

Critiquing the Filipino Film Today: Notes for the Round-Table Discussion on Film Criticism

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For purposes of this discussion, this writer has three simple goals: a) to describe one productive way of critiquing the Filipino film in our day; b) to highlight the elements of this type of film criticism; and c) to reaffirm what I believe are the tasks and challenges facing film critics today.

To this writer, film criticism is the analysis and evaluation of a given film, which seeks to provide audiences with a deeper understanding of said film.

Analysis of the Film

Analysis seeks to explain the content and form of a film on its own terms, clarifying whether it succeeds or fails in what it wants to do. Analysis would try to answer questions like:

- 1) What are the major themes of the film?
- 2) How does the filmmaker structure reality so that these themes may be developed through the film narrative?
- 3) What point of view is employed throughout the film, and why?
- 4) How are the plastics of the image (actors, sets and location, costumes, props and lighting) and the sounds (including dialogue and other diegetic sounds) orchestrated to create the mise-en-scene of specific sequences?
- 5) How are the scenes shot by the camera and how are these shots edited, scored, and titled?

To illustrate, analysis of the film *Serbis* by Brillante Mendoza (2008) should show how the film is able to harness the elements of cinema in order to express and elaborate on its major theme: The deterioration of the Pineda family members and the relations between them. In the space of one day, each of the protagonists suffers a setback or undergoes an incident that causes further erosion of their characters. Nanay Flor loses the bigamy case that she filed against her husband. In court, her own children testify that their father does not have a second family, so that the second family will not be eligible to claim any part of the father's inheritance. Nayda imperils her marriage by openly showing her attraction to her n'er-do-well cousin who works as the theatre projectionist. Nayda's husband realizes for the first time that his marriage is a trap. Alan, Nayda's cousin, decides to run away from his responsibility to Merly, whom he has impregnated. The screening of bomba films and the sexual transactions between gays continue inside the

movie house, even as the procession of Good Friday wends its way around the theatre building.

Opting for the style of neo-realism, the film sets its story in the actual Family Theater, from where the film stories have been derived. Here family members live in separate rooms, whose distances from each other symbolize the alienation between the family members themselves. Acting strikes us as undramatic, natural, matter of fact even, but it is truly expressive and consistent with character. There are no costumes, only everyday clothes that characters of this class would wear. Much of the film is shot with a meandering camera that represents the point of view of characters as they go up and down the theatre's maze of stairs, even as it captures the flux of life in real time. The live sound reproduces the external noises, including the beep of jeepneys and *vrooming* of tricycles, which sometimes almost drown out the dialogue. The sound pollution from the outside is meant to parallel the pollution inside the theatre, both the physical stench of the toilets and the "moral" filth inside the screening room. Editing is mainly invisible and generally minimal, in order to preserve the rhythm of real time.

Aside from illustrating the internal coherence, or lack thereof, of a cinematic work, analysis may also try to explain how the film got to be what it is. In this regard, questions regarding the economic, political, social conditions under which the film was made, as well as the artistic circumstances, influences and styles which shaped the film become relevant. These questions would include the following, for a film like *Serbis* :

- 1) What is the mode of production of an indie film like *Serbis* as opposed to that of a mainstream film?
- 2) How does the production cost impact on the filmmaker's freedom to choose his subject matter and the way he wants to shoot his film?
- 3) How was it possible to create a bold and cutting edge film like *Serbis* in 2008?
- 4) What is the filmmaking style proposed by Bing Lao's Found Story, and how did it shape *Serbis*?

The cost of an indie film is a mere fraction (one fifth or one sixth) of the budget for a mainstream commercial film, mainly because DV filmmaking is so inexpensive that filmmakers themselves can afford to produce their own films. Because of the elimination of the big time producer who was eager to ensure a return on investment and a hefty profit if possible, filmmakers were now free to pursue their artistic vision and make the films they wanted to make without any artistic compromises. Although *Serbis* was shot in celluloid (thanks to a French investor), the director was left to make his own artistic choices without interference or dictation from its

executive producer, who funded the film precisely because of the artistry of the Mendoza films he had seen in Europe. Moreover, the film was shot in the same indie way that Mendoza's previous indies were made.

But *Serbis* is special in the sense that it is the film that best exemplifies the filmmaking style of Bing Lao's Found Story. Searching for a style of filmmaking that was more appropriate to Filipino characters and narratives, Bing Lao developed the concept of the Found Story, which "is a story drawn from real life whose objects are represented in the story as referents", namely, any phenomena, physical or cultural, that are found in the real world. The Found Story may be approached through three different narrative perspectives" the dramatic time mode, the real time mode, and the poetic time mode. The real time mode "foregrounds the power of the place and how it influences the found characters in a certain way." Stories in this mode happen in a particular place with a specific locale. And that locale has a great influence on the people within that place." In *Serbis*, that locale is the Family Theatre, a real functioning theatre in Pampanga. Mendoza explains, "We found this cinema in Angeles City and this family, who ran the place, lived right inside the cinema. That was the starting point of the whole film." Lao further explains "Again, it is a found story, a found place, and the noise is found too.... That is what these films are all about. They are about the physicality of these locations, and that informs both the subject matter and the aesthetics."

Evaluation of a Film

Evaluation highlights the significance of the content and form of a given film. Content would include the ideas and values imbedded or animating the narrative and its characters. Form would include the genre (action, drama, comedy, horror and fantasy, *bomba* [adult film]) or the indie style (neo-realism, social epic, personal meditation, among others) used in the film.

Content

The significance of certain films is rooted in the fact that they pioneered in the presentation of certain ideas or values at specific periods in our history. The evaluation of such films therefore can focus on and develop the film's achievement in this regard but it must also examine the weaknesses or limitations of the ideas presented. Allow me to cite some examples of films which have become significant in our history for the ideas they propounded.

- 1) *Bayaning Third World* (De Leon, 1999) is the first film to question the heroism of Jose Rizal, at the time of the centennial celebrations

when movies like *Jose Rizal* (Diaz-Abaya, 1998) continued to venerate the hero as the unquestioned center and source of Philippine nationalism. However, even as the film deconstructs the heroism of the national hero by showing his rejection of the revolution and his possible retraction, the film nonetheless ends by saying that if we have doubts about his heroism, those doubts will be dispelled when we read Rizal's works, which ironically are the works that embody his lack of confidence in a revolution from below.

- 2) *Sister Stella L.* (De Leon, 1984) is the first film to expose the economic exploitation of workers and the salvaging of labor leaders as well as the politicization of the religious and the censorship of the press during the period of Martial Law. After being gagged for more than a decade of restrictive censorship and terrorized by the ubiquitous military, filmmakers began to organize and protest against arbitrary and unreasonable censorship in the early 1980s, becoming even more militant and aggressive under the banner of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP) after the Aquino assassination in 1983, even as the anti-Marcos movement spread rapidly to all classes. Both Jose Lacaba and his co-writers and the director Mike De Leon were members of the CAP, and the film was made with the help and support of the burgis elements who had turned against the dictatorship. *Sister Stella L.* was later followed by *Bayan Ko* (Brocka, 1984), which was also significant for daring to depict the Lakbayan march and the singing of the anthem of protest, *Bayan Ko*, which the BRMPT tried to censor. Brocka brought the case to the Supreme Court, which ruled that the BRMPT could only classify not censor films. This decision in turn forced Marcos to replace the BRMPT with a more "liberal" MTRCB in 1985.
- 3) The film *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* (Roño, 1988) is significant for being the first film that directly tackled women's issues, like wife battery, abandonment by husbands, prejudices against separated women or single mothers or working mothers, and the first film to have as heroine a woman who struggles, not always successfully, to perform her work as employee in a Women's Crisis Center and her job as mother of two and live-in partner of a macho mama's boy. Unlike many women's films that end up by endorsing the traditional roles of women as obedient wife and dutiful mother, the film holds up the far from ideal but loving and rights advocate Lea as a heroine for our times. One should point out, however, that for reasons known only to the writer and director, one whole side of Lea, that of political activist who would join demonstrations against the Marcos

dictatorship, was edited out in the movie, removing thereby an important arena in the women's movement.

- 4) *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (Solito, 2005) is a very significant film because it is the first gay feature film that shows the gay not as an object of derision or as a victim of macho chauvinism, but as a boy accepted by his family and friends, and one who in the end shows willingness to transcend the dehumanizing effects of poverty by educating himself. Departing from Dolphy movies where gayness is considered as a sickness (not a sexuality) that should be cured and can be cured by finding the right woman for the gay man, *Maximo* presents gayness as a fact of life, a kind of sexual persuasion that need not be changed nor repressed. Here the gay boy chooses his love over his family because his family has committed a wrong, but when his beloved policeman becomes accessory to the murder of Maximo's father, Maximo in turn rejects him and comes out a better and more confident person after all the tragedies that beset him.
- 5) *Anacbanua* (Gozum, 2009) is the first Pangasinan film, in the sense that it is made by a native of Pangasinan and it uses the Pangasinan language in its main narrative. The persona of the film, a *balikbayan* [returning Filipino] who rediscovers his Pangasinan roots, visits the different places of his childhood, and the different landmarks of Pangasinan, and the places that are famous for the manufacture of famous Pangasinan products, like the native *bagoong* [fish sauce], *bolo* [machete] and knives, and pottery. Outstanding is the cinematography of the film which heightens the poetry of the subject matter and narration. It should be pointed out however, that even as the film highlights the achievements of one region and encourages the younger generations not to forget their language and culture, it also discourages the youth from learning or speaking the national language because it is not their native language. The film thus falls into the trap of nativism (wanting to go back to an idyllic rural period) as well as regionalism (the refusal to be integrated to a larger nation through the Filipino language.)

Form

The significance of other films may be attributed to their innovative use of cinematic forms or styles which open up new possibilities for the communication of new ideas. Allow me to give some examples of films that are significant for their novel and imaginative use of form in the service of their chosen content.

- 1) *Tuhog* by Jeffrey Jeturian (2001) exemplifies how an exploitative genre like bomba can be used to subvert itself and expose its predatory nature and ways. The film is about a mother and daughter who are sexually molested by the same man, the mother's father and the daughter's grandfather. A film producer and writer offer them money to use their story for a film they say will give them the justice they deserve. But the finished film disgusts both mother and daughter because they are depicted as sex-obsessed females who welcome the sexual advances of the old man. But even as the film uses the genre and conventions of the bomba, it is careful not to dwell on nude bodies to avoid titillating of the audience. The camera shots and direction effectively distance the audience from the scenes, encouraging them to reflect on the contradictions that are playing out on screen.
- 2) *Aguila* by Eddie Romero (1980) is an important film because it rides on the popularity of Fernando Poe Jr and the action film in order to dramatize its historical epic showing the transformation of Philippine society from the period of the 1896 revolution to the period of activism in the 1970s. A cinema of ideas, *Aguila* traces the changes in four generations of the Aguila family and their involvement in the issues of their times—betrayal of the revolution by the *ilustrados*, connivance between the politicians and the local leaders in the despoliation of lands in Mindanao, the suppression of the Sakdal uprisings of the American period, the ideological conflict between Huks and Americans after the Liberation, the tragic involvement of one son in the Korean War, the corrupt elections of the 1950s, the imposition of Martial Law and the rise of activism in the 1970s. Although FPJ refused to give up his low waist pants and his long sideburns, the film succeeded nonetheless in transforming the action film into a film of social ideas.
- 3) Another successful transformation of genre is typified by *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* (Roño, 1988). Billing itself as a melodrama about family relationships, the film was able to attract the traditional audiences of melodrama, the women, who are the primary targets of the messages of this film. But even as audiences identified with the usual dramatic confrontations and tear-jerking situations of the melodrama, they were also introduced to characters who were no longer black and white but individual and real like themselves, living in or reacting to situations that were familiar and credible.
- 4) A film that is significant for creating a form that cannot be aligned with any of the genres and can only be considered on its own terms

is *Bayaning Third World* (De Leon, 1999). With no real “story” to speak of, the film’s narrative follows the ups and downs of a director and writer who are researching in order to make a film about Rizal. Interestingly, the research process or the collection of data is dramatized, with the researchers in contemporary clothes, entering the houses of the past where their research interviewees live. At one point towards the end, the film space of the past connects to the film space of the present. The film is shot in black and white, so that the viewer will find it easier to maintain a distance from the film, a distance that will encourage him to think about the issues being raised by the film.

- 5) An achievement that could have only been done because of the new DV cameras is *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (Zuasola, 2010). This is the first Filipino film shot in one continuous long take, that chronicles the last hours of Eleuteria in Cebu before she embarks on her trip to Germany as a mail order bride. From behind, in front or from the side, the camera documents how her parents fetch her from the river, force her to dress up, how she listens to her cousin who is married to a German, how she meets up with the village idiot who is trying to plant a banana tree in the water, and then later her boyfriend who tries unsuccessfully to spirit her away, how she arrives at the port and says a bitter goodbye. The new technology has allowed the filmmaker to document life as it is lived and as it flows in real time, with all its vagaries, intrusions and unpredictabilities.

In evaluating the content and form of a film, I use very specific standards. In general, I would endorse films that critically portray important realities in our society (in whatever style) but at the same time have messages which are liberative and transformative, and conducive to the protection of the rights of all Filipinos and the creation of an egalitarian nation. I also would endorse films that highlight innovation, experimentation and transformation of cinematic forms so that they become worthy vehicles of new and progressive ideas. On the other hand, I do not endorse films that in any way discriminate or exploit anyone, or propagate ideas that are elitist, colonial or patriarchal.

Tasks and Challenges for the Critic of our Time.

In ending allow me to identify what I believe are the qualifications that are necessary to be able to analyze and evaluate films well :

- 1) An appreciation of the language of film;
- 2) A knowledge of the history of the Filipino film as well as familiarity with Philippine history;

- 3) An appreciation of film as cultural artefact and as social catalyst;
- 4) A familiarity with the theories that analyze the social and political significance of film;
- 5) A critical language that is sincerely interested in communicating with the audience, that is free of theoretical jargon and pedantic language;
- 6) A healthy respect for other critics in order to encourage dialogue; and
- 7) Above all, an attitude of balance and fairness, which is free of all personal agenda and self-promotion.