

# On Philippine Film Canon Formation in the New Century

## A Roundtable Discussion

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### Introduction

In spite of the imperfections, incompleteness, and even notoriety of its process and product, film canon formation is an inescapable practice. Canons are directly or indirectly formed by the viewing public and its channels of popularization, by artists and cinephiles, and by critics, scholars, and professionals.<sup>1</sup> Janet Staiger (1985), in her essay “The Politics of Film Canons,” considers canon construction as a practical necessity, because “a scholar of cinema cannot study every film ever made” (p. 8). The idea is true however counterintuitive it is—we expect that one who makes a list of best films has seen all films, but of course this cannot possibly be true.

I myself have learned what it feels like to undertake the quixotic task of trying to see every Filipino film (in 2017), in fulfilment of my various tasks as film teacher, scholar, critic, and programmer. (I have watched countless films as part of my work, but only this year have I *attempted* to see everything.) Catching feature-length movies in festivals and cineplexes around Metro Manila (and missed ones through screeners) is daunting enough. Watching short and feature films, numbering to hundreds, from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao in the digital age of “everyone can be a filmmaker” is overwhelming, to say the least.

The urgency of the desire to see all springs from my unacknowledged (and now, here, acknowledged) need to come up with a personal list of “Filipino” films, great or otherwise, that does not only account for industrial,

art, and political cinemas—corresponding to Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s (1969) First, Second, and Third Cinemas—but also the emergent “regional” films corresponding to Fourth Cinema.<sup>2</sup> It is an obsessive desire and, alas, it is impossible to attain.

And yet in spite of not being able to see all, in our need for efficiency, order, and a working evaluative system, as Staiger (1985) asserts, we continue with our project of canon formation, as individuals and collectives, informally and formally. Remarkably, the project is premised precisely on impossibility, and no list can offer finality. What remains, in place of completeness, is the politics that undergird canon formation, the one thing that remains inescapable in the project. Which films will be remembered, which ones forgotten? Who will tell us, and on the basis of what?

For the virtual roundtable discussion that follows, I have invited four critics to reflect upon the matter. Skilty C. Labastilla, co-founder of *Pinoy Rebyu* and member of the Young Critics Circle, answered the questions I sent all four critics in relation to his ongoing project of canon making. He talks about how *Pinoy Rebyu*, self-described as a “Filipino film aggregator,” produces and publishes lists like annual Top 20 Filipino Films, Best Performances of the Half-Century, Greatest Pinoy Films of All Time, and others.<sup>3</sup>

Cinephile and blogger Richard Bolisay considers the canonizing gesture of the Museum of Modern Art and points to the gaps of MoMA’s (2017) film exhibition series entitled “A New Golden Age: Contemporary Philippine Cinema.” In particular, he highlights the glaring absence of films from regions beyond Manila in the MoMA program and argues why these films cannot be neglected anymore in any reckoning of Philippine cinema today.

Mauro Tumbocon, Jr., director of the Filipino Arts & Cinema International Festival (FACINE) held annually in San Francisco, takes stock of his efforts in bringing the best of Philippine cinema and Filipino American films to an American audience. He cogitates on how his grounded and ongoing conceptualization of a “Filipino American” cinema (and this cinema’s relationship to “Filipino” cinema) has guided his curatorial process through more than 20 years.

The RTD closes with a piece from Joel David, who it was that initiated the systematic effort of canon formation in the Philippines in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> He reflects on his shifting viewpoint on the project and discusses the process that went into his latest effort to lead a committee in forming a list of Top 100+ Films for an upcoming issue of *YES! Magazine*.

## References

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Bourdieu categorizes these sources of cultural legitimization as “specific,” “bourgeois,” and “popular” (as Cited by Allen & Lincoln, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>The term was coined by Maori filmmaker and critic Barry Barclay in 2002. See Stuart Murray (2008) and Corinn Columpar (2010).

<sup>3</sup>*Pinoy Rebyu* can be accessed here: <https://pinoyrebyu.wordpress.com>

<sup>4</sup>*Pinoy Rebyu* recalculated the poll tabulated by David and his students in 1989 using their own formula and published the new results in <https://pinoyrebyu.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/1989-poll-of-greatest-pinoy-films-full-tally-and-individual-ballots/>.

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