

The Transnational Pastime

An Interview with Joel David

Paul Douglas Grant

While there is a long and rich history of popular writing on cinema in the Philippines, the development of a more critically and theoretically engaged local film writing is a relatively recent phenomenon. Popular periodicals such as *Kislap-Graphic*, *Liwayway*, and *Bisaya* attest to the strong link between journalism and film writing in the Philippines. But the establishment of the *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino* in 1976 set the stage for a more rigorous Filipino film historiography and criticism and ultimately set the grounds for the emergence of more theoretically sophisticated writing. One of the pioneers of this new tendency was film scholar and former member of the *Manunuri*, Joel David. He taught at the Film Institute of the University of the Philippines and is currently Professor at Inha University in South Korea.

While David's publications in the 1990s are approachable texts about "the national pastime," they also serve as historical documents of the way in which the global assimilation of poststructuralist thought was manifesting in Filipino film writing. Along with writers like Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr., Nick Deocampo, Rolando B. Tolentino, and Bliss Cua Lim, David did his graduate work in the US. He earned his M.A. degree in Cinema Studies in 1994 and his Ph.D. degree in 2002, both from New York University. He returned to the Philippines with a new critical methodology in the humanities and social sciences in hand. But David, along with these other writers, was not produced in a critical vacuum, and it was not simply the contact with the

Anglophone repurposing of predominantly French thought that brought about the shift in critical approaches to cinema in the Philippines.

As early as the 1930s in Manila, the entertainment magazine *Literary-Song-Movie* was already dedicated to film writing, particularly in the domain of creating a star culture. Even in the southern city of Cebu, another hub of early film activity in the Philippines, writing on cinema appeared in the 1920s and '30s in the newspaper *Bag-ong Kusog* and, later, with the introduction of *Bisaya* magazine, film writing for periodicals was institutionalized. In the early 1950s, Cebu even had its own film journal dedicated to Visayan language cinemas, *Visayan Fotoplay*, which was edited by E. Brian Baring, who had also written a number of screenplays for early Cebuano films.

However, it was in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s that the film journal as a critical platform really made inroads in the Philippines. The year 1975 saw the publication of *Sampelikula*, which only had one issue. According to film archivist, Teddy Co, it is now quite difficult to locate copies of *Sampelikula*, but he stressed the importance of this journal, due in large part to the inclusion of an interview with Lamberto Avellana (T. Co, personal communication, May 26, 2015). Another substantial publication was *SineManila* in 1984, which was published by the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP) and for which David served as issue editor and writer. In the editorial statement of *SineManila's* inaugural issue, David acknowledges the problematic history of film writing in the Philippines, where he notes:

Mention a journal on Philippine cinema and a few eggheads will be able to name at least one other title that once laid claim to the function. In so far as the ECP is concerned, however, none exists at the moment—a disturbing fact when considering that movie-going probably rivals baby-making as the most popular local pastime and that, as a more reassuring corollary, although other countries make more babies than we do, no other nation goes to the movies as often. (David, 1984, p. 1)

In a recent reflection on the magazine, David points out that only one issue of *SineManila* came out, but that the editorial team had actually completed enough material for three issues. When the second issue was ready for publication, however, the ECP ordered *SineManila* to halt the production of any further issues. Instead, the *Filipino Film Review*, a quarterly journal, was published by the Film Ratings Board, an agency which also operated under the ECP (J. David, personal communication,

May 29, 2015).¹ In addition to *SineManila* and other publications, David wrote regularly for the magazine, *National Midweek*, under a pen name.

Another significant publication was born in 1985. That year, MOWELFUND Film Institute published the first issue of the journal, *Movement*, under the editorship of filmmaker and film historian, Nick Deocampo. The journal was one of the longest running in the country, albeit its releases were irregular, and it was dedicated to marginal cinemas. In 1999, *Pelikula* journal came out of the College of Mass Communication of the University of Philippines, Diliman. It was a large-format glossy that ran for only four issues, but it was able to document the state of Philippine cinema just before the close of the century. Film critic and theater scholar, Nicanor G. Tiongson, served as its editor-in-chief. The journal acknowledged, from its inaugural issue, that it was concerned with the state of critical film writing in the Philippines. The hope was that *Pelikula* could “encourage a lively, but critical discourse on cinema...” Alongside these publications solely devoted to cinema, there are of course the academic journals that have continued to print critical essays on cinema through the years, notably *Ideya*, *Kasarinlan*, *Diliman Review*, *Philippine Humanities Review*, *Humanities Diliman*, and *Plaridel*.

In the new century, the 2000s saw a series of short-lived magazines come to print, notably *Flick*, *Escolta*, *Kino Punch*, and *Splice*, put together mainly by young writers from film organizations based in Manila universities, with some contributions from established critics. Today, in the regions beyond Manila, there are at least two print journals, *Sinekultura* in Cebu and *New Durian Cinema* in General Santos City.

Of course, along with this history of print publications, there has been an explosion of film writing online, with a formidable number of critics publishing in the form of weblogs. Noel Vera, the late Alexis Tioseco, Francis “Oggs” Cruz, and Richard Bolisay have all maintained, at one time or another, active blogs that featured film criticism, garnering international attention. One of the questions that the digital platforms for film criticism poses concerning the print magazine or journal in the age of digital reproduction and distribution is whether or not there remains a need for what may well be a dying format.

It is in reference to this question that we can return to Joel David—a writer who has traversed print criticism and now maintains the website *amauteurish.com*—who offers an interesting response. His website bridges the two platforms of print and online publishing in specific ways. David makes available online a collection of his older writings in print, at the same time that he publishes new works exclusively online, such as the e-book *Millennial Traversals* (2016). He also maintains a list of personal favorite

sites, pointing to younger writers' blogs like Adrian Mendizabal's *Omnitudo* and Epoy Deyto's *Missing Codec*.²

What follows is an edited version of a correspondence that I had with David regarding his critical and intellectual trajectory. David took the time to reflect on his engagement with Filipino film writing as well as his transition from print writing and distribution to his recent move to digital publishing and the online redistribution of previous writings.

Paul Douglas Grant (PDG): *Can you describe your intellectual trajectory and how your writing developed into the critical approach that we see in your books?*

Joel David (JD): My film criticism was something that started out as an option that evolved into a phase and that eventually solidified before I knew what to do with it. I started writing book reviews for the high-school paper, which sufficiently impressed the teachers who were then deciding whom to send to some secondary school press conference. In college I attempted a few film reviews but felt frustrated about my inability to grapple with the terms of the form. But film was the medium *du jour* and most publications were interested in it. I was also determined to avoid the economic and political analyses that had marked me as an activism-oriented campus journalist, so my shift to cultural writing included a few more movie reviews. As you can imagine, the local critics group (Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, or the Filipino Film Critics Circle) had to downgrade their definition of "critic" to include reviewers, or else they'd have comprised only two members (Pete Daroy and Bien Lumbera) and maybe two associates (Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr. and Nic Tiongson).

I knew I needed a lot of leveling up after interacting with the best film artists of the time, and even more after I joined the Marcos government's Experimental Cinema of the Philippines. I read up on the standard early-film discourses (Arnheim, Balazs, Eisenstein, Bazin, etc.) plus the works of active practitioners, with emphasis on stylists like Kael and the Philippines's Nestor Torre (his early years). Kael was occasionally wrong and sometimes terribly so, but I was fascinated by how she could figure her way into sounding just right—a skill I might need in case I'd do regular reviewing. For some reason many prominent local critics of the time preferred John Simon, who to me was too willing to sacrifice insight for the sake of displaying wit and erudition.

PDG: Is it possible to perhaps describe what the effect of Martial Law was

on your development?

JD: During the late years of the Marcos regime, the University of the Philippines (UP) introduced the first undergrad film program in the country, and since I'd completed a bachelor's in journalism at the Institute (now College) of Mass Communication, the ECP assigned me to take the major courses so that the agency could eventually offer its own film courses. I said that if I took the equivalent of an extra semester I could complete a second degree, so in effect I became an ECP scholar, which required completing the courses plus an occasional public-relations piece for the agency. The Marcoses were ousted, ECP was dissolved, and I had a film degree that no one else shared since it took the other majors much longer to complete the program. I tried industry work but was delegated to entry-level production-assistant tasks at starvation wages. At that point I retried journalism and TV scriptwriting, but all these jobs disappeared as media workers were unionizing for the first time and the panicked owners figured that shutting down their companies (and reopening them under different names) was the easiest solution.

PDG: Yet even if you transitioned back to journalism for a moment, you clearly re-entered academia. What was it that brought you back to the university?

JD: Around that time the dean of UP Mass Communication bumped into me and said that, since I was the program's first and only graduate, I should teach film. Ellen J. Paglinauan, who adjusted her Fulbright program from geography to film, had just returned from the US and became my colleague and mentor. She knew my up-or-out deadline was approaching and that I could better serve the faculty with a film degree, so she helped me work out a Fulbright application. The politicking on the Philippine end was terrible, but fortunately the Institute of International Education "corrected" the Philippine-American Educational Foundation's (PAEF) list of recommendees and repositioned the education minister's daughter from first to somewhere near last, and (according to Ellen) ranked me on top. That was why no amount of pleading from PAEF could convince me to settle for any of the less-expensive choices. It was NYU or bust, although that also amounted to hubris on my end. The Fulbright was for a master's degree; when NYU accepted me to the doctoral program, I could only apply for another US government grant (like another Fulbright) if I resided outside the US for two years.

UP was interested in getting a Ph.D. for the film program and told me to find work and apply for student loans. I managed both and intended to pay off all my loans once I reached a managerial level at the company that hired me, but I could only manage to reduce my loan amount by half when my residency deadline was imminent. Also, back in the Philippines, UP could not provide me with the means to repay my loans either; my mother sold some property to settle my account, with the understanding that I should repay her instead. That's how I took the first offer to teach in Korea, on exchange; upon returning to UP, my salary was withheld for some mix-up that I had nothing to do with, so I sent out an SOS to friends in Korea—which is how I found the university where I'm currently working.

PDG: It seems like there is change in style from your book *The National Pastime* (1990) and the later *Wages of Cinema* (1998), something like a move towards a more poststructuralist approach to writing about cinema? Is it fair to say that this is one of the earliest books by a Filipino writer on cinema that engages this kind of writing?

JD: *National Pastime* and the second book, *Fields of Vision* (1995), were meant to be just one book, an anthology of film journalism. I tried to interest some university presses in it, but they all gave two-year (or longer) timelines, so I went to the commercial press, Anvil. They said they could produce it in three months, which was just right for me, but I later realized it was too fast. They wanted only half of the manuscript I submitted, plus pictures (when I preferred to have none), and a glossary of film terms. A “layperson” editor took charge and insisted on an approach that could be summed up as “if it's about movies, then I shouldn't have to put in too much work to understand it.” I thought that was fair to a certain extent, but I also realized that it meant that an opportunity for casual readers to learn something new (by meeting the author half-way) was being discarded. That's the reason why the glossary I was forced to write contained some sarcastic passages.

The remaining articles from the original volume would become my second book, I thought, and I brought the manuscript to the Ateneo de Manila University Press just because Prof. Esther Pacheco told me they wanted to handle my next title. When I compiled the manuscript, I realized *Fields of Vision* would just be echoing *National Pastime*, so I held off until I was able to do some “academic” (mostly quantitative and canonical) exercises, with the rationale that all of the available local samples were too deeply flawed to be taken seriously.

The third book, *Wages of Cinema*, was meant to be strictly a personal middle stage between completing my graduate requirements and starting work on my thesis. I mentioned to Prof. Laura Samson, then the director of the UP Press, that I had performed this strategy of gathering my (not necessarily ready for primetime) material so I could find a workable direction for myself, and she asked to take a look at the manuscript. After a few days, she said she wanted to publish it as a book and asked if I would grant her permission to do so. I thought fine, at least I'll have some feedback on how to improve the material even if in the end I'd wind up pulling it out of the publication process for being too callow, but apparently the readers signed off on it without any major changes.

So the approach you mentioned was deliberate in the sense that I looked for ways beyond repeating each previous book's approaches, but it was also accidental in that I would have been more cautious about getting the stuff out if I had a name to uphold by then. People immediately told me about some progression they noticed—from classical to structuralist to poststructuralist—so I incorporated that insight in the back-cover text of the last book, but it wasn't something that needed to be done if anyone had asked me. Each book generated some negative comments, but I only answered the one (about *Fields of Vision*) that complained that the text required readers to do some work on their own.

The fourth “book,” *Millennial Traversals*, was essentially a digital-edition mop-up operation, where I compiled everything else I'd written on film and media up to 2016, so that anything by me could be accessed in book form. I'm hoping to get all the digital editions of my books in e-publication formats so that they could be downloaded and printed or read at the reader's convenience. When I'll manage to do that is the question.

PDG: Can you tell me a bit more about your turn to a digital online presence and the issues you face regarding the dissemination of your previous books online?

JD: The 2014 record states that it went “live” on June 13, but that I was adding features since March of that year. But since it was originally part of the list of tenure requirements, I remember setting up another website, with a Korean webmaster, in 2009. I forget its name now, but I remember updating it (via the webmaster) five or six times. I realized that if I were to have my own website, the best arrangement would be

to have as much control over it as possible, which is why I undertook some quick research on blogs and observed the more active ones (especially Michael Musto's *La Dolce Musto*, when he was still with Village Voice). All of these activities became part of my preparation for teaching the Media and Cyberculture undergraduate class, and later the Digital Humanities graduate class, at Inha University.

I must have opened a WordPress account in 2011 or 2012, since I kept tinkering with blog templates and formats for a while before I launched the website. I decided to make it archival in nature, after I saw all the trolling and spamming that went on in the blogs that weren't moderated by their owners, and the badmouthing and resentment that went on when the blogs were moderated. Since anything archival would be less topical than ordinary weblogging, it would justify my refusal to entertain any type of commentary and avoid this no-win situation. In late 2013, I also concluded that the free WordPress services would yield a stale-looking design. I subscribed to the most basic among their several paid features, and immediately the improvement in appearance was satisfactory enough, so I kept this arrangement. I also wanted a showy, trashy, corny, pretentiously funny name, but the best I could do was settle for a mash-up between "amateur" and "auteur": amauteurish.

But then in seeking out ISI-listed publications to fulfill the bulk of the tenure specs, I stumbled on Ateneo de Manila University's *Kritika Kultura*, which was open-access, an obvious ideal combination of prestige and availability on the level of profit-oriented academe that had somehow never occurred to me before. Researchers were asking for copies of my out-of-print books, so I arranged with certain publishers to work out new and expanded editions—but publishing, like all the other predigital media forms, was no longer as vibrant as it used to be. I was fascinated enough with so-called film piracy via the Quiapo Cinematheque (with Laikwan Pang's studies as guidepost) and also became familiar with the work of Jojo Devera and other people invested in reviving and strengthening the public domain.

Two newer projects, a *Manila by Night* book and a special Philippine cinema canon volume for *YES! Magazine* are exceptional cases: I'd accumulated enough material about *Manila by Night*, from my dissertation preparation onward, so that I was able to edit *Kritika Kultura*'s first film forum devoted to articles on the movie, and that provided me with the impetus to pique the interest of Arsenal Press's limited queer films series; Summit Media (the *YES!* publisher) saw

some mini-reviews (which I collectively titled “Short Takes”) for a personal canon of 100 local film titles that I uploaded and offered to buy the rights to them, upping the fee if I participated as a consultant in their one-shot canon project.

In terms of the downloadable copies of my own books, plus more PDFs of other materials—these are all in the future. I imagine I’ll need to spend for and train in page-layout software, so that I might be able to circulate the books better. All in good time like everything else. There’s a point, or a line, where I move from surrendering my own copyright to claiming those of others, when I find out-of-print material (usually institutional in nature) where the publisher is difficult to determine and often is already defunct. I know enough to tread carefully here and I generally wait until there’s enough of a social-media interest in an issue relatable to the material.

To me it’s still entirely rational, once we take out the element of finance as the ultimate arbiter of success. Jojo and I have stable jobs that allow us to engage in blogging activities, in which the actual price of (in my case) paying for a domain and WordPress’s custom-design privilege isn’t all that costly. I get to dispense with the guilt of telling researchers that my books can be found in certain hard-to-access libraries, as well as preempt sites like GoogleBooks from monopolizing readers with uploaded versions of my sole-authored books that I’d rather update and revise if I get another chance, which is now. It doesn’t really stop publishers from wanting to have exclusive rights to my future output, and I get to keep myself busy with feeding the machine, with the additional leverage of defying it (by getting my manuscript out on the blog) when it misbehaves.

PDG: One final question regarding your trajectory, what became of your NYU doctoral dissertation?

JD: The dissertation was titled “Primates in Paradise: The Multiple-Character Format in Philippine Film Practice,” which is undergoing a really long process of revision. I don’t want to rush it at all, since it’s got a core that’s worth refining as carefully and ambitiously as possible. I’d cannibalized some chapters for journal articles that I’ve published, as a way of undertaking the revisions.

Some books and several articles (including in the *New York Times*) have already come out on multi-character movies, which is fine, since the phenomenon is fairly new in the US, with Robert Altman as its pioneer. Since one of my bachelor’s degrees was in journalism, I know

enough about the relative worth of the scoop (or being the first to report on something significant) vis-à-vis the interpretive or feature article: it's extremely rare for both to be the same, and between being first to report and coming up with the best article on the same topic, I'd rather leave the privilege of being first to others. That's the reason why one of the people I was mentoring described me as "bukas-palad" or open-palmed, meaning that I didn't mind cluing in people to useful bits of information, even exclusive ones. For me, the real competition lies in how well anyone reads any material. If you're chronologically last and no one else follows, the careless smart-ass observers would focus on the fact that you were last; but the real implication is that you were definitive, since no one could add anything after you came along. *'Di ba?*

References

David, J. (1984). Scenario. *SineManila*. Retrieved from <https://joelsky2000.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/sinemanila-maiden-issue.pdf>].

Endnotes

[1] According to David, the *Filipino Film Review* ran between 1982 and 1985 and produced about 13 to 14 issues.

[2] His complete list can be found at the sidebar of *amauteurish.com*.

PAUL DOUGLAS GRANT teaches graduate cinema studies at the University of San Carlos, Philippines. He is the author of *Cinéma Militant* (Wallflower, 2016) and co-author of *Lilas: An Illustrated History of the Golden Ages of Cebuano Cinema* (University of San Carlos Press, 2016). He has also translated works by Serge Daney and Jean-Louis Schefer. (corresponding author: pdg244@nyu.edu).

