Wages of Cinema

Film in Philippine Perspective

Joel David

University of the Philippines Press
Diliman, Quezon City
1998
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JOEL DAVID'S *The Wages of Cinema* is his third book of film criticism. The first two were *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema*, and *Fields of Vision: Critical Applications in Philippine Cinema*. Both in the range of their subjects as well as in their insight, all three books already constitute an important contribution to Philippine film criticism.

The essays in the present collection, as in the previous two, were initially written as papers for various conferences, or as articles for popular publications. Film is, after all, a popular medium, and the first film essays of Joel David saw publication in, among others, the radical magazine *National Midweek*.

The academic tone and diction of these essays belie their attempts to address issues in the writing, production and criticism of what, as his first book points out, is among the most favored of pastimes in the
Philippines—a pastime perhaps as favored in this country as partisan politics.

But popular as Philippine film is, what it has long needed is precisely the kind of understanding of its various manifestations and developments, as well as its problem and possibilities, that only academia can provide, given the complex relationships and loyalties that afflict those in the industry itself who would attempt the same task.

Film criticism in the Philippines has mostly been a journalistic enterprise, in the past driven by the need to fill empty newspaper space, and, quite often, by the conflicting loyalties of publicists. This began to change in the late 60s, as university-trained critics broke into journalism and began to seriously assess the strengths and weaknesses of films towards that end common to all criticism: the improvement of the genre. The serious criticism of film, however, has since the martial law period been sporadic and occasional, lacking the sustainability that a consistent vision can provide.

The critical efforts of Joel David have been, since he began writing in the 80s, among the most consistent as well as the most comprehensive, addressing such diverse and necessary concerns as audience response and the Filipino documentary.

Not all academics are necessarily equal to the effort. But in Joel David we have someone whose involvement in and love for the medium have created a body of work that in this particular time both Philippine cinema as well as the study of it sorely needs.

Luis V. Teodoro
UP Diliman
April 15, 1998
PREFAE

The main psychological barrier I encountered in presenting a third volume of similar material for publication is the anxiety deriving from a naturalized Western expectation; that it would be, if not the best (after good and better), then at least the resolution, after exposition and development. How I wish that were so in the case of this, my third book on cinema in the Philippines. Oddly enough, the earlier motives that I could not overcome in the first two books—The National Pastime and Fields of Vision—have somehow managed to inscribe themselves in the present volume. These consist of two related tendencies that perhaps typify the situation of writing (in the traditional sense) in our cultural context: where, for larger historical reasons, cultural production has outpaced critical analysis, writers with ambitious critical projects will often enough find themselves in the predicament of having to set the very same groundwork that good criticism seeks to probe
into, modify, and even repudiate; partly as a consequence of this difficulty, I have always regarded my findings as provisional, subject to further discoveries both at the basic empirical level and at the theoretical level as well.

These qualifications I hope should temper whatever enthusiasms may arise in response to the present volume. Readers who might want to insist on building (or demolishing) what can now be called a body of work on the basis of a progression (or regression) from reviews in the first book, old critical approaches in the second, and new theoretical discourses in the current one are of course entitled to do so. It might even be possible to read a similar attempt at structuring in *Wages of Cinema*, in the book’s observation of a teleological mapping of postmodernist concerns in cultural theory, with an international component coming in from left field, as it were. I wonder, however, if real life could be just as definitive.

For one thing, I had always considered foreign-film commentary crucial to the critical practice of any sufficiently cosmopolitan national cinema, and therefore I endeavored to produce reviews of then-current foreign-film exhibitions alongside my usual (and now extensively anthologized) articles on local cinema. Perhaps I should have published an intermediate volume of such reviews, but the absurdity of reading them out of their sociohistorical context was compounded by the danger of regarding these pieces as circulating within and measurable against the canons of Western film criticism. In fact, I had had chapters comprising foreign-film reviews in each of my previous books, but my reservations regarding their effectiveness vis-à-vis the articles on local cinema won out.

The current volume’s essays were produced in the course of roughly an academic generation, initially as papers that sometimes made their way to conferences and occasionally as texts written for purposes other than academic credit, minus the few constraints (and many fulfillments) of working within an active national and industrial imaginary. The pressures I had to deal with in overseas graduate studies had to do with the general one of survival, the more specific one of growing in seriously differential ways from my cultural roots (a fact that
never failed to frustrate and confound me whenever I visited the Philippines), and the peculiar one of trying to meet my non-Filipino readers, including faculty advisers, in terms, including choices of film texts, that they could be capable of responding to.

Hence I should indulge in my standard gripe that foreign students get a rawer deal in the First World, particularly if their disadvantages are compounded by circumstances of race, class, and sexuality, but then I should also be the first to know that there are enough exceptions around to challenge this notion; moreover, I have somehow come to suspect such universalizing tendencies as not entirely free of false modesty and reverse egotism—something on the order of one’s being ennobled by having suffered more than others did.

As far as I can relate, then, my growth as an academic (which did not start only after I left my home country—an obvious point which I feel cannot be overemphasized) did not strictly observe the pattern presented by this book. That is, I did not start out obsessed with “Subjectivities,” refining these further with “Specificities,” and finally graduating (as I have not, yet) with “Sexualities,” just as I never began consuming and commenting on foreign movies only upon leaving the Philippines. It might be more accurate to say that I was always sexual and subjective from the start, and am still concerned at present with questions of history and cultural distinction—questions that fortunately tend to cut across barriers of nation, culture, and period. On an even more literal level, if one were to chronologize the essays compiled here, one would have to keep leaping from one category to another, even crossing halfway around the world at certain points.

These categories then are necessarily artificial designations—a fact that applies not just to the basic principle of cultural studies in general, but to the purposes of the individual essays in particular. More than in the case of my previous books, I find myself wishing each one (some more than others) were inventive and self-sufficient enough to stand independent of the rest. In the end, I find myself countering that such is the function of a collection, where each piece serves to complete and is completed by the others, and where any exceptions should actually be the ones that do not belong. My personal favorites (perhaps the
most fluid qualifier of all) seem to be the ones that happen to raise issues that critical writing and analysis can never hope to answer by themselves. A psychoanalyst might be able to establish deeper and darker reasons for such an outlook; to the best of my knowledge, the only thing I can recognize on my part is a desire to keep at it, meaning productive discourse, with the prospect of failure a necessary risk and that of success an outcome of good timing, better luck, and the best possible readership ("best" here denoting as much generosity and patience as intellectual ardency). Given such undue fatalism, even I might not be able to tell what kind of critical project I could be able to come up with next. This then is where the reader steps in.

New York City
August 1997
Laura Samson, Luis Teodoro, Ellen J. Pagлинаuan, Delia Barcelona, Carol Hau, Gley Atienza, Susan Quimpo, Roland Tolentino, Mau Tumbocon; Maurine Haver, President, Haver Analytics; Myra Cruz Valencia, Joseph Aguinaldo, John Dencker, Luc Bontemps; Heidi Pizarro, Elizabeth Velasco, Ellen Geronimo, Edith Banton Lucila, Ophelia Miller Segovia, Prescy and Demetrio David; Annie and Mike Molina; Charmian Uy and Tina and Ed Baluyut; David Bentley, Gregory Panteix, Sven Diehl, Daniel Doubleday, André Dronigke, Jens Gräf, Paul “Heinz” Felix, Viola Rothe and Frank Bretag; Ricardo Lee, Melanie Garduño, Rowena Raganit, Rod Tarlit, and the Third World Studies Center of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines.