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From top to bottom:

1. Baconaua - One Big Fight Productions & Waning Crescent Arts (2017);
2. Respeto - Dogzilla, Arkeofilms, Cinemalaya, CMB Film Services, & This Side Up (2017);
3. Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino - Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., & Ebolusyon Productions (2004);
4. Himala - Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (1982); and
5. That Thing Called Tadhana - Cinema One Originals, Epicmedia, Monoxide Works, & One Dash Zero Cinetools (2014).



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# Film Criticism in the Philippines

Introduction to a Symposium

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## Abstract

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

## Keywords

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Outside the Establishment

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The "Other" Critics

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

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

A logical consequence of this flurry of film-book anthologizing is an increase in the publications of non-affiliated members: Joel David<sup>4</sup> and Alice Guillermo were no longer with the MPP when their volumes appeared. Other notable authors of books of film criticism were foreign-based Mel Tobias, with *One Hundred Acclaimed Tagalog Movies*; Johven Velasco, whose *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.* came out posthumously; Jessica Zafra, whose compilations of her articles included one on cinema titled *Twisted Flicks*; and Richard Bolisay, the most recently published author, with *Break It to Me Gently*, an anthology of mostly blog posts. Like the MPP and YCC, Tolentino, David, Vera, and Bolisay all maintain internet blogs devoted primarily to film and film commentary. In fact, it is on the internet where film commentary has proliferated: among blogs that feature a collective of authors are *Cinetactic*, *Film Police Reviews*, *New Durian Cinema*, with other blogs such as *Cinema Bravo*, *Cinephiles!*, and *Philippine Cinema Forum* migrating to *Facebook*. In the present collection, Jeffrey Deyto, whose essay precedes the collection of personal statements, also has a blog of his own, titled *Missing Codec*. Former MPP member and YCC founding chair and current director of the San Francisco-based Filipino Arts & Cinema International's annual film festival, Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr., contributed his vision for Filipino film criticism (subtitled "A Personal Testimony"); Paul Alcosoba Castillo, who runs the *Kung Sine Sine Lang (With Only Film)* blog, delineated how he learned how to read movies; Noel Vera, whose *Critic after Dark*, like Tobias's volume, was foreign-published, explained his approach by answering interview questions to himself; Libay Linsangan Cantor, known for the long-running *Takilya ni Leaf lens (Leaf lens's Box-Office)*, advocated for her concept of the intersectional reviewer; and last, but also possibly a first in Philippine journal publishing, Ricardo Espino Lopez explains, in his trademark queer lingo, how he became the *Knee-Jerk Critic* of his blog.

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

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

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



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## Notes

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

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## Auteurs & Amateurs

### Toward an Ethics of Film Criticism

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#### Abstract

Film criticism in the active film industries of Asia mimics the Western models on which film production is premised as well. The problem of sifting through and determining what constitutes film criticism first encounters the question of motive, admittedly an ethical one: is the critique independent enough to be taken as an evaluation free from the promotional requisite of the film being reviewed? From this distinction between serious commentary and presumably disposable publicity comes a hierarchy of writing on cinema, policed by a growing cadre of commentators on social networks and affirmed by instructors of communication and institutions that seek to bestow recognition for quality achievements. In ascending order, these would be film reporting (including gossip writing), promotions, reviewing, and criticism. I would argue, however, that this ground-level upward-gazing perspective impedes the larger envisioning of the discursive fields of film and culture. Criticism, in the industrially fostered operations of media, also serves its own promotional function, no matter how badly its practitioners claim to disavow the notion. What it promotes are the schools of thought and/or practice that give rise to theories

that predetermine writers' and artists' orientations. This paper aims to consider the various dominant schools in Asian practice, with focus on the Philippines, and to determine ways in which film theories may be made more responsive to local experience.

### Keywords

film theory, industrial practice, film scholarship, spectatorship, film reviewing, new media

It's amazing how people like judging. Judgment is being passed everywhere, all the time. Perhaps it's one of the simplest things mankind has been given to do. And you know very well that the last man, when radiation has finally reduced his last enemy to ashes, will sit down behind some rickety table and begin the trial of the individual responsible.

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would not try to judge, but bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea-foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply, not judgments, but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes - all the better. All the better. Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be a sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.

—Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher"

My odyssey as a Filipino film critic was marked by a few firsts: first fresh college graduate to be invited to the Filipino film critics circle, first former student activist to work in the Marcos dictatorship's film agency, first and only graduate of the country's undergraduate film program (my second degree actually), first to publish a local prizewinning book in film criticism, first Filipino to be accepted to a doctoral film program, first director of the national university's film institute; although one last first—to teach a graduate course in pornography and feminism—will again be probably not to everyone's liking or appreciation.

I take this personalized narrative-based mode because the lessons I learned about ethical practice in film criticism were hard-earned and initially defiant of then-existing values and ideas. But before we move on to what those insights might be, allow me to point out a problem, more of a kink really, in the expression "ethical practice in film criticism." What I mean by this is that, contrary to commercial practitioners' expectations, and in line with the thrust of the conference, film criticism always-already presumes ethical practice. This would be its most vital, though also most obvious, resemblance to literary criticism.

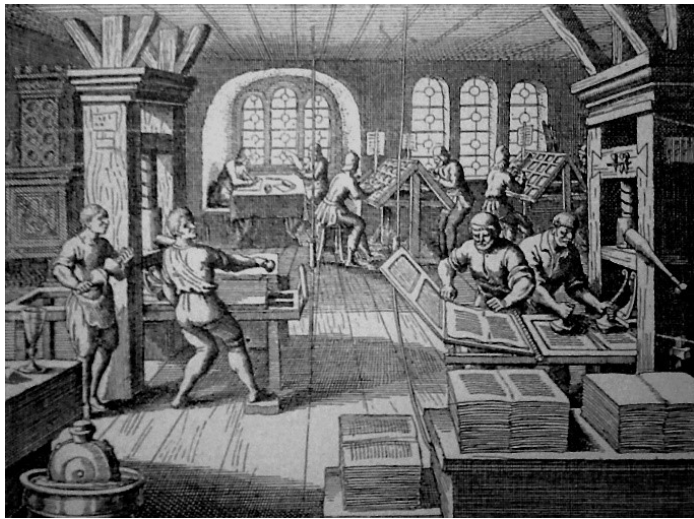


Fig. 1. Printing as an extension of literary production, vs. film production as the essential component of filmmaking. (Above: from the University of Pittsburgh's The History of the Book and Printing Collection; below: Cecil B. DeMille on an early movie project, from Cecil B. DeMille photographs; Photograph Archives; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.)

I may also need to clarify this early that I depart from the premise of what we term ethical literary criticism in a crucial manner. One way of understanding why this distinction must be made is in the industrial definition of film production as opposed to literary activity. To better comprehend the comparison, let's consider each sphere during the recent past when media technologies had yet to begin converging in digital formats, and were therefore distinct from one another (Figure 1). In literature, the entire manufacturing activity comprising the use of all types of printing and copying machines, plus binding and distribution systems, can never be fully equated with actual literary production. A significant, unknowable, but possibly greater amount of literature is necessarily created privately, almost entirely by individuals, and an invaluable amount resides in the collection and maintenance of written material, not all of it printed in the still-contemporary sense.

Film, on the other hand, is emblematic of what we should really call the post-literary mass medium, in the sense that without the presence of an industry, it would not exist—except, at best, as theater. From beginning to end of the filmmaking process, one or more machines are operated by technical specialists, even in the case of the simplest possible type of production, the home movie. In fact the most distinct type of movie we recognize today, the film event, is premised on industrial spectacularization, with its mega-budget appropriation, cast of thousands, reliance on preexisting commodities such as hit prequels or comic books, and global distribution system, with a showcasing of the latest digital-graphic applications as an essential component of its attraction.

My sentimental education regarding this matter proceeded from my stint in the Marcos-era film agency, heightened by my film-school internship, and concretized in the year-long freelance work I conducted, in effect replicating what I did right after completing my first degree, in journalism. Allow me to interject here that freelancing in media is the one thing I would never recommend to any fresh graduate, unless she or he has a masochistic streak. Nevertheless, I had enough of a background in student activism and government service to sustain me with a few overweening delusions: first,





Fig. 2. Special Labor Day 1987 issue of *National Midweek* (defunct); from the author's collection.

that scouting the field for the best option can be done while earning a living; second, that media outfits would be fair enough to reward hard work rooted in academic training; and third and most unreasonable of all, that a free radical could affect some changes significant enough to improve the system.

In my short autobiographical account of my stint as production assistant for a mainstream studio (Figure 2), I mentioned a notion I had hoped for that somehow became a reality: today, graduates of any of the country's few film programs get hired by film and media outfits on a regular basis (David, "Movie Worker" 13). An even luckier few of these degree-holders manage to skip an on-the-job training process and make local and sometimes global waves with their first few film projects. Yet the lesson that impacted my practice as film critic did not appear in this account I wrote. It was something I formulated later, after returning to film commentary by being designated the resident film critic of a prominent weekly newsmagazine.

I will admit that I wished that when I first stated my newly formulated ethical premise, my colleagues hailed me as harbinger of a useful and progressive insight. In reality, I collected a number of verbally abusive responses then, and still do so occasionally today. Strangest of all, for me, is the fact that these almost entirely come from representatives of the national university, bastion of claims to Marxist ideals in the country. My aforementioned premise runs as follows. Because of its industrial nature, film practice enables individuals to support themselves and their families and acquaintances. We kid ourselves if we merely focus on the high-profile examples of celebrities and producers and major creative artists: the majority of people working on any sufficiently busy project would actually be working-class, as I had been when I worked in the industry.

When a project ends, one could sense a festive atmosphere, with people simply relieved that the struggles and headaches that they sustained through several weeks, sometimes months or even years, of mostly physical labor, have finally come to an end. Yet on the ground, there would also be palpable anxiety: which upcoming project can they latch onto, in order to be able to continue maintaining a decent source of income? Corollary to this is the hope that the project they just finished earn back its investment, if not become a hit, because this means the producer would be able to bankroll a future film, with the strong possibility of rehiring them.

I tracked this logic to its extreme conclusion and realized that its ethical core was solid enough to apply to any kind of project. Even a supposedly aesthetically dubious undertaking, like a genre film, or a socially disreputable effort, like a trash or pornographic entry, still represents a godsend to any impoverished member of the film crew. And if the said dismissible output makes a killing at the box-office, this may be unwelcome news to society's moral and aesthetic guardians, but it certainly portends nothing but glad tidings for the project's collaborators—its producers and artists, of course, but its workers as well, silent though they may be.

I was taken aback, and still tend to have the same response, by the magnitude of the hostility exhibited by academe-trained experts whenever I attempted to articulate this critical premise. In retrospect, of course, I can see

where my should-be colleagues were coming from. The class-based orientation of orthodox Marxist training behooves them to focus on the role of captains of industry—producers, financiers, investors—and subject their judgment of a film product to the moral depredations wrought by capital. As a consequence, profitability, according to this view, should be its own reward already, so a movie that hits pay dirt ought to meet higher expectations or face critical dismissal. Bound up with this judgmental mindset would be the known political sympathies of the major entities behind the production, as well as the operations of narrative formulas, with genre projects suggesting a questionable set of motives, and “low” or “body” genres confirming the producers’ and filmmakers’ surrender to decadence.

The one positive and relatively recent development on this front is that a progressive strain in feminist thinking, which we might call the sex-positive anti-censorship school (Kleinhans and Lesage 24-26), has set out to recuperate these modes of practice that once resulted in what we might term film detritus, or types of movies that so-called respectable experts and institutions would have jettisoned from any canon-forming activity; some of the more familiar examples would include pornography, horror, tearjerker melodrama, toilet-humor and slapstick comedy, home and diaristic movies, even advertising and propaganda.

This development was affirmed on several institutional fronts during the last few years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, of the over 200 titles classified as “condemned” or “offensive” by the US Catholic Church’s Legion of Decency from 1936 to 1978 (Catholic News Service), several showed up in the so-called Vatican Film List (SDG), which were supposedly endorsements to the faithful of nearly 50 titles, presented by the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications on the occasion of cinema’s first centenary in 1995 (Figure 3). What this meant was that movies once regarded as immoral by religious standards, were later admired as insightful windows into the human condition. When I was in the process of completing my cinema-studies doctorate, the top-ranked American film schools started announcing courses on US skinflicks of the 1970s, now regarded as a Golden Age in porn production; a previously X-rated film, John Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* (1972),



Fig. 3. Federico Fellini’s *8½* (1963), which appears in both the US Legion of Decency’s list of condemned films as well as the Vatican Film List comprising titles endorsed to the Catholic faithful. Cineriz & Francinex publicity still.

was an arthouse hit, as was an even earlier entry, *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965), described as Russ Meyer’s tribute to bosomania. Films with outright pornographic sequences can at present be submitted to compete in the A-list film festivals of Europe, and even win major awards for the effort.

What this made evident to me was the fact that in popular culture, no pre-existing judgment is guaranteed to last forever. Just as the historical heroics and Biblical epics and costume dramas that once dominated US Academy Awards are only screened for camp amusement today, and the downgraded B-movies of that same era are now considered essential to studies on the development of film language (Monaco 7-10), so can we indulge in the engaging exercise of identifying which forms of audiovisual media today happen to endure the disapprobation of authorities in government, academe, and corporate-sponsored institutions. Only those among us who still cling to beliefs in eternal verities in approaches to popular culture, will be dismayed by the constant revision and repudiation of standards that

mark contemporary evaluations of film and cultural artefacts, and will probably be surprised when today's so-called trash items become tomorrow's *objets d'art*.

I might need to clarify, however, that my insistence on recognizing the cruciality of continuing film-production activity to the sustenance of an industry, does not imply that I desisted from formulating negative commentary during the six-year period when I had to turn in reviews on a weekly basis. What my premise precluded, in my personal practice, was the use of sweeping condemnations like "worst movie ever made," unless I could mix in tonal shadings of irony or camp. Put another way, anything that could lead to the conclusion that such-and-such a release should never have been made would make me think more than twice: I could just as well be commenting on the potboilers I had worked on, and if they'd never been made, how would I have survived?

How then should I evaluate the moral worth of a film that I had to review? The answer to this entailed a two-stage procedure, one building on the other, and once more provoking unusual controversy. The first necessitated a bout of critical self-awareness on my end, a condition that applies as much to resident critics as to contemporary bloggers, especially those who set out to cover sudden concentrations of new or old releases, such as film festivals or retrospectives. When an editor or publisher stipulates that the critic must review everything on a given slate, the latter ought to initiate a constant negotiation regarding which releases are accordant with her level of competence or interest, and which ones lie beyond the scope of her abilities. I was fortunate during my resident-critic years that the movie industry was churning out up to four local releases a week, not to mention the far bigger amount of foreign releases that were being distributed. So picking out a film or two or more, out of five to ten choices was a far better ratio than the one-to-one requirement imposed by some internet websites on their reviewers.

The second stage, as I mentioned, was when troubles would arise—not with my casual readers, but with my self-appointed critics. The method I observed took shape after the usual formal-slash-sociological, form-and-

content approaches I used, left more questions than answers in their wake. Mostly these would revolve on another bout of self-doubt: how sure was I that any declaration I made was certain to hold up through an unpredictable future? As an example, a canon-creation project for Philippine cinema, ongoing for nearly a decade already, yielded several surprises when we went through the few major films of the past half-century (David and Maglipon).<sup>1</sup> Among the movies released during the martial-law period of 1972 to 1986, for example, several titles acclaimed for their political daring felt, in retrospect, like melodramas in desperate search of significance. What stood out today, with some of them increasing in stature and integrity, were the honest-to-goodness flat-out melodramas, dismissed by film critics of the time for being flighty, apolitical, decadent, tending toward camp, and produced by a studio suspected of reveling in covert sponsorship from the dictatorial regime.

The ideal critical approach would therefore set down any conclusion we can make about a movie as strictly provisional, subject to further developments in cultural and political history. But what about the more problematic film-texts I mentioned earlier—i.e., the movies that enjoyed popular patronage? Would there be a means of presenting findings about these releases without falling into the trap of the high-art-vs.-low-culture binary? The only method I could think of during the time was to contact actual members of the mass audience. When I would encounter friendly get-togethers in the congested neighborhoods where I resided, I would approach the people I knew and chat about the movies they just watched or were planning to watch. Refreshingly, these were people who were unconcerned about my academic intent or the impression they would give about themselves among the intelligentsia. So when I asked them for the reasons behind their choices, they never felt obliged to genuflect before the altar of moral worth or aesthetic significance. What they would provide instead was a unique though residual form of cultural logic, more helpful in elucidating why any current box-office hit was raking it in, regardless of its critical standing.

Even today, one could see this deplorable and potentially tragic separation between the chattering classes and the mass audience, or the public at large, or what we increasingly recognize as the majority of online netizens.



When confronted with the reality of inconsistencies in voters' choices, our colleagues would tend to explain this away by describing them as uneducated, unsophisticated, devoid of higher moral senses, vulnerable to petty corruption, oblivious to the consequences of their decisions. This type of academically acceptable though horrifically anti-progressive approach was what I attempted to evade via the admittedly casual anthropological research I conducted before setting out to articulate my responses to any contemporary film release during my time as resident critic. Once again, for reasons that I cannot (and prefer not to) fathom at this time, colleagues tended to react violently when I set this out as a prescription.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 4. Rene Requistas and Joey de Leon in scenes from Tony Y. Reyes's *Elvis and James*: farting scene (left) and accidental golden-shower scene (right). Filmstar Productions, frame captures by the author.

The first time I laid it out, rather than used it as a means of explicating specific popular films, a trend in Philippine cinema was arousing the ire of people across various political divides, even opposing ones. This was during a time, a few years after the world-famous February 1986 “people power” uprising, when the surest guarantee of box-office performance was for any movie to resort to toilet humor (David, “Shooting Crap”). Characters would be seen on prime-time TV trailers clutching their tummies or butts, rushing

to toilet cubicles, with diarrhetic sounds emanating from inside and characters in the vicinity responding to what appear to be unpleasant odors (Figure 4). The exponent of this funky trend was a comedian named Joey de Leon, still-popular today, whose latest exploit was a wildly successful comic-romantic setup that played out during the real-time real-life segment of a noontime variety show (Zamora).

Gamely accepting the challenge to defend his use of toilet humor on a TV talk show, de Leon found himself confronting the right-wing pro-Church chair of the censor's board, as well as a leftist academic famed for being occasionally censored and thrown in jail by the martial-law government of Ferdinand Marcos. During a time when the members of the left-leaning Concerned Artists of the Philippines were conducting a series of rallies to protest post-Marcos censorship policies, this was the one remarkable moment when representatives of both sides came together for a common cause—to castigate de Leon's reliance on a borderline-obscene strategy for provoking audience laughter. I criticized the spectacle via the following remark:

To question a person on the basis of principle is a simple thing to do, but when that principle happens to enjoy popular support, then the possibility of claiming to be better than the majority, antithetical to the democratic premise of raising questions on their behalf in the first place, emerges. This puts the ... “critic” in a position too awkwardly similar to that of the cultural censor, who derives his *raison d'être* from the perverse notion that the people, even (or especially) in a democracy, could not know what is good for them. (David, “Shooting Crap”).

One direct aftermath was that a few years later, I encountered the aforementioned artist-academic during my graduate studies in the US, and got berated by him for violating some code of bourgeois behavior that I could not decipher. I later figured out that it might have been because of the article I had written: I had taken extra care not to mention him by name, but there was certainly no denying the widespread coverage of his full-on theatrical performance as offended moral guardian on live TV. What I could have explained, if he had been able to simmer down and engage in a sober discus-

sion, was that the moviegoers I had talked with certainly did not regard themselves as cultural dupes longing or willing to be taken in by a possibly cynically motivated comic talent. The key lay in the still-prevalent euphoria over the People Power event, when the country's major artists all focused on projects that would commemorate the ouster of a long-entrenched tyrant and the restoration of democratic institutions.<sup>2</sup>

The movie audience responded to these predictable and admittedly sanctimonious texts by withholding their patronage of local film releases. As a result, from an average of nearly 170 films produced during the Marcos years, sometimes hitting as high as over 230 productions in one year, the local industry came up with 120 titles the year after people power and barely 100 the year after (David, "Annual Filipino Film Production Chart"); many of these in fact were sex films intended for the minimally policed rural circuit. The country's most successful studio, Regal Films, managed to persuade audiences to resume their movie-going habit by providing comic fantasies featuring a breakout child actor, Aiza (now Ice) Seguerra ("Aiza Seguerra"). While these appealed to women and child viewers, Joey de Leon found a means of filling the gap for more mature audiences, including males, by seizing on a deliberately uncouth rejection of the spiritualistically inspired religious revivalism induced by what people still refer to today as the "miracle at EDSA."

The difficulty of pursuing this particular configuration of critical framework cum method is further complicated by the stylistic demands it makes on expression. The principle I follow stems from the differentiation between academic writing and criticism. The only Filipino film critic recognized as a National Artist, Bienvenido Lumbera, prescribed an approach to writing criticism that conflated it with scholarship: "the writer must not be imprisoned by cuteness or [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" (72).

My own response, as a graduate-studies scholar confronted with the demand to observe an "objective" and "impersonal" presentation of research

findings, was to constantly seek ways to query, if not subvert, this requirement, rather than allow an entire arsenal of literary possibilities to go to waste. In doing so, I managed to realize that the process of deconstructive *jouissance* can operate beyond analytics, via the mechanics of style. In criticism, especially in reviewing for a general readership, the playpen covers a far wider territory. The expressive demands may be greater, but the potential to involve the reader in formally discursive challenges, with the commentary providing a fixed reflexive coordinate to the film or films being discussed, would be worth the extra effort of drafting what we may call the creative critique.

The ideal to strive for would be an industrial intervention, where the critic helps articulate, for the artist as well as the audience, the film-text's historical significance and significations, the development of the project's auteur or auteurs, the industrial limits posed by budget, technology, and training, and how these may be overcome, and the larger social, political, cultural, regional, and global concerns (if any) where text, auteur, and audience may position themselves in pursuit of further insights or benefits. Such instances of intensive interactions among critics, creatives, and consumers have been few and far between, in the experience of Philippine cinema. Nevertheless, they have been known to happen, and have generally proved fulfilling for all parties concerned. The goal in observing a useful and progressive ethical approach to film criticism would be to ensure that critics' contributions to the growth and development of cinema become a more-or-less permanent feature of critical activity.

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## Notes

1. I agreed to participate in the project in the same spirit as a number of earlier canon-centered exercises I completed: as a way of slowing down, if not halting local canon-forming activities by raising the stakes, as it were. The persistence of canonizing practices from abroad and by local award-giving bodies, however, makes this a Sisyphean challenge. My doubts about the advisability of canonizations stemmed from my participation in the Philippine film critics circle, wherein I observed how the members' annual awards for film excellence, intended to support the community of artists, actually wound up fostering unnecessary competition and resentment in their ranks. In a later instance, the publication of a book by another former member of the group, Ricardo Lee's *Si Tatang at mga Himala ng Ating Panahon (Old Man and the Miracles of Our Era)*, Bagong Likha Publications, 1988) made me realize how awards categories fail the award-givers themselves: the book had the best published journalism, fiction, and screenplay in book form for its year, but the National Book Awards provided no recognition because it could not accommodate the volume's supposedly incompatible combinations of categories.
2. In fact a fairly recent study, Eva-Lotta E. Hedman and John T. Sidel's *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century* (part of Routledge's Politics in Asia series), noted the positive social function of the carnivalesque in the films of Joey de Leon and Rene Requiestas: "This recurring mockery of mimicry in Philippine popular music and films seems to resonate with practices of everyday life engaged in by ordinary Filipinos throughout the archipelago" (152).
3. The essentially university-scale conflict (centered in the national university's flagship campus in Diliman) was exacerbated by an opposing team securing a tabloid from which a series of attacks could be published. The controversy demands a careful and fair treatment, which for me cannot be facilitated by taking one side or the other, including the side I identified myself with. A well-meaning cultural critic articulated the side he stood up for, necessarily distorting the arguments to uphold his version through a number of articles. In my study of conflicts among critics, these tended to be personalized and centering on issues that do not necessarily represent essential positions: the famed debates between Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael over auteurism, for example, supposedly resolved in Sarris's favor when Kael turned out to be not only self-contradictory in her subjectivity as critic but also observant of auteurist analysis; on the other hand, Sarris's upgrading (actually a mistranslation) of the French New Wave's *politique des auteurs* into a theory has resulted in a lot of problematic approaches to the study as well as the practice of films (David, "Auteur Criticism"). An even more heartbreaking quarrel was the one that occurred between two of the most



influential New Wave practitioners, François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, over what an observer has described as a misreading of letters occasioned when Godard had relegated himself to what may be regarded even today as fringe filmmaking activity at the moment that Truffaut had released his commercial and critical success, *La nuit américaine*, in 1973: “the letter to which Truffaut responded so vehemently was, from different angles, several different kinds of communication. It was, certainly, a reproach and a demand; but it was also a plea and a nostalgic wink of complicity, an extended hand as well as, plainly and simply, a sketch for a film. Truffaut saw only the reprimand and answered accordingly” (Brody, “Chapter 17: Restoration [1973-1977]”).

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## From Opinion to Method

### Filipino Film Criticism beyond Communicative Capitalism

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#### Abstract

In the light of Barthes's failed assassination of the author, this essay will tread on the plane of film criticism's practices of resuscitation of the author. Looking at the current phenomenon of the explosion of quantification in social media space, this essay considers the way communicative capitalism and neoliberal psychopolitics regulate points of view, analyses, and criticism in the internet, and funnel them into a single unit, which is in the form of opinion. This essay will look into three reviews of *Citizen Jake* (2018) which, as will be argued, often function in double: not only as reviews, but also as consumer guides, which come from the individual opinion of a privileged member of the audience, the reviewer. As a recommendation to resist these reductions, it is suggested that the film critic must practice a self-conscious theorization by looking at the social practices governing the production of the film, the subject of criticism. Dialectically, this will also resolve the failed modernist projects of defacing the author, defacing capitalist subjectivities, toward a materialist conception of film.

#### Keywords

death of the author; reviewing; film production; functionalism; communicative capitalism; psychopolitics; Emotional Design

This essay seeks to provide a functionalist approach to film criticism. In light of the practice of “film criticism as consumer guide,” we will look into how this is deployed in the light of current historical realities: the coming of communicative technologies as main channel of exchange and the entrenchment of neoliberal economics, which has intensified the market’s drive for profit through the use of such technologies. We are looking at the exchange between market and technology in the light of Jodi Dean’s concept of *communicative capitalism* and Han Byung-chul’s model of *psychopolitics*. It is suggested here that a communicative form of capitalism captures all kinds of messages and reduces them to commoditized contents as contributions. These contributions further emphasize the highly individualist and personalized mode of exchange which is prevalent in the current social-media space. These elements then affect film criticism, in a way that they reduce film criticism to a mere “difference in opinion.” Such function, I will argue, necessarily leads to the reiteration of the importance of the director as auteur and the reproduction of the critic through the auteur.

The perceived current functions of film criticism will be contrasted with Edel Garcellano’s view of the task of the critic as a partisan articulator of ideology and Patrick Flores’s reconceptualization of film, which should look for the methodical and ethical task of answering what film is. The opposition of the function and proposition noted above will be situated in the metacriticism of three reviews of the film *Citizen Jake* (2018) produced by Cinema Artists Philippines (see Figure 1).

A proposition for the insistence of the work of the critic as analyst is posited as a recommendation. For this to happen, a balanced, necessarily dialectical, weighing of social practices producing a film and the film-image, which involves the rules of its production, must be taken into consideration by would-be critics. Not that this is not always the case in any available film criticism, but a call for a more self-conscious theorization is needed to detach film criticism from the infantilizing ways of communicative capitalism.



Fig.1. Jacobo Herrera Sr. (Teroy Guzman) argues with his politically committed son, Jake (Atom Araullo) in Mike de Leon’s *Citizen Jake* (2018). (Publicity still from Cinema Artists Philippines)

### A Crisis in Contemporary Film Criticism

In 1968, Roland Barthes wrote a two-pronged attack on both the author and the traditional critic: proclaiming the former’s death, and exposing the latter’s job of resuscitating the former (142-48). Literary criticism at that point had confided its trust to the author as the “person” whose “voice” is of utmost importance in a literary text. Barthes noted that this positivism for the author is “the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology,” which brought about the modern conception of the author along with the “discovery of the prestige of the individual” (142-43).

Unlike literature, which historically locates itself in the figure of the singular author, cinema, being a technology of spectacle, locates itself among circus attractions: a commodity for simultaneous mass consumption. In this sense, we can see another inverted relationship between literary criticism and film criticism. In current practices of literature, the written piece's production and distribution (as an object of consumption) is often affected by the critic through advanced review copies and award-giving bodies. Films, on the other hand, are meant to be seen by more than one person. In a movie theater, the audience and the critic are at the same end of consumption. With Barthes's critique of the author as a figure, we can see how in the production of literature, the reader is not within consideration: the production of the literary work is more or less a dialogue between the literary infrastructure, the author and the critic; readers are meant to be at the consuming end. With cinema, the studio is meant to be on the producing side while the audience is still consuming: the dynamic does not place the critic as essential. The film critic is born after the film audience.

There's a historical reason for this: literature, the practice of writing, was not intended for mass production as objects, and it took a long time for it to be commoditized with the coming of the printing press. Cinema, on the other hand, being born as a spectacle, is already a commodity: its use- and exchange-values were born almost simultaneously. It should be noted that the earlier forms of what passed as "film reviews" showcased the quality of the spectacle one can see.<sup>1</sup> Even at the birth of cinematic narration, what its reviews were essentially saying was that these motion pictures were "telling stories." This is closer to a consumer guide or review.

Decades of film reviewing, even when it reached the point of reviewing "film as art," still were unable to escape the function of the consumer guide. In the Philippines, film criticism was born out of attempts to balance these contradicting desires. Rolando B. Tolentino noted the birth of contemporary film criticism in the Philippines back in the 1970s, when academics from literature and mass communication tried to critically engage with the consumer-driven medium from the perspectives and theories of their own fields (xi). These engagements of academic perspectives and theories

open an attempt to reconfigure film criticism as a process which is autonomous from film practitioners. Joel David's polemic on the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino's (MPP) framing of their cited films in their annual awards highlighted this attempt, that the MPP's mode of citation necessarily distorts consumerist prerogatives in film criticism "to the point where film is perceived as something that's intended to further the welfare of its patrons" (45). But this attempt for autonomy does not seem to sit well with most film practitioners, including film critics themselves.

An interesting case of "anti-theory" in film criticism can be best demonstrated in the case of Patrick Flores's 1993 critique of Lino Brocka, which was not taken well by a number of influential and budding film practitioners and film critics. For those who were offended, Flores's (and his then-colleagues at the short-lived periodical, *Bongga*) critique, whose theorizing transcend from the work to the person/author, was arrogant and unfair, as noted in a manifesto published against Flores.<sup>2</sup> On his contribution to the roundtable talk on film criticism organized by the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication's Office of Research and Publication on March 19, 2014, Flores notes in his paper, "The Elusive Film Criticism" the same observation in our contemporary reality: "in these parts, theory poses a threat to the cherished comforts among some readers and practitioners, and curiously among peers, too" ("The Elusive Film Criticism" 159).

In light of the 1993 incident, Edel Garcellano responded to one of the signers of the manifesto against Flores with a defense of Flores's theoretical approach. Garcellano highlighted the need of a self-conscious theorization on film criticism and review in this note:

A critic . . . is by definition a partisan to his own truth. As such, he/she desires to cleanse the perimeter of discourses whenever language, for instance, manifests itself as the signifier of this unconscious, the ideologized signifier itself. . . .

All reviews are admittedly limiting, and delimiting, we agree; but some are more forcefully argued than others. And it is with these limitations that we strike combative poses. (140)

Garcellano sees how these combative poses can be found in the theories the critic deploys which serve as its partisan stance: a critic's assessment of any film provides his own theory of what film is. Flores, in his roundtable talk, affirms this take on criticism in a more guided tone, with his questioning of the conceptualization of film criticism which is distinguishable to common opinion:

As we revisit the question of film criticism, so do we need to revisit our conceptualization of critique. What to our reckoning is critique? And for sure, we need to reevaluate our conceptualization of film that is intertwined with our conceptualization of critique. What is film? This is a fundamental point. . . . Here, we discern a shift: from film criticism to critical practice in film. Instead of asking what film criticism is, we can ask instead: What does it mean to do film criticism? What does it entail? What is at stake? ("The Elusive Film Criticism" 158).

American film critic Simran Hans noted, however, that "more than ever, criticism is seen as a publicity tool" (Donaldson et al.). Hence, a retrogression to the theoretical aims of criticism present in Garcellano and Flores. This is more or less true with the advent of Filipino film websites such as *Cinema Bravo*, *Film Police*, and *Unreel*, where writers provide both PR as well as reviews. The reason for this, as Hans would observe, probably comes from some (unconscious) anxiety: "Critics who don't have the benefit of a media name like the *Observer* attached to them can be concerned that their access might be limited if they say the wrong thing." But as practices of contemporary film reviewing would show, this element of "wrongness" tends to pass in what Flores calls the contemporary times as having an atmosphere of the "cult of the amateur, the autodidact, the putatively witty, entrepreneurial self-taught, self-promoting reviewer." These kinds of reviewers, for Flores, turn for the worse when

the self-styled commentator becomes a groupie, a glib byte maker, a hype-meister, a trigger-happy blogger, sometimes even a film producer or a bit player under the ambience of a wider creative industry of design, music, festivals, writing workshops, and other minor spectacles ("The Elusive Film Criticism" 160).

What Flores has noted of contemporary reviewers in the internet echoes what Byung Chul-han noted that digital platforms seem to be operating more with a power which is "smart and friendly [but] does not operate frontally" and are quite tolerant of these amateurish aspects (14). This smart power, which Byung refers to as *psychopolitical*, "is constantly calling on us to confide, share and participate: to communicate our opinions, needs, wishes, and preferences—to tell all about our lives" (15). Contrary to Garcellano's and Flores's formulation of the critique as partisan (and therefore political), contemporary forms of film reviews seem to fall into something which is negotiable and open, but always concerning the power holders themselves. At most, the general practice of film criticism, especially in the advent of blogging and web media, seems to fall more generally in the realm of public opinion. Jodi Dean noted how this reduction of the necessarily political into an opinion gives way to the consumerist aspect of what she refers to as communicative capitalism. For Dean, communicative capitalism morphs politics into consumer choices (11). But being just one of the choices, film criticism, in the sea of opinions, falls into debates, from time to time, as a "plural confrontation of opinions without truth" (Badiou 16).

Interpenetrating implications of the technological developments from film production, through consumption, to film cultures have been cited as sources of crises in contemporary film criticism. This new breed of film critics grew alongside contemporary venues of exhibition. Flores notes the effect of new venues on the practices of film criticism:

There can be no compelling artistic production without a compelling culture of critique. While there is in our midst intense celebration of new works in festivals, there is virtually zero production of critique. A case in point is Cinemalaya, which has festivalized independent cinema but has not created a lively ecology for criticism to flourish, as if film were merely a form of content to be provided in the market of the creative industry, or that it could only be acknowledged through an awards scheme not so far away from the Famas.

Quite sadly, practitioners bask in this festivalization of so-called independence, seeking validation from festival organizers who cannot hold still, take



a pause, and engage in a critical discussion. It is basically a circus masquerading as culture, with aspirants waiting in the wings for a berth, like bloggers wanting to become bureaucrats. (“Plea for Policy, Cry for Critique”)

Flores’s observations highlighted Alexis Tioseco’s position on the lack of critical culture in the Philippines: “Many filmmakers, especially filmmakers in the Philippines, have a problem with the word critic. We have little to no culture of healthy polemics in the country, as any attempt to consider fault is taken as a personal attack. Rare are those [who] are able to deal with it properly” (“The Letter I Would Love to Read to You in Person”). The sources of these effects of the new technology and film culture on film criticism will be traced to the current dominant economic and cultural base within which the Philippines situates itself over the next sections.

### Film Criticism as Consumer Guide

Joel David wrote in 1989 a general observation between audience desire and the film critic:

we come around to the vicious cycle where most moviegoers couldn’t care less about aesthetics to begin with, only with entertainment values, and so the film reactor committed to working within a journalistic grind gets reduced to selectively evaluating films (only the praiseworthy ones), or compromising her or his criteria to conform to the less antagonistic aspects of film appreciation. This presumes that the film critic-aspirant possesses the minimum of an academically acceptable sensibility to begin with, but in practice the entire setup is so pervasive and aggravating that beginners in the craft of writing on film rarely even acquire insights on possible areas of exploration and development. (44)

This observation thus explains the inevitable reversion of film criticism into consumer guide-writing in the print medium. Capitalist ideology brought to cinema contradictory problems even during its genesis: being inherently a spectacular commodity, cinema premises its sustainability on profits from a mass audience; on the other hand, critics evaluate the film either through the unique “signatures” of the author as individual,<sup>3</sup> or any

other mode of aestheticizing, leaving aside the industrial elements of the film production. Both concerns, however, focus on the consumption end: only the studios are concerned with mere profit, while the critics, also functioning as consumer guides, suggest which studios, signatures, or styles are worth buying/seeing.

Neoliberalism seems to resolve the conflict produced by capitalism by embracing cinema’s commoditization as its reality with its recent campaigns of blurring distinctions between the arts and the market.<sup>4</sup> This supported the validation of the “reviewer” as a critic, not in the same line of analytical practices of the visual art and literary critic, but by via value-adding quality as an extension of marketing. The fact that this very journal itself defined the “practicing critic” as one “who wrote three or more regular-length commentaries, each comprising 800 words or more, published during the past year” in its call for entries acknowledged the historical role of the film critic more as a commentator on films than as an analyst.

Looking at what passes for film criticism in the twenty-first century, it’s not hard to see how the practices of writing an “online film critique” is not any different from any product reviews. We can see, for example, screening schedules at the *ClickTheCity* website with the accompanying reviews of its resident critic. Or on film writings such as *Cinema Bravo’s* Antz Cabrera in his review of *Citizen Jake* (2018):

The film had a lot of symbolisms involved with it and when examined closely enough can be understood really well. The film’s use of colors and chiaroscuro was very creative as well. I thought the story needed this kind of flavor. The use of flashbacks was on point to make people understand the story even more.

Setting fiction aside, what happened in the film is actually plausible in real life. There are rampant killings that are never resolved because of the abuse of power which is relatively common among Filipino societies. Whoever has the money can easily hide the truth and get away with it.

Power is a good thing, but when abused can have repercussions which may not be favorable to the majority. Will we ever survive this dog-eat-dog



society that plague [sic] our country? That is a question that warrants a clear answer. (“Movie Review: *Citizen Jake* [2018]”)

The marketing aspect of the writing can be observed from the concluding paragraphs of Cabrera’s review of the film. What is pointed out is less of actually “reviewing” the film but merely rewriting the film narrative and what the film is actually selling. The review, however, is not particularly concerned with whether what the film tries to sell or say has been sold or said well or not. It is content with mere repetition.

The repetition of the film’s sloganeering was done by Tristan Zinampan from *Film Police* in the conclusion of his review:

In the end, *Citizen Jake* posits that our fight should never be selective nor [sic] myopic. Corruption and oppression are like The Mind Flayer from *Stranger Things* season 2 to which everything is connected.

We cannot kill the beast by just chopping [off] one of its arms. For those stuck in apathetic slumber, it is time to wake up. For those who are awake but have eyes set in the distance, look down, look down around, for evil encroaches and surrounds. (“*Citizen Jake* Is a Wake-Up Call for Both the Asleep and [the] Woke”)

Although Zinampan’s review has a considerable amount of aesthetic analysis to it, his writing is often framed with a specific audience in mind to whom he’s trying to sell the film with the *Stranger Things* references he mentioned.

Some writings on *Citizen Jake* conform more to the classical trope of reviewing, similar to how Philbert Dy does in his posting in *Rogue*:

*Citizen Jake* is pretty rousing by the end, the clarity and sharpness of its ideas likely to inspire some much-needed discourse about media, class, and the history of our sad republic. It says some things that probably need to be heard in these troubled times, even as it admits its own limitations. There are elements that don’t quite succeed, a lot of the dramatics coming off strangely cold, and the reflexivity [sic] only creating more distance. But overall, there is plenty of merit in what the movie is attempting, and there is something to be learned from its point of view. (“Though Uneven, *Citizen Jake* Is Properly Rousing”)

In this concluding statement from his review, Dy repeated the things the film tried to sell, along with his assessment. In fact, he even insisted on a conclusion which was contrary to what the film invested in: Dy is convinced that there is something to learn from the film, while *Citizen Jake* insists that it has something new to tell you. While Dy scrutinized some of the forms, most of his conclusion made the same repetition of popular discourse surrounding the film, as Cabrera and Zinampan’s reviews did. Dy’s review did not question which elements did not quite succeed and how these unsuccessful elements meshed with his other conclusion about *Citizen Jake*’s discursive potential. What Dy did in this review was not much in terms of encountering the film, but rather comprised his insistence on and consideration of the director’s supposed genius, as he noted in his piece written in *Rogue* magazine in 2017 on de Leon’s “genius” (Dy, “We Need to Talk about Mike” 54-57).

The way Cabrera, Zinampan, and Dy went about their pieces complies with the practice of film criticism since the beginning. They express the tendency of having their assessments mainly considerate of their consumerist ticks, which can reduce their view of cinema and writings close to the level of a shopping guide. Only this tendency of reviews to become consumer guide-like is amplified by another layer of capital expropriation on the internet.

Jodi Dean noted how the modes of producing value in the internet through communication channels contributed to the blurring of lines between any activity’s boundaries with those of commerce. Dean suggested a feature of communicative capitalism: it “morphs message[s] into contribution[s]” (26). On the internet, the efficiency as signifiers to specific signifieds of the words “review” and “criticism” declines as they begin to be accessible on a singular platform/medium with a certain leaning on the former. In the sea of opinions, a “critique” is just another good or bad review. Film criticism, in the time of “content creation,” places the filmic analysis to the “occlusion of antagonism necessary for politics.” The critique becomes mere data circulating and “trying to catch and hold attention, to push or sway opinion, taste, and trends in one direction rather than another” (24). It is not to say that criticality is impossible on the internet, it’s just that the platform

makes any message disappear, so to say, along the barrage of information that users encounter. A critical post or comment, in the end, is just another post or comment in the news feed, no different from the sponsored posts, shared memes, and your friends' travel photos.

### Film Criticism and Neoliberalism

It is often that one takes a film's criticism (or any criticism for that matter) as a mere sign of the critic's insecurity. Edel Garcellano, writing in the 1990s, noted of an incident of how people in the film industry themselves see film criticism and theorization as personal attacks. Garcellano described this incident:

for some quarters [of the cinema complex] to insist that criticism of its products (which include films as well as actors/directors/writers/etc.) adds to the burden of an enterprise that needs all the compassion it must have—a baby that must be protected even from the harsh light of the sun—certainly mistakes film theorizing as a discursive supplement that has nothing to do with film itself, as though filmmaking does not have any theory to begin with. (142)

This denial of theory and theorization and aversion to critique came to fruition in what Han Byung-chul, coming from his critique of Eva Illouz, described as the making of an emotional capitalism. To appeal not to the intellect, but to the irrational sentiments with which people identify, is a consumerist project named Emotional Design, which “molds emotions and shapes emotional patterns for the sake of maximizing consumption” (45). For Han, emotional capitalism is part of what he sees as a *psychopolitical* project under societies of control (in contrast with Foucauldian biopolitics under disciplinary societies). Psychopolitics, as a replacement for biopolitics, becomes important under neoliberal economies where there is a perceived overabundance of “individual freedom”<sup>5</sup> which psychopolitics banks on and “hails emotion as the expression of unbridled subjectivity” (Han 46). Han's treatise agrees with Dean's model of communicative capitalism: psychopolitics concerns itself less with the control of the neoliberal subject's psyche,

than with the control of the capital that can be extracted from emotions which “provides ‘raw material’ ... to optimize [for] corporate communication,” forming “the pre-reflexive, half-conscious, physico-instinctual level of action that escapes full awareness” that neoliberal psychopolitics “seizes ... in order to influence actions” (Han 47-48), actions which are often in the form of consumption.

Because most practices of current “film criticism” on the internet refuse self-conscious theorization, two things are being done: one is the reproduction of the auteur, and the second is the reproduction of the critic through the auteur. The three reviews of *Citizen Jake* cited earlier often repeat this aspect of the auteur. On Cabrera's review: “Mike de Leon never failed to deliver. After an eighteen-year hiatus, *Citizen Jake* certainly is a gem we Filipinos could all be proud of” (“Movie Review: *Citizen Jake* [2018]”). On Zinampan's: “Often a trope in movies is when a hermitic, wise—often, cranky—veteran is brought out of retirement to school the youth when the times have turned most trying (especially when the villains they once faced in the past have re-emerged from the ether)... In this instance, it is Mike de Leon that has rejoined the fray and his weapon of choice is *Citizen Jake*” (“*Citizen Jake* Is a Wake-Up Call for Both the Asleep and [the] Woke”). Dy's review has the preview sentence: “Mike de Leon's return to cinema is smart, if not always dramatically engaging”—often citing this filmmaking hiatus of the director within an auteuristic lens (“Though Uneven, *Citizen Jake* Is Properly Rousing”).

With the aversion to theory, the resuscitation of the author and its reproduction both found also the resuscitation of the prestige of the individual in the work of art. But as pointed out earlier, this really is not to the benefit of the individual herself as what is being reproduced are the relations of production. Contradictorily, the neoliberalization of the cinematic enterprise brought about the demise of the most personal forms of cinema: “the neoliberal restructuring of media production began slowly obscuring noncommercial imagery, to the point where experimental and essayistic cinema became almost invisible” (Steyerl 34).

In the age of communicative capitalism, the auteur found its reinvigoration: as a commodity being consumed at the same time as the film. The individual auteurial concept found itself “degraded into the genital organs of Capital,” genitals which are necessary to the reproduction of capital (i.e., of the reproduction of existing relations of production). In the context of more recent historical realities, the reproduction occurs in the film-image itself: “the first time as commodity, the second as art” (Beller 23). It is as we may observe that in the second instance of the occurrence of the image, the film director as the auteur is located, foreshadowing the complex network of labor power, labor relations, and political economic framework responsible for the production of the images.

In this reproduction of the auteur in the image, the audience, from which the film critic emerges, is part of the assembly line. Beller’s thesis of the cinematic mode of production looks at cinema as value-producing: “Cinema and its succeeding (if still simultaneous) formations, particularly television, video, computers, and the internet, are deterritorialized factories in which spectators work, that is, in which we perform value-productive labor” (1). This factory reproduces existing relations of production through “a projection of a public, which is not public after all, and in which participation and exploitation become indistinguishable” (Steyerl 74). The expansion of the cinematic mode of production to social media platforms, not just simply the internet, further alienates the difference between participation and exploitation and places everything into what seems to be a channel of singularity found in the *Facebook* news feed.

### A Space for Film Criticism?

In light of communicative capitalism and neoliberal psychopolitics, the social media-dominated internet is becoming less and less ideal for a democratic-critical space. As mentioned earlier, criticism in the time of communicative capitalism is merely tantamount to the presence of content on a website. The optimistic promise of a democratized space has become a virtual market in which what is considered criticism is that which supplements capital.

The flattening of the meanings between criticism and opinion begs for a re-evaluation of the concept of criticism itself. The role of the critic in this sense was called into question: since communicative capitalism captures feedback not just from the critic but also from the consumers with equal weight, criticism requires more functions than the reproduction of capital. To reclaim its autonomy, criticism would now need to look for a way out of the auteur-as-reproduction-of-capital. While postcapitalist production is still beyond our current conditions, we are compelled to look at the other aspects which criticism produces.

First of all, what is being described when one refers to “criticism”? Raymond Williams located the word, yes, on the correct assumption of anti-critical minds: “[criticism’s] predominant early sense was of fault-finding” (47). Williams, however, does not really see anything wrong with it, since for him fault-finding is in fact criticism’s most useful aspect. He suggested, however, that we dialectically configure these processes of criticism between fault-finding and conscious response, which will thereby place criticism on a theoretical plane of activity:

the elevation to “judgment,” and to an apparently general process, when what always needs to be understood is the specificity of the response, which is not an abstract “judgment” but even where including, as often necessarily, positive or negative responses, a definite practice, in active and complex relations with its whole situation and context (49).

Flores reiterates the same from a film specialist’s viewpoint:

Film criticism assumes a level of specialization. I am committed to this requirement, to this moment of a specific intelligence. There should be a method and style of argumentation that underlies it and alongside it, a disciplinary accountability, a latitude for speculative thinking, and an academic desire (“The Elusive Film Criticism” 158).

Williams’s suggestion negates auteurism, which has always been the most conservative of film criticism practices since it repeats how hermeneutics processes religious scriptures to arrive at a “correct” interpretation. Flores’s

specialist view can capture Williams's suggestion. Williams's recommendation necessitates a criticism that looks at how a certain configuration was performed in consideration of the properties which allow the piece being criticized to come into being. Film criticism then is less concerned with interpretation: criticism should be looking for a method. It is here that we look at criticism as an inherently theoretical activity.

As cited earlier, Garcellano's note on the personalization of cinema will also inversely prescribe the acknowledgment of the existence of theory in the aspect of filmmaking, and therefore, the object of analysis of criticism is not merely the film-image/object itself, as it would cover only a phenomenological reading: the experiential, therefore, is something which is incomplete when considered as analysis or criticism. Perception needs to be rationalized and only needs to return to the material as an act of practice. This practice, after rationalization, however, does not entail a cycle or a repetition. It is necessary to imagine a step forward: a step which changes the material, for it will not change by itself. The return to practice, after rationalization, must take into consideration also the corrections and revisions of the errors seen in the rationalization of the material, or what Mao Tse-tung calls "revolutionary practice."<sup>6</sup>

The sources of theory, which is practice—social practice—is not "confined to activity in production" alone, but also takes other forms such as "class struggle, political life, scientific and artistic pursuits" (Mao 296). This leaves purely formalistic and purely "political" readings on the erring side for they do not envelop a holistic look: those methods do not produce an actual critical analysis. Mao did not place a criterion of importance on the categorization of the forms of social practices. The knowledge anyone acquires does not just come from her interactions with the material (scientific and artistic activities) but also from her political and cultural life.

Criticism as theorization looks at these diverse aspects of life as the film, whether as a commodity or as art, will not exist on its own and therefore cannot be taken "within its own terms" as if these terms do not stem from the social practices of production. A criticism "cannot rise beyond the ethos of capital ... and the earlier this primacy of polemical index is observed,

the better would be the understanding of the conditions of our existential ironies, the rationale of relative containment (in consonance with the relative autonomy, of base and superstructure, mode of production and culture)" (Garcellano 138). Production practices have theory and history. Earlier semiotic approaches in film analysis acknowledge this reality: that a signified is one which has been constructed from a specific location over the course of history. The film image then does not serve a "universal" function, but a particular social function.

### **Resolving Contradictions: For a Self-Conscious Theoretical Criticism**

A problem arises when the thought of self-conscious theorization in criticism is to take place: what is to be done with the auteur? With web criticism? The answer lies not in their abrupt abandonment, but in paving the way for their necessary abolition.

Considering social practices in criticism also entails working under the conditions it wants to abolish. Conditions of communicative capitalism and psychopolitics in the internet, and also remnants of semi-feudal and semi-colonial legacies at least in the Philippine socio-political terrain, are temporally situated where the critic in the twenty-first century is writing. The task might be big, but the weight to bear is necessary for the abolition of these very conditions. To finally mark a death for the author, it is necessary for the critic to also participate in projects which aim for the death of the conditions which necessitate the production and reproduction of the author.

While the critic's activity is relatively autonomous, carrying a theoretical project necessitates an acknowledgment of the oppositional relationship between the task of the critic and the subject of criticism. Self-conscious criticism does not merely repeat this relationship: the product must be of a transformative nature.<sup>7</sup> But the formula for transformation can never be in a neutral sense if we are aiming for an abolition: the dialectical relationship must be antagonistic.

This theorization will be antagonistic also toward the merely aesthetic approach (that is, of a vulgarly formalist one) which begs to judge the film



according to qualities of “good taste.” Vulgar formalism is yet to be criticism: such readings are merely calibrations according to a certain standard and do not reach any kind of critical level. Formal analysis must be raised to a certain extent of theoretical abstraction: abstractions which are conscious of their own history and sources. It is only then that theoretical generalization can be made possible.

In the case of the errors committed in the *Citizen Jake* reviews cited above, it may be possible to process from this method a synthesis between the perceived auteurism and the conditions which brought forth the images analyzed. Questions can be raised: does the form correspond properly with the conditions in which it was made? How does the form fare with general contemporary filmic practices and conventions? It must be pointed out, however, that in this method, to reiterate Garcellano’s view on criticism, the “message” is limited by the form and the conditions of its production which are both determined by the ethos of capital.

The theoretical line of criticism outlined above subjects the critic reflexively to the method of dialectically looking at the opposition between the film commodity and social practice. While we view critique this way, in the sense of a developing project-in-progress, this follows what Flores suggested earlier, that it necessitates a reconstruction of our understanding of film. These reconstructions necessitate the abolition of an older notion for a construction of a new one. It is in the same vein that we plot here for a successful assassination of the author/auteur. In line with this assassination plot, the theoretical approach to criticism should also lead to the effacement of the critic which enables the resuscitation of this very author.

## Notes

1. James Battaglia’s senior honors thesis noted the function of earlier film reviews from the late-1890s onward highlighting the qualities of either cinematic equipment or films merely according to their spectacular qualities. His historiography of film reviews and criticism provided the changing dynamics of the shift toward the “film as art” approach, but is still rooted in the qualities of film as a commodity. See Battaglia’s “The Past” from “Everyone’s a Critic.”
2. Flores archived the whole coverage of this incident including his response in one of his anthologies. See the section in Patrick Flores, “Manifest/o Destiny” (177-84).
3. It should be noted that this has not always been the case and practice of film criticism. However, post-1968 practices of auteurism, after the political turn of *Cahiers du Cinema* and the debate between Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael over auteurism, brought upon a kind of restoration of the critic as the locator of the auteur in the person of the film director.
4. Regarding the non-division between independent and mainstream film practice, Liza Dino-Seguerra, the chairperson of Film Development Council of the Philippines, claims that the criteria are “the films that [Filipinos] make. It will separate the good ones from the not-so-good ones. Films are films” (Lago n.p.).
5. “Individual freedom” which is always expressed as capitalist free competition. Karl Marx noted that this kind of freedom does not relate itself to any person at all and is “the most sweeping abolition of all individual freedom and the complete subjugation of individuality to social conditions which assume the form of objective powers, indeed of overpowering objects—objects independent of the individuals relating to one another” (“Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58” 40).
6. “The active function of knowledge manifests itself not only in the active leap from perceptual to rational knowledge, but—and this is more important—it must manifest itself in the leap from rational knowledge to revolutionary practice” (Mao 304).
7. “All contradictory things are interconnected; not only do they coexist in a single entity in given conditions, but in other given conditions, they also transform themselves into each other” (Mao 340).



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## Filipino Film Criticism

### A Personal Testimony, in a Few Words

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What else is there to write of Filipino film, at this juncture of its one-hundredth-year anniversary? This is even assuming that within the last thirty-five years of my involvement with the subject, much has been written about it. Yet, as both evaluators and commentators, we continue to struggle with how to define Philippine cinema's past owing to the paucity of primary materials—considering that perhaps, only a tenth of its total output may be considered extant—and be conflicted about forging its future in the face of the media and technology upheavals of the last twenty years, its development stunted by still very regressive government policies.

Therein lies the challenge to film criticism, if I may say so, at the present time.

Unlike that of many others, my work as film critic, if I were to ascribe to myself that title, began almost the same time I started working part-time as movie journalist—movie writing for a popular movie magazine in the early 1980s, titled *Jingle Extra Hot*. Its publisher, the legendary Gilbert Guillermo, himself the founder of *Jingle Music Magazine*, elected me to do serious movie reportage for the magazine, in a manner different from the rest of typical movie reporting that was considered trivial, provocative, and sensational; that, plus a weekly movie review. With the latter, he gave me enough latitude to be hard-hitting, uncompromising. Over the years, in

various publications—magazines, broadsheet, and tabloid—and later, even radio, in both Filipino and English, the direction set forth for me by my first publisher did not change, ranging from occasional pieces to almost daily movie reviews; this experience might have given me the unique vantage point from where I drew my position as film critic.

Within thirty-five years, my own career trajectory from movie writer to film reviewer/critic to critics groups/film festival organizer—my growth as writer enhanced by my personal and professional relationship with critics Joel David and Patrick Flores as well as film practitioners like screenwriter Ricky Lee, producer/manager Ed Instrella, and the late Johven Velasco—with lessons learned by my interaction with artists and the industry, led me to assume a contrarian position in relation to the current practice of criticism.

My trajectory also followed the predilection of these colleagues to enhance their fondness for theoretical discourse with an appreciation for mass culture, starting with the most successful Filipino movie star in history, Nora Aunor (Figure 1). At certain points it seemed like we competed among ourselves to prove who was the most Noranian among us, leaving behind the middlebrow orientation of mainstream academia and criticism. Through the figure of Aunor, we were able to enrich our understanding of Filipino pop culture and refine, and possibly indigenize, some of the Western-sourced ideas that seemed most applicable to the Philippine setting.

My belief in the statement—artist, first; criticism, second—therefore suggests that a critic's word need not be taken as the last, but always needed to be challenged; in essence, a film is always open to reevaluation. Film criticism may only flourish when film is subject to an evaluation that goes beyond the text. A film can be seen from different lenses, outside of the usual and popular “supermarket” grading wherein like any merchandise, an entity is reduced to a number of stars, or the petty thumbs-up/thumbs-down rating—an approach that is discursive, even argumentative, with a decidedly lucid framework.

The reviews I came up with occasionally challenged the expectations of their outlets. A few editors believed that tabloid journalism had to be maintained at a barely literate level in order to be understandable to working-class



Fig. 1. Multimedia Philippine star Nora Aunor (born 1953). (Photo from the Facebook Nora Aunor page; used with permission.)

readers. The feedback I received for my reviews, however, proved that our audiences (essentially overlapping with readers during the time when movie-going was still a widespread regular activity) were capable of grasping complex ideas in polysyllabic language, as long as it helped elucidate for them insights and lessons on our national pastime.

Around this time (the mid-1980s), I was granted what was a singular honor during that time: an invitation to join the original film critics group—an aspiration that has surprisingly persisted to the present among a few millennial critics. It did not take long for me to realize that award-giving for profit and visibility, without any irony or genuine critical output behind it, has no place in any serious critic's ongoing concerns. This was the reason I opted to found alternative groups, seeking like-minded colleagues for whom awards were a secondary matter at best. I also found myself in the midst of critical turbulence, in an intense and debilitating debate on whether new ideas can serve as criteria for evaluation or whether we needed to observe the same careful process that their originating cultures undertook before arriving at their current state.

Because film criticism lies at the core of what we refer to as film culture, its practice needs to be inscribed within the larger realm of what makes cinema possible: 1) structural issues that govern areas of production, exhibition and distribution, which include making government media-related institutions accountable to their public; 2) aspects of film work that play vital roles in organizing and sustaining a robust film culture, like archiving/preservation of materials and making these accessible to the public, as well as film scholarship and literacy; and 3) other areas of concern rarely explored and examined, including media consumption, audience reception, and the role of diasporic communities in the field.

The convergence of previously disparate media technologies is introducing profound shifts in terms of capital, ownership, distribution, and consumption, with a number of experts arguing that “film is dead” and others claiming that it persists in new and still-emerging media. The impact on skills training, as well as on film criticism, is starting to be felt by practitioners who started out in what are now termed analogue media. In that sense, I envy critics and filmmakers who started out exposed to nothing but digital technology and digitalized processes, although I must admit that my vantage point of knowing the roots of certain modes of practice as well as my familiarity with celluloid-era texts (many of which have alarmingly disappeared out of sheer negligence) gives me some satisfaction.

On top of this all, as a diasporic film critic, I am now faced with the greater challenge of how to put Filipino film, now including those produced in the diaspora, within the wider discourse of world cinema. My work, as it has always been, has just begun.

## Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon*

A Rearrangement of a Troubled Landscape

— Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr. —

Filipino Arts & Cinema, International

*Ekran* is proud to be the first to publish a wide and detailed analysis of ... Lav Diaz's latest film (at the same time this is—in the opinion of the editorial board—a successful experiment in overcoming the traditional (im)potence of the “Western” gaze), which is among other things the reason for publishing most of the texts in English, for the issue will also be distributed abroad. Because we believe that words and images still carry weight (Jurij Meden, editorial, *Ekran: Magazine for Film and Television*, 2005).

Perhaps it is by cosmic design that the writing of this essay on Lav Diaz's latest effort, *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino (Evolution of a Filipino Family, 2004)*, should coincide with the broadcast premiere of Ramona Diaz's documentary *Imelda* (2004) in the United States.<sup>1</sup> (The two Diazes are not related.)

The two works, while they both deal with the Marcos years, either directly through the subject in the latter case or through a historical background in the former, assume contrary positions. *Imelda*, on the one hand, attempts to humanize Imelda Marcos, considered the other half of the conjugal dictatorship, beyond the notoriety of 3,000 pairs of shoes supposedly found in her closet when the Philippine People Power protesters stormed Malacañang Palace in 1986. On the other hand, the ten-hour film





Fig. 1. Elyan de Vera as Raynaldo, out to avenge the death of the woman who adopted him, in *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004).

*Ebolusyon* dramatizes the plight of a peasant family living in abject poverty amid the oppression and violence of the Marcos regime (Figure 1).

As both film writer and history student, I decided that this is the most opportune time to provide some basis for a critical assessment of Lav Diaz’s work, so as to render an earnest judgment of the film. My intention is not to make a comparative evaluation of the two works—although I foresee one in the near future—but to comment on that period of my homeland’s history with cinema as a medium of revelation. I must admit to a risk in doing so. Given my temporal and spatial distance from the subject in question—I have

lived in the United States for the past twelve years—I must recall past experience to be able to produce a thoughtful appraisal of the period and of the film.

True, the wounded psyche (Figure 2), as Lav Diaz is wont to describe it, wrought by the Marcos legacy of pillage and murder, still remains to be expressed and manifested fully in Filipino artists’ creative works. (Ferdinand Marcos was elected president in 1965, then reelected in 1969. In 1972, a year before his second term should have ended, he declared Martial Law in his attempt to keep himself in power in perpetuity.) There have been various



Fig. 2. Raynaldo (Elyan de Vera) buries his dead adoptive mother Hilda (Marife Necesito). (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)



attempts, both then and now, in music, literature, theater, and visual arts that succeeded in conveying the sense of outrage and disillusion with state institutions.<sup>2</sup> In film, a number of film artists made films that contributed to popular debate, even at risk to their lives and careers: Lino Brocka (*Bayan Ko [My Country]*, 1984), Ishmael Bernal (*Manila by Night*, 1980), and Mike de Leon (*Kisapmata [In the Wink of An Eye]*, 1981; *Batch '81*, 1982).<sup>3</sup>

Regrettably now, no major work able to make a thoughtful and sober assessment of the Martial Law years in the Philippines has been made. The present historical distance, almost twenty years after the fall of the dictatorship, could have afforded us an opportunity to reflect on the slaughter of our citizens and the plunder of our nation's resources arising from the Marcoses' greed for power and wealth, thereby enabling us to learn lessons from it, in a way that Western artists ponder on the Holocaust years.

Attempts are at best, modest: there is one, through the revisionist cinematic interpretation of Lualhati Bautista's Martial Law classic novels, both of them directed by Chito Roño: *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa (Lea's Story)*, 1998) and *Dekada '70 (The Seventies)*, 2002); and another, through an anarchist critique of Philippine revolutionary struggles in Gil Portes's *Andrea, Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina? (How Does One Become a Mother?)*, 1990), Joel Lamangan's *Bakit May Kahapon Pa? (Why Is There a Yesterday?)*, 1995), and Mario O'Hara's *Pangarap ng Puso (Demons)*, 2000).<sup>4</sup>

It seems ironic to find another strand of creative impulse on the subject that is more recent: an outright denial of the "wounded" Filipino soul; if ever, it is capable of redemption, only if one forgives. This is exemplified by the religious incarnation of the domestic family drama in Laurice Guillen's *Tanging Yaman (A Change of Heart)*, 2000) and the Christ-like representation of the hero in Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Muro-Ami (Reef Hunters)*, 1999).<sup>5</sup>

Along this line, what appears to be most disturbing is the tendency of a few filmmakers to put a so-called human face on the oppressor. This is exemplified by *Imelda*, where the filmmaker Ramona Diaz has not only succeeded in recuperating the Marcos cult but has entirely diminished, if not trivialized, the long years of suffering of our people under the Marcos dictatorship. Implicit in the project, because Imelda Marcos was granted a forum

to narrate her part in history (a few sound bites from a couple of progressive journalists do not suffice), is to exonerate her—or even the entire Marcos family and their minions—of the sins of Martial Law. One asks, "Whose sins were those then?"

In the film's final frame as the closing credits are rolling, we watch the Marcos children Imee and Bongbong, who are now public officials in their father's home province, make their entrance with glee into an auditorium filled with their political supporters. As if saying, "We are back!"

The effect is both scary and devastating. To this writer then, the act of completing this essay on Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon* becomes a moral responsibility. It is in this context therefore that one discerns the true worth of Lav Diaz's ten-hour opus. In terms of sheer length, *Ebolusyon* has no precedent. However, it is the audacity of its vision—thematic and aesthetic—that makes it one of the most important films in the history of Philippine cinema.

The ambition of *Ebolusyon* is not merely to chronicle one Filipino peasant family's struggle for survival through the dementia of the Marcos Martial Law years but to document the Filipino people's own. The time period, 1971-87—assayed by archival footages, newsreels and the re-construction of actual events, e.g., interviews with the late activist-filmmaker, Lino Brocka, interspersed at various points in the film—corresponds to the events leading to the declaration of Martial Law through the upheaval that follows the People Power revolt. This provides a contextual framework upon which the filmmaker is able to dramatize the story of the Gallardo family against the tumult of the period, representative of the larger society (Figure 3).

*Ebolusyon*, shot in black and white, opens with Puring (Angie Ferro), the grandmother, and her three granddaughters on the farm, their drawn faces and bodies projected as shadowy figures obscured by the blinding rays of the sun. This sequence of shots sets the emotional tone of the film: pained, wounded, desperate. Nevertheless, because the men in their lives have been beaten down by fate or misfortune, this family of women remains the moral core of the narrative. Theirs are the lives, intertwined with others, that progress painstakingly through the length of the film, signifying the impoverished, almost dead-end existence of the Filipino, but punctuated only



Fig. 3. The rape scene of Hilda (Marife Necesito) by a drunkard (Joe Gruta). (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

by outbursts of violence: The rape and murder of the mentally challenged daughter, Hilda (Marife Necesito). The maiming, incarceration and eventual killing of the son, Kadyo (Pen Medina). The savage abduction of Carlos (Erwin Gonzales), adopted son of Fernando (Ronnie Lazaro).

In-between, while the narrative bifurcates into two main arcs—one, Raynaldo (Elryan de Vera), leaves after he shoots his mother's



Fig. 4. Angie Ferro as Puring, a grandmother fretting over the breakup of her family. (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

rapist-murderers, and the other, Kadyo, searches for Raynaldo in Manila after his release from prison—at the center of the film is the story of Puring and her three granddaughters: Huling (Banaue Miclat), Ana (Sigrid Andrea Fernando), and Martina (Lorelei Futol). It is in their uncontained rage and fear of an uncertain future—an overall tone of resignation and despair—that enables the viewer to understand fully the brutality of the Marcos years.



Fig. 5. Joe Gruta as a violently abusive drunkard and Marife Necesito as his mentally impaired rape victim, Hilda. (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

Not a few may comment on the length of the film as an instance of directorial conceit. On the contrary, one has to make a case that it is the long novel format that affords us with occasions to reflect on the impact of Martial Law on our present lives. Moreover, it enables us to experience the past, as if exorcising ourselves of its demons.

There is pain in this process of recognition. A feeling of dread permeates even moments of quietude. The uneasy stillness of the rice fields, where one barely hears the wind, presages the savagery of the war between the government and the rebel forces in the countryside. The eeriness of the unhurried rain that accompanies Fernando's trek to the mountains in search for gold foreshadows the impending tragedy in his family. These are scenes that resist the idyllic, pastoral spectacle of rural life commonly seen in both contemporary art and popular culture.

Devoid of a commercial film's artifices—such as swelling music, special lighting, and stylized editing and design—and entirely reliant on the almost completely real-time enactment of events, *Ebolusyon* compels us to look at film in a wider cinematic context, as a form of resistance to mainstream narrative and style. Consequently, the filmmaker allows us to examine the subject of the tragic Filipino past with a sense of urgency, in a way that is more probing and thoughtful.

This duality of filmic vision—wherein film is both document and fiction—raises the issue of cinema as an aesthetic and cultural medium. The employment of what appears on the surface as either unrelated shots or diversionary narrative contrivance—one recalls the use of actual news footage of the massacre of farmers in Mendiola in the vicinity of the presidential Malacañang Palace, and the staging of the studio taping of the radio drama serials—serves to disrupt the process of fictionalizing; it thereby provokes us to comment, to see storytelling as a device to inquire into the larger issue of the human condition at a particular time-space (Figure 6).

The ubiquitous insertion of the radio drama serial, for one, provides a necessary break from the drudgery of everyday life—both for the benefit of the characters and the viewers—in the same way that they/we find solace in their songs and in their stories. Nevertheless, it is the use of the radio drama serial in its adherence to the conventions of storytelling—linear narrative, suspense-driven, hero-centered—that reminds us, observers and students of film, of the popular origins of the cinematic melodrama. Similarly, the frequent singing of “Sapagkat Mahal Kita” (Because I Love You, words and music by Felipe de Leon), a popular kundiman or Filipino love song, and the



Fig. 6. An exacerbation of the victim's trauma by making her witness the murder of her adoptive family. (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

jukebox playing of the then-current pop tunes of Eddie Peregrina and Rey Valera, underscore the use of music as an emotive device in conventional cinematic storytelling.

In *Ebolusyon*, however, radio drama—as well as music—serves both as critique and reconstruction of popular cinematic tradition and narratives. One points to the filmmaker's particular selection of materials. One drama serial titled “Habang May Pag-asa” (While There Is Hope) follows a young girl's dream of being a movie star, her way out of poverty, with her ending up in sex movies. The other, “Ang Lahat May Pag-asa” (Hope Awaits Everyone), tells of a young girl who gets seduced by her stepfather but is thrown out of the house by her own mother for her transgression. These drama serials represent two common narrative tropes in popular Philippine fiction as well as film melodrama, and serve to counterpoint filmmaker Lino Brocka's assertions on what ails Filipino movies in particular, and the larger

Philippine society. The typical closure that is characteristic of these narratives impedes any possibility of a critical assessment of the sociopolitical condition that defines them.

What Brocka suggests, in his words and in his more meaningful works, e.g., the aforementioned *Bayan Ko* and other films such as, *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (Manila: In the Claws of Neon, 1975), *Jaguar* (1986), and *Orapronobis* (Pray for Us, 1989),<sup>6</sup> which may also be Lav Diaz's concern, is the imperative to wage a sustained, even protracted, counterhegemonic offensive, both pedagogic and agitational, to alter/reconstruct attitudes and practices, eventually transforming society. Implicit in this effort are attempts to reconfigure film, not merely as a marketable product, but as an instrument for social change.

Significantly, *Ebolusyon*, by directly rejecting the formulaic conventions of popular film, is able to reimagine cinematic space for its viewer with a grammar that is liberative, and with a narrative that allows the interruptions and contradictions inherent in social realities to play out. *Ebolusyon* owes its potency to its consistent refusal to prescribe solutions, more or less letting opposing forces continually engage in a space of tension.

More than anything else, the eventual valuation of *Ebolusyon* lies not only in its repudiation of the formal characteristics of popular film, but in its courage to insinuate that film is what social critic Edel Garcellano refers to as “extension of the contemporary sociopolitical ferment of society.”<sup>7</sup> The film, by acknowledging the issue of land as central to social unrest, suggests that it is only through the peasant class reclaiming ownership of their land that the nation will find its own redemption.

The failure of institutions to make changes in people's lives—be it government, church, or the revolutionary movement—constitutes the film's thesis. A visually powerful image of Kadyo's almost twenty-minute walk toward his death after being stabbed, is reminiscent of Christ bearing his cross to Calvary, thereby representing a collusion of these aforementioned institutions. The futility of his death—a senseless, nameless murder—evokes a feeling of unease because one does not find finality in it. There are no kin

able to reclaim his body. There is no closure. This, metaphorically, is the great Filipino tragedy.

It is only through the agency of art, the filmmaker making his film, that we, the viewers, are only able to redeem ourselves. In *Ebolusyon*, Lav Diaz has to let his protagonist Raynaldo return to his cousins' fold. He also has to retell the story of the baby who was left in the dumpsite many years ago. It was presumably, Raynaldo. He has to create the tale of the two mothers: the mother who bore him, and the mother who saved him from the ants.

In the meantime, my country and my people continue to grieve.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. Ramona Diaz's *Imelda* was premiered on US public television on May 10, 2005, as part of the annual Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. In January 2004 it was honored with a cinematography prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon ng Pamilyang Pilipino* was screened in March 2004 at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California, as part of the annual San Francisco Asian American International Film Festival.
2. Even during the martial-law period, artists and cultural workers produced works that conveyed their outrage against the US-propped government of Ferdinand Marcos, notably the works of underground writers Emmanuel Lacaba and Jose Maria Sison. But it was after the assassination of oppositionist Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. that a great number of artists—in music, visual arts, theater, and film—joined forces with the proletariat to protest the morally bankrupt Marcos government in the streets through their art. To cite a few: Lualhati Bautista, the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), visual artists Jose Tence Ruiz and Antipas Delotavo, and the musical group Patatag.
3. Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, and Mike de Leon are widely considered the main figures in what critics often refer to as the Second Golden Age of Philippine cinema, 1970-90. Brocka's *Bayan Ko (My Country)*, 1984, the story of a union workers' protest in a printing press, was shown at the Cannes Film Festival, where Brocka created some furor when he wore a "blood-streaked" Philippine map-designed barong shirt (the Philippine national costume). Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980) dramatizes the impoverished lives of multiple characters in Manila. The Marcos government forbade it from competing at the Berlin International Film Festival because it was allegedly a smear on Manila's reputation as premier city in Asia. De Leon's *Kisapmata* (1981), about an incestuous relationship between a retired policeman and his daughter, and *Batch '81* (1982), about the violence of a student fraternity hazing, are allegories on the authoritarian Marcos government.
4. Lualhati Bautista's popular novels *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* and *Dekada '70* are considered feminist documents of the Martial Law period. Their filmization, both directed by Chito Roño, reduced their political significance by merely dramatizing the personal travails of a woman living through the tumultuous years of Martial Law. Portes's *Andrea, Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina?* and Lamangan's *Bakit May Kahapon Pa?* have a woman revolutionary as the protagonist, but presented her as too individualistic, emotional, and crazed. O'Hara's *Pangarap ng Puso*, while breaking some ground in non-linear storytelling, is really a pastiche of revolutionary iconography that is confused and directionless.
5. Laurice Guillen and Marilou Diaz-Abaya, in their earlier works, bore great promise and appeared to usher in highly valuable feminist perspective in popular cinema when they started making films in the early '80s. They left filmmaking toward the end of the decade—apparently in frustration over the state of the industry—and returned in the mid-'90s with an entirely different attitude to cinema. Guillen's work has since borne Marian (after the Virgin Mary) thinking in film, notably *Tanging Yaman* with a scene of the grandmother's seeming ascension to heaven. Diaz-Abaya's output, on the other hand, has tended to a metaphysical rendering of social realities, notably in *Muro-Ami*.
6. Brocka's *Maynila*, about life in the slums of Manila, was considered a landmark in Philippine cinema (cinematography was done by Mike de Leon). *Jaguar*, also screened at Cannes, tells of a lowly bodyguard of a politician, who gets involved in a crime. *Orapronobis*, the story of an ex-priest who tries to save the lives of his former lover and her son from the clutches of a demented paramilitary head, served as an indictment of the Corazon Aquino regime's continued human rights abuses.
7. Edel E. Garcellano, "A Choice of Film Review (Or, Reviewing the Reviewer)" in *Knife's Edge: Selected Essays* (U of the Philippines P, 2001).

# Kung Paano Ako Natutong Bumasa ng Pelikula

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Nagsimula ang hilig ko sa pag-unawa sa mga pelikula nang minsang ginamit ni Propesor Michael M. Coroza sa Gradwadong Paaralan ng Unibersidad ng Santo Tomas ang *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) bilang halimbawa ng pagbasa sa teksto. Iniukol ng propesor ang atensyon sa dulong eksena ng paghagis ng kuwintas pabalik sa dagat at sa binitawang linya ng protagonistang si Rose na “A woman’s heart is a deep ocean of secrets” na ayon sa pagpapaliwanag ay maaaring susi sa buong pelikula. Ipinatatanaw nito kung paanong lumulubog ang kalalakihan sa kanilang pagkahumaling sa kababaihan sa kabila ng tila dominasyon ng una sa huli, at inilalarawan ito ng barkong simbolo ng mapagmalaking lalaki na nilamon lamang ng Karagatang Atlantiko na, gaya ng brilyanteng Heart of the Ocean, ay kumakatawan sa babae.

Ito ang dahilan kung bakit sinimulan ko ang personal na blog pampelekula na *Kung Sine Sine Lang* noong 2014 na dapat ay ehersisyo lamang sa closed reading ng mga tekstong pampanitikan o iyong tinatawag na New Criticism dahil malikhaing pagsulat ang pinagmumulan kong disiplina. Bilang isang instruktur sa unibersidad, naging bahagi rin ang maikling anekdota tungkol sa *Titanic* sa introduksiyon ko sa sining ng pelikula sa pagtuturo ng Art Appreciation, na kursong sa ilalim ng General Education sa antas ng kolehiyo. Ngunit lagi kong idinaragdag na ang panunuring pampelikula ay hindi nagtatapos sa closed reading, na ang paraang ito ay nagbubukas sa iba’t

ibang teoryang pilosopikal at kultural o pampanitikan. At gaya sa halimbawang *Titanic*, pumapasok na ang tunggalian ng mga kasarian, politikal, at ekonomiyang kalagayang umiiral sa pagitan ng mga tauhan at maging sa kaligiran ng obra.

Bagaman kumukuha na ako ng master’s nang mabuksan ako sa idea ng pagsusulat hinggil sa pelikula, matagal na akong nanonood ng mga pelikula. Gayong lumaki ako sa panonood ng mga Hollywood films, kumikiling ang panonood ko sa mga Filipinong pelikulang independent. Nasa kolehiyo na ako nang matuklasang “indie” pala ang dalawang takdang papanoorin para sa klase: *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong* ni Mes de Guzman at ang *Maicling Pelicula nañg Ysang Indio Nacional* ni Raya Martin. Nabuksan din ako sa papausbong pa lamang noon na Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival kaya naman sinusubok ko hanggang ngayon ang pagtangkilik sa mga katulad na film festival. Inaabangan ko maging ang mga pelikulang usap-usapang ilalabas o kaya’y nagsipagwagi sa mga prestihiyosong patimpalak sa abroad. Lahat ng ito, dinarayo ko sa mga venue gaya ng Cultural Center of the Philippines, mga micro-cinema, at iilang sinehan na inilaan ng mga mall.

Mahalagang may ganitong bias laban sa produkto ng mainstream films dahil maaaring sa indie matatagpuan ang mga sineng labas sa pormularyo ng malalaking studio. Kaya mula 2014, inilalaan ko ang pagsusulat hinggil sa mga pelikulang indie na matutunghayan lamang sa mga film festival dahil dito, para sa akin, pinakasagana ang mga sine natin na masasabing dapat ay mahusay sa lahat ng mahuhusay. Gayunman, pinipili ko pa rin aling pelikula ang gagawan ng kritisismo o kaya’y pagbasa. Kung may anim hanggang walong kabilang sa kompetisyon, may dalawa o tatlong obrang hindi ko isusulat kahit napanood. Dahil bukod sa pagbibigay ng rebyu kung maayos o hindi, kung maganda o pangit ang likha ng filmmaker, kinikilatis ko rin tuwing nagsusulat ang silbi ng bawat elementong piniling ipasok sa pelikula at kung paano nito naipamamalas ang isang bagong idea sa tagapanood.

Sa ganitong pagtingin, kinakailangang nakalalampas ang isang pelikula sa pinakamababang kahingian ng organikong kaisahan, iyong walang nasasayang na eksena’t elemento sa kabuuan ng ipinahihiwatig na bisyon ng direktor. Kung hindi na natutugunan ng sine ang antas na ito, hindi ko

na maaasahang makapaglalahad ito ng higit na maayos na kahulugan para sa akin, at higit sa lahat, sa payak na tagapanood sa sinehan. Kung ihahambing ko ito sa pag-aaral at pagbabasa ng panitikan, nararapat na pagkatapos ng closed reading, nagsisimulang mailugar ang obra sa konteksto ng panahong naipalabas ito at maging sa buhay ng filmmaker.

Nais kong linawin na nakalaan ang pagsusulat ko hinggil sa mga pelikulang indie, na para sa akin ay isang terminong hindi patungkol sa budget. Nagiging indie ang pelikula dahil sa kakulangan ng mga sinehang nagbibigay ng suporta para maitawid sa tagapanood ang likha ng filmmaker sa kabila ng kompetisyon ng mga kanluraning sine, lalong-lalo iyong mula Hollywood. Dahil dito, nilalayan ng sinimulan kong blog na maipatanaw sa Filipinong manonood kung ano ang dapat nilang asahan sa mga inilalabas na bago ng mga maituturing nilang “hindi kilalang” mga aktor o direktor. Kung nakapanood naman at hindi maunawaan ang natunghayan, ang pagbasa ko ay naroon para linawin ang ilang mahahalagang punto sa pelikula.

Naniniwala akong mahalaga ang ibinibigay kong pagpapaliwanag sa kahulugan at bisa ng obra, pelikula o panitikan, dahil ito ang maglalapit sa tao at sa sining. Dahil sa ngayon, may sapantaha ang mga nagbabasa ng panunuring pampelikula, lalo kung nasa anyo ng rebyu, na ang tanging silbi nito ay sabihin kung dapat o hindi dapat panoorin ang isang pelikula. Dapat sana’y pinagbibigyan ang anumang ipapalabas at hindi lamang nadidiktahan ang panlasa ng manonood batay sa opinyon ng isang kritiko. Sa ganitong paraan matututo kung paano dapat tangkilikin ang sine at iba pang uri ng sining sa Filipinas.

## How I Learned to Read a Film

TRANSLATED BY JOEL DAVID

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My appreciation for film started when Professor Michael M. Coroza at the graduate program of the University of Santo Tomas used James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997) as a sample for textual reading. He directed our attention to the final scene where Rose casts her necklace into the ocean while uttering the line “A woman’s heart is a deep ocean of secrets,” which (per Professor Cordoza’s lecture) may be the key to understanding the entire film. In a sense, a lover is submerged by his passion despite his apparent dominant role, and this is symbolized by the ship’s representation of masculine pride via the Heart of the Ocean diamond, that was swallowed up in the end by the Atlantic Ocean.

This is the reason I started my *Kung Sine Sine Lang* blog in 2014, intending it as an exercise in closed reading literary texts via New Criticism, because creative writing was my discipline. As a university instructor, the short *Titanic* anecdote was my means of introduction to film art and enabled me to teach Art Appreciation, a course under the college’s General Education program. But I always add that film reviewing does not end with closed reading, that this activity opens various philosophical and cultural or literary theories. And just like in the example of the *Titanic*, we find conflicts of gender, politics, and economic situations that surround the characters as well as the text.

Although I was already taking my master's when the idea of writing on film occurred to me, I'd been a film viewer for a long time. I may have grown up on Hollywood films, but my preference is for independent Filipino releases. I was already in college when I discovered that two of my assignments happened to be "indie" films: Mes de Guzman's *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong* (2005) and Raya Martin's *Maicling Pelicula nañg Ysang Indio Nacional* (2005). I also became aware of the then-emerging Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival, which is the reason I continue to patronize these types of film festivals. I watch out for films that generate buzz or that win in prestigious foreign competitions. I attend all these at venues like the Cultural Center of the Philippines, micro-cinemas, and some theaters allotted by shopping malls.

This bias against mainstream-film products is important because one can find in indie films those products outside the formulas of big studios. Hence since 2014, I devoted my writing to indie films available at film festivals since here, for me, can be found the best of the best of our films. Nevertheless, I still select what films I would criticize or read. If there are six to eight titles in competition, I would not write about two or three of these even if I had seen them. Because aside from providing a favorable or unfavorable review, I also look at each element that the filmmaker utilized for her film and how this revealed a new idea to the audience.

In this perspective, a movie has to transcend the minimum requirement of organic unity, with no wasted scene and element in the vision being conveyed by the director. If the film is unable to meet this requirement, I cannot expect it to provide a fuller meaning for me, and most of all, for the average movie-goer. If I were to compare this to the study and reading of literature, what should follow after a closed reading is the placement of the work within the context of the historical period of the content as well as of the filmmaker.

I wish to clarify that I devote my critical writing to indie movies, which for me is defined not by its budget. A movie becomes indie because of the commercial distributors' failure in providing support to allow audiences to access the work of the filmmaker despite the competition of Western

releases, especially those that emanate from Hollywood. Because of this, my blog aims to reveal to Filipino viewers what they should expect from the work of "unfamiliar" actors or directors. If they're able to watch but not understand what they see, my reading will enable some of the most significant points of the film.

I believe that what I provide is important in providing the meaning and impact of a work, film or literature, because this is what will enable the audience and the work to come together. For at this time, those who read film evaluations, especially in the form of reviews, may believe that these only serve to declare whether or not a film release should be patronized. We should allow for whatever happens to be screening and avoid dictating the preference of the viewer according to the opinion of the critic. By these means the viewer could learn how to properly patronize films and other art forms in the Philippines.

# Ang Gabi ng *Baconaua*

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Mahabang pagtawid sa laot at dilim ang tinatangka ng *Baconaua* ni Joseph Israel Laban gaya ng mapapansing pagdaan sa kuwadro ng mga bangka sa kalagitnaan ng tubig, at mabagal na pagbagtas ng tauhan dito (Figura 1). Ang magkahiwalay na pagdaraos ng ritwal para sa mga pinaniniwalaang yumao't hindi na babalik na mga kaanak ay pagpapakahulugan na ang karimlan ng gabi at karagatan ay kamatayan. Gaya ng ritwal ng paglilibing ng mga sinaunang Filipino na makikita sa mga Manunggul jar, makikita sa ibabaw nito ang paghahatid sa kabilang panig lulan ang bangka. Gayunpaman, ang pagpili na padilimin lalo ang sinematograpiya upang iparamdam na isang hindi natatapos na eklipse ang kabuuan ng pelikula. Ito ang karaniwang iniuugnay sa halimaw na bakunawa na sinasabing kumakain sa buwan at sanhi ng pagkawala nito tuwing eklipse. Tumutugtog mula sa transistor ang dalawang banyagang bersiyon ng pambansang awit ng Filipinas hudyat ng bagong araw ngunit ang imahen ng mga islang ipinatatanaw ng kamera'y sumasalungat sa nadidinig dahil halos walang araw na nagpapaliwanag sa kalupaan.

Bukod sa pagkawala ng liwanag, may iba pang katangiang iniuugnay sa nilalang na bakunawa ang tuwiran at hindi tuwirang ipinamamalas. Dito, pinaniniwalaang ito ang kumukuha sa mga nangangahas na lumusong sa pampang o pumalaot sa pusod ng dagat tulad ng pagkawala ng ama



Fig. 1. Karaniwang buhay ng mga taga-isla bago ang mahabang gabi. (*Baconaua*, dinirhe ni Joseph Israel Laban, One Big Fight Productions at Waning Crescent Arts, 2017)

ng magkakapatid at ang pananakot ng mga bata sa dalampasigan. Para sa mga Marinduqueño rito, bahagi ng kanilang pamumuhay ang paniniwala sa halimaw na nangunguha ng tao na bahagya lamang ipinasisilip ng pelikula, marahil upang mapanatili ang misteryo nito. Nananatili ito sa ilalim ng tubig para hindi basta makita gaya ng aksidente ni Dino (JM Salvado), ang bunso at nag-iisang lalaki sa magkakapatid. Ngunit ang lokal na bakunawa ng lalawigan ay itinutumbas din sa dragon ng kanluran at ng mga Tsino na inilalahad sa pagdating ng dayuhan mulang Tsina.

Sa kabilang panig, nariyan ang buwan na lagi't laging kinakain ng nasa-bing halimaw, na ayon sa mito'y lumamon din sa dati'y anim na iba pang buwan. Kaya lamang nailigatas ang huli't ikapitong buwan dahil gumawa ng ingay ang mga tao upang itaboy pabalik sa pinagmulan ang bakunawa. At





Fig. 2. Ritwal ng paghahatid sa kabilang buhay na di sang-ayon sa Kristiyanismo. (*Baconaua*, dinirhe ni Joseph Israel Laban, One Big Fight Productions at Waning Crescent Arts, 2017)

gaya ng arketipikong pagtutumbas ng buwan sa babae sa iba't ibang panitikan, ang papel nina Divina (Elora Españo) at Dian (Therese Malvar), ang dalawang supling ng nawawalang ama, ay maaaring makitaan ng katangian ng buwan. Higit pa itong mamalas sa dulong bahagi ng pelikula, sa kabilugan ng buwan, sa sandaling waring nag-iisa na lamang ang panganay, ipinahihiwatig ang pag-ako ng natitirang anak sa tungkuling iniwan ng lumisang ina, nawawalang ama, napaslang na bunso, at suwail na kapatid. Maging ang huling imahen ay naglalarawan ng pagiging isa o pagsasanib ng nanlalaking buwan sa ibabaw ng dagat habang pumapalaot papalapit dito si Divina.

Mula sa katutubong paniniwala, mahahalata ang pag-iral ng konseptong nagmumula sa Kristiyanismo maging sa malay ng mga nasa labas ng sentro ng kapangyarihan (Figura 2). Ang biglang pagdating ng napakaraming

mansanas sa dalampasigan ay masamang pangitain para sa ilan sa pamayanan ngunit itinuring na biyaya ng iba. Kung susundin ang depiksiyon ng mga likhang sining na halaw sa Henesis, ang mansanas dito ang prutas na pinagmulan ng pagkakasala't pagkamulat ni Eba, isa ring babae na nagpasya para sa kanilang dalawa ni Adan. Pero dito, mapapansing natutuhan ni Divina ang leksiyon ng kaniyang pagkakasala na pilit niyang ipinababatid sa kapatid na nahulog din sa parehong lalaki na literal at metaporikal na nagpakagat sa ipinagbabawal na bunga.

Higit na makapangyarihan ang dagat rito kaysa sa piniling ipakita ng pelikula at higit dapat na katakutan kaysa sa bakunawa sapagkat sa tubig umiinog ang kabuhayan ng lahat ng mamamayan. Dito nagmumula ang kanilang kakanin sa araw-araw ngunit ito rin ang bumabawi sa mga mahal sa buhay. Dito nila idinaraos ang mga ritwal at ipinaubaya ang naging buhay ng mga yumao gayong ito ang naglayo nang tuluyan sa mga magulang at supling. Dito nagmumula ang biyaya at yamang madali nilang mahahango ngunit dito rin nagmumula ang mga banta mula sa labas. Ang laot ng *Baconaua* ay dapat kilalanin bilang tauhang kayang maging mapagbigay ngunit marunong bumawi upang pantaying muli ang kalikasan.

## Pagkilala

Muling nilagda nang may pahintulot ng may-akda mula sa *Kung Sine Sine Lang* blog, June 8, 2017, [kungsinesinelang.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/ang-gabi-ng-baconaua/](https://kungsinesinelang.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/ang-gabi-ng-baconaua/).

## The Night of Baconaua

TRANSLATED BY JOEL DAVID

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Joseph Israel Laban's *Baconaua* attempts a long journey over sea and darkness, as manifested in the crossing of boats across the frame amid the stillness of water, as well as the slow traversal of its characters. The separate observance of rituals for family members believed to have perished signals to us that the darkness of the night and sea is tantamount to death. Redolent of the burial ritual of precolonial Filipinos that made use of Manunggul jars, where the dead ancestor is transported to the afterlife by means of a boat ride. Nevertheless, the decision to darken the cinematography conveys the impression of a never-ending eclipse throughout the film. This is commonly associated with the mythological dragon, the *bakunawa* that supposedly devours the moon and causes it to vanish during a lunar eclipse. Two foreign versions of the Philippine national anthem are broadcasted over a transistor radio to indicate a new day but the camera reveals an image of several islands that disavows the hopefulness in the soundtrack when the sun refuses to cast any light on the earth.

Aside from the darkness, other attributes associated with the *bakunawa*'s perception are manifested directly and implicitly. In this place, people believe that the creature abducted anyone brazen enough to plumb the ocean's depth or sail too far out, as in the instance of the disappearance of the father and the warnings sounded by children at the shore. For the residents of Marinduque,

believing in the human-snatching monster has become part of their way of life although the film merely hints at this, possibly to retain its mystique. The *bakunawa* remains submerged so that it cannot be readily perceived, as what occurred in the accident of Dino (JM Salvado), the youngest and only son among the siblings. But the province's own monster is also equated with the dragon of the West and of the Chinese as depicted in the arrival of Chinese migrants.

On the other hand, the moon is constantly being consumed by such a monster, whose attacks, according to legend, used to return for six more months. The only reason that the seventh month could be saved was because the residents would create enough uproar to drive the *bakunawa* to its origin. And just like the archetypal correlation of women with the moon in various types of literature, the roles of Divina (Elora España) and Dian (Therese Malvar), the two eldest children orphaned of their father, may also be seen as moon-like in their character. This would be better manifested toward the end, during full moon, at the moment when the eldest is apparently by herself, the remaining child implicitly assuming the duties left by the departed mother, missing father, slain youngest, and wayward sibling. Even the last image illustrates the singularity of the gigantic moon above the sea as Divina floats toward it.

From a native perspective, one can sense the predominance of concepts derived from Christianity even in the consciousness of those outside the seat of power. The sudden arrival of untold numbers of apples at the beach forebodes misfortune for certain natives but is considered a gift by others. If we were to follow the depiction of artworks based on Genesis, the apple would be the fruit that caused Eve to sin and become enlightened, another woman who decided for both herself and Adam. But in this case, one may perceive that she has learned from her transgression a lesson that she insists on teaching her younger sibling who has fallen for the same man and has literally and figuratively tasted forbidden fruit.

The sea is more powerful than what the film depicts and should be feared more than the *bakunawa* because everyone's livelihood depends on the sea. This is where their daily sustenance is derived but it has also claimed

their loved ones. This is where they perform their rituals and accept the loss of those who perished even as it sets apart parents from offspring. This is where bounty and wealth can be derived although threats from outside also arrive through it. The sea of *Baconaua* must be recognized as a character capable of not only giving but also taking in order to restore the balance of nature.

## Acknowledgment

Reprinted with the author's permission from the *Kung Sine Sine Lang* blog, June 8, 2017, [kungsinesinelang.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/ang-gabi-ng-baconaua/](http://kungsinesinelang.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/ang-gabi-ng-baconaua/).

## State of My Opinion

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Noel Vera

*BusinessWorld*

**How did you start?** In 1995, when I walked into the *Manila Chronicle* press room and turned in to Celine Cristobal—who was the lifestyle editor at the time—an article on Robert Zemeckis' *Forrest Gump* (hated it). Called two weeks later to ask if they accepted the story and was told they printed it that week. Have been writing ever since.

**How often do you write?** Once a week—more if, say, there is a special screening, or if a significant filmmaker has died and I feel he or she needs a tribute. Less if life happens to get in the way.

**How do you prepare for the article?** My methodology is ridiculously simple: *Wikipedia* to start; for biopics I hunt down articles comparing true story to adaptation. Issue films I read up on the issues. If the film is from a famed filmmaker or is done in a particular style I might read up on the filmmaker or style to refresh my memory or check for new developments. Sometimes I research on similar films in a particular genre, or films that have tackled a similar issue, or have used a similar approach. Really the common-sense approach—do your homework, or at least do a background check.

On the rare occasion I can talk to the filmmaker I will ask about budget, production problems, his opinion on the issues being tackled, etc. If there

is something I know or suspect is autobiographical I will try asking about that. I try to be as upfront as possible that I cannot guarantee I will like the film—just that I will do my best to be fair.

**How do you see the films?** When I can, where I can. In a movie theater as much as possible, DVD or online streaming when it is not. Festivals are a golden resource—I will binge four, five, six films a day, midnight screenings. Film festival invitations do not come very often anymore.

**How long do you take to write the article?** As little as three to four hours, if I am lucky, when it is not a struggle. It helps if I have seen the film some time before and thought it over in my head. Also helps when I talk the film over with someone afterwards. If I'm lucky and I have time I can start a draft early and just think it through for a week or two, do research. I like to think you can see the difference, that the article is more carefully written and substantial.

**Do you have a rating system?** I love rating systems—well love to laugh at them. Stars, thumbs, popcorn buckets—it all seems silly to me. I would like to adopt one, just to parody its use (“Plus one star for the presence of actor X, minus 1/2 star for the failed toilet joke”).

**Do you know anyone in the industry and do you play other roles than critic in the industry?** I do know a few critics, scholars, filmmakers. Maybe a handful of actors. We mostly have a casual acquaintance. We have also had disagreements and yes a filmmaker has been pissed at me for talking against his film—I understand, it's his baby that he's worked on for so hard for so long. I try to be polite as possible, making clear that's my opinion and it is also not going to change. Sometimes we reconcile.

I have done translations and subtitling. I have done scripts. I have acted in one film, a brief scene. I have been a jurist. I have recommended films to festivals, provided film prints (to Munich, if I remember right), and did a program for [International Film Festival] Rotterdam. Not a lot but enough.

**Do you have another job?** I work full-time at a placement for at-risk youths, male and female; I am an overnight supervisor. It is interesting work and pays fairly well.

**What is the state of Filipino film criticism? Of Filipino filmmaking?**

Filipino film criticism has evolved. We have lost some of our best people—Hammy Sotto and Gino Dormiendo come to mind—while others seem to have grown inactive, thanks to the rise of free film blogs, of *Letterboxd* (where anyone with internet access can put up a movie review), and of *YouTube* reviewers. I am glad to see the rise of serious writers on Filipino films—I am thinking of Oggs Cruz at *Rappler*, and of Adrian Mendizabal, who writes on film from a philosophical perspective. New generation seems to have sprouted and they are as ambitious and creative as any of us; what is missing is historical perspective, a sense of what Filipino films were like in earlier decades. Think about it—the number of people who have seen a film on 35mm is gradually diminishing.

At the same time films from the past have been recovered—I am thinking of Gerardo de Leon's *Noli Me Tangere* among others. Mike de Leon has been posting old films in installments on his *Facebook* page Casa Grande Vintage Filipino Cinema—that is a gold mine of perspective there, much of it digitally stored and available online.

And same time as all this the independent scene is—well, not flourishing, but definitely surviving, and as ambitious and inventive as ever. Jerrold Tarog, Antoinette Jadaone, Khavn, Denise O'Hara, Raya Martin, Keith Sicat, Sari Dalena, Richard Somes, John Torres, Lav Diaz—more names and more styles than I have room or memory to cite. Chito Roño and Joel Lamangan are still active; Mike de Leon came out with a film last year, after eighteen years. Plenty to write about.

**What's your present status as a film critic?** Since my move to the USA I mostly regard myself as an outsider looking in—I have to; I do not see all the Filipino films I want to. I like to think myself as a kind of bridge between



local and international cinema, that I can see what Hollywood is up to and judge it according to the strength and creativity of our own filmmakers; at the same time I can see what our filmmakers are doing and put it in context of international cinema.

**What's your methodology for evaluating films?** I do not have any one set method for critical evaluation—I do subscribe to the auteurist school of thinking in regarding the director as often being the prime author, though I have seen cases where the writer or actor have had significant or even dominating influence over a production. I consider political themes, social themes; I consider aesthetic approach. Depending on the kind of film it is—arthouse or multiplex—I consider what its aims are (Entertain? Instruct? Break new ground?). Then I sometimes switch things around and look at the picture from a different viewpoint.

**Where do you get these approaches?** From wherever I can—Pauline Kael was an early influence; same with James Agee. I learned to read Dave Kehr, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Stanley Kauffmann, David Bordwell, Joel David, Hammy Sotito, and Nick Deocampo, and I have talked to Filipino filmmakers about approaches and inspirations.

**What is my goal in writing?** To keep myself sane. Because if I do not write, if I do not express my thoughts and feelings about what I have heard and seen, I will explode—literally, I sometimes think. I achieve peace and emotional balance by letting out the bile and blessings through my pen (or keyboard if you like).

I prefer not to focus on one kind of film, just to keep my diet varied. I will admit to having a bias towards independent and genre films (science fiction, horror, fantasy, comedy, action), and to a bias towards Filipino films—but being aware of that, I look at what I can, when I can.

**What is a well-made film?** I hesitate to say—I am afraid I will box myself in. A coherent, well-written script would be nice; imaginative directing and

camerawork would be nice; honest and skilled acting would be nice, but all that can get tossed out if the director has a strong enough idea. Straub-Huillet's *Europa 2005 – 27 octobre* has a camera move down a street to an electrical transformer; that is it. You had to know in advance that the transformer killed two youths being chased by police. Was it a good film? Does having to know the information beforehand make it bad? I thought it was a powerful experience, mysterious and beautiful. Could I be fooling myself that I saw something great? I do not know; after all these years, I do not know all the answers.

## Works Cited

- Europa 2005-27 octobre*. Directed by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet [uncredited], Rai 3, 2006.
- Forrest Gump*. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, Paramount Pictures, 1994.
- Noli Me Tangere*. Directed by Gerardo De Leon, Bayanihan Film Productions & Arriba Productions, 1961.

## Faceoff

— Noel Vera —

*BusinessWorld*

Film swaggers all pissed off all kissed off  
 Staggering while dragging a pair.  
 Has the grit of an *8 Mile* ripoff at kickoff  
 Midway a *Karate Kid* flair.

Despite the borrowed feel borrowed beat  
 We confront a whole other creature  
 With its own look its own meat its own heat  
 Pitched like a hundred-five fever

Old man meets young buck shit out of luck  
 Old will teach young some wisdom:  
 Words that stun as if head had been struck<sup>1</sup>  
 Set to the young buck's rhythm

Cuz rap is no stranger to Philippine shores  
 We been battling for near a century<sup>2</sup>  
 The rhymes the pulse the lyrical wars  
 The fight to inflict verbal injury

But young buck too the old man fuel  
 Remind him of a past bad-scarred  
 The pains of living under Marcos rule  
 (The ghoul the cruel the red-tipped tool)  
 The ghosts whose memories die hard

All swept aside by the new reality  
 This “drug war” our mayor declared;  
 What’s two lives in a fascist totality  
 (Insanity bestiality gory immorality)  
 Deaths ’tween generations shared?

This be a new exciting young punk  
 Aureate glow hard-rapping tempo  
 But its soul’s straight out of ’70s funk  
 Out of Mike and Mario Ishma and Lino<sup>3</sup>

Film has its flaws can’t be denied<sup>4</sup>  
 But lands with a “FUCK YOU!” thud  
 Speaks truth to power to arrogant pride  
 To the lust to spill our blood



Fig. 1. Left to right: Ybes Bagadiong as Payaso, Abra as Hendrix, and Chai Fonacier as Betchai in *Respeto* (publicity still).

### Acknowledgments

This review of *Respeto* (directed by Treb Monteras II, produced in 2017 by Dogzilla, Arkeofilms, Cinemalaya, CMB Film Services, and This Side Up; see Figure 1) was published in *Businessworld* on September 15, 2017. In the first stanza, the films mentioned are *8 Mile* (directed by Curtis Hanson, produced by Universal Pictures, 2002) and *The Karate Kid* (directed by John G. Avildsen, produced Columbia Pictures and Delphi II Productions, 1984).

## Notes

1. Featuring samples from Bien Lumbera, Frank Rivera, Vim Nadera and other carnivora.
2. It's called *Balagtasan, yo!* (Extemporaneous debate performed in verse; named after 19th-century poet Francisco Balagtas.)
3. Not so much the 1970s as the '70s to '80s Martial Law films: Mike de Leon's *Batch '81* (MVP Pictures, 1982); Mario O'Hara's *Bagong Hari* (*The New King*, CineVentures, 1986); Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (Regal Films, 1982); and Lino Brocka's *Insiang* (Cinemanila Corp., 1976).
4. Would a man with a gun stop if confronted? Wasn't the man attempting multiple EJKs (Extra Judicial Killings) at the finale the wrong man?<sup>5</sup>
5. Meaning—those who plan to watch DON'T READ—should have been a cop not a drug dealer?<sup>6</sup>
6. Still a worthwhile film.

## My Personal Critical Philosophy

### The Intersectional Reviewer

Libay Linsangan Cantor

*Takilya ni Leafkens*

I am a writer by trade, and it is a happy feeling to always get paid writing a piece you worked so hard on, especially now that I work as a freelance content provider for various publishing clients. But out of all the content I have been writing my whole life, there is one kind of writing I will not mind not getting paid to do: film reviews or film criticism essays.

As a film major who graduated from the University of the Philippines' College of Mass Communication, I learned how to analyze films using specific traditions, frameworks, and theories. One of these is the auteur theory, wherein you need to analyze the body of work of a certain filmmaker to compare and contrast past works with the current one you are reviewing. Formalism was, of course, one theory we were required to learn, wherein we need to strictly analyze the technical components of the film in question. We were also taught to review using film semiotics, where we need to investigate the film language presented by the filmmaker, to assess the signs and symbolic structures suggested there.

All of these academic concepts sound very useful when doing school paper reviews or writing academic journal articles, but they may not be very effective for first-time reviewers writing in non-academic commercial publications. Outside of the hallowed halls of academe, you would soon realize that following one strict film analytical theory or framework would

not really work well with certain readers, especially if you are writing for pop-culture outlets with a general audience. This realization came to me when I started writing film reviews in one of the very first entertainment and lifestyle portals in the country called *Localvibe.Com*. Author Miguel “Chuck” Syjuco edited and ran that pioneering site with his fellow Ateneans in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He offered me a column of my own which I called “Cut to Cut,” and we got varied responses from my reviews. There were times when some readers would react to the very academic tone of my analysis—a tone I did not realize I utilized—and he discussed this nuance with me. He reminded me that we have to address a more general audience whose aim of reading film reviews falls under the lifestyle aspect, that it is also a longer announcement of sorts of currently available entertainment options in the metro. In short, the reviews have to be more relatable. As I wrote material for many similar pop culture-oriented publications in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I soon realized that the tone of my articles and essays needed to be attuned to the style of the publications I am writing for. Therefore, I needed to be more aware of the content outlet’s target audience and use language they could understand better. I also realized that I should apply this style to my film reviews as well.

I learned to polish my burgeoning film review style with that first column, and this learning process continued over the years, especially when I started working for *Pinoy Times*, an “intelligent tabloid” in Filipino established by *Philippine Daily Inquirer* founder Eugenia Apostol. I was hired to replace their outgoing entertainment editor who merely followed the prevailing gossip-oriented language of local tabloids. When I overhauled the style of our entertainment section—meaning using the traditional journalistic standard of presenting entertainment news as news, not as gossip-like tidbits—I also created a film review column for myself. The column was merely a content filler, actually, when there were slow news days. But I made it into a regular fixture when PR staff of showbiz press conferences (or presscon) organizers started giving me compliments and more tickets to movie premieres of the films they were promoting, saying that they liked my honest no-holds-barred reviews; this meant that I did not merely write

“praise releases” like other entertainment writers just because I got free tickets to the premiere. I also continued this aspect of not writing praise releases when I was offered a lifestyle section column at the *Manila Times* (which I called “The Scribe Vibe”) in the late 2000s.

But I also got my fair share of criticism for critiquing the way I did. I found out that certain filmmakers would complain because they thought I was merely a tabloid entertainment press person without the proper film credentials. And I did not blame them for thinking this way, though. I read somewhere, ages ago, that ex-Beatles singer-songwriter Paul McCartney allegedly had a snobbish take on music reviews before, since he did not find credible the analysis of reviewers who did not have any musical training or background. For him, they did not have the authority to have a say on things of which he was an expert. But this snobbish take also takes away the power of the audience to appreciate an art form in terms of how they receive or perceive it. In pursuing my M.A. in Creative Writing, I got grounded on reader-response theories that took into consideration the way a particular audience experiences a text. And this could also be applied to films as well, since a film’s inevitable audience is not fellow filmmakers but the general populace—a population largely unschooled in the formal traditions of filmmaking.

Aside from my formal B.A. Film education, I indeed had those credentials. I was tempted to remind them of a group of French film critics who took matters into their own hands once, and became filmmakers as well, to prove the points they were making in their analyses. This is why I appreciate the French New Wave filmmakers as well, since I believe you could be both: a reviewer and a filmmaker, at the same time—which is what I actually am, when I reviewed those local films. While I may not have directed full-length films just like them (though I wrote full-length film scripts that actually won awards), I have ample practical knowhow of how to make films—because I made short ones. Outside of my film-school life, I have had the opportunity of writing and directing several short narrative and documentary films, and I have worked as a crew member on the sets of commercial and independent full-length ones. I also became part of several creative development



groups wherein the primary job was to conceptualize commercial films and TV shows, which we later got to work on as episode scriptwriters. So yes, I was able to work inside film producers' creative offices and on the sets of films or TV shoots, where you experience the chance to see how the material is helmed, from script to screen.

Furthermore, my scriptwriting training did not end in the hallowed halls of academe, either. Having worked as a script analyst for the late director Cirio Santiago's film company, Premiere Entertainment Productions, in the mid-1990s, I also honed my skills in breaking down storylines to see where specific Hollywood influences would seep into the pitched local stories. Santiago made it a point to have me look at the scripts many writers were pitching for possible production. Sadly, on average, four out of five scripts I used to review were downright clones of Hollywood films, and this exercise helped me enhance my skills in comparative analyses of films. After my Premiere stint, I also joined the scriptwriting pools of educational TV shows in ABS-CBN. The very corporate style of creating TV show arcs for specific audiences also enhanced my insider knowledge of how concepts turned into TV shows in this country, to complement my working knowledge of how a film concept becomes a film as well. Needless to say, these job experiences I have had enhanced the way I reviewed films.

During the 2000s, and due to my publication connections back then, I was able to review many types of films for various publishing content needs. Their preference for those reviews was always local titles while some asked for current Hollywood releases. As a personal policy, though, outside of those work-related reviews, I don't really choose what kind of film I will review. My priority wasn't focused on genre or mode of production; I can review MMFF entries, digital independent festival films, foreign films, and commercial releases. As much as possible, I try to review as many films as I could, even if they are not required of me anymore. This was also due to the fact that, after my *Localvibe.Com* review days, I discovered that many followers of that site read my reviews to gauge whether they would watch a film or not. While that is not my main purpose in writing reviews—to have

that expert's final say on things—that kind of feedback encouraged me to pursue film criticism more steadily.

My hybrid style of reviewing films apparently struck a chord with readers out there. The first thing I needed to communicate was the relatability of the language I was using. I use words that one would hear used everyday in Metro Manila at a given moment: it has to be friendly, non-alienating (therefore no academic jargon), insightful, and best of all, entertaining. It is not written like a stand-up comic's script, but it's humorous. It is not written like a cynic commenting from the ivory tower, but it is peppered with sarcasm when necessary. It uses terms currently in vogue in mainstream media, popular culture, and society. I was once described by a fellow writer as someone who has this caustic wit about me, so I suppose this is also fused into my writing subconsciously—my own brand of tone or voice. However, writing with this kind of approach in popular publications would easily be dismissed if one did not know the writer's credentials. And since readers—especially those who also echo that ex-Beatles' sentiments—did not have the benefit of looking at my CV, I infuse a hybrid of the auteur and formalist approach of analyzing a film's aspects to give integrity to my observations, with a special focus on the cinematic aspects that always hook me onto a film: the story and scriptwriting, directing, and acting or the (non)believability of casting a celebrity for a role. What, no editing, cinematography, musical score, and others? In a star-struck society like the Philippines', sorry but you have to have some aspects of acting (or their favorite actors) mentioned in there. But yes, the other filmic elements are also there, described or mentioned if they are worth mentioning (meaning if I have not used up my word-count limit yet in breaking down the elements of a film's plotting and storytelling style). This is the line I try to tread when writing for publications back then: one that lies between the academic and the popular or entertaining.

Treading this line for formal publications apparently worked, and I continued getting compliments from friends, peers, and strangers. And this kind of positive response continued when I created a film review blog in the late 2000s called *Takilya ni Leafkens* ([leafkensstakilya.wordpress.com](http://leafkensstakilya.wordpress.com)) to continue reviewing films outside of work requirements. But this time, I can

relax a bit more, and readers can park at their own risk, so to speak, when reading my take of films in my own space. For in this space, I did not need to mind the reputation of the publication I was writing for, since this is my own, and I have my own rules. While I continue to bring with me the academic influences from my Andre Bazin / Sergei Eisenstein / Christian Metz-schooled subconscious and use hybrids of the auteur theory or formalist theory in there, I make it a point not to appear too out there or too up there, as if I am preaching from that ivory tower of scholars. The language is still there, a mix of popular with the academic, but I also code-switch a lot, using Filipino and English interchangeably, especially when I use showbiz or gay lingo sentence formulation or jargon—something that audiences are also exposed to in popular media. I can also amplify my sarcasm, and that caustic wit flies no end here. But to differentiate me from other bloggers, I have always been guided by a small lesson I learned back in Law and the Mass Media class in college that thing called libel. I don't namedrop unnecessarily or directly attack or malign anyone in my films. I understand the fine line between being critical and purely lambasting someone; I never cross this line in my language and tone. But blind items, that's another story!

Blogging about films also found me utilizing theoretical frameworks that appealed to me later in life, namely third-wave feminism, queer theory, and other identity-politics discourses regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, or SOGIE. These concepts also work well with film analysis, so that they complemented and enhanced my reviews, which was automatically added to my cognitive reality of an eclectically oriented film reviewer. So no, I do not aim to be feminist in my reviews; it just appears like it, because my feminist self always adds her two cents whenever there's the need to do it. My queer self does the same.

This is the reason I label my approach to film criticism as a hybrid style—I intersect all of these personalities, influences, and work experiences when doing my analysis of a film. Today, I review films as a filmmaker, a scriptwriter, a film studies student and later a film school teacher, a woman, a feminist, an LGBTQ person, a Filipino, and a pop-culture enthusiast. In film analysis, I find it very limiting and myopic to use just one lens in

looking at things. We already live in a hybrid multimedia/multitasking/multiple-screen world where many lenses are fused into one, and to analyze a film with a singular theoretical monocle is already passé for me. The intersectionality of who I am gets reflected in the reviews I write.

Writing reviews became a steady hobby for me over the years, and I still publish my reviews in my blog. When I started that film-review blog, I was merely focused on continuing my interest in doing reviews. But as I got older, I also considered the aspect of giving ample feedback to filmmakers as a component of my film criticism, aside from helping to promote certain independent efforts that I believe needed to have wider exposure (such as the works of my friends, colleagues, and former film students). But often, in this country, many filmmakers don't see film reviews as feedback, as I earlier described. Most filmmakers still sadly want reviewers to do a commercial pop-culture pandering, to promote their films and write those praise releases, and they seem to be allergic to the concept of constructive criticism.

Inasmuch as I have been connected with the local showbiz circles since I graduated from college in 1995, I have weaved in and out of the film and TV industries since then, as well as in the publishing industries (lifestyle and entertainment beats of newspapers, and glossy urban magazines). It is inevitable that I find myself becoming friends with or having colleagues from these industries. But when it was time for me to review the films they made, I do it using the intersectional lenses I usually use; I throw in my support, of course, but I also throw in my two cents' worth if I see something that needs to be critiqued. An indie film producer, a former scriptwriting colleague, once chided me, though, for writing a predominantly “negative review” of their gay film, since he was hoping that I would support and promote it just because I happen to be lesbian. A badly made film is a badly made film, first and foremost, and there are no friendships when it comes to film criticism, only honest to goodness constructive criticism. For that producer to feel like I was personally attacking their film and “not being an LGBT ally” goes to show that many filmmakers still need to mature properly in this country. But I will not wait for that; instead, I will just continue assessing films using my aforementioned lenses, friend or no friend. After all, to echo a former gay

professor-colleague's thoughts about that film, if they wanted us (LGBTQ film reviewers) to write a good film review of their films, then they better make good films to begin with. I concur.

But what is a good film, anyway? In my 20 years of experience doing film criticism for various commercial and academic publications, I have come to realize that it is not proper to critique based solely on the good versus bad dichotomy discourse. I have always lectured in my film/media classes that films need to be assessed whether they are working or not working for a specific audience. An overall storyline could be seen as good, for example, but its specific details may not be working well to tell the narrative it's trying to push. A character might not be working properly in a given subplot, but it may function better in another subplot if her or his story arc leaned towards another direction in the film. As an example, I can use my analysis of *That Thing Called Tadhana* (published February 16, 2015) which I posted in my blog, the first time a blog of mine accumulated 700+ views during the time it was posted. A look at it now in my blog stats will reveal that this review has had nearly 950 views in all, as of this writing, out of my homepage's 8,339 views.

I mention this post's statistics because there have been several people who shared it and said that they agreed with what I said. There are those who sent me a private message to agree with my points privately instead. The reason for the secrecy is that these readers were afraid to go against the grain of popular opinion about this film. The first item they found far-fetched—which they agreed with me when I pointed it out—comprised the unrealistic activities and decisions of the two main characters in this film. Granted that it was attempting to show a unique narrative, but the characters and their situations still need to be grounded in reality—a must for me to consider a film as good. As I mentioned in my review, I found it incredulous for middle-class late-twentysomethings or early-thirtysomethings to just meet someone and spend hard-earned money to go on a whimsical out-of-town trip for several days. Situations of the story need to be plausible for me, or if highly experimental, they should be properly set up; pass on the *deus ex machina*, please, and hand me the plant and payoff, with dramatic irony on the side,

anytime. Yes, I will have fries with that. What else? Good, credible acting, one that reflects how a celebrity understood the person they are trying to portray, with the director figuratively walking beside them, philosophically parallel even, guiding them as they step up the ladder of rising action to lead us to a satisfying or thought-provoking climax, plot point by plot point, with the visual assistance of effective cinematography and perfectly pulsed editing and musical scoring. These, to me, are elements that a good movie ought to have.

In teaching scriptwriting and story development, I have always paralleled filmmaking with cooking. It is like saying yes, we all know what ingredients are needed to make an adobo dish, but how can the director, scriptwriter, cinematographer, editor, musical scorer, production designer, actors, and everyone else involved cook up a storm and present us with a new way of preparing the dish? As a filmmaker/scriptwriter, I can detect if they scrimped on the meat, the pepper, or overdid it with the soy sauce or vinegar. My specific senses can taste this filmic dish, so to speak. As an audience member enjoying pop culture fare, I can also sense whether they were trying to make traditional *adobo* palatable for all, or if they were experimenting gourmet-style, to show us something new, like international film festival new (as I end up asking, "*Pang-Cannes ba ito o pang-kanto lang?*").<sup>1</sup> As a film reviewer, I will assess whether they succeeded in delivering the dish the way they intended to deliver it. I don't mind if they are going the traditional route or the experimental route; I'm more concerned with whether they succeeded in making their project work or not. In short, I assess whether they were able to build a house I would like to inhabit or not.

It does not matter what kind of film I am reviewing, but I apply this approach to whatever it is that I want or need to review. I do not choose specific films to review, after all. I try to enjoy as much as filmmakers could offer out there. I am an avid follower of documentary and narrative films, short or feature-length, and I can review any genre (except for my personal dislike of horror, but I make exceptions based on certain trending films). I do not use any rating system; I merely state the parts of the film that work for me, and I justify my opinion. I do the same with the parts that didn't work

so well for me; I justify them based on the intersectional lenses I carry as a reviewer.

In general, I find myself labeling a film as well-made when the script has integrity: the story concept is intriguing and unique, the characters are fresh, their characterizations are neither caricatured nor stereotypical, scenes flow logically, and the film directing was able to weave all of these elements into the kind of material that will make you ponder on specific aspects of life that the film is presenting. I used to include great cinematography as another qualifier for a film to be well-made, but even the aesthetics of lighting, framing, and camera movements are subjected to experimenting, making them appear uneven sometimes, so I merely treat it as a bonus if this technical aspect in a film was executed impressively.

As I age with cinema and as cinema ages with me, I still find myself adding new layers to my multi-lensed view of film analysis. I am already at that so-called Tita Stage in my life,<sup>2</sup> and this is the newest persona who also makes herself apparent in my current film reviews. No, there is no talking down to the younger generation with this approach. It is the opposite; there is always an observation or two (or twenty) of how certain aspects of a film appeal to an older audience, and this is how I let my *tita*-hood chime in from time to time. This was also how I couched parts of my review for *That Thing Called Tadhana* mentioned above: a movie-watching *tita* talking with the future drivers of Philippine cinema.

Now that I have evaluated how I have developed as a film critic or reviewer, perhaps I can safely say that this hybrid style will continue for as long as I have newer personas to add to my being. There will be newer paths to take in life, for sure, and lessons I would gather from such roads might pave the way for newer insights to infuse into critiquing films. In addition, the film industries will also bring you to more paths which you can choose to follow or not. These cinematic travels will always be and remain intersectional. So as an observer I termed as #filmmiron,<sup>3</sup> I will always be there at the side of the road, minding signs that say “yield” or moving when the light turns green for me to cross. There will always be new hues and tints, adding on filters or removing older ones, on how I would look and see a cinematic

spectacle. But my reactions and observations will always remain as eclectic as ever, until the Great Director out there commands me to “roll credits” for good.

Until then, I’ll see you all the movies, *mga beh*.<sup>4</sup> Over and out—and proud.

## Translations

1. “Is this for Cannes [Film Festival] or just for the street corner?”
2. “Tita Stage” is literally Aunt Stage, understood as Old (Eccentric) Womanhood.
3. “Filmmiron” is a conflation of “film” and “miron” or kibitzer.
4. Affectionate counterpart for “you guys.” *Beh*, also written *bhe*, is the contraction of the local approximation for “baby” (*be-beh* or *bey-beh*); see also *rapbeh*, a conflation of *sarap* (yummy) and *beh*.

## The Future Is Here, But the Future Is Not Now

(Or in Short, a Review of That Film That Made You Quote Lovelorn Quips This Love Month. Or Earlier If You Caught This in Its Festival Inception.)

————— **Libay Linsangan Cantor** —————

*Takilya ni Leafkens*

### **That Thing Called Tadhana (2014)**

Director & scriptwriter: *Tonet Jadaone*

Director of Photography: *Sasha Palomares*

Sound: *Jedd/Bryan Dumaguina*

Cast: *Angelica Panganiban, JM De Guzman*

Pitch: *Great concept. Fresh take on storytelling. More stories like these, please.*

Catch: *A good story should be realized by good directing. Pulso is the key. Find your original. Leave duplicates at home. Just saying.*

That local movie that got people buzzing again is a good one (Fig. 1). This is good news for the new darlings of Philippine cinema, and I am quite glad that I’ve had the privilege of peeking at the early stages of these darlings’ lives back when they were film students and I their film thesis adviser/film teacher. Teaching back then, I have always reminded these kids that they are going to be the future of Philippine cinema if they so choose to accept that path. After all, they are there in our classroom learning about the art and the craft of this form we so love. As a teacher, I am realistic: I know that some of them are just there for the four-year clocktime course while some are there to gain knowledge and move on to other fields, leaving a handful who will actively pursue different aspects of filmmaking in their lives, be it in the





Fig. 1. *That Thing Called Tadhana* layout/poster. (Cinema One Originals, Epicmedia, Monoxide Works, and One Dash Zero Cinetools, 2014)

mainstream, the alternative, or the indie. And if they so choose to be part of the film future, then they better prepare for it in the present by looking into the past. For we are only doomed to repeat the mistakes of history when we don't really learn from it. Tama po ba, Sir Teodoro Agoncillo?<sup>1</sup> But I digress.

The year 2014 was a literary one for this film reviewer and I did not have the time to peek into what is happening in cinemas both local and foreign since I chose to focus on the literary world of my huge universe. That at lumablapy muna lola mo hehe, kaya you know.<sup>2</sup> So I kinda missed Direk Tonet's other efforts, but I've been hearing some buzz about a couple of works she's done in the past. Alas, since indie filmfest skeds conflicted with my work skeds, I missed all screenings of all things. So I was really glad

this Cinema One entry had a commercial release, of course picked up by Star Cinema and supported by the same people who were in that ABS-CBN-led indie filmfest. Of course, this might also mean that the same "story consultants" that sat on panels to review scripts/films already shot were also present in this film to give it a few-pointers. Well, you get the drift.

Like what I mentioned in my pitch, the one thing that this film has is a really great concept. And I bet the concept also had a good script that went with it. The thing with Tonet is that she was able to capture the essence of today's Pinay who undergoes real shitty hindi-ito-pang-romcom-nampotah type of love stories, and heartbreaks. Like I've never been so pleased to see a pretty heartbroken girl say Putangina! or Tangina naman! na pagkalutong-lutong mas malutong pa siya sa Lapid's Chicharon pare, all because her heart is hurting. Totoong ganito ang tao kapag heartbroken at totoong masakit kaya totoong napapamura ka at totoong wala kang class, finesse, o anumang kagalang-galang sa hitsura o pagkatao mo minsan kapag brokenhearted ka tangina tulo-uhog habang hagulgol and all. Angelica's performance of the brokenhearted Pinay was well-captured here, great performance talaga si ati. Ever since I saw a different side of her naman as a non-sitcom type of comedian in *Here Comes the Bride*, pak na pak talaga ang acting ni ati.<sup>3</sup> That's why I got doubly curious to see this film when I saw her topbill it.

But then here comes JM, once the darling of our business unit sa dos when I was there in my recent past as part of a team conceptualizing teleseryes and helping out in reality shows. I do not know if it was the way he interpreted the character or if he still had some remnants of his personal troubles that crept into his professional performance, but his acting really appeared so uninspired. As in hindi siya mukhang inspired to shoot, much less to work. But I think this meh mode niya worked to build the character of the meek dude that will contrast with the loud gal character of the film. Kaya lang sana minsan naman, sana in-injection-an nila siya ng caffeine sa katawan man lang, know what I am saying. Or maybe I am just nitpicking. Kape pa more!<sup>4</sup>

I felt like some scenes showing the boylet's characters were axed, therefore reducing his performance into a dedma type of guy that ended up not

being realistic. Like towards the end, when he mentioned that he mentioned about a person taking care of him with Biogesic or something, I was like “Nasaan ‘yung eksenang ‘yun?” ganun. Weird limbo scenes pare.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of the film is not entirely new. It is the usual tossed salad of a formula wherein you throw in elements already familiar to viewers and cook them up to serve something hopefully familiar but also new. As I have always said in my scriptwriting classes, you cannot reinvent the wheel but by golly push that wheel into a different direction so we could see new scenery and take us to places only you could see from your unique perspective. And literally, this film took us there: to places where we experience heartache so devastating that we tend to forget who we are or where we come from or, more important, where we are going now, now that the love is gone, ‘ika nga ng kanta diyan somewhere. Not new because we have already seen films na strangers on a train/bus/plane/what-have-you ang peg, and of course my generation—and theirs—had Richard Linklater’s *Before* series as a default peg. But what’s great about *Before Sunrise* is that the long train ride produced a chance encounter of a boy and a girl who had a hell of a time killing time by talking to each other about mundane things and profound things. Here in *Tadhana*, all we see is a girl bawling her eyes out in a Rome-to-Manila flight, and their only chance encounter, aside from having met at the airport so boylet can help girlet with her overweight luggage, is seatmates sila and boylet could not care less when girlet was watching the quintessential love-lost-and-love-found-but-sana-ako-na-lang-love-mo-ulit-kasi-tanga-ako-nung-pinakawalan-kita local romantic drama film *One More Chance* on her laptop. That’s about it. I mean dude, I have had more conversations with strangers in a two-hour trip from Manila to Davao/Dumaguete/wherever Philippines, and this is a Rome to Manila flight ha. Ang dami na dapat nilang napag-usapan, lalo na ang unang crucial thing: na sana nagpakilala muna sila sa isa’t isa, karugtong ng pagpapakilala ni boylet sa sarili kay girlet sa airport. I mean, more convos siguro, since tinulungan siya ng boylet, regardless of her sabaw mode from her mega-cryola mode K.<sup>6</sup> Yes, we want to be cinematic but being cinematic works when we try to be more realistic at first.

And speaking of being realistic, it really fell flat on its face when meh boylet just went with the flow and accompanied girlet to wherever the hell she felt like going. I mean, sure, realistic pa rin if you ask a “stranger” to eat in a restaurant with you or go to a videoke so you could sing your broken heart out. But to actually have another life form engage you into going on a 500-plus-peso fare ride (one way) going somewhere (so mga lampas 1k yan if roundtrip) out of Manila is a stretch, especially if there was not enough getting-to-know-you-muna moments between the two of them (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> What *Tadhana* lacks is what *Before Sunrise* has developed well: exposition. As in, we get to be exposed to the who/why/what/where/how come stuff of the characters, before they decide to jump to a higher plot point to take the exposition to its more interesting rising action, hopefully to take us to the wonders of the plot’s climax and wonder where in the world this climax will take place/happen, and how. Alas, this is where I sort of disengaged with the good concept turned unrealized script, as the directing did not lead us to these seemingly simple but really truly important “smaller” scenes. Are they not as cinematic for one’s taste? It should be, since it is in the smaller and simpler scenes that you get the most profound insights, or elicit the most intimate of moments, between characters. Yes, this is realistic, but it could also be cinematic. Think about it. How many films have banked on the simplicity of shots, of a moment, a scene captured not because it has a gazillion things happening at the same time, but only one thing happening at that moment, captured quietly on film, a moment for us to ponder on. Pulso. Pinupulsihan dapat natin ang panahon, ang eksena, ang detalye ng kuwento.<sup>8</sup> Sadly, the film wanted to hurry up to the climax of things that it forgot to set up these important pulses that could make the film beat more towards its apex. Sayang.

Sa henerasyong ito ng budget travelers, may pera at panahon ka bang mag-up and go nang basta-basta without thinking of your job (na sa later scenes lang nabanggit), your money (yaman nila to be buying bus tickets just like that ha) or your time? Ilangkla ang cinematic sa realistic para mas lumipad siya nang husto.<sup>9</sup> #justsaying



Fig. 2. Anthony and Mace on their bus trip. (*That Thing Called Tadhana*, Cinema One Originals, Epicmedia, Monoxide Works, and One Dash Zero Cinetools, 2014)

And speaking of not quiet, cinema has its way of speaking to you without letting you hear anything. A good, quietly captured moment could actually speak for itself, and there's no need to drown it with melodramatic musical score. The film also suffers from this drowning from time to time so that I wonder if the filmmakers or the producers are scared of "not hearing" a scene. If so, then it becomes television fare, where the execs seem to be scared of that thing called dead air. In cinema, there is that thing called pregnant silence. Ang daming laman kahit wala kang naririnig, dahil sa ang nakikita mo ay marami nang sinasabi agad. At ang dami niyang feels! You got a great actor na and a great story to boot, so let them speak for themselves sometimes. Sayang these moments, especially when the girllet was just feeling the moment, kunwari 'yung nasa Sagada siya and shouted her frustrations amidst the clouds atop Mt. Kiltapan.<sup>10</sup> Her shouting on that quiet scenery could have made a great poignant scene. But again, it was drowned by musical score. Heartache needs to be felt lang sometimes, not heard. Let the scene breathe on its own. I hope they keep this in mind next time.

And this is why I titled this review the way I did. Because no matter how we tout that the future of Philippine cinema is already here, the future that we hopefully want to happen is not quite happening now, at least not yet. Not when the mainstream's heavy hand is so obvious in shaping the form of



Fig. 3. *That Thing Called Tadhana* publicity material. (Cinema One Originals, Epicmedia, Monoxide Works, and One Dash Zero Cinetools, 2014)

these future-leading folks, not when these young ones feel like they have to be or mimic their mainstream mentors in order to be taken to the fold. In a way, if this is the objective—to become one with the fold—then this film has already succeeded. But seeing that the future may also want to have a different take on things, then maybe we still have to see what they will come up with next, in order for us to get excited more about how they could revive the future of this art we so love. But yes, this is indeed a great start.

I could see why so many people like this film, the same reason why I like it: its believability. I mean, sino ba naman kasi ang hindi na-heartbroken sa Pilipinas, at may populasyon nga dito na nagtatangkang maglakbay kapag ganito ang moda. And yes, laging ang default ay bundok: Baguio, Sagada ganyan (Fig. 3). Natawa nga ako sa concept na ito, at salamat at may nagtanggong nito finally. Puwede rin namang beach ang puntahan, di ba? Bilang archipelago tayo, mas madali 'yun. Pero siguro dahil love could move mountains dapat ang peg, bundok ng tralala ang inaakyat ng Pinoy para doon hanapin ang sagot sa tanong ng lahat ng heartbroken: huwayyyyyy or huwaaaay meeeee. And of course, andiyang unending love quotes and love songs to make you cry. Pero sana din naman, nailatag ang characterization ni girllet bilang love-quoting girl, kasi iisang quote lang lagi ang kinuquote niya, and it kinda gets tiring teh. Quote pa more, girl. Dami pa riyan. Buklat ka ng *Eat Pray Love* baka makatulong hane? Or Shakespeare. Yes, these

are the new things that we want to see in our local films. This believability works. It is just the delivery that lacks a bit and I find wanting. In Tagalog, tinimbang ngunit overweight sa ilang bagay at underweight sa iba.<sup>11</sup> Yes, we want a new cinematic recipe indeed, and thanks for this really nice bite. But I hope the cinematic commercial cookie cutter gets challenged more next time. Hashtag just saying.

Again, great story. Loved this film because of the good concept. Witty will truly save the world, to quote Tonet's other business, but I also hope someday, witty will be brave enough to break out of the mold, to discover her own. Andiyan na naman, eh. And the audiences are ready for it; long overdue, actually. I guess all I'm saying is: talon pa more!<sup>12</sup>

Good luck with the next one. Looking forward to it.

## Acknowledgment

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## Translations

1. Am I right, Professor Teodoro Agoncillo?
2. That and your granny had to attend to her love life first hehe, so now you know.
3. ...who undergoes real shitty this-isn't-for-romcom-dammit type of love stories... Like I've never been so pleased to see a pretty heartbroken girl say Sonofabitch! or Bitch please! with a texture that's even crunchier than Lapid's pork cracklings man, all because her heart is hurting. This is how real people behave when they're heartbroken and it's real painful so you'll really cuss out without any class, finesse, or any respectability in your appearance or personality sometimes when you are brokenhearted dammit your nose runs while you squall and all. Angelica's performance of the brokenhearted Pinay was well-captured here, she really delivers a great performance. Ever since I saw a different side of her as a non-sitcom type of comedian in *Here Comes the Bride* [directed by Chris Martinez, 2010], gurl is capable of attaining a superior level of performance.
4. ...once the darling of our business unit [at Channel 2] when I was there in my recent past as part of a team conceptualizing teleseryes and helping out in reality shows.... As in he did not seem inspired to shoot, much less to work. But I think this meh mode of his worked to build the character of the meek dude.... But then I wished that once in a while, they managed to infuse enough caffeine in his body, know what I am saying. Or maybe I am just nitpicking. Have more coffee!
5. I felt like some scenes showing the guy's characters were axed, therefore reducing his performance into an expressionless type of guy that ended up not being realistic. Like towards the end, when he mentioned that he mentioned a person taking care of him with Biogesic or something, I was like "So where is that scene?" you know. Weird limbo scenes man.
6. ...now that the love is gone, as that song went somewhere. Not new because we have already seen films where strangers on a train/bus/plane/what-have-you was the setup, and of course my generation—and theirs—had Richard Linklater's *Before* series as a default setup.... Here in *Tadhana*, all we see is a girl bawling her eyes out in a Rome-to-Manila flight, and their only chance encounter, aside from having met at the airport so young buck can help young lass with her overweight luggage, is they are seatmates and the guy could not care less when the girl was watching the quintessential love-lost-and-love-found-but-I-wish-you-loved-me-again-because-I-was-stupid-to-let-you-go local romantic drama film *One More Chance* [directed by Cathy Garcia-Molina, 2007] on her laptop.... There was so much for them to talk about, especially the first crucial thing: that they should have introduced themselves further to each other, after the initial introduction of the guy to the girl at the airport. I mean, more convos I guess, since she was assisted by the guy, regardless of her distracted mode from her mega-cry-a-river mode OK.
7. ...going somewhere (so around more than 1,000 pesos if it's a roundtrip) out of Manila is a stretch, especially if there was not enough getting-to-know-you-first moments between the two of them.
8. Pulse. One should first take the pulse of the time, the scene, the details of the narrative.
9. In this generation of budget travelers, would you have the money and time to up and go on a whim without thinking of your job (which were only mentioned in the later scenes), your money (they are loaded to be buying bus tickets just like that ha) or your time? Anchor the cinematic to what is realistic so that the film soars more fully.
10. Too much content even if you do not listen, because what is onscreen already speaks volumes. And it is packed with feels! You got a great actor already and a great story to boot, so let them speak for themselves sometimes. Too bad these moments, especially when the girl was just feeling the moment, as for example when she was in Sagada and shouted her frustrations amidst the clouds atop Mt. Kiltapan.
11. I mean, who has not been heartbroken in the Philippines, and there is a local populace that wishes to get away when they are in that mode. And yes, the mountain's always the default: Baguio, Sagada and so on. I was amused by this concept, and I am glad that someone raised the question finally. They could have gone to a beach too, right? Since the country's an archipelago, that would have been more doable. But maybe because love could move mountains was the required peg, any mountain anywhere is what Pinoys climb so they could find there the answer to everyone who's ever been heartbroken: whyyyyy or whyyyy meeeee. And of course, you have got those unending love quotes and love songs to make you cry. But I also wish as well that the protagonist's characterization as love-quoting girl was better explained, since she kept quoting the same quote, and it kinda gets tiring sis. Quote some more, girl. There are many others. Crack open a copy of *Eat Pray Love* and it might help dear? Or Shakespeare.... In Tagalog, it was weighed but found overweight in some matters and underweight in others.
12. You have initiated it already, see.... I guess all I'm saying is: take the plunge!



## Kung Paano Aketchi Naging si TheKneeJerkCritic

— Ricardo Espino Lopez —

GMA Network – Entertainment, Talk/Variety

Sinetchi ba itech feelingerong TheKneeJerkCritic at hungkapsmuks magreview-keme ng movies as if may K? The nerve! The nerve daw, o?!

Anu raw?

Sabi ko, sino nga ba si TheKneeJerkCritic and how dare he do movie reviews. As if!!!? *Ganern.*

Ang sagot, self-published blogger siya. Hindi siya nababasa sa magazine, e-zine, nor sa broadsheet. Ni hindi nga siya pinatos ng tabloids eh.

*TheKneeJerkCritic* ay isang blog na nagpufocus sa pag-rereview ng mga local at foreign films, at isama na rin ang ilang palabas sa teatro, habang gamit ang street-based off-the-cuff language with more than just a sprinkling of *bekinese* or gay lingo.

*TheKneeJerkCritic* is actually a spin-off ng una kong online alter ego, si IshnaVera, which I started around 2006. Diverse at walang direksyon pa ang sakop ng pagsusulat ko noon bilang IshnaVera at pasulpot-sulpot lang. *Pag gusto ko lang humanash.*

Ooops sorry, force of habit. I mean, kapag mayroon lang akong gustong sabihin.

My first “review” was not really even an actual review. It was more a reaction piece, my personal take sa pelikula as an experience rather than a review about the movie.

See Evidence A, an early sample ng review ko of the groundbreaking pink indie film *Ang Lihim ni Antonio* [dinirhe ni Joselito Altarejos, Beyond the Box & Viva Digital, 2008] (Fig. 1):

I missed catching *Lihim ni Antonio* nung ipinalabas ang director's cut nito last year yata. I managed to get hold of a copy recently and I excitedly popped it into the player.

Ang takbo ng *Lihim* goes like this:

... fast-forward, fast-forward, fast-forward... play, rewind, play, rewind, play ... fast-forward, fast-forward ... play, rewind, play, rewind, play ... fast-forward. Stop. Eject.

Ay! May kwento ba? Sige try ko some other time wehehe.



Fig. 1. Still picture ng *Ang Lihim ni Antonio* ni Joselito Altarejos. (Beyond the Box & Viva Digital, 2008)

Well, apparently may audience ang ganitong piyesa kasi I eventually noticed na tuwing may “reviews” lang ako nakakakuha ng online engagement from my friends, who made up the totality of my reading population at that point.

It was around April 2015, na napagnilay-nilayan ko na karirin kaya ang pagrereview at gumawa ng entirely separate blog. Thus *TheKneeJerkCritic* was born.

So ito ang una kong post bilang The KneeJerk Critic, a review of the critically acclaimed but Oscar-snubbed masterpiece, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [dinirhe ni Joss Whedon, Marvel Studios at Walt Disney Pictures, 2015], *charot* (Fig. 2):

Eto ang cheat sheet ng kwento ng *Age of Ultron*:

Wham. Bam. Boom.  
Yada-yada. Love angle. Yada-yada.  
Boom. Bam. Wham. CGI efok.  
Family ek. Balbon na dibdib ni Mark Ruffalo. Hopia-cum-emo.  
Chase scene. Sprakatak. Tarakatat.  
Eklavu. Eklavu. Hubad na Chris Helmsworth.  
Jennylyn. Jennylyn. Robot gagawin kong kalbong Bollywood actor na may mahiwagang bindi!  
Bonggang-bonggang multi-hero fight-scene tableau.  
Kaboom. Kablam. Death scene for major emo moment.  
Climactic finish.  
Epilogue segue to introduction of *Avengers 2.0*.  
Credits.



Fig. 2. Still picture ng *Avengers: Age of Ultron* ni Joss Whedon. (Marvel Studios at Walt Disney Pictures, 2015)

Hindi yan excerpt huh. Yan na yung buong review. *Kinarir* ko na yan nang lagay na 'yan. *Wag nga kayo*. Work in progress pa ako nun ok?

Char.

So what qualified me to review movies? *Huwell*, aside from paying the exorbitant movie ticket price, *waley*. *Bet ko lang humanash eh, buhkit ba? Balakayujan*.

Cards on the table. I have no bachelor, master's, much less a doctorate degree in film or film appreciation to give me any credibility as a reviewer. Hindi nga ako nakatapos ng college eh. So I totally have no credentials as a film critic. Zero. None. Zilch. Nada. Gusto ko lang.

Though my work in media places me sa bandang laylayan ng hierarchy ng entertainment industry, wala akong koneksyon sa paggawa ng pelikula whatsoever.

What I am is a movie fan.

Or make that, a fan of movies.

Wala akong ilusyon na maging film connoisseur. Keber ako kung quirky indie film yan, o studio-released mainstream movie, o super-commercial fluff. Hindi ako isnabera. Rom-com, sci-fi, superhero blockbuster, awards-bait, o anime, basta nainteresan ko, papanoorin ko yan. Maski lumang reissue nga pinapatulan ko eh. Here's an excerpt ng review ko ng *Himala* [dindirhe ni Ishmael Bernal, *Experimental Cinema of the Philippines*, 1982] na pinanood ko 35 years after its original run (Fig. 3):

Ang kwento ay umiikot sa barrio Cupang, isang puritang rural village na sinasabi ng mismong villagers eh isinumpang matuyot dahil meron raw silang pinagtabuyang leper noon na later on pinaniniwalaan nilang si Mama Mary in disguise.

Lagoat, inimbey niyo ang Mother of God!

Later, during a major-major solar eclipse, aba mukhang nag-return engagement si Mama Mary sa Cupang -- pero limited edition lang dahil kay Elsa lang siya nagpapakita.

Tapos nagkaroon si Elsa ng stigmata keme. Tapos, after that, nakakapaghealing na ang bakla, este ang visionary!

Parang mumurahing kolboy, nagpasalinsaling-bibig ang chismis ng faith healing and before you know it dinagsa na ng iba't-ibang uri ng maysakit ang balur ni Elsa kasunod ang mga paparazzi.



Fig. 3. Still pic ng *Himala* ni Ishmael Bernal. (*Experimental Cinema of the Philippines*, 1982)

Nagga-gamble din ako sa mga movies na hindi ako sure kung maganda o hindi, especially indie film. Indie films kasi need the financial support ko as a viewer as well as kung ano mang exposure ang napoprovide ko as an online reviewer.

Nag-eeffort rin akong mag-binge watch ng entries ng local filmfest like MMFF, Pista Ng Pelikulang Pilipino, at Cinemalaya, in support of the local industry. Minsan it turns out na maganda pala yung movie at win ako, minsan naman *chakaru* so lose. Pero for commercial movies, kung feeling ko mapapangitan lang naman ako, I skip it na lang kasi wala akong balak na gumastos para inisin lang ang sarili ko. *Bakla ako, hindi tanga, OK?*

As a viewer, I prefer movies that touch me emotionally. I have nothing against intellectual movies pero mas bet ko yung kinikilig ako sa movies. Keri rin pag pinaiiyak. OK rin lang pag-isipin ako ng movie pero not too much *puwede?* Ayoko ng pelikulang *masakit sa bangs*, yun bang mahirap *ispelengin* at nagpapadeep. Ramdam mo naman yung nagpapa-*high-falutin* at pa-impress lang si director, *di ba?* Sorry, *thank you next* ka sa akin.

Ayoko rin ng pelikulang ginagawa akong tanga. Hello, kung tangahan lang naman, I can do that by myself *'noh*. *Charot*.

Pero hindi ako masyadong choosy. All I ask from a movie is that delivers what it promised. I can enjoy a kababawan movie just as easily as a well-made *wasakan-hugot* movie. The key is managing my expectation. Better yet exceeding it. Ilang beses na bang ginamit yung linyang “*pinaghirapan po namin ito*” sa promo ng movie tapos pag pinanood eh halatang puke-pukeng effort lang ang ginawa? Mga *pohtah* kayo.

As a reviewer, same din ang hanap ko, kasi parang hindi mo naman mapaghihiway ang viewer sa reviewer. Mas mabubusi lang siguro. My reviews are experiential rather than technical pero nangyayari pa rin na paglabas ko ng

sine parang OK naman sa akin yung film, pero habang sinusulat ko na yung review at kinukutkot ko na, ayyy parang ayoko na pala siya.

Downside of watching a movie you plan to review, hindi ka maka-sitback and relax kasi nagbubusisi ka na habang nanonood or may biglang papasok sa isip mo for your review na kailangan mong alalahanin yung phrasing at yung context ng eksena wherein you got the insight.

Also, kahit paano, nagtatry naman akong i-expand ang utak ko as a reviewer. Nagbasa-basa rin naman na ako ng ibang movie reviews online, nag-aaral maging mas kritikal sa panunuri, at nanonood nang nanonood nang nanonood.

So oo, though “kneejerkcritic” ang blog name ko at maraming kneejerk reactions akong isinusulat, hindi naman kneejerk ang pagpapublish ko ng reviews. Pinag-iisipan ko pa rin naman ito as a whole kahit paano.

There are still some considerations na binabalanse ko. Like if indie film ito or teatro, bilang advocate, mas effusive ako sa sa praises at medyo mas kind ako sa panchachaka kung pangit. Sasabihin ko *medyo* pangit lang. Hahaha.

But mainstream films are fair game. Go to town ako diyan, especially kung obvious money-grab ang intention ng pelikula. Chakahin natin nang bong-gang-bongga yan when deserved! I will never say na nagandahan ako sa movie dahil lang sinabi ng ibang respected critics na maganda yung movie. *Kung nachakahan ako, sasabihin kong nachakahan ako. Fight me. Char.*

Tulad ng review ko sa Dawn Zulueta and Piolo Pascual starrer na *Love Me Tomorrow* [dindirhe ni Gino M. Santos, ABS-CBN Film Productions at Star Cinema, 2016] (Fig. 4):



Panget.

Maganda ang shots. Glossy siya, well-framed. Pero panget.

Isoli niyo pera ko, isoli niyo oras ko level na panget.

#lovemetomorrow? Eh hindi ko nga siya like man lang today.

Ito yata yung pelikula na hindi ako masyadong nabother na chaka ang audio sa SM Cinemas kasi at a certain point wala na akong pake sa dialogue dahil alam kong walang wawa.

Sayang yung visuals. Sayang yung charm ni Dawn Zulueta. Sayang ang abs ni Papa Piolo Pascual. Pohtang ina may Ana Abad Santos ka sa cast, ginawa lang flower vase sa gilid, anuvey?!!!

Honestly the best thing about the movie is the ending.... End na yung movie. Uwi na tayo. Da best.



Fig. 4. Promo pic ng *Love Me Tomorrow* ni Gino M. Santos. (ABS-CBN Film Productions at Star Cinema, 2016)

Which now brings me to the language I use which I would describe as *bekinese na balajurs nag nagpapaka-learned. Char.*

Though there are very few reviewers who deliver their critiques in a manner similar to mine, my choice of vocabulary is not unique. I have been inspired by not just a few blogs using the same mode of expression. The now inactive blog of Mandaya Moore comes to mind. So basically, sabi nga ni Cherie Gil, “*you’re nothing but a second-rate, trying-hard copycat!*”

It was a conscious decision for me to use and continue using *bekinese* as the primary mode of communication in my blog.

Una, sabi nga ng mga pokpok na stripper sa *Gypsy* [dindirhe ni Mervyn LeRoy, Mervyn LeRoy Productions, 1962], “*you gotta have a gimmick*” (Figura 5), at yun yung gimmick ko. When I started the blog, all I wanted was to express myself and be read. Yung desire to be of service sa industry came later, and by that time medyo established na yung character at brand nung blog. May *brand-brand* pa talagang nalalaman ’noh?



Fig. 5. Still pic ng “You Gotta Have a Gimmick” number sa *Gypsy* ni Mervyn LeRoy. (Mervyn LeRoy Productions, 1962)



Second, since I was trying to use my voice to serve the industry, my movie reviews had to be read and shared. And to be read and shared in this day and age, you have to entertain. Or at least shock and awe.

Third, I believe that movie reviews need to be read and enjoyed by the masses and hindi yung iilan lang nang nakakabasa at nakakaintindi. Ano 'to, paramihan ba ng magamit ng multisyllabic words ang labanan?

Fourth, with using street and bekinese language, I try to be their eyes and their voice. Hopefully the reviews would encourage the masa to go and watch, to inform them na merong ganitong mga klaseng pelikula available for them to watch. And maybe, just maybe even educate them to be more critical sa panood at more discerning sa choices ng pelikulang susupportahan nila.

Fifth, I love the exercise. Bet ko yung finding ways to see a particular movie with a unique perspective. Or retelling the story in a different, more colorful light. Kung hindi ko sila mahikayat na manood ng mga pelikula, then maybe the review itself might entertain you and make you laugh.

At kung hindi kayo natawa, *eh di pakyu kayo!*

*Char.* Shock and awe.

## How I Became TheKneeJerkCritic

TRANSLATED BY JOEL DAVID

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**Ricardo Espino Lopez**

GMA Network – Entertainment, Talk/Variety

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Who is this self-important TheKneeJerkCritic who is presumptuous enough to review movies as if he had the qualifications to do so? The nerve! He said the nerve, right?...

The answer is, he is a self-published blogger. He does not read magazines, e-zines, or broadsheets. Even the tabloids steered clear.

*TheKneeJerkCritic* is a blog that focuses on reviewing local and foreign films, plus a few stage presentations, while using street-based off-the-cuff language with more than just a sprinkling of *bekinese* or gay lingo. It is actually a spin-off of my earlier online alter ego, Ishna Vera [snobbish], which I started around 2006. My attempts as Ishna Vera were diverse and directionless and came out only occasionally. *Only when I felt like acting up.*

Ooops sorry, force of habit. I meant, only when I needed to state something.

My first “review” was not really even an actual review. It was more a reaction piece, my personal take on film as an experience rather than a review about the movie.

See Evidence A, an early sample of the groundbreaking pink indie film *Antonio’s Secret* [directed by Joselito Altarejos, Beyond the Box & Viva Digital, 2008]:

I missed catching *Antonio's Secret* when the director's cut was shown last year I think. I managed to get hold of a copy recently and I excitedly popped it into the player.

The narrative of *Antonio's Secret* goes like this:

... fast-forward, fast-forward, fast-forward.... play, rewind, play, rewind, play ... fast-forward, fast-forward ... play, rewind, play, rewind, play ... fast-forward. Stop. Eject.

Ay! Was there a narrative? All right I'll try again some other time wehehe.

Well, apparently this kind of approach has its own readership because I eventually noticed that only when I had “reviews” was I able to get some online engagement from my friends, who made up the totality of my reading population at that point.

It was around April 2015 when it occurred to me to get into reviewing and write an entirely separate blog. Thus *TheKneeJerkCritic* was born.

So here is my first post as The Kneejerk Critic, a review of the critically acclaimed but Oscar-snubbed masterpiece *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [directed by Joss Whedon, Marvel Studios at Walt Disney Pictures, 2015], kidding:

Here's the cheat sheet of the narrative of *Age of Ultron*:

Wham. Bam. Boom.

Yada-yada. Love angle. Yada-yada.

Boom. Bam. Wham. CGI efok.

Family stuff. Hairy chest of Mark Ruffalo. Yumminess-cum-emo.

Chase scene. Sprakatak. Tarakatat.

Stuff. More stuff. A naked Chris Helmsworth.

Jennylyn. Jennylyn. A robot whom I'll transform into a bald Bollywood actor with a magic bindi!

Am impressive multi-hero fight-scene tableau.

Kaboom. Kablam. Death scene for major emo moment.

Climactic finish.

Epilogue segue to introduction of *Avengers 2.0*.

Credits.

That was not an excerpt—that was the entire review. That was as much as I could give then. Do not clobber me because I was still a work in progress, OK?

Kidding.

So what qualified me to review movies? Huwell, aside from paying the exorbitant movie ticket price, nothing. I just felt like acting up so lay off. Mind your own business.

Cards on the table. I have no bachelor, master's, much less a doctorate degree in film or film appreciation to give me any credibility as a reviewer. I never even completed college. So I totally have no credentials as a film critic. Zero. None. Zilch. Nada. I just like the activity.

Though my work in media places me near the bottom in the hierarchy of the entertainment industry, I don't have any connection with film production whatsoever.

What I am is a movie fan.

Or make that, a fan of movies.

I do not have any delusions about becoming a film connoisseur. I do not worry if a specific release is a quirky indie film, or studio-released mainstream movie, or super-commercial fluff. I am no snob. Rom-com, sci-fi, superhero blockbuster, awards-bait, or anime, as long as it piques my curiosity, I will line up to watch it. Even an old reissue isn't out of my range of interests. Here is an excerpt of my review of *Himala* [directed by Ishmael Bernal, Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1982], which I watched 35 years after its original run.

The plot concerns barrio Cupang, a destitute rural village that the villagers themselves claim was cursed to droughtiness because they once banished a leper whom they later believed was Mama Mary in disguise.

You're screwed, you insulted the Mother of God!

Later, during a major-major solar eclipse, well look who wanted a return engagement at Cupang, none other than Mama Mary - but it was a limited edition because she revealed herself only to Elsa.

After which Elsa was visited by stigmata keme. Then, after that, healing powers were granted her royal queerness, I mean our visionary!

Like a low-rent callboy, the rumors of faith healing were passed on by word of mouth and before you know it, people with all kinds of ailment swooped down on Elsa's home followed by the paparazzi.

I would also gamble on movies that I were not sure were worth watching, especially indie films. That is because those films need my financial support as a viewer as well as any kind of exposure that I can provide as an online reviewer.

I also make an effort to binge-watch entries of local film fests like the Metro Manila Film Festival, Festival of Philippine Films, and Cinemalaya, in support of the local industry. Sometimes it turns out that the movie is a gem so I win my bet, sometimes it is awful so I lose. But for commercial movies,

if I feel like I will just be disgusted, I just skip it since I don't intend to shell out money just to annoy myself. I'm queer, not dumb, OK?

As a viewer, I prefer movies that touch me emotionally. I have nothing against intellectual movies but I prefer to be titillated at the movies. I do not mind being made to cry either. I will appreciate a little intellectual effort with certain movies but too much, all right? I do not want movies that give me a headache, the ones that are too difficult to figure out and trying to be deep. You would know if something is high-falutin and the director is just showing off, right? Sorry, *thank you next* is my message to you then.

I also resent movies that make me feel like an idiot. Hello, I can do well enough making myself idiotic, right. Kidding.

But I am not too choosy. All I ask from a movie is that delivers what it promised. I can enjoy a shallow movie just as easily as a well-made heart-rending movie. The key is in managing my expectation. Better yet exceeding it. How many times do we hear the line "we poured all our efforts into this project" during some film's promotion and then we see some twattish result onscreen? You bunch of jerks.

As a reviewer, I look for the same thing, since you cannot really separate the viewer from the reviewer. There is just more to be done. My reviews are experiential rather than technical but occasionally after I finish watching the film seems OK to me, but as I write the review and pick it apart, ayyy I do not think I like it any longer.

The downside of watching a movie you plan to review, you cannot sit back and relax because you have to concentrate as you watch or you get a sudden insight for your review where you need to remember the phrasing and the context of the scene wherein you got the insight.

Also, whenever possible, I try to expand my mind as a reviewer. I read other movie reviews online, I study how to be more critical in my approach, and I watch and watch and watch.

So yes, though kneejerkcritic's my blog name and I recount a lot of my kneejerk reactions in my writing, I do not upload my reviews in the same manner. I spend some effort in figuring out what I write as a whole.

There are still some considerations that I try to balance. Like if it is an indie film or stage presentation, as an advocate, I am more effusive in praising and somewhat kinder in dissing if I find it bad. I would say it is just a *little* bad. Hahaha.

But mainstream films are fair game. That is where I go to town, especially when the film just intends to function as a money-grubber. Let us tear that apart bodaciously when it deserves it! I will never say that I found a movie worthwhile just because a few respected critics say the same thing. *If I found it hideous, then I'll call it hideous. Fight me. Kidding.*

As in this review I wrote of the Dawn Zulueta and Piolo Pascual starrer titled *Love Me Tomorrow* [directed by Gino M. Santos, ABS-CBN Film Productions at Star Cinema, 2016]:

It's awful.

The shots are nice. It's glossy, well-framed. But awful.

The return-my-money, return-my-time level of awful.

#lovemetomorrow? I didn't even like it today.

This must be the only movie where I wasn't bothered by the substandard audio at SM Cinemas because at a certain point I couldn't care less about the dialogue because I knew the rest would be worthless.

What a waste of visuals. A waste of Dawn Zulueta's charm. A waste of those abs of Papa Piolo Pascual. Sonofabitch you've got Ana Abad Santos in the cast, and you used her as a virtual flower vase in one corner, what gives?!!!

Honestly the best thing about the movie is the ending.... The movie's over. We can go home. The best.

Which now brings me to the language I use which I would describe as *bekinese* that is vulgar but tries to sound learned.<sup>1</sup> Joking.

Though there are very few reviewers who deliver their critiques in a manner similar to mine, my choice of vocabulary is not unique. I have been inspired by not just a few blogs using the same mode of expression. The now

inactive blog of Mandaya Moore comes to mind. So basically, as [film villain] Cherie Gil once said, "*you're nothing but a second-rate, trying-hard copycat!*"

It was a conscious decision for me to use and continue using *bekinese* as the primary mode of communication in my blog.

First, as the hookers-cum-strippers sang in *Gypsy* [directed by Mervyn LeRoy, Mervyn LeRoy Productions, 1962], "*you gotta have a gimmick,*" and that was the gimmick I picked. When I started the blog, all I wanted was to express myself and be read. The desire to be of service to industry came later, and by that time the blog's character and brand was fairly established. So now I am name-dropping *brand* pretending to understand it, eh?

Second, since I was trying to use my voice to serve the industry, my movie reviews had to be read and shared. And to be read and shared in this day and age, you have to entertain. Or at least shock and awe.

Third, I believe that movie reviews need to be read and enjoyed by the masses and not the few who can read and understand. What is this, a contest on who can use the most number of multi-syllabic words?

Fourth, with using street and *bekinese* language, I try to be their eyes and their voice. Hopefully the reviews would encourage the mass audience to go and watch, to inform them that there are these new types of films that are available for them to watch. And maybe, just maybe even educate them to be more critical in watching and more discerning in their choices of films they wish to support.

Fifth, I love the exercise. I am sold on finding ways to see a particular movie with a unique perspective. Or retelling the story in a different, more colorful light. If I am unable to convict [readers] to watch a film, then maybe the review itself might entertain you and make you laugh.

And if you do not find it funny, *then fuck you all!*

*Kidding.* Shock and Awe.













I must admit that at first I didn't know if I could accept those extended scenes where nothing much happens. Hello ADHD generation. And since I was a TV person for whom time is money, I got used to the rule of starting the scene as close to the action as possible and ending it just as quickly. So while watching, I was making my own edit points ... beat, beat, beat, o here's where we can cut, ayyyy it goes on ... all right, beat, beat, beat yet more ... fine we can cut here ... ayyy it still continues what the, hey?!!!

I thought people were joking when they said that when you watch a Lav Diaz movie and you see a water buffalo entering to walk across the screen, the camera will wait until it exits before the scene is cut. IT'S ALL TRUE! There's a scene where Susan Africa, Alex de Rossi, and Hazel Orencio are climbing a hill. They start from below, we run the roll forever until they disappear from view. No way the camera followed them, no cut to closeup to show how they emote. We just waited for them to walk forever where our view consisted of soil and the hem of their skirts disappearing into the horizon. What's the cinematic meaning? That they walked a long time and distance? Search me! I couldn't make out the reason.

And just wait until there's a musical or poetic interlude. Let's stop the flow of the story and milk the moment of everything it's got. Sing the song entirely, recite the poem completely ... no matter how many times these were performed earlier. I got the idea that secretly, this was the natural break in editing that Lav was giving the audience as in, "*OK you gurls, you know that the song will be sung again, that means you can go take a pee or buy some snacks, when you return, you won't miss much.*"

In fairness to me, after a few moments where I zzzz'd slightly, it didn't take too long before I got into the rhythm of the movie's pace. I didn't feel so frustrated within because of edit points. I just accepted what I got. Lav never forced me to watch his film didn't he? I knew it was a Lav Diaz movie, I knew it was eight hours, I bought my own ticket. So what should I complain about? Just shut up and eat more potato chips.

Anyways, I applauded the film's premise wherein Oryang, Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Aguinaldo existed in one universe along with the fictional characters of *El Fili* comprising Simoun, Isagani, and Basilio with

three Tikbalangs and Bernardo Carpio on the side.<sup>2</sup> Ayyy what imagination! Aylaykitt! Go ahead and run with it!

The movie's narrative proper begins after the failure of the fictional massacre-by-bombing attempt by Simoun [in *Fili*], but right before the very real execution of Rizal at Bagumbayan via firing squad ... someone emotes while strumming a guitar ... JLC strains to practice the recitation of a poem in the dark ... Sid Lucero buys a rice cake...

...wait should I continue the detailed narration of events? This runs for eight hours mother. How about our other duties? Kidding.

Actually I thought of issuing spoiler alerts about certain plot points but then you should really be aware of the general turn of events, right? Meaning you should have read in your history book about what happened and you should also have read the *Fili* right?<sup>3</sup> Right? RIGHT???. It's like announcing a spoiler alert about the ending of *Jesus of Nazareth*.<sup>4</sup> Hello! He was nailed to the cross and gave up the ghost! The end.

Anyway, forget about it, it's too exhausting to recount.

Here's all I can say for now.

Lav's got a pulse on the limits of his audience's patience. He'll push the temporal extent of a scene, but right before the moment when I'd journey to dreamland, he'll cut to another scene. For the most part. In other scenes, brother please clip your footage, you can't milk anything more from it.

The never-ending cough of Joel Saracho seemed contagious and at moments was already calling attention to itself. Halfway thru I started coughing myself. He must have been responsible for infecting Susan and this became the Myth of the Coughing of Susan Africa.

The handsomeness of Papa Piolo Pascual becomes more and more evident in black and white. In John Lloyd Cruz's case, not so much.

The movie deserves being shown with subtitles, to be fair to its multi-lingual dialogue. Aside from the use of florid Tagalog, it has scenes with dialogue in Spanish, English, Chinese, and Hiligaynon. Pak. I clapped for Papa P for his extended English-language scene with Bart Guingona. Their discussion was outright philosophical but Papa P never faltered. Intense



throughout, though he'd shift accents from neutral Pinoy English, to English with a twang to Hispanized English. But I didn't mind.

Between this film and *Heneral Luna*, Emilio Aguinaldo's image was completely ruined for Filipino audiences no?<sup>5</sup> His bones must be tumbling and pirouetting about at this time. BTW how come in the whole movie, characters were made to call historic figures by their full name, surname and all? It seems awkward to be face-to-face with Oryang but still addressing her as Gregoria de Jesus. Same with the other historical characters. I felt it was deliberate and done for a reason, but one I couldn't determine [why exactly].

I laughed at the scene where Alex [de Rossi] as Cesaria Belarmino was asking for forgiveness from Oryang, and calling herself "the most beautiful maiden of the East"... Well you go girl. A bit later Oryang would smash Cesaria's skull with a rock. In my mind was Oryang saying, "*Bitch I'm the muse of the [revolutionary] Katipunan and you dare to call yourself most beautiful maiden?!!! Not today bitch, not today!!!*" No big deal except to lighten my mood.

What I couldn't take was the too-easy forgiveness that Oryang granted Cesaria on behalf of other people for the latter's betrayal of the revolution that caused the deaths of many. Forgiving [Cesaria] for herself, OK fine, if that's your bag. But for you to assume the right of those whose loved ones perished, to avenge themselves WELL WAIT!!!! In the same vein that the film vilified Aguinaldo, it seemed to be whitewashing the image of Cesaria. Wait a minute bitch! OK you're a victim of circumstance but it was your choice to double-cross your comrades. If you ever felt guilty, you deserve that, bitch.

Angry? Not really, just something I opted to bring up.

Papa P outshone JLC considering JLC was in full acting mode while Papa P just reclined on a hammock and sighed.

Have I mentioned that Papa P's handsomeness is enhanced in black and white? Huwell, it bears repeating.

I'm not hating on JLC huh but the universe sez NO! And JLC, that *barong* with cuffs, that was appropriate for godfathers at baptisms during the 1990s, not the 1890s. Just off-putting. From his first moment he was already acting intensely. Correction, acting for TV. As if he was out to prove something.

Hello, you may have overlooked the memo, this is not an actor's movie, this is a Lav Diaz show, he's the star all the way. You'll notice, even in highly emotional moments, there won't be any closeup to see the tears and hear the moans. A full shot is all you'll get and sometimes with your back turned, all up to the actors to project whatever emotions they want to convey.

Another tidbit I couldn't swallow was with all the trekking about of Papa P/Simoun while sustaining a bullet wound, JLC/Isagani failed to find him a native doctor or herbalist. Hello, you were able to party with the Rizalists but you were unable to cure my Papa P?<sup>6</sup>

Yes I know that at the end JLC would admit that he wasn't enthusiastic about finding a herbalist and doctor because he was glad to see Papa P suffer. That was the problem, the need to verbalize his motivation for his failed action, instead of just conveying this visually via acting in the lengthy-lengthy-lengthiness of the film. Uhhmm show, don't tell?

I think the main problem is JLC was too old for the role. He's no longer an ingenue. While the role was asking for uncertainty and the unfocused anger of the youth, what we got was weakness of character because no one could deny that granddaddy JLC was no longer a spring chicken. Sorry about it.

Go #teamtikbalang, with Angel Aquino, Cherie Gil, and the revitalized Tony Mabesa, Bernardo Bernardo!!! They're the ones who awakened me and pulled me into the movie and basically sustained me to the end. I'm flabbergasted. Lav's imagination's so rich. And it totally worked. That section going toward the end of the film's first 1/3, I thought, how can Lav sustain this level of creativity for the succeeding five hours? The answer is, he can't. The last 2/3 was totally uneven.

In fact I got the feeling that I was watching two different movies. The Oryang and the tikbalang storyline seemed to benefit from polished scripting, from its philosophizing through the florid lines that articulated Lav's beliefs. The Simoun storyline seemed to suffer from uneven writing. Many lines of dialogue seemed to have been conceived in English then translated verbatim into Tagalog. The impact was unwieldy.





## About the Authors

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and journalists, a cause that includes professionalism of the Asian American ethnic press. Tumbocon was a member of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (Filipino Film Critics Circle) in 1986-89 and founded the interdisciplinary critics groups, the Young Critics Circle in 1990 and Kritika in 1992. He was correspondent of the Filipino American newsweekly, the *Philippine News*, and was a fellow of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Journalism. He is currently a fellow of the Wildflowers Institute, a San Francisco-based organization that works on new concepts of community organizing, and a member of the Wildflowers Arts Council. He works in a nonprofit organization that provides social services to individuals who were formerly homeless in San Francisco. (Photo by Ben Villao). <mftworks@hotmail.com>



**NOEL VERA** worked as officer for the Bank of the Philippine Islands while writing film criticism for *Businessworld*, as night supervisor at an institution for at-risk youths. He has written for *Film Comment*, *Cahiers du Cinema España*, and *Rogue Magazine Philippine*, and translated Filipino films into English for international screenings. He published a book, titled *Critic after Dark: A Review of Philippine Cinema*, in 2005, and maintains a blog at [criticafterdark.blogspot.com/](http://criticafterdark.blogspot.com/). <noelbotevera@gmail.com>