

UNITAS

SPECIAL ISSUE ON FILM CRITICISM



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

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

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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

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.

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.

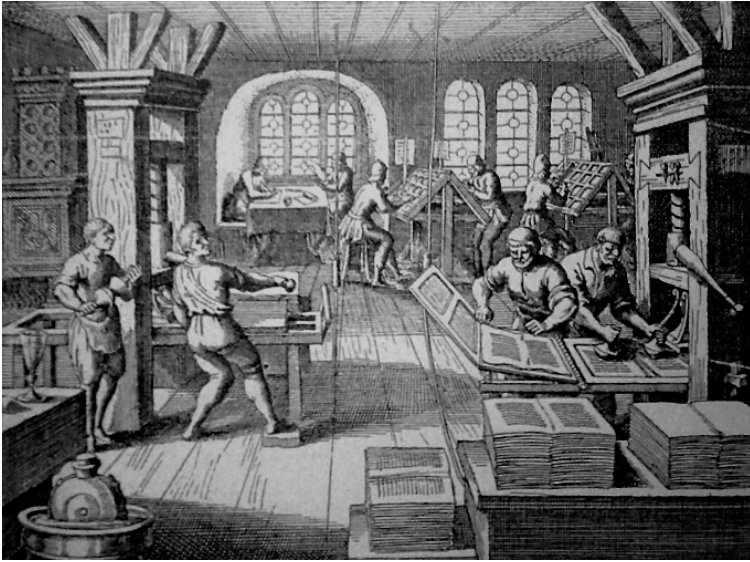


Fig. 1. Printing as an extension of literary production, vs. film production as the essential component of filmmaking. (Above: from the University of Pittsburgh's The History of the Book and Printing Collection; below: Cecil B. DeMille on an early movie project, from Cecil B. DeMille photographs; Photograph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

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, 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'd 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.



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

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 20th 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), 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



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.

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).¹ 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'd encounter friendly get-togethers in the congested neighborhoods where I resided, I'd 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'd 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.³

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).



Fig. 4. Rene Requiestas 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.

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 discussion, 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.²

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" (Lumbera 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 proj-

ect'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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