THE NATIONAL PASTIME
—CONTEMPORARY—
PHILIPPINE CINEMA

JOEL DAVID

With an introduction by Bienvenido Lumbera

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Opening Credits

Everything in the body of this anthology was intended for publication during a specific period in the past, and so is marked by the date of the particular newspaper, magazine, or journal where it appeared. Only in a few instances was the process unconsummated, but never for want of trying; in such cases I nevertheless indicated the month and year during which these should have been printed. Also, where editorial differences led to revisions in the published text, I sought to restore what had been in the original manuscript.

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Introduction

In the Philippines today where, we are told, about one third of the population of the capital city consists of moviegoers, it may be safely said that only a very few are serious moviegoers. When one of these serious moviegoers turns into a film critic the way Joel David did in the late seventies, he finds himself searching for the rest of the few so that he can engage them in a dialog. He writes reviews for the dailies and the weekly magazines and, if he is fortunate enough to find an interested journal that comes out once or twice during the year, he produces a critique, all the while hoping to connect with kindred spirits. Into this scene now steps our young serious moviegoer-turned-critic who has collected some of his essays into a book in a bid to reach the rest of the few other serious moviegoers and, hopefully, to make contact with new ones.

When Joel David became the youngest member of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino in 1980, he joined an assortment of serious moviegoers a number of whom were his senior by many years. In that company, he must have found out that even among the ranks of serious moviegoers people were coming from many directions, and only a passionate faith in the powers of film held them together. In time he was to drop out of the MPP, and away from the banter and aesthetic and political discourse of the company, he was to become one of the most prolific critics in town, finally ensconcing himself as the “reviewer in residence” of National Midweek magazine.

As a reviewer, David is not one to breeze through when you are in a hurry to find out what to see. As a matter of fact, he grabs hold of you when you allow him, and demands that you think along with him, engaging you in dialog which does not leave you in any kind of intellectual repose. After he has let go of your proverbial collar, then you realize that David stands apart as a reviewer because he has been touched by film theory as no other regular reviewer active hereabouts had been. Contact with theory inevitably leaves a mark on any reviewer’s vocabulary and syntax even, rendering his language “difficult.” When a critic, under the influence of theory, translates visual experience into verbal terms, his language assumes an aspect of remoteness even as it seeks to connect with the readers. This has happened in David’s case, making it necessary to read him in book form rather than in isolated reviews.

In what might be held up as the young critic’s apologia for his practice, David writes in “World’s Shortest Prequel” about a childhood
game of launching paper boats on the floodwaters of Sampaloc and marveling at the rainbow-colored patterns left on the murky waters by what he fancifully calls “automobile spillage”:

How to convey the values and dimensions of this primal aesthetic experience has been the greater challenge of my work as film critic and instructor.

The “confession” cues us into the seriousness with which David takes his role as a commentator on contemporary Philippine cinema and bids us pay patient attention. The vast and variegated array of feature films serving as specimens in his account of the continuities and disruptions in the contemporary Philippine film industry convinces us of his assiduousness and earns him credulity both as critic and incipient theorist. We may not always agree with him, but if he is able to make us reflect on what we had seen on the screen and to respond to it on our own, we will have learned from our dialog with him. With certain critics whose reviews are no more than an elaboration of personal taste and preference, we may disagree and come away with nothing more than a sense of having disposed of an ill-considered opinion. David does not let us off that easily. After an encounter with him, we come away feeling that our assumed verities have been challenged and that, possibly, we ought to re-view our experience of a particular film.

The appearance of The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema adds one more title to the short list of film books available to Filipinos interested in a deeper understanding of their own culture. Among the other items in that list are Readings in Philippine Cinema (Rafael Ma. Guerrero, ed.), The Urian Anthology 1970-1979 (Nicanor G. Tiongson, ed.), Movie Times (Isagani R. Cruz), Notes on Philippine Cinema (Emmanuel A. Reyes), and Short Film: Emergence of a New Philippine Cinema (Nick Deocampo). Joel David’s book will have earned its place in the list when its theoretical temper begins to impress itself on the consciousness of moviegoers who manifest heightened awareness of the seriousness of their pastime.

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