

Critical Island Studies Colloquium in Seoul

Can Asians Critique?

: Theory, Criticism, Creolization

7 January (Tuesday) 2025

Kim Dae-Jung Presidential Library and Museum

ZOOM ID: 837 7703 6844

Session 1

13:10 - 14:00

Koichiro Kokubun

Tokyo University, Japan

"Middle Voice and the Question of Responsibility"

Hang Kim

Yonsei University, South Korea

"A Political Logic to Avoid the Political: Reconsidering the Discourses of Culture during Inter and Post war Japan"

Session 2

14:00 - 14:50

Jungwon Park

Kyung Hee University, Korea

"Asia-Latin America as Method?
: Deconstructing the West and Rethinking Asian Studies"

Ki-Myoung Kim

Kangwon National Univeristy, South Korea

"Theory of Causation and Principle of Irreduction
: Nāgārjuna, Spinoza and Latour"

Session 3

15:00 - 15:50

Joel David

Inha University, South Korea

"Predicaments of Prestige: Negotiations and Symbolic Violence in Philippine Critical Film Practice"

Jay Hee-jeong Sohn

Kyung Hee University, South Korea

"The Body as a Site of Critique in the Age of Addiction Economy: A Brief Introduction to Digital Feminism"

Session 4

15:50 - 16:40

Maria Luisa Torres Reyes

The University of Santo Tomas, Philippines

"Diasporic Dispersions, Dislocations, Displacements"

Jae Yin Kim

Kyung Hee University, South Korea

"Can AI Think, Write, and Create?"

Session 5

16:50 - 17:40

Jeremy De Chavez

The University of Macau, China

"Archipelagic Feeling
: Towards a Theory of Tidalectic Affects"

Wening Udasmoro

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Republic of Indonesia

"Hip Hop and Island Liberation from Trauma and Sorrow"

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Zoom: 837 7703 6844

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*** This work was supported by a grant
from Kyung Hee University in 2024 (KHU-20242253).**

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Session 3

Predicaments of Prestige: Negotiations and Symbolic Violence in Philippine Critical Film Practice

Joel David (Inha University)

Abstract

As with its neocolonial center the US, the Philippine practice of film criticism was closely allied with academic and journalistic professions. The definitive triumph of Ishmael Bernal as film director occasioned several of his contemporaries to emulate his example of writing film reviews in newspapers while developing a film-industry network where they could possibly wangle directorial or scriptwriting breaks. Needless to say, the majority of these aspirants did not amount to any significance, as either critics or practitioners. What also remained unremarked was that this strategy was actually European in origin, modeled by the French *nouvelle vague* but with a vastly differing historical and cultural context that called for critical reconfiguring. This lecture will attempt an evaluation of the tradition of Philippine film criticism via its self-declared proponents, the organization of media reviewers who banded into an award-giving organization. It will make use of James F. English's reworking of Pierre Bourdieu's formulation and development of the concept of culture capital, in English's *The Economy of Prestige* (2005), which appropriately problematized the practice of award-giving. Where we can immediately see how, for better or worse, the critics fostered an academicization of award-giving, positioning them among premodern institutions such as the Académie Française, they were also oblivious to the larger issues raised by the intervention of US interests in Asia during the Cold War era. This accounts for a problematic legacy of short-sightedness amid Euro-style obsession with validation on the part of the Philippine critical and artistic community.

Keywords: academization, award-giving, film critics, cultural politics, Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino

For better or worse, the Philippines can claim to be the Southeast Asian country where Western and West-aspiring powers staked their territorial claims in the region: Spain from the early 16th century, the United States during the turn of the previous century, and Japan during the middle of the past century. The impact of these interventions helps explain why the primary cultural forms in the country can mostly be traced to locales far removed from Asia, with the US responsible for reintroducing photography and cinema after the expulsion of the Spaniards and following through with the rest of electronic mass media that the West later made sure to propagate through the rest of the world.

Hence it would not be surprising to discover that during the colonial years (roughly first half of the 20th century), media trends in the country followed closely those of the US. Media specialization was primarily a matter of skills training, since both sides of opposed political persuasions regarded successful popular culture as irredeemably compromised by corporate sponsorship, unworthy of elevation to high art among conservatives and a fifth column for capitalist values among progressives. The country's nominal independence from American colonization marked its transition to a Latin American-style banana republic, but it is also a way of understanding cultural developments that have eluded native scholars of pop culture.

In an essential sense, the Philippines's filmic cultural orientation reverted to European influence once more, but this time it was from France rather than Spain, and it had to await the spread of French influence through Europe before reaching the US, from where the Philippines picked up the perspective that local scholars termed "film as art." Such awareness was nearly too late, since the vast majority of celluloid output was lost to a combination of tropical climate, careless storage practices, industrial self-sabotage as a means of union-busting, and a drive to cannibalize celluloid products, squeezing any form of profit that these could yield, often by converting strips into hats and horns for New Year merry-making. As an example, when Lino Brocka wanted to mount a retrospective of films by Gerardo de Leon, he had to send volunteers to provincial cinemas all over the country to find if any prints might still be kept in storage (Figure 1). Several major films were outright already missing while one was damaged as it was being projected; three other prints were subsequently recovered from various Southeast Asian archives.

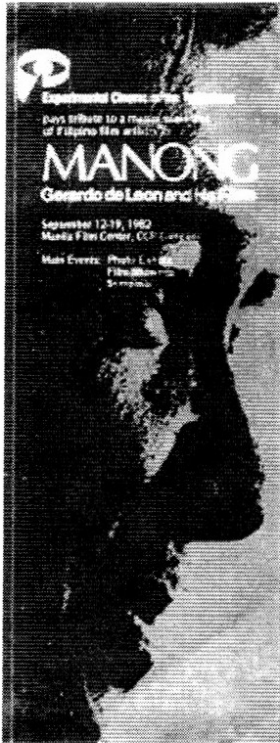


Figure 1. The retrospective of Gerardo de Leon films organized by Lino Brocka, titled "Manong" [Big Brother] and held at the Manila Film Center. All existing de Leon films are sourced from this recovery project except for *Sanda Wong* (1955), recovered in Hong Kong; and *Dyesebel* (1953) and *Anak ni Dyesebel* [Child of Dyesebel] (1964), recovered in Thailand. The celluloid nitrate copy of *Hanggang sa Dulo ng Daigdig* [Up to the Ends of the Earth] (1958)

Film criticism arrived around this time, initially as review commentaries printed as adjuncts to movie journalism in English-language newspapers. In fact, the first movie awards to be announced and handed out were sponsored by the *Manila Times* newspaper and called the Maria Clara Awards, named after the tragic heroine in national hero Jose Rizal's novels. Two years afterward, the instability of one publication determining nationwide film excellence gave way to the Maria Claras transforming into what became announced as the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences or FAMAS Awards, apparently inspired by the US Oscars, which were presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Unlike the American model, however, the FAMAS remained an organization of entertainment reporters, so the anomaly of its self-declaration as an academy remained a gap waiting to be filled.

The earliest regular film critic on record, T.D. Agcaoili, patterned his career after the French New Wave critics-turned-filmmakers. So when a younger group of critics converged at the *Manila Chronicle*, owned by a politician who turned from serving as Vice President of Ferdinand Marcos to being an opposition leader, they all observed the same strategy of writing reviews and later wangling film assignments. The members of the group had varying degrees of filmmaking success, but their most celebrated member was Ishmael Bernal, who became the primary friendly rival of the internationally renowned Lino Brocka.

Originary Texts

In tracking the fortunes of Philippine film criticism as centered in the organization that claimed to be its leading progenitor, I will be proceeding from one of the more inspired applications of Pierre Bourdieu's discourse on *Distinction*, from his eponymously titled book. In *The Economy of Prestige*, James F. English's study of, as per the book's title, "prizes, awards, and the circulation of cultural value," the author proposes a suspension of Bourdieu's progressively inflected analysis (more forcefully articulated in his short polemic, "Racisme de l'intelligence") in order to inspect more closely the dynamics behind what he described as the 20th century's obsession with markers of symbolic value.

Interestingly, English points up two historical occasions that will be significant in our attempt to evaluate the manner in which the symbolic economy's extreme features emerged and developed in the Philippine cultural context. The first was the introduction of what he considered the first modern award, the Nobel Prize, whose impact on literature was wide-ranging and, more important, controversial from the start. English argues that, while controversy can have the potential of sabotaging the credibility of any recent award, prizes handed out by prestigious institutions can ironically have a stronger shot at popularity and, consequently, an extended existence when they are accompanied by accusations of scandalous circumstances.

The other development English mentions is the 1960s superstructural shift that can arguably be regarded as resulting from European cinema's successful challenge against Classical Hollywood: the transition to a so-called weightless economy, affirmed by the eventual abandonment of the dollar/gold standard in 1971, in which "a preponderance of activity concerns trade in such intangible forms of property as knowledge or information, news or entertainment, numbers or options or predictions" ("The Age of Awards" in *Economy of Prestige*). With this redefinition of economic value, we arrive at the paradoxical situation where although the literal weight of bought and sold goods has remained more or less constant, the increased trade in dematerialized products enabled the global economy to grow five times (circa the first decade of the millennium) since 1972. English's extrapolation of this still-continuing drift allows him to arrive at another surprising conclusion: that no matter how crowded the field of awards and prizes may seem, their

proliferation will persist into the future.¹

The Philippines's alertness to these trends resulted in an ever-increasing flurry of prestige-marking activity. The Nobel Prize for Literature found its Philippine counterpart around the same time that the Maria Clara Awards were announced – and even more impressively, by a captain of industry also anxious to legitimize the product he manufactured. To be sure, Carlos Palanca Sr.'s La Tondeña Incorporada (now Ginebra San Miguel), as an alcoholic-beverage distillery, was far less destructive than Alfred Nobel's dynamite production, although the company's notoriety emerged much later, when the Palanca Award for Literature was secure in its prestige stature: in 1975, the company was the first to experienced the first union-organized labor strike under the martial law regime of the Ferdinand Marcos Sr. dictatorship (Fernan).

More than the Nobel or even the most successful (and controversial) literary award, the Man Booker Prize, the Palanca, already recognizing achievement in English plus any number of Philippine languages starting with Filipino, sought to cement its links with the most high-profile cultural activity, that of audiovisual production, by introducing prizes for television and film scriptwriting in 1990 and 1994 respectively, and even adding literally forward-looking categories for futuristic fiction in 2000. Meanwhile, the FAMAS became vulnerable to the interests of the fixed number of major studios during the First Golden Age of Philippine cinema (roughly coexistent with the 1950s), with one of the production outfits withdrawing its participation ironically during the end of the Golden Age, in 1960.

This same studio, Sampaguita Pictures, cast its lot with a then-emerging popular politician after the company screen-tested a vivacious and musically inclined beauty queen who was snagged by said politician after a whirlwind courtship. The young and glamorous couple, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, racked up political points – enough to secure them the presidency, according to new journalist Nick Joaquin – after the censors permit for their hagiographical movie, *Iginuhit ng Tadhana* [*Determined by Fate*]: *The Ferdinand E. Marcos Story* (directed by Conrado Conde, Jose de Villa, and Mar. S. Torres, 1965), was delayed during its premiere night and Imelda consequently shed tears in the theater lobby accusing the incumbent President's government of censorship (Figure 2). Hence the Marcos couple's infatuation with cinema, possibly inspired by John F. Kennedy's successful exploitation of television in his presidential campaign against Richard Nixon, intensified to the point of not just a second biofilm, *Pinagbuklod ng Langit* [*Conjoined by Heaven*] (directed by Eddie

Garcia, 1969) for Marcos's reelection, but also a scandal-ridden third project, *Maharlika* [*Guerrilla Strike Force*] (directed by Jerry Hopper, 1970/1987) that arguably became the reason for Imelda Marcos's rise in cultural dominance in her husband's regime.²



Figure 2. The Marcos family during their inauguration (left) and as depicted in the campaign flick *Iginuhit ng Tadhana* (right). One figure is common to both: the actor portraying the Marcoses' son is Ferdinand Jr., also known as Bongbong, informally addressed as BBM and elected President in 2022. (Film still from Sampaguita Pictures)

With the political stability enforced by the declaration of martial law in 1972, Filipino film critics were able to embark on more rationalized prestige-making activities. These were two-pronged, comprising first, a reassembling of reviewers (with new recruits) in need of a newspaper outlet after the closure of the opposition-owned *Manila Chronicle*, provided by the *Philippines Daily Express*, owned by a crony of Ferdinand and edited by a relative of Imelda; and second, a deployment to the FAMAS under the supervision of the dean of the national university's then-newly formed Institute (now College) of Mass Communication. The latter condition, in effect for two years, coincided with the release and subsequent awarding of Brocka's independent breakout efforts, *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* [*Weighed But Found Wanting*] (1974) and *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [*Manila: In the Claws of Light*] (1975), the first Filipino movie to be added to the Criterion Collection, a film buff's wet dream, via Martin Scorsese's World Cinema (film recovery) Project (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The order page of *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* at the Criterion Collection website. (Screen capture from www.criterion.com/films/29221-manila-in-the-claws-of-light)

Critics Crystallize

The *Daily Express* and FAMAS critics banded together in an organization called the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (or Filipino Film Critics Circle, hereafter MPP) in order to hand out annual awards, starting with the year 1976. Their timing was opportune because one of the younger talents of the First Golden Age, Eddie Romero, made his “comeback” from directing Filipino films for US drive-in theaters (thereby initiating a horror subgenre called the Blood Island films, actually an appropriation of a Hammer Films title on Japanese World War II atrocities against Southeast Asian and British nationals set in Indonesia). It was also the year when the most unlikely yet most successful Philippine star, the dark-skinned Nora Aunor, produced her most ambitious film, a period narrative on the Japanese occupation with her character torn between a Filipino guerrilla and a Filipino-Japanese official. The MPP called their trophy the Urian [Jeweller’s Stone] and gave best film prize to Romero and best actress to Aunor.

What has been overlooked by film historians, even those critical of the group, was the MPP’s life-achievement prize. The very first one was handed out not to a filmmaker

but to a producer, Manuel de Leon, son of the founder of LVN Pictures, responsible for overseeing projects that mostly won major prizes at the Asian Film Festival. The exclusion of Sampaguita Pictures was consistent during the first Marcos presidency, with directors, actors, and technical talents associated with either LVN or Premiere Productions winning subsequent life-achievement awards. It would take the late 1990s for the first Sampaguita performers to be acknowledged, with ironically the founder's daughter, a member of Imelda's "Blue Ladies" inner circle, given a life-achievement award during the current millennium.

The preference primarily for Premiere was articulated by the most senior founding member, Bienvenido Lumbera ("Critic in Academe" source exchange), with a harsh judgment of the interregnum between the First and Second Golden Ages, or the 1960s up to the early 1970s, articulated in his descriptor of this period as an era of "Rampant Commercialism and Artistic Decline" ("Problems in Philippine Film History" 181-84) followed by "New Forces in Contemporary Cinema" ("Problems" 184-86) starting in 1976. Lumbera's defense of the production strategies of the First Golden Age precisely centered on its oligopolistic process: "during the 1950s businessmen had more confidence in the industry: 'If our movie flops, that's all right. We have a big production scheduled next that will surely draw in the crowds.' Such a procedure essentially is a rational kind of capitalist thinking" ("Critic in Academe" 62).

The romanticization of the First Golden Age masks a number of troubles that got mentioned in passing even in some of the citations that the MPP prepared for their life-achievement winners. Anita Linda, the first actor winner, described how she participated in a labor strike at Premiere and found herself blacklisted by the other studios (Reyes 421). An even more problematic predicament emerged with the recent declassification of materials by the US State Department, confirming the then-apparent US intervention in the film cultural policies of the region that eventually became known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This involved a recuperation of Japan's capacity to dominate the countries it had colonized in the territory when it envisioned a Greater East Asian Cinema as an adjunct of its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere during World War II. The ostensible goal was to stanch the expansion of the socialist bloc by using cinema, with Manuel de Leon as "likely the only influential Southeast Asian film producer still participating in the FPA [the US-sponsored Federation of Motion Picture Producers in Asia-Pacific] during this decade" of the 1960s (Sangjoon 12). Hence the much-vaunted

track record of de Leon in the FPA-sponsored Asian Film Festival was in fact attributable to his matching of conservative film material with the FPA's antiprogressive agenda.

With LVN as a pro-US agent, Sampaguita as a supporter of a then-emerging fascist dictator, and Premiere as union-buster, the prospect appears to have been dim for Philippine cinema. But in fact, Lumbera's dismissal of the period after the First Golden Age was precipitate, and had to be qualified even by himself. He remarked, of the period that featured films that became known as *bomba* or bomb, featuring soft-core sexual themes whose unsupervised screenings contained hard-core inserts, that such films deserve to be reevaluated in light of their overt challenge to the strictures of conservatism and denial of women's prerogatives in acting on their desires and preferences ("Pelikula" 216).

Moreover, the films of the 1960s were characterized by an impressive, pioneering, taboo-breaking, politically charged vulgarity, of the sort never seen before or since in the country, and that would be essential to explaining why the Second Golden Age held far more promise and managed to meet more expectations than the First. Moreover, most filmmakers who made their mark during the First Golden Age actually produced what a number of people would consider their best products during the subsequent non-"golden" years.³ The sheer proliferation of innovation alone would be worth a compendium all its own – transformation of actor-producers into auteur-moguls, triple-digit annual production, transitions to color, regularity of regional-language production and international coproduction, eager bandwagoning by politicians, depictions of heretofore unseen images of graphic screen violence, musical teen-idol unruliness, social turmoil, and straight and queer sexualities.

Awards Agonisms

The application of the MPP's awards concept itself fed into a trend that similarly originated in Europe, but during a premodern period rather than with any of the modern tendencies that emerged in the 20th century. This proceeded from the simple reality that nearly the entire long-term membership of the MPP comprised professors in the elite consortium constituted by the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, and De La Salle University. Talents associated with these institutions were surer to win than those from, say, the university belt of Manila, with the occasional exception of the University of Santo Tomas; the founding of the national university's Film Institute in 2003 (preceded by

the College of Mass Communication's Department of Film in 1984) became the primary source of candidates for Urian awards and even for the group's "best of the decade" awards for films and performers.

The premodern European trend cited by English in his study was the academization of literary prizes in France, where preference was given to entrants who were associated with the Académie Française ("The Age of Awards"); the concept became controversial enough even overseas, so that when England announced plans for the founding of the Royal Society, a counterpart institution, Sir Walter Scott sent in 1821 one of the longest letters in his correspondence, addressed to the Honorable Sir John Villiers and described by English as "one of the great documents of prize bashing" (Grierson 397-405).

A more politically involved consequence of the imposition of academic preferences was the appraisal of film-texts created by artists whose orientation (and therefore sympathies) lay with the original Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas or Philippine Communist Party, founded in 1930 and distinguished by a history of pro-labor and anticolonial struggle, including successful participation in anti-Japanese resistance during World War II. After experiencing betrayal by the returning US colonizers, the members resumed their guerrilla activities, this time directed at the neocolonial Philippine government. After severe repression and confronted by a breakaway party and guerrilla army, the PKP leadership called for its members to surrender in exchange for estates in Mindanao. Films recounting its history of conflict and confrontation with power, mostly made by Celso Ad. Castillo, were initially downgraded in MPP reviews and overlooked in annual awards results, until the addition of ironically younger members enabled Castillo to win major prizes in one year, a feat that he would be unable to repeat afterward (David, "From Cloud to Resistance" part 1, note 1).

While this example of overcoming ideological bias can be overcome (as in this case) by insistent internal calls for openness and fairness, a more vexed problem inhered in the awards concept itself and conflicted with the group's avowed ideals. In attempting to provide consumerist assistance by sifting through the film industry's releases and announcing the group's preferences in the form of quarterly citations and annual awards and winners, the group inevitably favored reviewing, rather than criticism, as its primary form of critical practice. The more senior members had critical-writing samples that ranged from revaluation of pre-existing canons to historical revisionisms, with left-conservative moralizing (premised

on binaristic argumentation) as the most common form of output. Inasmuch as the PKP favored Soviet conventions, the newer progressives tended toward Maoist prescriptions, with Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum* as foundational text (listed in Works Cited under Mao Tse-tung).

And yet, as I complained to the group during my short tenure in the early 1980s, the implementation of the awards concept violated the group's avowed intent of supporting the community of artists. The process of winnowing achievements in fixed categories on a regular basis led to resentments and disappointments on the part of people who were shut out at any stage of the recognition mechanism, and resulted in forms of lobbying that created complications with the members' tendency to perform maverick decision-making.⁴ It resulted in defensive maneuvers where the technical award for best editing, for example, would always have to be adjusted to support whichever film won for best scriptwriting, since elements such as structure, pacing, and narrative tension are shared by both activities.

Hidden Contestations

Even more scandalous in retrospect is the group's otherwise laudable attempts to buck public expectations and select underdogs as their awardees. The selection that resonated for decades was, unsurprisingly, in the 1982 performance category, when the MPP passed over Nora Aunor for *Himala* [*Miracle*] in favor of Vilma Santos for *Relasyon* [*Affair*] (Figure 4). Both films shared the same director (Ishmael Bernal) and a writer (Ricky Lee), who developed differences between them but separately declared to friends and acquaintances that the group was grossly mistaken. (Personal disclosure: in declaring that a Second Golden Age transpired nearly during the entire martial-law period, I wrote a much-quoted passage, that "the one outstanding performance of the period ... belongs to Nora Aunor in *Himala*.... Not since Anita Linda in Gerardo de Leon's *Sisa*, circa the First Golden Age [actually the first Maria Clara best actress awardee in 1951], had there been such a felicitous exploitation by a performer of ideal filmmaking conditions"; see "A Second Golden Age," page 24.)



Figure 4. Climactic scenes of *Himala* and *Relasyon*: left, Elsa (Nora Aunor) confesses to her followers that her pregnancy resulted from rape rather than immaculate conception, affirming that miracles do not exist, before a bullet from an anonymous shooter kills her; right, Marilou (Vilma Santos), whose married boyfriend suddenly died from cerebral aneurysm, calls her mother to report what happened. (Screen caps from *Experimental Cinema of the Philippines* and *Regal Films* respectively)

As a result, the MPP had to justify their consideration of Santos as superior to Aunor, despite the latter's record of excellence in recording arts and legitimate theater, and allotment of her wealth as the country's most successful multimedia star to productions of art-film projects. Santos was given successive best-actress awards for two more years and generally consistently defeated Aunor in later years when both were nominated, accumulating the biggest number of Urian prizes. The evaluation of the larger community of artists departed from the MPP's: Bernal, like Brocka, was posthumously declared a National Artist, while Lee won the prize in the same year that Aunor did. A millennium-era President, Benigno "Noynoy" S. Aquino III, son of the woman who ousted Ferdinand Marcos and succeeded him as President, endured widespread criticism for rejecting an earlier decision by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts to proclaim Aunor.

More than the Palanca Award for Literature, the Order of the National Artist of the Philippines was the country's closest approximation of the Nobel. It was created the same year that martial law was declared and Imelda Marcos was able to convince the country's primary practitioner of literature in English, Nick Joaquin, to accept the recognition by agreeing to free a political prisoner he had mentored. The process has remained free from political intervention, with one millennial-era President, Noynoy Aquino's predecessor Gloria

Macapagal Arroyo, being overruled by the Supreme Court for adding her preferences to the list of candidates submitted by the NCCA (Dedace).

A more scandalous reading emerged when an advocacy movie produced by Aunor, titled *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.* [*The Real Life of Pacita M.*] (again scripted by Lee), lost in the film and performance categories to a studio tearjerker that starred Santos, despite all the other award-giving bodies giving it these prizes. Elwood Perez, who directed the Aunor film, stated that the MPP would never provide him with any form of recognition because he asked a veteran scriptwriter to fix a screenplay submitted by a senior member. *Facebook* netizens picked up on this allegation and noted that Aunor's loss in *Himala* was preceded by her prioritizing of a 1980 project with Brocka for exhibition at Cannes Film Festival (*Bona*, which was recently rereleased), at the expense of a film that the same member also scripted. The larger irony was that this member had written one of the moralistic "critical" articles denouncing what he declared were wrong values in Philippine cinema, headed by producers' racial preferences for fair-skinned performers and singling out Aunor as exemplary of the type of actor who more closely resembled the profile of the native audience.

A curious trend observed by English was in how awards jurors tended to aspire for prizes themselves ("Taste Management"), as a way to justify their right to pass judgment on their peers. The process favors their candidacy, since the arbiters would actually be mostly colleagues of MPP members; hence senior MPP member Lumbera was able to be declared a National Artist for Literature despite a paltry record in comparison with a later winner such as Lee. Current aspirants include the anti-Aunor campaigner as well as Aunor's rival.

Canon Calibrations

The longer-lasting problem for critical evaluation is the canonical implication of annual film awards. Merely raising a simple question already points up the concept's inherent historical weakness: "Is there always one 'best' film for every year that transpires, so that the MPP's choices over time can constitute a reliable canon listing?" In recognition of the absurdity raised by the query, as well as to add more winners and extend their award program's running time (and consequent advertising revenues), the MPP would announce its choices

for ten best films of the decade as well as a variable number of best performers. The group would naturally resist any attempt at admitting it committed errors, so that the ten films of the decade more often than not were merely the same films that won Urian prizes for best picture during their respective years of release.

The variability of production opportunities as well as occasional political and economic crises would logically intervene not just in the regularity of production but also in the artistic community's capacity to focus on the generation of quality output. Even during more encouraging periods, they will have to contend with such unpredictable and generally obstructive governmental policies, starting with censorship and taxation. Finally, the private sector imposes its own requisites in terms of genres, cast, exhibition venues, and so on. The narrative of the Philippines's critics circle's half-century of participation just as egregiously exhibits more problems than it solves: from an incompetence of the typical member in exercising critical thinking through the opportunism of supposedly mature elderly critics in penalizing practitioners who thwarted their career ambitions to the failure of the awards strategy in creating a credible formation of quality achievements of Philippine film artists.

A final example of the third instance should suffice in concluding this account. A nearly complete canon project begun in 2012 covering available regular-length feature-film samples from the beginning to 2020, has resulted in a list of nearly 180 films that may be plotted out in a graph of annual titles (Figure 5).⁵ One may note the paucity of early entries, partly due to the difficulty of preserving celluloid in a tropical country but also because of such historical aberrations as the Japanese occupation, declaration of martial law, and the transition to democracy. One year in particular, 1984, yielded an extremely unusual number of passable films, but not only did the Urian select only one "best" film from a handful of nominees, the members also kept writing reviews that lamented the state of film production and nitpicked with any detail they could find. The vulgar-Marxist-inflected instruction to regard the period of capitalism, exacerbated by fascism as incompatible with the production of progressive cultural products, would have justified this approach ideologically for conservative leftists. But afterward, when production fell because of audiences turning against the cultural celebration of the pre-martial law bourgeoisie's triumph in reclaiming their lost opportunities, the MPP critics quieted down, even deciding at one point not to hold any awards ceremony.

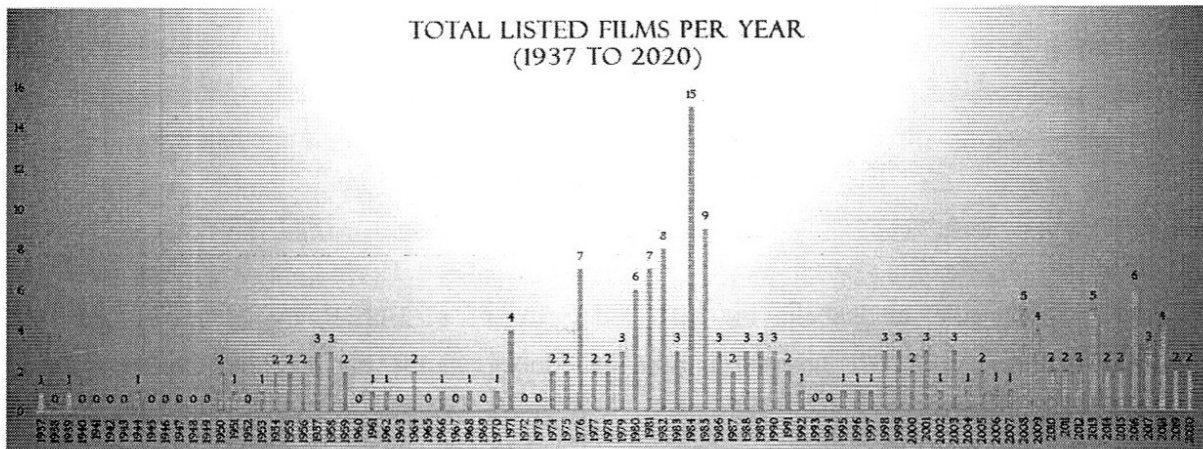


Figure 5. Canonical trends in Philippine film-quality performance. (David, Canon Decampment, *Amauteurish Publishing*, 2023, posted at amauteurish.com/2023/11/14/canon-decampment/)

The preceding study of the intervention of the original organization of film critics in Philippine cinema, in making use of principles and examples begun by Bourdieu and extended by succeeding practitioners (particularly English) has led to similar conclusions: that more questions demand to be answered, and that these efforts at the construction of distinction might have more destructive effects if the problems they raised remain unattended.

Notes

- 1 The closest the country ever came to the abolition (as opposed to the folding up) of an award-giving group was when the Film Academy of the Philippines was formed in 1981 and announced its intent to hand out awards. As Director-General of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines tasked with implementing the President's Executive Order, Imee Marcos announced that the FAP, comprising guilds of film professionals, will serve as the country's sole authentic academy and replace the FAMAS. Joseph Estrada, then the mayor of the municipality (now city) of San Juan City in Metro Manila, was expecting to be elevated to the FAMAS Hall of Fame in

two categories, acting and producing, by winning one more award in each category; he successfully opposed Imee's plan – a rare instance of another Philippine official opposing a member of the dictator's family and surviving. Estrada was subsequently elected President but was impeached via popular protests reminiscent of the people-power revolt that deposed the Marcoses.

- 2 Shown overseas in 1970 but released in the Philippines in 1987 after the Marcoses' downfall, *Maharlika* starred an American starlet, Dovie Beams, in what has been her only leading role, as Isabella the martyred girlfriend of Bob Reynolds (played by Paul Burke), who conducted successful guerrilla forays against the Imperial Japanese Army and was intended to bolster Ferdinand Sr.'s claim that he earned a record number of medals from the US Army (subsequently repudiated by the institution). Beams yielded to the man she called "Fred" but after their affair became a media scandal, he denied having known her. Upon learning that her life might be in danger, she called for a press conference where she provided proof of their relationship, in the form of explicit audio recordings of their bedroom sessions. Caroline S. Hau, in "Dovie Beams and Philippine Politics: A President's Scandalous Affair and First Lady Power on the Eve of Martial Law" (in *Philippine Studies: Historic and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, volume 67, numbers 3-4, 2019, pages 595-634), ascribes to the Beams affair Imelda's considerable rise in influence during the martial law period.
- 3 Another MPP elder member, Agustin Sotto, echoed Lumbera's lamentation on the rise of independent producers following the collapse of the studio system, but qualified that "this was also the period when the top directors shot their best works" ("Ninth Period" in "History of Philippine Cinema: 1897-1969" in *Pelikula at Lipunan [Film and Society]: Festival of Filipino Film Classics and Short Films*, National Commission for Culture and the Arts Committee, Film Academy of the Philippines, and Movie Workers Welfare Fund, 1994, n.pag.).
- 4 In rejecting the only Urian award he ever won (for *Jaguar* in the 1979 awards), Lino Brocka lamented how he preferred the corruption practiced by FAMAS, since nominees only had to bribe the jurors in order to win an award. In contrast, he criticized the MPP for their inability to correct errors that resulted from the members' biases. This was apparently in response to *Jaguar* actor Phillip Salvador losing in the best actor category. See Joel David, "The Night the Critics Gave Out Their Awards," *Philippines Daily Express* (4 March 1980), pages 20-21.
- 5 Ironically, the canon project observed the processes instilled in me by the MPP during their early years. These were: a willingness to cover the widest possible selection of

available releases in their best conditions (to preempt biases induced by poor technological conditions), the organizing of a select group to determine entries based on extensive deliberations, the rescreening of titles that had proved controversial or borderline-acceptable, and the articulation, in the form of capsule reviews, of reasons for the selection. In addition, I also provided pointers for the proper appreciation of offbeat films, drawn from genre-transformation studies, star texts, experimental cinema, third-cinema aesthetics, and so on. Where people involved in production were still around, I also attempted to contact them to request answers to problematic elements in the work.

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