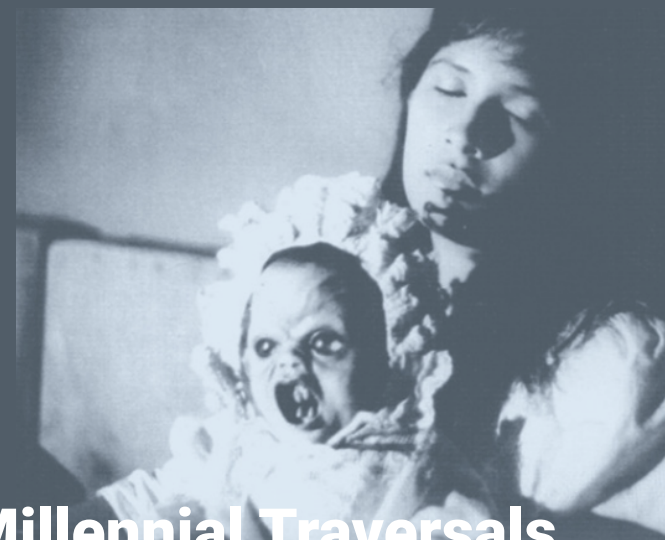


# UNITAS

SEMI-ANNUAL PEER-REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL ONLINE JOURNAL  
OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN LITERATURE, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

BOOK EDITION  
2019



## Millennial Traversals

Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery

PART II: EXPANDED PERSPECTIVES **JOEL DAVID**



DAVID

PART II

## Millennial Traversals

PART I

DAVID



SEMI-ANNUAL PEER-REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL ONLINE JOURNAL  
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# UNITAS

VOL. 88 • NO. 1 • MAY 2015



Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery

## Millennial Traversals



2019

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PART I: TRAVERSALS WITHIN CINEMA **JOEL DAVID**

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## **Millennial Traversals**

Outliers, Juvenilia, &  
Quondam Popcult Blabbery



ALSO BY JOEL DAVID

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# UNITAS

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## Millennial Traversals

Outliers, Juvenilia, &  
Quondam Popcult Blabbery

PART II: EXPANDED PERSPECTIVES

**JOEL DAVID**





*Millennial Traversals:  
Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery  
(Part 2: Expanded Perspectives)*

Book edition  
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UNITAS journal edition  
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Original Digital Edition  
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Cover still from *Tiyanak*, © 1988 Regal Films

Printed and bound in the Philippines by La Limariza Printing Press and completed via funding from the Inha University Faculty Research Grant.

The National Library of the Philippines Cataloguing in Publication Data:

David, Joel.

Millennial traversals : outliers, juvenilia, & quondam popcult blabbery :  
part II: expanded perspectives / Joel David.-- Book edition. -- Quezon City :  
Amateurish Publishing, [2019], c2019.  
xxii, 179 pages ; 22.86 cm

Bound dos-a-dos; book opens to the right from both the front cover and  
the back cover. ISBN 978-621-96191-1-0

1. Motion pictures – Philippines – Reviews. 2. Film criticism –  
Philippines. 3. Philippine literature – Reviews. I. Title.

791.4375      PN1995      P920190153

UNITAS is an international online peer-reviewed open-access journal of advanced research in literature, culture, and society published bi-annually (May and November).

UNITAS is published by the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines, the oldest university in Asia. It is hosted by the Department of Literature, with its editorial address at the Office of the Scholar-in-Residence under the auspices of the Faculty of Arts and Letters. Hard copies are printed on demand or in a limited edition.

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### History and Coverage

Established in July 1922, **UNITAS** is one of the oldest extant academic journals published by a university in the Philippines as well as in Asia. Still, **UNITAS** is perhaps the oldest extant academic journal of its kind in the Philippines and Asia in terms of expansive disciplinary coverage and diverse linguistic representation through the decades. While always cognizant of disciplinary specialization, it has been “multi-disciplinary” in publishing scholarship that is intra-disciplinary within the humanities and the arts, and interdisciplinary across the other disciplines. As it was in the beginning, it has aimed for “unitas” by conjoining disciplinary difference through its pages.

Moreover, it has been multi-linguistic on the whole, allowing itself to evolve from a journal published purely in Spanish, and then in English, becoming bilingual eventually in the various issues in which articles are written in Spanish and English, or

as has been the case in the last several decades, in English and Filipino. And, of late, **UNITAS** has also published articles in other languages.

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the **Young Critics Circle**,  
and **Kritika**—

*“...người ta thôi nghĩ về sự may mắn trong hạnh phúc.”*  
(from a Vietnamese proverb)

## Contents

**xvi** Introduction to the UNITAS Print Edition  
of Part II: EXPANDED PERSPECTIVES

**xxi** Introduction to the Original Digital Edition

### **1. Non-Film Reviews**

- 1** Adaptation Comes of Age  
• *La Bohème (Giacomo Puccini)*
- 3** Disorder & Constant Sorrow  
• *Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years*
- 6** The Novel Pinoy Novel  
• *Si Amapola sa 65 na Kabanata*
- 9** High Five  
• *Gang of 5: Tales, Cuentos, Sanaysay*

### **2. First Persons**

- 13** Movie Worker
- 16** Love Was the Drug
- 22** The Dolphy Conundrum
- 24** The Carnal Moral of a Brutal Miracle
- 28** A National Artist We Deserve

### 3. Interviews

- 32 Star Builders on Parade
- 36 The Fantasy World of Rey de la Cruz
- 42 Perseverance in a Neglected Dimension
- 55 The Critic as Creator
- 65 Critic in Academe

### 4. Commentaries

- 76 Cinemasex
- 80 Big Hopes for Short Films
- 85 Levels of Independence
- 88 *Sight & Sound* 2002

### 5. Culture at Large

- 96 Kim Daejung & the Aquinos
- 98 Crescent Tense
- 101 Asian Casanovas
- 104 The Sins of the Fathers
- 107 A Benediction in the Offing

### 6. Foreign Scenes

- 110 Tarriance in Thailand
- 116 Empire of the (Risen) Sun
- 125 Small Worm, Big Apple
- 127 Unease in the Morning Calm

### 7. Metacriticism

- 131 How to Become a Film Critic
- 136 Some Words on Film Awards
- 150 A Lover's Polemic

### 8. Last Closure

- 160 Reflections on a National Pastime
- 170 Acknowledgements
- 173 Index
- 180 About the Author

## Introduction to the UNITAS Print Edition of Part II: EXPANDED PERSPECTIVES

**Note:** *Millennial Traversals* is divided into two parts. Each part shares the first portion of this print-edition introduction. If you have read this same five-paragraph opening section in Part I: TRAVERSALS WITHIN CINEMA, please skip these paragraphs and go directly to the portion subtitled *Reading Strategies*.

The codex edition that you are reading represents a unique publication trajectory that might only be the first of several other possible samples in the newly arrived age of the internet. The 2015 copyright year represents the actual date (July 23, to be exact) that *Millennial Traversals* was announced on my blog, *Amauteurish!* The fact that the original digital edition persisted for a while meant that I was able to tinker a bit with it—correcting errors, providing updates, repositioning certain articles—based on my own and its readers’ responses. My earlier books, which came out right before the internet became a global medium all its own, were the first to benefit from the essential corrigibility of any self-owned internet posting.

With the then-impending appearance of my first book *qua* book (a monograph, rather than the anthology format of the previous volumes), I strove to come up with one final collection, premised on a theoretically permanent online existence. Unlike my earlier books, *Millennial Traversals* would benefit from an always-amendable condition. The advantage of its open-access nature became immediately apparent when the Canada-based

monograph editors requested that one of the interviews in the original draft be pulled out for inclusion as an appendix in the book of mine that they were working on. In proofreading the other articles before uploading them, I would occasionally write an introduction and/or append a note as necessary, but sometimes the need to provide corrections or modifications would arise after the article gets posted (the internet equivalent of getting published)—and it was always a matter of logging into the blog and fixing the material as many times as it required, a luxury entirely unavailable to any print-published author, as anyone old enough to remember predigital media will attest.

I was grateful enough for these twists in publication possibilities. But the present development was something I had never anticipated: a published version that not only succeeds but also affirms the original digital edition. It were as if the goddess of multimedia decreed that my books needed to mirror one another’s formats regardless of which format preceded or succeeded the other(s). I sought to maintain as much of the original edition as I could. In the case of my originally print-published volumes, some degree of editorial intervention on my end could not be avoided. For the original digital posting of *Millennial Traversals*, I attempted to anticipate possible queries or qualifications by providing introductions, endnotes, postscripts, and/or references.

I thought these measures would suffice, since the gap between digital and print editions would be far shorter—a few years, compared to the several decades in the case of the print-first books. Another disadvantage I discovered is that digital books rarely get reviewed, and those that exist open-access style are virtually (pun intended) ignored. Since the print edition would require a two-volume output (serendipitously conforming to the digital edition’s two-part structure), I checked out the number of pages of each part and attempted to work out a more-or-less balanced proportion. This was when I discovered that a design and concomitant content that could function satisfactorily in interactive format may stump, annoy, or confuse readers who were following the linear trajectory of a book publication. On a website, HTML links would enable users to jump from one article to another (or back to a contents list), or even within various sections of a long article, using whatever their needs of the moment happened to be: information, analysis, curiosity, pleasure, or combinations thereof.



This is my means of explaining why the print edition slightly departed from the original digital edition. Paradoxically, since the digital edition of this book will be migrating to the publisher's website, I also had no need to maintain the original format that appeared in my blog, *Amauteurish!* Will there be a further modification when the current book version reverts to digital? Aside from the fact that it would no longer reside on my archival blog and that it will remain open-access, I have no way of predicting *Millennial Traversals'* further millennial traversals.

### Reading Strategies

The second part of *Millennial Traversals* provides continuity with the first by opening with reviews. It also departs from the first by picking out reviews of “non-films,” specifically an opera, an autobiographical account, a post-modern novel, and an anthology of short fiction. I have a few more reviews on record, but these (on film books) are either scholarly and journal-published, or the hundred-plus movie mini-critiques that will constitute the years-in-the-making canon project commissioned by Summit Media (with me as consultant) that will be published in a volume titled *SINÉ*.

The expansion of perspectives (per this volume's title) follows a near-circular arc: from the personal to the subjectively familiar to issues on the edge of my specialization (culture or politics but no longer film) and to foreign contexts, before returning to the foreign country where I reside to work, and to metacritical issues in film. The final essay was actually an early state-of-the-medium report I wrote that offered a speculation on which then-apparent trends would have increasing and continuing impact on Philippine film practice.

The first post-review section, *First Persons*, begins with an account (“Ordinary People”) of my years as a fresh film graduate at the national university. Most people in the same situation today regard industry work as their first option, and have a ready and responsive support network to help them. As the first-and-only graduate, I had to begin by convincing people not just of my suspicious-sounding status, but also that there actually was a Philippine film program securely in place. From that point, my career swerved into academia, and I sought to narrate the traumatic difficulties I had to surmount by displacing these onto the tale (“Love Was the

Drug”) of a colleague whose resolution was far less fortunate than mine. The rest of the section dealt with unfairly maligned major artists—a comedian, a woman filmmaker felled by early illness, a superstar denied the recognition she deserved before everyone else alive, by a pathetically presumptuous and narcissistic Chief Executive.

The next section, *Interviews*, expands on the preceding one by allowing the subjects to foreground their voices. “Star Builders on Parade” interviews a trio of talent managers, all historically significant by now, while the next article focuses on one of them, Rey de la Cruz. This would be followed by more serious (and somewhat less-fun) insights provided by a film practitioner (soundperson Ramon Reyes), a critic-turned-director (Pio de Castro III), and a critic-administrator (Bienvenido Lumbera). Commentaries, the next section, would be fairly lightweight, the equivalent of a breather, where I report on sex-film trends, the short film format, the notion of (predigital) independent cinema, and my first and only participation in a global-scale canon exercise.

The next two sections, *Culture at Large* and *Foreign Scenes*, observe their own mini-arc by starting and ending with the neighboring country where I launched my academic projects. The first compared the historical “democratic” leaderships of the Philippines and Korea, while the rest considered controversies from either or both countries that resonated in both places: the Ampatuan massacre in Maguindanao, the accusations of womanizing directed at various Asian subjects (including the Philippines's Manny Pacquiao), the even worse claims of child rape allegedly done by Catholic priests, and the sudden, unexpected vacating of the papacy by a still-living Pope. The second section reported on my visits to Thailand, Japan, New York, and Korea—initially focused on film but expanding to issues of politics and culture.

The last multi-article section would be the collection's money shot, to use an analogy from the film-pornography genre. “How to Become a Film Critic” was a tentative and too-careful parody of my then-still-fresh stint at the Filipino Film Critics Circle, whose members made a show of looking at the problems I raised and announcing resolutions to some of them—none of which they even bothered to undertake. “Some Words on Film Awards” was a situationer (to use the only appropriate-though-slang term) on my

participation in the organizing of alternative critics' groups spearheaded by the indefatigable Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr. (founding director of the quarter-century San Francisco-based Filipino Arts & Cinema International or FACINE); it lists and evaluates the results of what then seemed like an overly prolific film-awards situation in the country. "A Lover's Polemic" was the article that finally triggered the local critics circle into organizing what it claimed was an academic roundtable on film criticism but which devolved into bashing presumptuous critics (who supposedly criticize those who give out credible and incorruptible awards) and film bloggers. I provided some quick notices in a blog post, and elaborated on my response in an explication on my canon-forming projects. The issue must necessarily be regarded as still-continuing and possibly irresolvable, so (like anything on the internet) what we've got is what we'll have to deal with for now.

The collection ends with my first journal article an attempt to determine what had seemed then like a long-drawn-out close to an era and an anticipation of what may arrive next; current historians would identify the before-and-after periods using technological designations (celluloid and digital respectively), but the actual challenge would be in figuring out how modes of conception, production, distribution, and spectatorship had shifted. In this respect, *Millennial Traversals* closes at the point where cinema was, in a sense, about to be superseded by new-media technology, but also about to turn into a universally available and increasingly accessible mode of practice.

## Introduction to the Original Digital Edition

*Millennial Traversals: Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery* is my first book of the new millennium, and like most contemporary claims, that one can be deconstructed at every point: the millennium's no longer that new, I've done other books since 2000 (mostly as editor, but also as dissertation author), and ... the present volume is not, or not yet, a book, at least in the printed dead-tree sense that my previous solo-authored ones were. Moreover, aside from my diss, I've never really written, much less published, an extensive monograph, which would be the type of book I'd prefer to uphold. Although I expended conscious efforts to ensure that my previously published compilations had as much internal consistency as they could handle, they were still essentially anthologies, as this current one is; and maybe the distinction of *Millennial Traversals* is that its pretensions reside elsewhere, no longer in trying to appear like a deliberately planned and duly parsed product. My rationale for insisting that the present exercise is still part of the continuum provided by my previous volumes is simple (shaky maybe, but simple): *The National Pastime*, *Fields of Vision*, and *Wages of Cinema* all exist in revised and updated form on my archival blog, so *Millennial Traversals* merely skipped the paper-and-ink stage and got to be introduced to its readership in digital format. (I'm still planning to have "publishable" PDF versions of all the texts I've mentioned here, but I can't foresee right now how soon I'll be able to work that out.) In this manner,

virtually all my non-academic (and a few academic) film and culture articles will have been compiled in book form.

The positive aspects of creating a strictly open-access book revealed themselves in separate stages. I knew that I wouldn't have to deal with publishers' and editors' and readers' quirks, which for some reason assume creative dimensions when they confront popular culture material; that included the corollary advantage of having the longest manuscript text I ever compiled, nearly double (in terms of number of articles) that of *The National Pastime*, my previous longest book. When I cooked up a title, I realized I could formulate something that any sensible publisher (or her accountant) might faint upon hearing, and I could lump together anything I wanted without worrying about possible objections like *why foreign films?* *why incomplete period coverage?* *why the shifts to other media and even to non-media?* *why the wide divergence in analytical approaches?* I could improve on the texts at any time and place, although I do hope to minimize my tinkering once the manuscripts go public. I won't need to strengthen an opening essay that I knew was too lame by my standards, since I felt when I was writing it that it just needed to be placed out there in order to temper, if not overturn, my very first book's unexpectedly influential first essay. The foreign-film reviews still seem rather perfunctory, which was why I had no problem eliminating them from my earlier books—but they somehow assumed increasing usefulness the longer I kept at them. The local film reviews similarly dropped out from the pre-millennial books because of their uncertain significance in relation to the rest of my output, although they still could function as markers of an era; in *Millennial Traversals* they serve to indicate my interest in as wide a variety of film types as Philippine cinema makes available.

## Non-Film Reviews

### Adaptation Comes of Age

#### **La Bohème (Giacomo Puccini)**

Translated and directed by Rolando Tinio

Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra (cond. Yaacov Bergman)

The several years since the Marcos era and its system of cultural patronage collapsed saw the consequent floundering of a number of Cultural Center of the Philippines-based artists. The best of them, Rolando Tinio, may have had the saddest story to tell: his Teatro Pilipino production company lost both venue and office, his formidably gifted wife Ella Luansing died in a vehicular accident, and the objectors to his vision of translating foreign works for Filipino audiences happened to replace the very administrative officials who provided him with the support he needed.

When he finally announced the closure of Teatro Pilipino last year, most cultural observers were behooved to pay tribute; after all, not only had Ella just died, no one could also come close to Tinio at his peak when it

came to several areas of translation, stage design, and performance of foreign plays. His recent effort in venturing beyond strict translations to adaptations of such works can therefore be regarded as a strategy for survival, since it is these kinds of efforts that even so-called nationalist theater groups occasionally resort to. In fact, although this may be simplifying the matter all too much, Tinio had to go much further—translating and adapting not just plays, but also operas—in order to be able to work once more at the CCP.

His initial attempts met with the same mixed blend of reactions that his translations provoked, although of course this time the issues went way beyond linguistics, into the more contestable area of the validity of the local context vis-à-vis the terms of the original being adapted. Within the operatic form, the debate becomes even more complicated: one could question as well not just the accuracy of translation but the aptness of the style of language (in this instance, Filipino) in relation to the music.

Like the best Teatro Pilipino (and “nationalist”) theater productions, the key to appreciating works that are foreign in origin lies in values apart from the unresolvable issue of whether the original sentiment perfectly fits the new context. With Puccini’s *La Bohème*, Tinio has once more—as he did two years ago with Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata*—demolished all arguments in favor of pureness of origin (starting with the notion that Filipinos should stage only Filipino works and translate these for foreign audiences), arguing in turn that a genuinely gifted artist will always be capable of making fundamental connections between only-apparently disparate elements.

It would be the height of conceit to suppose that any attempt can therefore be justifiable per se; an even greater conceit of course lies in the very staging of opera. *La Bohème* has been argued as flawed in terms of its entertainment potential, particularly since its dramatic highlight arrives much too early—in the second of four acts—followed by two acts of a long-drawn-out retribution (for the characters’ bohemian lifestyle, as it were). On the other hand, Giuseppe Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, which staged about a month earlier also at the CCP, was a safer (and far more expensive) effort at local opera production, what with a sure-fire popular choice with the original Italian libretto retained, plus the use of Italian singers in lead roles.

What this entire study in contrasts, which would entail ticket prices that range from the present production’s Php 300 to the earlier one’s Php

2,000, proves, is that safer isn’t necessarily better. Opera being as rare as it is hereabouts, *Rigoletto* was at best a celebratory event, the equivalent of an over-budgeted high-school undertaking, with some assistance from the pros. *La Bohème*, on the other hand, both dared and succeeded in transforming a potentially problematic work into an original Filipino experience, signifying the completion of the transition process of its director from expert translator to master adapter, plus his rehabilitation as one of the foremost theater talents of our time.

The last performance, featuring the much-maligned senior cast, saw the singers in peak form, perhaps as a response to the media’s lionization of the junior performers. This may also have been one of the few occasions, reminiscent of Teatro Pilipino’s glory days, where the audience applauds an empty stage, for the sheer expressiveness of the set design. Someone—an accountant, not a critic—had better inquire into how such a superior production had managed to charge relatively reasonable prices, and whether such costs could be further lowered, starting with the obvious solution of scheduling longer runs.

The development of Filipino theater has traditionally been seen as taking steps away from Western practice, toward the consideration of indigenous forms and material; in a sense, Tinio may have been a casualty of this view. *La Bohème* demonstrates that artistic excellence is an indispensable component of this ideal, and that there are ways of making various principles meet on equal terms. Bravo, then, and more opera and Tinio, please.

## Disorder & Constant Sorrow

### Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years

Susan F. Quimpo & Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, with David Ryan F. Quimpo, Norman F.

Quimpo, Emilie Mae Q. Wickett, Lillian F. Quimpo, Elizabeth Q. Bulatao, Caren Q.

Castañeda, Jun F. Quimpo, & Maria Cristina Pargas-Bawagan

Manila: Anvil Publishing, 2012

In the process of finalizing the current issue of *Kritika Kultura*, Ateneo’s online journal, on Ishmael Bernal’s *Manila by Night*, I went over some of the notes I

took during the too-few interviews I had with the director. One of the statements he made, that our stories as a people are better told as a collective, became the basis of several articles and an entire dissertation I wrote on the film and its author. The format, which we can call by its description “multiple-character,” is a tricky one to pull off. Seemingly “social” fictions like *Gone with the Wind* or, closer to home, *Noli Me Tangere* typically begin with a large group of characters, then reduce the narrative threads until they focus on a hero, sometimes with a romantic interest or against an antihero, or (in the case of *GWTW*) a love triangle—which, by presenting a character torn between two options, invites singular identification and thus maintains the heroic arrangement.

The multicharacter film format actually originated in literature, so it would not be surprising to find it deployed more readily in fiction and theater, where the “star” demands of cinema can be more easily ignored. The more ambitious samples, like *Manila by Night* (and Bernal’s avowed model, *Nashville*), succeed in portraying, via the interaction of its characters, an abstract, singular, social character that embodies the conflicts, frustrations, and aspirations of the milieu the text’s figures represent. The unexpected delight of my current Pinoy reading experience, in this wise, was in recognizing several of these qualities (and then some) in a recent book, titled *Subversive Lives*. Listing Susan F. Quimpo and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo as authors, the Anvil publication actually comprises contributions from the Quimpo siblings and the widow of their brother.

The Quimpos achieved fame (or notoriety, depending on one’s perspective) for several of the siblings having participated in the anti-dictatorship movement during the martial-law regime of Ferdinand Marcos. Since the only genuine opposition during most of this period was provided by the outlawed Communist underground, the Quimpo family, by its association, underwent dramatic upheavals, acute heartbreak, and occasional but still-too-rare moments of grace that would appear almost fantastic had the book been announced as a fiction. The fact that these events actually happened, related by the individuals who directly experienced them, provides the reader with a sense of how irreparably damaging authoritarianism has always been for our particular national experience.

I remember how, as a student at the state university, I could always rely on the fact that my smartest classmates would be sympathetic, if not

involved outright, with student-activist causes—in sharp contrast with the situation I later observed as a teacher. *Subversive Lives* provides a panoramic chronicle of how the militarized dictatorship, profitable only to foreign and mercenary local business and religious interests, upheld the worst legacies of colonial education and magic-patriarchal morality: backward thugs armed, fed, and protected by the machinery of an irredeemably corrupted state were allowed to wield life-or-death mastery over the very people in whom, by virtue of their capacity to exercise discernment, creativity, and determination, the future of the nation would have resided.

The Quimpo children, in this respect, may be regarded as representative of the country’s best and brightest, had they emerged in another place, another time. Starting out as stereotypical overachievers, the only source of pride of their financially distressed parents, they grew up just when the storm clouds of tyranny were gathering; having moved to a cramped apartment near the presidential palace, they were initially witnesses, then active participants, in the increasingly violent protest actions then taking place in their neighborhood.

One of the most powerful dramatic undercurrents in the book is how the Quimpos’ parents coped with the spectacle of several of their children giving up their scholarships, then their bright futures, by moving from school dropouts to wanted figures, hunted down and tortured by the military. One of the sons recollects his reconciliation with his father at the latter’s deathbed, and his story suddenly breaks free of the storytelling mode, addressing his father in the present as if he were still alive, and as if no reader would wonder: “Talk to me. I’m your son.... Why don’t you express all your heartaches, disappointments, and frustrations?” The siblings never shake free the realization that the paths they chose were not what their parents had hoped for them. If their parents lived long enough, they would have seen that the Quimpo children had been able to attain impressive career trajectories, covering several continents and participating in impactful projects (of which the book serves as group memoir) that would have been the envy of the more privileged families with their utterly predictable and vision-im-poverished choices.

Even the sister who had opted for life as an Opus Dei numerary found inevitable parallels between her Order and the fascist system that her

siblings were struggling against. The story of the retrieval of their brother's body is hers to tell, and one would probably wind up smiling, in the face of the long-anticipated tragedy, at how she had managed to muster enough reserves of strength to confront and intimidate the military officers who felt like aggravating her and her grieving female companions, just for the heck of it. When, famished after the confrontation, one of them mistakenly brings one too many orders of Coke and the driver of their vehicle innocently asks whom the spare bottle is for, then they turn toward their brother's body and cry all over again, I could not help turning as well toward the best moments in Pinoy cinema, where our film-authors are so casually able to incite these tender combinations of humor and warmth amid overwhelming sadness.

The book ends with a controversy that has shaken up, and continues to do so, the Philippine revolutionary movement. The Quimpos who were then still involved were major participants, and express the opinion that the leadership they challenged had taken on qualities of the dictatorship that they had fought against and (in a sense) succeeded in ousting. Like the best Filipino multicharacter texts, *Manila by Night* foremost among them, *Subversive Lives* is sprawling, occasionally meandering, sometimes indulgent, and necessarily open-ended. It is also gripping, heartfelt, insightful, and forward-looking, so much so that the aforementioned "flaws" would be a small price to pay for its still-rare literary largesse, just as the Quimpo children's rebellion has made the country's journey to a more meaningful present a trip for which we as their witnesses ought to be grateful.

## The Novel Pinoy Novel

### ***Si Amapola sa 65 na Kabanata***

Ricky Lee

Quezon City: Philippine Writers Studio Foundation, 2011

The results of the recently concluded American presidential elections seemed guaranteed to make everyone happy—except for the Republican Party and its now less-than-majority supporters. American conservatives could have spared themselves their historic loss if they had taken the trouble

to inspect the goings-on in a country their nation had once claimed for itself, the Republic of the Philippines. The admittedly oversimplified lesson that Philippine cultural experience demonstrates is: when conservative values seek to overwhelm a population too dispossessed to have anything to lose, the pushback has the potential to reach radical proportions.

This is my way of assuring myself that a serendipitous sample, Ricky Lee's recent novel *Si Amapola sa 65 na Kabanata* (Amapola in 65 Chapters), could only have emerged in a culture that had undergone Old-World colonization followed by successful American experimentations with colonial and neocolonial arrangements, enhanced by the installation of a banana republic-style dictatorship followed by a middle-force uprising, leaving the country utterly vulnerable to the dictates of globalization and unable to recover except by means of exporting its own labor force—which, as it turns out, proved to be an unexpectedly successful way of restoring some developmental sanguinity, some stable growth achieved via the continual trauma of yielding its best and brightest to foreign masters.

*Si Amapola* is one of those rare works that will fulfill anyone who takes the effort to learn the language in which it is written. A serviceable translation might emerge sooner or later, but the novel's impressive achievement in commingling a wide variety of so-called Filipino—from formal (Spanish-inflected) Tagalog to urban street slang to class-conscious (and occasionally hilariously broken) Taglish to fast-mutating gay lingo—will more than just provide a sampling of available linguistic options; it will convince the patriotically inclined that the national language in itself is at last capable of staking its claim as a major global literary medium. In practical terms, the message here is: if you know enough of the language to read casually, or enjoy reading aloud with friends or family—run out and get a copy of the book for the holidays. The novels of Lee, only two of them so far, have revived intensive, even obsessive reading in the Philippines, selling in the tens of thousands (in a country where sales of a few hundreds would mark a title as a best-seller), with people claiming to have read them several times over and classrooms and offices spontaneously breaking into unplanned discussions of his fictions; lives get transformed as people assimilate his characters' personalities, and Lee himself stated that a few couples have claimed to him that their acquaintance started with a mutual admiration of his work.

This is the type of response that, in the recent past, only movies could generate—and the connection may well have been preordained, since Lee had previously made his mark on the popular imagination as the country's premier screenwriter. The difference between the written word and the filmed script, per Lee, is in the nature of the reader's participation: film buffs (usually as fans of specific performers) would strive to approximate the costume, performance, and delivery of their preferred characters, while readers would assimilate a novel's characters, interpreting them in new (literally novel) ways, sometimes providing background and future developments, and even shifting from one personage to another.

*Si Amapola* affords entire worlds for its readers to inhabit, functioning as the culmination of its author's attempts to break every perceived boundary in art (and consequently in society) in its pursuit of truth and terror, pain and pleasure. For Lee, the process began with his last few major film scripts (notably for Lino Brocka's multi-generic *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak* [*Dirty Affair*]; 1990) and first emerged in print with his comeback novellette "Kabilang sa mga Nawawala" (Among the Missing; 1988). More than his previous novel *Para Kay B* (*O Kung Paano Dinevastate ng Pag-ibig ang 4 Out of 5 sa Atin*) (*For B* [*Or How Love Devastated 4 Out of 5 of Us*]; 2008), *Si Amapola* is a direct descendant of "Kabilang," at that point the language's definitive magic-realist narrative.

Despite this stylistic connection, *Si Amapola* is *sui generis*, impossible to track because of its fantastically extreme dimensions that abhor any notion of middle ground. The contradictions begin with the title character, a queer cross-dressing performer who possesses two "alters": Isaac, a macho man (complete with an understandably infatuated girlfriend), and Zaldy, a closeted yuppie. His mother, Nanay Angie, took him home after she found him separated from his baby sister and, notwithstanding the absence of blood relations and any familial connections, raised him (and his other personalities) with more love and acceptance than most children are able to receive from their own "normal" relatives. A policeman named Emil, a fan of real-life Philippine superstar Nora Aunor, then introduces Amapola to his Lola Sepa, a woman who had fallen in love with Andres Bonifacio, the true (also real-life) but tragically betrayed hero of the 19th-century revolution against Spanish colonization. Lola Sepa moved through time, using a then-recent technology—the flush toilet—as her portal, surviving temporal and septic

transitions simply because she, like her great-grandchild Amapola, happens to be a *manananggal*, a self-segmenting viscera-sucking mythological creature.

Already these details suggest issues of personal identity and revolutionary history, high drama and low humor, cinematic immediacy and philosophical discourse, and a melange of popular genres that do not even bother to acknowledge their supposed mutual incompatibilities; if you can imagine, for example, that a pair of *manananggal* lovers could be so abject and lustful as to engage in monstrous intercourse in mid-air, you can expect that Lee will take you there. The novel's interlacing with contemporary Philippine politics provides a ludic challenge for those familiar with recent events; those who would rather settle for a rollicking grand time, willing to be fascinated, repulsed, amused, and emotionally walloped by an unmitigated passion for language, country, and the least and therefore the greatest among us, will be rewarded by flesh-and-blood (riven or otherwise) characters enacting a social drama too fantastic to be true, yet ultimately too true to be disavowed.

At the end of the wondrously self-contained narrative, you might be able to look up some related literature on the novel and read about Lee announcing a sequel. Pressed about this too-insistent meta-contradiction of how something that had already ended could manage to persist in an unendurable (because unpredictable) future time, he replied: "Amapola the character exists in two parts. Why then can't he have two lives?" Nevertheless my advice remains, this time as a warning: get the present book and do not wait for a two-in-one consumption. The pleasure, and the pain, might prove too much to bear by then.

## High Five

**Gang of 5: Tales, Cuentos, Sanaysay**

Ninotchka Rosca

New York: Mariposa Center for Change, 2013

While awaiting the international availability of Amazon's Kindle Paperwhite, I placed some orders for a number of dead-tree editions—which also ran into unexpected delays. Meanwhile a packet arrived in the mail, containing a

slim volume titled *Gang of 5: Tales, Cuentos, Sanaysay*. The author, Ninotchka Rosca, was someone I'd never met in person, although anyone with even a remote association with progressive literary circles in the Philippines would have heard her name sooner or later.

My personal regret is my failure in going beyond the opening pages of her first novel, *State of War*—I was then preparing for overseas graduate studies and ran out of time to read all the then more recent Filipiniana titles (mostly eventually damaged by the elements) in my collection. After having made the author's acquaintance on a social network, I recognized certain qualities I'd grown familiar with from an earlier generation of activist authors, with whom I once hung out as a way of furthering my unsentimental education. Assertive, impatient with detractors, firm in her convictions, unsparingly self-critical, she would nevertheless surprise everyone with a graciousness that could only have come from a first-hand familiarity with people-oriented service—from gestures as casual as sharing pictures (of her home, or her past) that made her happy, to helping an infirm neighbor abandoned by everyone else, to offering assistance to anyone devastated by natural calamity.

My *Gang of 5* copy will never leave my personal book shelf, mainly because of the author's signature succeeding a handwritten quotation from Conrad Aiken—and also because of the text, "Limited Edition," affixed above the title. In an exchange, Rosca said that the book will be available to a general readership by mid-year, and however one cuts the argument, it would be a major loss for readers of Philippine literature if it weren't. For this, out of all the several anthologies of Pinoy English-language short fiction ever put out, will satisfactorily serve as the all-purpose single-volume introduction to local writing that anyone will ever need. None of the five pieces is less than inspired, each one represents a writing challenge distinct from the rest, and everything builds up to the larger anticipation of greater pleasures awaiting in the output of other Filipino authors—final proof of Rosca's generosity of spirit in honoring her colleagues by providing evidence of how equal they are, as she is, to the challenge of literary excellence.

The book, as far as I can surmise from her social-network postings, was another of her selfless exercises in pursuit of a worthy crusade: it was intended as a giveaway for donors to the Mariposa Center for Change's

Stand with Grace Campaign, a so-far successful effort to prevent a corrupt and abusive Congressman from forcing his mistress, who had sought asylum in the US, to return to his overeager clutches. Such a cause-oriented origin should not mislead the reader into expecting a series of feminist philippics; rather, the pieces are feminist in the best updated sense, some of them even abandoning the literal prescription of center-positioning a lead female character, and in one case even revealing an otherwise strong and politicized woman as a villain—a lesson well-learned from the never-ending "positive images" debates of whether Others should always be depicted as virtuous, unblemished, normative, wholesome, victims-but-never-victimizers, etc.

The collection opens with an account of the musings of a murderously inclined male sociopath, an achievement noteworthy if only for its success in comprehending the morbid mind, without recourse to the generic solutions of depicting the character as evil or abnormal; the story's ultimate source of terror lies in how such a person emerges as normal, even respected, in the Third-World milieu where he operates. The collection then shifts gears—another country, another gender—and provides a feel-good (in the well-earned sense, for which my word will have to suffice for now) tale of what it means to be a Filipina within an imagined community, even among people who have precisely nothing else but their imagination to follow-through this exquisitely complex construct.

Rosca maintains the central story, "The Neighborhood," as a link to her past and future as storyteller. It comes from her earlier highly acclaimed anthology *The Monsoon Collection* (which I also have not read, to my continuing chagrin). Here she orchestrates the interactions of one of the metropolis's several slum neighborhoods, a colony within a colony; a possibly magic-realist event closes what is necessarily an open-ended account, so it makes perfect sense that the central character's narrative will be continued, per Rosca's declaration, in her forthcoming novel, *The Synchrony Tree* (whose excerpts she has posted on her blog Lily Pad, a pun on the Filipino expression "about to fly, or take off"). The last two pieces focus on women's heartbreak, one a semi-*nouvelle à clef* seemingly based on a famous Philippine multimedia pop star's self-exile in the US, the other an autobiographical-sounding account of a mother's abandonment of her helpless, oppressed daughter. Rosca refuses the facile options of resorting to victimological formulations



of these characters' respective plights; the reader is assured of her sympathy precisely because of her willingness to cast a cool, almost clinical eye on the inner conflicts of these personae, familiar from the stock repertory of soap fictions yet unnervingly represented with flesh-and-blood tangibility in these texts.

Rosca recalled how Julie de Lima, wife of the founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines, once remarked that "Only Ninotchka can render Joma [Sison] speechless." The occasion was a public exchange on the use of English as a medium for expressing the ideas and sentiments of Filipinos, with Sison asserting the standard nationalist line that only a native language will fulfill the challenge of depicting, say, a slum child's innermost concerns. Rosca, by her own account, maintained that "language—any language—[is] a malleable tool, per the writer's skill. I then asked him whether reading Mao Zedong, [who came from] a Chinese peasant family, in English translation implied a loss in the thoughts of the revolutionary leader.... The question is why we accept reading scientific, philosophical, or political tracts in a foreign language [yet] demand that literature restrict itself to a first-level reality." The incident reveals the little-known willingness of Sison in welcoming adversarial discussions, but it also cost Rosca the respect of some of his more fanatical followers.

*Gang of 5* is, among many other things, elegant proof of her defiant stance regarding the utility of the language she happened to have at her command. Its achievements would have needed no further justification beyond the serendipity of reaching an extensive readership, but Rosca typically allowed it to shoulder a wide range of objectives—from assisting a battered woman, to embodying her convictions on language, even serving as a conduit in her once-and-future fiction projects—and like all major works of literature (even the shortest ones), the collection itself abides. Somewhere there's a lesson for the country's political and economic leaders, if they could find enough time and humility to draw inspiration from a few dozen pages of wondrously well-wrought prose.

## 2

## First Persons

### Movie Worker

*To commemorate its second anniversary issue, National Midweek announced an "Ordinary People" omnibus feature and asked four authors (including me, as well as Rudy Villanueva, Juaniyo Arcellana, and Melanie Manlogon) to detail our ironically non-ordinary experiences in the arena of labor. A rather cringe-inducing tagline, accompanying an inapposite TV studio setting, announced: "As continuity person, his work was to record everything that went on during the shooting. But he also carried camera equipment, made coffee for the star, parried the verbal abuse of irritable crew members. And he was a University of the Philippines graduate." I loved my work at the magazine so much it didn't matter. Curiously, the fantasy I expressed toward the end of the article—that of local film (and media) work acquiring a semblance of professionalism in terms of academic preparation—eventually came to pass, not exactly in the way I anticipated, but then such are the vagaries of fate.*

Confession of the week: I was an ordinary movie person. Actually I still am, were it not for the impression that film commentators hold significant

influence over the industry—a consensus held by most industry personalities including, not surprisingly, film commentators. But to get to the point: I once actually started wondering what all the hoopla over the position of film critic was. I'd been writing more or less regularly on local cinema since the turn of the decade, and had a membership (and occasional officer status) in the *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino* [Filipino Film Critics Circle], plus employment in the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, to show for it.

Still, there remained that disturbing atmosphere during movie occasions—previews, premieres, parties, and other such assemblages outside of the physical processes of movie-making—that anyone who could be present only at the presentation of a work could not actually have been involved with it and was therefore, for all intents and purposes, an outsider. A critic, for that matter, got away with slightly better treatment, some form of deference really, that to my mind has lost its original basis for existence, but that ought to be another story.

So in 1984, when the University of the Philippines announced the opening of a bachelor's degree in film—the first not just in the country but in the immediate Asian region as well—I lost no time in re-applying for student status at the mass communication institute which was handling the course program. (Not quite accurate: I lost an entire semester, having learned of the program's existence exactly when the '84-85 academic year started, too late to arrange for my return to school.)

I had the advantage of holding an earlier degree (journalism, batch '79) at the institute, plus the determination to finish as fast as possible whatever the cost, and maybe the first batch wasn't so appreciative of the distinctions in store; they pointed out my exemption from the thesis requirement (already fulfilled by my earlier degree), but I retorted to myself that, unlike them, I had to finish a final individual film project, which the program's coordinators justified as my equivalent of a production thesis.<sup>1</sup>

Anyway there I stood, for more than a year the only qualified film applicant in the history of Philippine education, willing to undergo whatever it would take to make me a part of the movie system at last.

What lay ahead, I wouldn't wish on my worst enemies. A major outfit sounded out a call for assistants in production, and as far as I knew, I was the only one who responded then. More than a month of follow-ups afterward,

I finally got in—as an apprentice, I was forewarned, and for the rival of the company I had applied with. An apprentice, I was made to understand, gets free food but no pay, and is responsible for ... well, whatever comes up during production. Break a leg then.

Someone who took charge instructed me to record everything that went on during the shooting—the blocking of everyone and everything on the set (including the lights), the position of everything that appeared in the camera viewfinder, the lines of dialogue, the movement of actors, atmosphere people (a euphemism for extras), and physical objects, not to mention the usual details of date and sequence and scene numbers, location and performers—for which I needed to continually refer to the script, a copy of which was provided me much, much later. Continuity, the job was called, although I distinctly recall carrying camera and related equipment, preparing coffee for a certain performer, and parrying the verbal abuse of several particularly irritable crew members. Plus I had to buy a stopwatch (I borrowed one instead) to time the individual takes, and reproduce as many copies of a certain form on which to keep my records.

I finally was able to plead for the reimbursement of the two reams of continuity forms that I had to mimeograph, and the film's director, who provided me with invaluable recollections of the previously flourishing regional cinema with which he'd been involved, batted for a consolatory sum of money that the producers provided to defray part of my transportation expenses. At this point the creditors, who extended financial assistance so that I could be able to finish my second degree, were impatient for some material results. Without the benefit of clear thinking, I agreed to replace a would-have-been batch mate in a big-budget semi-period piece. As it turned out, the guy and his group mates edged me out in a more substantial fundraising project, while the movie project I got into got shelved for alleged shortage of funds.

To the rescue came the muse I had abandoned. A colleague in writing, now into editing (while I was contemplating the feasibility of going insane), asked me to write for the publication she was handling. On what? I asked. The movies, she answered, since that's where you're now. I lay aside insanity for the moment but it arrived anyway in another form. The first production outfit I had applied with immediately after graduation this time offered me

a respectable-enough designation in an out-of-town project. By then I was already making twice as much as the offer (which, I was assured, was already somewhat beyond standard rates) just writing for the publication and a television show on the side. When the movie I said no to got released, it made good box-office business and was reportedly its producer's critical favorite, while the publication I had cast my lot with folded up and the TV show shut down.

Hope springs eternal even for those who never learn, but I'll respect whatever way you interpret that: my alma mater somehow remembered it had an only graduate lying around (close to the literal sense) somewhere, who'd not only be the only academically qualified film worker in the country but also the only qualified film instructor as well.

So coming full circle now, what easier way to augment the predictably pitiful (but not for me, you bet) income that teachers receive? Why nothing else, or nothing less, than good old-fashioned semi-scholarly commentary on films. At least, this way I get to torment not only my students but my readers as well, and with a little bit of luck and a considerable amount of self-delusion, even the industry might consider restructuring its professional setup in lieu of an oncoming onslaught by starry-eyed and financially secure film graduates—and doesn't that add up quite logically, dramatically even, with this historical era of countless coup attempts? Anyway, till that moment arrives, I'll be happy where I am. I guess.

### Note

1. After a few other (expected) false starts, the production thesis became a viable option in the eventually upgraded College of Mass Communication. Extremely few undergraduate candidates, in fact, choose the research option.

## Love Was the Drug

Warning: emo material coming up.

A basic personal contradiction underlies the existence of this introductory essay. Johven Velasco had asked me, as his colleague and sometime mentor, to write one for his first book, *Huwaran/Hulmahan: Reading Stars,*

*Icons, and Genre Films in Philippine Cinema*, then at the manuscript stage.<sup>2</sup> My reply, in so many words, was that an intro would be more useful for a young author who needed some sort of validation from an established personage; in his case, he'd had enough of a stature to introduce himself, so to speak, so I told him he'd be better off asking friends like me to just review his manuscript for the benefit of the reading public.

The outpour of grief that attended his sudden death on 1 September 2007, might have surprised those who knew him as only an occasional credit or by-line or lumbering, cane-dependent figure. Velasco, for the most part and increasingly toward the end of his life, epitomized as nearly complete a combination of Othernesses that anyone could find in an individual in his situation. He was a teacher without the necessary advanced academic qualifications, illegitimate and impoverished in a middle-class milieu, intelligent and overweight in the face of middlebrow pop culture's philosophobia and lookism, spiritual amid the materialist orientation of liberal academia, principled even when surrounded by pragmatists, and openly queer by any measure, when most men from generations later than his still opted for the comforts and conveniences of the closet. To top it all, his was a looming presence—about as in-your-face as Otherness could get.

When he lost his full-time teaching position at the University of the Philippines Film Institute (UPFI), his *cri de coeur* in the form of a mobile-phone SMS became the equivalent of a much-quoted haiku, the lamentation of a Pinoy Job: *Bakit ako pinarurusahan? Naging tamad ba ako? Naging masama ba ako?* [Why am I being punished? Did I turn lazy? Did I become venal?] No one had the heart to point out to him that what had changed was not so much him but the world around him. For where he had remained an old-school maestro, benevolent toward friends and gentlemanly toward enemies, everyone else, even those who walked the hallowed halls of academe, had long already internalized the dog-eat-dog values that typify periods of developmental haste.

*Huwaran/Hulmahan* was one of the means by which he had hoped to recover from the devastating financial and psychological blow dealt by the loss of his UPFI instructorship, the one incident from which he could actually never recover, the straw that finally broke his over-burdened back. He had originally been assigned to a number of non-compensatory academic

functions, all of which he tackled in his usual selfless and enthusiastic manner. But when it came time for everyone else to take stock of his situation vis-à-vis the university's up-or-out policy for untenured faculty, no one came to his defense to explain to higher authorities why he had not been able to make any headway in completing his master's degree.<sup>3</sup>

When he told me this kind of casually brutal though legally defensible negligence would not have happened if, among other factors, I had stayed on instead of decamping for the proverbial greener pastures, I figured I owed him a favor, but I let him apply on his own terms. In response to a call for papers to the Korean conference I was then coordinating, he submitted the *Huwaran/Hulmahan* manuscript—to which I had to answer that he had enough quality material to constitute an entire panel unto himself. His response to his experience of attending the conference was to re-assess his predicaments and formulate a few resolutions, but the form it took was an amazing and much-circulated (and tragically self-prophetic) epistolary piece that now serves as the epilogue of this collection—a funny, self-deprecating, astutely observed, yet ultimately heart-breaking narrative that reflected as much of the peoples surrounding him as it revealed a heretofore unheralded ability: Velasco the raconteur. Philippine film commentary is rife with personal essays, but “Korean Rhapsody” stands out for having been written during its author's fullest maturation, where a peculiar combination of wisdom and kindness suffuses the usual gestures toward camp, ambition, self-doubt, and defiant hopefulness.

*Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.* may be translated as “Modeling/Molding Etc.” The present volume differs from Velasco's earlier compilation in that it contains, apart from his autobiographical essay and all the original *Huwaran/Hulmahan* pieces, a number of journalistic contributions that started appearing in a number of periodicals since the start of Velasco's term as UP faculty, as well as some of his plans for revisions (notably the splitting up of the longest article into one essay and a short fan article). Upon my return from my stint as exchange teacher in Korea, I kept asking him about his *Huwaran/Hulmahan* manuscript, with the intention of convincing him to submit it as the equivalent of a creative thesis before presenting it to a university press for publication. He was receptive to the idea—it was consistent with the resolutions he listed in his personal reassessment—yet in a few months he seemed to have

turned against everything he wanted to continue or complete, and instead talked, albeit jokingly, about setting himself up for his eventual retirement. The day he failed to wake up, he was scheduled to take a trip to a farm to consider some options in agri-business, a direction that he'd said he was reluctant to take. His partner of several decades, Jess Evardone, stayed over at his house to accompany him, and was the first person to discover that he was no longer alive. But in staying on first in the hearts of a few, and later in the minds of many more, his Otherness was thus in the end both completed by his death yet paradoxically also now fully absent.

An expanding circle of friends decided that Velasco's legacy was worth maintaining, and the present volume is only one of several planned outputs. In putting together all the writings we could salvage, from hard drives and disks through email attachments to scanned manuscripts, I got to realize in hindsight that Velasco's hesitation in getting his original manuscript published was not really because he had given up on accomplishing anything. On the contrary, he had lately discovered the psychic rewards of being a public intellectual operating in the feedback-intensive field of popular culture, so much so that one way, perhaps the only way, and definitely the first way of looking at *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.* is that it is a work in progress, whose final form would have been defined possibly a year or two later had he lived on, depending on the insights that he could have drawn from his intensive coverage of the local movie scene.

Yet the current manuscript, for all its gaps, overlaps, and reversals, already constitutes an impressive achievement in itself, one that makes it possible to canonize its author as the millennium's first major Filipino film commentator, relegating a significant number of other aspirants (myself included) to the status of also-rans, Salieris to his Mozart. Even in its still-to-be-finished state, *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.* is indicative of Velasco's ability to bridge distant and contemporary periods and subject their emblematic phenomena to sharp critical scrutiny leavened with wry humor. But more than a mere display of intellectual acrobatics is one quality that remains in full, regardless of the condition of the compilation or of its individual articles: Velasco's unabashed affection for his material, his refreshingly frank appreciation and admission of cultural pleasure, as evident in the collection's emphasis on performers and their films.

“In Praise of the Film ‘Star,’” the very last article he wrote and his first to be published posthumously, serves to determine the general direction of the collection as a whole. It is quickly followed (in Part 1: Fan Texts) by a series of fan articles, and the selection of subjects says as much about the author as they do about the performers themselves: chronologically, Velasco first wrote about someone he identified with (Susan Roces), then about those he had known personally, which in a sense amount to the same thing. The articles grow in length as Velasco proceeds to problematize questions of culture and political economy. Before discussing stardom itself, we turn to a section where Velasco foregrounds the issue that lurks behind everything he wrote as an academic—i.e., gender politics, the best thing, he said once, that graduate studies ever gave him. When he first heard me use the word “transgressiveness” as an indicator of progressivity, he remarked that he’d always wanted to aspire to that type of ideal, and was glad that it could now be openly acknowledged in contemporary scholarship; I must add that he took the concept much farther than I could have imagined it could go in Philippine film studies.

Hence under Part 2: Gender Texts he goes to town in imbuing female personae with masculine attributes and vice versa, and objectifies the Filipino male with admirably shameless delight, to the extent of embracing (figuratively in print and, who knows, literally in real life) a veritable stable of “bad” boys. In returning to a consideration of the movie star (Part 3: Star Texts), he discourses with renewed authority, effectively restoring to prominence Susan Roces and Fernando Poe Jr., the real-life reel couple he regarded as king and queen of the make-believe world that had provided him with much-needed solace during his formative years. The collection closes with a large group of articles, Part 4: Film Texts, that in one respect derive directly from his fascination with star personalities; the other respect is the one that also justifies Velasco’s position as our foremost film expert in the new millennium: he could write knowingly about the present, without the need to demonstrate any high-art or film-buff pretension, mainly because he maintained so much fondness for a past he knew first-hand. This section ends with his challenge to both organized and practicing Filipino film critics (often two discrete categories, as it happens nowadays): after demonstrating how to properly evaluate first a festival period and then a calendar year of sustained film practice,

Velasco points out, in laypersons’ terms, precisely what makes award-giving and comparative auteurist analyses so dissatisfying—i.e., their practitioners use critical-sounding evaluation as a subterfuge instead of facing up to the manifold challenges and contradictions of genuine critical writing.

All of which brings us back to Velasco’s primary motive for writing—his love for all kinds of media of expression, whether belonging to high art or mass culture. In retrospect it wasn’t just the discursive potential of local cinema that Velasco approached with this strange (in both senses of unusual and queer) combination of tenderness, acceptance, and rigor. Whenever he reflected on his personal and professional misfortunes, his tendency to break down in private followed by his refusal to protest the many injustices visited on him seemed then like a confirmation of the multiplicity of weaknesses that inexorably brought about his utter marginalization and ultimately his demise. But with this volume in hand, it has become evident that he was determined to fight after all, and the form that his resistance took was the hardest for anyone to muster, more so for someone in his condition: to struggle, to the bitter end if necessary, for love of everyone, and to respond to those who abused him with an even greater dose of forgiveness and understanding.

He died enviably, peacefully in his sleep, just as he had lived unenviably for most of his too-short fifty-nine years (or a full sixty, by East Asian reckoning), constantly worrying where his next red centavo would come from just so that he could write one more article, teach one more class, mentor one more advisee, direct one more script, crack one more joke, celebrate one more friend’s achievement. *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.* is one among several proofs of how generous he had been, to a country, a society, and a university that could not properly figure out just how much he was giving out, so that he could be given in return the basic things he needed in order to attain all that he had ever asked for—a decent living, nothing more.

## Note

2. A distinction must be made between the aforementioned *Huwaran/Hulmahan: Reading Stars, Icons, and Genre Films in Philippine Cinema* and the present *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp: The Film Writings of John Velasco*.

3. I find it only fair to mention now how he had nearly been unilaterally replaced by another teacher who had also lacked a master's degree. I wrote a letter to the academic personnel committee arguing that Velasco, with his extensive experience and greater preparation, deserved to be rehired if non-MA holders could be considered. The chair however swept it aside and never brought it up in the committee deliberation. The unqualified applicant was never hired.

## The Dolphy Conundrum

An earlier generation of Pinoy media observers would have thought that the death of Dolphy, once it arrived, would have left behind the issue of his profligacy: the usual tally of the deceased's offspring and their corresponding mothers alone would already bring up the issue of his sexual insatiability and the potency of his allegedly humongous "secret weapon." Yet it is a measure of the extent of the Philippines' cultural maturation that the only controversy left literally in his wake is the question of why he had not been declared a National Artist, the country's highest official distinction for people in his profession.

His earlier nomination, during the previous round, was supposedly sabotaged by the objection of a highly influential culturatus. The ensuing round of exchanges has been seemingly obsessed with the violation of a confidentiality agreement—a strange and moot assertion, considering that the National Artist selection process is performed as part of a mandate of the national government and is therefore always open to public inquiry. Nevertheless a resolution, as far as one can be determined, has been promised by no less than the President, with his assurance of support for any future recommendation for the award to be handed to the late comedian.

At this point a personal disclosure ought to be made: not so much because of my past association with some of the institutions involved in the controversy, but because of my incomplete coverage of a film artist who I presume to critically evaluate. I can probably count about a dozen Dolphy films that I have seen, and a whole lot of film excerpts, but this would not pass my own test for serious attention to someone's body of work. Yet for someone with over 220 film titles (not to mention successful TV crossovers)

since over 60 years back, Dolphy himself might be able to forgive anyone who'd been unable to watch a hundred or more of his own titles, much less claim to have preserved them himself.

With the National Artist question, the answer may be parsed as simply and literally as possible: he was a major star (possibly the Philippines' most prolific one even solely in terms of film projects) and therefore "national," and he had possessed sufficient artistry not only in maintaining this status but also in impressing colleagues and (certain) critics, including the official mainstream organization (with which I was also once associated) that had given him a lifetime achievement prize. Yet the next logical question, of whether being both nationally renowned and unquestionably artistic automatically makes one deserving of being called a National Artist, is where a lot of qualifiers have to be raised.

Dolphy had been part of the wave of local stars who wrested control of their careers from the vertically integrated studio system of the 1950s (the so-called First Golden Age) by producing their own projects; one such figure, Fernando Poe Jr., had already been granted the recognition, while an arguably just-as-vital name, deposed Pinoy President Joseph "Erap" Estrada, may never receive it. This is because first and foremost, the distinction is inevitably political, and it would simply be more politic to bestow it on Dolphy than on Erap. Yet unlike the major stars who emerged immediately after World War II, Dolphy had been saddled with twin disadvantages that make his triumph more remarkable for its time.

One of those liabilities, poverty, was an acceptable one, in the sense that the democratic system being upheld by the republic (exemplified by the social mobility afforded by media stardom) allowed for individuals to transcend such class-based limitations. The other matter, his East Asianness, was a far trickier situation for anyone to navigate. The war had traumatized the population into an affirmation of the racial stereotyping originally propagated by the early European colonizers—that of distinguishing between the "right" kind of fair-skinned people (Caucasians) and the "wrong" kind (East Asians, who were earlier demonized as pagans and were later imaged as ruthless colonizers). Hence Filipino aspirants to movie stardom had to misrepresent their mestizo features as non-Asian; or, if this were impossible to pull off, then they had to settle for less-profitable second-tier status

as villains (e.g. Bruno Punzalan), seductresses (Bella Flores), or comedians, where Dolphy (alongside Chichay, Babalu, and a long list of other names) found—and managed to build on—his niche.

It was certainly no help when newly emerging nationalists with anti-imperialist sentiments sought to critique Philippine culture's excessive white love by producing xenophobic literature that targeted the local Chinese community. This context helps explain not just Dolphy's long-term political neutrality (just as Chinese Filipinos were known to support both establishment and opposition candidates during elections) but also why his type of comedy evolved toward a safe, family-friendly, middlebrow variety. Of his few forays with "serious" filmmakers, none had been with Manuel Conde or Ishmael Bernal, the National Artist auteurs who had reputations for scathing social satire. In fact he had tended to fall into the same misconception that the biggest Hollywood clowns, from Charlie Chaplin to Tom Hanks and Jim Carrey, had about serious material: that it had to be unfunny in order to "deserve" respect.

Ironically it was also as a result of this nationalist resurgence that East Asians (Filipinos or otherwise) were finally able to attain star status in local media, starting with the distinctly *chinita* Vilma Santos all the way through the frankly named Rico Yans, Sandara Parks, and Kim Chius of the present, with Dolphy's own children deploying his once-suppressed surname; any number of leaders—all the way to Presidents and Cardinals—no longer need to remain silent about their overseas ancestry.

How then should good old *Pidol* be assessed? His National Artist award will be handed down, barring unforeseen abnormal circumstances, and that would restore some symbolic balance to the excesses in our history of racism, however long-gone this tendency might have been. But it would be far more instructive for his audiences to remain aware of his weaknesses as much as his virtues, and the all-too-human reasons that had forced him to resort to the self-limiting career measures that he, in a sense, had no way of avoiding.

## The Carnal Moral of a Brutal Miracle

One fascinating thing about having been present during the emergence of critical awareness in Philippine cinema was observing how games of auteur

favoritism played out: who would be the critics' pets and how would the rest fare in relation to them? The way the rules were formulated—a series of commentaries by organized critics that built up toward an annual awards ceremony—made for dramatic though ultimately hollow displays, as a community of artists would be set one against another, with those who won more trophies regarded as first among their peers. The problem would be not so much the occasional lapse in judgment (Ishmael Bernal losing as director of *Manila by Night* [1980], Nora Aunor undervalued for some of the best performances in global cinema) as the regressive impact of film awards on cultural understanding; awards could not serve as periodic summations of critical evaluation simply because there is rarely any real criticism behind them. Influence-peddling probably, favoritism definitely, but critical thinking? Only if we accept celeb-fetishism as worthy of serious scholarly consideration.

Marilou Diaz-Abaya was one of the early victims of this still-ongoing practice of intellectual barbarism masquerading as earnest cultural analysis. Emerging fully formed and initiating a so-far unparalleled film series on Philippine femininities, mostly with the same team of close associates providing assistance, she met with dismissive responses from the exact same group of people who should have known best. Her recent death, after an extended bout with breast cancer, had met with a lot of appreciative reminiscences, evidence of the care and humor with which she prepared for the end; yet whether this kind of appreciation will ultimately extend to her body of work—that both remains to be seen and does not excuse the neglect with which her practice had been met. None of her major films (except for two star vehicles on Viva Films) is available on DVD; their restoration might be all that remains, if justice deserves to be served, toward the rehabilitation of her stature as major Pinoy film artist.

In retrospect, it would be easy to see how Diaz-Abaya could be so casually written off. Not only was she young, she had come from financial privilege and so could afford extensive film training, then-unavailable locally. Her circle included some of the most prestigious players the industry had ever seen: Ishmael Bernal mentored her, Jesse Ejercito produced her projects, and Ricardo Lee (the only one still actively practicing his craft) wrote scripts for her. It were as if she had been an interloper, and she had enough

self-deprecating humility to preempt everyone in cracking jokes about her sheltered upbringing. Moreover, film practice at the time had attracted the finest talents in the country, facilitated in no small part by the fact that the Marcoses, despite their ruthless control of media, were sufficiently star-struck (Ferdinand won the presidency via biographical blockbusters, Imelda had screen-tested for the studio that produced her husband's films) to treat film as their fair-haired child, their showcase of progressivity and proof to the world of their cultivation of democratic space.

Thus critics had no lack of talent to uphold, and shelving a relatively young newcomer who came from the "wrong" (that is, the right) side of the tracks would not count for much when so many others and so much else could be celebrated. Lino Brocka could come up with an instantly recognizable global classic in *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975), and Ishmael Bernal could presently respond with *Manila by Night*, arguably an even more significant contribution. Diaz-Abaya staked her claim to this order of filmic discourse by proffering *Moral* (1982), which expanded the city-film setting to include the newly formed metropolitan area and focused on women's issues. Differing from *Maynila*, *Moral* sustained the sexual politics and multi-character format of *Manila by Night*; if the Bernal film still stands heads and shoulders above everything else, then both *Maynila* and *Moral* might be seen as its proper bookends, one anticipating and the other upholding the middle production and sharing its stature as major Philippine-film confabulations.

Interviewed by phone, Lee recalled how Diaz-Abaya knew the long-term value of their output: *Moral* was "the only movie where my name and [producer] Jesse Ejercito's appeared along with hers above the title," he said, adding how her readiness to share credit extended to a directing class where he handled the writing portion as well as to the joint memoir of their professional collaboration that they had nearly finalized when the end arrived. He explained further why his scripts with her, and her films with him, have marked each other like no other Filipino director-writer team-up had ever had: "No other director treated my material with the openness and care that she did. Some of the materials we tackled were new to her—queerness, prostitution, incest, promiscuity, atheism—but with her I always had the assurance that she would set aside her biases and preferences and come around to the vision in our material."

What compounds the difficulty of evaluating Diaz-Abaya's output was her restlessness which, given how limited her time had been, may now appear as an eagerness to cover as much ground as her seemingly boundless energy could allow. I had occasion to interact with her twice, once in graduate school when she dropped by New York on her way home from a European film festival, and another time about a year ago when her cancer had been in remission; each time I was with a "younger Marilou," first film critic Bliss Cua Lim and then filmmaker Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil, and both times it still amazes me to recall how she had no other agenda except to indulge in intelligent exchanges. Earlier she had just finished *Milagros* (1997) and announced that she felt it was time to tackle films about men: "I'm not sure I'll be as successful as I had been with [films on] women," she said, "but I have to take this risk so I can know for sure." More recently, she had just released her last film project, *Ikaw ang Pag-ibig* (2011), but she talked with undiminished excitement about teaching, research, writing, and spiritual preparation—everything (except perhaps the last) that I and everyone else I know had been doing.

What will always haunt me about her is my envy about how she never allowed any limitation to stand in her way: she consorted with far older adults when she was young, opted for a profession dominated by biological men, ran with a crowd far removed from her genteel and well-heeled origins, pursued topics and challenges way beyond her comfort zone, and kept looking forward even with death staring her down for years. She welcomed the revitalization of film practice via the shift to digital technology, but was never remiss in cautioning against the dangers of excess privilege—and who better to know about this than her? In one of several excellent interviews that have cropped up all over Philippine news outlets, she made mention of how indie-film production could entrap its practitioners; after affirming how respect for the audience should be "non-negotiable," she proceeded to explain the merits of the currently most popular (and consequently most derided) local genre, the romantic comedy. This was a lesson that her generation of filmmakers learned the hard way: that the way to improve a much-abused mode of practice is not to reject it, but rather to seize it and transform it so that the people who attend to it will benefit from patronizing it.

Marilou Diaz-Abaya had always connected and insisted on learning and never hesitated to share what she had. In a too-short lifespan she had earned



much more than a beautiful farewell, but in the meanwhile that is all we have been able to give, even as the harder long-term work of revaluation lies ahead.

## A National Artist We Deserve

Of whether Nora Cabaltera Villamayor, legally a senior citizen of the Philippines and permanent resident of the US, is an accomplished artist there can be no doubt. One might inspect the record of her multimedia accomplishments—as recording artist, television performer, stage actress, concert act, and film producer and thespian—and concede that she may have excelled in many, if not most, of these areas; one might even be a serious observer of any of these fields of endeavor (as I have been) and assert that no one else comes close, although many certainly aspire to her level of achievement.

Not surprisingly, the rejection by President Benigno Aquino III of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts's endorsement of Aunor has occasioned a number of impassioned and articulate responses, starting with social networks, by now filtering through mass media, and inevitably destined to land in scholarly discussions, with the Philippines's own major indexed humanities journal, *Kritika Kultura* of Ateneo de Manila University, slated to publish a special section devoted to her. (Personal disclosure: I am in charge of this specific project, as forum editor.) The nature of the reactions should not surprise anyone attuned to Philippine popular culture: the late-1960s working-class devotees who demanded for, and got, the teen idols they wanted have since grown along with them, many gentrifying and positioned in various capacities all over the globe.

It would have been instructive for the president's culture team to have looked into the origin of what National Artist for Literature and Magsaysay Awardee Nick Joaquin described as a phenomenon, in one of his landmark journalism articles. For way before the 1986 middle-class people-power revolt that restored the oligarchy that Aquino effectively represents, an earlier, limited, though genuinely working-class form of people power, comprising mostly rural migrants working as factory hands and domestic labor, discovered the pleasures of pop-culture consumerism and ignored the

dictates of the then-already enfeebled studio system of the so-called First Golden Age of Philippine cinema.

Rather than flock to the presentations of the typical European-featured and bourgeoisified talents then still being insistently launched by the major studios, the new urbanites, still capable of earning disposable income without seeking overseas employment, used their peso-votes to signify what types of idols they preferred. Today's intellectuals replicate an error of historical interpretation when they position Aunor and her teen-star rival, Vilma Santos, as belonging to the native-vs.-mestizo division that observers during that time believed was at play: although Santos first emerged as a child star during the waning years of the Golden Age, her fairness did not conform to the anti-Asian requisites of the time; grown-ups with distinctly Oriental features like hers would have been relegated to serious secondary roles as male villains or femmes fatales or, at best, comic roles (where, instructively, the biggest star, Dolphy, had to suppress his Chinese surname).

Hence the masses' new choices represented iconographies long withheld by the elite-controlled studio system, with the two biggest stars no longer male, and either *morena* or *chinita* (as the types represented by Aunor and Santos used to be termed). By the arrival of the 1970s, the more Western-looking (and increasingly marginalized) types accommodated this new demand for transformative appearances by exploring unusual options, including the pornography genre now remembered as *bomba*—also a reference to then-emerging student and labor unrest.

Since then this social experiment in discovering new images of media performers for popular consumption has either ended or changed, depending on what perspective one opts to adopt. East Asian-type candidates have managed to swing the door wide open, thanks to the viability demonstrated by Santos and followed through by the middlebrow Chinoy-ethnocentric efforts of Philippine cinema's most successful producer, Lily Yu Monteverde. But proof that this progressive window has also long slammed shut lies in the fact that no other brown-skinned mainstream female star has emerged since Aunor.<sup>4</sup>

To confound matters for the race- and class-conscious arbiters of social acceptability, Aunor's Otherness was too close for comfort to her mass adulators' condition—i.e., like them she was born poor and far from

the capital city, enduring the then-standard harsh treatment reserved for those perceived as unable to call on socially influential contacts for protection, cursed with disproportionate ambition and fated to rely on wit, talent, and industry to attain her dreams. Not surprisingly, for the period of what might count as her on-the-job internship, she displayed an earnest studiousness, carefully enunciating her song lyrics and delivering over-rehearsed renditions of even the most casual lines of dialogue, and investing whatever spare funds she had in art or period-film projects that baffled her fans and accounted for her occasional impoverishment (by movie-star standards).

Nevertheless, when her artistic maturity had peaked, roughly toward the close of the 1970s, the fruits of such unmatched discipline and struggle went on glorious display and earned her an entirely new generation of followers, many of them academically trained in cultural and media appreciation. I remember suspecting her then of finagling her performance record by paying attention to only her serious projects (as other major performers and directors were wont to do), and attending the screening of several potboilers she appeared in during her many periods of financial difficulty: to my amazement, each one, without exception, was stamped with a level of expertise that performing arts majors would have killed for.

This background also helps explain her disdain for the trappings of social respectability, having realized (as most long-lived artists do) that the widest range of experiential possibilities can always be harnessed in the service of interpretive craft. Small wonder that when she had the assurance of serious coverage during her current career resurgence, she spelled it out for the world, without apologies: chemical dependencies, multiple (including same-sex) partners, neuroses and anxieties, an inexplicable wanderlust, regret in the innocence of the now-lost past and hope in the uncertainties of the future. It was a source of amusement for me to see her fans scrambling to rationalize her statements, with a few of them abandoning their devotion to her because of their newfound fundamentalist religious convictions.

Less amusing was the spectacle of a supposedly enlightened presidential administration decreeing, in effect, that it did not want to be represented by such a powerfully transgressive figure. Its ignorance of the artist's temperament gets exposed when we look up the list of names who had already made it to the ranks of the country's officially endorsed masters and see that the

best among them had made use of similar methods of exploring hidden or difficult truths and realities. The kind of sensibility that counts a public record like Aunor's as contaminated by her less-than-"exemplary" lifestyle encourages medieval institutions like the Catholic Church to attempt a takeover of official cultural functions; worse, it plays into the dangerous oligarchic fantasy that a commodified, infantile, unexceptional mass culture is the perfectly satisfactory consequence of a wholesome moral existence.

#### Note

4. In fact, a reversal of the casting of mestizas in sex films seems to have occurred, with brown-skinned actresses such as Maribel Lopez and Sarsi Emmanuelle (featured together in Elwood Perez's *Silip* [1985]) and Elizabeth Oropesa "permitted" to star in such productions. In fact, this merely reflects the more libertarian values inherent in these projects, as well as the need to cast as wide a net as possible, mestizas still welcome, in order to meet the demand for such willing talent. Also worth noting is the possibly not-incidental fact that these actresses remained capable of delivering outstanding performances.

## Interviews

### Star Builders on Parade

*I remember reconstructing (during the pre-digital era) the original ending of this article as soon as I realized that the published version had cut out several paragraphs toward the end, including the closer. Unfortunately I misplaced not just this original version but the clipping of the published version as well. After tracking down a copy of the newspaper on microfilm, I realized it would be impossible for me to reconstitute what I originally wrote; on the other hand, I also realized that I had (possibly subconsciously) pursued one of the interview subjects, Rey de la Cruz, since he'd presented the edgiest case for star-building; during the later interview (following this one), he not only reneged on his promise to retire from talent management but had adopted the studio-initiated trend of launching new faces in batches, with the wildly popular satirical twist of commodifying the members of the group: softdrink beauties, hard-drink beauties, street beauties, revolutionary beauties, etc. This necessarily truncated piece can therefore be regarded as an intro to the more extensive de la Cruz interview. For his part, Douglas Quijano remained a sensible acquaintance, articulate and cooperative; while Jesse Ejercito lost his bid for posterity along with his (and his brother Joseph Estrada's) attempts at political*

*ascendancy. In film-historical terms, Ejercito's loss was more pitiful than Erap's, since he had set a template for successful quality productions outside the realm of studio interference—still the best example, to my mind, of the producer as auteur—and may never be acknowledged for it as long as the trauma of the Erap presidency remains in the popular imagination.*

Behind every screen personality's rise to fame and notoriety is a star-builder, the one who made it all possible for her or him. Say Rio Locsin, Nora Aunor, or Alma Moreno, and those who keep close tabs on the film industry will surely connect them with names like Rey de la Cruz, Douglas Quijano, and Jesse Ejercito respectively. These latter-listed are the people behind the stars—influential satellites well-connected with movie-world bosses and the press, the all-around counselors of their celebrity wards who also wield enough cash to invest in developing their discoveries.

"I pick up my talents from the mud, polish them until they shine brightly, and hold them up for the public to see," says Rey de la Cruz, Rio Locsin's first manager. Before Locsin entered his life, de la Cruz was generally considered a jinx. His previous clients—Olivia O'Hara, Mitos del Mundo, and Susan Henson—never quite made it, which in this business means "made it big." After Locsin, however, he has been confidently promoting some new faces: Yehlen Catral (a "re-discovery" from 1975), Gil Guerrero, and Rio Locsin II. He also swears that after these three he will be bowing out of show business, "an ungrateful world," he sighs.

Nevertheless he realizes that ingratitude is inherent in the profession: "Intrigues are healthy; gossip is the barometer of popularity." In spotting potential stars, de la Cruz, an optometrist, begins (not surprisingly) with the eyes. Then, if the woman's bosoms are ample ("at least 34 inches") and her legs shapely, he approaches her. Discoveries invariably turn out to be females since, according to de la Cruz, perhaps deliberately mixing up species, "It is hard to tame a lion but easy to sell a woman.... Beauty queens and middle-class women are to be avoided [because] I don't want my discoveries to look down on me. I prefer ordinary persons because they'll be sincere and persevering."

Having lured a discovery with promises of stardom, he enters into a five-year contract with her. In effect, he assures himself of 20 percent of her

profits. (Rio Locsin, he claims, defaulted in her third year, thereby divesting him of a 25-percent return on investments.) Then he cooks up gimmicks calculated to whet the public's appetite. "I avoid fabricating because of my profession as a doctor and my upbringing with a lawyer-uncle and a religious grandmother." De la Cruz's gimmicks, nonetheless, are unmistakably sensationalistic. For instance, he gave the press a recent heyday by announcing his same-sex relationship with ward Gil Guerrero.

But as if to dispel any impression of him as a wicked witch to his Cinderellas and Cinderfellas, he lets fall a checklist of what he thinks an ideal star-builder should be: "Witty, imaginative, tactful, honest, courageous, understanding, law-abiding, and most of all, non-exploitative." He declined to comment on the casting couch syndrome, the practice of stars going to bed with their star-builders, although he does not deny that he has been approached for pimping services. "What I do in such a case is refer such people to 'friends' who I know engage in those practices."

In effect Rey de la Cruz can be considered the star-builder who thrives on straightforward, if mostly attention-getting, methods. A series of recent talent-management awards that he had won attests to the effectiveness of his outlook. And although his tactics are unique, in essence he does not differ from most other star-builders in town. Regal Films project coordinator Douglas Quijano, for example, employs the same process in finding talents. He started way back, late 1969, with Nora Aunor for Tower Productions. "She was the first star I saw who couldn't be controlled. Using reverse psychology, I encouraged destructive gossip about her so the public will first pity her, then sympathize with her."

Quijano claims to have also discovered Tirso Cruz III, Al Tantay, and Tet Antiquiera for the movies. The last he considers "an ego trip, since Tet was everything a movie star should not be." Her most notorious gimmick, of course, was her giveaway of underpants during the opening day of her first movie. "My gimmicks [compared, presumably, with de la Cruz's] are usually more simple, more acceptable." His job begins when he spots persons with star potential. Like de la Cruz, he prefers "those from the ranks because you can pump sense into them."

After agreeing verbally on an initial charge of 10 percent on their earnings, he finds out which of their traits he can sell. He carefully maintains,

though, that "personal problems I keep private, unless [the stars] themselves expose these to the public." In spite of his professed uprightness, Quijano is reputed to ride on the industry's propensity for gimmickry and the public's conditioned preference for controversy.

It is healthier to have a large circle of star-builders, adds Jesse Ejercito, whose most successful finds have been Elizabeth Oropesa and Alma Moreno: "The more stars, the merrier. That should always be helpful in minimizing costs and delays." Ejercito began in 1975 with Oropesa in an Ishmael Bernal film, *Mister Mo, Lover Boy Ko*. Originally a Gloria Diaz vehicle, the project was handed over to Oropesa (with whom Diaz had starred a year earlier in Celso Ad. Castillo's *Ang Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa*) after it became apparent that Diaz would soon be too busy with other commitments.

Oropesa duly set the standard for Ejercito's subsequent discoveries: unconventionally beautiful, physically well-endowed, and histrionically gifted. With little variation, all Ejercito protégés proved themselves competent as actresses. After Oropesa came Chanda Romero, then Daria Ramirez, Alma Moreno, Lorna Tolentino, Beth Bautista, and Amy Austria—his so-called *Siyete Belyas* (Seven Beauties, though *belyas* in Tagalog also connotes something professionally indecorous). So far, Ejercito has only had one male client—Dondon Nakar, who as a former child star was not exactly a recent discovery. The reason for the gender imbalance, according to Ejercito, is that "most contemporary projects accommodate female leads. There are already many established actors anyway like Dolphy and Fernando Poe Jr."—and, he carefully avoids adding, his own brothers, Joseph Estrada and George Estregan.

Ejercito's preference for females does not really stand up to economic inspection. If anything, the preference for female discoveries only confirms the readier saleability of women. After all, for male discoveries, no physical or thespic expectations are imposed in such refined and competitive measures as they are for women. Ejercito ensures his discoveries' success by insisting that they should be able to act—in the performing-arts rather than the casual sense—first. As an active producer, he also knows that when a film project begins, press releases concentrate on the star; after a month or two, attention tends to focus on the material itself. "I don't use gimmicks to enhance a star's image. The gimmicks should come with the project," he claims.

The casting-couch syndrome, he says, “all depends on the other people in the industry. I don’t indulge in it, and I don’t think other successful producers do either.” Ejercito allots about Php 300,000 to promote each project. His stars’ contracts require a 10-percent management fee payable to him. Actresses, however, are not the only ones whom Ejercito provides with opportunities. He has also given directors Manuel “Fyke” Cinco and Ishmael Bernal some of their biggest breaks. “To stay in this business, I have to promote deserving films,” he maintains.<sup>5</sup>

### Note

5. Jesse Ejercito’s accomplishment as producer has been overlooked by the academic and critical establishments, mainly because of the aforementioned close association with Joseph Estrada’s ignominious stint as President. Nevertheless, the record of his output—whether as owner of his production outfits Crown Seven, Seven Stars, J & R, and Merdeka, or as line producer for a long list of companies including his brother’s as well as Bancom Audiovision, Cine Suerte, Stellar, and the Second Golden Age giants Regal and Viva—easily outflanks that of any other independent producer in terms of the high incidence of quality and innovation that he supported.

## The Fantasy World of Rey de la Cruz

*The surge of renewed interest in the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of too-young Pepsi Paloma in 1985 has still not raised any eyebrows regarding what subsequently happened to her rabble-rousing manager, Rey de la Cruz. Shot dead in the optical clinic where he lived, de la Cruz had deliberately cultivated an unsavory reputation—but mainly in his showbiz affairs. When Communist Party renegade Felimon “Popoy” Lagman was also slain by unidentified assassins, the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino, which he led, mentioned that an arrest warrant for him still had to be served for the murder of de la Cruz. So the question of who killed de la Cruz, unlike the issue of whether poor Pepsi was murdered, appears to have been resolved, but only because his supposed killer can no longer attest to or deny the charge.*

A tall leather chair behind an appropriately imposing table provides film personality Rey de la Cruz, incidentally Doctor of Optometry, with a suitable position from which to survey prospective applicants, patients, and interviewers who get to sit on depressed and low-backed receiving chairs. “I have always been a star-builder,” he smiles beatifically, “even when I was still a student. Everything you see here, without exception, comes from the blood, sweat, and tears I invested in my work in the movies.”

“Everything” I took to include an entire floor space of a relatively tall building in the Lilliputian backside of Quiapo, two blocks near the subject’s famed optical clinic, where a rugged male attendant directs correctly credentialed curiosity-seekers like me to search the doctor’s residence downstreet. “You won’t miss it,” he assures me, and sure enough, the first building that seems to assert an air of dignity in this polluted part of the district yields Rey de la Cruz’s name, and nothing else, for the fifth-floor portion of its directory.

The address where de la Cruz holds court will immediately impress the outsider with its overabundance of the trappings of fast accumulated wealth. A pair of gossiping old women, an alert girl Friday, a half-dressed teenage kid, and some children quietly at play make sure that you get ushered into the right parlor, instead of the kitchen, bathroom, or private chambers where, de la Cruz clarifies later, starlets Lampel Cojuangco and Mishelle Zobel, his latest acquisitions—rather, *alagas*, reside.

### Distinctions

Dr. de la Cruz starts out by showing a recent issue of *Asia* magazine, which featured him in a sidebar on an article on the local bold-movie trend. “I was also voted ‘Most Controversial Guest of the Year’ in *See-True*”<sup>6</sup>—he points to a plaque on a side table—and was interviewed for Channel 2’s *Variety* program as well as another international magazine.”

Then he quickly gets to the point. “I don’t understand why people take my controversial status against me. I provide a living for my discoveries, I give the *masa* the entertainment they want, and I make a living in the process—*ano’ng masama duon?* I even agreed to become barangay captain of Quiapo to be able to render more and systematic service to my fellowmen, and then a nuisance like Polly Cayetano questions my appointment, charges

me in court for exploitation of minors, and calls me a pimp on the air. *Sa dami ng sumasakay sa akin, kailangang mag-rationalize ako, otherwise matagal na sana akong nawalan ng pag-asa.*"

Sooner or later it becomes clear to even the most casual observer that the very subject of Rey de la Cruz may require some rationalizing too. I had interviewed him a half-decade ago for an omnibus write-up on the state of star-building in the country<sup>7</sup> and, in contrast to pros like Jesse Ejercito and Douglas Quijano, he had seemed much more guarded and tentative way back then.

"*Marami na akong na-build up,*" he continues, "and each time *na me kumakalas sa akin*, I'd tell myself *tama na, ayoko na*. And then *me bagong dumarating, me responsibilidad na naman ako, balik na naman sa star-building.*"

At this point he cannot seem to resist a digression. "*Tulad nung case ni Lala Montelibano—hindi ko naman intensyon na mang-iskandalo*. I heard she wanted to break away from me, so when I learned she was appearing in *See-True*, I presented her with her real mother, as if to tell her, 'We are all responsible for other people in our lives, so don't forget whom you are responsible for.' *E siyuro*, her adoptive mother thought the real mother was there to get back Lala, *di pati yung* thirty-percent commission *niya sa bata e mawawala, kaya ayun, nagkagulo na.*"

Although aware that the incident has generated a generous amount of public outrage, de la Cruz will admit that at the most "I tell only white lies, in the interest of promoting a movie. *Sino naman ba'ng hindi gumagawa nuon? Pero* if ever I resort to a gimmick, *ginigimikan ko lang ang totoo*. Example: *yung Tondo-girl gimmick ko ke Myrna Castillo, maraming nagalit doon dahil hindi raw kapani-paniwala na me ganung kaganda sa slum area. Nag-white lie na ako nung pino-promote yung launching movie niya*, when I said *na me tattoo siya sa boobs, pero* it turned out *na mas effective yung gimmick ko kesa sa promotion nung pelikula.*"

In the long run, he has seen to it that, as far as he's concerned, only good comes out of whatever vulgarities he foists upon the public to capture their attention. "*Hindi alam ng marami,*" he explains, "*na* behind all the publicity, I train my discoveries to become model citizens. *Lahat ng social graces ini-introduce ko sa kanila. Pati sa acting, me workshop sila* conducted at my expense, exclusively for them." He proudly points out that two of his female

stars have attained well-earned reputations as serious actresses, even though one of them—Rio Locsin—had a painful and public falling-out with him, and another—Sarsi Emmanuelle—has been having difficulty in sustaining her popularity because of alleged professional indifference.

### The JQ Connection

"If you still cannot take what I'm doing," he says between chuckles, "blame Joe Quirino." As his journalism professor at the Manuel L. Quezon University, the inimitable JQ took him away by introducing him to Mars Ravelo and Jose "Doc" Perez. The former may account for his propensity in plotting *komiks*-like twists and turns to publicize his wards, but it is the Sampaguita Pictures mogul he credits for teaching him "the ABCs of star-building. All in all Doc gave me ten valuable tips, all of them confidential."

That was twenty years ago, when the Stars '66 batch of discoveries had a tantalizing effect on him, coming as he did "fresh from a small town in Cagayan, where I was the seventh among eleven children; *ako lang ang bakla, ako lang ang napadpad sa showbiz, at ako lang,*" he finishes with relish, "*ang nakapagpaaral sa twenty-five na kamag-anak ko*, some of whom are now big-timers in the States."

He strokes a thinning crop of hair and directs his professorial mien toward a forever-gone era of innocence, of roses and lollipops and Zandro Zamora. "I was only twenty when I started out. I had ten thousand pesos, all my savings, to begin with, so I bought my first car, a second-hand Triumph Herald, *para maging karapat-dapat kay Zandro Zamora. Bini-build up ko siya pero nasira ang ulo ko sa kanya, masyado ako naging possessive*. We parted ways as friends—if he ever considered me a friend—*pero* since then *babae na lang ang kadalasang bini-build up ko*. I get too involved with my men, and then they get involved with my female discoveries, as in the case of Gil Guerrero and Myrna Castillo. People get the impression *tuloy na pinapares-pares ko yung mga alaga ko.*"

After he made it big with Rio Locsin in the mid-'70s, he launched Myrna Castillo (initially as Rio Locsin II, to replace the then already-gone original) and, after she paired off with Guerrero—only to lately return to de la Cruz—he launched his first batch of female starlets. Because of their literally commercialized designations they became known collectively as the

“softdrink beauties”: Coca Nicolas, Sarsi Emmanuelle, and the tragic Pepsi Paloma, who figured in a messy rape case (capped by an exploitation vehicle) before she allegedly took her own life. Introduced along with them was what de la Cruz describes as “the only uncola, Myra Manibog.” Then the “hard-drink beauties” followed—Remy Martin, Chivas Regal, Vodka Zobel, and Brandy Ayala; only the last, according to de la Cruz, “has survived in showbiz. The rest are in Japan earning two thousand dollars a month each as live entertainers.”

### Trendsetting

De la Cruz’s arrival as a promo personality was accorded a dubious form of flattery during the early ’80s when his concept of launching discoveries in batches was imitated. Into the movie pages (as well as a few actual productions) marched the “street beauties,” who sported such throw-away appellations as Ayala Buendia, Aurora Boulevard, Remedios Malate, Lerma Morayta, and Bridget Jones. A parade of pulchritudinous hopefuls has been following suit since, assuming de la Cruz-inspired sobriquets like Lyka Ugarte, Claudia Zobel (another tragic waste), and, in keeping up with his latest batch, Cristina Crisol and Elsa Enrile.

Yes, he has decided to contribute his share to the political awakening of the country by presenting, on the heels of the runaway Lala Montelibano, the “revolutionary beauties,” complete with farcically flippant anecdote: “*Nagkita-kita raw sila sa EDSA during the revolution, hindi na makauwi sa dami ng tao*, so they decided to stay together with the rest of people power.” An enumeration of what sound like *noms de guerre*, instead of screen names, follows, showing that by now, the guy has crossed the line between wordplay and downright irreverence: “Aida Dimaporo, sixteen; Ava Manotoc, Vanessa Ver, and straight from Cebu, Lota Misuari, all nineteen; plus a tribute to my tormentor, Polly Cayetano, seventeen. I chose those names,” he hastens to add, “because I want people to become less emotional about political personalities. I’d like to see them smile when they hear those names.”

But what about the names’ real owners? “My legal research reveals that there’s no law against using other people’s names. Of course I might desist if the *origins* want me to, *pero* I’m sure that if they see the girls, with their beauty and sex appeal, *baka matuwa pa pati sila*.”

What de la Cruz tries his best to suppress is the notion that his girls are “available”—the subject of his interview with *Asia* magazine. “If ever they do it on their own, I have to make sure *na hindi naa*-associate *yung ginagawa nila sa akin*.” He applies the same tack to an even more sensational recent development in local film practice: “Beware, I tell them, if your director wants you to do penetration scenes, because I can’t be around to keep watch all the time. Ask yourselves *na lang*, in a practical way: *gusto niyo ba*, type *niyo ba yung makakapareha niyo*, *tama ba yung bayad sa puri niyo*, and *dapat*, money down. *Kung maaatim ng kalooban niyo e bakit hindi*, *basta hindi kayo pinupuwersa*. *Pero kung ako ang tatanungin kung ano’ng advice ko*, *sabihin niyong sabi ko*, *huwag*.”

### Legacies

By a mysterious coincidence a side door opens, and out drifts a pale and fragile wisp of a girl in housefrock, smiling shyly at everyone present and receding before anyone could figure out what she was about. “*Si Lampel Cojuangco*,” Rey de la Cruz whispers, almost conspiratorially. “*Hindi na ’yan mabobola ng producer sa mga penetration scenes*.”

For every extreme development de la Cruz has required a balancing factor; it must be alarmingly reflective of the times that he claims to have resorted recently to, of all things, Bible-reading. “*Dito ko kinukuha ngayon yang mga lessons na ina-apply ko sa kanila*,” he says, picking up a voluminous edition from his desk and putting it down just as quickly.

One wonders how far he is willing to enforce the scarily stiff Judeo-Christian tradition on his present and prospective talents. “*Me male applicant pa nga aka dito from the States*”—he takes out photos of a mean-looking Oriental in progressive stages of dishabille and spreads them over the scriptures—“*at mahina na yung dalawang walk-in applicants a day*, from both sexes, *sa akin*. That’s because I can claim now that my stars get sold partly on the basis of their association with me. *Pati masa nakikilala na yung hitsura ko*.”

Talking about his image and popularity leads him to articulate his longing for “a legitimate ‘bold’ center, *para magka-outlet ang artistic bold films*, *para ma-develop ang taste ng local audience*, *at higit sa lahat*, *para may pagkakakitaan ang mga taong umaasa sa ganung klaseng hanapbuhay*, *kesa mapilitang gumawa ng mas masama pa*. I don’t understand why people get mad

when the censors get strict, *tapos* they get mad again when there are bold films released. Most of all I don't mind being associated with bold, *pero ayun na nga*, it's always taken against me."

Maybe you've become a symbol of sorts? I suggest. Rey de la Cruz smiles. He seems to like the idea.

## Notes

6. A then-popular TV talk show featuring mostly film personalities, hosted by Inday Badiday (screen name of Lourdes Jimenez Carvajal, sister of magazine editor Letty Jimenez-Magsanoc).
7. "Star-Building Pays," *Times Journal* (May 26, 1980): 21, 23.

## Perseverance in a Neglected Dimension

*I had planned a series of interviews with outstanding film practitioners and had, by this time, already conducted limited Q&A sessions with Ishmael Bernal and Ricardo Lee. What intervened was my sudden return to university, for my second bachelor's degree, in film. Needless to point out, I learned much less from the program (and some teachers I had had probably learned more) than from my interactions with practitioners; but other factors cropped up, from individual (the death of cinematographer Conrado Baltazar) to political (the people-power uprising that shut down the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, which had arranged a work-study program for me). I had never gone over this article again since its original publication; it sounded stiff then from being defensive about the choice of subject, and still does. I was gratified however to realize that the claims I made about the interviewee had only intensified through the decades, and that if I'd been fated to write about only one technical contributor, I could do worse than focus on the typically least-celebrated talent on most film projects. The original exchanges, which were conducted over several sessions at Ramon Reyes's studio and home, were recorded by hand (ironic, considering the nature of Reyes's craft, but he was not one to point that out); the notes have been lost, but I remember our speaking in Taglish and drafting the article accordingly, then deciding, with Reyes's approval, on translating our conversations to English to dispense with the extensive translations.*

If he had settled for security and stability, Ramon Reyes would not appear as imposing as he does now. South Asian features set in a six-foot frame, he confronts a career which has consistently resisted the efforts of his predecessors to draw forth some sense of importance, if not material well-being, from the star-blind business of movie-making. An impression of street-smart confidence rounds out an aura of intimidation, a trait the real character does not share: Reyes will be quick to point to himself as an epitome of his profession's paradoxical nature. "The fact that producers reserve sound mixing for last among the phases of film production," he growls, "implies that the process itself is indispensable. It's the phase that finalizes every project, that in a sense prepares it for exhibition. Yet I still have to come across films other than those of Mike de Leon which have a design for sound ready even at the pre-production stage."

The voice derives a resonance not from volume but through a capacity to articulate with sound logic (pun intended). Close attention will eventually reveal, however, a modesty which would have disadvantaged most film aspirants who have only talent to fall back on. In spite of his attempts to draw attention to his profession instead of himself, Reyes can hardly help his propensity for perfection. Ten awards in a span of a little over seven years from four award-giving bodies, plus a special trophy intended as a commendation for collective technical excellence—no other track record remains as impressive so far in his or any other technical field of Philippine filmmaking. What makes the achievement extraordinary is not so much the ordinarieness of the victor as the fact that no one who understands the import would begrudge him for it.

A Manileño from birth, Ramon Arevalo Reyes was a spark in the postwar baby boom which made possible the entrenchment of the star system in the 1960s and the emergence of movie patronage as a national distinction in the '70s. The succession by Filipinos of nearby Taiwanese as the most movie-going people in the world, estimated for posterity by the latest edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records* (McWhirter) at almost twenty films per capita per annum, just about says all that needs to be told about the prevalence of the practice. And with the steady decline of the Filipino birth rate (ironically due in no small part to increased sexual awareness through films, which in turn has triggered off the social psyche's conditioned conservatism



as evidenced in family-planning and anti-smut campaigns), filmmaking in the Philippines may revert to the purely commercial orientation of the late '60s—minus the fanatic adulation afforded by a predominantly youthful population—unless an international market for local quality films be developed, or the high population growth rate returns.<sup>8</sup>

The attendant demand for formal training Reyes admits would faze him. “Except for Amang Sanchez, I know of no other soundman who has taken up sound engineering. That’s why I insist on being credited for ‘sound’ instead of for ‘sound engineering.’” Reyes himself holds an Associate in Electronics, which he finished in 1965 at the University of the East after two years of preparation for his childhood aspiration, a BS in Mechanical Engineering. Prior to that, he had typical middle-class preparations comprising elementary schooling at San Sebastian College and intermediate schooling at Don Bosco Technical Institute, where he spent his free time tinkering with machine-shop equipment.

Movies then he watched purely for entertainment, until Mike de Leon, already an LVN Studios busybody, approached Reyes’s father Luis, already a star soundman recently rewarded by the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences for his work in Gerardo de Leon’s *El Filibusterismo* (1962), for a possible successor in the studio’s tradition of technical expertise. Although dynasticism was (and remains) a feature of Philippine filmmaking, the elder Reyes refused responsibility for his son’s employment—more from a sense of propriety than self-preservation. Two other awards from regional festivals later, Luis Reyes shared his second FAMAS award with his son’s first for their work in Lino Brocka’s *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975). The paternal team-up was to prove durable enough for a few more trophies for two consecutive years afterward—the first another FAMAS and the second an Urian from the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino for *Itim* (with Sebastian Sayson) and the third another Urian for *Kung Mangarap Ka’t Magising*, both by Mike de Leon, who has since defined a cycle in the Reyes line by retaining Ramon for all his succeeding projects. In 1979 the Reyeses worked on another Brocka film, *Jaguar*, which, like *Maynila*, was destined to capture the admiration of European critics in the early '80s.

Yet for all his filial gratitude, Ramon Reyes would not encourage his children Carmelite, Lawrence, and Angelica, all under ten years of age, to

work for film. “My success—if you could call it that—was due to a combination of luck and hard work, fifty-fifty. I would not want to have my kids take such big risks.” The family recently moved into a house of its own, after transferring several times from one residence to another, to a modest bungalow in Greenland subdivision in Cainta, Rizal. Reyes’ wife of twelve years, the former Virginia Alvarez, understands. She occasionally drops by LVN Studios, about an hour’s public-vehicle ride away from their place, to bring him some food or sometimes just keep him company. Consolation, however small, Reyes derives from the realization that “other soundpersons are not paid well at all, especially when compared to movie workers in other fields.”

The Reyes household is always busy, accommodating an average of eight—residents, househelp, visitors, not to mention pets—at a time. The entrance leads to a living room which barely distinguishes itself from the adjacent dining room; this in turn leads to the garage, from which one could either cross the lawn back to the entrance or take a slightly longer route out through Sampaguita Road and back into the front gate. Ease of access is reinforced by the reassuring arrangement of available space as defined by cushions by the front door opposed by a hi-fidelity component rack built into book and record shelves, then by aquaria and aquatic equipment opposed by kitchen appliances in the dining room. Faced at thirty-seven with all this material evidence, Reyes would certainly feel left behind when compared with his would-have-been colleagues in engineering school. “I couldn’t even afford to sustain my fondness for raising goldfish,” he muses, brushing silver-streaked hair away from leaden-rimmed spectacles. “I simply discovered I could spend my leisure time on activities more appropriate to my profession.”

### The Once and Always Expert

Work for Ramon Reyes normally begins after lunch at the LVN sound studio and could proceed way into the night, to avoid the distraction caused by office transactions. While occupied last year with *Oro, Plata, Mata*, he often worked until morning with Peque Gallaga, whose first solo credit as director it was. Gallaga’s staid wife Madie, who line-produced the project for the Exeperimental Cinema of the Philippines, becomes uncharacteristically

garrulous to praise the efforts Reyes expended on the film: “He would work with Peque like mad, sometimes insisting on perfecting what already seemed to us an acceptable soundtrack.” After a first print converted highbrow preview audiences from skepticism to acclamation, Reyes and Gallaga, in typical celebratory form, retreated into the cold gloom of the LVN sound studio to remix certain portions of the film, including the entire first and last reels.

It was the subtly improved soundtrack of snatches of dialogue floating more distinctly above the din of party chatter in the opening sequence that dispelled the only major complaint against Reyes’s work in *Oro, Plata, Mata* during the Urian deliberations. For what may stand as the most outstanding achievement ever—luxuriance and evocation in eight channels, instead of the already extravagant four—in sound engineering in local cinema, Reyes won his latest Urian as well as the Film Academy of the Philippines awards. As further evidence, however, that his work was no fluke, Reyes’ closest competitor would have been himself, for his work in Mike de Leon’s *Batch ’81* where, in contrast with that of *Oro, Plata, Mata*, the use of sound observed austere prescriptions so as to epitomize the disembodiment of the characters from the rest of their social environment.

Reyes’s latest Urian trophy means a lot more to him than just another acknowledgment of a job well done: “My colleagues have been teasing me about winning the Urian only for films directed by Mike de Leon. This time I managed to somehow prove that I could outdo myself regardless of my familiarity with the filmmaker.” The *Oro, Plata, Mata* soundtrack Reyes recalls as a “very complicated effort, involving various mixing levels.” For one thing, he points out, the clarity of dialogue depended upon the purpose of the scene—meaning that dialogue may be either distinct, as in the intimate scenes, or almost drowned out, as in the party, outdoor, or massacre scenes. Sound effects, for another thing, had to be carefully filtered so as to avoid conflicts of purpose. The country-house generator, for example, had to sound practically subliminal so as not to intrude in the depiction of activity at the rural estate, while on the other hand the burning fields had to sound cacophonous so as to contrast with the stillness of the forest retreat in the next scene.

Behind Reyes’s exploit in *Oro, Plata, Mata* lies the experience of what he remembers as “learning almost purely from practice”—by his calculation,

more than eighty field recordings and three hundred sound-engineering work for films since his first credit, Romy Villaflor’s *Assignment: Hongkong*, in 1965; a more immediate predecessor in his use of naturalistic sound effects would be his then year-old output in Laurice Guillen’s *Salome*. “I used to work on about fifty films a year until Magna Tech Omni emerged as a major competitor in 1977, after which I could do only about thirty, sometimes as few as twenty, a year. Since sound mixing for film is my bread and butter, I don’t have the option of choosing whether I want to work on a given project or not; but at least one good project a year will compensate for all the mediocre ones.”

Reyes prefers to work on “relatively quiet” undertakings like Mike de Leon’s *Itim* and *Kisapmata* (1981), since these would be both creatively challenging yet “easy to work on, without the need to experiment with unnecessary sounds.” When the project bears more noise than promise, however, Reyes tries to sustain himself as far as the film would allow him to. “The advantage here is that the producers of such projects would not take the artistic side seriously, so they pay attention only to the earlier portions of the film. If my inspiration doesn’t last until the end, neither would their interest anyway. Usually we wind up impressed with each other, they in my efficiency and I in their carelessness.”

Although fluent in the abstractions pertaining to his profession, Reyes allows instinct to influence his performance. “Normally I allow an equal ratio between instinct and routine. But the more challenging the project, the more I tend to rely on instinct.” Contrary to logical expectations, he resorts to routine only when a “quantity, as opposed to quality,” project imposes purely professional, as opposed to artistic, demands, especially in terms of deadline. “You wouldn’t believe how some producers think post-production can be accomplished within one week but sometimes I get notices to finish my work in three days. In which case I’d barely have time to concentrate on quality, much less allow for inspiration.”

Before working on an artistically difficult project, Reyes would allow himself a whole day of rest. This he more often than not realizes through staying at home and listening to music. His stereo component system, an ingenious combination of old-fashioned speakers and contemporary hardware set in space-saving setups, provides him with all the fidelity he requires.

Reyes believes in serious music as an extender of sound appreciation, and goes at the moment for the aural sensualities in old-time jazz and futuristic renditions of classics ranging from Bach to Wagner.

### Sound Principles

“Music,” Ramon Reyes maintains while playing Tomita’s synthesizer version of Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” (from the *Suite bergamasque*), “is just another form of sound.” Reyes is beyond the assertion of the superiority of his element as justification for the existence of his profession; in fact he believes in the functional subordination of film sound to action. “During fight or chase scenes I avoid the use of music as much as possible. If it has to, music can come in more effectively before or after the action.” Indeed the current crop of progressive film musicians has been able to harmonize well with Reyes when it comes to projects they work on together—proof of which resides in the regularity with which a particular musician would win an award in the same film Reyes wins for. Among the aforementioned scorers would be Ryan Cayabyab, Lorrie Ilustre, Lutgardo Labad, Jun Latonio, Winston Raval/Vanishing Tribe, and foremost of all Max Jocson, whose efforts for de Leon’s *Itim* and Brocka’s *Cain at Abel* and *Maynila* can be taken as textbook samples of the unobtrusive deployment of film music.

In so far as the Urian, the award which ensconced Reyes as the best craftsman in his field, is concerned, Reyes says: “The criterion the critics use for sound is correct.” Said criterion goes: *Sound in a film is effective if dialogue, music, sound effects, and silence are vividly reproduced and are creatively orchestrated.*<sup>9</sup> “I would prefer, however, that artistic approach be given more weight.” A preferable direction lies in the integration of art and technique as presumed in the criterion stipulated by the MPP for music, thus: *Music in a film is considered effective if it underscores meaning, heightens mood and emotion, helps define character, and reinforces the rhythm and pace of the film.* Replacement of the word *music* with *sound*, however, would result in an ambiguity brought about by the differences between organized and disorganized sound. Hence a more ideal criterion would have the latter starting out as *sound, particularly the use of dialogue, music, sound effects, and silence*—granting, of course, that such a conception would be comprehensible for the average industry practitioner. “In itself,” Reyes concedes, “the existing

criterion is already too advanced for second-rate associates. One time I argued with a producer over as basic a technicality as perspective. He refused to consider the possibility that the volume of dialogue may diminish when the speaker moves away from the camera or out of the frame.”

In any case, the resolution of the conflict between style and substance in sound engineering could then enable practitioners to concentrate on more advanced theoretical issues, among which the pre-eminence of original sound over artificial sound Reyes would propound as his favorite crusade: “The reputation of movie soundpersons suffered with the emergence of the sound studio. I used to disagree with my father over the limitations of dubbing, but now I realize that I wouldn’t mind sacrificing clarity for ambience and perspective anytime.” The technical clean-up assured by the availability of the sound studio developed a set of conventions that do not necessarily meet the requisites of realistic reproduction. Ambience, for example, is usually idealized to the point where a rarefied audibility is preferred to the sonority of an enclosed marketplace, even when the setting in question happens to be, say, an enclosed marketplace. This anti-realistic anomaly Reyes traces to the abuse of the studio’s capability of controlling unwanted effects: as a result, serious performers are themselves expected to vocalize in a normal indoor range of volume, a standard which glosses over a national mentality acquired from centuries of conditioning under loquacious colonizers.

“I remember my father’s very first piece of advice: observe rehearsal carefully for the cuing of dialogue, or the magic of the moment will be lost. That was the time when the expertise of mikepersons was indispensable to the set.” One of the more obvious examples Reyes mentions is the feeding of lines in comedy. “Since performers dub their lines one at a time all by themselves, the sense of timing, not to mention spontaneity, is difficult to recapture.” An element of nostalgia never fails to inform Reyes’ ideal of a project as “100-percent original sound.” He started out as a field recorder and successfully survived the transition to studio engineering. At AM Productions, wherein he practiced for eight months in 1966, he had the opportunity to work with the late Gerardo de Leon, now generally regarded as the most significant filmmaker of his time, on an omnibus project called *Tatlong Kasaysayan ng Pag-ibig*. “We had already exposed some two hundred feet of film for a master shot when I shouted ‘Cut!’ because of the intrusion

of extraneous sound. ‘Manong’ displayed no anger, he just offered friendly advice regarding how unnecessary sounds on the set can become effective incidental sounds on the screen.”

### Sound Lessons

Such training for sound expertise Reyes declares cannot be acquired from studio work alone. “When I suggested to Mike de Leon that we fill in a pause when Ward Luarca sees Chanda Romero for the first time at the gate in *Batch ‘81*, I didn’t even consider the symbolic significance of a jet plane roaring overhead. I just thought that if I were recording on the set and a plane *did* fly overhead, I would think first, just as ‘Manong’ would have, of how interesting it might turn out to be.” Reyes points with pride to his work in Brocka’s *Maynila*, which exploited the field sounds of Chinatown, Quiapo, and Diliman, requiring only about 30-percent studio dubbing. The foreign-trained Amang Sanchez he refers to as evidence of how “locally, we’re still catching up with the refinements of dubbing when a big-budget prestige project like [Francis Ford Coppola’s] *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which I managed to observe, used original sound almost entirely throughout.” Sanchez may have pioneered in alerting contemporary local audiences to the viability of original sound through his work in Marilou Diaz-Abaya’s *Brutal* (1980) and *Moral* (1982), but Reyes looks forward to single-handedly dissipating the myth of its inadequacy once and for all.

The local film industry fell behind its foreign counterparts ironically by trying to overtake what appeared to have been a trend toward studio engineering in the 1960s. But considering the fact that other local industries were (and still are) reliant upon foreign, and particularly American, ones, the transition from field to studio would have been inevitable anyway. Besides, as Reyes recalls, the lack of professionalism among performers then as now incurred additional production expenses. “While waiting for a latecomer, ambience would be modified, mainly because set noise varies according to time of day.” A thoroughly professional production like Lamberto V. Avellana’s filmization of National Artist Nick Joaquin’s *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* (1966) could have benefited then from an expensive process called “direct optical,” where sound was transferred directly from field to film. This was during a time, according to Reyes, “when urban centers were not as

congested as they are now,” thereby enabling field sound, as handled by his father, to be recorded with a minimum of intrusions. “Today’s typical prestige productions would not risk as much as LVN did then,” Reyes reflects. “Modest casting, domestic situations would normally be given proportionate technical treatment, not the kind of services enjoyed by Avellana’s particular project.”

In contrast, the disuse of field sound in *Oro, Plata, Mata* makes the younger Reyes’s achievement therein all the more admirable. “It’s a shame,” says Madie Gallaga, the film’s producer (and director’s wife), “that we decided upon ‘Monching’ only during the post-production stage. Several sounds in the rain forests of Negros are not available on standard sound-effects tracks. Also some stage-trained performers could not re-deliver their particular brand of upper-class hysteria in the studio. If we had managed to capture all the field sounds expertly enough for the final track, I would say that there would have been a qualitative difference.” Aware of the profit-oriented realities of the ’80s, Reyes would rather pin his hopes for the resurgence of original sound on the now-famous persistence of the Filipino filmmaker. “We are definitely behind the industries of other countries when it comes to facilities for recording original sound, but available local equipment might prove competent enough.” Resistance Reyes foresees as dual in nature: “Industry bigwigs will of course refuse to consider costlier arrangements on the set, much less buy additional equipment. But I’m also afraid that a cult of purism has developed among filmmakers: many of them might think twice before giving up technical deftness for authenticity.”

### Within Hearing Range

Artistic issues are not the only problems confronting the Filipino film crafts-person. More immediate ones center on the need to survive. Although Reyes acknowledges that “our pay here [at LVN] is okay—we earn better compared to the average movie worker,” he is also aware that most of his colleagues “have to resort to sidelines.” Of the nearly one hundred members of the Sound Technicians Association for Motion Pictures or STAMP, only about ten are actively involved in the more lucrative phase of post-production. The two-year-old FAP guild, first headed by FAMAS multi-awardee Juanito Clemente and now by Magna Tech Omni resident soundperson Rolando

Ruta (helping out Reyes' indisposed father, who at present is recovering from a mild stroke), has been striving to finalize a standardization of rates for duly accredited members.

Compared with the experience of the other FAP guilds, STAMP could run into a lot of static owing to the crosslines involved in the allocation of a post-production budget which could reach as low as Php 20,000 out of the Php 1 million required for a passable production.<sup>10</sup> Frets Reyes, "How can you demand an increase in salary when you still have to look out for what you can get for your particular phase of production?" More often than not, a practitioner can get too grateful for a generous budget for sound engineering to be able to worry about how much will go to her as payment for her services. As can readily be gleaned from application forms for workshops and courses of the Movie Workers Welfare Fund, bright-eyed locals raring to crash into the festive world of filmmaking almost one-to-a-person rank sound supervision as their least-preferred field of specialty. "It doesn't have glamour, and it doesn't have the capacity, financial or otherwise, to compensate for the absence of glamour," Reyes says. "The age range of sound supervisors is 35 to 38 and increasing. The young ones think it's not rewarding enough as a craft while the older ones say it's not rewarding enough as a profession."

And then of course there are the several discordant influences prevailing upon filmmaking as both art and craft. Censorship at the moment has generated the loudest uproar: "Sound doesn't suffer as much from [celluloid] cuts as do the visuals, although the effect is more pronounced on music. The more important repercussion is the limitation the process imposes on post-production. The extra time the film spends with the censors should be used for necessary improvements on the finished product." As to the provision of help for candidates for legal derailment, Reyes admits that soundpersons can only supply creative detours—"the creaking of a bed or the moaning of a couple in a lovemaking scene can be toned down so as not to become too suggestive."

Other professional hazards come even from well-meaning sources, or what in a broad sense may be termed "self-styled sound critics." Reyes enumerates three examples: the clumsy synchronizing of dialogue, the re-processing of prints from positives instead of master negatives, and the

absence of standards for sound equipment in commercial theaters—all of which have detrimental effects on film sound. "When people hear out-of-sync delivery, hisses and scratches, or just plain bad playback, they tend to blame the soundperson without figuring out that the film editor is responsible for synchronization, the laboratory technician for print processing, and the theater owner for playback equipment. The solutions to these problems would require greater effort than STAMP can muster, but we can go a long way if we start with enlightened moviegoers." He tactfully avoids mentioning critics, but the implication is, or should be, deafening enough.

### Soundperson as Person

For his part, Reyes intends to persist in the pursuit of his career in the neglected dimension of film sound. Given the opportunity, he would not hesitate to work "for about three or four years in a more competitive milieu—the United States would be perfect—to acquire familiarity with advanced facilities and exchange knowledge and experience with experts." Immigration would be out of the question though. "I'd still prefer to practice here, although a generation from now, when new blood comes in, I might have to start a stable business of my own just to be able to get by." Such pessimism may not be in keeping with the promise of progress in local cinema, but for Reyes it will do. "At least by then I might be able to contribute a few things on my own terms."

The prospects would not seem too far-fetched when Reyes's status as the country's premier soundperson is taken into account. He has just finished working double-time on another ECP project called *Misteryo sa Tuwa* (dir. Abbo de la Cruz), is winding up work with Sebastian Sayson on still another ECP film called *Soltero* (dir. Pio de Castro III) as well as with Juanito Clemente on a Regal production called *Sinner or Saint* (dir. Mel Chionglo), and is set to tackle the latest Mike de Leon film, *Sister Stella L*. Believers in historical determinism might all-too-readily concede that Reyes's award-based recognition for this year will be ensured by any of the four titles mentioned.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the turnout of events, Ramon Reyes would be content with awaiting his next quality offer while earning his keep from the usual ones and relaxing with biking and ball games. "I could get by with a good massage or an out-and-out comedy movie, so long as I don't get to dwell too much on the technical side

of life.” So says one compleat professional, the ace technician in his field of endeavor, and his colleagues, competitors, and audience can dwell on the certainty that his craft, consummate as it is, will contain enough humor and humanity to go around for some time to come.

## Notes

8. By some estimates rapid population growth not only returned to the Philippines, but has exceeded the Asian region’s former topnotcher Pakistan (see *CIA World Factbook* and World Bank reports); it is outpaced by Singapore, which is also comparatively highly developed.
9. The Filipino version of the MPP’s Urian Awards criteria appears on the group’s website. The English version appears in the annual awards brochures as well as the decadal *Urian Anthology*, a selection of the output of the members.
10. Excluding inflation, Php 20,000 (during the late 2000s) would be about 500 and Php 1 million about 20,000 US dollars. These relative costs will be difficult to adjust to current rates, since the digitalization of production has restandardized film practice. Contemporary independent films, for example, are known to have cost as little as Php 2 million, while low-cost studio productions might cost at least ten times that amount.
11. As it turned out, Reyes (during my last year as a member) did compete with himself and received his latest critics’ award, his sixth, for Mike de Leon’s *Sister Stella L.*; with four more trophies afterward, he would emerge as topnotch winner (with two incredible three-year runs in 1980-82 and 1995-97). Since Luis F. Nolasco and William Smith in 1983 and 1985 respectively, however, the critics’ lifetime-achievement awards have been given to practitioners in other categories.

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## The Critic as Creator

*Completed on assignment at the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, this interview was seemingly afflicted by the several strokes of ill fortune that befell it, its production agency, and eventually the government that had set up, best intentions notwithstanding, the ECP. As Soltero was being finalized, Senator Benigno S. Aquino was murdered by still officially unknown assailants—and no amount of goodwill from this point onward could ever save the Marcos government. The ECP was dissolved and replaced by a more profit-oriented institution prior to the downfall of the regime. Pio de Castro III suffered a near-fatal stroke a few years later and died thereafter, as did Bienvenido Noriega Jr.; Jay Ilagan perished in a vehicular accident. The hotel where the bulk of the interview was conducted, Hyatt Terraces in Baguio City, collapsed in 1990, during the last major Luzon earthquake of the 20th*

century. The article itself was intended for *SineManila*, an ECP film magazine which was unceremoniously shut down by a turf-obsessed intelligence agent in the organization; it eventually came out in an older outlet of mine, the national university's student paper. As de Castro had feared, critical responses to Soltero ranged from cool to frozen; how much of this may have been due to the media's civic duty of denouncing any move (including any movie) made by the Marcos government will have to be determined more carefully, at some future time.

Anyone who wills himself success in filmmaking must at least be competent in the less compound medium of literature. Hence the several cases of serious writers on film—often lumped together under the dubious heading of “film critics”—who eventually go into film practice, and the occasional instances of film practitioners who set down their thinking on print through interviews or articles or book writing. Not surprisingly, the field is replete with some of the best minds at work in any national art scene, a veritable namedropper's delight: the French New Wave, the New American Cinema, to cite the more familiar foreign contexts hereabouts. More relevant still are the treats of Ishmael Bernal accommodating any interviewer daring enough to take him on, or Eddie Romero discoursing lucidly on the aesthetics and politics of local cinema under his own byline.

Such rare examples of talent awesome enough to cross over limitations inherent in various media make of us lesser mortals, if not trustful admirers, then suspicious watchdogs of that remote realm of genius. Any artist who distinguishes himself in a particular field cannot repeat his success elsewhere unless he were more than just another diligent craftsman: when Pauline Kael abandoned her *New Yorker* post, upon which she built a reputation as the most influential critic in America, the entire movie press called itself to attention; when her first project as script doctor, James Toback's *Love and Money* (1982), flopped both critically and financially (notwithstanding an impressive debut by its director in *Fingers* [1978], which Kael was among the few to appreciate), howls of self-righteous protest resounded beyond Hollywood. Smug silence accompanied the still-plucky Pauline's return from peril to the pages of her all-too-forgiving publication.

A similar posture prevails in the country. About the worst thing you could say of a tried-and-tested film writer who has “legitimized” his status

via membership in the local film critics' circle is that he is using the organization as a stepping-stone for breaking into the industry. All those contacts, all that goodwill, all that theoretical sharpening, where else could everything lead but toward practical application? Sooner than later another founding member of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, Pio de Castro III, will be going the same route attempted by his colleagues Behn Cervantes and Nestor U. Torre Jr.—right into the mainstream of filmmaking. As most frustrated film buffs would delight in pointing out, de Castro's predecessors—whether deservedly or not—did not meet the expectations accordant to individuals of their stature, proof of which lies in their inactivity as film directors at the moment. (Never mind that perhaps the most successful critical and commercial filmmaker in the country, Ishmael Bernal, was also a practicing critic before his entry into the industry.)

“You might consider me a bit different,” de Castro clarifies at the outset. “I was into filmmaking way before I went into film criticism. Even as a Manunuri member, I derived my subsistence primarily from commercial filmmaking. My practice of film criticism was more of an avocation, something that followed from my delight in the medium and not the other way around.” Pio de Castro III is the 40-year-old multi-awarded advertising and television director—and erstwhile Manunuri chairperson—unanimously recommended by the board of jurors of last year's scriptwriting contest of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines to direct the third-place winner, Bienvenido Noriega Jr.'s *Soltero*. The movie follows the outfit's first major (1982) successes, Ishmael Bernal's *Himala* (from the screenplay by Ricardo Lee) and Peque Gallaga's *Oro, Plata, Mata* (from the screenplay of Jose Javier Reyes).

All the awards and distinctions garnered by both only serve to complicate the prospects begin brought to bear on de Castro's *Soltero* by an audience already made vigilant with the awareness that the feature film debutant had been and can still be capable of passing reliable judgment on his colleagues-to-be. With the great probability of confronting unreasonably high criteria for critical acceptance, de Castro has decided this early upon a stance of self-effacement. “I'll be very happy just to get mixed reviews for this film,” the heavily built authoritative director and occasional character actor cool-headedly declares. “If some like it and others hate it, that would be a good

enough turnout for me.” Such modesty belies what may be the most auspicious motion picture debut since, well, *Oro, Plata, Mata* although again the absurdity of latching reputations onto first works would be validated in the cases of established artists whose subsequent outputs render even well-received first films less significant, and vice versa.

Post-production observers can attest to the project’s evolution from literary winner to cinematic aggregate, from a disjointed three-hour rough cut to (as of press time) a coherent two-hour interlock. “I wanted to pursue the ‘experimentalism’ of the project by shooting the script exactly as the writer finished it,” says de Castro. “Normally you would have the director revising a script to suit the demands of his particular sensibilities, if not discarding it altogether and retaining just the plotline and the names of the characters. With *Soltero* it was different. I had to audition for the role of director. I could have been rejected; so the way I saw it, my passing the trial for the position meant my being qualified to direct the script as written.”

De Castro certainly had credibility in so far as being a “soulmate,” a key word in the film, to the central character in *Soltero* was concerned. He married late, about five years ago, and so was a *soltero*, or bachelor, for most of his life thus far. Almost immediately upon graduation from the Ateneo de Manila University, he took up his MA in film and TV at Wayne State University as a Fulbright-Hays scholar. When he returned to the country in the early 1970s, he applied for and got into Image Film, the advertising outfit with which he is still connected. He also moved into a small apartment near his office at LVN Studios; it was here where the Manunuri used to meet until de Castro, then already married, moved to San Juan where, needless to add, the Manunuri still goes to during sessions.

## Foundations

*Soltero* the screenplay tells the story of Crispin Rodriguez, a banking executive in this late 20s, whose singular pursuit is that of love in its various forms. In three particular areas of his life—romantic, familial, and professional—he realizes his aim in varying degrees of success. The film, in contrast, focuses on the aforesaid areas according to the amount of personal commitment involved on the part of the lead character—i.e., the most on Crispin’s love life, some on his family, and a few on his officemates. The evolution of

emphases from the abstract whole of the screenplay to the more accessible simplification of the earlier mentioned interlock commenced only after it became literally evident that strict observance of the written work would have necessitated a final cut which exceeded three hours in length. “It would have been nice to see what the three-hour-plus finished product would be like,” says scriptwriter Noriega, “but we won’t be able to sell it. Having two versions of the same film—a long one and a short one—would also be financially inadvisable because of the expense involved.”

De Castro and Noriega, in apparent disregard of the traditionally individualistic processes acknowledged in undertakings of “high” art, conferred with expert acquaintances and arrived at the hierarchy of emphases essential to delimiting the running time of the final version. As it is, however, the film’s present form will be undergoing a few more reconsiderations induced by its problematic transition from script to screen. A rich exposition, for example, appears to raise some issues which are not all pursued, while a few resolutions ask to be expounded on beforehand. “I’m amazed,” says de Castro in a more typically candid mood, “that a lot of people have been passing judgment on the project as if it were already finished. So many things can still be accomplished in the course of post-production.”

He may be merely reacting to a manifestation of the high expectations he had already anticipated. Those fortunate enough to have attended screenings of both rough cut and interlock, for example, will marvel over the remarkable job of restructuring accomplished in the present form, in which shots and sometimes entire scenes intended for mutually exclusive purposes were transposed to other sequences without any noticeable diminution of credulity. Given such expertise, the tendency of insiders to extrapolate their expectations could very well soar out of control. The notion that this course need not apply to established directors who have consistently maintained a level of mediocrity would be patently unfair, but de Castro is not one to take the whole thing seriously. As he announced during audition sessions for the movie, “I just want to do a successful commercial exercise—a ‘bold’ tearjerker!”

As a result of what may be considered the streamlining of the screenplay, lead character Crispin Rodriguez’s story has been constructed to begin with the end of a romantic relationship and end with the end of another



one. The multi-leveled treatment carried over from the original screenplay allows for a meaningful overlap of the two women's stories, not to mention the several ingressions into the affairs of Crispin's family and officemates, which serve as commentaries on the lead character's condition. A series of events arranged chronologically provides a throwback to the narrative requisites of commercial cinema, but the overall emotional wallop is more exhaustive without being as blatant as the commonly encountered cases of box-office melodrama, primarily because of the high degree of intellectual involvement demanded by the unconventional storytelling mode.

Yet preview audiences agreed that the product so far has demonstrated more commercial potential than could be expected from a prototype of the existentialist art film, purveyed most capably by contemporary German filmmakers. For with perhaps an eye out for the genre's absence of appeal among Filipinos (witness, if you can, the local availability of Ingmar Bergman releases), de Castro seems to have surmounted its individualistic nature by infusing it with a more popular, and therefore mass, accessibility. Or has he? Experts at home in the territory of personal cinema constantly allude to the humor, the ease with which the best samples are executed; after all, ethereality, when it becomes more than just the subject of the work itself, can never be mistaken for its antithesis, ponderosity. In this respect, the director of *Soltero* can be said to have hit the right formula in his approach to the work—that is, to regard leaden material with the levity of familiarity. But then again, would that be a fair remark to make about a presumably perspicacious artist?

Extra-creative factors will determine the permanence of *Soltero's* contribution to local filmic history, but at this time at least one declaration can confidently be made: the movie succeeds on its own terms not because of its commercial concessions or its generic faithfulness, but because of its conscious verisimilitude to a heretofore unexplored aspect of Philippine social reality, an achievement which draws a historical affinity through Crispin Rodriguez from other characters of contemporary cinema grappling with the entanglements of their respective social fabrics—e.g., the Kulas of Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (1976), the Miguelito Lorenzo of *Oro, Plata, Mata* (1982), even the Julio Madiaga and the Poldo Miranda of Lino Brocka's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975) and

*Jaguar* (1979) respectively. The fundamental difference, however, between Crispin Rodriguez and the other names mentioned is that the *Soltero* character achieves historical significance paradoxically by his distance from the historical vortex. Whereas the other characters get caught up, whether or not against their will, in the velocity of their respective social eras (and thereby become signposts of some sort for scholars of local culture), Crispin Rodriguez could never attain fulfillment as a realist character except through the mutual exclusion between himself and his particular reality—which, because of its alienating affects, can never be disclosed in any other way.

He may be loath to consider the comparison, but de Castro bears such a visionary resemblance to Crispin Rodriguez. His wife, the former Joy Soler, describes him as “a very quiet, contemplative, into-Zen person. I've never seen anyone so placid. It takes a large amount of negative stimulation to get him angry at something.” The de Castros first met while they were both performing for the Philippine Educational Theater Association during the early '70s. “He was visiting [founding chair] Cecile Garrucho then,” Joy recalls, “when he got persuaded to act for PETA. In one summer he did Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechuan*, the passion play *Kalbaryo* where he played Jesus Christ, and an Off-Broadway production, [Gretchen Cryer & Nancy Ford's] *The Last Sweet Days of Isaac*.” De Castro's acting career shifted media when Lino Brocka cast him as the ambitious worker Imo in *Maynila*, where he garnered critical notices for his sharply drawn portrayal of a single-minded proletarian who leaves his hopeless existence behind for the higher living of a white-collar employee, effectively a proto-yuppie. His last screen appearance was in Romy Suzara's *Mga Uod at Rosas* (1982), in which he appeared as a commercial artist who again leaves behind a starvation lifestyle, this time as a serious painter, for the more lucrative lure of advertising.

### Resemblances

Again the parallelisms prove too tempting to resist. “The guy's determination is fantastic,” avers Joy. “During film festivals where he decided to participate, for example, he could watch movies round-the-clock, sleeping less to watch more, and still retain what he saw for critical discussions”—reference here being made especially to de Castro's involvement in both editions of the

Manila International Film Festival, the second of which he participated in as chair of the committee in charge of a well-received comprehensive retrospective of Filipino films. Unlike his filmic portrayals, however, de Castro does not believe in brandishing his curriculum vitae so readily. “He takes care to keep most of his achievements discreet,” says Joy, without any hint of disappointment whatsoever. “Whenever he gets wind of a big break coming his way, he never tells me unless it’s been formalized. As a person close to him, I have the impression that his expectations are in inverse proportion to his efforts.”

Casual observers can easily corroborate the couple’s selfless dynamicism. Their residence is inadvertently referred to as the Manunuri headquarters even by the members themselves; for most of the group’s profitless subsistence, the de Castros “subsidized” meetings by preparing hearty meals (then as now the main incentive for attendance) for an inadequate token among the members present. Joy maintains that “there was no prior agreement between Pio and myself to support the group as well as we could. The Manunuris are the sort of people I don’t need in my career, but that’s precisely why I enjoy their company so much: they provide a welcome respite, these artistically inclined individuals who are honest and humane for a change. Also I make a deliberate effort to link up with Pio’s concerns, and serving the group is one of the most gratifying ways I know.”

“I learned a few things while doing *Soltero*,” says de Castro in Baguio, after a day of shooting some pivotal sequences, accommodating an unexpected TV interview in between, taking the ECP public relations staff to a few interesting locations (including a general hospital for the treatment of a member’s eye infection), and staying up past midnight to answer some off-the-record questions while preparing to leave for Manila by early morning. “No, actually I learned a lot. What we see on the screen in the movie theater, the things we can criticize so easily after a short period of practice—those weren’t created with as much facility. I believe in film criticism, I believe there’s a place for it not only within the interests of the general public but those of the industry itself; I have always been into filmmaking, but working for the first time inside the industry has given me a different perspective. Whereas before I could assent to some sympathy for local artists, today I might even become vehement about it. I have this newly emerging conviction that if only to help

them appreciate first-hand the plight of local filmmakers, all the film critics around us should be given the opportunity to direct.”

De Castro did not exactly push himself forward in a director’s direction, if one were to judge by the number of breaks he broke. One of the more recent ones went to an established director and was shown last year to a good box-office crowd which seemed to have excluded serious film observers, while another has been on hold ever since the local censors demanded a certification from the material’s writer, who has been dead long enough for his works to be made required reading even in institutions where they were previously banned. “I was always on the fringes of the industry, more as a filmmaker than as a critic. In a sense I still am, because of the nature of ECP. I tried my hand in advertising first and TV next, to be able to gauge my capability for film direction. With advertising, I thought that if I could make a minute or less worthy of my client’s money, then maybe I could use longer time to greater advantage; with TV it was more of an experiment: I did a limited series film-style, with more complicated setups, matching shots, and so on. When people said I did well, I felt more confident.”

A host of awards of merit and excellence from local and international advertising congresses, plus positive reviews and a Catholic Mass Media Award for the TV series *Pira-Pirasong Pangarap*<sup>12</sup> all serve to back up the assurance—of production experts if not de Castro himself. “I’m glad I had the opportunity to work with ECP; it’s the only outfit which could have produced a project like *Soltero*—an unconventional movie without traditional exposition, obvious conflicts, surface climax. I was also given leeway in the casting, except for Jay Ilagan, for whom the screenplay was written and who was specified from the start. I chose the performers solely on the basis of their individual proficiencies.” The actors referred to can likewise enjoy the privilege of a certain amount of prejudgment. “If anyone asks me how any of the actors performed according to expectations,” says de Castro, “I would say simply that the very fact that they were cast implies that expectations were already met.” Jay Ilagan, who delineates the character of Crispin Rodriguez, may at this point in his life claim to have enacted the role of his career,<sup>13</sup> just as Vic Silayan did in Mike de Leon’s *Kisapmata* (1982) where Ilagan won his only other acting awards (Metro Manila Film Festival and the Manunuri’s Urian as supporting actor), a year

after his MMFF trophy, also for supporting actor, for Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Brutal* (1980).

Based on the controversies (or absence thereof) attendant to the production of *Soltero*, de Castro can assert that the project thus far seems to have acquired the approval of ECP observers. Previous ECP films always elicited adverse reactions regarding budgeting, with *Soltero* so far the only exception, notwithstanding last year's economic inflation. "In fairness to finance experts connected with the project," adds de Castro, "when they saw the results they understood why a few seconds' take could cost so much and take so long to set up." In contrast with its spectacle-scale ECP precedents, *Soltero* may yet chart a new and more affordable course for future productions—both within ECP and, more important, an industry whose audience has been estranged from essential intimacy in cinema ... that is, if and when *Soltero* achieves its expected impact upon film experts and unexpected acceptance among moviegoers.

The movie's director would rather not be too optimistic about either. "The movie has its moments, to say the least. I don't want to be disappointed by the way it turns out, artistically and financially." A performance by the film on both levels as modest as its filmmaker would suffice for the purposes of the film lover who only wanted to do good. The future can be just as modest: "I want to do a gangster film," for a change of pace. I want to let out all the fury and excitement which I had to keep under control in *Soltero*." A slight pause, then "I just hope I did well enough to deserve to make another movie."<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

12. A moderately successful early 1980s program, rather than the '90s series with the same title.
13. After a recent re-viewing of Ishmael Bernal's *Salawahan* (1979), I realized that this was Jay Ilagan's indisputable peak as actor. For some reason, all his performances seemed to decrease in effectivity the further we get from this point.
14. As it turned out, Pio de Castro III and Bienvenido Noriega Jr. managed to make one more movie each after *Soltero*; a renowned and much-awarded playwright, Noriega in fact had died before one of his plays was adapted for the screen.

## Critic in Academe

*The following comprises the original introduction (circa 1990) of this Q&A exchange:*

*When Bienvenido Lumbera's candidacy for the directorship of the University of the Philippines Film Center was announced, he reacted with typical modesty; at least, he told himself, this could be another opportunity for him to carry out some of his proposals for film study and research in the Philippines.<sup>15</sup>*

*Such self-diminution contradistinguished a critic and scholar whose reputation in certain sober circles in academe and the film industry is almost legendary; this, plus his clarity of purpose, clinched for him the highly visible and passionately contested UPFC post. A professor at the Filipino department of the UP College of Arts and Letters, Lumbera, who holds an MA and a PhD in comparative literature from Indiana University, headed the English and Philippine Studies departments of the Ateneo de Manila University until his stint in prison as a Marcos-era political detainee. He has authored three books on Philippine culture,<sup>16</sup> all winners of National Book Awards, and holds a number of distinctions for his other creative and critical output. Now pushing 60, Bien, as he is fondly called, is regarded as the pioneer in modern criticism in Philippine literature, theater, and popular culture in general, but most especially in film.*

*This interview was originally conducted in two Taglish sessions at his poster-wallpapered UP Faculty Center cubicle, between breaks from his hectic schedule as teacher, center director, occasional lecturer, and creative writer-cum-cultural consultant. Lost in the transcription are the subject's avuncularity and clearheaded delivery, although an infectious (and youthful) enthusiasm for topics dealing with culture and criticism, booby-trapped with an ironic sense of humor, can still be detected.*

*Bien is married to the former Cynthia Nograles, with whom he has three daughters.*

### **In your early years, it seems you were also doing critiques in other areas aside from film.**

I actually started as a student of literature. Then, because of my involvement in the nationalist movement, I slowly realized that many Filipinos are more influenced by cultural forms that cannot be classified as literature—such as *komiks*, television, and film.

**The fact that you have recognized the reality of change—does this mean that you had to adjust your original perceptions as well?**

The first time I wrote about film—this was in the early 1960s—I attempted to explain why Filipino films could not be as good as foreign films. Initially I thought that was what was originally described in the circles in which I moved as catering to the taste of the uneducated masses. Like, for example, I would look for what I called the logic of irony. There were only one or two films out of maybe about eight or ten that talked about which I thought answered my demands—*Kadenang Putik* (1960, dir. Cesar Gallardo) and, I think, *Huwag Mo Akong Limutin* (1960, dir. Gerardo de Leon). Later I realized, if my criteria could allow only a few films to be considered valid for discussion, there must be something askew. Fortunately, by now I think I’ve gotten over this.

**Are there certain other things that you wanted then that have been realized today?**

I think now we see the application of theory, largely drawn from Western theory, in the films that are shown. When some people view films, they go beyond regarding these as mere entertainment. Films now are being studied for how they reflect culture and society, whether consciously or directly or not.

**What would be some other things that disappoint you at present?**

One of the things that I hoped would happen would be for more Filipino movies to be of the same weight and quality as those that were produced in 1976. My expectation was that after all, since the industry had been able to produce these films before, perhaps in the coming years more would come out—no longer exclusively for elite viewers or with overt artistic intentions, but with technical polish, thematic sophistication, or subtleties of performance whether in writing, direction, or acting as part of local industry ethics. I think the crucial context here is the system that prevailed during the 1950s: filmmakers were each committed to working for a single studio, so even if their projects were not all highly intelligent or aesthetic, they’d still have the chance to do different types of films in one year.

**But there also seems to be a form of studio domination today.**

Seiko, Viva, Regal have what they call a stable of directors and actors, but when it comes to giving out assignments, it’s like: “We’ve finally contracted Phillip [Salvador] and we have to do a movie, but what’s hot nowadays? Action? Then let’s make an action star out of Phillip.” No longer do people consider where an actor or actress or director excels, unlike before, when there was more latitude [for one’s capabilities].

Now I’m not saying that Doña Sisang [LVN’s Narcisa de Leon], Doc Perez [Sampaguita’s Jose Perez], [or] Doña Adela [Premiere’s Adela Santiago] was interested only in art, but perhaps during the 1950s businessmen had more confidence in the industry: “If our movie flops, that’s all right. We have a big production scheduled next that will surely draw in the crowds.” Such a procedure essentially is a rational kind of capitalist thinking. I believe at present what we have is a highly manipulative system, essentially exploitative in its use of filmmaking talent, and I’m tempted to call it unprincipled in handing out assignments.

**Do you think then we should make moves to initiate a return to the old ways?**

No, I do not envision a return to the studio system in the 1950s. Even in the States that arrangement is gone for good; but when that happened, the so-called independent filmmakers were able to do films which had earlier been difficult to produce because of commercial dictates, and standards of technical excellence were carried over. In our case, the independents did not have sufficient equipment to go around, so whoever had larger capital could rent the better machines and facilities, and those who could cut costs did so. Gone are the productions that could instill pride in the industry. For example, if we mention [Regal’s] Mother Lily’s production of *Sister Stella L.* (1984, dir. Mike de Leon), I’m sure what she remembers is the big financial loss incurred by that movie, and whatever else it achieved, she’s determined not to make that kind of project again. That kind of perspective can’t be helped among those who invest their money, but neither does it contribute to enthusiasm and experimentation and pride in what our filmmakers do.

**But isn't there a continuity between the system at present and the one that came out with so many quality products during the '70s?**

The '70s provided a conjuncture of several factors. The censors demanded to see a complete script before they could give a permit for shooting, so they could scrutinize film projects as early as the pre-production stage. Studios turned to journalist and creative writers in order to be able to impress the censors. Young filmmakers and writers saw here an opportunity to break into the industry and inject some seriousness in terms of content. Then: "Too bad, these movies don't make money"—so producers backtracked.

But from that point on, the writers and directors who were able to get in already had a foothold. They're still disadvantaged at present by the fact that the producers have become safe players. Plus, taxes, both national and local, have increased considerably. This is why producers always aim at having megahits, since only then can they hope to profit from film production. No longer do we have modest pictures that are not going to realize a lot of income but won't flop entirely either.

**Other industry people say that this decline in the profitability of film is just part of an international trend—what is known as the video revolution.**

I think that's definitely true in First-World countries. Few Japanese now watch their own films because most of their stars appear on TV shows. In our case, TV probably doesn't have the same reach as the movies. Those away from city centers, who'd commute to the province during weekends and watch a movie before leaving—I'm sure they constitute a large number of moviegoers in this country.

**So is it in this context—of hopefulness because the masses still patronize our own films, and on the other hand the desperation of the industry in surviving—that you expect academe to step in make changes?**

Academe cannot intervene actively and has no power to compel capitalists to make better movies. All that can be done—on this, I can speak with some degree of certainty—is for the industry to be taken seriously, its products evaluated regardless of aesthetic quality, and a report given of what these products tell us about Philippine society.

**Wouldn't you say there has been a trend, at least in politics, to link up with academic institutions—something that the industry tolerates inasmuch as this doesn't have anything to do with business anyway?**

The government doesn't really have any profound understanding of the workings and implications of moviemaking. They get bothered by films that they think will disturb people, like *Orapronobis* (1989, dir. Lino Brocka) and, in the past, *Batch '81* (1982, dir. Mike de Leon) and *City After Dark* (a.k.a. *Manila by Night*; 1980, dir. Ishmael Bernal), but these are isolated cases. In their consciousness films are produced so that capitalists can make a killing, and so the government should be in on the profits. Those are the simple facts of thinking among bureaucrats about the industry.

**The creativity of our filmmakers during the Marcos regime contrasts with those in other countries who benefited more from political freedom; would you say that this indicates a peculiarity in the Filipino psychology?**

I think what happened here was not just a matter of individual initiatives on the part of filmmakers. The artist's discontent, if not assisted by others from outside his circles, becomes a private protest, since she tends more to reflect upon herself than to go out and join groups. I guess that's what happened in the case of Mike de Leon's films: Mike is a very private person, as can be attested to by those who observe the local film scene. But his outputs leave no doubt that he has some political consciousness operating, and I would attribute that simply to the fact he knew that—it sounds corny, but—*hindi siya nag-iisa* [he wasn't alone], others were protesting and organizing. Assuming a situation where there is no movement, Mike de Leon might just stay put; I doubt if he would have the inclination to put into film his discontent with the situation.

**How would you compare the present crop of filmmakers with the previous one?**

With Ishmael Bernal, Lino Brocka, and Eddie Romero then, you could separate their narrative since their films purposefully set out to tell a story. But if we consider Peque Gallaga, Laurice Guillen, Marilou Diaz-Abaya—offhand, I notice, they give emphasis to specific qualities of film.

You don't remember them for the materials that they handle, but for what they did to the medium, like Laurice's attempt at trying to tell different versions [of the same incident] in *Salome* (1981). Even in [Guillen's first film] *Kasal* (1980) there was that kind of exploration of levels of reality and motivations of characters. It seems like their group prescinded from the overtly philosophical, political telling of material; what becomes immediately obvious is the attention they lavish on details that one finds in reality. It's not so much the material anymore but the approach to reality that matters.

**Would you say this has had an effect on film practice?**

I would say it is an advancement. They must have seen what Lino and Ishmael had accomplished in the past, so they try to go beyond. It is hoped that there would be an integration of the kind of film work done by the earlier masters in the direction of a more complex use of narrative, if possible, in the future. But more and more, I think the old approach to seriousness in film practice, where the artist does a narrative that has a line that can be easily plotted out, is becoming a thing of the past.

**What was the role of film critics in this kind of progression?**

Nothing, because you see critics—

**—were ignored by the artist?**

Yes. And besides, strictly speaking, we cannot talk about intensive critical activity in the local film world since outlets are not available, and critics do not work full time, they dabble only when the occasion arises. That is something that will have to be worked out, possibly in academe: to create activity more productive of critiques and reviews.

**Would it be possible to say that Filipino film artists have assumed the functions that should have been performed for them by critics, in terms of evaluating their own work and integrating the lessons in their succeeding output?**

Actually, artists are the ones who set the direction for what they want to be doing—assuming that they live in a society which provides them with a

sense of history. But the act of taking the cue from critics—I don't think that has ever happened here.

**I remember, in the Manunuri, the time when we had some feedback from the industry saying that the only reason why some of us were into criticism was because we wanted to break eventually into the industry.**

I don't think that's something that should be begrudged any film critic. I suspect that that was engineered by publicists who had taken advantage of their position in order to advance themselves in the industry. One reason why a person goes into analysis of film is that she's interested in whatever it is that makes a good film. I think the real outrage is that some people go into criticism so that producers will take notice, then they'd say bad things about certain movies so that the producers will mollify them.

**Would you say that the ideal balance between theory and practice was the same reason why you maintained some creative output—doing translations and librettos, writing for the stage, and performing occasionally?**

In my case, I never made a strict separation between the creative part of me and the analytic part. My writing for the theater derives from an original urge to do creative writing when I was in college and immediately after. Then I got into teaching, so I began to do more criticism, more history. But essentially, I guess I saw myself as a creative artist.

**Some practitioners, I heard, were also into criticism before they went into active industry work.**

Ishmael [Bernal] wrote some articles on film, now I remember, for the magazine *Balthazar*.

**What would be the qualities of a good film critic?**

She likes movies; she would have seen a lot of films, not only local but also foreign ones. She has a good eye—meaning if she sees something on the screen, she's capable of recalling the details and immediately relating the elements of a particular image. And also, of course, she knows how to write:

her command of style should enable her to communicate her insights. Very important, in my view, is her respect for her intended audience. Once a critic assumes that only she knows whereof she speaks and the audience should be content with whatever her pronouncements are, she'll make an offensive impression on the reader.

**Mel Chionglo once told me that a liberal arts preparation is crucial to a filmic sensibility.**

Yes, I think it's very important that the writer can fall back on a fund of insights and information from previous exposure to the arts. Because if all one can rely on is one's personal prejudices, the narrow concept of art that can be derived from reading some books, one can't provide any substantial commentary for even the worst kind of products.

One time when I was speaking at the Cultural Center of the Philippines about theater, I said—I gave a number of dos and don'ts—that the writer must not be imprisoned by cuteness or *katarayan* [snark]. I think that's a very strong tendency when one is beginning to write, when you fall in love with a manner, an expression, a point that you want to make, and you put that across and sacrifice the object you're talking about. I went through that experience when I was younger. *Time* magazine in the 1950s had very elegant stylists, so their reviews were always quotable, memorable.

**How much further does local criticism have to go before it can assume a significant role in the filmmaking industry?**

It's not so much criticism that has to change but media which has to be more receptive to serious comment on film—meaning to say, not just anyone can be made to become a film reviewer, and the publications themselves have to be prepared to print serious articles that might offend the [advertising] producer. Then there also has to be an adjustment in the economic structure to enable people to become professional critics—like, you're a newsperson whose beat is the movies, and your reviews are now considered the result of the discharging of your responsibilities. That will not come to be until the country has achieved a certain degree of prosperity, when movie writers won't need to do press releases or hack-write for actors in order to make a decent living.

**You're implying that theorizing in film will also have to wait, since the practice of film criticism will take some time before it can flourish.**

Not wait in the sense of postponing theoretical or critical activity, but accepting that no reasonable compensation can be offered at the moment. You can't expect to survive on criticism, that the industry will appreciate and accommodate your actuations, and that the rest of society will support what you're trying to accomplish.

**Isn't your scenario rather grim?**

[Smilingly.] Really, there's no other word for it. It's a grim world that the Filipino critic lives in. So the fewer illusions she has about the viability of her profession, the better for her.

**Do you think we'll be able to realize a theory on film that we can call our own?**

Well, not in my lifetime, because I only have a few more years to live. Right now we have not yet come up with a definitive film history, and you need history in order to be able to propose or suggest a theory of film. The fact that LVN could show a lot of its old films, and Sampaguita also has some of its own left—these are good signs, these are the texts that students will study. From such a study maybe the beginnings of a theory can be proposed; there's no other substitute for this procedure. When I saw some films in the 1950s and even earlier in the late '40s, I was watching not as a critic or even as a student of film, I was just an ordinary fan who followed the films of certain actors and actresses whom I liked. When I look back, I simply think of one as a movie in which Oscar Moreno appeared, another in which Paraluman played this kind of role. It was not until the 1970s that I began to think of film as a field of study. For instance, I once saw something by Gerry de Leon, *Isumpa Mo, Giliw* (1947). Among the movies of the past that I vividly recall, that was it—[it featured] Elsa Oria, Angel Esmeralda, Fely Vallejo. I found it very moving. But I remember only certain moments and highlights, so I cannot discuss the totality of that film as a work of art. That's a problem with film, it's such an ephemeral experience, and once the text is lost, it's difficult to reconstruct.

## Note

15. A few years after this interview's publication, Bienvenido Lumbera won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts. More recently, he was proclaimed National Artist for Literature, a category that included literary criticism. Regarding his University of the Philippines Film Center directorship: confronted with the claim of the UP College of Mass Communication that the UPFC should serve as support agency of the CMC's film program (following the national university's call to eliminate institutions that duplicated the functions of existing educational programs), Lumbera took the UPFC position that the CMC had no ability, and therefore no right, to administer a film program. As the next Director of the UPFC after Lumbera, I coordinated with CMC and higher UP officials to enforce the rule. The merger of the UPFC with the CMC's Department of Film was formalized by setting up a new institution, the UP Film Institute.
16. As of the 1990 publication of the interview, these were: *Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema, and Popular Culture* ([Manila]: Index, 1984), *Tagalog Poetry 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences in Its Development* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1986); and *Abot-Tanaw: Sulyap at Suri ng Nagbabagong Kultura at Lipunan* (Quezon City: Linangan ng Kamalayang Makabansa, 1987). Since then, Lumbera has published several volumes and edited a few more, including a revision titled *Revaluation 1997* (Manila: University of Sto. Tomas Publishing House, 1997) and two books on film: *Pelikula: An Essay on Philippine Film* ([Manila]: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989) and *Re-Viewing Filipino Cinema* (Pasig City: Anvil, 2011).

## Commentaries

*These articles' functions eventually evolved from interpretive reports to intensive commentaries, the more I became familiar with industry issues and dynamics. Their topicality of course became their problem: unlike reviews, which serve to historicize specific film releases (many of which have been or will be disappearing), these aimed to intervene in a usually fluid historical moment that sometimes later overturned or rendered irrelevant the points I raised. Also, by their generalist nature, several of these served as springboards—informal frameworks—for more in-depth studies I conducted afterward. Occasionally I would keep pursuing the same topic, revising and expanding as I went along; in the instance of film censorship, I wound up with a few articles that I managed to anthologize in my books and therefore dispensed with the earlier, less-developed discourses. Finally, in my capacity as media practitioner (in magazine offices, and especially at the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines) and in the interest of popularizing my findings, I had assumed that the data at our fingertips would be properly archived and wouldn't need to be cited; that, as it turned out, was one of the worst oversights I committed during the pre-internet era.*



## Cinemasex

The recent leniency of the censors board concerning the approval of nonconventional movie material should be regarded with sobriety instead of enthusiasm. For if past patterns of censorship are to be taken into account, a clampdown on sex and violence in local cinema should have been imminent by now. The current countercheck against excessive censorship is provided by the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, whose libertarian accomplishments may yet give way to more commercially oriented activities.

The depiction of human sexuality in Philippine cinema, typical of Catholicized culture, has been given shorter shrift than that of violence, notwithstanding the commonsensical notion that the former would normally be preferable to the latter. A decade-long study by American government commissions, in fact, confirmed the harmful effects of violence, as opposed to the harmlessness of sex, in media. The suppression of sexual themes in local cinema has led to the occasional proliferation of musical and/or comic romances, in which the socially dictated pattern of love, courtship, and marriage is observed. The first feature-length “pure” Filipino film, Jose Nepomuceno’s *Ang Dalagang Bukid* (1919) and the first local production to incorporate sound, Vicente Salumbides’s *Collegian Love* (1930), although both lost to posterity, can be speculated as conforming to the same romantic mode.

Musical and/or comic romances, however, cannot completely compensate for the ignorance of sexual issues imposed by predominantly conservative institutions on the Filipino public, due to the genre’s tendency to trivialize personal and social responsibilities. In lieu of the inadequacy of musical and/or comic romances to convey substantial lessons in human sexuality, Filipino filmmakers have managed to provide insights into sexual problems during libertarian spells in censorship. Even more impressive are the accomplishments of at least two local artists in the face of prevailing reaction.

### The Legacy of “Manong”

Sexual themes in Philippine cinema were first explored by the late Gerardo de Leon, who may yet be rightfully regarded as the greatest of Filipino film stylists. Considering the conservative bent of postwar Philippine society, de

Leon certainly had a rough go of it. First he started with socially justifiable issues of sexual exploitation, succeeding in 1951 with *Sisa*. Then he employed double-entendre in apparently less serious undertakings like *Dyesebel*, in which the siren’s rival asks the male lead to consider what she, the rival, could offer which the siren could not. Typical of the establishment’s inability to accommodate de Leon’s daring was the reaction to his barrier-breaking 1960 film *Huwag Mo Akong Limutin*. A woman censor complained that “all of the crimes in the book and the various forms of immorality have been centered in this one picture.”

The film was banned by the board of censors for its frank confrontation of sexual taboos like adultery and abortion, but was eventually passed on the basis of a political compromise: then President Garcia, to whom the movie’s producers elevated the censorship issue, had to reassure the industry for his recent ban on films from Communist countries. Although the movie eventually won the industry award as its year’s best picture, certain significant portions, including a merely attempted abortion scene, did not survive the censors.<sup>17</sup> (In contrast, Lino Brocka’s 1974 critical and commercial hit *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* began with a prolonged and graphic depiction of a forced abortion, thus driving home the same point that de Leon indicated he had wanted for *Huwag Mo Akong Limutin*—the abject nature of nonprofessional instances of the practice.)

Largely due to de Leon’s singular achievement, local cinema can be considered to have been liberated, if only on the thematic level, from the tradition of desisting from the discussion of sexual taboos. The past decade alone saw several serious, if not entirely successful, treatments of sexual issues in contemporary Philippine society. The following list of films according to alphabetically arranged sexual issues, followed in parentheses by their respective directors, would comprise the best among the most recent (and accessible) ones. Although intensely psychosexual issues like bestiality or necrophilia still have to be tackled, one can readily see that, circa the early 1980s, the field has been well-represented:

- **Adultery.** The sixth commandment cuts through all social classes, and is thus accordingly approached in local cinema. Rusticity defines Romy Suzara’s *Laruang Apoy* (1977), while urban squalor does the same for Brocka’s *Ina Ka ng Anak Mo* (1979). An insightful and witty

approach is provided by Eddie Romero's *Sino'ng Kapiling, Sino'ng Kasiping?* (1977), while an emotional one can be found in Maryo J. de los Reyes's *Gabun: Ama Mo, Ama Ko* (1979)—both dealing with the middle classes. Danny L. Zialcita's *Ikaw at ang Gabi* (1979) is an atmospheric study of loneliness among the so-called beautiful people.

- **Extra- or premarital affairs.** This pastime can understandably be indulged in only by those with plenty of leisure time, beginning with the upper middle class (with Baguio as backdrop) in Mike de Leon's *Kung Mangarap Ka't Magising* (1977). The working-class girl figures as an object between two well-off brothers in *Isang Gabi sa Iyo, Isang Gabi sa Akin* (1978) and the middle-class mistress pays her dues in *Relasyon* (1982), while the male dilemma is adequately handled in *Ikaw Ay Akin* (1978)—all by Ishmael Bernal.
- **Homosexuality.** The best films on the subject are by Lino Brocka: the tragedy of concealment in *Tubog sa Ginto* (1970), the inadequacy in the fulfillment of sexual roles in *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay* (1977), the ostracism of the otherwise gifted gay man in *Palipat-Lipat, Papalit-Palit* (1982).
- **Incest.** Celso Ad Castillo's *Tag-ulan sa Tag-araw* (1975) is an exhaustive inquiry into the romantic relationship between two cousins, but the definitive treatment, complete with political overtones, would be Mike de Leon's *Kisapmata* (1981).
- **Lust.** Castillo's *Ang Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa* (1974) is a semi-successful allegory, Bernal's *Nunal sa Tubig* (1976) attempts at philosophical significance, and *Init* (1979) and *Insang* (1976), both by Lino Brocka, concern the present and proletarian classes respectively.
- **Machismo.** A critical view of the Filipino male's many insecurities is held by Brocka's *Caught in the Act* (1981).
- **Nymphomania.** Castillo's *Nympha* (1971) regards with sympathy the plight of the sexually driven woman, while Laurice Guillen's *Salome* (1981) examines the social consequences of her actuations.
- **Prostitution.** Illegal recruitment is the villain in Gil Portes's *Miss X* (1980), economic deprivation in Mel Chionglo's *Playgirl* (1981). The issue is tackled on several levels in Bernal's *Aliw* (1979).

- **Rape.** Again Lino Brocka predominates with the reality-based *Rubia Servios* (1978) and the fantasy-fulfilling *Angela Markado* (1980).
- **Sexual exploitation.** The woman as an unwilling sex object can be found in Castillo's *Burlesk Queen* (1977) and Brocka's *Bona* (1980). The women in *Mister Mo, Lover Boy Ko* (1975) and *Lagi na Lamang Ba Akong Babae?* (1978), both by Ishmael Bernal, as well as in Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Brutal* (1980), develop an understanding of and consequent adjustment to their roles as sex objects. Those in Bernal's *Pagdating sa Dulo* (1971) and Brocka's *Kontrobersyal* (1981) attain the level of self-exploitation in the conducive world of show business, while those in Danilo Cabreira's *Mga Tinik ng Babae* (1978) arrive at some form of collective desperation. The male syndrome, on the other hand, is explored psychologically in Mario O'Hara's *Mortal* (1976) and socioeconomically in Christian Espiritu's *Alaga* (1980).
- **White slavery.** Brocka's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975) deals effectively with this contemporary phenomenon.

### Another Milestone

At the top of this already formidable list would belong Bernal's 1980 masterwork *City after Dark*—a hard, innovative, and ultimately affecting study of perversion and brutality in the big city. As in the case of *Huwag Mo Akong Limutin*, *City after Dark* was initially banned by the censors and passed months later, only after sustained media furor, with what must be the longest censors permit ever (four pages of specific cuts and deletions). The mangled version, however, still retained enough of its original merits to win the local film critics' award for best picture.

*City after Dark* (originally titled *Manila by Night*) delineates the turbulent state of affairs revolving around, among others, two sexual outlaws—a lesbian drug pusher and a gay couturier. The pusher pimps her girlfriend, a blind sauna masseuse, to the couturier's drug-addicted lover. Meanwhile the couturier's real steady, a cab driver, impregnates a naïve waitress who, to be able to afford an abortion, agrees to a persistent pimp's offer of prostitution to Japanese tourists. Here the waitress learns of the taxi driver's live-in mistress, a professional prostitute in nurse's disguise. The masseuse, for her part, resists an attempt by her boyfriend, a victim of illegal recruitment, to

perform with him at live-sex shows; eventually she betrays her girlfriend the pusher to narcotics agents. The drug addict loses his “liberated” girlfriend, and himself gets lost in Manila as his mother, a former prostitute who married a police officer, watches helplessly and herself becomes addicted to her painkillers.

The original version featured a staggering array of locales, including a sauna cubicle, a brothel, a gay bar and rundown morgue, and had advanced state-of-the-language lines of dialogue, whose obscenities and political references were either cut or deleted. A case is currently growing for the movie as one of the best, if not actually the best, Filipino films ever made—one that will assure the country of lasting recognition in world cinema; meanwhile the assent of culture officials on the foreign exhibition of *City after Dark*, like the acceptance of the public-at large of the value of local sex films, still has to be ascertained.

### Note

17. Jose F. Sibal, the movie’s scriptwriter, prior to migrating to the US, provided me with a copy of the script he wrote for the film—which by then (the late 1980s) was declared missing. In the plot, a young couple seek the service of an illegal abortionist but back out from guilt at the last minute.

## Big Hopes for Short Films

The history of filmmaking in the Philippines, as in anywhere else in the world, begins with short filmmaking. Considering that the first film cameras in the country arrived in 1897, local film historians can easily presume that the earliest footage in the Philippines goes as far back as that same year; in fact the earliest extant footage, a copy of which is currently in the custody of the film archives of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, was made the year after by Spanish Lumière camera operator Antonio Ramos, who called it *Escenas Callejeras* (Street Scenes), reproduced from the paper print collection of the US Library of Congress. Up until the advent of the studio system in the early 1900s, historians have been able to document several

other short films and a few features films made in the Philippines mostly by foreigners. At about this time filmmaking in the Philippines began to demonstrate the distinctions, which persist up to the present, that allow for a categorization of filmic activity between feature filmmaking and short (actually intended for specialized audiences) filmmaking.

Refinements in the definition of the medium, however, remain unresolved in so far as practicable applications are concerned. In this regard the first ECP Annual Short Film Festival can be considered the first step toward activating short filmmaking on the level of a legitimate national industry, instead of merely serving as an adjunct to commercial film production, the activity against which it is at present defined.

### Short Film Bodies

With the exception of politically motivated short filmmaking projects initiated by the turn-of-the-century colonial government, local short film-making first flourished largely with the help of the commercial sector. Banahaw Pictures, for example, produced some short works of Manuel Silos (best known for *Biyaya ng Lupa* or Bounty of the Earth), whose first work, a 1927 16mm. silent film called *Tres Sangganos*, he later expanded into his first feature, a three-part series called *The Three Tramps*. As late as the 1950s LVN Pictures was producing, although for non-commercial purposes, documentaries directed by Lamberto V. Avellana and Manuel Conde. By this time the prevalent attitude among film industry practitioners was that short film-making was a less profitable (and therefore less preferable) alternative to feature filmmaking. Short films were being produced for prestige, if not for considerably lesser purposes like promotions or propaganda.

With the inevitable decline of support from the private sector, short filmmaking survived through the agencies of first government, then educational, and most recently foreign institutions. An exception would be a 1979 documentary on Pinoy rock, Gil Portes’s *Pabonggahan*. The film, which was commercially released, reportedly broke even; nevertheless no follow-ups by way of subsequent commercial documentary releases were made. The rule, meanwhile, consisted of the diversification of institutional support for short filmmaking. Toward the 1960s about a dozen government bodies were involved in separate filmmaking activities. The next decade realized

similar participation by educational institutions, notably the mass communication departments of the Ateneo de Manila University and the De La Salle University, and the Film Center of the University of the Philippines.

The incursions of several foreign filmmaking outfits which utilized local sources for the production of foreign-owned work, reminiscent of the American propaganda shorts during the early local history of the medium, constituted the latest feature of short filmmaking in the Philippines. On the subject of faith healing alone, at least three countries—America, Canada, and West Germany—have shot shorts which have also been exhibited locally; these, in respective order of nationalities, would be Dorothy Dietrich's *Psychic Phenomena: Exploring the Unknown* (1977), Global Video Productions' *Revealed! Psychic Surgery in the Philippines* (n.d.), and Werner Schiebeler's *Paranormale Heilmethoden auf den Philippinen* [*Paranormal Healing Methods in the Philippines*] (1973). In fact the fairly active West Germans continue to undertake projects along the same line as well as in other directions, as in the case of Peter Kern & Karsten Peters's *Die Bootsleute von Pagsanjan* [*The Boatmen of Pagsanjan*] (1980).

More widely known (though not necessarily widely seen) among local audiences are several semi-critical documentaries on Manila, which have elicited adverse reactions of varying degrees: the BBC's *To Sing Our Own Song* (1983), François Debré's *Les trottoirs de Manille* [*Sidewalks of Manila*] (1981), and Gesichter Asiens's *Die Stadt, die sich menschlich nennt—Manila, eine asiatische Metropolis* [*The Place, Which Calls Itself the City of Man—Manila, an Asian Metropolis*] (1981). All of which goes to prove, whether pleasantly or painfully, the sufficiency of material for cinematic exploitation—enough, ironically, to attract outsiders to the country which, on the basis of readiness of local producers to seek foreign locales, its natives may be taking for granted already.

### Short Notice

In spite of primarily financial (and thereby almost overwhelming) limitations, Filipino filmmakers have performed creditably in foreign short-film competitions. Almost immediately after his Grand Prix and ad hoc awards in two consecutive Southeast Asian Film Festivals, National Artist Lamberto V. Avellana reaped two Spanish Conde de Foxa awards for *El Legado* [*The*

*Legislator*] in 1958 and *La Campana de Baler* [*The Bell of Baler*] in 1960. Another Spanish award, the Prix Cidalc, went to Manuel Conde's *Bayanihan* also in 1960. Other Filipino filmmakers, who in their time represented the select few who kept faith in an economically pointless concern, were also rewarded with returns on a level more lasting than inflation-prone terms for efforts whose pursuit of profit had fallen far behind that of quality.

Through the early '60s such strokes of more than just luck prevailed. The Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources's *The Gray Menace* was cited in West Germany's Asian Film Week in 1961. Jose Avellana's *Son of the Sea* won a Berlin Film Festival special award in 1960. Emeterio Ornedo's *They Shall Not Want* was the lone local entry to the Film as Communication Competition in the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1963. The year after, 1964, provided a golden harvest of sorts: Tony Smith's *Brave Little Island* won a citation in the Nigeria Film Festival, Jesus Ramos's *Masinloc* won a similar citation at the London International Film Festival, Ferde Grofe and Emmanuel Rojas's *Soul of a Fortress* won second place in the Bilbao Film Festival, and Jesus Ramos's *Mangagingay, a Place of Happiness* won the Rotary Award for Service to Mankind [*sic*] in the Asian Film Festival. Filipino short films did just as well during the late '70s. Tikoy Aguiluz's *Mt. Banahaw, Holy Mountain* won the silver prize in the now-defunct Young Filmmakers of Asia Film Festival in Shiraz, Iran, in 1976, while Kidlat Tahimik's *Mababangong Bangungot* (Perfumed Nightmare) won the Berlin Film Festival's international film critics' awards in 1977. All of which again goes to prove the availability of local talent in proportions formidable enough to face up to the best from the rest of the world.

Foreign recognition of local short film accomplishments actually preceded local recognition. The first National Short Film Festival was held 1962 by the Film Society of the Philippines. After proclaiming Lamberto V. Avellana's *The Barranca Story* the winner, the FSP held another such festival the next year before abandoning the undertaking altogether. Thirteen years later the Catholic Mass Media Awards provided categories for excellence in television productions. Jurors were allowed to proclaim as many deserving winners as necessary, thus allowing for recognition of short films shown on television.

In 1981 the participants in the then five-year-old Cinema-as-Art Workshop conducted by the UP Film Center competed among themselves

in the first Manila Short Film Festival, where Rochit Tañedo's *Ang Kutsero sa Purok Himlayan* won the short feature prize. The same year the UP Film Center and the UP President's Council on the Arts again sponsored another Manila Short Film Festival, the ECP announced its first Annual Short Film Festival, thus giving the country the distinction of having had two short film festivals, each enduring for two years, with a third one on the way so far. Will the third observe the numerological pattern set by the first two and give way to the next sponsor's short film festival after 1983?

### Support for Shorts

For short films' sake it ought not to. Also, an essential qualification: "short films" refer primarily to the less-than-35mm. formats such as 16mm., super8, or video, rather than to running time—although these types of films do tend to be less than feature-length in duration. At the moment the future of Filipino short filmmaking points in the direction of integrated institutional support, one which can best be provided by a government-sponsored film outfit like the ECP. As proven in the case of *Pabonggahan*, short films still have to acquire a steady (read: commercially viable) standing among feature film producers. Another alternative would be the reliance upon foreign capital, as in the instance of Kidlat Tahimik, who was commissioned by the German television network WDR, ZDF to do his second short film *Sino'ng Lumikha ng Yoyo? Sino'ng Lumikha ng Moon Buggy?* (Who Invented the Yoyo? Who Invented the Moon Buggy?) on the basis of his Berlinale coup for *Mababangong Bangungot* mentioned earlier. This global approach to maintaining one's filmmaking presence, however, would obviously entail expectation imposing enough to discourage prospective practitioners from trying themselves out at the craft.

Evidence of promise among practitioners abounds. For the past few years the Film Forum of the Goethe-Institut Manila has been showing well-attended short film accomplishments of both members and non-members; some exhibitions featured outputs by film students and practitioners. Philippine television may not be long behind. Recently a three-year effort called *Life Cycle of the Philippine Eagle* was shown during prime time. The indispensability of institutional support, however, cannot be over-emphasized. The ECP festivals may yet provide the impetus for retrospectives,

appreciation courses, workshops, full-scale production—culminating in a local short-film institution which would pave the way toward legitimizing a truly alternative form of cinema. Meanwhile, the public's attention has been attuned to the ongoing festival; if only for the recognition afforded our better modern-day short film practitioners, its purpose may well have already been served. The long hard life of Filipino short films need not unspool with the next tail leader.

### Levels of Independence

The current catchword in film circles is independence, and it's a measure of how far film awareness has progressed when the sector laying claim to the term intends it to refer to a format-based difference vis-à-vis commercial-gauge products. But first a few technical clarifications. The fact that [circa 1990] film exists in varying formats, measured in widths, is ascribed to the practicality of various industry-based purposes: Super 8mm., an improvement over 16mm.-halved 8mm., was home-movie stock until video became far more economical; 16mm. serves specialized industrial purposes, mainly advertising; 35mm. is for what may be called mainstream production, normally national but preferably international in scope of distribution; outside the country lies the possibility of 35mm.-anamorphic projection (which expands to twice the image width with the use of the proper lens) plus its real-thing equivalent, 70mm. wide-screen, for roadshow presentations.

Such a convenient availability for most conceivable filmic requirements belies the historical origins of the medium. Film formats differed not because usages varied, but because every investor who had the money and foresight was racing to get his measure standardized—which may have been the first clear instance of the desperate competition that the medium has been exhibiting since, without letup, this first century of its existence. One way of providing some value to the numbers is by scaling them from least to most, and assigning some factors that observe the same principle of ascension or descension. Super 8mm., 8mm. and 16mm. provide maximum individual freedom at minimum cost, while 35mm. and 70mm. provide (the potential for) maximum profitability and audience exposure.

From the extremes it becomes immediately clear that both sides could formulate claims to the ideals of independence, presuming that such an ideal matters in this sort of undertaking. A practitioner in Super 8mm., or even in video (a non-filmic medium which could accommodate certain basic principles anyway), could point to the minimalization of authorship problems on the basis of the fewer workforce requirements of such a format; on the other hand, a mainstream person could counter that the essence of freedom is material-based, and so only those with sufficient financial, industrial, distributional, and popular support could achieve social change—which, after all, is (or should be) the goal of independence.

Proponents of 16mm., including film-educational institutions, have come up with their rationalization for its increased usage: assuming that both sides of the extremes' arguments are valid but not necessarily conflicting, 16mm. offers a resemblance to mainstream technology at considerably affordable cost; though several times more expensive than Super 8, it also happened to be more accessible in this country since 1985, when Kodak Philippines phased out local Super 8 processing.

Within mainstream practice, however, the issue of independence also assumes as many possible claims as there are self-conscious institutions. "Independence" actually originally referred to the production outfits that were relegated to the fringes during the postwar heyday of the studio system up to the early 1960s; once the majors were weakened by internal problems (talents' dissatisfaction leading to labor problems) and external pressures (busting of production-and-distribution monopolies), the so-called independents closed in and instituted a system, if the word could still apply, of free-for-all enterprise. A subsystem of outfits based on stars, who were eventually distinguished from the rest of the constellation by the term superstars, has proved more enduring—and in fact constitutes what we can consider the mainstream independents of today.

Of course, the big three—Regal, Viva, and Seiko—in our current studio-dominated system all started out as independents relative to now inactive or defunct production houses. As mentioned earlier, any of these giants could claim, if they had a mind to do so, to being the true exponent of independent cinema in the country: all they have to do is admit that they don't care to exercise this prerogative at the moment, and offer a genuine

industry break to anyone who'd challenge their stature. The mad scramble for assignments in itself could serve as proof of the dissenters' double-minded acknowledgment that, yes, enslavement to filthy lucre *does* liberate one from the poverty of cheap formats.

Meanwhile, there are the past and future processes of mainstream independence to contend with. Until as late as the early 1980s certain filmmakers could break free of, well, the Filipino language at least, by doing regional cinema in the Cebuano or, though rarely, Ilocano tongue. The system of distribution—outside the Tagalog region (and the attendant demands of Metro Manila moviegoers)—also enabled drastic reductions in budget costs and the use of non-stars: the profitability of such an option is still being realized by today's countryside-circuit *penekula* or hard-core sex-film investors; in fact, the first color Cebuano film (and one of the last as well) was actually shot in Super 8 and blown up, grains and all, to commercial-gauge 35mm., reportedly clobbering Manila and even foreign releases at the box office wherever it was shown. There's a disturbing analogy somewhere, though, for future film scholars to ponder on: since we could say that regional movies have been replaced by sex films, does this mean that our provincial folk have "progressed" in their preference for spoken language to the inarticulate dictates of the, er, heart?

Finally, the most promising aspect of independence thus far almost became a local tradition were it not for the reckless conduct of an international film festival by the previous regime during the early 1980s. Exhibition in foreign film circuits proved favorable for Filipino directors fortunate enough to have been invited by patrons, but the problem is actually greater than the sanguinity of local producers in the sufficiency of the local filmmakers: Filipino authorities are pathetically simple-minded about the prospects of exporting our most impressive cultural body of work, preferring to dwell on the implications for the national image, as if that were all that the medium is good for.

The opening up of international film opportunities (confirmed by a corresponding ferment in film-theory circles) to Third-World cinema might find the Philippines typically left behind in an endeavor where we were in a sense pioneers—recall our participation in foreign festivals during the 1950s. It's a good thing that certain individual practitioners have gone as far as

preempting both local producers and officials, notably the censors, in getting their dream projects produced not by themselves or by fellow Filipinos, but the foreign entities who'd have better access to worldwide distribution.

Such a notion of relying on foreigners for institutional support is, of course, profoundly antithetical to the concept of independence in the political scheme of things—which only goes to prove that the ideal of film may be more than merely material, or even political. In Japan, the world's most economically independent nation, the best directors (Akira Kurosawa and Shohei Imamura, among recent examples) look toward non-Japanese investors for aesthetic salvation. Tokyo also happens to be the closest capital where we can get Super 8mm. films processed. Something like having one's sushi and sashimi, too.

### ***Sight & Sound* 2002**

In May 2001, via an introduction made by a professor, I was contacted by an editor at the British Film Institute's *Sight & Sound* magazine. It opened with a "Sensitivity: Confidential" line but I guess that, since the results of that decade's survey had been published and even succeeded by another decadal poll, and since no national security issue seems to be at stake, I could quote portions from the exchanges. "We are starting to compile a database of possible contributors to the [next year's] poll.... I will send out a more thorough questionnaire, requesting your top ten once the project begins in earnest, as at this stage we are still trying to identify more key figures from around the world" ("*Sight & Sound* Top Ten Poll" email, May 22, 2001). It also requested for more possible Filipino contacts but the person later said that she could only get in touch with one of them, so in effect—since 1992 contributor Agustin Sotto had just passed away—there were only two 2002 contributors from the Philippines.

On Valentine's Day the next year, the formal invitation came, from another sender: "As you may know, every ten years since 1952, *Sight & Sound* magazine has published a 'Top Ten' list of films based on an extensive poll conducted among the world's most respected film critics. Over the decades this has become an important gauge of film opinion" ("*Sight & Sound* Top

Ten" email, February 14, 2002). Since I'd done canon exercises for Philippine cinema, and completed graduate-level course work in film, I figured I'd participate just this once, as I would for all the other canon projects I ever got involved in. I prefaced my list with a short paragraph that included, "I have been maintaining a personal canon for the past few years. I find it has not changed much since I first drew it up, so here are the films" ("Re: *Sight & Sound* Top Ten" email, February 15, 2002).

Ten days later I got a response that said: "Following initial responses to the Top Ten poll we would like to offer some clarification to the list that we are asking you to submit. As with the previous polls, we would like you to choose the 'best' films in cinema history rather than your own personal favourites. Also the poll should be limited to feature films excluding shorts" ("*Sight & Sound* Top Ten Poll Clarification" email, February 25, 2002). This could have been a standard message sent out to some, or all, respondents, but I had no way of finding out for sure. Just in case it was directed to only me, I gave out a response that went, in part:

I was surprised to read that the poll is now being confined to feature films—I recall stumbling across several short films (mostly from the silent period) and non-feature titles in the breakdown of individual votes during past surveys. As an example, I had included Michael Snow's *La region centrale*, which is of full-length duration, since I remembered the same filmmaker's *Wavelength* being listed in 1992 & I found the title I listed more accomplished. I did leave out the ground-zero footage of the aftermath of the nuking of Hiroshima—the most powerful strips of celluloid I've ever seen (dramatically enhanced by my having been in the city during the screening), but too fragmented to serve a sustained unitary purpose. Finally, bodies of work by certain auteurs hold up better than some of these choices—Kenji Mizoguchi's, Su Friedrich's, Ann Hui's, Georges Franju's, Louis Feuillade's, David Cronenberg's, etc.—but none of their individual projects stands out the way the movies in my list do.

I do not get how anyone's list of historically best films could exclude some personal favorites. In fact I would be suspicious of anyone who admits that her list of "best" titles does not contain any favorites. I have seen the "best" films in cinema history, as you put it, proceeding from the *Sight & Sound* results and other canons through the years. I have always made an effort to watch these titles traditionally—projected onscreen in a darkened auditorium, with other audience members present. I have been attending

screenings since the 1960s (I remember dreaming of a now-lost Filipino fantasy film in '66), watched my first unaccompanied commercial screening in '72, and took to serious and extensive film coverage (i.e., whatever may fall under canonical considerations, however remotely) in '78. I point this out just in case your apprehension proceeds from the reasonable suspicion that my choice of titles has been idiosyncratic. It has not been so, except possibly in relation to some pre-existing standards that I cannot adhere to, inasmuch as my concern is genuinely what's best, within and beyond questions of good taste and moral rectitude. I assure you that if the list I submitted comprised my personal favorites, it would be completely different except for maybe a couple of titles.

So are American porn films better than *Citizen Kane*? Almost all of them aren't, even by the most liberal standards, but a significant handful are, and so are a number of other entries, including a Bollywood release, a questionably motivated documentary, an American B-movie, and *La règle du jeu*. I doubt if Welles's outpouring deserves to show up even in a top-20 ranking, and if your publication persists in this project then justice may ultimately stand a chance of being served. Have my several screenings of *Kane* diluted my appreciation of it? No, I found it already too whiny-white-guy precious the very first time I saw it, 20-odd years ago. Have I subjected the other "bests" in my list to the same degree of multiple screenings? Yes, some more than others. Am I indulging in parochialism by listing something from my national cinema? Only if American critics are being parochial in listing the insufferable *Citizen Kane*. Is "history" frowning on my choices? I must leave this aspect of your clarification unanswered—it's simply too scary to contemplate, if you were in my situation.

In the list below I have replaced the Snow film with something else. I have retained the documentaries, since I honestly believe feature filmmaking would not have been able to prosper this impressively were it not for the nonfiction tradition. However, if for any reason you wind up including an "experimental" non-feature/non-documentary in someone else's list, please do me the favor of restoring *La region centrale*.

("Re: *Sight & Sound* Top Ten Poll Clarification" email, February 26, 2002)

The movie that I substituted *La region centrale* with was Michael Ninn's 1995 film *Latex*. If the editors had acceded to this change, my final published list would have included three porn films, since I'd already listed Henry Paris's 1972 *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* and Gerard Damiano's *The Devil in Miss Jones* (hereafter *DMJ*). But in fact even without *Latex*, I'd effectively originally listed more than two because I specified the 1972-93 "*The Devil*

in *Miss Jones* film series" (with Henri Pachard and Gregory Dark doing the second and third installments), in the same spirit of *Sight & Sound* conflating Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974) into one entry.

In any case, *Sight & Sound* published the original list I submitted (minus the succeeding "series" films in *DMJ*) and excerpted sections from the third paragraph of the email quoted above. The print edition wound up placing my entry right above an appreciation of *Citizen Kane*, the very movie I had bashed. In the next survey, in 2012, *Kane* was dislodged after a 40-year run as the magazine's all-time best film—in all likelihood a development that would have occurred sooner or later, to which my outburst was incidental (Figure 1).

Here was the original submission I handed in:

1. *Salò, o le centoventi giornate di Sodoma* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy 1975)
2. *Manila by Night* (Ishmael Bernal, Philippines '80)
3. *Khalnayak* (Subhash Ghai, India '93)
4. *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (Henry Paris, US '76)
5. *La hora de los hornos: Notas y testimonios sobre el neocolonialismo, la violencia y la liberación* (Octavio Getino & Fernando E. Solanas, Argentina '68)
6. *La règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, France '39)
7. *God Told Me To* (Larry Cohen, US '75)
8. *La region centrale* (Michael Snow, Canada '71)
9. *Olympia* (Leni Riefenstahl, Germany '38)
10. *The Devil in Miss Jones* film series (Gerard Damiano / Henri Pachard / Gregory Dark, US '72-93)

Figure 1. (Next page) *Sight & Sound* September 2002 cover and my list (with an excerpt from my comments on *Citizen Kane*) on page 29.



# Sight & Sound

The Monthly Film Magazine/September 2002/£3.25

## THE TEN

As chosen by Quentin Tarantino, Michael Mann, Bernardo Bertolucci,

## GREATEST

Jim Jarmusch, Camille Paglia, Theo Angelopoulos, George A. Romero,

## FILMS

Ken Loach, Catherine Breillat, James Toback, Aki Kaurismäki,

## ALL TIME

Tim Robbins, Slavoj Žižek, Fredric R. Jameson and hundreds more...

### Road to Perdition

Sam Mendes revives the gangster movie

### Ingmar Bergman

Exclusive interview with the legend

### Roger Corman

Why I'm in love with The Godfather

Plus Cameron Crowe on Renoir and every new film reviewed including *Insomnia*, *Talk to Her*, *Windtalkers*, *Devdas*, *Men in Black II*, *Lovely & Amazing*, *Once upon a Time in the Midlands*

**MANOHLA DARGIS**  
US, Los Angeles Times  
*Au hasard Balthazar* (Bresson)

*Barry Lyndon* (Kubrick)  
*The Godfather and The Godfather Part II* (Coppola)  
*La Grande Illusion* (Renoir)  
*Masculin Féminin* (Godard)  
*The Puppetmaster* (Hou)

*Scenes from under Childhood* (Brakhage)  
*Some Like It Hot* (Wilder)  
*Tokyo Story* (Ozu)  
*Touch of Evil* (Welles)

In picking these ten, I have tried to be as honest as I can, choosing movies that I feel are 'perfect', at least for me. Almost all of my top ten have made me cry, sometimes a lot; one has even made me cry laughing (*Some Like It Hot*, naturally). I've seen most of them at least several times (a few I've seen far more times), and I could watch all of them again and again. Two, three, four minutes earlier my list included *Belle de jour*, *Sauve qui peut* (la vie), *Flowers of Shanghai*, *His Girl Friday*, *Killer of Sheep*, *Little Stabs at Happiness*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *La Règle du jeu*, *Satantango*, *Sunrise* and *Way Down East*.

**JOEL DAVID**  
Philippines, University of the Philippines  
*Salò* (Pasolini)

*Manila by Night; City after Dark* (Bernal)  
*Khalnayak* (Ghai)  
*The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (Metzger)  
*Hour of the Furnaces* (Solanas)

*La Règle du jeu* (Renoir)  
*God Told Me To* (Cohen)  
*La Région centrale* (Snow)  
*Olympiad Berlin 1936* (Riefenstahl)  
*The Devil in Miss Jones* (Damiano)

So are American porn films better than *Citizen Kane*? Almost all of them aren't, but a precious handful are, as are a number of other entries, including a Bollywood release, a questionably motivated documentary, an American B-movie, and *La Règle du jeu*. I already found *Kane* too whiney-white-guy precious the first time I saw it, 20-odd years ago.

**DAVID DENBY**  
US, New Yorker  
*L'avventura* (Antonioni)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*Dekalog* (Kieślowski)

*The Godfather and The Godfather Part II* (Coppola)  
*Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa)  
*Sunrise* (Murnau)  
*La Règle du jeu* (Renoir)  
*The Third Man* (Reed)  
*Weekend* (Godard)  
*Vertigo* (Hitchcock)

**MALGORZATA DIPONT**  
Poland, president of the Polish Film Critics Club  
*Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein)

*A Blonde in Love* (Forman)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*The Devil and the Nun* (Kawalerowicz)  
*8½* (Fellini)  
*Les Enfants du paradis* (Carné)  
*The Gold Rush* (Chaplin)  
*Rashomon* (Kurosawa)  
*Stalker* (Tarkovsky)  
*Viridiana* (Buñuel)

**PHILIP DOOD**  
UK, director of the ICA  
*City Lights* (Chaplin)  
*The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer)  
*Vertigo* (Hitchcock)  
*The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo)  
*Screen Tests* (Warhol)  
*Time of the Gypsies* (Kusturica)  
*Fires Were Started* (Jennings)

*Le Mépris* (Godard)  
*His Girl Friday* (Hawks)  
*Atanarjuat The Fast Runner* (Kunuk)

**DANIIL DONDUREI**  
Russia, editor in chief of *Iskusstvo Kino*  
*Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*L'Atlantide* (Vigo)  
*Rashomon* (Kurosawa)  
*8½* (Fellini)  
*The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer)  
*Wild Strawberries* (Bergman)  
*Dead Man* (Jarmusch)  
*Rocco and His Brothers* (Visconti)  
*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman)

**PATRICK DUYNSLAEGHER**  
Belgium, Focus Knack  
*Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Fassbinder)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*The Damned* (Visconti)  
*Napoleon* (Gance)  
*Satyricon* (Fellini)  
*Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa)  
*Sweet Smell of Success* (Mackendrick)  
*2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick)  
*Tristana* (Buñuel)  
*Vertigo* (Hitchcock)

**MICHAEL DWYER**  
Ireland, Irish Times  
*Barry Lyndon* (Kubrick)  
*Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*Fanny and Alexander* (Bergman)  
*It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra)  
*La Nuit américaine* (Truffaut)  
*Raging Bull* (Scorsese)  
*Three Colours Trilogy* (Kieślowski)  
*Vertigo* (Hitchcock)  
*The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah)  
An exercise in pure masochism. And I was amazed to find I had space for only one of the 2,500 films I've seen since 1992.

**RICHARD DYER**  
UK, University of Warwick  
*All That Heaven Allows* (Sirk)  
*Il bidone* (Fellini)  
*Day of the Dead* (Romero)  
*Le Gout des autres* (Jaoui)  
*India Song* (Duras)  
*Loving Couples* (Zetterling)  
*Maciste all'inferno* (Freda)  
*Pukekah* (Amrohi)  
*Sense* (Visconti)  
*Sunrise* (Murnau)

**ROGER EBERT**  
US, Chicago Sun Times  
*Aguirre, Wrath of God* (Herzog)

*Apocalypse Now* (Coppola)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*Dekalog* (Kieślowski)  
*La dolce vita* (Fellini)  
*The General* (Keaton)  
*Raging Bull* (Scorsese)  
*2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick)  
*Tokyo Story* (Ozu)  
*Vertigo* (Hitchcock)

**KLAUS EDER**  
Germany, FIPRESCI  
*Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein)  
*The Gold Rush* (Chaplin)  
*La Règle du jeu* (Renoir)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*Paisà* (Rossellini)  
*Tokyo Story* (Ozu)  
*Ordet* (Dreyer)  
*Pathe Panchali* (S. Ray)  
*The 400 Blows* (Truffaut)  
*Black God, White Devil* (Rocha)

**THOMAS ELSAESSER**  
Holland, University of Amsterdam  
*Sunrise* (Murnau)  
*La Règle du jeu* (Renoir)  
*Citizen Kane* (Welles)  
*The Big Sleep* (Hawks)  
*Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Ophüls)  
*Sansho Dayu* (Mizoguchi)  
*Vertigo* (Hitchcock)  
*Some Like It Hot* (Wilder)  
*Taxi Driver* (Scorsese)

### 1 Critics' Top Ten

## Citizen Kane

### Monthly Film Bulletin December 1941

This is unquestionably one of the most intelligent films to appear for many years. No one who is really interested in the cinema can afford to miss it. Even those who go to the cinema simply for a few hours' entertainment, and who even perhaps profess to be bored by intelligence, will find themselves curiously spellbound by this spirited attempt to break with most of the formulas which Hollywood holds so dear. 'Citizen Kane' is refreshingly new, from its theme, which has a maturity which one has almost despaired of finding on the screen, right down to its cast, every one of which acts superlatively well and none of which has ever appeared in films before. Orson Welles' innovations of style will almost certainly influence current film-making, although the question of whether he has made any significant contribution to film technique is not likely to be answered until the film has taken its place in history. Meanwhile the fact that it should even give rise to the question is a measure of the film's stature. Its style is essentially theatrical but is unusual in its narrative construction, in its dialogue which has been written with amazing realism (as where a single voice rises

out of a Babel of voices and suddenly dominates the rest), and above all in its pictorial compositions. These last (for which probably Gregg Toland, the cameraman, deserves most credit) have been most carefully constructed so as constantly to give emphasis to the dramatic action. To the resources of lighting, which has been most skilfully used, has been added construction in depth, made possible by wide-angle lenses used in combination with ceiling sets. This construction in depth which anticipates some of the effects of the stereoscopic film is the most obvious novelty of the film and the one most easy to imitate. There is every danger that the imitators will repeat the device without a due appreciation of the narrative skill which has made its use here so effective. 'Citizen Kane' is not above criticism but it would be unthankful to seek to analyse weaknesses in a film which offers such a full measure of merit and brilliance. The MFB was incorporated by Sight & Sound in 1991

*Citizen Kane* (1941): dir Orson Welles; scr Herman J. Mankiewicz, Orson Welles; director of photography Gregg Toland; editor Robert Wise; art directors Van Nest Polglase, Perry Ferguson; music Bernard Herrmann



Top of the world: Orson Welles, Joseph Cotten

Apart from dropping the sequels of *DMJ*, *Sight & Sound* also adjusted the other entries to conform to what appeared to be the magazine's style standard, strangely appending the censors-imposed title of *City after Dark* to *Manila by Night*. Several of the media coverage (including those from *Slate* and *The Guardian*), not to mention a number of blogs and discussion boards, made references to my list, specifically the inclusion of *Misty Beethoven* (attributed by *Sight & Sound* to Randy Metzger, Henry Paris's real name), probably because I listed it ahead of *DMJ*. In fact in the comprehensive tally of film titles, another Damiano film, *Deep Throat* (1972), also showed up; and in contravention of the *Sight & Sound* email admonition, so did an anything-but-full length film, the advertising entry *Surprise, Surprise* (credited to British Airways). And as far as I could tell, none of the 2012 respondents listed a hard-core entry, aside from Nagisa Ōshima's *Ai no korida* (1976), listed as *In the Realm of the Senses*.

A few individuals managed to track me down via my then-active University of the Philippines email address, generally wanting to know how I came up with my list; I answered each message as earnestly and comprehensively as I could, but it never led to an exchange, because how could it? What's there to explain beyond the basic insight that to fully appreciate a medium one should begin with what it has to offer, rather than with one's personal baggage—or rather, in my case, that one has to adjust one's baggage to accommodate whatever's available out there?

### Note

18. Speaking of national security, one of my later messages, sent a week after the 9/11 terrorist incident, started with "Relieved to report that I've lived through the attacks on lower Manhattan, thanks to my holing up in Brooklyn (which I used to think made me less fortunate)" ("Filipino critics' availability" email, September 18, 2001); I seem to have lost the message that precipitated this response.

## Culture at Large

*These articles constitute a throwback to my juvenilia, in the sense that they look outward, toward contemporary "global" issues. After opting to specialize first on political and economic topics, I focalized even further on media, then film, then outward once more after I'd gained sufficient confidence in my specializations. The first commentary was commissioned for a special Korea Times issue by Cathy Rose Garcia. After another KT contribution of mine came out, I was tasked with figuring out a productive activity for the then-newly formed Resource Persons Group (now the Association of Filipino Educators in Korea), an organization originally spearheaded by the Philippine embassy. I recalled how my experience in writing according to a regular schedule fostered camaraderie with a small circle of like-minded individuals. Via Guia Yonzon, my former supervisor at the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, I managed to contact Teresita "Cookie" Reed, who as it turned out was married to Ed Reed, the then-head of the Asia Foundation (and formerly a professor at Kyunghee University); Cookie was a deskperson at Korea JoongAng Daily, and she introduced us to Suh Ji-won, a smart and pleasant editor with whom we were happy to coordinate. Unfortunately Ji-won's stint at KJAD was soon to end, and when he left so did the column. My contributions are listed according to order of submission except for two film reviews that effectively bookended my submissions*

and have been included in a section in Part I titled *Foreign Film Reviews II (Exertions)*: one on *Trần Anh Hùng's I Come with the Rain* (titled "Wet Noodles") and another on *James Cameron's all-time blockbuster* (titled "2 Guys, While Watching Avatar").

### Kim Daejung & the Aquinos

After the suicide of former Korean President Roh Moohyun, the news of the death of Kim Daejung would confirm, in the minds of democratically minded observers, the passing of an era. Those with a pan-Asian sensibility would find further confirmation of that remark in the overseas death of still another symbol of another anti-dictatorship struggle, that of Corazon "Cory" Aquino in the Republic of the Philippines: two prominent names in the parallel historical experience of two countries, linked by the involvement of the US as each country's wartime liberator—the Philippines from Japan (Korea's colonizer) and Korea from the Communists in the North and from China.

Indeed, an enterprising film epic might well show the paths of Kim Daejung and Aquino's husband Benigno "Ninoy" Jr. virtually crossing each other during the Korean War, which the then-teenage Aquino covered as a newspaper correspondent. (Ninoy Aquino subsequently parlayed his reportage into a script, eventually turned into a much-celebrated but now-lost film titled *Korea*, directed in 1952 by Filipino National Artist Lamberto V. Avellana.) Further cinematic license, though a likelier occurrence, would depict the Aquinos and the Catholicized Kims socializing during their exile in Boston, perhaps during a spiritually uplifting celebration of Sunday Mass.

As survivors of their respective countries' triumphant pro-democracy movements, Kim Daejung and Corazon Aquino were each seen, by commentators looking at both national experiences, as the other country's version of herself or himself: Kim as the Aquino of Korea, Aquino as the Kim of the Philippines (and each as a possible Nelson Mandela of Asia). The comparison may be inaccurate in several crucial areas—for one thing, it was Ninoy, not Cory, who returned from exile just as Kim did, but Kim was not assassinated upon arrival as Ninoy Aquino was—but it was widespread global acclaim that sealed the similarities between the two ex-Presidents: Cory Aquino's "Woman of the Year" distinction in *Time* magazine (an honor for which

Imelda Marcos would surely have gladly walked barefoot), Kim Daejung's Nobel Peace Prize.

The outpouring of grief that attended each leader's recent demise threatened to shape up as the latest challenge against each one's respective President (circa 2009), Korea's Lee Myung-bak and the Philippines's Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. At some point in the late ex-Presidents' last few months, in fact, each one expressed oppositional dissatisfaction with her or his present-day successor, with Aquino even suggesting she could resume her presidential functions if ever the need for a replacement came up.

Yet amid the waves of nostalgia washing over the mostly middle-aged middle classes of Filipinos and Koreans, one would hear insistent rumblings of dissent, and not always from supporters of the incumbent leaders either. Kim, the allegations go, handled the aftermath of the International Monetary Fund crisis in a manner that made Korea more vulnerable to foreign intervention, and pursued his Nobel to the extent of pandering (possibly including a cash-for-summit arrangement) to North Korea, a regime that has proved weirdly incapable of reciprocating properly. But Kim's Korea was Shangri-La in contrast to Aquino's Philippines. She resisted the long- (and still-) overdue exigency of land reform in order to retain the family hacienda, agreed to repay an entire clutch of corruption-ridden foreign loans (including the ultimate white elephant, a nuclear plant constructed near earthquake fault lines and a now-active volcano), and otherwise responded to a string of horrendous political, economic, and natural disasters—including increasingly violent coup attempts, multiple and extensive daily brownouts, and the worst volcanic eruption of the last century—by hurrying to prayer, a manner admirable for a mother, or mother superior, but not a serious President, even or especially in the Third World.

In the end it all comes down to the reality that resilient people will devise ways of coping, and good democracies enable (pardon the appropriation) people power by allowing the population to change—or retain—its elected leaders every so often. If Filipinos were too aghast then that Ferdinand Marcos's arrogant, sexist, and self-serving prophecy—that Aquino would prove an even worse Chief Executive than he—had somehow come true, by the new millennium they could take heart that Roh Moohyun's supporters still remembered, during his funeral, to use the color yellow that Aquino,

following her late husband's prescription, had adopted for her admittedly righteous and courageous anti-dictatorship campaign.<sup>19</sup>

We see this principle demonstrated, down to the level of schools and families, and way across the Pacific during George “Dubya” Bush’s presidential term, where those who best embody certain cherished causes do not necessarily have equally sterling management skills.<sup>20</sup> But if people continue to select charismatic candidates who turn out to be utter duds (Filipino Exhibit A: Joseph Estrada), it could only mean either that they refuse to learn their lesson, or that they still believe in miracles. Just to ensure that the former scenario never fully plays out its tragic outcome, we ought then to constantly remind ourselves of our heroes’ failures, alongside their finest achievements. Such an option might keep us awake longer, but it would help future generations abide in the past more securely.

## Notes

19. The color continued to be used by the liberal opposition in Korea, with yellow ribbons festooning the City Hall vicinity of Seoul during the candlelight protests against President Lee Myung-bak’s unilateral resolution in 2008 to allow the import of US beef during the mad-cow panic, as well as the negligence that led to the tragic capsizing of the MV *Sewol* in 2014, during the presidency of Park Geun-hye.
20. As it turned out, the significance of the global disaster that was George W. Bush resonated in terms of his dynastic origin. As of this update (2015), the current presidents of the Philippines and Korea were children of former presidents—Park Chunghee’s daughter Geun-hye, and Cory Aquino’s son Benigno III. Like Dubya, they are also perceived as less effective than their parents, although this response may be more a matter of opposition-led criticism than (as in the case of Bush) painful and palpable reality.

## Crescent Tense

One subjective measure of the distress over the recent killings in Mindanao’s Maguindanao province (also called the Ampatuan massacre) is how Philippine-based foreigners, including the few Koreans I advise mainly

for their thesis completion, seem as traumatized as the Pinoy bourgeoisie, in stark contrast with the rest of the natives. This is not to say that the working-class majority feels unaffected by the tragedy. In fact the oft-noted peculiarity of the local response to crises—marked by the incongruent use of humor, or in this case silence—can be read as a form of the Filipino’s fatalistic acceptance of the brutalities of fate, as well as a means by which the individual could refocus her attention on the exigencies of personal survival.

I must confess that I encourage my Korean advisees to indulge in something approaching xenophobic paranoia. Most Koreans who visit the Philippines are impressed by the local culture’s excessive libertarianism, a welcome relief from the severe patriarchal hierarchisms that invariably confront most East Asians from birth onward. Yet the country’s seemingly boundless promiscuity misleads foreigners into thinking that its culture is as benevolent as it is tolerant.

More than once, some of my Manila-based colleagues had informed me that one or another of my male Korean students had set out, usually alone, for some unannounced inter-island itinerary, with the person’s mobile phone occasionally losing signal due to the underdeveloped condition of some far-flung destination. So far the guys have returned safely, convinced all the more of the kindness of the “other” Filipinos vis-à-vis the relatively cynical and materialistic Manileños, even as my friends and I wonder how to impress on these wide-eyed innocents the kind of dangers they were lucky to have skirted.

The Maguindanao massacre was not, even in my wildest and weirdest and saddest dreams, the example I had hoped for, but there it is. The widespread response to the event turns on its perpetrators’ bald-faced assumption that they could get away with such an extensive and bloodcurdling criminal operation, directed in broad open-space daylight against a large and influential group comprising mostly women, uninvolved passersby, and (the ultimate indication of contemporary hubris) media professionals. Beyond the jaw-droppingly pathological stupidity of a group of men driven by old-line machismo and power-hungriness, one could somehow sense a shock of recognition, even among Koreans who happen to belong to an old-enough generation.

For this is how people with absolute power (with the concomitant absolute corruption) have always tended to behave, down to the knee-jerk

assignation of blame to armed seditionists. Just replace the unsophisticated provincial dynasty with more urbane, charming, and eloquent types and one would have the US-sanctioned Third-World dictatorships that most middle-aged Southeast Asians (and Koreans and Latin Americans) still remember all too vividly.

Which makes the actuations of the Maguindanao-massacre perps as backward as they are barbaric, locked in a period and setting that ought to have been relegated to a permanently passed past. What provides an underlying unease regarding the response of the current Philippine administration is the fact that both sides of the political fence, the outraged ruling party as well as the infuriated opposition, are calling for immediate and unqualified intervention, thus conjuring up spectacles once more associable with the excesses of the long-deposed Marcos regime. The deployment of Philippine army troops to predominantly, supposedly autonomous Muslim areas, with hasty arrests of elements perceived as rebellious, and everything conveniently blanketed by President Arroyo's imposition (since lifted) of martial law, possibly as prelude to a transition of power to a bereaved rival who, it must be stressed, mirrors his opponents' penchant for maintaining a militia force.

How the Philippines' second largest (and richest, resources-wise) island ever reached such a sorry state of affairs, with the Maguindanao case a culmination of a long and so-far unending series of tragic events, can be best understood via a sufficiently distant geopolitical perspective. From, say, an orbiting satellite's view, what may be regarded as the Philippines' Christian majority is actually the Indo-Malayan archipelago's regional minority, disproportionately empowered by the historical accident of the US's so-far undisputed status as global police.

After largely successfully resisting foreign attempts at colonization, the Philippines' Muslim population found itself at the receiving end of a series of ill-advised political trade-offs initiated by the American reoccupation of the country after World War II. First, the US reneged on its promise of benefits to the local Communist army after contracting it to undertake the bulk of anti-Japanese resistance. The peasant-based insurgency that ensued from this instance of Cold-War duplicity suffered severe repression, and the then-fledgling Philippine administration sought to mollify increasing

antipathy by providing ex-rebels with settlements in Mindanao, many of which were located in still-undocumented Muslim ancestral properties.

The disgruntlement that percolated under the social surface finally erupted with the Marcos government's decision to infiltrate, destabilize, and reclaim Sabah in Malaysia using a commando unit (code-named Jabidah) of Filipino Muslims, trained on a ship without being informed of the nature of their mission. Upon learning what they were expected to carry out, the young men attempted to mutiny and were summarily executed (in a scenario reminiscent of then-concurrent events in Korea depicted in Kang Woo-suk's 2003 blockbuster *Silmido*). Having since been radicalized by the Jabidah massacre, several generations of separatist Muslims experienced some of the most harrowing peace-time assaults on their Mindanao territories by Philippine armed forces, punctuated by a few truce periods.

The US's so-called war on terror did not ease matters for the severely put-upon Pinoy Islamic populace. In the current millennium, a few individuals attempted to meet half-way the globalist call for entrepreneurship by supplying, to an extremely responsive and grateful nationwide market, affordable copies of otherwise unfairly priced digital content; instead they were continually hounded and accused of more than just video piracy by the Motion Pictures Association of America, whose leader, the late Jack Valenti, claimed (but never proved) before the US Senate, as a way to justify harsher measures, that the profits made by "pirates" were donated to terrorist organizations.

Where the recent return of the Philippine army to Muslim areas in Mindanao might lead this time is anyone's guess, but if history were to serve as indicator, what may appear to be a solution at present might only lead to further heartbreak in future.

## Asian Casanovas

When the only serious contenders during the last US presidential election were a woman and a black man, most commentators wondered which category, gender or race, would prove worthier of the patronage of the electorate. As it turned out, voters felt more confident about being led by a black man,

although in a show of buyer's remorse typical of history's most successful consumer society, some Americans nowadays tend to write how Hillary Clinton would have had the leadership qualities that Barack Obama, for all his Kennedyesque charisma, sadly lacks in a time of serious global crises.

Yet the bigger picture has largely been overlooked. The standard presidential qualities of maleness, whiteness, wealth, and old age have become more and more difficult to assert, due to the rise of identity politics during the only truly progressive revolution the US ever came close to, comprising the various cultural upheavals of the 1960s. After the election of the non-WASP John F. Kennedy ushered in the Camelot spirit, the old boys' club managed to hold on for a few more decades afterward, although it became increasingly apparent that successful candidates could, and then should, be sold on the basis of their deviation from the norm: Jimmy Carter had been a peanut farmer, Ronald Reagan a B-movie actor, Bill Clinton an impoverished native son who could complete his education only through scholarship grants. In this context, even "Dubya" Bush connected with voters despite his monstrous incompetence precisely because he was an aw-shucks underachieving everyday guy, in dull contrast with his father, the US's (and by extension the world's) last old-line patriarchal President.

The foregrounding of the formerly immovable categories of race and gender during last year's election recalls another category, one where both qualities reside, and which (officially, at least) supposedly no longer exists: that of Orientalism. Ever since Edward Said published his eponymous study, Orientalism (or, more accurately, anti-Orientalism) became an area of scholarly pursuit, first within comparative race studies, where Said had originally located his ideas. Not long after, feminist scholars joined the growing body of work critiquing *Orientalism*, but in fact improved on Said's framework by incorporating the issue of desire.

In other words, where Said pointed out instances in Western literature where the Oriental was presented as inferior to the Western subject, more recent studies of Orientalism, focusing mainly on popular culture, acknowledge that racial bias (expressed via Christianity-inspired moral chauvinism) had a tense and often conflicting relationship with desire, often by the West for the Other. For all its potentially contentious, controversial, even occasionally pornographic implications, this view helped explain several

phenomena, including the feminizing attitudes Western nations and peoples had toward Orientals, as well as the West's comparatively less destructive colonization projects, rather than the outright enslavement or extermination wrought on populations that early conquistadores regarded as subhuman.

In order to see just how far Orientalism might have transformed, I have been casually following the still-unfolding scandal-sagas of three celebrities, all males in their 30s, more or less Asian, and beset by women trouble. Tiger Woods, who describes himself as "Cablinasian" (Caucasian, black, [American] Indian, Asian), is actually more Asian than any of his other racial designations, but like Obama, exhibits the more genetically dominant African skin color. Pinoy boxer Manny Pacquiao is the more "native" Asian sportsman, a multiple-division champ, while Lee Byung-hun, as close to the stereotypical Oriental as any East Asian can get, is a Korean actor who has appeared in local and global blockbusters. One can "rank" them, as I had just listed them, in terms of increasing "Asianness," but the way that twinned conditions occur among them is even more fascinating: Pacquiao and Lee are more racially Asian, Woods and Lee have middle-class backgrounds, and Woods and Pacquiao are already-legendary title holders in the traditionally masculinist profession of sports.

If we proceed from the feminization of Orientals by the self-masculinizing West, then Woods would be the person least subject to this outlook, mainly due to his most-mixed and consequently least-Asian ancestry. Ironically he has been the one so far whose stature has regressed the most, largely because of his incursion in a field, professional golf, which had been the bulwark of a type that would have once included the likes of former US Presidents. The outing, so to speak, of his sex addiction was undertaken by women who were, to put it mildly, unruly—and, more significantly, white.

Lee, like Pacquiao and unlike Woods, only has to worry about a single female complainant, non-white at that. Although the specifically Korean offense of *honin-bingja-ganeumjoi*, or obtaining sex under a false promise of marriage, is no longer in force, it nevertheless points up the disparity between Lee and his way-too-young ex. Lee's advantage over the other two is that, as a so-far unmarried man, he is still technically free to play the field.

Pacquiao, if we were to take his detractors' assertion that his philandering is more than just a gimmick intended to drumbeat his and his alleged

paramour's media projects, might not suffer the same extreme fall from grace that Woods did, but nevertheless still has to contend with his status as a family man. Yet he is the one blessed with a partner who has been fully supportive, who holds back her outraged responses whenever he prepares for one of his much-anticipated matches, and displays a warmth and graciousness during her interviews that have disarmed even those who had long gotten over her husband's mystique.

This is where a further insight into Orientalism makes itself indispensable: within even a Western domestic sphere, where no racial Others might be present, the woman can still be configured as the Oriental of the man. (This is in fact a more optimistic view than John Lennon's song title, drawn from a novel by Zora Neale Hurston, that "Woman Is the Nigger of the World.") In a situation like the Philippines, which has been Orientalized several times over—by multiple colonizations, rapacious rulers, and possibly permanent underdevelopment—it is the country's women, the close-to-legendary Pinays, who have managed to keep heart and hearth alive, further proof that, as Korea had earlier demonstrated, the most Oriental among us just might persevere in the end.

## The Sins of the Fathers

The recent sensational revelations about ungodly, sometimes literally closeted goings-on in the Catholic hierarchy would not surprise those with a passing familiarity with Philippine colonial history. An early 20th-century report by James A. LeRoy in the Academy of Political Science's eponymous journal listed a litany of excesses, all economic and political in nature, culminating in the charge that the Spanish friars "in general encourage[d] stagnation rather than progress." By way of explaining such behavior, the author remarked that the majority of religious-order members "seem[ed], from their appearance, manners, and personal habits, to have been recruited from certainly not the best classes of Spain."

It would be possible to tease out certain strands to explain both the character of religious officials posted to distant colonies, as well as the antipathy of the American observers who provided such condemnatory remarks. On

the one hand, it would be next-to-impossible to persuade the most promising administrators, religious or otherwise, to accept an assignment in a destination that would have taken months of travel to reach, and from which a return to Spain, the colonial center, might never materialize. One extreme allegation was that out of desperation, some of the orders would seek potential recruits from the ranks of convicts and use their "conversion" as a means of petitioning for their release and subsequent deployment to Las Islas Filipinas.

I would not wish to cast the first stone, as it were, in maintaining that genuine repentance cannot occur in real life, even outside the pale of the then-raging European Enlightenment. But the actuations of many such shepherds of the flock did turn nothing less than wolf-like once they reached their Oriental destination. The first recorded account of a Philippine lynching, for instance, consisted of a mob of Spanish friars fatally assaulting their very own Governor General, a liberal administrator who had ordered investigations into and arrests of corrupt government officials and their religious defenders.

And as in public comportment, so in private: the climax of one of the multiple narrative strands in José Rizal's masterly 1887 roman à clef, *Noli Me Tangere*, consisted of the revelation that the heroine, María Clara, had actually been sired by the hero's mortal enemy, Father Dámaso; believing that her true love had perished as a falsely accused subversive, María Clara insists on entering the nunnery, only to fall into the waiting clutches of her ardent secret admirer, Father Salvi. The upshot of such common-knowledge instances of devilry among the country's Holy-Joe imports is that even today, when someone with distinct European features turns up in an impoverished rural area, people simply shrug and say that a foreign priest must have intercepted the person in question's ancestral line.

Such historical material can, at best, only serve as backdrop for the burgeoning tales about clerical scandals, which have so far been confined to the First World. That they involve this particular Catholic pope, at this particular historical moment, when in fact these stories extend into conditions whenever and wherever patriarchy holds sway (not just the present, and not just in Christendom), bespeaks of interests that had been at play even during the specific period when Spanish rule, epitomized by friar

power, was being demonized in the Philippines: then as now, it was the Americans, the incoming colonizers, who took the lead in exposing the abuses of the Church—so just as we may be grateful for the outing of previously suppressed information, we might also do well to wonder who stands to benefit from such exposés in the end.

Joseph Ratzinger's insistence on ideals that had been bypassed by several centuries of liberalization efforts (the last occurring as recently as the 1960s, during the Second Vatican Council) has led to the ugly quagmire that his dispensation finds itself in. The fact that priests all over the Western sphere believed they could continue to rape and torture minors with impunity is consistent with, not counter to, the position that women have no right to their bodies, queers have no right to happiness, humans (poor ones especially) have no right to reproductive health, and all opposing faiths ought to make way for the "one" "true" church, complete with god's original (though long-dead) language, Latin. Emblematic of the darkest possible humor, were it not a real-life situation, would be the dozens of deaf children who attempted for decades to communicate to others their experience of abuse in the hands of an American priest who had meanwhile petitioned for, and received, clemency from the pope.

One more image, drawn from pedophile literature, would be that of hawks preying on hapless chickens. Once more, hard as it may seem, one must first attempt to withhold judgment; so yes, great literature can come out of such disturbing desire (witness *Lolita*, or *Death in Venice*), and a number of successful long-term relationships may have started from such distressing origins, if we were to accept some child-bride narratives at face value. However, as admitted atheist columnist Christopher Hitchens pointed out, the very people who represent an institution that upholds the most stringent moral standards (to the point where most of these have in fact already been rendered obsolete by modern history) ought themselves to conform to the most basic requisites of human decency, starting with the injunction to visit no harm, first and foremost, on the innocent and helpless.

In this instance of (pardon the pun) chickens eventually coming home to roost, one might hope, pray even, that Ratzinger and his minions could make the leap, resistant though they may seem to be, straight into the second millennium AD. For starters: maintain the separation of church and state,

accord reproductive health the import that good science has long acknowledged, respect the variegated possibilities of human sexual desire, provide for the ordination of women priests (and eventually a woman and/or non-white pope), and yield criminal transgressions to the jurisdiction of civil authorities. The apices of European classical art, music, architecture, and literature betoken the possibilities of lofty, if not divine, inspiration, but there remains no reason to restore the unlamented Holy Roman Empire just to be able to partake of these pleasures.

## A Benediction in the Offing

Catholics old enough to recall Latin passages in Sunday Mass will be more disturbed than the rest of modern society at the irreverence that greeted Joseph Ratzinger's recent announcement that he would be resigning from his position as Pope. *Slate* online magazine, for example, performed the clever maneuver of resurrecting the harshest assessments of Benedict XVI's reign written by the late Christopher Hitchens, on the correct but probably unnecessary assumption that Papal apologists would hesitate to criticize someone who had already died.

Most of the prevailing notions—or what we could now-ironically call conventional wisdom—dwells on a centuries-old Western opposition, between the Old World (medieval, patriarchal, European) and the New World (secular, progressive, American): specifically, that Benedict's attempt to roll back the changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council was undermined beyond redemption by the US's forward strides in terms of rejecting its own version of religious fundamentalism, promising for its citizens and the rest of the world a future marked by justice, tolerance, enlightenment, and capitalist prosperity.

Yet it would not be all that difficult to figure out where this utopic vision of a Kumbaya-perfect existence reaches its limit: a capitalist order anywhere, even within the US, will need a miseducated, misinformed, easily misled population (once commonly termed the Third World) in order to perpetuate the system of excessive profits afforded by uneven developmental patterns; from the perspective of old-style captains of industry, the



US was never more at risk internally than it was during the 1960s, when the emerging generations seemed to be awakening to the realities of oppression and threatening to institute systemic changes. The apparent present-day lurch toward fulfilling those temporarily suspended expectations will require a containment more severe but also more subtle than what religious superstition can afford; what form it will take will be the next stage in American social history.

Moreover, the basic tools used by American progressive thinkers (secularism, materialism, deconstruction, etc.) were generally formulated and developed in Europe, from practices in law and academia that could be traced, if only dimly today, to Christianity's then-still-benign influence during and after the "Holy" Roman Empire. Hence it would be possible to see the less-reverential responses to current Vatican State announcements as not so much owing entirely to a more secular Americanized sensibility, but probably even more to another centuries-old rivalry, between the monolithic Catholic Church and the diversified, often contentious Protestant denominations unified by the common goal of castigating Catholicism for its alleged negligence or outright rejection of Biblical prescriptions.

Filipinos are entitled, so to speak, to claim a unique position in this war of the (Old-vs.-New) worlds. For with the political and economic surrender of the country's Spanish occupants, what remained entrenched was the religious colonization wrought by European Catholic orders. In a perfect moral universe, the Philippine Church would have exercised its watchdog function against potential abuses and corruption by other foreign presences, starting with the entity that falsely claimed to have liberated the country from Spain: the US (temporarily supplanted by Japan, but dishearteningly welcomed back by the natives after World War II). A persistent line of thought among nationalist intellectuals holds that the US has succeeded in maintaining neocolonial control over the Philippines, thus accounting for the peculiar departures in the country's developmental narrative, in contrast with the more typical Asian experience of full postcolonial sovereignty.

In the context of this discussion, the Vatican State deserves to be recognized as the Philippines' other neocolonial presence. Its institutional and individual representatives continue to hold real property and collect financial returns, and openly advocate for its interests among native media and

elective officials. The fact that it does so for the sake of avowed ideals (God's will, in so many words) does not make it all that different from official US personnel who declare free market and global order as their rationale for intervening in local affairs. More tellingly, it has tended to collude with the US and the native elite whenever its interests can be promoted (recall the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines and the American Chamber of Commerce hailing the declaration of martial law) or are threatened (both Church and the US government withdrawing support for Ferdinand Marcos when the latter's leadership had become entirely untenable).

In the interstices of the Catholic-vs.-Protestant, Old World-vs.-New World conflicts that occasionally arise between the two entities, Filipinos have found possibilities for social critique and cultural resistance, no matter how contingent and ephemeral these may be at the moment. Occasionally one can sense these attitudes being expressed, especially in popular cultural forms, in texts that satirize colonial mentalities and religious fanaticism. Whether these can eventually enable the populace to stand for genuinely and recognizably Philippine national interests would be one of the many challenges that future generations will have to confront.

## Foreign Scenes

*As resident film critic of National Midweek, I had to compensate for two extensive absences in 1988, when I took my first foreign trips, by reporting on the countries I visited, with special attention to their film scenes. First was Thailand, and this and the next account I filed, from Japan, were printed after my arrival, with extensive illustrations. Although the Japan report was then better-received, it strikes me today as excessively melodramatic. The article on New York City was commissioned by a student publication during my exchange stint in Korea. I knew then that other folk would be paying attention, so I did a roundabout way of name-dropping the previous foreign locale I'd lived and worked in. Only the last report, on Korea, was written while I was living in the country (as I still do), as well as before the game-changing presidential regime of Rodrigo Duterte.*

### Tarriance in Thailand

The institutional film short gets played, not just once in a day, the way our national anthem does in Manila, but before every film screening, and

everyone has to stand. It's an amateurish curiosity—a succession of shots of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the present Thai monarch, detailing his childhood and maturation, and ending with a display of people's affection for the subject. All in slow dissolves of miserably taken still photographs. And no one attempts to laugh, or even giggle.

"Within the constitutional monarchy, the king's supposed to be beneath the law, but anything out of the ordinary can be carried out only in his name," said Surapone Virulrak, whom we address as *Ajan*, or teacher. He's the former dean of the communication faculty of Chulalongkorn University, which sponsored a video workshop for us teachers at the newly upgraded College (from Institute) of Mass Communication at the University of the Philippines. He supplements his lecture with unusually adroit sketches, a carry-over of his undergraduate training in architecture. He's also quite fluent in English, almost typically Filipino-academic, and that derives from some years of work and study in Seattle.

For his entire term as dean he had to turn down film and television lead-role offers. *Ajan* Surapone's arguably the most prestigious film actor in Thailand [circa the mid-'80s], and not just by his own account either; at least he was the most consistently nominated for film-acting awards, until the deanship came along. Now, he stars in a period soap-opera on TV, just to make the industry aware that, as he puts it, he's available again.

### Spectations

The first film I saw in Thailand roughly translated as *Tiger on Beat*. It was a rough-and-tumble detective movie, well-paced and contemporary in sensibility, but I had trouble asking further information from the Chula U hotel staff. Then I encountered the receptionist in the department store under lease from the university, and I pointed out the mini-theater where the movie was playing. "That's not Thai," he said, "That's Chinese."<sup>21</sup>

Next night I checked out a nearby movie-house where something that translated as *The Ghost Rises from the Grave and Causes a Riot* was playing—after confirming it was Thai, of course.<sup>22</sup> The box-office attendant wouldn't let me in after I specified my ticket price in English. "This is Thai," she said. "I know" I said, "I want to watch." "Sorry," she said, "this is Thai. You won't understand." Fortunately a long line had formed

behind me and those on it were, from the way they sounded, getting impatient.

The movie caused a riot, all right. As in *Tiger on Beat* the viewers were mostly teenage kids responding enthusiastically to every punchline (that's how I *knew* it was a punchline) and slapstick routine. The story oscillated between a village old-timer by day, giving advice to a bunch of, what else, teenage kids, and a haunted temple by night, where the kids try to liberate a lovely female ghost from the control of a prosthetically overcome phantom. This time I managed to correctly identify a trailer subtitled *Call Girls 88* as non-Thai;<sup>23</sup> the work wasn't as cheap as its title suggested—social-realist film noir, Hong Kong gone Hollywood, permeated the screen.

### Object lessons

"A Thai actor," Surapone was answering my question en route to the Grand Palace, where he would tour our group to what we made-believe was the envy of onlookers, "would make, maybe at the most, 150,000 baht [per project]." A baht's almost the price of our peso, 1 to 1.47 at the Dong Muang International Airport the day we left Thailand, 25 days into the country. And how much, I inquired further, would a highly paid movie actor get? Mentally deducting Dolphy's rate from, say, Eddie Garcia's, I had in mind differences in the millions. "Much less, of course," Surapone said. "About 100,000."

Bridget Zubiri, our head of delegation then going on a binge on Thai desserts, said, "Actors in the Philippines can make millions." Our *Ajan's* eyes dilated momentarily, then regained their admirably cultivated distance. "Ah yes, in Manila. I've been there before."

We were required to finish documentary projects on Thai handicrafts, which flourish in the northern city of Chiangmai, somewhat the lowland counterpart of our Baguio. We left the day after Songkran, the Thai New Year, when pouring water on someone earns blessings for the receiver and maybe a cold virus or two. *The Nation*,<sup>24</sup> one of two English language papers in Bangkok, ran a front-page picture of a policeman smiling at a Songkran reveler while reaching for his gun.

To our dismay Songkran in the north is observed for over a week. We'd sneak out of our bus for midday meals or snacks, when water-drenching is disallowed, then race back with merry-makers after us; we'd be lucky to get

back sans shivering from the air conditioner. No one dared go out to watch movies, although the glorious Doi Suthep temple-atop-a-mountain and the several-blocks-wide Night Bazaar were generally spared such sloshy frolic.

And anyway our quota of film pleasure had been met before we left. The night before *The Last Emperor* swept the Oscars, the film teachers in our delegation saw it and agreed it was a humanist achievement of sorts. Even extensive cavils by *The Nation* regarding allegedly pro-Chinese censorship practices that subtracted almost a half-hour from the original running time did not deter us from discussing at length what merits (and demerits) we found. At the very least a textbook case, we agreed, of classicism in epic filmmaking.

And then some: viewing it in Thailand gave me the added poignancy of identification with the paradox of not being satisfied with what most men would die fighting for. Pu-yi, the lead character, was basically the archetypal decent guy struggling to keep abreast of sweeping social developments that somehow managed to march a step ahead of him each time. The Thai king, after a succession of sometimes controversial and even excessive ancestors, did not have to deal with upheavals in the political structure, colonization by foreign powers, or the worst aftermaths of social revolutions. When he decided to institute reforms within himself, as monarchy, he actually took a step ahead of developments forthcoming in his society, particularly the Westernization and industrialization of Thailand.

### Misimpressions

We arrived bearing the notions of acquaintances who had been there at least a half-decade earlier. Don't worry, the line went, Bangkok's just like Manila. Going by the flora and natives, they were right. But the hour-long drive from Dong Muang airport to Chulalongkorn in the heart of the city revealed something else: Manila in a time-warp of what could have been if the political storm (read: the Marcos dictatorship and its aftermath) had never brewed at all.

Surapone, after some nagging and pleading on our end, finally screened for us his personal video copy of *Red Bamboo*,<sup>25</sup> which made waves during the last Manila International Film Festival. He played a monk caught between the irrelevance of old ways and the extremes of political radicalism. I quick-recalled the spate of politicized "biographical" films that emerged in the wake

of our 1986 revolution and wasn't surprised at *Red Bamboo's* resolution: the centrist won out in the end.

The only Thai film I'd seen prior to the trip was the official MIFF entry, Vichit Kounavudhi's *Son of the Northeast*.<sup>26</sup> It won a special jury prize as well as the Office Catholique Internationale du Cinema award, and has grown fondly since in my memory. I couldn't source a copy in the Bangkok video-shops, though, and even if I did there'd have been the additional expense of transferring it from an alien video system to one compatible with our own. I settled instead for a copy of the 1976 novel, a Southeast Asia Award-winner.

One last excursion into contemporary Thai cinema was a soft-core tearjerker called *Golden Butterfly*.<sup>27</sup> A rural lass gets gang-raped, submits to her hometown boyfriend, moves to the city and entertains a succession of lovers and rapists, and realizes to her horror that they all somehow get killed after sexual contact with her. Her golden-hearted employer pines after her, but since she genuinely loves him, she refuses to give in, until he too forces himself on her. What do you know, he gets shot by the girl's father, but the difference is that he survives, and he and she wind up on a meadow in bloom prior to another consummation of their passion.

I recalled how last year was dismal enough to outrage our local critics' group, but couldn't name any Filipino film item from the period that could compare with the naïveté of the two Thai titles I saw in downtown Bangkok. One movie-house was showing *Isla*, Maribel Lopez's literal coming-out film, and even if it were all cut up, which was likely, it could still provide a couple of lessons for Thai filmmakers on some merits (and a whole lot of demerits besides) of straightforward storytelling. And that was from five years back yet!

### Turning points

Then began our requisite studio tours, Channel this and Network that showcasing space-age technology and state-of-the-art equipment. One outfit in the itinerary confirmed my growing suspicion. Kantana Studio was actually a sprawling mansion where its showbiz-family owners reside. The place served the best meal among all the outfits we visited, but saved something even better for last: a video screening of a succession of extensive opening billboards of their TV series, some already expired, others still ongoing. Such imaginative exploitation of any audiovisual medium I had not seen since the

heyday of the Hollywood brats, honest. And so this is where all the talent promised by *Red Bamboo* and *Son of the Northeast* had gone, a crossover case.

Display shelves modestly kept to one side of the receiving area attested to Kantana's stature as record-holder in media awards in the country. Proof positive lay literally in the backyard studio lot: walk around a fair-sized pond complete with quay and a couple of boats, and you arrive at a block-long reconstruction of a Bangkok slum; farther down lies a simulated prewar prisoners' camp where cast and crew are busily working on a period series on political detainees. As we kept repeating, *hanep*.

I was a bit alarmed as well. A generous proportion of Pinoy film talent now works regularly for TV, and the current post-Marcos dispensation still refuses to taint its fingers, so to speak, by supplying the movie industry with the institutional support that the previous dictatorship provided. How long before Philippine cinema gets abandoned by its best and brightest, in favor of a less-satisfactory medium? More worrisome, is such a transition a necessary consequence of global media development?

The answer will have to wait, so meanwhile I sought a statistically normative means of escape. The movies, yes, but this time excluding Thai and Chinese outputs. *Fatal Attraction* still has to reach Manila, and *No Way Out* I hadn't seen. They charge plenty, 30 baht for the equivalent of orchestra comfort, and make you wait for the start of the screening, then make you leave afterward. I prefer this system, but I inquired anyway if any movie-houses observe the enter-anytime arrangement the way Manila theaters still do.

"Sure," said Surin, a Chula technician earning twice what I make from teaching. "In the second-run theaters. But not in Bangkok. In the provinces."

### Notes

21. The movie's star, Chow Yun-Fat, would eventually be globally famous in John Woo films, with 1992's *Hard Boiled* as his breakout role; directed by Lau Kar Leung, *Tiger on Beat*, like *Hard Boiled* and a lot of other Chow films, was a buddy movie. A closer Pinoy connection up to that point almost took place when he starred as a Vietnamese boat person in Ann Hui's *God of Killers* (1981), and was originally cast (though eventually replaced) in the same director's *Boat People*, made a year later.

22. Unfortunately I am unable to identify the movie today. The Internet Movie Database lists no Thai horror films from 1988, although it does identify two comedies, Bhandit Rittakol's *Boonchu Poo Narak* and Somching Srisupap's *Rak Rak Oom*; either one sounds likely, so I'd appreciate any reader providing a definitive confirmation of what this movie's Thai title was.
23. David Lam & Chi Wong's *Ying zhao nu lang 1988*, also translated as *Girls with no Tomorrow*, was an omnibus Hong Kong film that starred the now-inactive Elsie Chan and a then-lesser-known Maggie Cheung.
24. A Bangkok daily newspaper, not to be confused with the self-described "flagship of the left" New York weekly magazine.
25. Adapted from the 1954 novel by Mom Kukrit Pramoj, *Pai Daeng* (*Red Bamboo* in English) was directed by Permpol Cheyaroon in 1979.
26. Produced in 1982, *Son of the Northeast* was adapted from Kampoon Boonthawee's novel *Luk Isaan*.
27. I must acknowledge defeat at this point by admitting that I am entirely unable to even suggest which among existing Thai filmography titles this might be. The lesson to take away here is: watching films without translations provides unique insights into popular responses, but also leaves the observer completely helpless in attempting a recollection when archiving activities have been less than optimal. Needless to add, I have since been careful to make sure that native speakers accompany me during the foreign-language films I watch, to be able to provide me with translations.

## Empire of the (Risen) Sun

"Don't their heads ever bump together sometimes?" I asked Ruksarn Viwatsinudom, a Thai national. We were zigzagging across a sea of gray suits on the upper of two underground levels of Shinjuku district in Tokyo. Most of the gray-suit wearers were also hurrying in various directions, but quite a lot were facing one another and bowing profusely.

Ruksarn was too much in a hurry to respond with his usual repartee. "Taguchi-san was never late in Bangkok. I could stand him up there, but now we're in his country." We had actually cut some precious minutes from our training just to make this appointment: Ruksarn and I were the only

film teachers in an international delegation of 12, so we had arranged some specialized trips for our common concerns. Sure enough, with the overhead summer sun confirming both the stroke of noon and our arrival at our street-corner rendezvous came Taguchi-san, perspiring but pleased at our punctuality.

It wouldn't have been this discomposing for us had we stuck to the schedule submitted reliably by our coordinators every week or so; every minute would have been accounted for, including allowances for traffic and recovery from meals and trips. The training would last more than two months, inclusive of out-of-town tours by bullet train, but we were often allowed to spend our weekends and after-hours the way we wanted. Unfortunately no long trips or official transactions could be accommodated during these periods.

That was why we needed some help. Taguchi-san set up for us meetings with Imagica, a commercial audiovisual outfit, and Nihon Daigaku, a film-offering university. Imagica remains the only processor in Asia of Super 8 film, which we still used at the University of the Philippines, but the Tokyo headquarters did not handle that particular service. I had to content myself with the details of the branch concerned (too far from Tokyo to visit), plus jaw-dropping demonstrations of computer-graphic animation and a multi-slide presentation good enough to pass for a movie complete with split-screen features. Ruksarn's delight was fuller. At King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, where he founded and still oversees a film and video academic program, they never got to use Super 8; instead, students complete their works in 16mm. format, fully subsidized by the school and their coordinator.

But at Nihon Daigaku, which translates itself as Japan University and which had been offering a degree in cinema since the 1920s, he despaired somewhat. Equipment, which observed 16mm. and commercial 35mm. formats, was stored in huge warehouses according to type: here a light room, there a camera room, elsewhere an editing room, etc. Students operated their own film processors. Exercises could be done on any of three sound stages, complete with collapsible walls and overhead platforms for special setups. There were video facilities, of course, most of them up-to-date even by Japanese standards.

Ruksarn whispered something in Thai to a grinning Taguchi-san, then turned to me for the translation. “I want to kill myself,” he said. “Or else maybe steal all this equipment, whichever comes first.” How can I describe to you, went my dramatic internal monologue, how Third-World this makes me feel?

### Bench-lifting

I could do much better with our training exercises and final productions, which were conducted entirely in and for video; a film orientation definitely provides a qualitative advantage in this case. My name appeared in the credits of three out of four graphic animation productions, and I narrated four out of five documentaries, including my own. And Ruksarn’s.

When he, though jokingly, contemplated suicide, there was some irony we must have been aware of at the same time. Every week brought with it intensive television coverage of sensational international news—the Nepal killer quake, aerobatic collisions in West Germany, the fatal plane crash of the Pakistani prime minister, the prevalence of prostitution in neighboring countries like Thailand and the Philippines (to which we kept responding with indignation more face-saving than righteous). Other times, everyone’s attention would focus on local matters, such as a smashup between a submarine and a fishing vessel, the unusual delay in the arrival of summer weather, the relaxation of import restrictions on American oranges and beef, and the emergence of preschool-age suicides.

Earthquakes were the most common calamity we would experience, so much so that a week wouldn’t be complete without any. Once I was editing a Betacam exercise, the machine blinked and gave off a strange sudden scent, and the strongest tremor I ever felt in Japan (and the Philippines, in more than a decade) occurred; it was brief, and right afterward I looked around: the foreigners among us were all panic-stricken, the Japanese nonchalant. In one of our out-of-Tokyo destinations, a charming suburban city with Mt. Fuji (familiarily addressed as Fuji-san) looming in the distance, media officials outlined their earthquake safety measures. A prominent local specialist had been predicting one on the order of the great Kanto disaster of 1923, so the government, said one speaker, implemented some controls “to reduce the [estimated] millions of possible fatalities to a few hundred-thousands.”

The seeming fatalism of the Japanese in the face of such prophecies of doom, scientific or otherwise, hints at incredible collective powers of concentration. One respected savant had even been moved to conclude that the Japanese brain must be structured differently from that of the rest of humankind. No one seemed ready then to equate this logic with ultra-nationalism, which is how they refer to their overseas exploits during the last World War.

A more visible motive for their overpowering sense of survival would be the sheer number of fellow competitors. Metropolitan Tokyo has become one of the most populated capital in the world—as it was when it was called Edo, until (as a relatively young capital) it was decimated by earthquakes and, well, the consequences of ultra-nationalism.

Even then, I could write to my students and make them envious with my descriptions of what a wondrous convergence there was of attractive young people in the city, all of them extremely shy yet fascinated with foreigners. At the same time I learned quickly to steer clear of certain types of old-timers, the ones who don traditional garb and seem to have reached maturity during the mid-century: they would instantly recognize you as an outsider, and stare you down in public for not being one of their fortunate 120 million.

### Differences

How much I could be missing (one lecturer estimated the annual per capita income at nearly 4 million yen, or way over Php 600,000) I realized when I saw the teenage janitor of our international center driving a smart red sports car. Was the car his? I asked a receptionist. “I think so,” smiled Hashiguchi-san, who had treated Ruksarn and me to a movie and later sent me (in Manila) copies of *Tokyo Journal*. Was it brand new? “It must be.” How could he have bought it? Hashiguchi-san seemed as puzzled as I was. “Maybe he worked for it.”

Hashiguchi-san was the only Japanese I ever got to know, outside of Japan University, who shared a passion for films. Even the speakers in our training course, who represented Nihon Hoso Kokai (Japanese Broadcasting Center, a public agency) were fond of foretelling the eventual demise of the medium, what with continual advances in video. A more immediate cause, particularly among foreigners, was the price—1,500 yen, or about Php 400, for an ordinary orchestra seat.

But the most obvious reason for the decline in film attendance (almost 10 times less than 30 years ago) would be the near-absolute absence of necessity for the experience. Anywhere in Tokyo one is sure to run into an audio-visual stimulus; downtown the combinations can be downright staggering to a foreigner who isn't fluent enough in the language to fully understand what's being written or said—posters on walls, television screens in display windows, newspapers and magazines all over (including translations of foreign-language titles), multi-screens in shopping centers, performances in the streets, electronic billboards on buildings, airships in the sky.

The NHK lecturers themselves didn't even bother to single out the contributions of their compatriots to world cinema. Never cross the conversation axis (an imaginary line bisecting two speakers) and be careful with details in continuity, said our speakers on camera usage. *Rashomon*<sup>28</sup> would make a poor example in this case, but I couldn't presume yet to tell them so. The editors acknowledged the influence of film on video, even mentioning montage, but didn't point out how the Russians derived their revolutionary prescriptions from their study of Oriental ideograms.

How did this sort of attitude affect the state of Japanese cinema itself? I first tried to look for answers from the medium involved. *Dun-Huang*, a co-production with the People's Republic of China, reflected more the aspirations of the Japanese's cultural and racial ancestors (and erstwhile colonials), notwithstanding the common obsession with the past that gave rise to *Kagemusha* and *The Ballad of Narayama* not so long ago. The world-weariness that characterized both titles still could be felt in *Dun-Huang*, but the epic panache that once provided cinematic and ideological vigor had been replaced by a languor that allowed the spectacle to devour an already feeble premise.

*Dun-Huang* offers a dramatic explanation for the real-life existence of an ancient collection of scrolls in the middle of a Chinese desert. A scholar, according to the film, had seen too many material fortunes rise and fall with the passing of time (and a number of warlords as well) so that, as a final act of heroism, he decided to save not his city, not his present ruler, not even himself, but the store of knowledge that he had accumulated and committed to these delicate pieces of parchment.

Unlike other PROC co-productions, including *The Last Emperor* and even our very own *Hari sa Hari*, *Lahi sa Lahi* (but, in a manner of speaking, very

like its makers), *Dun-Huang* is strikingly isolationist. No foreigners interact with any of the characters here; even the Japanese have abstained from making distinct references to their love-hate relationship with the mainland, or selecting material that would allow them to throw in a Japanese national in so little as a minor role. Maybe such a philanthropic act as conjuring some sympathy for non-Japanese will take some practice on their part—after all, not since the current government have the Japanese been known to pay serious attention to their immediate, less-developed neighbors.<sup>29</sup>

Another title, Hashiguchi-san's treat, translated as *Tomorrow*—a day in the life of a Nagasaki family, ending with the nuclear bombing of the city in 1945.<sup>30</sup> The treatment was lovely but totally predictable, each member expressing her or his fond hopes for a next day that never came.

### Yesterday

More vivid was our tour of Hiroshima City, where a government building in the eye of the atom-bomb explosion was allowed to remain standing amid the absolute ruin of its surroundings. A longing for the past could be perceived in the city's desire for streetcars, but to be able to arrive as close as possible to a long-ago, you'd have to cross the bay to magical Miyajima Island, where speckled deer would approach you as you disembarked, to be petted or fed as you wished. The Hiroshima A-Bomb Museum screened for special guests gut-wrenching footage shot by Japanese government cameramen almost right after the bombing, confiscated right afterward and held for about three decades by the Americans. No amount of justification, including the declassified memoranda displayed in the museum detailing American findings of suspicious military activity in the city, would ever be able to account for the annihilation, both sudden and slow, of the innocent. Survivors and would-be fatalities walked as shadows, skin, hair, and internal organs falling out to give way to light. Surprisingly, I couldn't remember a single shot of a crying face; the horror must have transcended human comprehension. The absence of tears coupled with the anonymity of visible personae made the suffering more inwardly disposed, more heartbreaking.

Relatively easier to take was an encounter with a fellow citizen. I had learned in Shinjuku that Filipinas in Japan are very pretty, but could be mistaken for other Asian nationals. What gave them away were their stares: where Thais,

Indonesians or Malaysians would lower their eyes, Filipinas would rather that the stranger gave in before they did; they spoke better English too.

"You're a Filipino?" She looked like a young teacher out on a date with her boyfriend. She was attractive and he was Japanese and this was a side-street honky-tonk in Hiroshima. Pinoy, I said; it could have been a confirmation or a correction of her level of discourse.

SHE: Where are you staying?

I: In the hotel at the corner, I forget the name.

SHE: What are you doing here?

I: Observation tour. Part of a government scholarship for educational TV.

SHE: How long have you been here?

I: In Japan, almost two months. Hiroshima, we arrived yesterday, we're leaving in an hour.

SHE: [*without speaking*] Won't you ask me anything about myself? What I'm doing here, why I have to do it, what I feel about doing it?

I: [*in reply, also wordlessly*] Wouldn't it be better to just talk about things we can answer now?

SHE: *Sayang*, I'd like to give a letter to my family.

I: I could give them a message, just tell me where to go.

SHE: No, they're too hard to find. *Maha-hassle ka lang*. I'm not even sure of their address anymore. [*Without speaking again.*] You don't have to remind them I'm alive and working in Japan. I send them the money they need.

### To give peace a chance

The Japanese no-nukes movement is based in Hiroshima, its theme is peace. One of our documentaries was a coverage of the delightful science museum of Toshiba, which happened to be the country's main proponent of nuclear power. We watched the commemoration of the bombings on Tokyo television while doing storyboards on the museum.

More subliminal were the dream states induced by nocturnal media. Hotel-room TV sets suddenly became capable of providing forbidden fare

with a few hundred-yen coins. In Shinjuku you could select from a number of small air-conditioned cubicles complete with cushion, tissue paper and trashcan, feed a thousand-yen note into a slot of the "video box" and watch even kinkier material.

Traditional blue-film screenings still had to struggle for patronage, surrounded as they tended to be by competitive video outlets. I watched a triple-fare treat in a Quiapo-seedy-type movie-house. The items, about an hour long each, were tongue-in-cheek (sometimes literally) presentations of various erotic complications, quite competently executed. I made the mistake of asking some elderly Japanese what the collective title meant, until Hashiguchi-san explained that *Onanie* was derived directly from the biblical character.<sup>31</sup>

One final search area I refused to take seriously, until it was almost too late; it yielded at least one possibility of where we were all headed. The discovery was somewhat accidental. We learned that our international center actually bordered the military camp where Yukio Mishima committed his spectacular multimedia suicide. Naturally we were thrilled, a reaction that seemed to embarrass the receptionists who volunteered the information. I asked if it were possible to get inside the place, but was instead offered an 80-percent discount on an entrance ticket to Tokyo Disneyland.

So there I went, sampling some woolly roller-coaster rides, until I noticed a cluster of postmodern-style pavilions. "American Journey" provided a 360-degree sensurround experience through an encirclement of projectors. "Captain EO" was the old three-dimensional trick utilizing tinted glasses, updated with real-life laser and smoke effects; Francis Coppola directed a George Lucas production of Michael Jackson saving the future from evil and misery by singing and dancing his latest hit, "Another Part of Me."<sup>32</sup>

The last audiovisual happening was free; it was also the most amazing; and, unlike the previous ones, it was Japanese. "Meet the World" combined several levels of video projection with the dioramic interactions of moving mannequins. A theatrical entertainment commercialized by Louis Daguerre before he invented the photographic process that bears his name was revived, to stunning effect, by having the audience physically transported, where they sat, to other designated tableaux.

In a flight of fancy<sup>33</sup> I had earlier written that the future of film lay in a combination of various levels of projection with live actors. Here I was



witnessing the realization of such a principle, but using video and robots. The subject matter was absolutely perfunctory—a capsule history of the Japanese nation, pre-school level—meaning that true film talents still had to claim what was undeniably a mutation, a hybrid even, of their medium. At least some Hollywood guards had bothered to come up with the confection that was “Captain EO”; but will we ever live to witness, say, a Steven Spielberg superspectacle in the mold of “Meet the World”?

As with the no-nukes movement or prostitution issue, a Third-World subject could only write about what did or could happen. The Japan Airlines plane rose above bald mountains alternating with population-center infrastructure, and a few hours later brought before me expanses of green, beside a bay whose waters seemed to absorb, rather than reflect, the hues of the setting sun. It could have been literally fatal; good thing I had gorged myself sick on sushi and sashimi every opportunity I had back there.<sup>34</sup> By airmail I exchanged curricular information with King Mongkut Institute in Bangkok and with Japan University, and pictures and postcards with most of the other delegates and some Japanese acquaintances. My first weekend home Hirohito fell sick, and an entire nation stood still, waiting. Wonder if the earthquakes and suicides similarly held their peace?

## Notes

28. *Rashomon* was a global hit from Japan, made in 1950 by Akira Kurosawa based on stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa.
29. The films in the paragraph, in order of mention, are as follows: *Dun-Huang* (a.k.a. *Tonkō* or *The Silk Road*), dir. Jun'ya Satō, 1988; *Kagemusha*, dir. Akira Kurosawa, 1980; *The Ballad of Narayama*, (a.k.a. *Narayama-bushi kō*) dir. Shōei Imamura, 1983; *The Last Emperor*, dir. Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987; *Hari sa Hari, Lahi sa Lahi*, dir. Eddie Romero, 1987.
30. *Tomorrow* (a.k.a. *Tomorrow—ashita*), dir. Kazuo Kuroki, 1988.
31. An Internet Movie Database filmographic entry exists on the title *Special Onanie* (dir. Masahito Segawa, 1987), which does run for about an hour, but unless this specific film title was shortened and made to stand for the rest, and was hardcore in nature, then information on an omnibus collectively titled just *Onanie* will have to be presumed lost. This type of film would be known outside Japan as

“pink *eiga*” (presumably in contrast to the Western “blue movie”) and circulated with some success in foreign festivals long afterward, during the 1990s.

32. This was actually the MTV version of the song from MJ's *Bad* album, enhanced with special live effects.
33. See “Carnival Cinema,” originally published February 7, 1990, in *National Midweek*, and anthologized in *Fields of Vision: Critical Applications in Recent Philippine Cinema* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1990) 102-05.
34. The discoloration of coastal water turned out to have been the first incidence of red tide in the National Capital Region in modern times.

## Small Worm, Big Apple

I could have been one of the many jinxes that started upending the junkyard paradise that was New York City since the 1990s. The World Trade Center was first bombed a few months after I arrived and collapsed a few months before I finally left for home. A demented tourist shot a number of sightseers at the observation deck of the Empire State Building—a structure that loomed right outside the office where I worked for almost eight years. An unemployed immigrant also shot several passengers on a train leaving the city for the suburbs. The stock market plunged twice, first because of the Asian economic recession, then because of the overvaluation of dot-com shares.

In all instances except the last, foreigners were considered responsible for what happened. Yet this was one of the contradictions about living in that city, as opposed to living elsewhere in North America: everyone there was a foreigner, or had descended from one. Of course virtually all Americans are non-native, but it seemed that only when they get to New York do they care to point out how, at some point in the past, they actually belonged elsewhere.

The place had a certain way of exacting payback. I was supposed to be able to finish my studies, my share of the all-American dream, through the all-American method of working hard. What didn't show up in the equation was that the money I'd earn, the largest I'd ever make in my life up to that point, would amount to less than nothing in the face of the exorbitant cost of

living. I eventually wound up with my graduate degrees, plus a few thousand dollars' worth of student loans.

In the face of such an unwelcome and unmitigated disaster, how did I manage to muddle through? If I thought then, as I do now, that the place was just as badly (or even worse) hit than I was, that would have been no consolation. Once I left the city, I'd have to wait out two years working in the Philippine national university before I could find a job that paid decently enough to cover the loan payments.

The answer would be self-evident enough to anyone living in New York. The place itself has enough talent and diversity to make even the poorest resident occasionally feel lucky to be alive. A master violinist from a major Chinese orchestra, a black doo-wop trio with remarkable timing and perfect harmony, a female performance artist who could assume unusual poses for long stretches, Peruvian musicians invoking the Andes through their *charango* and panpipes, and so on ... and these were just the characters one could encounter performing for loose change in the subway.

When the major opera houses announced their new seasons, I'd be in line for my student-priced tickets, each one a tenth of what a Broadway musical would cost me. One of the little secrets of long-time "cultured" New Yorkers is that they never go to Broadway, only to the opera, although my reason for attending was that I was a student of the spectacle (of cinema, but before that, historically speaking, there was only the stage). When my out-of-town friends would insist on Broadway shows then complain about how backward the stories were and how old-fashioned their politics played out, I'd try to convince them to try an opera, which would have the same brand of outmoded ideological messages, but with better music, finer singing, and grander staging. Besides, I'd say, Broadway's origins lay in a lesser form, the Viennese operetta. No go, though; seemed like people in the rest of the world would not respect any of their friends who went to New York and spent their time on presentations that did not feature pop stars and current music.

I always envied those who'd been to the great museums of Europe, but every so often the New York institutions would mount retrospectives that would be the equivalent of the usually-dead artists coming back to rework their magic: Joan Miró, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, the circle of French surrealists, and of course the shock artists whose exhibits

then-mayor Rudy Giuliani kept attempting to thwart. In my specialization, I'd taken the number of free and discounted film screenings so much for granted that, when my home university asked me for my first-year viewing list, I was amazed to jot down, based on my notes, brochures, and tickets, over 300 titles of the widest possible array of movies, from high art to trash, from festival favorite to disreputable pre-Disneyfied Times Square run, from fun genre sample to structural-materialist cerebration (my favorite, which I made sure to watch twice in its entirety, was three hours of Michael Snow whirling his camera on various axes from atop a Canadian mountain).

There'd be food my friends and I would treat ourselves to when we had the spare funds, categorized according to nationality: Greek (authentic but also occasionally the code word for all-around New York diner), Italian, Mexican, French, Spanish, Ethiopian, Malaysian, Indian, Korean, and the always-reliable Chinese. Wines could be found for as low as \$3 a bottle, so I could indulge my alcoholic depression by pretending I was learning vintage and vinification.

All in all the range and breadth of distractions would be enough to make you believe the place was worth living in despite its inadequate services and pugnacious population (and hey, I was one of them too for a time). Enough to sometimes forget what you originally came for, in fact. The first time my late father saw me again, he said: "I can't believe it—I never thought I'd live to see the day when you grew old." He said I reminded him of Rip van Winkle, a New York character created by a New York author. And at that point I knew the dream was over. I was finally back home.

## Unease in the Morning Calm

News about the latest saber-rattling from the pseudo-socialist feudal monarchy of North Korea still has the capacity to upset folks back home in the Philippines, despite the fact that South Korea happens to be, after Mongolia, the farthest East Asian country from the archipelago. Our connection with the peninsula goes deeper than the appreciation of *telenovela* and K-pop products shared by our neighbors and now, thanks to Psy, by the rest of the world.

The Catholic sector claims to having had historical precedence in Philippine-Korean relations (a pre-20th-century martyred missionary was supposedly trained in Asia's first Christian outpost), but the more vital connection was realized by the Koreans first, prompted by their traumatic initiation in their experience of colonization: when they sought the help of Western powers to support their resistance against Japanese occupation about a century ago, they realized that the first country they expected to help them, the US, had effectively agreed (in the Taft-Katsura Memorandum) to allow Japan its "right" to annex Korea as long as Japan in turn recognized the US's claim to the Philippines.

From that point onward Korea and the Philippines would be bound by America's Asian interests. Filipinos responded to South Korea's call for assistance during the Korean War, earning admiration from the beleaguered population for their level of prosperity, second then only to Japan. The Koreans' cool attitude toward their former colonizers is key to what has since become a genuine alternative to Western-style development, where an aspirant to First-World status jump-starts (and sometimes maintains) its journey to material progress by forcibly exploiting an "other" population, whether within its borders (as slaves) or in another country, with plunder and extermination constituting extreme but (from the colonizer's perspective) occasionally necessary measures.

What South Korea (henceforth Korea) had wrought since then, which several other non-East Asian nations managed to replicate, was an attainment of developed status using the formula claimed but never actually deployed by the originary European model: sheer hard work, where in effect the capitalistically exploited group is the native population itself. Such an option could only be available to genuinely decolonized states—and once the US extended its imperial Cold War arrangements beyond Latin America to include the Philippines, that model had less than a snowball's chance in Manila of surviving on our shores.

Yet within the interstices of covert premises that distinguish marginal relationships (the political as much as the personal), it would be possible to assert that Koreans found their inspiration in the early Philippine example; in much the same way we could aver that Filipinos also persisted in their pursuit of the now-patentable Asian model developed, pun intended, by

Korea, in spite of the US's inescapable neocolonial stranglehold, not by resisting their colonized condition but by embracing it and proffering the only products they can lay claim to—their literal selves—to any master willing to take possession of their services.

This admittedly hasty account helps explain, on the one hand, why among East Asians it is the Koreans rather than the more historically empire-minded (and populous) Japanese and Chinese who found vast and open acceptance in the rest of Asia via their popular cultural products; and on the other hand, why it is the Philippines that has become the Koreans' favorite single-country destination. As Filipinos, we shortchange ourselves if we believe that our English-language expertise and our tropical-paradise resorts have sufficed in attracting the hardest working, least self-forgiving nationals in the world, a people who deal with their distinction of having the highest unhappiness indicators (divorce and suicide) among OECD member-countries not by easing up, but by hunkering down and driving themselves even more mercilessly.

The trade-off becomes apparent to the increasing numbers of Filipinos who arrive in Korea as workers and/or spouses and participate in a highly regimented system where historically uninterrupted Confucianist patriarchy has fused with Western orthodoxy so successfully that the observance of hierarchical orders (the young deferring to the old, women deferring to men, and so on) has achieved the semblance of an all-encompassing secular religion: the government can set an audaciously precise goal (recovering from recession, for example, or introducing a microtechnological innovation) and the rest of the nation moves accordingly to ensure it arrives, as announced, on schedule. For this reason, long-time foreigners have learned to respond to unusual events such as North Korea's latest noise barrage by taking the cue from the local population: their contemptuous dismissal of the stink being raised by the big boy across the DMZ rings louder by being so utterly silent. *Try invading again*, seems to be the sentiment, *and see whether you'll ever want to return to your old regime after taking in wonders your imagination can't even begin to comprehend*.

They may as well be addressing the Filipinos too, but the Philippines has a ready retort: free from the developmental treadmill that has the other Asians running just to stay in place, and much wiser after realizing how

easily the American dream can betray most of its purchasers, the people of the islands can be as free as they wish to be, as cynical of the values that Western (and Westernized) peoples hold dear, and as kind as only those who have nothing to lose can get. Until one of a multitude of masters from foreign shores comes calling, life can be beautiful, as it was always meant to be.

7

## Metacriticism

### How to Become a Film Critic

*This was drafted and published in my second year as member of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino—too soon to be calling out my colleagues, but I’ve never let up since. The organization’s officers tsk-tsked me during the next meeting after the article came out, and said that the group needed to discuss the issues I raised. That (typically?) never came to pass. The one productive result for me was an extended one-on-one I had with Bienvenido Lumera, discussing the problem of tone and distance in critical writing—proving once more than nothing gets wasted even when your best intentions result in a tawdry bit of trumpery. (Minor note: I also retained the use of the outmoded masculine third-person pronoun as a way of signaling the article’s dated nature.)*

Anyone can become a film critic. One need only browse through the countless movie magazines that have been published since the abolition of the Print Media Council to find proof and, possibly, pluck in such a statement. For film criticism is here to stay. The indispensability of film reviews to the survival of the industry itself is rivaled only by that of intrigues and

controversies. Even the forthcoming film festival, an undertaking of dubious motivations, will include a screening of local films chosen by whom the organizers consider the country's film critics.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, any movie publication worth its newsprint seeks to restore the prestige lost by its reliance on gossip and pornography by playing up relatively serious film articles. For the movie writer who wants to acquire as wide a readership as possible and maintain his dignity at the same time, film criticism affords the best compromise.

Film criticism, to begin with, is not literature. Fossilized fogies who maintain that it is a specialized form of writing are either sore over the prosperity of those whom they consider hacks or simply frustrated film critics themselves. The aspiring film critic who has no intention of venturing into academe, however, has nothing to fear from such absurd assertions. Neither does film criticism entail membership in a critics' group: the only existent one in the country, by not having accepted new members this year, may be bent on extinction. Besides, apart from the fact that its awards are under fire from various sectors of the movie industry, the group, as pointed out by a tabloid columnist, cannot wield the influence of a corporation (which it is not).

Local film criticism is a simple matter of using any of a number of convenient and easy-to-master approaches, which could be categorized according to the disciplines they fall under.

### Power plays

True to the nature of Philippine politics, the political approach to film criticism is the most simplistic yet the most effective one available to the beginner. Contrary to academic requisites, however, it does not necessitate the mastery of every possible ideology; one of two will do. The first is rightist film criticism, wherein anything directly or indirectly supportive of the present dispensation may be labeled true, good, or beautiful, or combinations thereof. The basic defense here is that film, like any other mass medium, should serve its audience by serving the latter's leadership. This is best achieved by depicting the leadership's preoccupations, usually consisting of amorous adventures and counterinsurgency operations.

The rightist film critic will find a ready body of praiseworthy work in National Media Production Center documentaries and Ramon Revilla or

Anthony Alonzo movies. He will find a receptive audience through various government, military, and corporate publications. The leftist film critic, on the other hand, would thrive best in a campus setting. He would have to contend, though, with the possibility of press censorship. This risk considered, the leftist film critic is sure to find a gullible readership so long as he conforms to Marxist ideology. To fulfill the requisites of historical materialism, he can cite a number of movies that have fallen prey to the paws of the establishment's appointed watchdogs, the censors.

Movies as old as *Patria Amore* (1929) and as recent as *Sakada* (1976) lend themselves conveniently to the leftist political approach since, by virtue of their having been banned in some form or another, they need not be subjected to aesthetic evaluations. Their very absence can, in a sense, be made to speak for themselves. The more insecure leftist film critic can take a corollary stance—that of the angry young writer who maintains that nothing of filmic import can ever be produced within a capitalist setup. Here the job is considerably simplified to castigating every movie that comes along. Lino Brocka's movies on squatters, for example, can be criticized for presenting problems, but not the solution—which, of course, is revolution.

### Populism

Readers of movie magazines should by now be familiar with the standard assertion of movie scribes that the moviegoing audience is the only valid judge of cinematic taste. The justification here is at once both romantic and democratic, premised as it is on the verity of film as mass art. To wit: since the masses alone determine the fate of movie projects via their peso votes, a film can only be as good as the extent of its viewership. This way, box-office bombs can be defused without attendant critical commotion.

The populist film critic will not be wanting in outlets. Writers for movie magazines are currently among the highest paid in print media and, as stressed earlier, are under pressure to provide a semblance of scrutiny for the productions they publicize. The social approach to film criticism would endear the practicing critic to both successful producers and the masses of moviegoers responsible for that rarity, the box-office biggie. For lending prestige to propitious productions and articulating the people's preferences, the populist film critic certainly deserves all the prosperity and popularity due him.

### Traditionalism

The last approach comes closest to film criticism as commonly conceived; even then there are subtle but significant variations that the beginner should be made aware of. The first requires a background of film history, so that current movies may be judged according to their semblances to acknowledged masterpieces. The traditionalist critic, in this regard, can rave over Regal Films' musical-comedies on the basis of their generic affinities with Manuel Silos's works—taking care to let go of the fact that the latter were innovative while the former are not; or he could commend Dolphy's or Chiquito's fantasy movies for reminding him of Manuel Conde's costume comedies, so long as he makes no mention of the latter's technical excellence and good taste.

Another possible approach to local film as art involves references to other art forms. The connoisseur-critic could justify a favorite director's poor pacing by calling his style "poetic" or "painterly"; or, in a more nationalistic vein, he could defend tearjerkers or action movies by drawing respective similarities to the *senakulo* or *moro-moro*.

### Cultism

The most popular artistic approach, however, makes no reference to any art form other than film itself. The cultist-critic's standard refuge lies in the *auteur* (French for "author") school of film criticism. Auteurism involves the insistence on the film director as the sole creative force behind cinematic art. This approach conveniently does away with the consideration of various contributions to a collective complex.

The cultist-critic could, for example, openly express his enjoyment of *Dear Heart* or *Hello, Young Lovers*, since the same respective directors of *Hindi sa Iyo ang Mundo*, *Baby Porcuna* or *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* should presumably have had, however subtly, some sense behind their scenes. Taking the cue from a self-styled cultist for Fernando Poe Jr., the cultist-critic could also build a case for similar actor-directors like Eddie Garcia and Eddie Rodriguez as underrated compleat-auteurs.

### Ready to roll

The aspiring film critic's best preparation consists of a listing of degrees, awards, organizations, plus a subsidiary catalogue of films seen and books

read. Even careless compliments might prove to be of some good future use. All these he should be able to recount at the drop of a—pardon the pun—pen. For the aspiring critic can, depending on his curriculum vitae, get away with anything so long as he constantly reminds both editors and readers of his qualifications. For this reason he can also afford to be subjective in his evaluations; in fact the less he knows the more he has to be subjective, since even the semblance of a framework could provide rivals with a basis for demolition.

Also the aspiring film critic should realize as early in his career as possible that he could never survive on film criticism alone; at the same time he should take heart in the fact that others before him have devised various means for survival. Some have resorted to press relations work for those whom they deem the more sensible members of the movie industry. The rationale here lies in the defensible proposition that the well-intentioned are worth working for anyway.

### Footholding

The more fortunate film critics have managed to strike the ideal balance between profit and presence by writing columns. Columnist-critics can get away with almost anything; this, however, can prove disadvantageous, as in the case of former *People's Journal* mainstay Giovanni Calvo, since offended parties would usually wait for more opportune moments before striking. This columnist-critics can turn to their advantage by encouraging opponents to air their grievances, thereby acquiring more material for future write-ups.

The Filipino film critic will know he has arrived when he could write as infrequently as possible and still be regarded as someone to deal (in more ways than one) with. To solidify his reputation he should first join a film organization or critics' group, then find an alternative source of income. At this stage one action complements another: just as infrequent writing minimizes his exposure to extensive counter-criticism, his landing some preferred position would be facilitated by his expanded curriculum vitae.

Finally, the Filipino film critic should steel himself against guilt. For not only will he be watching the (onscreen and otherwise) decline of Philippine films, he will also be contributing to it just as he could, materially speaking, make it contribute to him in return. With his help the movie industry may

yet succeed in sustaining its critical condition until further developments reel in.

### Note

35 The Print Media Council was one in a series of bodies that supposedly provided self-regulatory control over content, but which mainly functioned as censorship agencies tasked to oversee the broadest applicable interpretations of “national security” and “morality” issues. The “forthcoming film festival” mentioned here was the 1981 Manila Event, the (regime-declared) successful dry-run for the Manila International Film Festival series.

## Some Words on Film Awards

*Here’s an article that took a long time to post because of its accompanying table. I wrote it during the year when a few friends and I founded Kritika, the film critics’ group that (as explained further in the article) we felt implemented our idea of how awards should be conducted. The group folded up after two years, since most members traveled abroad either as migrants or as graduate students—but, as I once wrote elsewhere, only semi-ironically, this was the best demonstration of how truly responsible (self-critical) critics should handle the irresolvable question of prize-giving: by self-de(con)structing. I could not find an archival original of this article anywhere, and my own faded photocopy does not include date or page numbers. Even the matrix illustrating 1991’s film awards was severely misaligned—and since my sources then were print reports, some of the entries could not contain the complete list of nominees if these happened to be missing from the news items. What the article aimed to do was provide a snapshot of a year’s award-giving activities; as it turned out, even more movie awards emerged since then, but none of them have been as innovative as Kritika purported to be.*

Awards for Philippine film excellence have been around for the most part of the best years of local cinema. The early versions were first handed out during what is now called the first Golden Age of Philippine film (roughly the 1950s) while the current versions all developed during the second half of

the Marcos period, or what is now alternately being called the Second Golden Age (my term) or the new cinema (per Bienvenido Lumbera). Perhaps the most significant element in the formation of local film awards has been the presence of media commentators. In fact, even before the very first Filipino film awards were declared, newspapers undertook the task of clarifying for the public what they believed were the outstanding local films: in 1930, for example, the period’s leading critic wrote that Jose Nepomuceno’s adaptation of Jose Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere* was “the best Filipino film to date.... It is interesting to speculate just exactly ... how long it will be before another—naturally higher—standard is set for Filipino films.”

As if to further confirm this insight, the very first awards on record were instituted by a newspaper outfit, the Manila Times Publishing Co. Only two sets of trophies were handed out, in 1950 and 1951, before the concept, called the Maria Clara Awards, gave way to what was misleadingly called the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences, or FAMAS, Awards. Even this early it became evident that local film observers were aware of the pitfalls of existing award-giving bodies and made efforts to introduce reforms—not from within the institutions themselves, but by setting up new bodies instead. For example, the credibility of only one newspaper among many passing judgment on a complex art form would be limited by the expertise of that particular newspaper’s policies and personnel, so the need to have a more acceptable name—as “academy,” after the example of America’s Oscars (handed out by the US Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)—was the order of the day.

On the other hand, the influence wielded by the press was too strong, since after all, it had been the sole independent expositor of public judgment on local films since the inception of the industry. Not surprisingly, the FAMAS, despite its name, was actually dominated by various print practitioners—an improvement over *Manila Time*’s single-newspaper monopoly of the Maria Clara Awards, but definitely far from the nature of an authentic academy. For about a quarter-century this was all we ever really had, unless we count in the special case of local-government awards (the Manila Film Festival, begun in 1965 and later merged with other city-based efforts into the still-current Metro Manila Film Festival) as well as the occasional international festival prizes.

In the final analysis, one cannot deny that the FAMAS served a highly estimable function during its early years, with its record of having recognized a high concentration of currently acknowledged film masterpieces during the first Golden Age. The decline in the quality of its recognition may initially be ascribed to the overall decline in the output of the industry itself, due to the downfall of the studio system during the 1960s. However, when other award-giving bodies managed to recognize some of the more innovative products of the Second Golden Age, the FAMAS was unable to keep up with the times, thus resulting in an extremely uneven lineup of honorees.

### New Bodies

In 1976, two new award-giving bodies were formed, partly as a corrective to the FAMAS's increasingly unsatisfactory performance. The first was an expansion of the Catholic Church's then-long-dormant Citizen's Awards for Television, which used to give out occasional prizes to film achievement, into the Catholic Mass Media Awards, among which film was a crucial field. The second was the Urian Awards of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, the first organized group of Filipino critics. The CMMA was laudable in its interdisciplinary scope, attempting to cover as wide a range of practice as possible, thus opening up the possibility of demonstrating interaction among various media. The Urian, on the other hand, can be regarded as a more idealized version of the non-academy FAMAS, since public-relations and otherwise supposedly unqualified writers were excluded.

Nevertheless new limitations in practice eventually emerged—more immediately in the case of the CMMA, since its espousal of non-aesthetic and non-materialist criteria (intended to be derived from religious doctrine) tended to mystify rather than clarify several of its choices. In the case of the Urian, its effectivity was circumscribed by the mode of practice that it assumed: although purportedly an alternative, it opted to play the same showbiz game as the others in announcing a set of nominees, then declaring the winners after a period of mounting tension, thus giving occasion to a highly visible (not to mention profitable) award-giving ceremony.

The other bodies that followed attempted either to improve on or to compete with these existing groups. The Film Academy of the Philippines became the true academy, consequently suffering the display of lack of critical

evaluation; a lot of its choices, in fact, are regarded as no better than prizes for popularity. The MMFF was to the government what the CMMA is to the Catholic Church, thus being subject to its mother institution's errors in historical perception (including the Marcos-era's ill-advised "developmental" prescriptions); yet, owing to its early-festival timing, the MMFF's awards had the edge over all the other bodies in helping boost the box-office stock of its winners. The Philippine Movie Press Club's Star Awards may be seen as a force potentially more credible than the FAMAS and more powerful than the Urian and a true counterpart, in keeping with our observance of Hollywood trends, of the Golden Globe Awards. Alternatives to these necessarily mainstream bodies have been provided by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (formerly the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines) and the University of the Philippines, in their regular film (and, lately, video) competitions.

Expectations remained highest in the case of the Urian, however, since this was the group that mandated itself with the propagation of critical activity. Apart from the fact that most of its members tended to write less (partly due to the constricting high-art formalist nature of its awards criteria), the impact of the award itself began to diminish in significance with the emergence of several overlapping bodies; moreover, film artists, starting with the late Lino Brocka, began expressing gripes that could be traced to the absolutist nature of the prizes—only one winner per category could be declared over all the rest during each annual edition. At one point (in 1987) the Urian decided not to give out any prizes whatsoever, but this only made matters worse, aggravating the charges of elitism and its fostering of divisiveness among film artists.

The latest set of awards to have emerged has attempted to build on the more positive lessons provided by the experiences of these existing bodies. Like the press bodies, the group called Kritika (The Filipino Critics Circle), is expected to comprise active writers in media; like the CMMA, it is interdisciplinary in nature; and like the Urian, it commits itself, if only in name, to the pursuit of critical discourse in the country. (Its historical predecessor was actually the MPP, via first the breakaway group Young Critics Circle, followed by a further split in ranks resulting in Kritika.)

Unlike the previous groups, however, it has eschewed the traditional means of award-giving. Winners are announced forthwith, without having



to go through the trauma of competing with colleagues and awaiting a high-profile ceremony; several winners—whether works, individuals, or institutions—may be declared within flexible levels of achievement, in recognition of the fact that complex media forms (especially film) can accommodate innovations in differing aspects of achievements; attainments also need not be penalized according to their respective modes of production—hence alternative works may stand their own alongside mainstream ones; lastly, what the group hands out in addition to trophies, which connote finality and closure, are previously published citations, wherein the reasons for the prize and the choice of winner are explained in full. What this new form of prize-giving will result in still has to be seen, but meanwhile a whole new perspective on the role and responsibilities of critics has opened up, constituting a challenge to all the previous awards practitioners.

### 1991 as Sample

To demonstrate the cornucopia of issues that could result from the multiplicity—and redundancy—of having all these awards bodies in place, we could use a sample year as basis for observation. The last set of awards, all for 1991 productions, covered roughly a year; but only the festival prizes (Manila, CCP, and Metro Manila events chronologically) were handed out during the year itself, while the rest, logically enough, had to wait until the year was over. The CMMA, for its part, opted not to give out any awards this year, citing the numerous (and still ongoing) human-caused and natural disasters that demanded church ministration. Thus a total of eight sets of trophies became available, but then again, it would be impossible for any institution or individual to sweep the entire list for the same production, simply because the two local-government festivals could only allow the participation of entries in either one or the other. One could note here that, while the CCP festival can be justified as an alternative in most respects to the other festivals (not to mention the mainstream), the spectacle of having a filmfest for Manila, a part of Metro Manila, may be a tad too much—especially in the light of the re-emergence of Cebuano-language cinema, the regional production alternative.

Among the best-film winners, two—*Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.* and *Ipagpatawad Mo*—share three trophies each, although the first has one

loss (a nomination from the FAP) while the second has two (the Star and FAMAS). *Kailan Ka Magiging Akin* and *Sa Kabila ng Lahat* have one prize each, while five others, including *Ipagpatawad*, have what may be considered qualified triumphs: MMFF second- and third-best for *Juan Tamad at Shooli sa Mongolian Barbecue (The Movie)* and *Darna* respectively, and Kritika Silver Prizes for *Huwag Mong Salingin ang Sugat Ko*, *Ynang Bayan*, and *Masakit sa Mata*, and a Particularly Noteworthy Prize for *Ipagpatawad*. Would this make *Pacita M.* the more quantitatively unqualified winner, or do the two thrice-winners equal out because of *Ipagpatawad*'s additional nominations?

An even more interesting case would be that of *Yuta*, which may be seen to share the rank of the two contenders by virtue of its CCP, Kritika, and Urian prizes, but which actually has one more—an FAP trophy—from the previous year. On the other hand, what to do with awards like the FAP's and the Urian's that declare a film's excellence in a category separate from others simply by virtue of non-artistic limitations that may not be the fault of its maker(s) at all? Eleven other titles have remained on the level of best-film contenders, some of them, mostly festival entries, not even bearing any crossover distinction in terms of being nominated by the other bodies. *Hihintayin Kita sa Langit* holds the record for non-winning nominations with three, followed by *Kislap sa Dilim* with two. *Una Kang Naging Akin*, *Boyong Mañalac: Hoodlum Terminator*, and *Makiusap Ka sa Diyos* actually yielded prizes for their respective talents—all performers—in other categories, with *Hihintayin* coming up with an impressive seventeen. *Pacita M.* has nineteen in addition to its best-film prizes (plus a competition-level participation, in effect a nomination, from the Singapore International Film Festival), while *Ipagpatawad* has nine. Can a final aggregate winner now be determined?

### Individual Contenders

*Pacita M.*'s director Elwood Perez, writer Ricardo Lee, and actress Nora Aunor share four trophies each from various bodies, with Lee winning an additional two for story and Aunor a FAMAS Hall of Fame for her past accumulated prizes. Christopher de Leon belongs to the same four-trophy circle for his performance in *Ipagpatawad*, along with Gaudencio Barredo for the sound of *Hihintayin*. Among other performers, Dawn Zulueta won three awards, one for the lead category, while Eric Quizon had prizes for

lead and supporting categories and Eddie Gutierrez, two of the latter. The late Lino Brocka has one prize for direction plus a FAMAS Hall of Fame, while another late talent, scriptwriter Orlando Nadres, had two trophies, as did Olivia Lamasan. Surprisingly, cinematographer Johnny Araojo copped one prize more (three for *Juan Tamad*) than Romy Vitug (two for *Hihintayin*). Other double winners are editors Jesus Navarro and musical scorers Danny Tan and Ryan Cayabyab; George Jarlego won twice for different films, while George Canseco also won twice for theme-song composing, including a supposedly disqualifiable FAMAS (owing to Canseco's Hall-of-Fame stature).

The one-time film-prize winners of 1991 include director Carlitos Siguion-Reyna; actors Richard Gomez (in lead capacity), Leo Martinez, and Gabby Concepcion; actresses Vilma Santos (lead), Tetchie Agbayani, Mona Lisa, and Nanette Medved, visual designers Hesumaria Sescon and Julie Lluch Dalena; musical scorer Jaime Fabregas; editor Efren Jarlego; and theme composers Willy Cruz and the late Lucio San Pedro. Many other questions may be raised regarding the accompanying listing—notice, for example, the manner in which singers rather than composers were announced as nominees for the FAMAS's theme-song prize, not to mention how the prize-winner was not the nominee, who in turn was not the theme composer in the first place. All in all about one hundred forty prizes were handed out by eight bodies, which averaged about eighteen trophies per body, the actual range starting from Kritika's nine up to the FAMAS's twenty-six (inclusive of four memorial awards). Five is the standard number of nominations per category, with the MMFF and Urian having only three, and Kritika, as emphasized earlier, none whatsoever. The accompanying chart (Figure 2), sourced from media announcements, illustrates the database for this reading, with winners listed first and separated from the nominees by a semi-colon. One could only hope future charts would be simpler to draw up, less obsessed with star categories, and ... well, more critical toward both the titles under scrutiny as well as the award-giving process itself.

Figure 2. Table of 1991 film awards, listing winners according to award-giving body and category. (Prepared by the author.)

Award Category	Manila Film Festival*	Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video*	Metro Manila Film Festival	Kritika*	Philippine Movie Press Club Star Awards	Young Critics Circle*	Film Academy of the Philippines	Filipino Academy of Movie Arts & Sciences	Filipino Film Critics Circle Urian Awards
Film	(June 21, 1991) *no nominees announced <b>Kailan Ka Magiging Akin</b> , Akin Ka... Magdusa Man Ako; Boyong Mañalac; Hoodlum Termina- tor; Hahalka Ka Rin sa Lupa; Luv Ko si Ma'am.	(Nov. 29, 1991) *no awards for subcategories Experimental - <b>Yuta</b> (1st); <b>Anay Camugamo</b> (2nd); Feature - <b>Sugat</b> (3rd); Honorable Mention - <b>Pices</b> ; Documentary - <b>Masakrit sa Mata</b> (1st).	(Dec. 28, 1991) <b>Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.</b> (1st); <b>Juan Tamad at si Shooli sa Mon-golian Barbecue</b> (2nd); <b>Darna</b> (Std); Contreras gang; <b>Magdalena S. Palacol Story</b> ; <b>Okay Ka, Fairy Koi</b> (The Movie).	(Jan. 19, 1992) *no nominees announced; performance awards conflated into single category <b>Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.</b> ; <b>Yuta</b> (Gold); <b>Huwag Mong Salingin ang Sugat Ko</b> ; <b>Yang Bayan, Masakrit sa Mata</b> (Silver); <b>Ipagpatawad Mo</b> (Particularly Noteworthy).	(March 7, 1992) <b>Sa Kabila ng Lahat</b> ; <b>Huwag Mong Salingin ang Sugat Ko</b> ; <b>Ipagpatawad Mo</b> ; <b>Kailan Ka Magiging Akin</b> ; <b>Makiusap Ka sa Diyos</b> .	(March 26, 1992) *performance awards conflated into single category <b>Sa Kabila ng Lahat</b> ; <b>Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.</b> ; <b>Class of '91</b> ; <b>Ipagpatawad Mo</b> ; <b>Joey Boy Munti</b> ; <b>Dinangpot Ka Lang sa Lupa</b> .	(March 29, 1992) <b>Ipagpatawad Mo</b> ; <b>Hihintayin Kita sa Langit</b> ; <b>Sa Kabila ng Lahat</b> ; <b>Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.</b>	(April 4, 1992) <b>Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.</b> ; <b>Hihintayin Kita sa Langit</b> ; <b>Ipagpatawad Mo</b> ; <b>Kislap sa Dilim</b> ; <b>Una Kang Naging Akin</b> .	(April 11, 1992) <b>Film - Ipagpatawad Mo</b> ; <b>Hihintayin Kita sa Langit</b> ; <b>Sa Kabila ng Lahat</b> ; <b>Short Film - Yuta</b> .
Direction	<b>Chito Roño</b> ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ).		<b>Elwood Perez</b> ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); <b>Joel Lamangan</b> ( <i>Darna</i> ); <b>Jun Urbano</b> ( <i>Juan Tamad</i> ).	<b>Elwood Perez</b> ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ).	<b>Lino Brocka</b> ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); <b>Lino Brocka</b> ( <i>Makiusap Ka</i> ); <b>Christopher Strauss de Leon</b> ( <i>Huwag Mong Salingin</i> ); <b>Laurice Guillen</b> ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); <b>Chito Roño</b> ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ).		<b>Elwood Perez</b> ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); <b>Lino Brocka</b> ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); <b>Laurice Guillen</b> ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); <b>Augusto Salvador</b> ( <i>Joe Ping 2</i> ); <b>Carlitos Siguion-Reyna</b> ( <i>Hihintayin Kita</i> ).	<b>Elwood Perez</b> ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); <b>Laurice Guillen</b> ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); <b>Ronwaldo Reyes</b> ( <i>Batas ng 45</i> ); <b>Carlitos Siguion-Reyna</b> ( <i>Hihintayin Kita</i> ); <b>Christopher Strauss de Leon</b> ( <i>Huwag Mong Salingin</i> ).	<b>Carlitos Siguion-Reyna</b> ( <i>Hihintayin Kita</i> ); <b>Lino Brocka</b> ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); <b>Laurice Guillen</b> ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ).

Award Category	Manila Film Festival*	Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video*	Metro Manila Film Festival	Kritika*	Philippine Movie Press Club Star Awards	Young Critics Circle*	Film Academy of the Philippines	Filipino Academy of Movie Arts & Sciences	Filipino Film Critics Circle Urian Awards
Original Story	Mia A. Concio ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ).		Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Manuel Conde & Jun Urbano ( <i>Juan Tamad</i> ).	Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> & <i>Huwag Mong Salangin</i> ).				Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Mia Concio ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ); Vincent Crisologo ( <i>The Vincent "Bingbong" Crisologo Story</i> ); Olivia Lamasan ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Helen Meniz & Orlando Nadres ( <i>Una Kang Naging Akin</i> ).	
Original Screenplay	Mia A. Concio ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ).		Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Jun V. Lawas ( <i>Magdalena S. Palacol</i> ); Frank Rivera ( <i>Darna</i> ); Jun Urbano & Ricardo Lee ( <i>Juan Tamad</i> ).	Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> & <i>Huwag Mong Salangin</i> ).	Olivia M. Lamasan ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ).	Jose Javier Reyes & Jake Tordellas ( <i>Dinampot Ka Lang sa Putik</i> ); Roy Iglesias ( <i>Sa Kabila ng Lahat</i> ); Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Olivia M. Lamasan ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ).	Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Roy Iglesias ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Edd Palmos ( <i>Uniyak Pat Langit</i> ); Humilde "Meek" Roxas ( <i>The Vincent "Bingbong" Crisologo Story</i> ); N. Villavicencio ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ); Ricardo Lee ( <i>Juan Tamad</i> ).	Ricardo Lee ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Mia Concio ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ); Olivia M. Lamasan ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Orlando Nadres ( <i>Una Kang Naging Akin</i> ); Raquel N. Villavicencio ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ).	Olivia M. Lamasan ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Roy Iglesias ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Raquel N. Villavicencio ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ).
Screenplay Adaptation					Orlando Nadres ( <i>Una Kang Naging Akin</i> ).		Orlando Nadres ( <i>Una Kang Naging Akin</i> ); Emmanuel Borlaza ( <i>Kaputol</i> ); Gina Tagasa ( <i>Kislap sa Dilim</i> ).		

Award Category	Manila Film Festival*	Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video*	Metro Manila Film Festival	Kritika*	Philippine Movie Press Club Star Awards	Young Critics Circle*	Film Academy of the Philippines	Filipino Academy of Movie Arts & Sciences	Filipino Film Critics Circle Urian Awards
Lead Female Performance	Janice de Belen ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ).		Nora Aunor ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Nanette Medved ( <i>Darna</i> ); Alma Moreno ( <i>Magdalena S. Palacol</i> ).	Nora Aunor ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ).	Nora Aunor ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Dina Bonnevie ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Ruffa Gutierrez ( <i>Makiusap</i> ); Vilma Santos ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Lorna Tolentino ( <i>Kislap sa Dilim</i> ).	Nora Aunor ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Gina Alajar ( <i>Kailan Ka Magiging Akin</i> ); Vilma Santos ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Maricel Soriano ( <i>Dinampot Ka Lang sa Putik</i> ).	Nora Aunor ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Dina Bonnevie ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Sharon Cuneta ( <i>Una Ka</i> ); Vilma Santos ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Lorna Tolentino ( <i>Kislap sa Dilim</i> ).	Dawn Zulueta ( <i>Hihintayin Kita</i> ); Dina Bonnevie ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Sharon Cuneta ( <i>Una Ka</i> ); Maricel Soriano ( <i>Dinampot Ka Lang sa Dilim</i> ); Dawn Zulueta ( <i>Kislap sa Dilim</i> ).	Vilma Santos ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Nora Aunor ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Dina Bonnevie ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Lorna Tolentino ( <i>Kislap sa Dilim</i> ); Dawn Zulueta ( <i>Kislap sa Dilim</i> ); Dawn Zulueta ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ).
Lead Male Performance	Eddie Garcia ( <i>Boying Mañalac</i> ).		Eric Quizon ( <i>Juan Tamad</i> ); Edu Manzano ( <i>Contreras Gang</i> ); Jun Urbano ( <i>Juan Tamad</i> ).	Christopher de Leon ( <i>Huwag Mong Salangin</i> , <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> , & <i>Makiusap Ka sa Diyos</i> ).	Christopher de Leon ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Eddie Garcia ( <i>Boying Mañalac</i> ); Richard Gomez ( <i>Hihintayin Kita</i> ); Aga Muhlach ( <i>Joey Boy Munt</i> ); Phillip Salvador ( <i>Uubusin Ko ang Lahi Mo</i> ).	Aga Muhlach ( <i>Joey Boy Munt</i> ).	Christopher de Leon ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Gabby Concepcion ( <i>Una Ka</i> ); Rudy Fernandez ( <i>Bingbong</i> ); Richard Gomez ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ).	Christopher de Leon ( <i>Ipagpatawad Mo</i> ); Gabby Concepcion ( <i>Una Ka</i> ); Rudy Fernandez ( <i>Bingbong</i> ); Eddie Garcia ( <i>Boying Mañalac</i> ); Edu Manzano ( <i>Contreras Gang</i> ).	Richard Gomez ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ); Christopher de Leon ( <i>Ipagpatawad</i> ); Aga Muhlach ( <i>Akin Ka, Magdusa Man Ako</i> ).
Supporting Female Performance	Charo Santos ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ).		Tetchie Agbayani ( <i>Okay Ka</i> ); Nida Blanca ( <i>Darna</i> ); Armida Sigunion-Reyna ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ).		Mona Lisa ( <i>Huwag Mong Salangin</i> ); Jackie-Lou Blanco ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ); Nanette Medved ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Charo Santos ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ); Vivian Velez ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ).		Dawn Zulueta ( <i>Una Ka</i> ); Mona Lisa ( <i>Huwag Mong Salangin</i> ); Charo Santos ( <i>Kailan Ka</i> ); Armida Sigunion-Reyna ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ); Charito Solis ( <i>Joey Boy Munt</i> ).	Dawn Zulueta ( <i>Una Ka</i> ); Jackie-Lou Blanco ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ); Pilar Pilapil ( <i>Darna</i> ); Rina Reyes ( <i>Glass of '91</i> ); Amida Sigunion-Reyna ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ).	Nanette Medved ( <i>Sa Kabila</i> ); Jackie-Lou Blanco ( <i>Shake, Rattle &amp; Roll III</i> ); Jackie-Lou Blanco ( <i>Hihintayin</i> ); Mona Lisa ( <i>Huwag Mong Salangin</i> ); Armida Sigunion-Reyna ( <i>Pacita M.</i> ).

Award Category	Manila Film Festival*	Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video*	Metro Manila Film Festival	Kritika*	Philippine Movie Press Club Star Awards	Young Critics Circle*	Film Academy of the Philippines	Filipino Academy of Movie Arts & Sciences	Filipino Film Critics Circle Urian Awards
Supporting Male Performance	Dick Israel (Boysong Mañalac).		Leo Martinez (Juan Tamad); Monsour del Rosario (Contreras Gang); Johnny Delgado (Contreras Gang).		Eddie Gutierrez (Ubusin Ko); Michael del Mesa (Hihintayin); Julio Diaz (Kailan Ka); Leo Martinez (Juan Tamad); Ronaldo Valdez (Sa Kabila).		Eddie Gutierrez (Ubusin Ko); Robert Arevalo (Ubusin Ko); Subas Herrero (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Michael de Mesa (Hihintayin); Leo Martinez (Juan Tamad).	Eric Quizon (Hihintayin Kita); Gabby Concepcion (Kislap); Daniel Fernando (Huwag Mong Salingin); Dick Israel (Boysong Mañalac); Leo Martinez (Juan Tamad); Ronaldo Valdez (Sa Kabila).	Gabby Concepcion (Makiusap); Terence Baylon (pagpatawad Mo); Michael de Mesa (Hihintayin); Leo Martinez (Juan Tamad); Ronaldo Valdez (Sa Kabila).
Other Performance Awards					New Actress - <b>Donita Rose</b> (Class of '91); Malou Barry (Kislap); New Actor - <b>Dennis Padilla</b> (Maging Sino Ka Man); Lorenzo Manao (Isang Gabi, Tatlong Babae); Randy Soliven (Regal Shocker); Stuntmen - <b>Ben Dugan</b> (Ubusin Ko) & <b>Eddie Mañalac</b> (Joe Ping 2); Darling of the Press - <b>Sharon Cuneta</b> ; News-maker - <b>Robin Padilla</b> ; "Ulirang Artista" - <b>Gil de Leon</b> & <b>Leopoldo Salcedo</b> .		Child performer - <b>Terence Baylon</b> (pagpatawad); Benneth Ignacio (pagpatawad Mo); Lady Lee (Kailan Ka).	Child Actor - <b>Terence Baylon</b> (pagpatawad); R. R. Herrera (Basang -45); L. A. Lopez (Juan Tamad); Atong Redillas (Darna); Harold Zaleta (Umiyak Pati Langit); Child Actress - <b>Aiza Seguerra</b> (Okay Ka); Margaritha Fuentes (Makiusap); Sitti Mariam Leo (Moro); Lady Lee (Kailan Ka).	

Award Category	Manila Film Festival*	Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video*	Metro Manila Film Festival	Kritika*	Philippine Movie Press Club Star Awards	Young Critics Circle*	Film Academy of the Philippines	Filipino Academy of Movie Arts & Sciences	Filipino Film Critics Circle Urian Awards
Cinematography	Jun Pereira (Kailan Ka); .		Johnny Araolo (Juan Tamad); Caloy Jacinto (Pacita M.); Ramon Marcelino (Darna).		Romy Vitug (Hihintayin).	Jun Pereira (Kailan Ka Magiging Akin); Romy Vitug (Hihintayin Kita sa Langit); Joe Tutaness (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Ding Austria (Sa Kabila); Charlie Peralta (Dinampot Ka Lang).	Johnny Araolo (Juan Tamad); Clodualdo Austria (Kislap); Eduardo Jacinto (Una Ka); Ricardo Jacinto (Pacita M.); Joe Tutaness (Shake, Rattle and Roll III).	Johnny Araolo (Juan Tamad); Eduardo Jacinto (pagpatawad Mo & Una Ka); Ricardo Jacinto (Pacita M.); Joe Tutaness (Shake, Rattle and Roll III).	Romy Vitug (Hihintayin); Clodualdo Austria (Sa Kabila); Eduardo Jacinto (pagpatawad Mo).
Production Design	Charlie Arceo (Kailan Ka).		Edel Templonuevo (Juan Tamad); Benjie de Guzman (Darna); Visual Illusions & Tony Marbella (Okay Ka).		Charlie Arceo (Kailan Ka).	Leo Abaya (Kailan Ka Magiging Akin); Joey Luna (Hihintayin Kita sa Langit); Don Escudero (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Benjie de Guzman (Sa Kabila); Ronaldo Cadapan (Dinampot Ka Lang).	Edel Templonuevo (Juan Tamad); Rolando Cadapan (Dinampot Ka Lang); Benjie de Guzman (Huwag Mong Salingin); Don Escudero (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Joey Luna (Hihintayin).	Joey Luna (Hihintayin); Don Escudero (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Edgar Martin Littaua (Una Ka); Rey Maluanag, Tonette Policarpio, et al. (Pacita M.); Edel Templonuevo (Juan Tamad).	Benjie de Guzman (Huwag Mong Salingin); Benjie de Guzman (Sa Kabila); Edgar Martin Littaua (pagpatawad); Joey Luna (Hihintayin).
Other Visual Elements			Visual Special Effects - <b>Carlos Lacap</b> (Darna); Tony Marbella (Okay Ka); Make-up - <b>Cecille Baun</b> (Darna); Nick Medina & Rey Salamat (Okay Ka); Ely Paguio (Pacita M.); Yoly Unabia (Juan Tamad).					Special Effects - <b>Visual Illusions</b> (Okay Ka); Benny Barotcoy & Sammy Aranzamendez (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Carlos Lacap (Darna); Joe Cadorez (Medal of Valor); Ramon Reyes (Hihintayin).	

Award Category	Manila Film Festival*	Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video*	Metro Manila Film Festival	Kritika*	Philippine Movie Press Club Star Awards	Young Critics Circle*	Film Academy of the Philippines	Filipino Academy of Movie Arts & Sciences	Filipino Film Critics Circle
Editing	Ike Jarlego Jr. (Kailan Ka).		George Jarlego (Pacita M.); Efen Jarlego (Juan Tamad); Pepe Marcos (Contreras Gang).		George Jarlego (Sa Kabila).	Ike Jarlego (Kailan Ka); George Jarlego (Sa Kabila); Jess Navarro (Hihintayin Kita); George Jarlego (Dinampot Ka Lang).	Efen Jarlego (Ugapatatawad Mo); Danny Gloria (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Ike Jarlego Jr. (Kaputol); Augusto Salvador (Joe Pring 2); Edgardo Vinarao (Vincent "Bing-bong" Crisologo).	Jess Navarro (Hihintayin Kita); Efen Jarlego (Ugapatatawad Mo & Una Ka); George Jarlego (Pacita M.); Ike Jarlego Jr. (Kailan Ka).	Jess Navarro (Hihintayin Kita); Efen Jarlego (Ugapatatawad Mo); George Jarlego (Huwag Mong Salingin & Sa Kabila).
Sound Elements	Albert Rima (Kailan Ka).		Noel Mauricio & Lito Daet (Pacita M.); Gaudencio Barredo (Juan Tamad); Rolly Ruta (Darna).		Gaudencio Barredo (Hihintayin Kita).		Gaudencio Barredo (Hihintayin Kita); Joe Climaco (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Vic Macamay (Sa Kabila); Albert Rima (Kailan Ka); Rollee Ruta (Jaylo).	Gaudencio Barredo (Hihintayin Kita); Gaudencio Barredo (Juan Tamad & Una Ka); Albert Rima & Rolly Gonzales (Kailan Ka).	Gaudencio Barredo (Hihintayin Kita); Joe Climaco (Shake, Rattle & Roll III); Willy Islaw (Sa Kabila).
Musical Score	Nonong Buen-camino (Kailan Ka).		Danny Tan (Pacita M.); Willy Cruz (Darna); Mon del Rosario (Juan Tamad).		Danny Tan (Pacita M.).		Ryan Cayabyab (Hihintayin Kita); Nonong Buen-camino (Huwag Mong Salingin); Willy Cruz (Una Ka); Jaime Fabregas (Vincent "Bingbong" Crisologo); Danny Tan (Pacita M.).	Ryan Cayabyab (Hihintayin Kita); Nonong Buen-camino (Huwag Mong Salingin & Kailan Ka); Jaime Fabregas (Vincent "Bingbong" Crisologo); Danny Tan (Pacita M.).	Jaime Fabregas (Sa Kabila); Nonong Buen-camino (Huwag Mong Salingin); Ryan Cayabyab (Hihintayin Kita).

Award Category	Manila Film Festival*	Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video*	Metro Manila Film Festival	Kritika*	Philippine Movie Press Club Star Awards	Young Critics Circle*	Film Academy of the Philippines	Filipino Academy of Movie Arts & Sciences	Filipino Film Critics Circle
Theme Song	Nonong Buen-camino (Kailan Ka).		Lucio San Pedro (Pacita M.); Mon del Rosario (Juan Tamad).		Willy Cruz (Kaputol ng Isang Awit).		George Canseco (Hihintayin Kita); Nonong Buen-camino (Huwag Mong Salingin); Willy Cruz (Kaputol); Lucio San Pedro (Pacita M.); Rey Valera (Una Ka).	George Canseco (Hihintayin Kita); Malou Barry (Kislap); Dulce (Kailan Ka); Danny Tan (Pacita M.); Rey Valera (Una Ka).	
Other Prizes	Natatanging Parangal - Torbiliano (pseud. of Victoriano Ramos Sevilla); Post-humous Awards - Lamberto V. Avellana, Carmen Rosales, Leroy Salvador, Robert Talabis.						Life Achievement - Dolphy & Eddie Infante; Posthumous Awards - Mike Accion.	Hall of Fame - Lino Brocka & Nora Aunor; Dr. Cipriano A. Santiago Memorial Award - Dolphy; Lou Salvador Memorial Award - Prospero Luna; Dr. Jose R. Perez Memorial Award - Robustiano Lu Morote; Flavio Macaso Memorial Award - Marcelo S. Lagmay; German Moreno Youth Achievement Award - Ruffa Gutierrez & Ian Veneracion.	Natatanging Gawad Urian - Mary Walker.

## A Lover's Polemic

The difficulty in tracking the development of film criticism in the Philippines is that the practice tends to take after the volatile developments in the mass medium it seeks to cover. One could argue that it started out as an elevated form of advertising (or what cynical media professionals during martial law called “praise releases”), then sought its own institutional independence in the counterpart medium of print, then specialized further in the form of dedicated organizations, until it arrived at the current internet-facilitated Babelesque proliferation of individual and group voices. I would not claim to have done sufficient research in pursuit of this notion, and the urgency of figuring out the modern-day whys and wherefores of local film criticism would be formidable as it already is.<sup>36</sup>

What compounds the activity is the reality, as many an aspiring film practitioner discovers to her distress a few weeks into formal studies, that film criticism is hardly the only language that requires one's attention; it is actually a minor, relatively easy mode of practice in the field of film scholarship, itself a subcategory of the larger field of cultural and literary studies. Hence when students realize that one more language—that of film itself as medium of expression—awaits mastery, too many of them retreat into this technological fortress, stepping out only when necessary (and mostly only to like-minded confreres) and using the only means available to them, the increasingly inadequate vocabulary of filmcrit agitation and canon formation.<sup>37</sup>

In American graduate school, I was able to witness firsthand how this separation between film scholarship and production resulted in specialists who suffered from serious lack in whatever realm they opted to work in: practitioners who started out thoroughly clueless about histories of and issues specific to the medium, and academics who were hostile to the possibility that their object of study could have real-world (especially monetary) significance. So when my colleagues in the national university were planning at one point to accommodate the film students' understandable (but misplaced) resistance to literary and foreign-language studies, I felt I had no choice except to side with colleagues outside the program who derided their proposal to transform a full-blown degree into a glamorized certificate course.

## Territorialities

I would caution readers in other professions, not to mention other media, against bearing down on the admittedly pretentious and occasionally infantile excesses of contemporary Pinoy film artistes. The world that opens up to people who participate in film activity has been shifting for some time, in ways that differ considerably from critics who operate in other areas. Where the always-perceptive literary critic Caroline S. Hau could write, in this same publication, that “Rarely do Philippine books find a larger audience beyond the home country's book market and a few area studies departments in American and other universities,”<sup>38</sup> most Filipino film scholars have to contend with a disadvantage in the opposite direction: the preemption and sometimes negation of homegrown responses by foreign commentators, who maneuver from within systems that adequately fund research and handsomely reward the publication of journal articles.

To be sure, this globalized state of affairs may have once been an indispensable survival strategy for local practitioners. Asian and (for innovative B-film releases) US markets had initially already been accessible venues for Filipino producers, with or without foreign co-financiers;<sup>39</sup> with the crisis situation induced by the implementation of martial-law policies, however, a more rarefied outlet—European film-festival exhibition and distribution—began to be reconfigured on both ends (i.e., by Euro organizers and US-dominated Third-World filmmakers) as the perfect safe haven: First World (and therefore profitable) but non- or even anti-American, with artistic cachet as fallback justification for “subversive” expressions.<sup>40</sup>

Hence the Pinoy film-buff's world at the time (circa the so-called Second Golden Age roughly concurrent with the martial-law period), for all intents and purposes, comprised Manila as a site of struggle, Hollywood and its Asian satellites as sources of “safe” (i.e., politically uncommitted) profit, and the major film capitals in Western Europe, primarily Cannes in France, as nirvana, the ultimate destination for the worthiest among us. Small matter then that an undisputed master, Ishmael Bernal, was unceremoniously shunted aside at this venue, or that the festival's fave Pinoy, Lino Brocka, had already started to exhibit the mentality that has since become the knee-jerk prophet-rejected-by-the-natives response of today's so-called indie crowd.<sup>41</sup> More seriously, the present-day rush among wide-eyed cineastes to replicate

the Brocka model overlooks the fact that, although he continued to be defensive about his global successes, he quietly undertook a careful repudiation of his missteps in terms of identity politics (specifically his racism, sexism, and homophobia) and was building up toward major projects that would have restated his reconsidered positions minus his previous disregard for the local audience's generic preferences.

This imaginary geographic reconfiguration has become even more decentered and mutable at present, with Hollywood (via Sundance and the Oscars) finally being recuperated as just another playing ground, and the long-defunct Philippine-based outlet, the Manila International Film Festival, supplanted by the annual Korean festival in Busan. Pinoy filmmakers launch their auteurist vehicles, appropriately enough, via local "independent" festivals, supplementing their efforts with their individual or group weblogs and social-network websites. To say, therefore, that film criticism has arrived is true, in the sense that one may be able to find it anywhere (mainly in new media) wherever this community congregates, and largely just as untrue, if by criticism we refer to people who commit themselves to the practice without the ulterior motive of self-promotion and exploitation of press functions as a way of defending personal interests.

### A Genealogy

Much as I had pledged to acquaintances that I would refrain from my own knee-jerk tendency to bash organized colleagues, blame for Pinoy filmcrit's arrested development will have to be laid squarely at the swanky doorstep of the original critics' circle, the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (MPP). Just as filmmakers had earlier resorted to foreign filmfest participation as a means of resisting fascist state repression, so did the first batch of MPP members find at least one noteworthy purpose in banding together: the awards they were able to institute acted as a long-overdue corrective to the corruption-ridden and mislabeled industry prizes doled out by the print media-controlled Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences or FAMAS, which was then further debilitated by its leaders' flirtation with the dictatorship's film-centered cultural ambitions.

In nearly forty years of award-giving and decadal coffee-table book publishing, the MPP has barely managed to elevate everyday critical discourse

in the country. Its members' standard awards-checklist evaluation of individual films (providing a rundown of a film's categories as a way of judging its overall worth) is not only embarrassingly sophomoric and impressionistic, milking public interest in the group's cash cow, the annual awards ceremony; it was also already old when it first appeared: T. D. Agcaoili could be excused for writing this way back in the 1950s, when New Criticism was still fairly literally new, and even Ishmael Bernal had stylistically superior samples during his brief career as pre-MPP critic.<sup>42</sup> The group has apparently decided to self-devolve into a highly exclusive kaffeeklatsch confined largely to high-brow academic personalities who probably count themselves lucky (or not) that they could desist from the gossip writing churned out by their most prolific member.<sup>43</sup>

Having once been part of this circle, I can understand the remaining members' predicament even if I remain unsympathetic. Observing that most former members' output as critics generally improved, in quantitative and qualitative terms, once they left the group, I set out to follow their example. (Warning: from this point the article will turn increasingly subjective; pretend if you can that the "I" that follows is the persona that I-as-author also wish to subject to critical inspection.) With a few other MPP renegades, I set out to form rival groups in hopes that the trend of the MPP taking on aspects of the FAMAS, which it had sought to replace in spirit, would turn out to be a tendency that could be bucked. Either I was wrong about this particular instance of historical determinism, or I could not function with individuals who depart too extensively from my predilections; at this point I can only work effectively outside any long-term institutional situation, with the exception of basic bread-and-butter arrangements.

### Critical Protocols

As Hau had stressed in her *Manila Review* article, criticism proffers discourse beyond an elaboration of the writer's personal responses. Within our current terms, the latter type of output is designated as film reviewing and serves the laudable function of informing the potential consumer of whether a current release is worth patronizing or not. The problem with this concept, as many a frustrated reviewer (or a faithful reader of reviews) discovers early enough, is that in the age of the blockbuster release, audiences seem to decide on their film preferences irrespective of reviewers' opinions.

All this would be to the benefit of the social scientist, actually, since it makes the box-office performance of any major film release as close to a popularly determined phenomenon as can be readily found in any cultural context. (One measure of any film enthusiast's naïveté is how earnestly she or he perceives the artistry of "indie" releases as a value to be defended against the supposed vulgarity of the blockbuster movie. A useful rule of thumb would be to point out the contradiction in the person's concern for the masses' uplift vis-à-vis her or his rejection of the very sample[s] that they had decided to embrace; those who insist on reading this logic as a defense of the capitalist order ought to be regarded as beyond any kind of cultural assistance for the meantime.)

Film criticism, then, marks the step away from film reviewing, at best preparing the reader for the more difficult stage of tackling film scholarship. In requiring the author to be conversant with theoretical issues in film and culture, even when she decides not to foreground these in the written text, it makes demands that impressionistic responses do not impose on both writer and reader.<sup>44</sup> As in film scholarship, criticism does not seek to subject the text to consumerist standards of excellence; it assumes that the reader has seen the film, or intends to watch it eventually, for questions beyond (or including) the rewards of spectatorship.

The good-news corollary to this seeming limitation is that, since criticism is not quite (or not yet) scholarship, the critic has an entire arsenal, provided by reviewing in particular or journalism in general and literature as a whole, at her discretionary disposal.<sup>45</sup> Most film critics, not just in the Philippines, fail to exploit this potential and wind up writing with the stiff impartiality of "good" proper scholars. From what I can recollect, the list of Filipino film critics who had bothered with stylistic flourishes, for example, is both dismayingly short and short-lived: Bernal; MPP founding member Nestor U. Torre in his early period; ex-MPP members Ricardo Lee, Alfred A. Yuson, and Tezza O. Parel; and Raul Regalado. Almost all of them have virtually abandoned the practice (Bernal had passed away in 1996), and none had produced enough filmcrit articles for a book-length compilation. Tellingly, the surviving individuals (with the exception of Torre) have careers outside film journalism, areas of practice that require the study and application of creative technique, including the underappreciated element of humor.

### Working at Play

The type of critical experimentation I had in mind, once I had unfettered myself from the MPP's institutional expectations, was to engage in mostly still-foreign exercises, partly as a way of demeaning the value of annual awards by saturating the culture with canonistical declarations,<sup>46</sup> and mainly to induce a state where resistance and deconstruction can be initiated. Here is where I realized how popular responses can take on a life of their own: although a few of my minor assertions found their detractors, the "Second Golden Age" declaration I made not only took off but also generated what to me were unnecessary permutations. Also, in the last couple of years, any Pinoy film blog and Facebook group suffused with a sense of historical self-worth has been engaging in variations of all-time-best listings. Strange indeed to learn that I had been mothering all along the monster that I should be slaying.<sup>47</sup>

Outside of these still-to-be-resolved dilemmas, I managed to get some favorable feedback for a number of film-focused commentaries I generated originally for a number of publications, particularly as resident critic for the now-defunct *National Midweek*. The procedure I observed was something that occurred naturally (so to speak) to me from the beginning, as a yet untrained film specialist: the research would consist not just of the film release to be commented on, viewed at least twice, but also of the industrial and social contexts of its emergence. I was only to realize later that most people do not start out in this manner—indeed, that it would be a matter of pride for a film commentator to announce that she or he required just a single screening followed by a single draft,<sup>48</sup> without the need to inspect the filmmaker's related texts as well as the shape of the intended audience's responses.

The fact that I never hesitated to contact any available practitioner to inquire about her or his objectives rubbed up against the notion of intentional fallacy, where the critic upholds the author's motives as the only correct interpretation of the text. Serendipitously, this applies adequately only when a text is indeed "authored" by a single individual. Feature films rarely exhibit this condition, since they are always collectively configured. Moreover (and way before my classroom encounter with Michel Foucault's formulation of the "author-function"<sup>49</sup>), the best Pinoy film practitioners



know better than to resent well-intentioned negative observations, and are always only too glad to divulge insights into the creative process. The twin rivals for local canonical supremacy, both dead before their time, provided a study in contrast: I used to remark half-jokingly how a few minutes' conversation with the always-available Ishmael Bernal would be enough to raise anyone's IQ by a few points; whereas one of Lino Brocka's very few shortcomings was his constantly defensive stance toward the working press in general and critics in particular, deliberately making himself scarce (except to his closest associates, many of whom were foreigners) and creating what outsiders felt was a fairly unpleasant cordon sanitaire around himself.

The other major element in my preparation—one I found myself always pursuing even when I could not contact any of the participants in production—is the one (to my constant perplexity) guaranteed to occasionally elicit angry responses among fellow critics and scholars, even among non-Filipinos. This is where I seek out actual mass viewers at random, mention the film I plan to write about, and ask them about their honest responses and their reasons, without interjecting my personal reflections. Not a single one has made the admission that affirms the biases of local intellectuals, even in supposedly progressive circles: no one has said so far, "Oh sure, I want to watch [or not watch] this or that current release because I've got no taste or my knowledge is limited."

I take pains to spell this out at every opportunity because this way of thinking lies behind a lot of well-intentioned remarks that are always in danger of attaining critical mass (pun incidental), at worst eventually coalescing into educational and cultural policy. The insight that this essentially anthropological approach provides into "strictly commercial" film projects, where the practitioners cannot even be bothered to engage in dialogue about their output, would be indispensable to articulating a special, sometimes heretofore hidden type of cultural logic. The fact that a now-pervasive means to evade this challenge—digital production and exhibition—was once unavailable to a generation of filmmakers means that our elders had learned to always, always keep a finger on the pulse of the mass audience, or else risk career stagnation or worse. They might have welcomed a system that rewarded them with "independence," but the question must be asked: independence from what, or whom?

## Notes

36. The article's present title is derived from an observation made by Leloy Claudio, who was instrumental in persuading me to write on the topic. This article was made possible through financial assistance provided by the Inha University Faculty Research Grant. I have endeavored to compile and post responses to this article on my open-access blog, *Amauteurish!*
37. For this reason, outsiders who attempt film scholarship without adequate preparation similarly negotiate the field at their peril; witness the clunky regurgitation of dated theory anchoring already widely available data in Raymond J. Haberski Jr.'s ambitiously titled *"It's Only a Movie": Films and Critics in American Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001). A subsequent footnote will mention relevant canonizing projects.
38. Caroline S. Hau, "Reviewing the Reviewers," *Manila Review* (December 14, 2012).
39. For an in-depth study of a specific practitioner's output, see Bliss Cua Lim, "American Pictures Made by Filipinos: Eddie Romero's Jungle-Horror Exploitation Films," *Spectator* 22.1 (Spring 2002): 23-45. For a more comprehensive presentation, we may have to await the completion of a dissertation in progress, described by its proponent Andrew Leavold in his "Bamboo Gods and Bionic Boys: A Brief History of Philippines' B Films" (South East Asian Cinema Conference paper, 2008).
40. The association of European film practice with "art cinema" is espoused early enough in standard film-studies curricula, in one of the introductory textbooks, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's long-running (since 1977) *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012).
41. The only Brocka interview article fully worthy of its subject is Jo-Ann Q. Maglipon's "The Brocka Battles," from *Lino Brocka: The Artist and His Times*, ed. Mario A. Hernando (Manila: Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas, 1993) 118-54. At one point the always-beleaguered director points out how the British Film Institute's Sutherland Trophy prize for his *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (Malaya & Stephan Films, 1985) proved that a Filipino critic's complaint about the film was in error (Maglipon 147).
42. See T. D. Agcaoili, "Movies," rpt. in *Philippine Mass Media in Perspective*, eds. Gloria D. Feliciano and Crispulo Icban Jr. (Quezon City: Capitol, 1967) 133-61. Samples of Ishmael Bernal's film criticism have been compiled in the appendix

of Bayani Santos Jr.'s MA thesis titled "Ishmael Bernal: The Man and the Artist as Revealed in His Works" (Manuel L. Quezon University, 2010).

43. As a fan of such personalities as the late Giovanni Calvo or the *Village Voice's* (recently terminated) columnist and blogger Michael Musto, and an insistent re-reader of Petronius's *Satyricon* and obsessive purchaser of the occasional celebrity biography, I ought to clarify here that I do not disparage gossip writing per se; only its failed instances.
44. Several major American film critics have discussed the differences between reviewing and criticism extensively. The acerbic John Simon typically provided a bellicose distinction by stating that "Perhaps it is easiest to begin by defining the commonest kind of bad criticism, which is not criticism at all but reviewing"; from "A Critical Credo," *Private Screenings* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 1-16.
45. Phillip Lopate, proceeding from Stanley Cavell's metacritique, concludes that "the best film criticism verges on the personal essay, where the particular topic matters less, in the long run, than the companionable voice" (editor's introduction to *American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents until Now* [New York: Library of America, 2006] xxv). I would counter though that if we regard film-crit as typically suffering from too much bookishness, then this prescription merely serves to reposition and confine the activity at the opposite end.
46. A study of the proliferation of awards in the Philippines (mainly in the area of cinema) would be capable of sustaining a singular article of its own, with or without other forms of canonization. For a useful perspective on global trends that, for the most part, may have affected local developments, James F. English's *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) provides an effective summation.
47. The article that started this scandalous flurry of activities had a playful title that I have since forgotten; the publisher insisted instead on the far more dignified-sounding "A Second Golden Age: An Informal History" (*The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema* [Pasig City: Anvil, 1990] 1-17). I attempted a repudiation of the Golden-Ages concept in a lamentably inaccessible volume—"The Golden Ages of Philippine Cinema: A Critical Reassessment," *Cinema Filipinas: Historia, teoría y crítica filmica (1999-2009)* ([Andalucía]: Juna de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura Fundación El Legado Andalusi, [2010]) 217-24. The canonical exercises I mentioned constituted an entire section, 119-42, in my next volume, *Fields of Vision: Critical Applications in Recent*

*Philippine Cinema* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995). Among the noteworthy canonizing projects since then are Top-100 lists by two *Facebook* groups, Cinephiles! (spearheaded by Adrian Dollente Mendizabal, covering global cinema including the Philippines) and Pinoy Film Buffs (led by Archie del Mundo, ongoing as of this writing), and a Top-50 listing initiated by Skilty Labastillas at the Pinoy Rebyu blog.

48. Pauline Kael is famous for her claim that she watched a movie only once, then wrote out her review the same night, in longhand—George Malko, "Pauline Kael Wants People to Go to the Movies: A Profile," *Conversations with Pauline Kael*, ed. Will Brantley (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) 15-30. Rarely noticed are the qualifications to this remark: that she would scribble furiously in the dark during the screening, often taking all night to finish writing a review, and that she would moreover pick a film to write about only after having seen a number of contemporaneous releases. To me, this explains both the gut-feel immediacy of her writing, as well as the breezy, witty, yet complex manner in which she conveyed her ideas: as a connoisseur of jazz, she appreciated the need both to keep performing at one's best level, revising as often as necessary, and to spare the audience the details of the process by which the final product was created. The ability to form a take on a film in one viewing is something I have yet to acquire, even if I still find myself following all her other methods (except for writing by hand); then again, Kael was herself one of a kind in critical literature. On the other hand, Brecht Andersch narrates the account of Lawrence Chadbourne, who attended the New York critics' screening of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980): "As the lights dimmed, a woman squeezed into the seat next to him, pulled out a notebook and pen, and commenced furious note-taking. She spent half her time with her head bent down to peer at her incessant jottings, as they were streaming out. When the lights came on, Larry recognized his seatmate as Pauline Kael. Given her famous *modus operandi* of never seeing a film more than once, it would be safe to say she wrote her scathing piece—one amongst many, to be sure—without even having truly seen it once" (*Facebook* post, March 6, 2016).
49. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) 113-38.

## Last Closure

### Reflections on a National Pastime

*I had hesitated in tracking down this, my first attempt at an academic article, since, though the effort may have been suffused with good intentions, it bypassed the processes essential to guaranteeing rigor and contemporaneity. The late Professor Raul R. Ingles was insistent that I provide Philippines Communication Journal, the first scholarly periodical of the University of the Philippines's College of Mass Communication, with an article that would introduce the concerns of the then-fledgling college's newest program, overriding my objections about the lack of any (time for an) appropriate course, conference, or workshop where I could present my findings. I also had my doubts about the peer "reviews" the article underwent, so I never even bothered to keep any record of the resulting publication thereafter. Since my commitment to **Amauteurish!** necessitated my tracking down a hard copy of the journal, I was surprised to discover, alongside my expected dismay at how primitive the article's basic insights were, that in my desperation I had been driven to imagine a scenario where installation-video or convergent-media art might emerge; also, and more humbling, that my articles since then had not really progressed all that significantly beyond this first one. I would also have objected to the*

*title used during publication, but the original one (which I am restoring for this posting) supplied me with the inspiration for naming my first book.*

How literate indeed are Filipinos? With the use of the most reliable research instruments available, I daresay any scholar can reasonably challenge the myth of the high standard of literacy in the Philippines. The proof shouldn't be too surprising, and neither should it panic the more innovative sectors of local society. Language, the fundamental determinant of literacy, had been a problem even before the interventions imposed by Spanish and American colonial administrators.

There has never been a serviceable common tongue to unite diverse ethnic groups populating the archipelago, though there may be certain nationalists arguing for the viability of English even as others insist on the validity of Filipino, both sides in all fairness conceding to the exoticism of the former and the prematurity of the latter for highly advanced local applications. On the other hand, the national psyche hasn't exactly remained dormant throughout this period of cultural inadequacy. As is the case in various other Third-World settings suffering the same sort of divisibilities, a significant degree of literacy has been facilitated by a medium of communication that functions independent of any other linguistic system except its own: the cinema, ironically introduced by normally antagonistic industrialized nations.

Proof of such relatively advanced local literacy is bolstered by the moviegoing behavior of the Philippine masses. Not only are they the most avid movie viewers in the world (as duly recorded by a recent edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records*), they also patronize enough—though definitely not all—quality productions to maintain a steady supply of admirable titles, at least as much as would be necessary to sustain a number of competitive and overlapping annual award-giving bodies. More important for our purposes, Filipino film artists have managed to come up with a handful of works capable of initiating intelligent discussions on the future of the medium—as may become apparent later.

### Emergence of Movies

The difficulty in tracing the history of film, in the Philippines as anywhere else, is that the medium itself is too complex to allow for definitive individual

credits. Various sources point to about as many pioneers of as many as four nationalities—French, Spanish, American, and Filipino—involved in the introduction of cinema to the country (de Pedro 26). Hence, short of arbitrating issues that require much more resources than would suffice for a film evaluation, and that would lead to discoveries of disputable significance besides, the responsible observer can only begin with an acknowledgment of the collective nature of film enterprise.

She could go on with a reiteration of the need for systematic institutional preservation of as many types of local film output as possible, if only to enable historians to settle the more mundane questions of who-did-what first and thereafter. Moviegoing emerged as a predominant social habit within the past two decades as encouraged by the recently deposed dictatorial regime, and the reasons are not so difficult to comprehend, given the benefit of hindsight. For among all the existing forms of mass media in the country circa the twentieth century, that of film realized its potential for political advantage with the ascendancy of Ferdinand E. Marcos, both of whose presidential terms he personally ascribed to the box-office impact of pseudo-biographical pictures (de Vega 26-27). It was also during the Marcos years that mechanisms for institutionalized control of the local industry were set up or strengthened: the militarization of the censorship body in the middle period of martial rule, and then the founding of a developmental film agency, tasked with the provision of financial subsidies, tax rebates, archival services, alternative productions and venues, and even an international festival, right after the announced lifting of emergency powers (David 5).

Paradoxically such a repressive atmosphere induced a reaction so daring and, because of the multi-levelled nature of cinema, so creative that observers both here and abroad took notice and expressed admiration. But because these instances represented extremes that contrasted with the rest, eventually the mainstream, as a counter-reaction, calcified into the production of propagandistic action movies, cynical sex films, sleek melodramas, and inconsequential fantasy pictures. As for the current (post-Marcos) political dispensation, especially during its initial period of struggle to prevail, it found in other mass media—print and radio, and later even television—less resistance to its messages of criticism and dissent. Film was too closely

guarded, and more complicated as a medium besides, to accommodate what was in the main an informational need.

Hence from a status of high—if not almost exclusive—favor, film in the Philippines has now fallen to a state of near-total institutional disarray. The government apparently considers the industry's function of providing revenues through taxes (that reduce gross intakes by more than a third) sufficient excuse to allow its open-market operation. The measure of freedom granted the more cooperative media, however, is still being denied film practice, on the accustomed but now officious pretext that, revolutionary accomplishments notwithstanding, the masses' morals still have to be safeguarded. Institutional support, which is necessarily non-profit in nature, is similarly being withheld, again with the use of faulty logic—this time the argument that the system might resort to immoral movie screenings, as it did in the past, just to be able to support itself financially.

### Mass Medium

Politics is only one aspect of the Corazon Aquino administration's reluctance to support cinema in the Philippines. Lack of awareness about the potential of the medium, in more than just the propagandistic manner exploited by the previous regime, provides a possibly more crucial cause of passivity on the part of local policy-makers, including education and culture officials. Film is the first major confluence in the age-long attempt to capture reality, specifically its aural and visual attributes, in the totality of its existence in space and time. Because of its technological derivation from photography and the obvious space-time affinities with theater, film was at first regarded as a handmaiden of these other art forms—i.e., as a series of moving photographs that told stories staged, as it were, for the camera, and presented before an audience seated in a darkened auditorium, just as a theatrical production would be (Canudo 58-65).

The basic dialectic that initiated the development of film as a medium unto itself lay precisely in this misconception about its function: one side posited its value for documentation, while another alleged that it should tamper with such static preservation of reality and arrive at higher forms of truth by arranging a series of documentations in a logical, or at least chronological, sequence. After a partially successful bid among the realists (as the

pro-documentarians became known) to advance their cause by promoting visual expressionism, the formalists (the pro-storytellers) came up with the concept of montage, which in its skillful application ascribed a higher value to the result of a juxtaposition of two or more documentations, or shots (Bazin, "Evolution of the Language of Cinema" 23-29).

But just as expressionism, especially as practiced by its prime exponents the Germans, tended in its purest form to defeat the realist intention by its insistence on distorting reality,<sup>50</sup> so did montage, as evidenced in the output of its Soviet proponents, veer toward too much abstractification at the expense of dramatic involvement, the very objective of formalism. Here we find the two elements that make cinema such a dynamic form of expression: one, the shot, the repository of objective visual (and later, with the introduction of sound, aural) reality; and the other, the cut, the subjective discontinuation of the shot to replace it with another shot or to end the presentation altogether.

A further development in this regard, although claimed by realists, actually accommodates both positions in the argument, and in fact has been suggested as a throwback to the theatrical tradition. Premised on a discovery of the creative possibilities of the long take, or unbroken shot, the realists declared the redundancy of montage in lieu of arranging details or even blocking movement according to the spatial depth of a single frame using deep focus, as the technique was called (Bazin, "Evolution" 30-40). Roughly instanced, a filmmaker need not keep cutting from one image to another within a given setting; all she has to do is direct her actors and objects within a single camera setup, maximizing the availability of foreground, middleground, and background, at best allowing these to correspond to various levels of subjective presentations of reality.

### Outstanding Samples

Not surprisingly, all the canonical items in world cinema so far observe the essential outline of the aforementioned debate—the expressionist *M (A City Looks for a Murderer)* (dir. Fritz Lang), the montage watershed *Battleship Potemkin* (dir. Sergei Eisenstein), the deep-focus appropriators *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles) and *Rules of the Game* (dir. Jean Renoir), plus a number of relatively newer titles in color. And as may only be expected from an industry

almost wholly dependent upon advancements in foreign technology, the Philippines has had a handful of titles that parallel the aforementioned progression: Cesar J. Amigo's *Sa Atin ang Daigdig* and Gregorio Fernandez's *Malvarosa* during the black-and-white era, and Lino Brocka's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* and Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* of more recent provenance. *Sa Atin ang Daigdig*, an overlooked and truly rare (only one copy, in 16mm., known to exist) item, and *Maynila* demonstrate the realist mode in their preoccupation with their protagonists' physical environments, while *Malvarosa* and *Ganito Kami Noon* uphold the formalist tradition with their emphases on narrative presentation. Curiously, the scriptwriter of *Sa Atin ang Daigdig* eventually made *Ganito Kami Noon*—a debatable illustration of the primacy of formalism in film development.

Deep focus achieved moments of visual brilliance in the body of work of the late Gerardo de Leon. Unfortunately his concerns did not attain the same degree of immutability that his technical contributions do, so a revaluation of his accomplishments in light of his thematic limitations would be in order. A more estimable triumph in local utilization of the technique is Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night*, which fused a vision of perversion and brutality in the metropolis with in-depth execution of not just visual details but aural elements as well. The resultant aggregate is cohesive enough to withstand normal expectations of plot-based developments, allowing a character-intensive exploration that in turn provides a more abstract impression of a more comprehensive persona—that of Manila. For all its surface imperfections, particularly in terms of lighting and editorial indulgence in sex scenes, *Manila by Night* remains the one Filipino film capable of commencing productive contemplation about the future of cinema beyond national concerns. Skeptics are entitled to point out that this type of non-linear people-based presentation of milieu is nothing new in cinema, let alone literature (inclusive of theater); even Hollywood, bastion of reaction in world filmmaking, came up with successful milieu films like George Lucas's *American Graffiti* and Robert Altman's *Nashville* prior to *Manila by Night*, and followed up with Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* afterward. Yet a good half-decade or so since its original release, *Manila by Night* stands as a unique Third-World adaptation of an ideologically inflected narrative device that could only have originated in an industrialized context.

## The Challenge of Video

Meanwhile the global film community seems to have assumed a wait-and-see posture in response to the strides made by operatives in video. This attitude is compounded locally by the lessened priority accorded cinema by current administration officials, as explained earlier. In fact virtually all serious local film artists have shifted media, some of them for the first time, and most are now involved in television, as commercial a video outlet as any, with the major movie outfits following suit. Exponents of video, merchandisers especially, naturally valorize their medium as *the* future of mass communication, implicitly prognosticating the decline, if not the demise, of cinema. Pragmatists in film concede to the eventual likelihood of video supplanting film in so far as cost-effective technological competence is concerned.

But the very property that makes of video (circa the mid-1980s) such an ideal long-term investment also sets it apart, in a way, as inferior to the merits of cinema. Video relies on electronic transmission and reproduction—a difference that will always be perceptible even to the least sophisticated viewer. The direct use of light in film—to record an image and then project it on a screen—more closely approximates the process of human vision than does video. The relationship, to borrow a more exact physical concept earlier used by deep-focus realists, may in fact be described as asymptotic (Bazin, “*Umberto D.*” 82)—i.e., cinematic reproduction of reality approaches further than video, though neither can actually supplant the scientific principles involved in human perception of nature.

Where does this leave the hapless Third-World practitioner then? Quite simply to the confidence that film will retain qualities distinct from video, at least for the present, just as it had managed to distinguish itself from theater. One admittedly less-precise way of imagining these differences is: on a continuum of literary capacity as opposed to documentary immediacy, theater will lie at the former extreme and video at the latter, with film straddling the rest of the line. The behavior of video in this regard proceeds from the proposition ventured forth by the film expressionists—several decades too early as it now turns out. For video, by its electronic nature, possesses the property essential to stimulating audience awareness of its existence as a medium in itself, without the necessity of distorting the reality it seeks to capture.

This double-edged attribute of video is literally apparent in the relative acceptance of television documentaries over film newsreels, just as on the other hand movie melodramas are capable of claiming more viewers than can TV soap operas. With influences to draw from two extremes of the documentation-vs.-storytelling continuum, filmmakers should be all the more prepared to undertake further experiments with the medium, prior to breaking out in an eruption of media forms within singular and self-contained opera (the plural form of opus). Limitless possibilities for artistic accomplishments are realizable in such an envisioned supermedium as one that integrates every available major form in the depiction of movement from among several possible levels of awareness.

Film for one has proved itself receptive to implosions of disparate genres, as propounded and applied (but mislabeled “explosion”) by the French New Wave critics-turned-directors, and may therefore only be waiting to take the lead over what used to be the domain of theatricalized art “happenings.” Again occurs the issue of awaiting the cue from industrially advanced countries before striking out on our own. The question should be not so much a matter of pride as of practicality. The prospective supermedium’s technological components as well as the dimensions of its stagescreen will have to be standardized and, more important, manufactured in bulk—requisites that leave out sub-industrialized economies like the Philippines’. On the other hand, no one, regardless of industrial advantage, can foster a monopoly of intellect, so at least in this area of expertise, we can enjoy a speculative free-for-all.

## Exploratory Age

As our best minds try to figure out how to appropriate the future of mass communication—in which video shall find its true worth and film shall continue to play a major part—local film practitioners should learn to discard their xenophobic frames of mind and exploit the entire reservoir of ideological wealth in artworks from the so-called West. In particular, themes of existential absurdism and alienation as well as structural surrealist devices should be more than enough to complement the concerns of moral degeneration usually articulated by local film artists when they want to appear serious.

The time has come for Filipino film appreciators to correctly ascertain that the political daring of *Manila by Night* is nothing new, even in the local context, but that its experimentation with form sets it apart anywhere, validating its attempt at subversion. As for still-foreign themes and devices, absurdism and alienation seem like more universal phenomena compared with the parochial practices of plastic gimmickry indicative of certain sectors of the Western avant-garde, while surrealism can replenish local comic stocks at the same time serving as vital linkage with unfamiliar technology.

The aim is not so much to outdo Western performance in the exercise of filmmaking, although who would refuse such an engaging by-product? The challenge for local film practitioners is to own up to the certainties of radical departures possibly in the very nature of the medium itself, and prepare for this eventuality (with its attendant demands on thematic adjustments) by paying attention this early to new manners and techniques with which to approach the medium. Only then can film be made responsive to its continual evolution and to its preeminent role as mass medium for extensive communicatory purposes.

### Note

50. An explanation is in order here: for how could a realist line of thought have branched off into the proposition that reality should be distorted? The answer originated from the then newly emergent Gestalt psychology, with its emphasis on perception. Film theorists devoted to this school of thinking believed that film becomes truth in proportion to its audience's awareness of its properties—hence the call to distort reality to be able to provoke this sort of realization in the viewer.

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## Acknowledgments

### From the Original Digital Edition

Thanks are owed to my previous book publishers (Ma. Karina A. Bolasco, Esther M. Pacheco, Laura L. Samson), my previous editors (Lulu Torres Reyes, Jo-Ann Maglipon, Patrick Campos, Clarissa David, Violeda A. Umali, Cristina del Carmen Pastor, Daisy Catherine L. Mandap, Bayani Santos Jr., Benjamin Pimentel, Leloy Claudio, Bienvenido Lumbea, the late Raul Ingles, Caroline Hau, Flor Caagusan, Cristina S. Cristobal, Cathy Rose Garcia, Ricky Lo, Berroth Medenilla), and my current editorial assistant, Theo Pie. [Cover design: Karl Fredrick M. Castro; cover pic: **Tiyanak** publicity still (dir. Peque Gallaga & Lorenzo A. Reyes; Regal Films, 1988); author's pic: Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil.]

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### First publication credits for

#### Part II: EXPANDED PERSPECTIVES:

[N.b.: Articles are listed in order of their publication in this volume; their originally published titles may have been revised, sometimes extensively]

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**Diliman Review:** "Perseverance in a Neglected Dimension" (March-April 1984).

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## Index

- A**  
*Abot-Tanaw: Sulyap at Suri ng Nagbabagong Kultura at Lipunan*, 74  
 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, United States (Oscars), 113, 137, 152  
 Academy of Political Science, 104  
 action movie, 134, 162  
 Agcaoili, T. D., 153, 157  
 Agriculture and Natural Resources, Department of, 83  
 Aguiluz, Tikoy, 83  
*Ai no korida*, 94  
 Aiken, Conrad, 10  
*Alaga*, 79  
*Aliw*, 78  
 Alonzo, Anthony, 133  
 AM Productions, 49  
*Amauteurish!*, 157  
 American Chamber of Commerce, 109  
*American Graffiti*, 165  
*American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents until Now*, 158  
 Andersch, Brecht, 159  
*Angela Markado*, 79  
 Antiquiera, Tet, 34  
*Apocalypse Now*, 50  
 Aquino, Benigno “Ninoy” Jr., 96  
 Aquino, Benigno III, 28  
 Aquino, Corazon “Cory”, 96, 98, 162  
 Arajo, Johnny, 142  
 archiving, 80, 116, 136, 162  
 Asien, Gesichter, 82  
*Assignment: Hongkong*, 47  
 Ateneo de Manila University, 28, 58, 65, 74, 82, 125, 159  
 Aunor, Nora, 8, 25, 33-34, 141  
 Austria, Amy, 35  
 auteurism, 134  
 Avellana, Jose, 83  
 Avellana, Lamberto V., 50, 81-83, 96  
 award-giving, 21-22, 24-25, 34, 43-44, 46, 48, 53, 57, 63, 65, 74, 77, 79, 82-83, 111, 114-115, 132, 134, 136-142, 152-153, 155, 158, 161  
**B**  
 Babalu, 24  
*Bad*, 125  
*Ballad of Narayama, The*, 120, 124  
*Balthazar*, 71  
 Banahaw Pictures, 81  
 Bancom Audiovision, 36  
 Bangkok, 112-116, 124  
*Barranca Story, The*, 83  
*Batch '81*, 46, 50, 69  
*Battleship Potemkin*, 164  
 Bautista, Beth, 35  
*Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim*, 157  
*Bayanihan*, 83  
*belyas*, 35  
 Bergman, Ingmar, 60  
 Berlin Film Festival, 83  
 Bernal, Ishmael, 3-4, 24-26, 35-36, 42, 56-57, 64, 69, 71, 78-79, 91, 151, 153-154, 156-158, 165  
*Big Chill, The*, 165  
 Bilbao Film Festival, 83  
*Biyaya ng Lupa*, 81  
*Boat People*, 115  
*Boatmen of Pagsanjan, The*, 82  
 bold, 37, 41-42, 59  
*bomba*, 29  
*Bona*, 79  
*Boonchu Poo Narak*, 116  
 Boonthawee, Kampoon, 116  
 Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson, 157  
 box office, 16, 60, 63, 87, 111, 133, 139, 154, 162  
*Boyong Mañalac: Hoodlum Terminator*, 141  
*Brave Little Island*, 83  
 Brecht, Bertolt, 61  
 British Airways, 94  
 British Film Institute, 88, 157  
 Broadway, 61, 126  
 Brocka, Lino, 8, 26, 44, 48, 50, 60-61, 69, 77-79, 133, 139, 142, 151-152, 156-157, 165  
*Brutal*, 50, 64, 79  
*Burlesk Queen*, 79  
 Bush, George “Dubya” W., 98, 102  
**C**  
 Cabreira, Danilo, 79  
*Cain at Abel*, 48  
*Call Girls*, 112  
 Calvo, Giovanni, 135, 158  
 camp, 18, 115, 123  
 canon, 19, 89-90, 150, 156-159, 164  
 Carrey, Jim, 24  
 Carter, James Earl “Jimmy” Jr., 102  
 Carvajal, Lourdes Jimenez (Inday Badiday), 42  
 Castillo, Celso Ad., 35  
 Castillo, Myrna (Rio Locsin II), 33, 38-39  
 Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 109  
 Catholic Church, 31, 108, 138-139  
 Catholic Mass Media Award, 63, 83, 138  
 Catral, Yehlen, 33  
*Caught in the Act*, 78  
 Cavell, Stanley, 158  
 Cayabyab, Ryan, 48, 142  
 Cayetano, Polly, 37, 40  
 celluloid, 52, 89  
 Cervantes, Behn, 57  
 Chadbourne, Lawrence, 159  
 Chan, Elsie, 116  
 Chaplin, Charles “Charlie”, 24  
 Cheung, Maggie, 116  
 Cheyaroon, Permpol, 116  
 Chiang Mai, 112  
 Chichay, Mel, 53, 72, 78  
 Chiquito, 134  
 Chow Yun-Fat, 115  
 Chulalongkorn University, 111  
 Cine Suerte, 36

- Cinema Filipinas: Historia, teoría y crítica filmica* (1999-2009), 158
- Cinema-as-Art Workshop, 83
- cinematographer, 42, 142
- Cinephiles!, 159
- Citizen Kane*, 90-91, 164
- Citizen's Awards for Television, 138
- City after Dark*, 69, 79-80, 94
- Claudio, Leloy, 157
- Clemente, Juanito, 51, 53
- Clinton, Hillary, 102
- Clinton, William Jefferson "Bill", 102
- closure, 1, 140, 160-161, 163, 165, 167
- Cojuangco, Lampel, 37, 41
- Collegian Love*, 76
- colonization, 5, 7-8, 81, 100, 103-105, 108-109, 113, 120, 128, 161
- comedy, 24, 27, 29, 49, 53, 76, 116, 134
- Communism, 4, 12, 36, 77, 96, 100
- Communist Party of the Philippines, 12
- Conde de Foxa, 82
- Conde, Manuel, 24, 81, 83, 134
- Conversations with Pauline Kael*, 159
- Coppola, Francis Ford, 50, 91, 123
- criticism, 10, 16, 19, 21, 24-25, 36, 56-57, 61-62, 65, 70-74, 77-78, 82, 98, 125, 131-136, 138-139, 142, 150, 152-159, 162
- critics, 14, 20, 23, 25-26, 44, 48, 52-53, 56-57, 63, 70-72, 79, 83, 88, 90, 94, 114, 132, 135-136, 138-140, 151-154, 156-159, 167
- Cronenberg, David, 89
- Crown Seven (production outfit), 36
- Cruz, Tirso III, 34
- Cruz, Willy, 142
- Cryer, Gretchen, 61
- Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1-2, 72, 74, 139-141
- D**
- Dalagang Bukid, Ang*, 76
- Dalena, Julie Lluch, 142
- Damiano, Gerard, 90-91
- Dark, Gregory, 91
- Darna*, 141
- de Castro, Pio III, 53, 57, 64
- de Guia, Eric (Kidlat Tahimik), 83-84
- de la Cruz, Abbo, 53
- de la Cruz, Rey, 32-34, 36-38, 41-42
- de Leon, Christopher, 141
- de Leon, Gerardo, 44, 49, 66, 76, 165
- de Leon, Mike, 43-44, 46-47, 50, 53, 63, 67, 69, 78
- de Leon, Narcisa "Doña Sisang", 67
- de los Reyes, Maryo J., 78
- Dear Heart*, 134
- Death in Venice*, 106
- Debre, François, 82
- Deep Throat*, 94
- del Mundo, Archie, 159
- del Mundo, Mitos, 33
- Devil in Miss Jones, The, 90-91, 94
- Diaz, Gloria, 35
- Diaz-Abaya, Marilou, 25-27, 50, 64, 79
- dictatorship, 4-7, 96, 98, 100, 113, 115, 152
- Die Bootsleute von Pagsanjan*, 82
- Die Stadt, die sich menschlich nennt—Manila, eine asiatische Metropolis*, 82
- Dietrich, Dorothy, 82
- direct optical, 50
- Dirty Affair*, 8
- documentary, 81-82, 90, 112, 118, 122, 132, 164, 166-167
- Doi Suthep, 113
- Dolphy, 22-24, 29, 35, 112, 134
- Don Bosco Technical Institute, 44
- Dong Muang International Airport, 112-113
- Dun-Huang*, 120-121, 124
- Dyesebel*, 77
- E**
- Economy of Prestige, The: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Value*, 158
- EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue), 40
- Eisenstein, Sergei, 164
- Ejercito, Jesse, 25-26, 32-33, 35-36, 38
- El Filibusterismo*, 44
- El Legado*, 82
- Emmanuelle, Sarsi, 31, 39-40
- Empire State Building, 125
- English, James F., 158
- Escenas Callejeras*, 80
- Esmeralda, Angel, 73
- Espiritu, Christian, 79
- Estrada, Joseph "Erap", 23, 32, 35-36, 98
- Estregan, George, 35
- European Enlightenment, 105
- Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 14, 42, 53, 56-57, 62-64, 75-76, 80-81, 84, 95, 139
- F**
- Fabregas, Jaime, 142
- Facebook*, 159
- Fatal Attraction*, 115
- feminism, 11, 102
- Fernandez, Gregorio, 165
- Feuillade, Louis, 89
- field recording, 47
- Fields of Vision: Critical Applications in Recent Philippine Cinema*, 125, 158
- Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences, 44, 51, 137-139, 141-142, 152-153
- Film Academy of the Philippines, 46, 51-52, 138, 141
- Film Art: An Introduction*, 157
- film festival, 27, 61-63, 81-84, 87, 113, 132, 136-137, 140-141, 152
- film program, 74
- Film Society of the Philippines, 83
- film studies, 20, 65
- Fingers*, 56
- First Golden Age, 23, 29, 136, 138
- First World, 105, 151
- Flores, Bella, 24
- Ford, Nancy, 61
- format
- 16mm., 81, 84-86, 117, 165
- 35mm., 84-85, 87, 117
- 70mm., 85
- digital, 27, 32, 101, 156
- Super 8mm., 85-88, 117
- video, 68, 82, 84-86, 101, 111, 113-114, 117-120, 123-124, 139, 160, 166-167
- Foucault, Michel, 155, 159
- Franju, Georges, 89
- French New Wave, 56, 167
- French surrealists, 126
- Friedrich, Su, 89
- G**
- Gabun: Ama Mo, Ama Ko*, 78
- Gallaga, Madie, 51
- Gallaga, Peque, 45, 57, 69
- Gallardo, Cesar, 66
- Gang of 5: Tales, Cuentos, Sanaysay*, 10, 12
- Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon*, 60, 165
- Garcia, Eddie, 112, 134
- Garrucho, Cecile, 61
- genre, 8-9, 11, 17, 21, 27, 29, 60, 76, 127, 134, 152, 167
- Getino, Octavio, and Fernando E. Solanas, 91
- Ghai, Subhash, 91
- Ghost Rises from the Grave and Causes a Riot, The, 111
- Girls with No Tomorrow*, 116
- Giuliani, Rudy, 127
- global, 7, 25-26, 82, 84, 95-96, 98, 100, 102-103, 109, 115, 124, 152, 158-159, 166
- Global Video Productions, 82
- globalization, 7, 151
- God of Killers*, 115
- God Told Me To*, 91
- Godfather Part II, The*, 91
- Godfather, The*, 91
- Goethe-Institut Manila, 84
- Golden Butterfly*, 114
- Gomez, Richard, 142
- Gone with the Wind*, 4
- Good Person of Szechuan, The*, 61
- Gray Menace, The*, 83
- Grofe, Ferde, 83
- Guardian, The*, 94
- Guerrero, Gil, 33-34, 39
- Guillen, Laurice, 47, 69, 78
- Guinness Book of World Records*, 43, 161
- Gumapang Ka sa Lusak*, 8
- H**
- Haberski, Raymond J. Jr., 157
- Hanks, Tom, 24
- Hard Boiled*, 115
- Hard-Drink Beauties, 32, 40
- Hari sa Hari, Lahi sa Lahi*, 120, 124
- Hau, Caroline S., 151, 157
- Heaven's Gate*, 159
- Hello, Young Lovers*, 134
- Henson, Susan, 33
- Hihintayin Kita sa Langit*, 141-142
- Himala*, 57
- Hindi sa Iyo ang Mundo, Baby Porcuna*, 134
- Hiroshima, 89, 121-122
- history, 9, 14, 16, 24, 29, 33, 53, 60-61, 71, 73, 75, 80, 82, 85, 89-90, 96, 100-102, 104-106, 108, 124, 128, 133-134, 139, 150, 153, 155, 157-158, 161
- Hitchens, Christopher, 106-107
- homosexuality, 78
- horror, 114, 116, 121, 157
- Hui Ann, 89, 115
- Hulmahan Atbp: The Film Writings of John Velasco*, 17-19, 21
- Huwag Mo Akong Limutin*, 66, 77, 79
- Huwag Mong Salingin ang Sugat Ko*, 141
- Huwaran/Hulmahan: Reading Stars, Icons, and Genre Films in Philippine Cinema*, 17, 21
- I**
- identity politics, 102, 152
- ideology, 132-133
- Ikaw ang Pag-ibig*, 27
- Ikaw at ang Gabi*, 78
- Ikaw Ay Akin*, 78
- Ilgan, Jay, 63-64
- Ilustre, Lorrie, 48
- Image Film, 58
- Imamura Shohei, 88
- immigrant, 125
- In the Realm of the Senses*, 94
- Ina Ka ng Anak Mo*, 77
- independent, 27, 36, 67, 86, 88, 137, 151-152, 154, 161
- Init*, 78
- Insiang*, 78
- International Monetary Fund, 97
- internet, 75, 116, 124, 150
- Ipagpatawad Mo*, 140-141
- Isang Gabi sa Iyo, Isang Gabi sa Akin*, 78
- Isla*, 114
- Isumpa Mo*, Giliw, 73
- "It's Only a Movie": Films and Critics in American Culture*, 157
- Itim*, 44, 47-48
- J**
- J & R (production outfit), 36
- Jabidah massacre, 101
- Jackson, Michael, 123
- Jaguar*, 44, 61
- Japan, 68, 79, 88, 100, 117-124, 128-129
- Japan University, 117, 119, 124
- Jarlego, Effen, 142
- Jarlego, George, 142
- Jimenez-Magsanoc, Letty, 42
- Joaquin, Nick, 28, 50
- Jocson, Max, 48
- Juan Tamad at Shooli sa Mongolian Barbecue (The Movie)*, 141-142
- jury (film), 57, 63, 83, 114, 133
- K**
- K-pop, 127
- "Kabilang sa mga Nawawala", 8
- Kadenang Putik*, 66
- Kael, Pauline, 56, 159
- Kagemusha*, 120, 124
- Kailan Ka Magiging Akin*, 141
- Kalbaryo, 61
- Kang Woo-suk, 101
- Kantana Studio, 114
- Kasal?*, 70
- Kasdan, Lawrence, 165
- Kennedy, John F., 102
- Kern, Peter, and Karsten Peters, 82
- Khalnayak*, 91
- Kim Chiu, 24
- Kim Daejung, 96-97
- Kisapmata*, 47, 63, 78
- Kislap sa Dilim*, 141
- komiks*, 39, 65
- Kontrobersyal*, 79
- Korea, 96

- Korea (South), 18, 95-98, 101, 104, 110, 127-129  
 Korea, North, 97, 127, 129  
 Kounavudhi, Vichit, 114  
 Kritika (critics group), 136, 139, 141-142  
*Kritika Kultura*, 3, 28  
*Kung Mangarap Ka't Magising*, 44, 78  
 Kurosawa Akira, 88, 124  
*Kutsero sa Purok Himlayan, Ang*, 84
- L**  
*La Boheme*, 2-3  
*La Campana de Baler*, 83  
*La hora de los hornos: Notas y testimonios sobre el neocolonialismo, la violencia y la liberacion*, 91  
*La region centrale*, 89-91  
*La regle du jeu*, 90-91  
*La Traviata*, 2  
 Labad, Lutgado, 48  
 Labastillas, Skilty, 159  
*Lagi na Lamang Ba Akong Babae?*, 79  
 Lam, David, and Chi Wong, 116  
 Lamasan, Olivia, 142  
 Lang, Fritz, 164  
*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 159  
*Laruang Apoy*, 77  
*Last Emperor, The*, 113, 120, 124  
*Last Sweet Days of Isaac, The*, 61  
*Latex*, 90  
 Latin, 100, 106-107, 128  
 Latonio, Jun, 48  
 Leavold, Andrew, 157  
 Lee Byung-hun, 103  
 Lee Myung-bak, 97-98  
 Lee, Ricardo "Ricky", 6-7  
 Lennon, John, 104  
 Leroy, James A., 104  
*Les trottoirs de Manille*, 82  
 lesbianism, 79  
 Leung Lau Kar, 115  
 Library of Congress, United States, 80  
*Life Cycle of the Philippine Eagle*, 84  
 Lim, Bliss Cua, 27, 157
- Lino Brocka: The Artist and His Times*, 157  
 Lisa, Mona, 142  
 Locsin, Rio, 33-34, 39  
 logic of irony, 66  
*Lolita*, 106  
 London International Film Festival, 83  
 Lopate, Phillip, 158  
 Lopez, Maribel, 31, 114  
*Love and Money*, 56  
 Luansing, Ella, 1  
 Lucas, George, 123, 165  
*Luk Isaan*, 116  
 LVN Studios, 44-45, 58
- M**  
*M (A City Looks for a Murderer)*, 164  
*Mababangong Bangungot*, 83-84  
 Macapagal-Arroyo, Gloria, 97  
 Maglipon, Jo-Ann Q., 157  
 Magna Tech Omni, 47, 51  
 Magsaysay (Ramon) Award, 74  
 Maguindanao massacre, 98-100  
 mainstream, 23, 29, 57, 85-87, 139-140, 162  
*Makiusap Ka sa Diyos*, 141  
 Malko, George, 159  
*Malvarosa*, 165  
 Mandela, Nelson, 96  
*Mangadingay, a Place of Happiness*, 83  
 Manibog, Myra, 40  
*Manila by Night*, 3-4, 6, 25-26, 69, 79, 91, 94, 165  
 Manila Film Festival, 63, 137  
 Manila International Film Festival, 62, 113-114, 136, 152  
*Manila Review*, 153, 157  
 Manila Short Film Festival, 84  
*Manila Times*, 137  
 Manuel L. Quezon University, 39, 158  
 Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, 14, 44, 48, 57, 114, 131-132, 135-136, 138-139, 152-155  
 Mao Zedong, 12  
 Marcos, Ferdinand E., 1, 3-4, 56, 65, 69, 97, 100-101, 109, 113, 115, 137, 139, 162  
 Marcos, Imelda, 97  
 Maria Clara Awards, 137
- martial law, 100, 109, 150, 162  
 Martinez, Leo, 142  
 Marxism, 133  
*Masakit sa Mata*, 141  
*Masinloc*, 83  
*Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, 26, 44, 48, 50, 60-61, 79, 134, 165  
 Medved, Nanette, 142  
 melodrama, 60, 110, 162, 167  
 Mendizabal, Adrian Dollente, 159  
 Merdeka (production outfit), 36  
 Metro Manila Film Festival, 63-64, 137, 139, 141-142  
 Metzger, Radley (Henry Paris), 90-91, 94  
 migrant, 28, 136  
*Milagros*, 27  
 milieu, 4, 11, 17, 53, 165  
 Mindanao, 98, 101  
 Mirò, Joan, 126  
 Mishima Yukio, 123  
*Miss X*, 78  
*Mister Mo, Lover Boy Ko*, 35, 79  
*Misteryo sa Tuwa*, 53  
*Misty Beethoven*, 94  
 Mizoguchi Kenji, 89  
*Monsoon Collection, The*, 11  
 Montelibano, Lala, 38, 40  
 Monteverde, Lily Yu "Mother", 29, 67  
*Moral*, 26, 50  
 Moreno, Alma, 33, 35  
 Moreno, Oscar, 73  
*moro-moro*, 134  
*Mortal*, 79  
 Motion Pictures Association of America, 101  
*Mt. Banahaw, Holy Mountain*, 83  
 Movie Workers Welfare Fund, 52  
 multiple characters, 4, 6, 26  
 Musto, Michael, 158
- N**  
 Nagasaki, 121  
 Nakar, Donald, 35  
*Narayama-bushi ko*, 124  
*Nashville*, 4, 165  
 nation, 5, 7, 88, 103, 112-113, 124, 128-129, 161  
*Nation, The*, 112-113
- National Artist (of the Philippines), 22-24, 28, 50, 74, 82, 96  
 national cinema, 90  
 National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 28  
 National Media Production Center, 132  
*National Midweek*, 125, 155  
*National Pastime, The: Contemporary Philippine Cinema*, 158  
 National Short Film Festival, 83  
 nationalism, 24, 161  
 Navarro, Jesus, 142  
 neocolonialism, 7, 108, 129  
 Nepomuceno, Jose, 76, 137  
 New American Cinema, 56  
 new media, 152  
 New World, 107, 109  
 New York, 9, 27, 110, 116, 125-127, 157-159  
*New Yorker*, 56  
 Nicolas, Coca, 40  
 Nigeria Film Festival, 83  
 Night Bazaar (Chiang Mai), 113  
 Nihon Daigaku, 117  
 Nihon Hosokokai, 119-120  
 Ninn, Michael, 90  
*No Way Out*, 115  
*Noli Me Tangere*, 4, 105, 137  
*noms de guerre*, 40  
 Noriega, Bienvenido Jr., 57, 64  
*nouvelle a clef*, 11  
*Nunal sa Tubig*, 78  
*Nympha*, 78
- O**  
 O'Hara, Mario, 79  
 O'Hara, Olivia, 33  
 Obama, Barack, 102  
 Office Catholique Internationale du Cinema, 114  
 Old World, 107, 109  
*Olympia*, 91  
*Onanie*, 123-124  
 Ongkeko-Marfil, Ellen, 27  
 open ending, 6, 11  
*Opening of Misty Beethoven, The*, 90-91  
 Opus Dei, 5  
*Orapronobis*, 69  
 Oria, Elsa, 73
- Orientalism*, 102  
 Orientalism, 102-104  
 Ornedo, Emeterio, 83  
*Oro, Plata, Mata*, 45-46, 51, 57-58, 60  
 Oropesa, Elizabeth, 31, 35  
 Ōshima Nagisa, 94  
 Otherness, 17, 19, 29
- P**  
*Pabonggahan*, 81, 84  
 Pachard, Henri, 91  
 Pacquiao, Manny, 103  
*Pagdating sa Dulo*, 79  
*Pai Daeng*, 116  
*Palipat-Lipat, Papalit-Palit*, 78  
 Paloma, Pepsi, 36, 40  
*Para Kay B (O Kung Paano Dinevstate ng Pag-ibig ang 4 Out of 5 sa Atin)*, 8  
 Paraluman, 73  
*Paranormale Heilmethoden auf den Philippinen*, 82  
 Parel, Tezza O., 154  
 Park Chunghee, 98  
 Park Geun-hye, 98  
 Park Sandara, 24  
 Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 91  
*Patria Amore*, 133  
*Pelikula: An Essay on Philippine Film*, 74  
*penekula*, 87  
 people power, 28, 40, 42, 97  
*People's Journal*, 135  
 People's Republic of China, 120  
 Perez, Elwood, 31, 141  
 Perez, Jose "Doc", 39, 67  
 persona, 153, 165  
 Philippine cinema, 17, 21, 24, 29, 76, 89, 115, 125, 158  
*Philippine Mass Media in Perspective*, 157  
*Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa, Ang*, 35, 78  
*Pinoy Film Buffs*, 159  
*Pinoy Rebyu*, 159  
*Pira-Pirasong Pangarap*, 63  
*Playgirl*, 78  
 Poe, Fernando Jr., 20, 23, 35, 134  
*Poetry 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences in Its Development*, 74  
 Pollock, Jackson, 126
- pornography, 29, 132  
 Portes, Gil, 78, 81  
*Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, A, 50  
 postcolonial, 108  
 Pramoj, Mom Kukrit, 116  
 preservation, 44, 162-163  
 Print Media Council, 131, 136  
*Private Screenings*, 158  
 Prix Cidalc, 83  
 producer, 15-16, 26, 28-29, 33, 35-36, 41, 43, 47, 49, 51, 68, 71-72, 77, 82, 84, 87-88, 133, 151  
 production, 1-3, 14-16, 26-27, 31, 33-34, 36, 40, 43, 47, 49-53, 58-59, 61, 63-64, 67-68, 76, 81-83, 85-86, 118, 120, 123, 132-133, 140, 150, 156, 161-163  
*Psychic Phenomena: Exploring the Unknown*, 82  
 Puccini, Giacomo, 1  
 Punzalan, Bruno, 24
- Q**  
 queerness, 8, 17, 21, 26, 106  
 Quijano, Douglas, 32-34, 38  
 Quimpo, Susan F., and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, 3-4  
 Quirino, Joe, 39  
 Quizon, Eric, 141
- R**  
*Rak Rak Oom*, 116  
 Ramirez, Daria, 35  
 Ramos, Antonio, 80  
 Ramos, Jesus, 83  
*Rashomon*, 120, 124  
 Ratzinger, Joseph, 106-107  
 Rauschenberg, Robert, 126  
 Raval, Winston/Vanishing Tribe, 48  
*Re-Viewing Filipino Cinema*, 74  
 Reagan, Ronald, 102  
*Red Bamboo*, 113-116  
 Regalado, Raul, 154  
*Relasyon*, 78  
 Renoir, Jean, 91, 164  
*Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema, and Popular Culture*, 74  
*Revealed! Psychic Surgery in the Philippines*, 82  
 reviewing, 153-154, 157-158

Revilla, Ramon, 132  
 revolutionary, 6, 8-9, 12, 32,  
 40, 68, 102, 113-114, 120,  
 133, 163  
 Revolutionary Beauties, 32, 40  
 Reyes, Jose Javier, 57  
 Reyes, Ramon, 42-45, 48, 53  
 Riefenstahl, Leni, 91  
*Rigoletto*, 2-3  
 Rizal, Jose, 105, 137  
 Roces, Susan, 20  
 Rodriguez, Eddie, 134  
 Roh Moohyun, 96-97  
 Rojas, Emmanuel, 83  
 Romero, Chanda, 35, 50  
 Rosca, Ninotchka, 9-10  
*Rubia Servios*, 79  
*Rules of the Game*, 164

## S

*Sa Atin ang Daigdig*, 165  
*Sa Kabila ng Lahat*, 141  
 Said, Edward, 102  
*Sakada*, 133  
*Salawahan*, 64  
*Salo, o le centoventi giornate di Sodoma*, 91  
*Salome*, 47, 70, 78  
 Salumbides, Vicente, 76  
 San Francisco International  
 Film Festival, 83  
 San Pedro, Lucio, 142  
 San Sebastian College, 44  
 Sanchez, Amang, 44, 50  
 Santiago, Adela, 67  
 Santos, Vilma, 24, 29, 142  
*Satyricon*, 158  
 Sayson, Sebastian, 44, 53  
 Schiebeler, Werner, 82  
 screenplay, 8, 15, 21, 25-26,  
 56-60, 63, 68, 80, 96, 142,  
 165  
 Second Golden Age, 36, 137-  
 138, 151, 155, 158  
 "Second Golden Age, A: An  
 Informal History", 158  
 Second Vatican Council,  
 106-107  
*See-True*, 37-38  
*senakulo*, 134  
 Sescon, Hesumaria, 142  
 Seven Stars (production  
 outfit), 36  
 Sewol, 98  
 Shinjuku, 116, 121, 123

*Si Amapola sa 65 na Kabanata*,  
 7-8  
 Sibal, Jose F., 80  
*Sidewalks of Manila*, 82  
*Sight & Sound*, 88-91, 94  
 Silayan, Vic, 63  
*Silip*, 31  
*Silk Road, The*, 124  
*Silmido*, 101  
 Silos, Manuel, 81, 134  
 Simon, John, 158  
*Sinner or Saint*, 53  
*Sino'ng Kapiling, Sino'ng Kasip-  
 ing*, 78  
*Sino'ng Lumikha ng Yoyo?*  
*Sino'ng Lumikha ng Moon*  
*Buggy*, 84  
*Sisa*, 77  
 Sison, Jose Ma. "Joma", 12  
*Sister Stella L.*, 53, 67  
*Siyete Belyas*, 35  
*Slate*, 94, 107  
 Smith, Tony, 83  
 Snow, Michael, 89, 91, 127  
 Softdrink Beauties, 32, 40  
 Soltero, 53, 57-58, 60-64  
*Son of the Northeast*, 114-116  
*Son of the Sea*, 83  
 Sotto, Agustin, 88  
*Soul of a Fortress*, 83  
 sound engineering, 44, 46,  
 49, 52  
 Sound Technicians Associa-  
 tion for Motion Pictures,  
 51-53  
 Southeast Asia Award, 114  
*Special Onanie*, 124  
*Spectator*, 157  
 spectatorship, 154, 157  
 stardom, 4, 11, 13, 16, 20-21,  
 23-25, 29-39, 41-44, 67-68,  
 86-87, 111, 115, 126, 139,  
 141-142  
 Stars '66, 39  
*State of War*, 10  
 Stellar (production outfit), 36  
 Street Beauties, 32, 40  
*Subversive Lives*, 4-6  
*Suite bergamasque* (Claude  
 Debussy), 48  
*Surprise, Surprise*, 94  
 Suzara, Romy, 61, 77  
*Synchrony Tree, The*, 11

## T

Taft-Katsura Memorandum,  
 128  
*Tag-ulan sa Tag-araw*, 78  
 Tagalog, 7, 35, 74, 87  
 Taglish (Tagalog + English),  
 7, 42, 65  
 Tan, Danny, 142  
 Tantay, Al, 34  
*Tatay Kong Nanay, Ang*, 78  
*Tatlong Kasaysayan ng Pag-ibig*,  
 49  
 Teatro Pilipino, 1-3  
 technique, 42-44, 48-49, 51,  
 53, 66-67, 85, 134, 154,  
 164-165  
 technology, 8, 27, 86, 114, 117,  
 150, 163, 165-167  
 television, 16, 28, 57, 65, 83-  
 84, 111, 118, 120, 122, 138,  
 162, 166-167  
 Thailand, 110-113, 118  
 theater, 2-4, 17, 28, 41, 43, 51,  
 53, 61-62, 65, 68, 71-72, 88,  
 108, 111, 115, 117, 123, 126,  
 135, 154, 163-166  
 thesis, 14, 16, 18, 99, 158  
 thespic, 28, 35  
*They Shall Not Want*, 83  
 Third World, 11, 87, 97, 100,  
 107, 118, 124, 151, 161,  
 165-166  
 Third-World cinema, 87  
*Three Tramps, The*, 81  
*Tiger on Beat*, 111-112, 115  
*Times Journal*, 42  
 Times Square, 127  
*Tinik ng Babae, Mga*, 79  
*Tinimbang Ka Nguni't Kulang*,  
 77  
 Tinio, Rolando, 1  
*To Sing Our Own Song*, 82  
 Toback, James, 56  
*Tokyo Journal*, 119  
 Tolentino, Lorna, 35  
*Tomorrow—ashita*, 124  
*Tonko*, 124  
 Torre, Nestor U. Jr., 57  
 Toshiba, 122  
*Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.,  
 Ang*, 140-141  
 Tower Productions, 34  
*Tres Sangganos*, 81  
*Tubog sa Ginto*, 78

## U

*Umberto D.*, 166  
*Una Kang Naging Akin*, 141  
 University of the East, 44  
 University of the Philippines  
 College of Mass Communi-  
 cation, 16, 74, 160  
 Film Center, 65, 74, 83-84  
 Film Institute, 17, 74  
*Uod at Rosas, Mga*, 61  
 Urian Awards, 44, 46, 48, 63,  
 138-139, 141-142

## V

Valenti, Jack, 101  
 Vallejo, Fely, 73  
*Variety*, 37  
 Velasco, Johven, 16, 21  
 Verdi, Giuseppe, 2  
 Villafior, Romy, 47  
*Village Voice*, 158  
 Virulak, Surapone, 111  
 Viva Films, 25  
 Viwatsinudom, Ruksarn, 116

## W

*Wavelength*, 89  
 Wayne State University, 58  
 Welles, Orson, 164  
 West Germany, 82-83, 118  
 Woods, Tiger, 103  
 World Trade Center, 125  
 World War II, 23, 100, 108

## Y

Yan, Rico, 24  
*Ying zhao nu lang*, 116  
*Ynang Bayan*, 141  
 Young Filmmakers of Asia  
 Film Festival, 83  
 Yuson, Alfred A., 154  
*Yuta*, 141

## Z

Zamora, Zandro, 39  
 Zialcita, Danny L., 78  
 Zobel, Mishelle, 37  
 Zubiri, Bridget, 112  
 Zulueta, Dawn, 141

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