

## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

### Media and Popular Culture

Mass media are instrumental in the expansion and deepening of popular culture. Popular culture cannot be *popular* without media mass characteristics (in terms of broad reach, especially among the underclass), mediation (in terms of diffusion and intervention) and overdetermination (as explained in Althusser's concept of interrogated media apparatuses where media play a major role).

Mass media's role is also highlighted in understanding how popular culture functions in society. The media are projected as egalitarian. They have a mission and their primary objective is public service. They are said to be engaged in the delivery of news and programs without taking sides. There is no self-reflexivity in media since the latter do not focus attention on themselves. Even then, media's end-goal, just like business establishments, is profit. They deliver news, engage in public service, and reach out to their audiences to earn. They earn in the guise of serving the people and the country, and this explains why there are periodic public service endeavors extended by mass media establishments especially in times of natural and manmade disasters. We are urged to help those who were devastated by typhoons and landslides, but there is no encouragement to help in the prosecution of criminals, especially corrupt government officials, even if mass media are in a position to do so.

Media establishments mask their commercial interests by pretending to be on missions like "in the service of the Filipino people." We are projected as recipients of their public service and are encouraged to become good citizens. Their public service is supposedly realized when they give us the information necessary for us to decide on matters for the betterment of society. This service presented in a manner that is not related to the primary interest of profit-making. In our present consumption of television programs, news has become "infotainment", complete with music soundtrack, for example, in reporting the most violent crimes, the lack of social justice, and abject poverty. The reporters are imaged as showbiz personalities and used as endorsers who encourage audiences to patronize certain products.

News becomes showbiz and vice versa. In the process, the people become more concerned with the proliferation of the sex videos of personalities Piolo Pascual and Ethel Booba instead of the killing of 67 journalists since 1986 and 49 mass leaders and activists since 2001. The

corporations that are responsible for the popularity of personalities on television, film, publications, music and radio are also the ones who create such personalities – very much like the 24-hour service of *pandesal de pugon* – into the hottest news items. Those who control mass media guard its doors from the various aspirants in star searches to the groups that exclusively hold their training; to the drama series, noontime shows and game shows that they will join; to the recording studios that release their albums and ensure their promotion in fiestas, malls and bar tours; up to the point where they end up being adored by the masses. And the poor talents' Cinderella story ends with the corporation unilaterally ending their commercial (shelf) lives until many of them are relegated to the sidelines – in the company of those who tried, partly succeeded and temporarily filled the entertainment needs of fans and media consumers.

The interactive participation of fans, personalities, and corporations ensure that fans are not just simply fanatics but also consumers. Personalities are the saints of commerce, while the corporation is the altar of needs, faith, and hope. Every text message sent to *Debate* (GMA 7), every contestant's joining and choosing of his or her home partner, every news anchor's direct address to viewers or listeners, encourages viewers to buy products. This situation enables media establishments to fulfill the two acts endemic to public service. We choose information that we will believe in, take the side of, and defend; and, in many instances, that we will actually die for.

But the media do not lie when they claim that they deliver public service. Media, after all, are part of the services sector that creates financial wealth but not actual products. Among those in the services sector are entertainment, hotel and tourism, fastfood and retail, education, and health. With the onslaught of globalization, all these services are being opened up to competition with and participation by giant industry players.

The result of the current media situation is the construction of a middle-class consumerist identity. In my opinion, the issue and identity of citizenship are subsumed to the more important identity of consumer. A good citizen is first of all a good consumer. This particular role of media is to give people choices of what products to patronize or at least become aware of future buys. The media create an illusion of need among consumers – even if they do not have the capacity to buy, say, the latest cellphones, they nevertheless become aware that such products exist. The media create dreams and make them seem realizable.

As consumers, our identity is overdetermined by the media apparatus acting in concert with other ideological and repressive state apparatuses. In the everyday seduction of media, as in the everyday activity of mallng and watching films, our confidence in our middle-class consumerism and postmodern identity is heightened. It seems that we are exercising our rights to information and purchase even if all of these consumerist calisthenics – along with liberal democracy – are, in the final analysis, for the promotion of the business interests of media.

The reader of this introduction may consider me a “party pooper” given the many joys brought about by mass media consumption. Such effects cannot be denied since consumerism and liberalism are very enticing. The world of showbiz is enjoyable and gives legitimate access to other traditional capital – land and financial wealth, even education. If one has a good body and flawless skin, if one is young and determined, he or she may engage in acting and modeling. One may also try to win a beauty contest or a bikini open. Even the best dancers in second-rate bars can use their physical attributes as passports to upward social mobility. How can I deny this when many aspire to become part of the world of showbiz?

It is sad to note that this is already beyond the scope of critical media studies. Media advocacy requires participation in the media industry itself. The space for media education is not necessarily the laying down of new foundations since tertiary education and media studies are not focused on cohesive infrastructure but on the identification of opportunities within the existing infrastructure for alternative analyses and critical mindsets in the operation and praxis of media, along with those studying to become media practitioners. On one hand, the media and education spheres are the same since they both have the capacity to become proactive for social transformation. Debates are openly accepted within these spheres even if there is no qualitative change in the world of these spheres. But change happens nevertheless, and this is the hope of those who still struggle within these spheres. On the other hand, the production of information within these spheres ensure, most of all, the hegemony of the ruling class.


There is tacit acceptance that the intellectual sphere is basically capital that can be bought and sold by those who have it. But there is no world outside these spheres. Any change – whether radical or reformist – necessitates taking into account the intrinsic, hegemonic character of these spheres. In the process, media education should be able to struggle

with its own reflection and representation: that the text-product of media, in the current state of the media business, can only be challenged outside of the media sphere, and that media education communicates not with the media business but the education sector and with media scholars.

This is what links together the essays in this *Plaridel* issue on media and popular culture. Sarah Jane S. Raymundo challenges the notion of the popular, Emil M. Flores analyzes the concept of the Filipino superhero, Soledad S. Reyes criticizes the AM airwave comradeship, Reuben R. Cañete denounces the construction of male identity and urban lifestyle in the billboards of Bench underwear, Danilo A. Arao exposes the kind of political culture that makes oil price hikes and oil deregulation acceptable to the people, and Shirlita A. Espinosa raises the notion of time in the films of Lino Brocka and the transnational settings in the films of Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai. These essays provide the necessary context in understanding facets of popular culture towards exposing the essence and substance of its textualization and commodification.

This issue also contains book reviews of *Constructing the Filipina* by Georgina R. Encanto (Patrick F. Campos) and *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* by Thomas L. Friedman (Alfonso B. Deza); television reviews of *Star Circle Quest* and *Starstruck* (Jane O. Vinculado); and a film review of *Bunso* by Ditsi Carolino (Rosalie S. Matilac). Fernando A. Austria, Jr. also interviews television personality Boy Abunda for this issue. Lastly, this issue has a filmography of Filipino films in 2004 prepared by the U.P. Film Institute.

As issue editor, I thank all the scholars for entrusting me with their essays, reviews, interviews, and documents that are published here; all the referees for analyzing the contents of the articles and for helping improve their historical and social context; Ms. Berinice I. Zamora of the Office of Research and Publication (ORP) of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC); and CMC Dean Nicanor G. Tiongson not only for providing support, but also for strengthening scholarly work in the College.



**Rolando B. Tolentino**  
Issue Editor