

Bien! Oh, Bien! Where is Philippine Film History?

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This round-table discussion has given me the opportunity to reflect on the kind of film criticism I write. Mine is a type of criticism which comes from my historical writing. It critiques the way cinema has been framed by local film historians as something that is already ideologically constructed as “Filipino,” rather than frame it as a material phenomenon wrought with complexities rooted in material reality that complicates its identity. In this presentation, my singular focus on the historiography of Dr. Bienvenido Lumbera, who I will fondly call Bien throughout this essay, will serve as an example of my critical writing. This essay is a short version of a longer one that I am writing on the history of film criticism in the Philippines.

Before I proceed, allow me to state my approach towards film criticism. As mentioned, the criticism I write results from my historiographic work. More significantly, my criticism is informed by a “cultural-materialistic” framework. It is a reaction towards any form of “idealism” that locates culture change in human systems of thought rather than in material conditions. This is a strange observation as some of our historians manifest progressive thought in their criticisms, although I maintain that they remain as idealist critics in their understanding of the country’s cinema history. Their idealism lies in their belief that cinema is already essentially Filipino. Their writings exude with a priori assumptions regarding cinema’s identity while superseding the material evolution forming cinema’s phenomenological growth.

Contrasting myself from their position, I take the view that before we call cinema Filipino, we must first ascertain the material origins of the medium. In short, I take a materialist, rather than an essentialist, position with regards to cinema’s identity. In doing so, we may be surprised to discover how non-native forces and foreign influences helped construct the cinema we have come to cherish as our “native” cinema, our “national” cinema. This kind of criticism can only result from a close study of the medium’s material history. Its process entails a focus on observable, measurable phenomena (the *etic* approach) rather than on an ideational (or *emic*) approach practiced by historians who take a less than holistic approach towards their study of the medium. As a critic who believes on the materiality of cinema, I adhere to the belief that technological and economic aspects of cinema play a primary role in shaping its identity and development, not the other way around. With cultural materialism, I aim to understand the effects made by technological, economic and demographic factors in molding cinema’s structure and superstructure in scientific rather than ideational methods or ideological constructs.

My film criticism therefore is concerned with “historical process.” My writings have shown that preceding the formation of film’s identity is the material condition shaping its evolution and construction. In the case of cinema, I find any pronouncement of Filipino cinema highly problematic. Although difficult, I prefer to question such ideational claim and re-configure it to be one of inquiry by asking questions like: “What is Filipino in cinema?” “When did cinema become Filipino?” Instead of taking a nativist path that locates cinema in the mindset of critics (the emic approach), I take a stand to inquire about the growth of cinema in the country based on observable and measurable reality as mainly done by historians (the etic approach).

This difference in approach can be seen in the perspectives taken by our two camps. While earlier writings have placed the emphasis on the study of Philippine cinema on national identity—as if cinema was already Filipino even during its initial stages of development—I re-state the issue by proposing that we study first how cinema became Filipino. As a historian (from which my criticism is derived), I am concerned with how cinema came *to be* Filipino, investigating its process of *becoming* in order to deduce its state of *being*. This for me is a better option than to merely accept cinema as already Filipino. It is a belief that fuels my writing of a five-volume history of cinema in the country.

To illustrate the process of historical criticism I practice, allow me to focus on the writings of Dr. Bienvenido Lumbera. The reason I chose Bien’s historiographic writings is because he was among the first to present a clear program of inquiry into film historiography among local film scholars. It has to be acknowledged that Bien is among the first who can be called a “film historian.” He was the first to embark in writing self-reflexive articles on film history. But having said these, I hope I will be allowed, especially by Bien himself, to constructively critique his historical construction as it is wanting in its investigation and therefore problematic in its framing of cinema’s identity.

To start, I would like us to recall Bien’s two seminal essays that showed his interest in film historiography. In 1976, Bienvenido Lumbera wrote a seminal article in *Sagisag* entitled, “Kasaysayan at Tunguhin ng Pelikulang Pilipino” [“The History and Prospects of the Filipino Film”].¹ In the article, one can already see his major concerns regarding the medium’s history: what forces shaped local films and what were its prospects for development. Serving as a major undercurrent in his article is the theme of “nationalism,” one that he would personally espouse in many of his writings in literature and cinema.² Five years later, Bien wrote in *Diliman Review* another article, “Problems in Philippine Film History.” It deals with problems in Filipino film history, continuing his running theme of finding in film a site for native identity.³

Although his first article makes mention of history, it is, disappointingly, less about history than criticism. The critic-turned-historian ruminates more about the contextual nature of local cinema's growth. But while bemoaning the retarding "effects" made by forces like Hollywood on local cinema, he fails to concretely provide us with material evidences to convincingly prove his point. At best, his essay provides an opportunity to construct Philippine cinema as a subject of historical inquiry and this he does in self-assured ways that cannot be mistaken to be other than being "nativist." He is able to do it by contraposing native cinema against alien forces but which, sadly, fails to unmask their tacit ways of colonial cultural subjugation. His article could have been more liberating if only he had been more of a historian than a critic. Vacillating between his two roles, as critic he gives us a critique of the "effects" cast by foreign influences but as historian, he falls short in providing evidentiary proofs as to why Filipino cinema remains underdeveloped, except for his general statements about imported Hollywood technology and western influences on local culture. One issue we can tease out as well is that of "dependence," a topic which Bien, as critic, abhors. But how we can get local cinema out of a state of dependency, it would have been helpful if Bien has provided us with answers to questions like: How is native cinema dependent on foreign influences—technologically, aesthetically, financially? What social dynamics allow this dependence to prosper? Answers to these questions can provide us with concrete, material evidences that will make us realize that the much-vaunted identity that is Philippine cinema is a myth.

By not providing material details of our country's dependence on foreign film technology and capital and their local machinations, we are unable to know under what foreign *and* colonial conditions does our native cinema wage its struggle to become the "national" cinema that we claim it to be. In failing to know this it will be hard for us to understand, and perhaps, to "liberate," our cinema against the hegemonic control of such an "alien" medium. Our unproblematized popular acceptance of a "national/ist" cinema makes us fail to account for the foreign (or colonial) aspects of a western medium that is continually shaping its local clone. While we note that Bien's nationalist film history has been at the core of his critical thinking, we also note that this has limited his critical perspective. His notion of a "national" cinema forms only half of the argument for a liberative understanding of cinema. His lack of articulation to account for the other half of this cinema—what may be deemed as its "non-nationalist," or foreign, colonial, "non-native," western, international side—makes it difficult for us to achieve a holistic understanding of the real conditions and material state of this native cinema, as well as the actual oppression and struggle it needs to overcome.

It is in his second article, “Problems in Philippine Film History,” where Bien embraces the task which historians do best: engaging in historical periodization. But in doing so, two historical accounts of great importance are ignored as he excises them from historical memory, perhaps by force of his nationalist compulsion? Not surprisingly, these two events cover periods of foreign colonization—a topic that appears strictly out of the ambit of Bien’s nationalist discourse. The first are the initial twenty years of film’s colonial origins and formative beginnings under the Spanish and American colonizers, and the other, the war interregnum under Japanese military rule. Sadly omitted in the first is a whole chapter of early film history that Bien dismisses as a “veritable pre-history.”⁴ By ignoring the colonial beginnings of cinema and branding it merely as “pre-history,” the effect that is created to one who reads his essay is that of film being already Filipino from the start.⁵ By being selective of which dates to represent film’s originary “events,” to the naming of which “men” to represent landmark breakthroughs in introducing the medium, down to the choice of what “films” to pioneer the beginning of this cinema—all these point to a history that favors film’s *native* “emanation,” while choosing to be silent about the greater *material* forces—mostly foreign—fueling its advance in the country, i.e. the so-called “colonial” and foreign attributes counting among them technology, capital and modes of production.

Like choosing one’s memory of a past, Bien too becomes selective in his process, desiring only to construct a native cinema. He omits the crucial formative years that need rightly to be seen as colonial and internationalist. One must realize that this early film period—no matter how problematic for a historian to articulate, or even how “politically wrong” for a nationalist to adopt as a position—became the bedrock for what, only in time, would become the Filipino cinema we presently know. Bien’s framing becomes tainted with nativism as it constructs a history favoring only a local perspective, at the expense of actual material realities revealing of local cinema’s foreign dependencies. This makes Bien’s historiography inadequate. His nationalist ideological framing of film history, which silences its colonial origins and ties, is only able to tell us half of local cinema’s story, and thus, also half of its history. The other half aches to be told if we were to know all sides of our history.

I can mention two examples that will show the historical omissions Bien made and they can serve to prove my point that in their denial, Bien missed out telling us the other half of our local film history. One is about the contributions made by American pioneers in industrializing the studio system in the country and the other is the period of World War II. In failing to name Western personalities who caused the industrialization of local filmmaking that served as the groundwork for the emergence of the Tagalog

movie industry, Bien's article instead extols a set of native accomplishments, such as the rise of local studios like the pre-war X'Otic, Excelsior, Sampaguita, and LVN. He fails to mention that their growth was merely spurred by the establishment of Philippine Films set up by two Americans George Harris and Eddie Tait in 1933. It also served as a marked beginning of the country's reliance on foreign film importation. It is through the silencing of examples like this that makes it difficult for us to know how our native cinema became highly dependent on colonial ties, enough to question the native-ness of this "national" cinema. In brief, it was foreign capital, technology, and aesthetic influences which dictated the formation of the larger base of this nascent local movie industry's material and cultural infrastructure and growth.

There is another act of omission, again, made in a pattern involving the lack of articulation of colonial relations. While attributing to World War II the destruction of the local movie industry, the history of cinema during this brief period of Japanese military occupation remains un-articulated. During this short span of time, the native cinema, hardly out from the shadow of Hollywood, was cut off from its offshore source. The local film industry was at a virtual standstill. Yet, no matter how traumatic this period had been, I find it necessary to mention what happened to the nascent film industry in the hands of the occupying Japanese forces. In doing so, one will find out the reasons why within the decade after the devastating war the local movie industry almost "miraculously" recuperated from hopeless destruction and even reached its so-called "golden age" starting in the mid-Fifties. This phenomenal story is almost hard to believe. Why? Because by merely selecting major post-war cinematic achievements as Bien does, one still cannot see how local cinema reached its much-celebrated apotheosis. Nagging questions will hound anyone who will ask for reasons that can explain the immediate recovery of the native movie industry when the country, impoverished as it was after the war, razed to the ground by American bombs and torched by retreating Japanese soldiers, had no, repeat *no*, local manufacturing base for both the technology and the raw film that it needed to produce movies.

While those instances I mentioned are significant issues that need to be answered, I do not wish to create here an impression of favoring foreign film forces over the emerging national. Far from it. What is being vigorously proposed here is an effort to know materially what contending forces surrounded the growth of "native" cinema and not to ideationally and ideologically isolate its growth from the western dependencies and foreign influences swaddling its development. This is a simple case of facing and presenting reality, and historians—as well as critics—have the supreme duty to do, as best they can, to present the varied sides of reality for a more

truthful narration of “Philippine” film history. Otherwise, getting only one side of a story will result to a view that will be solipsistic, and in the end, impoverished of a truth that will be necessary to see the object of its study (i.e. native cinema) in its interdependent relations with a wider, global market.

Missing out on several salient historical points, Bien has positioned our understanding of an otherwise very international, very cosmopolitan, medium to that of the native. For this we are grateful to him for giving cinema a “native” face and we appreciate him for his efforts. He too has been amply rewarded and recognized with all the awards and recognitions that have been bestowed upon him. For it was indeed daring and “revolutionary” for him to insist during his time an agenda of “nationalism” while the world around him was consumed by western forces that shaped local economic, political, social, and cultural life. But there is another side to Bien Lumbera’s historicizing of cinema which this essay wants to bring out. It’s what he left out of his historical writings, and which we need to take cognizance of if we were to truly know our film history. This essay asks for a history that will be more true to what actually happened, without losing sight of the perspectives of the “local,” the “native,” and the “national.” This essay has been written for the sake of having a history that will make us attain a deeper historical understanding of the filmic phenomena that do not isolate Philippine cinema from the context of film’s international origins and continuing foreign domination from which this cinema continues to struggle and co-exist. We must address and redress issues beyond the borders of a nationalist understanding of film’s history that only limits our understanding of the medium as merely a strictly “local” affair.

In closing, I cast no doubt that Bien has gifted us with a film history which, despite its imperfections, has allowed us to build cinema’s past. By omitting some parts of that past, he actually asks us to participate in filling it up, in helping him with its construction, and in making this cinema whole. I am grateful that Bien did not write a perfect film history, for in that imperfection, all of us have a chance to contribute to its writing, have our own say in its intellectual re-building. It is how we add to Bien Lumbera’s project of constructing film’s history that we are able to affirm the importance of what he did, not only for the history of cinema but, more significantly, for our history as a people. In doing our share in this historical re-construction, we will see for ourselves the challenges, perhaps also the folly, in trying to attain *our* own cinema, and of writing about *our* own history: What it means and how we can be responsible with having a cinema, and a history, that we can call *our* own. And this is by no means an easy task, knowing that we are all standing on the shoulders of a giant.

Notes

¹Bienvenido Lumbera, "Kasaysayan at Tunguhin ng Pelikulang Pilipino" (The History and Prospects of the Filipino Film), *Sagisag*, October 1976; reprinted in *The Urian Anthology: 1970-1979*, edited by Nicanor G. Tiongson, Manila: Manuel L. Morato, 1983.

²Many of Lumbera's literary output and film criticisms have espoused a strong nationalist bent, making him one of the country's foremost nationalist scholars and critics and which earned for him the title of National Artist for Literature in 2006. For his strong contributions to the growth of native writing and for "asserting the central place of the vernacular tradition in framing a national identity for modern Filipinos," he was also awarded the 1993 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts.

³Bienvenido Lumbera, "Problems in Philippine Film History," *The Diliman Review*, July-August, 1981; reprinted in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, edited by Rafael Ma. Guerrero, Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983.

⁴Lumbera, "Problems in Philippine Film History," 67.

⁵Other essays or books that tended to essentialize cinema as being "native" or "national" from its very beginning were those written by the likes of Salumbides.