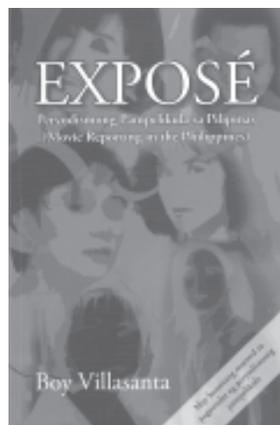


Showbiz Trivia as History

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Book Review of

Exposé: Movie Reporting in the Philippines

By Boy Villasanta

Manila: University of Santo Tomas

Publishing House, 2007 (408 pp)

Boy Villasanta's *Exposé: Movie Reporting in the Philippines*, published by the University of Santo Tomas (2007), is an ambitious book. It is the first attempt by an entertainment journalist to present “the history, philosophy, theory, directions, prospects, mission, and vision of entertainment journalism” in the Philippines (7). In its 12 chapters—plus its movie reporting manual and glossary—Villasanta writes as a scholar, apologist, historian, critic, ethicist, instructor, and most importantly, as “a movie reporter.”¹

Chapter 1 (Exposé Movie Reporting) of the book is a general apologia for writing about movie reporting. Chapter 2 (The Tradition of Movie Reporting in the Philippines) qualifies the term “movie reporting” and traces its origin from pre-colonial times to the present. Chapter 3 (Personal) is the autobiography of Villasanta. Chapter 4 (“Gossip”) is a defense of the “gossipy nature” of movie reporting.

Chapter 5 (Movie Reporting in the Third World) is a sociopolitical and economic evaluation of movie reporting in the context of the Philippines as a Third World country. Chapter 6 (PMPC, MOWPPAP, Enpress, PEN: Organizations of Movie Reporters) is Villasanta's accounts of experiences as member, founder, and/or observer of various organizations of movie reporters. Chapter 7 ("Cocky") specifies examples of "fearless" movie reporting. Chapter 8 ("Envelopmental Journalism") is an invitation to problematize ethical questions in the practice of entertainment journalism.

Chapter 9 (Structuralism) attempts a critical-theoretical appraisal of movie reporting and its use of language. Chapter 10 (New Journalism) describes new trends in entertainment journalism. Chapter 11 (Movie Reporting in the Portable Box) discusses the evolution of movie reporting on television and radio. Chapter 12 (The Prospects of Movie Reporting) is Villasanta's musings on how movie reporting, no matter the unpredictability of its future form, may be of benefit to society.

The writing voice and style of Villasanta is that of a movie reporter. His writing is decidedly parenthetical and richly colored. For example, in *Promosyon* (108-111), he begins by writing of the promotional value of celebrities' private lives, and then detours to the year 1800 and DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and finally ends with Eddie Garcia's thoughts on male nudity.

He drops names, ranging from Aristotle to Kris Aquino, and highlights them in bold letters. The names sometimes appear in unexpected contexts and with startling juxtapositions. For instance, he writes, "If one is to follow the classical philosophy of Aristotle that there is unity in writing, this has already been supplied in early showbiz writings, such as the one...written by Gemillano Pineda for *Liwayway* in 1955..." (233).

In between block quotations from John Fiske and one-liners by Michel Montaigne, Villasanta peppers his writings with showbiz trivia and actual movie reports. The middle section of

the book contains the trade names of showbiz magazines and entertainment columns, and photographs of the author, movie reporters, and celebrities. The experience for the reader is a cross between reading a fan magazine and a scholarly book on popular culture, precisely because the object of this scholarly project is showbiz writing.

A Unique Space in Film and Cultural Studies

The value of the first book-form history and evaluation of Philippine entertainment journalism and its various aspects cannot be belittled.

There is a dearth of bibliographic materials about Philippine cinema and film culture; but there are reams of popular movie reports, upon which a number of such books are based, in terms of historical research data or actual anthologized articles. Fan magazines and showbiz features on newspaper, radio, or television, churned out in daily heaps, are overwhelmingly more than the scholarly publications, for instance, by members of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino or the Young Critics Circle. Mass audiences are immersed in showbiz culture, and only a few will get to read scholarly film books—this is underscored by Villasanta’s project (see especially Chapters 3 and 5). And this has been true in history; there had been entertainment journalists before there had ever been film scholars (see Chapter 2).

It is important to note that the pedagogical film books are written by specialists for special readers (i.e., by scholars for scholars, instead of by popular writers for movie fans), with either one or two discernible nationalist scholarly projects.

The *first project* is the appraisal of Philippine film in the context of contemporary popular culture and its roots in folk traditions. The objects of concern in this scholarly project are entertainment media, movie and TV stars, the lineage of these popular forms and personalities, and the mass audiences who

patronize them. The *second project* is the systematizing of cultural knowledge into a unified National Cinema/Cultural History. The objects of concern in this scholarly project are the “serious” films, critically acclaimed (and not necessarily popular) film artists, and historical junctures when these converge to highlight “the best” in Philippine Cinema.

The *first project*, while deducing significant value from popular forms, does not necessarily seek to elevate these as canonical and definitive of a “Philippine Cultural Heritage.”² The *second project* aims to select and invest cultural significance to specific texts and discourses, in many cases outside of the mass audiences’ popular taste.³ The unique space of *Exposé* in film and cultural studies is its spanning of these two scholarly projects.

The book’s subject matter and Villasanta’s writing style enact the implicit conflict inherent in discourses made *about* popular culture by minority culture (i.e., specialists). He does not “merely use” the popular forms of entertainment journalism to evaluate popular culture, but identifies his project as an appraisal of entertainment journalism itself (7) and its roots in folk culture (19-20; 261-78); what specialists use as source and means of scholarship, Villasanta regards as a scholarly end in itself. He takes entertainment journalism not as a means to *look into* popular culture *from outside*, but—being a movie reporter writing *as* a movie reporter *about* movie reporting—as an end by which an insider can afford a vantage point for the outsider. Villasanta, who writes to and for the mass audiences, here now writes to the scholar who studies the culture of the mass audiences.

In *Exposé* a voice from popular culture decides to talk back and extend the space of “cultural citizenship” beyond minority culture, and not necessarily against it. Occupying a unique space, *Exposé* democratizes discourses made outside and inside popular culture.

While some of Villasanta's arguments invite interrogation or debate, as any scholarly work does, he takes entertainment journalism, invests it with the significance of a unified history (Chapter 2) that has direct influence upon National Culture (7; 320), and elevates it to scholarship.

Uneven Arguments

The scholarship of Villasanta's writing, however, becomes uneven or is even undermined whenever he inaccurately invokes critical terms; whenever he resorts to simplistic apologia for entertainment journalism; or whenever he uses critical terms out of context to function as apologia.

An example of the first point (inaccurate terms) is his use of the term "structuralism" (Chapter 9). Villasanta quotes Florentino Hornedo: "Structural criticism, like many postmodernist trends in criticism, is grounded on a theory of language..." (234). He then analyzes the actual and evolving language characteristically used in Philippine movie reporting, including gay lingo. But since he neither explains the theoretical context of the quotation nor the connection between "structuralism" and his exposition, he undermines his own analysis. Structuralism does *not* seek to analyze the use of actual language *per se*, but the "[patterns] of particular human systems of meaning" or "sign-systems which operate on the model of language" (Selden, et al., 70).

Another example is when Villasanta tries to neatly list down "facts" about Philippine movie reporting to correspond to Jim Collins' six-point definition of "postmodernism" (246-7). Consider these two points.

Collins argues (as Villasanta points out) that postmodernism is "a condition that responds to the general constitution of socioeconomic bases." Based on this point, Villasanta identifies militant movements within conservative showbiz culture as "postmodern." Collins adds, according to

Villasanta that postmodernism is “a specific mode of studying philosophy which questions philosophical discourse itself.” Corresponding to this point, Villasanta writes:

[Giovanni] Calvo, [Justo] Justo, [Lolit] Solis and [Alfie] Lorenzo wrote cockily, [Gil] Villasana appealed to conscience, [Billy] Balbastro took his knowledge in law and applied it to movie writing, [JC] Nigado questioned the ‘payola system’ of the movie press, and many other collisions against the system. (247)

But neither of the points which Villasanta raises have any direct correspondence to Collins’ points.

The case of the second (simplistic apologia) is a consequence of the fact that Villasanta is a movie reporter writing about movie reporting. Throughout the book, he takes great pains to note the accusations leveled against entertainment journalism and to write them off. For instance, he claims that local journalism considers movie reporting so low, to the point that the former has borrowed a foreign term, “yellow journalism,” to label the latter (53-54). His defense is that authorities of “legitimate journalism” accuse entertainment journalism of sensationalism *in order to* cover up their own irresponsible practices. Villasanta only dodges, but does not address, the essence of the accusation.

The case of the third point (out-of-context critical terms) is most nuanced. In the opening of the book, Villasanta lists entertainment headlines, ranging from the sensational to the inane, and then writes:

These are just some of the news headline texts—whether invented while looking up the ceiling or real occurrences—about the popular journalism of showbiz culture. These lines are loaded with meaning

for the avid fan even on the headline alone, but are perceived by others as unsubstantial. (1)

Having described the nature of entertainment headlines and its relative value to different classes of people, Villasanta asks the question: *Why study entertainment journalism at all?* His answer is a quote from Montaigne: “There is no desire more natural than that of knowledge” (2).

At the onset, Villasanta seems to suggest that the purpose of his project is the “gaining of knowledge.” But in Chapter 3, his project turns to apologetics. He undertakes to deconstruct the term “*chismis*” (“gossip”), in order to defend the “gossipy nature” of movie reporting.

He cites Rolando Tolentino’s assertion that “in the formation of history, what the folks say of what really happened in their environment should be taken into account in order to fit together the junctures” (83). Villasanta also quotes Ralph Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine: “Rumor is information, neither substantiated nor refuted; gossip is small talk with or without known basis in fact” (86).

The proper context of these two assertions is that the value of “gossip” and “rumor” is necessary in the study of culture and in the writing of history. When Villasanta writes of the value of these terms as historical and cultural “knowledge” (either in the traditional or Foucauldian sense), he stands on relatively stable ground. The arguments become shaky when he asserts that these terms are valuable as proper journalism.

Writing with the tone of exasperation, he claims that whenever someone censures a piece of movie reporting as “gossip,” he likes to counter with Rosnow and Fine’s quote and to tell the accuser that “every inch of publication by any Filipino movie reporter about anybody is information and not ‘gossip’” (86). However, if indeed the piece of movie report in question is “gossip” in the sense of Villasanta’s description (i.e., “invented

while looking up the ceiling”) or Rosnow and Fine’s (i.e., “small talk with or without known basis in fact”), then Villasanta should find himself back to square one against “legitimate journalism.”

Villasanta’s arguments are under fire in the field of journalism, where giving credence to gossip and rumor, reliance on unsubstantiated sources, and pursuit of trivia—while rampantly practiced—are constantly criticized.

A Movie Reporter Writing About Movie Reporting

Villasanta is at his best and most accessible to general readers when he is most assuredly a movie reporter writing about movie reporting. For instance, in chapters where he ventures into historicizing, what stands out as revelatory is his insider’s perspective. When he writes about developments in movie reporting on television and radio (Chapter 11), such as the phenomena of “tabloid-on-air” and “ambush interview,” he supplements his cold facts with actual scripts and anecdotes; he himself has had influence in shaping these developments, as writer, reporter, and host for television and radio.

Writing about new trends in movie reporting (Chapter 10), he is able to detail current practices and actual cultural politics. He informs the reader, for example, that a tabloid can get invited to the press conference of a sex film, but not to the press conference of a wholesome film; he has had firsthand experience as editor for *Bomba*’s entertainment section.

He is able to highlight a number of positions held by specific entertainment journalists or network bosses about receiving or not receiving “tokens of appreciation” and describe the motivations and practicability of the different positions (Chapter 8). He also narrates actual experiences of being offered and sometimes receiving unsolicited gifts.

He gives both a tight historical account and a vivid chronicle of the politics of movie reporters’ organizations (Chapter 6). The tightness of his historical account is a result of

insightful analysis of documents surrounding the formation of the Philippines Movie Press Club (PMPC). The vividness of the chronicling of other organizations' founding, dismantling, and by-laws (or the lack thereof) is a result of his being an insider.

In these chapters he is able to draw a critical and creative picture of his own position as practitioner, bringing to the foreground actual problems, experiences, and politico-cultural negotiations that a non-practitioner might otherwise miss. He brings to the attention of the reader some cultural realities that must be grappled with. What he finally affords the reader is the illustrative vantage point of an insider.

Notes

- ¹ Villasanta uses the terms “movie reporting” and “entertainment journalism” interchangeably, and qualifies his reason for doing so in Chapter 2.
- ² See for example Rolando B. Tolentino's *Richard Gomez at ang Mito ng Pagkalalake*, Sharon Cuneta at ang *Perpetwal na Birhen at Iba Pang Sanaysay Ukol sa Bida sa Pelikula Bilang Kultural na Texto* (2000); Bienvenido Lumbera's *Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema, and Pop Culture* (1984); or Rafael Ma. Guerrero's anthology, *Readings in Philippine Cinema* (1983).
- ³ See for example Nicanor Tiongson's *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art: Philippine Film* (1994); Joel David's “A Second Golden Age” in *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema* (1980); and Bienvenido Lumbera's “Kasaysayan at Tunguhin ng Pelikulang Pilipino” in Tiongson's *Urian Anthology: 1970-1979* (1983), pp. 22-47.

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