

Predicaments of Prestige: Negotiations and Symbolic Violence in Philippine Critical Film Practice

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Abstract As with its neocolonial center the US, the Philippine practice of film criticism was closely allied with academic and journalistic professions. The definitive triumph of Ishmael Bernal as film director occasioned several of his contemporaries to emulate his example of writing film reviews in newspapers while developing a film-industry network where they could possibly wangle directorial or scriptwriting breaks. Needless to say, the majority of these aspirants did not amount to any significance, as either critics or practitioners. What also remained unremarked was that this strategy was actually European in origin, modeled by the French *nouvelle vague* but with a vastly differing historical and cultural context that called for critical reconfiguring. This article will attempt an evaluation of the tradition of Philippine film criticism via its self-declared proponents, the organization of media reviewers who banded into an award-giving organization. It will make use of James F. English's reworking of Pierre Bourdieu's formulation and development of the concept of culture capital, in English's *The Economy of Prestige* (2005), which appropriately problematized the practice of award-giving. Where we can immediately see in how, for better or worse, the critics fostered an academicization of award-giving, positioning them among premodern institutions such as the Académie Française, they were also oblivious to the larger issues raised by the intervention of US interests in Asia during the Cold War era. This accounts for a problematic legacy of short-sightedness amid Euro-style obsession with validation on the part of the Philippine critical and artistic community.

Keywords academization; award-giving; film critics; cultural politics; Experimental Cinema of the Philippines; Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino

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Introduction

For better or worse, the Philippines can claim to be the Southeast Asian country where Western and West-aspiring powers staked their territorial claims in the region: Spain from the early sixteenth century, the United States during the turn of the previous century, and Japan during the middle of the past century. The impact of these interventions helps explain why the primary cultural forms in the country can mostly be traced to locales far removed from Asia, with the US responsible for reintroducing photography and cinema after the expulsion of the Spaniards and following through with the rest of electronic mass media that the West later made sure to propagate through the rest of the world.

Hence it would not be surprising to discover that during the colonial years (roughly first half of the twentieth century), media trends in the country followed closely those of the US. Media specialization was primarily a matter of skills training, since both sides of opposed political persuasions regarded successful popular culture as irredeemably compromised by corporate sponsorship, unworthy of elevation to high art among conservatives and a fifth column for capitalist values among progressives. The country's nominal independence from American colonization marked its transition to a Latin American-style banana republic, but it is also a way of understanding cultural developments that have eluded native scholars of pop culture.

In an essential sense, the Philippines's post-World War II filmic cultural orientation reverted to European influence once more, but this time it was from France rather than Spain, and it had to await the spread of French influence through Europe before reaching the US, from where the Philippines picked up the perspective that local scholars termed "film as art" (title of the early film-production workshops of the University of the Philippines Film Center). Such awareness was nearly too late, since the vast majority of celluloid output was lost to a combination

of tropical climate, careless storage practices, industrial self-sabotage as a means of union-busting, and a drive to cannibalize celluloid products, squeezing any form of profit that these could yield, often by converting strips into hats and horns for New Year merry-making. As an example, when Lino Brocka wanted to mount a retrospective of films by Gerardo de Leon, he had to send volunteers to provincial cinemas all over the country to find if any prints might still be kept in storage (Figure 1). Several major films were outright already missing while one was damaged as it was being projected; three other prints were subsequently recovered from various Southeast Asian archives.

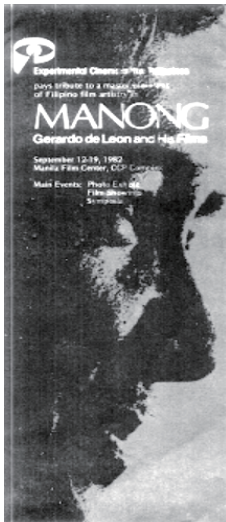


Figure 1. The retrospective of Gerardo de Leon films organized by Lino Brocka, titled “Manong” [Big Brother] and held at the Manila Film Center. All existing de Leon films are sourced from this recovery project except for *Sanda Wong* (1955), recovered in Hong Kong; and *Dyesebel* (1953) and *Anak ni Dyesebel* [*Child of Dyesebel*] (1964), recovered in Thailand. The celluloid nitrate copy of *Hanggang sa Dulo ng Daigdig* [*Up to the Ends of the Earth*] (1958) was permanently damaged during its retrospective screening, when its sprocket holes caught during projection and burned the print. (From the *Pelikula, Atbp.* blogspot, posted 23 August 2008)

Film criticism arrived around this time, initially as review commentaries printed as adjuncts to movie journalism in English-language newspapers. In fact, the first movie awards to be announced and handed out were sponsored by the *Manila Times* newspaper and called the Maria Clara Awards, named after the tragic heroine in national hero Jose Rizal’s novels; prior to this, in fact, the *Manila Times* was already known for announcing its year’s best choices, which was how the now-lost *Noli Me Tangere* (dir. Jose Nepomuceno, 1930) acquired canonical status (Torre 50). Two years afterward, the instability of one publication determining nationwide film excellence gave way to the Maria Claras transforming into what became announced as the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences or FAMAS Awards, apparently inspired by the US Oscars, which were presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Unlike the American model, however, the FAMAS remained an organization of entertainment reporters, so the anomaly of its self-declaration as an academy remained a gap waiting to be filled.

The earliest regular film critic on record, T.D. Agcaoili, patterned his career after the French New Wave critics-turned-filmmakers. So when a younger group of critics converged at the *Manila Chronicle*, owned by a politician who turned from serving as Vice President of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. to being an opposition leader, they all observed the same strategy of writing reviews and later wangling film assignments. The members of the group had varying degrees of filmmaking success, but their most celebrated member was Ishmael Bernal, who became the primary friendly rival of the internationally renowned Lino Brocka.

Originary Texts

In tracking the fortunes of Philippine film criticism as centered in the organization that claimed to be its leading progenitor, I will be proceeding from one of the more inspired applications of Pierre Bourdieu's discourse on *Distinction*, from his eponymously titled book. In *The Economy of Prestige*, James F. English's study of, as per the book's title, "prizes, awards, and the circulation of cultural value," the author proposes a suspension of Bourdieu's progressively inflected analysis (more forcefully articulated in Bourdieu's short polemic, "Racisme de l'intelligence") in order to inspect more closely the dynamics behind what he described as the twentieth century's obsession with markers of symbolic value. The consequences of shirking from this call, per English, are twofold: "a strictly cynical or mocking attitude, which economic exposés of the awards scene tend to induce ... [and] the mystified, essentially religious attitude toward culture that would shield artistic practices and artistic value from the kind of scrutiny that deploys economic conceptualizations in a broader sense" (7).

Interestingly, English points up two historical occasions that will be significant in our attempt to evaluate the manner in which the symbolic economy's extreme features emerged and developed in the Philippine cultural context. The first was the introduction of what he considered the first modern award, the Nobel Prize, whose impact on literature was wide-ranging and, more important, controversial from the start. English states that, while controversy can have the potential of sabotaging the credibility of any recent award, prizes handed out by prestigious institutions can ironically have a stronger shot at popularity and, consequently, an extended existence when they are accompanied by accusations of scandalous circumstances, for which he references Bourdieu in arguing that "there is perhaps no device more perfectly suited than scandal to making things happen on the field of culture" (190).

The other development English mentions is the 1960s superstructural shift

that can arguably be regarded as resulting from European cinema's successful challenge against Classical Hollywood: the transition to a so-called weightless economy, affirmed by the eventual abandonment of the dollar/gold standard in 1971, in which "a preponderance of activity concerns trade in such intangible forms of property as knowledge or information, news or entertainment, numbers or options or predictions" (76–77). With this redefinition of economic value, we arrive at the paradoxical situation where although the literal weight of bought and sold goods has remained more or less constant, the increased trade in dematerialized products enabled the global economy to grow five times (circa the first decade of the millennium) since 1972. English's extrapolation of this still-continuing drift allows him to arrive at another surprising conclusion: that no matter how crowded the field of awards and prizes may seem, their proliferation will persist into the future (53–68).¹

The Philippines's alertness to these trends resulted in an ever-increasing flurry of prestige-marking activity. The Nobel Prize for Literature found its Philippine counterpart around the same time that the Maria Clara Awards were announced—and even more impressively, by a captain of industry also anxious to legitimize the product he manufactured. To be sure, Carlos Palanca Sr.'s La Tondeña Incorporada (now Ginebra San Miguel), as an alcoholic-beverage distillery, was far less destructive than Alfred Nobel's dynamite production, although the company's notoriety emerged much later, when the Palanca Award for Literature was secure in its prestige stature: in 1975, the company was the first to experience the first union-organized labor strike under the martial law regime of the Ferdinand Marcos Sr. dictatorship (Fernan).

More than the Nobel or even the most successful (and controversial) literary award, the Man Booker Prize, the Palanca, already recognizing achievements in English plus any number of Philippine languages starting with Filipino, sought

1 The closest the country ever came to the abolition (as opposed to the folding up) of an award-giving group was when the Film Academy of the Philippines was formed in 1981 and announced its intent to hand out awards. As Director-General of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines tasked with implementing the President's Executive Order, Imee Marcos announced that the FAP, comprising guilds of film professionals, will serve as the country's sole authentic academy and replace the FAMAS. Joseph Estrada, then the mayor of the municipality (now city) of San Juan City in Metro Manila, was expecting to be elevated to the FAMAS Hall of Fame in two categories, acting and producing, by winning one more award in each category; he successfully opposed Imee's plan—a rare instance of another Philippine official opposing a member of the dictator's family and surviving. Estrada was subsequently elected President but was ousted via popular protests reminiscent of the people-power revolt that deposed the Marcoses.

to cement its links with the most high-profile cultural activity, that of audiovisual production, by introducing prizes for television and film scriptwriting in 1990 and 1994 respectively, and even adding literally forward-looking categories for futuristic fiction in 2000. Meanwhile, the FAMAS became vulnerable to the interests of the fixed number of major studios during the First Golden Age of Philippine cinema (roughly coexistent with the 1950s), with one of the production outfits withdrawing its participation ironically during the end of the First Golden Age, in 1960.¹

This same studio that refused participation, Sampaguita Pictures, cast its lot with a then-emerging popular politician after the company screen-tested a vivacious and musically inclined beauty queen who was snagged by said politician after a whirlwind courtship. The young and glamorous couple, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, racked up political points—enough to secure them the presidency, according to new journalist Nick Joaquin—after the censors permit for their hagiographical movie, *Iginuhit ng Tadhana [Determined by Fate]: The Ferdinand E. Marcos Story* (directed by Conrado Conde, Jose de Villa, and Mar S. Torres, 1965), was delayed during its premiere night and Imelda consequently shed tears in the theater lobby accusing the incumbent President’s government of censorship (Figure 2). Hence the Marcos couple’s infatuation with cinema, possibly inspired by John F. Kennedy’s successful exploitation of television in his presidential campaign against Richard Nixon, intensified to the point of not just a second biofilm, *Pinagbuklod ng Langit [Conjoined by Heaven]* (directed by Eddie Garcia, 1969) for Marcos’s reelection, but also a scandal-ridden third project, *Maharlika [Guerrilla Strike Force]* (directed by Jerry Hopper, 1970/1987) that arguably became the reason for

1 There have only been two verifiable and largely uncontested Golden Ages in Philippine cinema, despite belated claims that prior and subsequent periods also constituted similar phenomena. The first was more or less concurrent with the revitalization of the local industry after American colonization and during the ascendancy of the oligopolistic studio system during the 1950s, as detailed by journalist and professor Jessie B. Garcia in “The Golden Decade of Filipino Movies” (in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, edited by Rafael Ma. Guerrero, Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983, pp. 39–54). The second occurred during the period of stabilization occasioned by the declaration of martial law during the regime of the elder Ferdinand Marcos until his expulsion by the people-power revolt (1972–86), described by Joel David in “A Second Golden Age: An Informal History” (in *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema*, Pasig City: Anvil, 1990, pp. 1–19). A critique of the Golden Ages concept was also advanced by David in “The Golden Ages of Philippine Cinema: A Critical Reassessment” (in *Millennial Traversals: Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery, Part 1—Traversals within Cinema*, Quezon City: Amateurish Publishing, 2019, pp. 1–15).

Imelda Marcos's rise in cultural dominance in her husband's regime.¹



Figure 2. The Marcos family during their inauguration (left) and as depicted in the campaign flick *Iginuhit ng Tadhana* (right). Although Imee became an active theater presence at the national university and was considered by Lino Brocka to star in his first Cannes filmfest entry *Insiang* (1976), the figure common to both pictures is the actor who portrayed the Marcoses' son: Ferdinand Jr., also known as Bongbong, informally addressed as BBM and elected President in 2022. (Film still from Sampaguita Pictures)

With the political stability enforced by the declaration of martial law in 1972, Filipino film critics were able to embark on more rationalized prestige-making activities. These were two-pronged, comprising first, a reassembling of reviewers (with new recruits) in need of a newspaper outlet after the closure of the opposition-owned *Manila Chronicle*, provided by the *Philippines Daily Express*, owned by a crony of Ferdinand and edited by a relative of Imelda; and second, a deployment to the FAMAS under the supervision of the dean of the national university's then-newly formed Institute, later College, of Mass Communication (now the College of Media and Communication). The latter condition, in effect for two years, coincided

1 Shown overseas in 1970 but released in the Philippines in 1987 after the Marcoses' downfall, *Maharlika* starred an American starlet, Dovie Beams, in what has been her only leading role, as Isabella the martyred girlfriend of Bob Reynolds (played by Paul Burke), who conducted successful guerrilla forays against the Imperial Japanese Army and was intended to bolster Ferdinand Sr.'s claim that he earned a record number of medals from the US Army (subsequently repudiated by the institution). Beams yielded to the man she called "Fred" but after their affair became a media scandal, he denied having known her. Upon learning that her life might be in danger, she called for a press conference where she provided proof of their relationship, in the form of explicit audio recordings of their bedroom sessions. Caroline S. Hau, in "Dovie Beams and Philippine Politics: A President's Scandalous Affair and First Lady Power on the Eve of Martial Law" (in *Philippine Studies: Historic and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, vol. 67, nos. 3-4, 2019, pp. 595-634), ascribes to the Beams affair Imelda's considerable rise in influence during the martial law period.

with the release and subsequent awarding of Brocka's independent breakout efforts, *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* [*Weighed But Found Wanting*] (1974) and *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [*Manila: In the Claws of Light*] (1975), the first Filipino movie to be added to the Criterion Collection, a film buff's wet dream, via Martin Scorsese's World Cinema (film recovery) Project (Figure 3).

LINO BROCKA

Manila in the Claws of Light

— Lino Brocka achieved international acclaim with this candid portrait of 1970s Manila, a breakout example of the more serious-minded filmmaking the director had turned to after building a career on mainstream movies he described as “soaps.” A young fisherman from a provincial village arrives in the capital on a quest to track down his girlfriend, who was lured there with the promise of work and hasn’t been heard from since. In the meantime, he takes a low-wage job at a construction site and witnesses life on the streets, where death strikes without warning, corruption and exploitation are commonplace, and protests hint at escalating civil unrest. Mixing visceral, documentary-like realism with the narrative focus of Hollywood noir and melodrama, *Manila in the Claws of Light* is a howl of anguish from one of the most celebrated figures in Philippine cinema.

Manila in the Claws of Light was restored in 2013 by the Film Development Council of the Philippines and the Cinoteca di Bologna/L’Immagine Ritrovata Laboratory, in association with The Film Foundation’s World Cinema Project, LVN, Cinema Artists Philippines, and Mike De Leon. Restoration funded by Doha Film Institute.

SPECIAL FEATURES

- New 4K digital restoration by the Film Development Council of the Philippines and the Cinoteca di Bologna, in association with The Film Foundation’s World Cinema Project, LVN, Cinema Artists Philippines, and cinematographer Mike De Leon, with uncompressed theatrical soundtrack on the Blu-ray
- Introduction by filmmaker Martin Scorsese
- Signor Lino Brocka, a 1982 documentary about the director by Christian Blackwood
- “Mads”... A Filipino Film, a 2011 documentary about the making of the film, featuring Brocka and actors Hilda Koronel and Rafael Broca Jr.
- New interview with critic, filmmaker, and festival programmer Tony Hagan
- PLUG: An essay by film scholar José B. Capelo

New cover design by Adam Meitz

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Figure 3. The order page of *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* at the Criterion Collection website. (Screen capture from www.criterion.com/films/29221-manila-in-the-claws-of-light)

Critics Crystallize

The *Daily Express* and FAMAS critics banded together in an organization called the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (or Filipino Film Critics Circle, hereafter MPP) in order to hand out annual awards, starting with the year 1976. Their timing was opportune because one of the younger talents of the First Golden Age, Eddie Romero, made his “comeback” from directing Filipino films for US drive-in theaters (thereby initiating a horror subgenre called the Blood Island films, actually an appropriation of a Hammer Films title on Japanese World War II atrocities against Southeast Asian and British nationals set in Indonesia). It was also the year when the most unlikely yet most successful Philippine star, the dark-skinned and recently deceased Nora Aunor, produced her most ambitious film, a period narrative on the Japanese occupation with her character torn between a Filipino guerrilla and a

Filipino-Japanese official. The MPP called their trophy the Urian [Jeweller's Stone] (Figure 4) and gave best film prize to Romero and best actress to Aunor.



Figure 4. Prestige markers in Philippine cinema, left to right, along with the medallion for the Nobel prize for literature: the Maria Clara Award, the FAMAS Award, and the Urian Award. The first two trophies were designed by Guillermo Tolentino, the Urian by Vic Delotavo, and the Nobel by Erik Lindberg. The trophies' commercial afterlife "should be viewed as an extension and amplification of their original function—as a component of the awards game itself ... because every transaction involving that object involves strategic attempts to exchange and manipulate complex forms of value rather than to guard simple ones" (English 183–84; pics from the respective awards' online *Wikipedia* pages)

What has been overlooked by film historians, even those critical of the group, was the MPP's life-achievement prize. The very first one was handed out not to a filmmaker but to a producer, Manuel de Leon, son of the founder of LVN Pictures, responsible for overseeing projects that mostly won major prizes at the Asian Film Festival. The exclusion of Sampaguita Pictures was consistent during the first Marcos presidency, with directors, actors, and technical talents associated with either LVN or Premiere Productions winning the critics' subsequent life-achievement awards. It would take the late 1990s for the first Sampaguita performers to be acknowledged, with ironically the founder's daughter, a member of Imelda's "Blue Ladies" inner circle, given a life-achievement award during the current millennium.

The preference primarily for Premiere-produced films was articulated by the

most senior founding member, Bienvenido Lumbera (“Critic in Academe” source exchange), with a harsh judgment of the interregnum between the First and Second Golden Ages, or the 1960s up to the early 1970s, articulated in his descriptor of this period as an era of “Rampant Commercialism and Artistic Decline” (“Problems in Philippine Film History” 181–84) followed by “New Forces in Contemporary Cinema” (“Problems” 184–86) starting in 1976. Lumbera’s defense of the production strategies of the First Golden Age precisely, and conservatively, centered on its oligopolistic process: “during the 1950s businessmen had more confidence in the industry: ‘If our movie flops, that’s all right. We have a big production scheduled next that will surely draw in the crowds.’ Such a procedure essentially is a rational kind of capitalist thinking” (“Critic in Academe” 62).

The romanticization of the First Golden Age masks a number of troubles that got mentioned in passing even in some of the citations that the MPP prepared for their life-achievement winners. Anita Linda, the first actor winner, described how she participated in a labor strike at Premiere and found herself blacklisted by the other studios (Reyes 420). An even more problematic predicament emerged with the recent declassification of materials by the US State Department, confirming the then-apparent US intervention in the film cultural policies of the region that eventually became known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This involved a recuperation of Japan’s capacity to dominate the countries it had colonized in the territory, when it envisioned a Greater East Asian Cinema as an adjunct of its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere during World War II. The US’s ostensible goal was to stanch the expansion of the socialist bloc by using cinema, with Manuel de Leon as “likely the only influential Southeast Asian film producer still participating in the FPA [the US-sponsored Federation of Motion Picture Producers in Asia-Pacific] during this decade” of the 1960s (Sangjoon 12). Hence the much-vaunted track record of de Leon in the FPA-sponsored Asian Film Festival was in fact attributable to his matching of conservative film material with the FPA’s antiprogressive agenda.

With LVN as a pro-US agent, Sampaguita as a supporter of a then-emerging fascist dictator, and Premiere as a union-buster, the prospect appears to have been dim for Philippine cinema. But in fact, Lumbera’s dismissal of the period after the First Golden Age was precipitate, and had to be qualified even by himself. He remarked, of the period that featured films that became known as *bomba* or bomb, featuring soft-core sexual themes whose unsupervised screenings contained hard-core inserts, that such films deserve to be reevaluated in light of their overt challenge to the strictures of conservatism and denial of women’s prerogatives in acting on

their desires and preferences (“Pelikula” 216).

Moreover, the films of the 1960s were characterized by an impressive, pioneering, taboo-breaking, politically charged vulgarity, of the sort never seen before or since in the country, and that would be essential to explaining why the Second Golden Age held far more promise and managed to meet more expectations than the First. Moreover, most filmmakers who made their mark during the First Golden Age actually produced what a number of people would consider their best products during the subsequent non-“golden” years.¹ The sheer proliferation of innovation alone would be worth a compendium all its own—transformation of actor-producers into auteur-moguls, triple-digit annual production, transitions to color, regularity of regional-language production and international coproduction, eager bandwagoning by politicians, depictions of heretofore unseen images of graphic screen violence, musical teen-idol unruliness, social turmoil, and straight and queer sexualities.

Awards Agonisms

The application of the MPP’s awards concept itself fed into a trend that similarly originated in Europe, but during a premodern period rather than with any of the modern tendencies that emerged in the twentieth century. This proceeded from the simple reality that nearly the entire long-term membership of the MPP comprised professors in the elite consortium constituted by the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, and De La Salle University. Talents associated with these institutions were surer to win than those from, say, the university belt of Manila, with the occasional exception of the University of Santo Tomas; the founding of the national university’s Film Institute in 2003 (preceded by the College of Mass Communication’s Department of Film in 1984) became the primary source of candidates for Urian awards and even for the group’s “best of the decade” awards for films and performers.

The premodern European trend cited by English in his study was the academization of literary prizes in France, where preference was given to entrants who were associated with the Académie Française (English 37–39); the concept

1 Another MPP elder member, Agustin Sotto, echoed Lumbera’s lamentation on the rise of independent producers following the collapse of the studio system, but qualified that “this was also the period when the top directors shot their best works” (“Ninth Period” in “History of Philippine Cinema: 1897–1969” in *Pelikula at Lipunan [Film and Society]: Festival of Filipino Film Classics and Short Films*, Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts Committee, Film Academy of the Philippines, and Movie Workers Welfare Fund, 1994, n.pag.).

became controversial enough even overseas, so that when England announced plans for the founding of the Royal Society, a counterpart institution, Sir Walter Scott sent in 1821 one of the longest letters in his correspondence, addressed to the Honorable Sir John Villiers and described by English as “one of the great documents of prize bashing” (English 42–47; also see Grierson 397–405).

A more politically involved consequence of the imposition of academic preferences was the appraisal of film-texts created by artists whose orientation (and therefore sympathies) lay with the original Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas or Philippine Communist Party, founded in 1930 and distinguished by a history of pro-labor and anticolonial struggle, including successful participation in anti-Japanese resistance during World War II. After experiencing betrayal by the returning US colonizers, the members resumed their guerrilla activities, this time directed at the neocolonial Philippine government. After severe repression and confronted by a successful breakaway party and guerrilla army, the PKP leadership called for its members to surrender in exchange for estates in Mindanao. Films recounting its history of conflict and confrontation with power, mostly made by Celso Ad. Castillo, were initially downgraded in MPP reviews and overlooked in annual awards results, until the addition of ironically younger members enabled Castillo to win major prizes in one year, a feat that he would be unable to repeat afterward (David, “From Cloud to Resistance” part 1, note 1).

While this example of ideological bias can be overcome (as in this case) by insistent internal calls for openness and fairness, a more vexed problem inhered in the awards concept itself and conflicted with the group’s avowed ideals. In attempting to provide consumerist assistance by sifting through the film industry’s releases and announcing the group’s preferences in the form of quarterly citations and annual awards and winners, the group inevitably favored reviewing, rather than criticism, as its primary form of critical practice. The more senior members had critical-writing samples that ranged from reevaluation of pre-existing canons to historical revisionisms, with left-conservative moralizing (premised on binaristic

argumentation) as the most common form of output.¹ Inasmuch as the PKP favored Soviet conventions, the newer progressives tended toward Maoist prescriptions, with Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum* as foundational text (listed in Works Cited under Mao Tse-tung).

And yet, as explicated by English in describing prizes for high art and literature as "strategies of condescension" (189), the implementation of the awards concept violated the film critics group's avowed intent of supporting the community of artists. The process of winnowing achievements in fixed categories on a regular basis led to resentments and disappointments on the part of people who were shut out at any stage of the recognition mechanism, and resulted in forms of lobbying that created complications with the members' tendency to perform maverick

1 Four senior members may be counted as having written scholarly articles, most of them reprinted in various anthologies except for the first: the founding chair, Nestor U. Torre Jr., claimed that an actual Golden Age preceded the period recognized as the first one, necessarily without furnishing proof since all the films he mentioned had not been preserved; incredibly, this was included in the government's arts encyclopedia (see Works Cited). The critic with the least analytical problems was Petronilo Bn. Daroy, whose articles nevertheless suffered from severely flawed readings attributable to the rarity of early-cinema rescreenings; one of the films he critiqued, Gerardo de Leon's *Daigdig ng mga Api [World of the Oppressed]* (1965), is in fact considered lost ("Main Currents in the Filipino Cinema" and "Social Significance and the Filipino Cinema" in *The Urian Anthology 1970-1979*, edited by Nicanor G. Tiongson, Quezon City: Manuel L. Morato, 1983, pp. 48-61 and 126-37 respectively). Bienvenido Lumbera provided articles that were essentially revisions of the canon constructable from the results of the FAMAS awards process ("Kasaysayan at Tunguhin ng Pelikulang Pilipino" or "The History and Prospects of the Filipino Film" and "Approaches to the Filipino Film" in *The Urian Anthology*, pp. 22-47 and 94-101 respectively). Nicanor G. Tiongson's "Four Values in Filipino Drama and Film" dichotomizes standard oppositions in race, presentation, oppression, and worldview, criticizing the preferences for whiteness, spectacle, mastery, and optimism, arguing instead for brownness, realism, liberation, and hopefulness (*The Urian Anthology*, pp. 102-25); as the only still-surviving member, he has published since then articles on film history (see "The Filipino Film Industry" in the *East-West Film Journal* vol. 6, no. 2, 1992, pp. 23-61) as well as another dated universalistic piece titled "Paano Nga Ba Magbasa ng Pelikula? Apat na Dulog sa Pagsusuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino" or "How Should One Actually Read a Film? Four Approaches in Reviewing Filipino Film" (in *Santelmo: Liwanag sa Dilim*, issue 11, 2024, pp. 91-104). Behn Cervantes's "Ganyan Lang Talaga 'Yan" or "That's the Way Things Are" considers Philippine cinema in all its facets and finds it falling short of a progressive-left ideal, consistent with an unmentioned orthodox-Marxist formulation that a capitalist system will be unable to attain socialist ideals (*The Urian Anthology*, pp. 72-79).

decision-making.¹ It resulted in defensive maneuvers where the technical award for best editing, for example, would always have to be adjusted to support whichever film won for best scriptwriting, since elements such as structure, pacing, and narrative tension are shared by both activities.

Hidden Contestations

Even more scandalous in retrospect is the group's otherwise laudable attempts to buck public expectations and select underdogs as their awardees. The selection that resonated for decades was, unsurprisingly, in the 1982 performance category, when the MPP passed over Nora Aunor for *Himala* [*Miracle*] in favor of Vilma Santos for *Relasyon* [*Affair*] (Figure 5). Both films shared the same director (Ishmael Bernal) and a writer (Ricky Lee), who developed differences between them but separately declared to friends and acquaintances that the group was grossly mistaken. In the article that announced that a Second Golden Age transpired nearly during the entire martial-law period, the following became a much-quoted passage: "the one outstanding performance of the period ... belongs to Nora Aunor in *Himala*.... Not since Anita Linda in Gerardo de Leon's *Sisa*, circa the First Golden Age [actually the first Maria Clara best actress awardee in 1951], had there been such a felicitous exploitation by a performer of ideal filmmaking conditions" (David, "A Second Golden Age" 24).



Figure 5. Climactic scenes of *Himala* and *Relasyon*: left, Elsa (Nora Aunor) confesses to her followers that her pregnancy resulted from rape rather than immaculate conception, affirming that supernatural miracles are fraudulent, before a bullet from an anonymous shooter kills her; right,

1 In rejecting the only Urian award he ever won (for *Jaguar* in the 1979 ceremony), Lino Brocka lamented how he preferred the corruption practiced by FAMAS, since nominees only had to bribe the jurors in order to win an award. In contrast, he criticized the MPP for their inability to correct errors that resulted from the members' biases. This was apparently in response to *Jaguar* actor Phillip Salvador losing in the best actor category. See Joel David, "The Night the Critics Gave Out Their Awards," *Philippines Daily Express* (March 4, 1980), pp. 20–21.

Marilou (Vilma Santos), whose married boyfriend suddenly died from cerebral aneurysm, calls her mother to report what happened. (Screen caps from *Experimental Cinema of the Philippines* and *Regal Films* respectively)

As a result, the MPP had to justify their consideration of Santos as superior to Aunor, despite the latter's record of excellence in recording arts and legitimate theater, and allotment of her wealth as the country's most successful multimedia star to productions of art-film projects. Santos was given successive best-actress awards for two more years and generally consistently defeated Aunor in later years when both were nominated, accumulating the biggest number of Urian performance prizes (the director of her third successive Urian-winning performance, Mike de Leon, also complained that he was disappointed by her "wooden" delivery—see Anarcon). The evaluation of the larger community of artists departed from the MPP's: Bernal, like Brocka, was posthumously declared a National Artist, while Lee won the prize in the same year that Aunor did. A millennium-era President, Benigno S. Aquino III, son of the woman who ousted Ferdinand Marcos and succeeded him as President, endured widespread criticism for rejecting an earlier decision by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts to proclaim Aunor (Mongaya; also see "Controversy-Happy").

More than the Palanca Award for Literature, the Order of the National Artist of the Philippines was the country's closest approximation of the Nobel. It was created the same year that martial law was declared and Imelda Marcos was able to convince the country's primary practitioner of literature in English, Nick Joaquin, to accept the recognition by agreeing to free a political prisoner he had mentored. Although more overtly regarded as a strategy for cultural money-laundering, the process has remained free from political intervention, with one millennial-era President, Noynoy Aquino's predecessor Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, being overruled by the Supreme Court for adding her preferences to the list of candidates submitted by the NCCA (Dedace).

A more scandalous reading emerged when an advocacy movie produced by Aunor, titled *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.* [*The Real Life of Pacita M.*] (again scripted by Lee), lost in the film and performance categories to a studio tearjerker that starred Santos, despite all the other award-giving bodies giving the Aunor production these prizes. Elwood Perez, who directed the Aunor film, stated that the MPP would never provide him with any form of recognition because he asked a veteran scriptwriter to fix a screenplay submitted by a senior member. In May 2024, when *Bona* (1980), the Lino Brocka-directed film that Aunor produced, was about

to be relaunched at the Cannes Film Festival, a *Facebook* netizen, a former MPP member who founded and still runs the annual Filipino Arts & Cinema International Festival in San Francisco, California, noted that Aunor's loss in *Himala* was preceded by her prioritizing of a the Brocka project at the expense of a film that the same member also scripted (Tumbocon). The larger irony was that the discreditable member had written one of the moralistic "critical" articles denouncing what he declared were wrong values in Philippine cinema (see footnote on page 88), headed by producers' and audiences' racial preferences for fair-skinned performers and singling out Aunor as exemplary of the type of actor who more closely resembled the profile of the native audience.

A curious trend observed by English was in how awards jurors, owing to a misconception between a field they believe to be flawed and their own habitus which is intended to intervene and rectify these flaws (121–22), tend to aspire for prizes themselves, as a way to justify their right to pass judgment on their peers. The process favors their candidacy, since the arbiters would actually be mostly colleagues of MPP members; hence senior MPP member Lumbera was able to be declared a National Artist for Literature despite a paltry record in comparison with a later winner such as Lee. Current aspirants include the anti-Aunor campaigner—who later turned and supported Aunor when her credibility as opposition figure was recuperated—as well as Santos, Aunor's rival.

Millennial Contentions

The articulation of the group's criteria resided in a formulation that was outmoded as soon as it was announced, pursuant to Lumbera's revision of the pre-MPP film canon to favor political cinema: "In the case of two films which are equally well-made, the film with the more significant subject matter is to be preferred.... Accordingly, the content of a film is considered superior if it is a truthful portrayal of the human condition as perceived by the Filipino, and if it deals with the Filipino experience to which the greater number of moviegoers can relate" ("MPP Criteria" 3).

Such an unstable mergence of formalism with social realism would have led to a revision of the preexisting Philippine film canon (as embodied primarily in the FAMAS Award's listing of nominees and winners, supplemented by occasional international award-winners). As evident in the senior MPP members' historical surveys, led by Lumbera, this resulted in an affirmation of the FAMAS's early roster of winners, with a reordering or even rejection of its heavily compromised post-1950s choices. No upheaval on the order of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s critique of

Classical Hollywood's producer-driven prestige cinema occurred, mainly because the preservation of early film samples already focused on canonizable entries. With the MPP's entrenchment in academic film programs, succeeding generations of critics wound up echoing their elders' preferences, some of them even openly criticizing anti-MPP sectors.

The emergence of digital and social media during the turn of the present millennium reinforced this conservative-left sensibility. Academically trained graduates would attempt the *Cahiers du Cinéma's* historical model of critical noise-making followed by modish, sometimes radical, filmmaking; needless to say, few succeeded and none was able to replicate the feat of Bernal. Personal blogs sprouted up, nearly all of which announced 100-best canons that observed the MPP's preferences, with occasional maverick selections to demonstrate how the authors dared to differ from standard choices. Few of these listings provided citations, often for their first ten selections only; nearly all these blogs have either disappeared or been inactive for a decade or more.

The romanticist drive occasioned by the French New Wave's alleged radicalism yielded one influential opinion leader in Alexis Tioseco, a Canada-raised returnee who assumed his father's business but who claimed he was converted to film fanaticism after watching Lav Diaz's five-hour film noir *Batang West Side* [*West Side Avenue*] (2001). Continuing the tradition of highly subjective auteurist film appreciation, Tioseco brought over his Slovenian girlfriend and immersed in film activities almost entirely, using his blog to rhapsodize over his favorites and providing a much-reprinted wish list as an addendum to a love letter addressed to his girlfriend that championed practitioners that he believed upheld the art of cinema rather than its effectiveness as a vehicle of impacting mass audiences. His popularity attained sensational levels after he hired househelp who could not present clearances from the National Bureau of Investigation; he returned one night from a film event and disrupted burglars who had connived with said househelp, and wound up dead from stab wounds along with his girlfriend.

The incident boosted his romantic status and earned him accolades and book dedications from all over, including an auteurist volume by American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum. The symbolic implication of the offence has rarely been remarked: that this was a violent separation between bourgeoisie with good taste and criminal (termed "lumpen" by Jose Ma. Sison, ideologue of the Communist Party of the Philippines) proletariat. Film as art was imbued with moral ascendancy over box-office cinema.

The MPP of course found ways to update its bias toward social relevance.

Its erstwhile chair (then-concurrent dean of the College of Mass Communication) uploaded on his personal blog his dogmatized assessments of the entries in the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival, castigating in separate years Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil's *Boses [Voices]* (2008) and Marie Jamora's *Ang Nawawala [What Isn't There]* (2012) for attempting to infuse mainstream approaches in independent cinema, which he derisively termed "maindie." His blogposts were eventually deleted but his articulation of his prescription for films worth upholding (including, by implication, being honored by the MPP's awards) appeared in his introduction to *A Reader in Philippine Film*: "Our body of films constitute the country and its national identity. In the experience of our national cinema, these are the films that distinguish themselves because of their high aesthetic quality, capacity for interrogating the nation and national identity, and representation of the marginal and subaltern experience and collectivity" (Tolentino xx, translated by the present author).

The effect of this swing toward a high-art orientation was the severe downgrading of popular, star-driven genre cinema, specifically anything produced by millennial-era major studios as well as independent productions that attempted to replicate their output. In effect, critics tended to champion what audiences refused to watch, and vice versa. The situation became so dire (except from the established critics' perspective) that in the last series of interviews given by Second Golden Age filmmaker Marilou Diaz-Abaya before she succumbed to cancer, she cautioned how respect for the mass audience should be "non-negotiable" and explicated the merits of the then-currently most popular (and consequently most derided) local genre, the romantic comedy (Asian CineVision). Diaz-Abaya's personal ethos derived from the mentorship provided her by Ishmael Bernal; his friendly rival Lino Brocka also subsequently abandoned the art-vs.-commerce binary that he observed even through his global ascendancy and sought to develop projects that combined popular genre-sourced pleasure with strong political statements, before a vehicular accident cut his life short.

Canon Recalibrations

The longer-lasting problem for critical evaluation is the canonical implication of annual film awards. Merely raising a simple question already points up the concept's inherent historical weakness: "Is there always one 'best' film for every year that transpires, so that the MPP's choices over time can constitute a reliable canon listing?" In recognition of the absurdity raised by the query, as well as to add more

winners and extend their award program's running time (and consequent advertising revenues), the MPP would announce its choices for ten best films of the decade as well as a variable number of best performers. The group would naturally resist any attempt at admitting it committed errors, so that the ten films of the decade were, more often than not, merely the same films that won Urian prizes for best picture during their respective years of release.

The variability of production opportunities as well as occasional political and economic crises would logically intervene not just in the regularity of production but also in the artistic community's capacity to focus on the generation of quality output. Even during more encouraging periods, they will have to contend with such unpredictable and generally obstructive governmental policies, starting with censorship and taxation. Finally, the private sector imposes its own requisites in terms of genres, cast, exhibition venues, and so on. The narrative of the Philippines's critics circle's half-century of participation just as egregiously exhibits more problems than it solves: from an incompetence of the typical member in exercising critical thinking through the opportunism of supposedly mature elderly critics in penalizing practitioners who thwarted their career ambitions to the failure of the awards strategy in creating a credible impression of quality achievements of Philippine film artists.

A final example of the third instance should suffice in concluding this account. A nearly complete canon project begun in 2012 covering available regular-length feature-film samples from the beginning to 2020, has resulted in a list of nearly 230 films that may be plotted out in a graph of annual titles (Figure 6).¹ One may note the paucity of early entries, partly due to the difficulty of preserving celluloid in a tropical country but also because of such historical aberrations as the Japanese occupation (1953–45), the declaration of martial law (1972), and the transition to democracy (1986). One year in particular, 1984, yielded an extremely unusual number of passable films, but not only did the Urian select only one “best” film

1 Ironically, the canon project observed the processes instilled by the MPP during their early years. These were: a willingness to cover the widest possible selection of available releases in their best conditions (to preempt biases induced by poor technological conditions), the organizing of a select group to determine entries based on extensive deliberations, the rescreening of titles that had proved controversial or borderline-acceptable, and the articulation, in the form of capsule reviews, of reasons for the selection. In addition, a senior member also provided pointers for the proper appreciation of offbeat films, drawn from genre-transformation studies, star texts, experimental cinema, third-cinema aesthetics, and so on. Where people involved in production were still around, the capsule-review author also attempted to contact them to request answers to problematic elements in the work.

from among four nominees, the members also kept writing reviews that lamented the state of film production and nitpicked with any detail they could find. The vulgar-Marxist-inflected instruction to regard the period of capitalism, exacerbated by fascism as incompatible with the production of progressive cultural products, would have justified this approach ideologically for conservative leftists (Balibar). But afterward, when production fell because of audiences turning against the cultural celebration of the pre-martial law bourgeoisie’s triumph in reclaiming their lost opportunities, the MPP critics quieted down, even deciding at one point not to hold any awards ceremony.

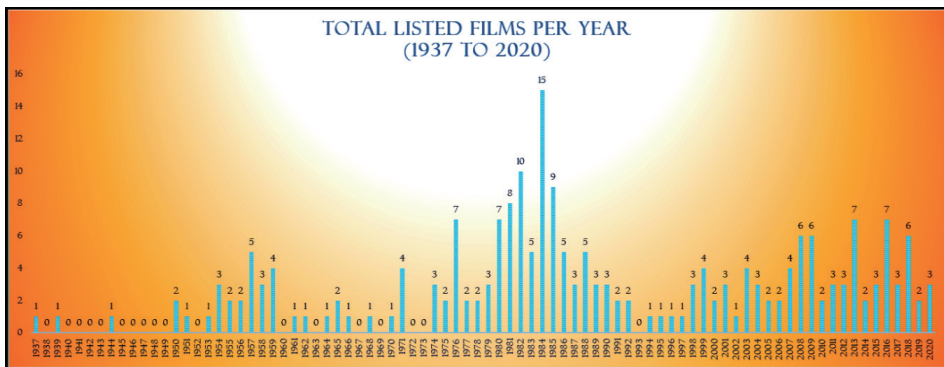


Figure 6. Canonical trends in Philippine film-quality performance. (David, *Canon Decampment*, Amateurish Publishing, 2023, posted at amateurish.com/2023/11/14/canon-decampment/)

The preceding study of the intervention of the original organization of film critics in Philippine cinema, in making use of principles and examples observed by Bourdieu and extended by succeeding practitioners (particularly English) has led to similar conclusions: that more questions demand to be answered, and that these efforts at the construction of distinction might have more destructive effects if the problems they raised remain unattended.

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