, admittedly more optimistic, way of viewing this diversification of critical efforts centered on Philippine film discourse would be the recognition of the absence of a common political incentive—which in the past was provided by the call to resist the repressiveness of the Marcos militarist and pro-foreign-interventionist machinery. By reconsidering the dynamics of the current situation, certain priorities could be agreed upon, starting perhaps with the indifference of the post-Marcos dispensations toward culture (especially popular forms), as well as the return of a democracy-threatening form of moralism in the guise of religious fundamentalist dogmatism in political dialogs. The greater nationalist challenge—that of coping with the effort of reversing the trend of underdevelopment, along with the latter's consequential furtherance of social repressions and inequalities—suggests itself as a forthcoming and all-but-overwhelming project that promises to tax all practitioners, including critics, of Philippine popular culture in their accountability to their country's crisis-ridden history. For the meantime, we provide the following symposium-styled collection: a number of critical

position statements—by Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr., Paul Alcosoba Castillo, Libay Linsangan Cantor, and Ricardo Espino Lopez—introduced by critical studies by Joel David and by Jeffrey Deyto. A seemingly random project wound up with a wide variety of not just approaches but also voices. Such is the vibrancy and variety of Philippine film criticism, regardless of what establishment authorities might believe.

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Notes

1. Maria Clara is the name of the frail and ultimately tragic romantic interest of the lead character in Jose Rizal's novel, *Noli Me Tangere*; Rizal was declared the national hero by the American colonial government because he opposed Spain (and was martyred in the process) and pressed for reform rather than independence. For a long time historians believed that the first Philippine films were two simultaneous rival projects on Rizal's life, both produced by Americans during the late 1900s. This was superseded by the contestable discovery during the '80s that foreign films (or possibly prototypes thereof) were first exhibited in 1896 and produced (with still-existing paper prints in some cases) in 1897 by a Spaniard, Antonio Ramos (de Pedro 26-27). Perhaps inevitably, movies based on Rizal's life or his fiction dominated the Maria Clara prizes.
2. Joel David would like to acknowledge Patrick D. Flores, for drawing his attention to this little-known fact via a report in a 1990 seminar on Philippine art and society under Brenda V. Fajardo. The review of the literature of local film criticism in this article also takes off from the structure of the aforementioned paper, the only copy of which was lost in the fire that razed the UP Diliman Faculty Center in 2016.
3. Extended studies by individuals unaffiliated with the critics' organizations have also been coming out, including texts written by Filipinos in US academe. Further auteur-oriented collections have also recently been published by film festivals (specifically, Busan and Jeonju) in Korea.
4. As coauthors of the present article, Arriola's and David's books will not be mentioned as part of the narrative of film-book publishing. Arriola's published text and title are mentioned in the author's bionote, while David's out-of-print ones are on his blog, *Amateurish!*

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