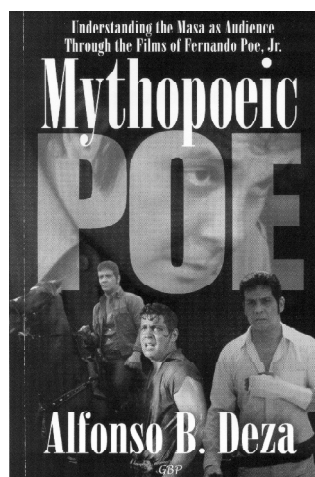


Finding the Man Behind the Myth Through the Audience

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Book Review of
***Mythopoeic Poe, Understanding the Masa
as Audience Through the Films of Fernando Poe, Jr.***
By Alfonso B. Deza
Quezon City: Great Books Publishing, 2006
(335 pp)

Fernando Poe, Jr., one of Philippine cinema's icons, has risen from matinee idol status to urban legend and finally to myth and icon. Referred to as "*Ang Panday*" (The Blacksmith), "Da King", "King of Philippine Movies", and simply FPJ, Fernando Poe, Jr.'s mystique has captured the curiosity of writers and has led them to embark on a journey to find out more about the man behind the myth. Two questions arise in this journey: How does one get to understand this celebrity of a cinematic icon? How does one begin to understand the audience that has in many ways catapulted the actor to mythical proportions?

The book *Mythopoeic Poe, Understanding the Masa as Audience Through the Films of Fernando Poe, Jr.* by

Alfonso Deza endeavors to answer both questions and attempts to unravel the FPJ mystique. It also aims to understand and describe the creation of such an icon of not only Philippine cinema but of the larger Filipino society as well. It is a fact that the cinema has always fascinated the Filipino audience. It has earned its place in Philippine culture and the arts through its indigenized name, *sine*. Such fascination with the movies goes beyond the silver screen and the audience's interest extends even to the personal lives of movie idols. In turn, their idols become real and become an important element in their reality.

Mythopoeic Poe is the off-shoot of Deza's master's thesis at the University of the Philippines. The book's roots even go as far back to an article solicited by Nicanor Tiongson, editor-in-chief of *Pelikula: A Journal of Philippine Cinema* titled "FPJ: The Action Hero as Collective Construct" (Deza, 2000-2001: 16). The word "Mythopoeic" in the title can even be viewed either in its denotative meaning, which is "of or engaged in the making of myths" (*Webster's Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, 1977) or as a word play on FPJ's surname. The book is divided into seven chapters that take the reader into his or her own journey of understanding FPJ and unlocking his mystique. Deza navigates his reader through the many layers of understanding how meaning is shared through films, how through film a "conversation" takes place between the film's *bida* (hero) and his audience, how through the reading of the film text one develops the self. Moreover, Deza introduces a new method to film research; the use of focus group discussions (FGDs) and survey questionnaires with chosen respondents to delve into how the audience sees FPJ as an icon and as a real person. In this respect, *Mythopoeic Poe* may be viewed as a study presented in book form or it can be a very interesting read since Deza's writing style is engaging and conversational.

Deza begins his book with a definition of terms aptly titled "Concepts in Brief", where he acquaints his reader with 22 concepts and terms used throughout the book. This section can also be



An undated photo of Fernando Poe, Jr. Retrieved January 21, 2009 from <http://www.pep.ph/guide/1437/Cinema-One-encores-Alay-ni-Da-King-this-Sunday,-December-23>

understood as the author's way of defining a parameter by which to appreciate the contexts in which the discussions in the book unfold. After this section is Chapter One (Search for Shared Meaning), which posits the concept of "film as communication", serving as the author's platform and take-off point in explaining the background of the book and the significant theoretical inspirations for the study. As Deza points out, his study hopes to provide palpable bases for understanding the ethos of the *masa* (masses) in relation to their favorite films and movie stars, as well as positing the notion of FPJ as the primary focus of collective

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awareness and communication for the *masa*. Deza proceeds to define the term *masa* for the study as:

...easily identified and accordingly described by virtue of status in society, as indicated by any or a combination of the following: a] Occupation (e.g., laborer, farmer, fisherman); b] educational attainment; c] place of residence; d] membership in a people's organization. An additional criterion (for the purpose mainly of screening) is that the *masa* participant must have seen, is inclined to seeing, or is an adherent or follower of FPJ films. (Deza, 2006: 17)

Deza continues his theoretical discussions up to Chapter Two. In this section, Deza problematizes the concept of FPJ and the *masa* using Symbolic Interactionism as a main theoretical thread. Symbolic Interactionism posits that the meanings people give to signs and symbols define them and the realities they experience and as individuals are socialized, culturally-agreed upon meanings assume control over their interactions with their environments (Baran & Davis, 1995: 289). Deza discusses how film as a symbolic form is able to initiate an internal dialogue with its audience. Applying the theory to his subject, FPJ as the lead actor (also the main character in the film) "converses" with his audience.

The chief operating principle that informs the internal dialogue or communication behavior of FPJ and the *masa*, resulting in the package of meanings or constructs that is the film itself, is their perception of the other. On the part of FPJ, his perception of the *masa* informs his action on what story to tell and in what manner. On the part of the *masa*, its perception of FPJ informs its action on what images to fancy or elements to consider in the film. (Deza, 2006: 36)

Chapters Three and Four deal with the results of the author's study. Deza presents the outcome of the survey he conducted among 101 respondents broken down as follows: 50 coming from the urban poor residing in Bernabe Compound, Pulanlupa 1, Las Piñas City and 51 coming from the rural areas of Southern Tagalog. The survey served two purposes: (1) to chart the demographics of his respondents; and (2) to find out how his respondents see FPJ as *bida* and what popular aesthetics are involved in reading FPJ, FPJ politics, and topics and themes they would like to see in future FPJ films. What is unique with Deza's questionnaire is the requirement of including the respondent's name on the survey form. While many studies often make the inclusion of the respondent's name optional (usually treating the respondent as a mere statistic), Deza finds the respondent worthy of mention and important as a person, "a gesture that sets the tone of open awareness between the respondent and the researcher." In Chapter Four, Deza presents the results of another method he used, which is the FGD that he conducted among his respondents who were fisherfolk. Deza describes the FGD as "informal and unstructured and premised on the idea that there is a direct relationship between the quality of the data sought and the nature of the interaction". The FGD was conducted on December 12, 2000 at Barangay Dalig, Sitio Bulaburan, Cardona in Rizal province and it contained information that was very relevant and insightful. The fisherfolk were members of the Bigkis Lakas Pilipinas. The author says:

As the receiver is the main focus of the study, a deliberate attempt is made to reflect the *masa's* perception of FPJ and his films, and the meanings these have in their lives, in their own language, on their own turf, so to speak, using their own systems of signification. I did not extricate these perceptions from guarded participants, but rather, they flowed out freely from heart and mind, such that in the extracted segments of text, even the rhythm of speech, and the circumlocutory nature of dialogue may be sensed. (Deza, 2006: 88)

This chapter contains excerpts from the FGDs that in a way attest to the participants' openness in discussing FPJ with the author. The excerpts of the FGD also show that "the fishermen apprehend FPJ not only as a movie star but also in the manner of a neighbor in their community, that is, as one of their own, talking casually...about his being left-handed or right-handed...alluding to his father and the tragic circumstances of his death" (Deza, 2006, p. 91). This chapter is very interesting because it illustrates how FPJ as the icon, seen on the big screen (or perhaps on television), becomes one with the masa as if he had popped out of the screen (reminiscent of *Purple Rose of Cairo* by American filmmaker Woody Allen) and joined them in their day-to-day struggles in life.

Chapter Five (FPJ on Filmmaking) is supposed to concentrate on the author's focus interview (FI) with FPJ. However, Deza begins the chapter with a form of apology to the reader as he justifies why the FI was conducted with Susan Tagle, FPJ's manager who had been with him since 1984. The author writes that "Fernando Poe, Jr. was characteristically a very private person; his evasiveness to interviews was as legendary as his image, and known even to the fishermen who participated in the focus group discussion." He further writes that:

The operating principle here in considering the responses of the proxy in lieu of the main subject's responses is Richard's (1955) postulate that common experiences and close acquaintanceship make for shared communication of meaning. It is thus assumed that answers given by Tagle are based on her long working years and acquaintanceship with FPJ, eventuating a solid understanding of his inclinations and insights as filmmaker. (Deza, 2006: 120)

This chapter contains excerpts from the author's FI with Tagle. Deza explores with Tagle the following aspects of FPJ's creative processes: (1) FPJ's metaperspective of his audience (includes

primary and secondary audiences and choosing what stories to tell and how); (2) FPJ's artistic control (includes the extent of artistic control, logical realism, and *tanging kakayahán* or unique capabilities in real life); (3) messages, film hits, favorite characters; and (4) views on the film industry. For anyone who would like to embark on a political economy study of the Philippine film industry and its filmmaking culture and processes, this chapter of the book will prove extremely useful. However, the chapter falls short in getting the responses to his questions from the man himself; the author should have explored all possible ways to have an interview with FPJ. While Tagle has worked for and with FPJ for the longest number of years and she knows all the ins and outs of producing a film "ala FPJ", still she is not FPJ. As such, the chapter reinforces the mythic quality of FPJ and does not fulfill the demystification of the icon.

Chapter Six (Three Films) contains the author's structural and textual analysis of three of FPJ's top grosser and most popular films, namely, *Ang Panday* (1980), *Isusumbong Kita sa Tatay Ko* (1999), and *Hagedorn* (1996). The textual analysis looked into the following elements, namely: paradigmatic pairing; multiplicity of central ideas; multiplicity of genres in filmic elements such as music, costume, setting, etc.; radical digressions from the narrative flow; and intertextual archetypes or recurring narrative situations. The structural analysis, as described by the author, "is guided by Todorov's causal transformation of a situation, which parallels the sequence of conflict in a story." The film is broken up into syntagms such as state of equilibrium at the outset, disruption of the equilibrium by some action, recognition that there has been some disruption, attempt to repair the disruption, and reinstatement of the initial equilibrium. Deza points out that "meanings ascribed to these units are informed on the main by the systems of signification and meaning of the masa derived from questionnaire results."

Chapter Seven (Internal Dialogue) is the section where the author synthesizes the findings of his study and endeavors to

elaborate and illustrate “the dynamic nature of the internal dialogue between source and receiver in the negotiation of meaning of four identified constructs in the film medium: 1) image as bida, 2) popular aesthetics, 3) FPJ politics in reel and real life, and 4) indications for future films” (Deza, 2006: 170). This chapter also leads the reader to the conclusions of the study. Here, Deza discusses the aspects of his study such as negotiated meaning, summary of questions asked in both the questionnaire and the FGD, and answers arising from the questions, and beyond cinema, which is essentially the book’s conclusion.

After Chapter Seven come the content and bibliographic notes, reference listings, and the appendices – Appendix A, which is a Filmography of Fernando Poe, Jr.; Appendix B, the Sample Survey Questionnaire; Appendix C, the Tables of Demographic Data, Incidence of Responses, and Favorite FPJ Films; Appendix D, the Tables Detailing the Responses; Appendix E, the Transcript of Freewheeling Discussion on Fernando Poe, Jr. and His Films; and Appendix F, The Focus Interview with Ms. Susan Tagle, Manager of Fernando Poe, Jr. One thing lacking in this book is an index of the contents of the book, which is normally found in the last pages; hence, the reader has to rely on the very general Table of Contents found at the beginning.



Movie poster of *Ang Panday* (1980). Retrieved January 21, 2009 from http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_nxUb2kYKSvI/R5NDvu632AI/AAAAAAAAADk4/g-phf43k0IM/s1600-h/Ang+Panday+1.jpg

Mythopoeic Poe, Understanding the Masa as Audience through the Films of Fernando Poe, Jr. is a thickly described and information-rich reference material. It also provides a critical view of the “mythical icon” that is Fernando Poe, Jr. In many ways, the book manifests the reflexivity of its author since he is an actor himself in both cinema and theater and has provided insightful angles in looking at the phenomenon of FPJ not only through his films but through the masa audience as well. One gets a glimpse of things to come even before you flip the cover – the book’s cover design bespeaks the layerings and intertextuality of film and shows the various imagings of FPJ.

The author’s use of two methods that are seldom used in film research, namely, the Survey Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion offers a fresh perspective in writing about film, which has almost always been through close textual analysis. This makes the book a significant contribution to the study of Philippine cinema and the film industry. However, the essential aspect of the book, that of experiencing FPJ “talk” and being able to “hear” from the man himself about his experiences, views, filmmaking style, and related matters, were not fulfilled by the author. While it may be argued that the theory of Symbolic Interactionism also posits that “the overlap of shared meaning by people in a culture means that individuals who learn a culture should be able to predict the behaviors of others in that culture” (Baran & Davis, 1995: 290), interviewing Tagle is not sufficient to quell a level of desire or expectation on the part of the reader to know how FPJ really thinks and how he himself was able to devise his own brand of filmmaking that has mesmerized thousands of fans or viewers who remain loyal to the man and the myth up to now. Be that as it may, the book is still a highly recommended read both for communication and media students as well as film and FPJ aficionados.

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