

## The Elusive Film Criticism

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At the outset, I have four points on film criticism for this discussion.

I start with the very fundamental question: What is film criticism? From this question, let me sketch out four aspects.

First, film criticism is a mode of inquiry, which means it lays bare questions and problems.

Second, film criticism is a procedure of explanation; it is a technique of analysis.

Third, film criticism is a proposition of judgment; it is an act of discrimination, with the critic expected to be discriminating. This habit of being discriminating inevitably leads to decisions mediated by discrimination; we have to live with this uneasy (but also at times thrilling) feeling of power and the moral obligation, or ethical exigency, that should shape it.

Fourth, film criticism is a gesture of writing; film criticism is written, and so we need to know how it is written; or if the critic knows how to write, a kind of writing commensurate with the artistic temper, or at least aspiring to its always potential incipience.

In light of these aspects, I ask the question: How is film criticism different from the other ways of generating knowledge about film in the form of, let us say, film theory or film history? Or more broadly, in the context of art history or art theory? I ask because I come from the field of art history and art theory of which film is a specific articulation. Moreover, how is film criticism to be distinguished from common opinion or commentary? I argue that film criticism assumes a level of specialization. I am committed to this requirement, to this moment of a specific intelligence. There should be a method and style of argumentation that underlies it and alongside it, a *disciplinal* accountability, a latitude for speculative thinking, and an academic desire. As we revisit the question of film criticism, so do we need to revisit our conceptualization of critique. What to our reckoning is critique? And for sure, we need to reevaluate our conceptualization of film that is intertwined with our conceptualization of critique. What is film? This is a fundamental point. Then, there is the material condition, its social thickness in which this particular film criticism plays out. There is thus this anxiety of context to bedevil and ground us, as well as an obligation to this inveterate context, and a commitment to this contingent context. Here, we discern a shift: from film criticism to critical practice in film. Instead of asking what film criticism is, we can ask instead: What does it mean to do film criticism? What does it entail? What is at stake?

To flesh out this context in the Philippines, we might want to ask

these questions: Who writes film criticism? How is it written? For whom is it written and who reads it? Why is it written? And finally where is it written?

As a way to respond to the need to discuss the context of film criticism in the Philippines, we can provisionally trace certain strains in the history of the practice.

The first strain of film criticism in the Philippines is journalism. The second is award-giving, initially organized by writers and journalists. And then the third is the organization of critics, largely from the academe who consciously presented themselves to the public as critics. In this regard, we can sense a movement from the FAMAS to the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino. Within the latter and across the years of its existence since 1976, several approaches to film criticism have been spun, animated by wider inclinations in scholarship about Philippine social life, broadly conceived. For instance, we can point to the tendency to situate the Philippine film in the ambit of the history of culture and related art forms like literature and theater. And here arises the always vexing question of identity. So what is identity? Is it native? Can it be global or planetary? Is it local? How does it become national and should it always be nationalist? Cannot it be intercultural instead? When is it post-colonial?

The second strain is materialist critique and semiotics. Also, there has been an attempt to reconsider the way the Philippine film is situated within the matrix of colonial theater and therefore within a more extensive colonial project. In other words, there is a reassessment of the methodology of film criticism and the historiography that frames it.

The third strain is the analysis of the logic practice of film in relation to industrial dynamics and a possible aesthetic program based on bodies of work, formulae, stylistic sources, so-called enduring traits, and dispositions, and so on.

The fourth strain is the intervention of independent cinema that has introduced to the field a new way of sensing and describing film. It is likewise this independent cinema that could offer a link between film and contemporary art.

The final strain is an interdisciplinary and hopefully a transdisciplinary framework in which the critic converses with (and transforms) a range of disciplines, trajectories, and archives of reading to access or intuit the robust ecology of film. The Film Desk of the Young Critics Circle exemplifies this tendency.

In closing, I would like to talk about reviewing as a symptom of film criticism. It is the film reviewer that is accessible, and not the film critic who writes in journals and academic publications. This being said, the film

critic can also be a reviewer but not without impediment, considering how popular formats discourage and even disparage complexity. The task for the reviewer who has sympathies with ideas and their history is to inscribe theory in the grammar of the review. Again, this is tough because I observe that in these parts, theory poses a threat to the cherished comforts among some readers and practitioners, and curiously among peers, too. The issue might be language that is regarded as readily apparent, consumable, easily recognizable and therefore reducible to preconception, to some self-fulfilling prophesy of a certain intolerance. If the critic's language is difficult, aesthetic, dense, elusive, ludic, it is dismissed as pedantic, obscure, academic, muddled. So the typical review becomes some kind of self-referential punditry and not critique. Actually, punditry is a more charitable term; platitude or a rant might be more precise. Critique or criticism is always difficult because the art to which it responds is highly mediated and resists being trapped in the clarities of common sense, instruments of preconceived notion that is more often than not actually prejudice.

Prevailing I think in the current atmosphere is a cult of the amateur, and that is not a totally negative phrase. The cult of the amateur, the autodidact, the putatively witty, entrepreneurial self-taught, self-promoting reviewer, or, let us concede for a moment, the informed commentator of film because of prolonged exposure to the material—this is now the norm. The situation of this type of reviewer turns for the worse when the self-styled commentator becomes a groupie, a glib byte maker, a hype *meister*, a trigger-happy blogger, sometimes even a film producer or a bit player under the ambience of a wider creative industry of design, music, festivals, writing workshops, and other minor spectacles.

I end with a timely and urgent plea for committed and talented and attentive critics that a fellow had sounded so many years ago. There is significant investment in the production of art, but no substantial effort to sustain critical practice and the necessary interlocution to the exceptional aspirations of both artists and audiences as well as to their many productive imperfections.