

# On Poetics and Practice of Film Criticism in the Philippines

A Roundtable Discussion

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## Introduction

So much has changed in the landscape of Philippine cinema since the first decade of the twenty-first century. The 2000s saw, at the outset, a significant decline in celluloid film production and then, quite fortuitously, the rise of a predominantly digital cinema. Film festivals as well as film education programs began to multiply in this new landscape where “anyone can be a filmmaker.” Supporters and viewers of Philippine films—primarily cinephiles, students and academics, and the intelligentsia—also became more active as commentators and reviewers, writing in relatively accessible and more interactive new media spaces.

What became clear in the period of transition, especially between 2004 and 2014, is how much our purview of Philippine cinema and the vocabulary we use to talk about it as a distinct field has been influenced by film critics in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For example, online and magazine articles and television features are replete with references to the golden age, alternative and independent films, the notion of the death of the film industry, and the idea that cinema is related to revolutions and to the nation, all of which were ideas put forward prior to the new century. Such epistemic categories employed in a very particular mode of evaluating film are what separates criticism from mere commentary. Indeed, the work of film criticism has been and still is not only a para-site of cinema but a primary site of struggle and contestation for meaning and direction. Some

of the defining critical writings before and during the rise of digital cinema in the Philippines have not only made distinctions among the aesthetic and formal qualities of individual works; they have also made and continue to make ethico-political pronouncements about Philippine history, culture, and society.

In 2014, as the digital era was shaping up more clearly, I thought it was a good time to reflect on the changing landscape of film criticism and to listen to critics, who have been actively writing for decades or who have been members of organized critics groups, on their thoughts on the history and development of film criticism in the Philippines. To this end, I invited a number of film critics to address the following broad questions:

- What has been the history of film criticism like in the Philippines?
- What have been the principles and presuppositions of your own critical practice, through the years?
- In your view as a critic, where is film criticism now or where should it be going?

Seven critics responded affirmatively to the invitation, and so the Office of Research and Publication organized the roundtable discussion (RTD) held on March 19, 2014 at the Plaridel Hall, University of the Philippines, Diliman. Three of the critics, Bienvenido Lumbera, Nicanor G. Tiongson, and Rolando B. Tolentino, are members of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (MPP). The MPP, the first organized film critics group in the Philippines, was established in 1976, with the avowed agenda of “making audiences more critical of the films which, whether they realize it or not, have an impact on their lives” and “giving producers systematic feedback on their products.” They give out the annual Urian Awards, and, apart from their respective books, some of their film writings are collected in the *Urian Anthology* series (1983, 2001, 2010, 2013). Three other critics, Patrick D. Flores, Eulalio R. Guieb III, and Choy S. Pangilinan, are members of the Young Critics Circle (YCC) Film Desk, a group which also holds an annual citation in film achievement. The YCC, founded in 1990, “stakes its claims in advocating a strategic and interventive agenda for a transdisciplinary film criticism that is responsive to the needs of the moment and responsible for its future aspirations.” Some of their film writings are collected in *Sampung Taong Sine: Philippine Cinema 1990-1999* (2002) and *Sining ng Sineng Filipino* (2009). The last participating critic is independent film scholar, Nick Deocampo, who was editor of *Movement* magazine in the 1980s and 1990s and author of three books on film history.

The papers that the critics read in the RTD were subsequently revised and are published here for the first time, according to their original alphabetical

sequence of presentation. The video coverage of the RTD, which includes the open forum with the audience, is available for viewing at <http://www.plarideljournal.org/videos/>.

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