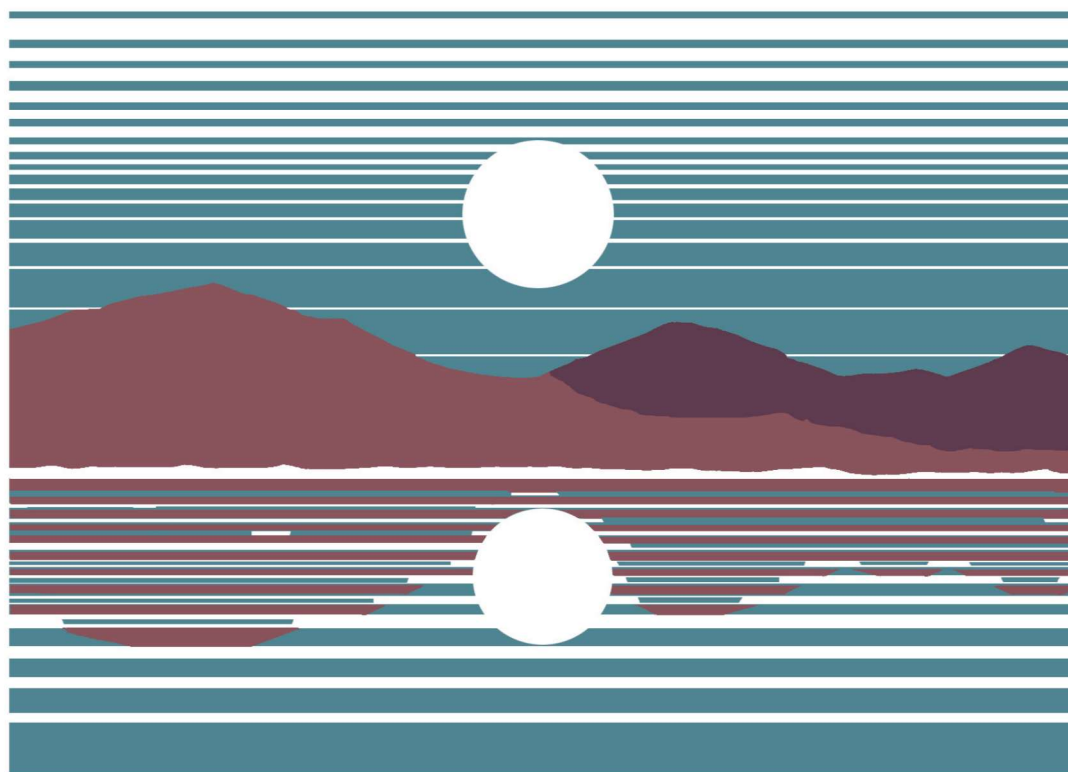


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Notes on the Filipino Action Film

AGUSTIN L. SOTTO

THE PECULIARITIES of the Filipino movie scene are perhaps startling manifestations of the cultural confusion that accompanies the turbulent changes of a society in transition. Filipino moviegoing is a deeply fragmented affair where audiences are split along socioeconomic, linguistic, and sexual lines. The result is a phenomenon common in Third World countries – the local intelligentsia abandoning commercial filmmaking to set up an alternative film culture heavily influenced by Western concepts and the mainstream, with its stereotypes and conventions deeply rooted in folk traditions and suffused with anachronisms and illogicalities, acting as the repository of the wild dreams, the deep-seated aspirations, and the searching outlook of the less fortunate.

In terms of socioeconomic and linguistic distinctions, the upper classes – the professionals, the college graduates, or, in local advertising parlance, classes A and B – patronize the English-language movies exclusively. The lower classes – the laborers, those who live on the fringes of society, or classes C and D – latch on to local films and to other folk media of *komiks* and radio serials for the articulation of their worldview.

Consumer surveys as well as on-the-spot checks reveal a marked preference by the sexes for certain genres.¹ For example, men generally patronize action movies; indeed, they fill theaters to capacity whenever these show films with popular action stars. On the other hand, women prefer melodramas and musicals; not surprisingly, men are turned off by the ingredients of these genres.

These socioeconomic, linguistic, and sexual distinctions of cinema patronage weigh heavily on commercial formulas. Characterization, themes, and plots are very much influenced by the social values, cultural norms,

and present concerns of the lower classes. Changes in formulas are dictated by the shifting moods of the times rather than by artistic whims.

Rich rewards are in store for those who master these formulas. There is a close link between politics, on the one hand, and movies, on the other. Movie stars who are sensitively attuned to the silent dreams of the multitudes are treated like gods. Those who command a large following can successfully run for public office. In certain instances, too, they have been known to be manipulated by artful politicians for campaign purposes.

This analysis of the genre of the Filipino action film is intended to shed light on the relationship between movies and society. It is also meant to focus attention on the Filipino male's concept of masculinity, his attitudes towards individuals and institutions (family, church, government), his social values, and his cultural norms. The study is also intended to pinpoint conventions and formulas of the commercial cinema.

The Philippines has a pervasive film culture. It produces 150 films annually, imports thrice that number, and has one of the largest movie attendance figures in the world. For these reasons, this study hopes to stimulate interest in one of the most fascinating and most vibrant film cultures in the world.

DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF THE FILIPINO ACTION FILM

In the late forties, French critics coined the term *film noir* to describe the dark mood of some Hollywood films made during the war and the years immediately after the devastating holocaust. Later studies, especially those by Raymond Durgnant and Paul Schrader, have sifted through this body of work to fashion precise definitions in terms of themes, styles, and influences (Schrader 1977, 284). Thus, *film noir* has come to stand for a definite historical period in American film history, though the term has been loosely ascribed to films of present-day America or even to those of foreign countries.

A similar case can be made for the Filipino action film, though such a heading can be very unwieldy. Action films, as the name suggests, contain action scenes, but such a simplistic definition would miss out on the very aspects this study would like to concentrate on – the strict form of morality, the idealism of the honor code, the set attitudes, the traditional values, and the folk thinking that are considered very Filipino in character. Also, an important point for consideration is that movies are studied not indi-

vidually but according to a rigid formula perfected by the action star himself. Once a certain behavior clicks with the public, this star never departs from these set responses. He uses the same motivations from film to film and, like Superman and Batman, his get-up sometimes never changes.

A historical survey can put this definition into a deeper perspective and provide a cut-off point necessary for the discussion.

The Filipino action film can trace its roots to a native theatrical form that was popular during the period of Spanish colonization (1571–1898), the *moro-moro*. The *moro-moro* is a morality play introduced by the Spaniards in which Christians battled Muslims and emerged victorious in the end. The theatrical form made clear distinctions between heroes and villains, employed a host of stock characters, and had for its climax the much-awaited battle scenes.

Such a theme was, of course, outdated by the time local films were finally produced. In the first decades of Philippine cinema (1912–1944), there was a proliferation of revolutionary dramas which pitted Filipino patriots against Spaniards. Many battle scenes were shot in order to entertain Filipino audiences, but, perhaps owing to a strong *ilustrado* (elite) influence, the films were more melodramas than action films.

Aside from revolutionary dramas, a few private-eye flicks produced before the war also had action scenes. Like the Hollywood detective films after which they were patterned, these movies lacked certain ingredients of the morality play and subordinated the fighting skills of the heroes to the love angle.

After World War II, there was a spate of guerrilla films in which Filipinos fought the Japanese. Alongside these was a revival of the swash-buckling epics in which Filipinos imagined themselves to be citizens of foreign lands who crossed swords with their antagonists.

Perhaps due to a studio system that saw personality cults as threats to studio discipline, movie stars were not allowed to choose their roles. Instead they were dictated by their home studios.

With the collapse of the studio system in the late fifties and with the rise of the *bakya* crowd, personality cults around movie stars developed to a degree never before manifested.² Now without the security of a movie contract, stars had to insure their durability by directly pandering to the tastes of the masses. Formulas were stumbled upon by accident, and movie stars from then on were forever identified with the stock characters they portrayed on the screen.

GIANTS IN THE FILIPINO ACTION FILM

The action star who laid the groundwork for the present kind of action films is Fernando Poe, Jr. (or FPJ, as he is popularly known). Working largely in westerns at the beginning of his career, FPJ was able to mold a distinctly Filipino character on an otherwise foreign personage. Self-effacing and modest but skilled with a gun, FPJ was catapulted to the top and has remained the box-office king for more than twenty-five years.

Following Fernando Poe, Jr., was Joseph Estrada, whose hard-hitting slum dramas won for him the mayoralty of a Manila suburb. Instead of borrowing from foreign sources, Estrada created a Filipino original. This character is the illiterate champion of the masses whose only capital is his guts. Estrada incarnated various types of the Filipino working class, such as stevedores and taxi drivers, and, contrary to the artificial settings of the dream factory, gave dignity to the poverty in his surroundings.

Other action stars who achieved fame were Jun Aristorenas, Jess Lapid, and Tony Ferrer.

In the seventies came a significant break with the tradition. Owing to the deterioration in social conditions, Ramon Revilla successfully introduced a different kind of action hero, the criminal. He raised this outcast from society to the level of a folk hero. The mood in Revilla's films is much darker, with action scenes trembling with graphic forms of violence.

This development appears, at first glance, to be a rejection of earlier and more benign models. However, in closer analysis, it is actually a progression on the established patterns. In Fernando Poe, Jr., and Joseph Estrada movies, man is pitted against other individuals, with the action hero routing his opponents and emerging victorious. In contrast, Ramon Revilla movies have pitted man against society, with the trump card, alas, in the hands of the corrupt.

Action stars who have capitalized on Revilla's formula are Rudy Fernandez and Anthony Alonzo.

ACTION STARS AND THEIR PREFERRED STYLES

Fernando Poe, Jr.

Fernando Poe, Jr., started his movie career with juvenile roles in 1956. In the late fifties, he began to specialize in westerns, a genre that was then

becoming popular despite the nonexistence of cowboys in the Philippines. In these movies, he crystallized the action hero beloved so much by Filipinos, a self-effacing, modest, solitary but rugged individual.

Most Poe movies begin with a town being attacked by a wanton band of thieves. The hero, played by Fernando Poe, Jr., arrives as a solitary horseback rider who at first offers no resistance to the arrogant rascals who kick him around. It is only when the heroine is accosted by this rowdy batch that he starts showing off his boxing and gun-wielding know-how. The action is built to a climax where the hero routs the offending parties.

Fernando Poe, Jr., has played a variety of roles from teacher (*Asedillo*) carpenter (*Ang Panday*), and guerrilla hunter (*Daang Hari*) to meek cop (*Mediavillo*). Perhaps because of the wholesomeness of his heroic portrayals, most of his films are set in the past.

Whenever Fernando Poe, Jr., portrays a modern-day hero, he indulges in a bit of violence, though not on the scale found in Ramon Revilla movies. "Such is the trend nowadays," FPJ said in an interview.³ He is always on the side of the law, and he never acts out criminal roles. In *Umpisahan Mo, Tatapusin Ko*, he is perplexed by the corruption in police headquarters, but his faith in the institution never wavers. Similarly, in *Sigaw ng Katarungan*, he is brutally tortured by drug dealers, but his psyche is never thrown off-balance.

Fernando Poe, Jr., is still the highest paid movie star and has reigned as Mr. Box Office for more than two decades now. He still personifies the idealistic Filipino, though under the present circumstances this has been largely modified.

Joseph Estrada

In 1967, running as an independent candidate against formidable opponents, Joseph Estrada won the mayoral elections in San Juan, a suburb of Metro Manila. Political analysts readily attributed this to his immense popularity as a movie star, especially in his portrayals of lowly born underdogs in action films that celebrate the dignity of spirit even among the very poor.

Like Fernando Poe, Jr., Joseph Estrada first starred in juvenile roles, but it was not until the *Batang* series (the man of the streets) that he gained a large following. The series has been hailed by National Artist Nick Joaquin as "the closest we have come to true Philippine cinema – not limp

clique art like those beautiful flops the producers point to as reasons for not reforming, but alive and gutsy pop art as contemporary as a canto boy's [town store bully] latest belch" (Joaquin 1977, 6).

The series popularized the squatter areas of Manila as a milieu and turned the rancid smells of the gutter into ennobling aromas of the resilient poor. Its major contribution is that it introduced realism to the world of action films, allowing the poor to take stock of their situation.

Joseph Estrada's best roles are Geron Busabos the tramp and Joe Nazareno the taxi driver. These characters rise above the poverty of their surroundings to struggle for dignity. Joseph Estrada on screen is the champion of the poor, the mediator between wayward brethren, the protector of the weak against extortionists, the succor to the needy, the patient and sacrificing Superman who helps the lowliest get the justice they deserve.

Ramon Revilla

Deterioration of social conditions in the Philippines was pronounced in the years prior to the declaration of martial law in 1972. A breakdown in law and order, widespread graft and corruption in public office, the rise of student activism, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the constant devaluation of the Philippine peso – these circumstances all engendered skepticism about traditional values. However, it was not of a degree to distort the essential distinctions between good and evil.

This disturbing change in the Filipino psyche was first manifested in the films of Ramon Revilla. He was a matinee idol of the fifties who made a dramatic comeback in the sixties. His *Nardong Putik* is a film on a notorious criminal whose talisman protected him from bullets. It scored phenomenally at the box office in 1971 and established him as an action superstar. After *Nardong Putik* came other dramatizations of real-life fugitives from justice such as *Kapitan Eddie Set*, *Tiagong Akyat*, *Kapitan Inggog*, *Terrorize Panay*, and others.

Ramon Revilla's movies are almost always based on life stories of real criminals. He reportedly goes from town to town to interview barrio folks, usually victims of social injustice, on possible subjects for films. Much fictionalization of course comes in when the renegade is lifted to the level of a folk hero and sympathy is drawn to his cause.

The standard Ramon Revilla movie often begins with the simple and upright hero terrorized by unscrupulous land-grabbers. At first, the char-

acter played by Revilla naively resorts to the police and the law courts to get back his land. But in his town the judges are bribed handsomely, and soon he becomes a victim of police brutality. The last straw comes when his wife and children are senselessly murdered. He is forced to flee to the mountains and mull over his revenge. There he assembles a band of disgruntled peasants and trains them to be sharpshooters. He leads them in robbing the rich – usually greedy politicians who have made fortunes out of the sweat of the poor. He disciplines his band to live by a strict code. Ramon Revilla's community then becomes his version of "Little Philippines" where justice prevails and good is rewarded. Those who transgress the unwritten laws are punished severely. Toward the end, Ramon Revilla suffers from *hubris*; he gets too hotheaded and kills too many people. He also becomes too unbending in his enforcement of his own laws and commits an unforgivable sin – heartlessness. His movies never end on a happy note. Like Moses who cannot enter the Promised Land because of blood on his hands, the hero he plays either dies in a blaze of gunfire from the encroaching authorities or, at the very least, is grazed by stray bullets.

Ramon Revilla's roles range from simple peasants hoodwinked by powerful politicians to Huk commanders with urgent pleas for justice. The latter role is markedly free of any ideological content but is replete with instances of social injustice. His movies are also strikingly more violent than those of Fernando Poe, Jr., or Joseph Estrada. The overwhelming might of the oppressor and the larger scale of the fight permit bloodier, more sadistic scenes.

Rudy Fernandez and Anthony Alonzo

Success spawns imitations. Two action stars who have followed Ramon Revilla's example are Rudy Fernandez and Anthony Alonzo.

Rudy Fernandez, son of an important film director, became an action star with his depiction of a fugitive on the run in *Bitaying si Baby Ama*. His succeeding roles were more or less in the same vein. These were in *Wanted: Alex San Diego*; *Sumuko Ka, Ronquillo*; *Kriminal*; *Somewhere*; and *Pasukuin si Waway (Cop Killer)*.

The Rudy Fernandez formula is very much like Ramon Revilla's, though on a minuscule scale. Rudy is often a boy from the province who moves to a squatter area. He is not familiar with the unwritten laws of the local Mafia and is bullied by arrogant extortionists. He fights back, but the Mafia with its political connections frames him up. He is sent to

prison, where he undergoes a dehumanizing experience. He then changes from a naive country hick into a hardened criminal. He escapes from prison and cold-bloodedly guns down his antagonists. Like Ramon Revilla, he either dies by the gun or is shot in the arm.

Anthony Alonzo's is a more frenzied variation. He often plays drug addicts, psychopaths, reformed criminals, and deranged individuals. In *Warren Balane*, he is a reformed drug addict lured back into the business by his mother's illness. In *Sendong Sungkit*, he is a criminal on parole who guns down the killers of his sweetheart.

An Anthony Alonzo movie often begins with a testimonial from his mother that as a child, he was good-natured. He comes home from prison with a promise to go straight. But because of the continuing breakdown in law and order, he reneges on his promise and is lured back to crime. However, once he has waylaid his oppressors – often mercilessly – he atones for his sins by undergoing heavy flogging and other Christian forms of penitence. Here Anthony Alonzo is linked with the cult of the Black Nazarene, a religious macho cult that has among its adherents many peasant criminals. Like Ramon Revilla and Rudy Fernandez, he is not allowed to live a happy life. Remnants of the gang he has helped suppress hunt him down and shoot him.

Lito Lapid

While the trend in the seventies seemed to be toward victims of injustice, one action star – Lito Lapid – made his mark by applying Fernando Poe's formula of one rugged individual facing up to society. One reason may be that Ramon Revilla's films are rated for adults only, while those of Lito Lapid cater to the kiddie market.

Lito Lapid's roles are more flamboyant, more the product of cross-culturalization. They range from samurai (*Barakuda*), cowboys (*Julian Vaquero*), and men of the streets (*Batang Salabusab*) to fantasy heroes (*Alakdang Bato*). Essentially a Lito Lapid movie starts out with flashbacks to his childhood where he witnesses the murder of his parents. He vows revenge. In the intervening years, he hones his skills in judo, karate, sharpshooting, arnis (or native fencing), and the samurai blade. There are often the obligatory scenes in which he receives training from a guru. When he has mastered his martial arts, he tracks down his killers.

Very much like Fernando Poe, Jr., Lito Lapid only fights back when there is a good reason. Usually this is the beating up of women and chil-

dren. Also, he is extremely shy with women and has to be pushed by his friends into courting the opposite sex.

QUALITIES OF THE ACTION FILM

Characteristics of the Action Hero

The action hero is always a virtuous individual. The one common denominator underlying all action film heroes is his unwavering belief in the good. This is most visible in the films of Fernando Poe, Jr., Joseph Estrada, and Lito Lapid. The action heroes vanquish their foes in order that justice might prevail and the rights of the poor be defended from the powerfully arrogant. In the movies of Ramon Revilla, Rudy Fernandez, and Anthony Alonzo, the good side is always emphasized. They are always shown as being forced to take the law in their own hands because the social institutions responsible for the maintenance of law and order have been tainted with corruption.

Violence is never a gratuitous act. The action hero never picks a fight but punches or shoots only in reaction to a challenge. In contrast to spaghetti westerns, in which motivations can range from profit to simple sadism, the act of fighting is never undertaken for its own sake.

The action hero has an unusual reserve of patience. In the earlier films of Fernando Poe, Jr., and Lito Lapid, the action hero is shown being beaten up by toughies. He never fights back except when women and children are threatened. This triggers a display of his martial arts skills, which he has been holding back for this one suspenseful moment. In the films of Ramon Revilla, this patience has been exhausted, and what triggers the spate of violence is usually the death of family members. This trait of the Filipino is summed up by the film *Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Darkness*), which has in its poster the following lines:

With every kick even a dog reacts differently,
With the first, he is surprised,
With the second, he thinks,
With the third, he remembers,
With the fourth, watch out.

The image of the Filipino as a meek puppy who gives his master all possible excuses until he runs out of them has been used by political analysts

to symbolize the surge in activism today after a decade of indifference. Curiously enough, this is well exemplified in movies.

The action hero is always protective of the weak. In a society where the poor have to be defended from the abuses of the powerful, the action hero is expected to protect them. He mediates in fights between brethren and acts as an ombudsman for that sector of society.

Blood money is never acceptable. Money coming from illegal sources – crime, gambling, and the like – is always rejected, even if it will help alleviate the plight of the poor. Dignity in poverty supersedes pragmatism in this case.

While this is emphasized in the films of Fernando Poe, Jr., Joseph Estrada, and Lito Lapid, the recent action films allow for a relaxation of this role. In *Warren Balane*, Anthony Alonzo becomes a drug pusher in order to pay for the medical bills of his mother. However, he has to atone for this sin by undergoing severe penitential acts.

The action hero is always a one-woman man. Because women are looked upon as prospective mothers and the foci of families, the action hero courts only one woman. In the films of Fernando Poe, Jr., Joseph Estrada, and Lito Lapid, the hero exhibits a kind of bashfulness toward women. Friends are often called upon to act as matchmakers. In the case of Fernando Poe, Jr., courtship is often a very quiet affair; his deceptively sexless behavior is belied by tender masculine strokes. In the case of Joseph Estrada, his lack of sexual aggressiveness is rationalized as his inability to provide the woman he would marry with a comfortable life.

In contrast, there is some womanizing in the films of Ramon Revilla, Anthony Alonzo, and Rudy Fernandez but never to the extent that they would be mistaken for playboys. This apparent contradiction is best seen in *Sierra Madre*, in which Ramon Revilla abducts a pretty woman but never goes to bed with her until she is sure of his honorable intentions. In the same movie, he castrates one of his men for attempting to rape a country lass. He shouts at the offender, “You have forgotten that you were born of a woman, and you have defiled that womb.”

Women

The mother is the center of the family. One peculiar characteristic of Filipino action films is the overriding presence of the mother. In *Daang Hari*, she is the only person who never loses hope in her missing son’s return. In *Sendong Sungkit*, her testimony on her son’s inherent goodness

is borne out by his heroism in the end. In *Terrorize Panay*, the mother sets out to reform her wayward son, as she is convinced of his intrinsic qualities. This deep emotional attachment of son to mother orients his attitudes toward women and teaches him early in his life to respect them.

Only the virginal woman can become the action hero's wife. Two types of women serve as the love interest of the action hero: the pure, virginal type who is modest in her manners and dresses conservatively and the aggressive type who is often skimpily clad and adheres to the new morality. The conservative woman always ends up as the hero's spouse; only she can ensure the successful rearing of children and the strong cohesion of the family. The sexually aggressive may try to seduce the hero; her advances are often rebuffed. Even if the hero does succumb to her alluring ways, the tryst will never end in marriage. More often than not, the loose-moraled woman is content to die for her love.

Institutions

The Filipino is family-oriented. The family is considered as the social unit in Philippine society. Particularly among the poor, it is the cooperation among family members that helps them overcome their deplorable conditions. This is exemplified in the films of Joseph Estrada in which family members work late hours in order to earn a few pesos for their sick mother's medicine.

The church offers salvation to the wayward. Philippine society is deeply religious. As such, there is a strong tradition of penitence in action films. This is readily seen in the films of Ramon Revilla, Anthony Alonzo, and Rudy Fernandez. Always the hero with blood on his hands needs to be cleansed of his wrongdoing. After his revenge is completed, he undergoes severe corporal punishment – flogging and other rituals – in order to atone for his sins.

Social institutions serve only the rich and the powerful. There is widespread pessimism toward social institutions in the Filipino action film. Both the police and the law courts are often depicted as serving the rich and victimizing the poor. Social injustice is the basis of all of Ramon Revilla's movies. On a smaller scale, the films of Rudy Fernandez and Anthony Alonzo have this implicit condemnation of social institutions. In Rudy Fernandez's *Waway (The Cop Killer)*, an innocent man is brutally tortured by the police; in *Kriminal*, the police are manipulated by a gambling syndicate.

Of late, the police and the military have been trying to clean up their movie image by lobbying through the Board of Censors for a stricter implementation of some of their statutes governing the depiction of law enforcement agencies. The military has recently been producing its own movies. Still the criminal environment and the social nature of the problems expounded offset any such cosmetic jobs.

In the films of Joseph Estrada, there is an attack on another institution – the hospital. Hospitals are attacked for their indifference toward the poor. Joseph Estrada would rush in with a sickly kid in his arms only to give up hope of any treatment due to the ludicrous bureaucracy imposed by the institution.

A death in the family serves as catalyst for the action hero's politicization. The drive to patriotism in Filipino action films is not automatic. There has to be a death in the family before the action hero starts to fight the political despots. In *Ang Panday*, Fernando Poe, Jr., launches an attack against his feudal masters only after the murder of his father. Similarly, in *Pedro Tunasan*, Lito Lapid remains apolitical even if his father exhorts the peasants to rise against the encroaching land-grabbers. It is only through his father's death that he takes up the fight. This is in striking contrast to Chinese kung fu movies in which a hundred Shaolin masters spring up in response to a call for patriotism.

CONCLUSIONS

The film critic has much to complain about in local mainstream production – illogicalities, anachronisms, cross-cultural borrowings, lack of subtlety in characterization, stock situations, and stereotypes. Many of his complaints are perhaps justified from the point of view of aesthetics. However, looking at the same problems from a sociological standpoint, one begins to see direct relationships between film conventions and cultural values.

It has been customary to dismiss these *moro-moro* as crass commercialism on the part of producers. This is not entirely a false assumption; but it should also be pointed out that producers are very much dependent on the public for commercial success. Perhaps a deeper problem exists in that producers are manacled by the mass audience's folk orientation.

It is posited that Filipino mainstream production should be appreciated along the rigid conventions defined by decades of Filipino filmmaking.

This proposed frame of mind is similar to that adopted while watching Noh dramas and Peking operas. When one sector of society develops faster than another, one tends to forget one's cultural roots and to use yardsticks alien to the native.

Another criticism is that it is an outmoded form that has to be replaced by modern, more relevant ones. Admittedly, this is again true; but one has to understand them thoroughly before renovating folk traditions. It would be extremely cruel to impose on the Filipino psyche foreign forms and conventions that do not relate to it.

An important reason for undertaking a study of folk perception is its pervasive influence in Philippine society today. In national elections, movie stars have been herded by the hundreds to attend political rallies. Moreover, big business corporations continue to commission confidential studies on folk perception in order to market their goods more effectively. Despite the apparent lack of interest paid by the upper classes to these pursuits, these institutions deem it important to possess an understanding of folk communications.

This split in Philippine perception is a saddening reality. It behooves the local intelligentsia to divest themselves of their Western biases and come to grips with folk traditions. It is only through such an awareness of one's roots that, one day, one can talk of a homogenous Philippine audience.

Agustin L. Sotto teaches film theory and criticism at De La Salle University in Manila and is the coordinator for film at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. He is writing a book on the history of Philippine cinema.

Notes and References

1. A survey among 200 college students in Metropolitan Manila showed a 91.5 percent exposure to heavy drama movies among a predominantly female population. Details are available in Albano et al. (1984).
2. The term *bakya crowd* refers to moviegoers in wooden clogs (*bakya*). It was coined in the fifties by film director Lamberto Avellana, now national artist for cinema and theater.
3. Interview with Fernando Poe, Jr., at Cafe Ysabel on October 9, 1984.

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