Readings in Philippine Cinema
Edited with an Introduction by
Rafael Ma. Guerrero

Experimental Cinema of the Philippines
1983
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THE GOLDEN DECADE OF FILIPINO MOVIES

by Jessie B. Garcia

The history of Filipino movies can perhaps roughly be summarized as follows: from 1) the glimmering, daguerreotype-figures broadly acting out one-dimensional roles in cut-and-dried situations of the crude silents; to 2) the Pepe-and-Pilar-are-in-love-so-they-sing-a-duet-under-the-tree stage; to 3) the pseudo-sophisticated spy-thriller which spells oomph, karate chops and nothing else; to 4) the labored, orgasmic gasp of our coital cinema.

Storywise, film-making in the Philippines has indeed degenerated. Filipino movies of the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s vintage also ran the gamut from saccharine to syrup, but they manifested an overriding earnestness, a sort of dubious honesty. For all their calculated gasps and sniffs, homilies and heehaws, they treated about typically Filipino characters within typically Filipino settings.

The direction may have been unimaginative and plodding, the acting broad and silly, the technical aspects ostentatiously crude and antediluvian — but what the heck, these films were as native to us as puto and dinuguan! 1

If the movies of yesteryears illustrate the crude, good-natured crumminess of movies without art, the bumper crop of present Filipino films exhibit the last word in gross dishonesty, vulgarity and plain stupidity. Most local films today have simply jettisoned the idea, or even the semblance, of a storyline.

The present formula of most local producers apparently runs this way: just let the hero and villain confront each other with six-shooters in the town plaza, add a liberal dose of bare tits and gaping pudenda, further add a dash of gore, spice it with erotic goings-on which are not even hinted at in the Kama-Sutra, mix well with tears, slapstick and hysteria, and — presto! — you have a superhit!

It is true most Filipino movies of today may be technically superior to their counterparts of past decades, but
this advancement manifests itself in no great measure other than the sedulous aping of pseudo-sophisticated technical devices from foreign films as zoom shots, soft-fading-into-focus and other fancy innovations. Artistically, the best output of present film-makers pale significantly in comparison to what the past decades, most especially the Fifties, have brought us.

Aaaaaahhhhh — the Fifties! Any avid Filipino movie fan who is past twenty may still treasure fond memories of those gay Fifties when local movies rode the waves of cash and ballyhoo. For local producers, it was indeed the days of wine and roses. Film materials were comparatively cheaper then; the prospects of making hay at the box-office were tremendously endless; any relative unknown, with enough studio hooptedoodle and fanfare, could be launched into superstardom.

The acknowledged “Big Four” of local movies — Sampaguita, LVN, Premiere and Lebran Productions — ground out movies like potted meat, and canned them like pork-and-beans. For the movie stars, it meant a fairy-tale existence onscreen — an ugly duckling who turns overnight into a dazzling beauty; prince now, pauper tomorrow.

For the dearly-beloved movie fan, the situation then was as it is now, only even more so. Omnipresent talent scouts sometimes “discover” an artista super anywhere — in basketball backlots, in dingy turo-turos, during studio open house. Starry-eyed, teenaged provincianas — not yet weaned from their Nanay’s influence, not even out of high school — hitched their wagons to a star, both in the literal and figurative sense. To any impressionable lad and lass, being an artista meant money, fame, glamour—in that order. Then, as it still is now, to be an artista was the Great Filipino Dream.

Decolonization

The only difference is that a sort of decolonization had taken place in the superstar image. During the Fifties, for instance, the stereotyped image of the bidang babae — the vestal virgin type — prevailed in Filipino movies: pretty, tall, well-shaped, fair-complexioned, preferably with Caucasian features. In other words, someone who looked like Gloria Romero. If you did not possess such physical endowments, it was better to go back to cigarette-hawking, hija, unless you wanted to compete with Aruray.
Nowadays, however, anybody who is as plain as brown wrapper can aspire to superstardom, provided she can cry a little, dance a little, and sing a lot. If there is one thing the Horatio Alger story of the little Bicolana marvel has wrought on the values of Filipino movies and moviegoers, it lies in having elevated poverty and physical plainness to veritable virtues.

The same thing holds true with the present crop of our *bidang lalake* — the *pogi*, well-built *tisoy*, although far from being extinct, is as believable to present cinegoers as, well, Prince Charming of the fairy tale. Being plain, being *barako*, being undoubtedly Filipino-looking is no hindrance to being a movie star nowadays. After all, if someone with Max Alvarado or Bino Garcia’s pugnacious looks can make the grade, why can’t others of infinitely pleasanter features do the same?

It was the Fifties which supplied us with stars whose luminescence has not dimmed even after the passing of decades. Gloria Romero and Nida Blanca — the two superstars who dominated the local flickerville of the Fifties — are still very much around, well and kicking. The mid-Fifties brought into orbit two relative unknowns who assumed the screen monickers of Amalia Fuentes and Susan Roces. Chosen from among a galaxy of pretty faces, the late Fifties witnessed their stars on the ascendency, which later waxed fully and dominated the screenland’s Milky Way all throughout the Sixties.
This decade in Filipino movies was ushered in by films of unbridled fancy, light hearts and heavy budgets. An industry reeling from the effects of war immediately set its sight on the commercial possibilities of films dealing with the never-neverland of whimsy and imagination. Why was this so?

One may hazard a psychological guess: after living for several years under the shadow of Japanese atrocities, local moviemakers may have been simply letting off steam, so to speak, using the film medium as an escape hatch for their creative faculties that were suppressed during the Japanese domination.

But that’s even going a bit too far. It can be surmised, too, that local audiences were plainly channeling their instinctive desire to forget their wartime travails through patronage of films dealing with the supernatural, the fantastic, the incredulous. But more likely than not, the answer lies plainly in the fact that fantasy films have always been very good investment at the box-office.

Thus, the most fantastically popular and top-grossing movies at the turn of the decade up to the mid-Fifties came primarily from the now defunct LVN studio, which was then enjoying its heyday. The studio costume epics of this period can lay claim to being some of the best kitsch local moviemakers ever turned out.

Indeed, Prinsipe Amante, its sequel Prinsipe Amante sa Rubitanya, Rodrigo de Villa, Doce Pares, Príncipe Tinioso, Singsing na Tanso, Sohrab at Rustum belong to that type of film which, sad to say, they don’t make anymore.

These films were an admixture of the Arabian Nights, King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, the Cid, Alice in Wonderland, Robin Hood and his merry brigands of Sherwood Forest, the swashbuckling exploits of Zorro, the amorous adventures of Don Juan with assorted characters from local mythology and demonology also thrown in for good measure.

One may reason out that at present, only the kiddies are likely to sit through such bushwa. However, the genre’s phenomenal success was reflective of moviegoers’ taste during the Fifties, in much the same way that the mass appeal of Love Story is indeed symptomatic of the present film audiences’ jaded appetite for cheap sex-and-violence stuff and their desire for a return to the basic essentials — love plus romance.

The world of eternal romance — this, fantastic photo-
plays supply, and much more. These films were ablaze with color, reeling with action, pomp and pageantry. The romance is swathed in decor, the violence innocuously portrayed with tomato ketchup and composed corpses.

Such films bring one back to the crumbling temples of one’s youthful, hooky-playing days at the nearby bug-infested theater — you know, when the volcano finally blows up and the evil monster is slain, and the prince saves the princess from the clutches of the dastardly villain.

The logic of the never-neverland of make-believe and magic lies in its keeping depression out of sight and out of mind, though mostly for only a good two hours. One can watch them secure in the knowledge that the world inhabited by Mario Montenegro (as Rodrigo) and Delia Razon (as his ladylove, Princess Jimena) is as distant as the stars and won’t in any way interfere with one’s thread of life as soon as the two hours are over.

“It’s all just stardust, see,” these films seem to say. In the one-dimensional portrayal of good-looking heroes and beautiful heroines triumphing over all obstacles in the cloud cuckooland of imagination, we see an elemental image of ourselves being projected on the screen, larger than the canvas of our uneventful lives, our daily burdens and frustrations.

Other variations of the fantastic and the unreal suffused the screens of the early Fifties. Lamberto Avellana’s Satur — with Manuel Conde playing the Beelzebub role — was a new reworking of the Mephistopheles myth. So was Gerardo de Leon’s Kamay ni Satanas. Sampaguita Productions’ Bernardo Carpio, an Alicia Vergel-Cesar Ramirez starrer, deals with the exploits of the famous strongman of Philippine mythology.

Fernando Poe Sr.’s definitive version of Mars Ravelo’s Darna — which starred Rosa del Rosario — started a whole cycle of female-superwoman flicks which reverberated up to the late Sixties as Liza Moreno, Gina Alonzo and Gina Pareño took turns in donning the famous cloak and Alakazam-ing their way across the starry heavens.

Darna and Og, the local Tarzan, were the culture heroes of the kiddies during the Fifties, in a manner akin to the hero-worship accorded by American kids to their own comic book heroes like Superman or Batman. Other notable screen creations of the Fifties which caught our movie public’s fancy were: Exzur, the mysterious visitor from outer space; Ramadal, the local invisible man; Bondying, the middle-aged
baby; Silveria, the talking horse; Kapitan Berong and the tulisang pugot; Kenkoy; the cigar-chomping Dalagang Ilokanapa; Dyesebel, the beautiful, lovelorn mermaid; and later on, the members of the Lo-Waist Gang.

Manuel Conde, the acknowledged showman of the Fifties, widened the horizons of the fantastic film genre as no moviemaker of his time did. His film incursions into the world of the magical, the fantastic, the supernatural have resulted in such memorable, lavishly-budgeted blockbusters of the Fifties like Siete Infantes de Lara, Apat na Alas, Prinsipe Paris, Ibong Adarna, to mention a few.

All were done in Ansco color, a novelty during those days. Conde's best works are indeed the closest thing to the film epic that local movies have ever essayed. His films have scope and a sort of primitive grandeur. The budget for his films - certainly astronomical by local standards - manifests itself overtly; in the lavish costumes and sets, expressly designed for his films by artist Carlos V. Francisco, and in the impressive camera tricks whipped up by Richard Abelardo, then acknowledged as the dean of Filipino camera wizards.

One of Conde's famous super-spectaculars is Lebran's Sigfredo in which he played the mythical hero Siegfried,
with Elvira Reyes as Brunhilde, and Erlinda Cortes as Kriemhilde of the German myth. The film, loosely based on Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, featured fire-breathing dragons, giants, dwarfs and other legendary denizens of the bogey world. The “miracles” Conde created on the one-dimensional screen in fact earned him the flattering title “the Filipino Cecil B. deMille.”

Undoubtedly, the crowning glory of Conde’s achievements is his pseudo film-biography of Temujin, or, as he is popularly known, Genghis Khan, the savage Mongol conqueror of the 13th century. In a series of broad episodes, Conde’s film chronicles Genghis Khan’s struggle on the Gobi plain with the dominating Karait tribe and its leaders; his miraculous escapes from his enemies; the rise of the Mongol military power; the courtship of Princess Li-Hai; and finally the victorious “earth-shaker” swearing the oath of world conquest, which later he almost fulfilled.

*Genghis Khan* was the official Philippine entry to the 1952 Venice Film Festival, the first attempt whatsoever of the fledgling local movie industry to crash a prestigious international filmfest. The attempt did not go unrewarded, however. It was adjudged as one of the outstanding pictures entered in the said filmfest.

To date, no other Filipino movie has duplicated the feat. In fact, the film created quite a big stir in that great European festival that United Artists decided to take it for American distribution.

In the print released all over the US, the Tagalog dialogue had not been scrapped, but from time to time the sound is muted and the action explained in an English narration written by the late James Agee, considered to be the best film critic America has ever produced. What must have motivated United Artists to take *Genghis Khan* for American distribution was the succès d’estime of a previous Venice Festival winner — Akira Kurosawa’s masterpiece *Rashomon* — which played to capacity audiences when it made the rounds of America’s art-house circuits.

**Favorable Reviews**

Of course, *Genghis Khan* is no *Rashomon*, but all the same, it painted the Philippines red in America’s respectable film circles. The reviews of *Genghis Khan* which appeared in widely-circulated American magazines, were generally favorable.
Arthur Knight, film critic of the Saturday Review of Literature had this to say: “The Philippines' Genghis Khan is a romanticized account of that half-legendary Chinese conqueror's formative years, but omitting none of the bloodshed commonly associated with his name. Primitive in most respects — including acting, make-up, sound and processing — it still has moments of curiously impressive power and intensity, a delight in the sheer production of a film.”

Knight further heaps praises on the film’s fresh approach, the certain roughness of execution and crude earnestness of intention which are not the least of its recommendations.

The critic of Time magazine made much of the film's striking resemblance to a rudimentary Hollywood western: “Manuel Conde plays the part of Genghis Khan as a rather handsome, ferocious, cunning but likable fellow, a sort of medieval Shane roaming the Gobi desert. The picture traces his career from his youthful nomad days to his campaign of world conquest. Although the movie may offer nothing much of historical significance, it is undoubtedly an excellent outlet for the pent-up aggressions of well-behaved moviegoers. Filmed on a large scale, it has both barbaric splendor and fighting frenzy.”

In an article entitled “The Screen — Authentic Comments on Films in the field of Nature, Geography and Exploration” published by the Natural History (the magazine of the American Museum of Natural History), a long column was expressly devoted to Genghis Khan. Dr. Walter A. Fairervis, an eminent scientist who had conducted many explorations in Mongolia — the very territory from which the Great Khan originated — has made many astute remarks about the film:

“Technically the faults of the picture are many; the geographic background (it is told in the narration that the territory represents the Gobi plains, but is actually the Philippine Islands), and the material culture are scarcely Mongol. Nevertheless, the Filipino awe at the famous leader, combined with a wonderful enthusiasm for the story, has brought out a kind of contagious spirit, which may well be akin to that of Temujin and his contemporaries. The Tagalog language, the enthusiastic broad acting, the zeal expressed in the scenes of feasting, quarreling, intriguing, and fighting, and the excellent music effects have a strong appeal.
The story is told without subtlety or refinement, which is perhaps more nearly valid for the Mongols than the pale imitations Hollywood often uses, for people of this ilk.”

Film critic Parker Tyler of the *Theater Arts* believed that the film sometimes appeared “amateurishly awkward and thin”; at other times, though, the savage legend of the Mongolian “world conqueror” appeared “majestic and eloquent in its straightforward manner.” The highest tribute ever accorded to Conde’s film was in Tyler’s opinion that *Genghis Khan* was slightly reminiscent of old-style, Russian hero-sagas, such as *Storm Over Asia*, an acknowledged masterpiece of Russian classic cinema.

No other Filipino photoplay has ever earned such generous plaudits from American critics.

The American TV *Key Movie Guide*, a pocketbook edited by Steven H. Scheuer, also recognized the artistic superiority of the Philippine version of the Temujin counterparts. In the book’s rating, Conde’s version earned three stars (meaning “good”), whereas, the expensive, name-frighted Columbia Pictures’ super-spectacular *Genghis Khan* — made in 1963 with such famous names as Omar Sharif, Stephen Boyd and James Mason in the cast — merited only two stars (“fair”). Another multi-million dollar production of Genghis Khan’s story — RKO’s *The Conqueror* which starred John Wayne and Susan Hayward — was good for exactly one star (“poor”).

Conde later went on to make other big-budgeted film ventures — “mammoth spectacles” and “monumental blockbusters”, to repeat the jargon of movie mags. In fact, he tried to surpass himself during the succeeding years in such ambitious undertakings as *The Fire and the Shadow* (later entitled *Krus na Kawayan*), the first joint Filipino-Vietnamese movie undertaking in history; *Juan Tamad Goes to Congress* and its sequel *Juan Tamad Goes to Society*.

The budget and scope of *Krus na Kawayan* was later on surpassed by Gerardo de Leon’s *Saigon*, which starred Leopoldo Salcedo, and whose impressive credits included being the first Philippine movie venture in Vietnam. The unique cast featured top Vietnamese actresses, officers and crew of the American warship, the USS Seminole, and thousands of Vietnamese refugees fleeing from Communist-dominated North Vietnam.

As for Conde’s *Juan Tamad* series, they are virtual masterpieces of that very rare genre — the satirical film.
Done in a humorous, sometimes biting-acidic vein, the series poked fun at our cherished political, social and cultural institutions, as well as highlighting the foibles and the “little murders” which plague modern Filipino life.

The film’s characters may be the stereotyped buffoons of a comic strip, and may be garbed in outlandish costumes, but they are as true as one’s next-door neighbors. The series was an attempt to reflect what the great mass of people felt as it contemplated the passing scene during the Fifties. Another effective use of satire on film was in the movie version of Fr. Horacio de la Costa’s popular radio serial Kuwentong Kutsero, which portrayed a low middle-class urban Filipino family as it copes with the day-to-day vicissitudes of modern life.

A further extension of the big-budgeted, power-packed-cast trend in local filmmaking during those times manifested itself in the Biblical costume epics which were not only an ubiquitous presence onscreen during the Lenten season, but infinitely more exciting than a long draw-out novena.

This was the specialty of Lebran Productions which turned out such worthy contributions to the genre as Kalbaryo Ni Hesus (with a star-studded cast, among them Norma Blancaflor as the Virgin Mary and Elvira Reyes as Mary Magdalene) and Ang Pagsilang ng Mesiyas. Both films were directed by the late Carlos Vander Tolosa. Another famous religious film of the Fifties was Himala ng Birhen ng Mga Rosas with Tita Duran as a novice.

The Fifties also turned out a spate of historical films based on the famous sagas of local legendary heroes. There was Premiere’s Diego Silang, with Jose Padilla, Jr. as Northern Luzon’s famous revolutionary hero, and LVN’s Dagohoy and Lapu-Lapu, with Mario Montenegro portraying both valiant fighters for freedom.

One of the best film biographies ever cranked out by local film-makers is Ramon Estella’s Ang Buhay at Pag-ibig ni Dr. Jose Rizal, with the phlegmatic Eddie del Mar turning in a subtle and dignified performance as the Great Malayan.

The blood-and-thunder photoplays of the Fifties — for all their one-dimensional characters, stereotyped plots, and contrived endings — have a crude vigor, an innocent earnestness. With stony panache, these films hurl the viewer into the gangbang affair of film-making and there is never a lag of interest, never a dull moment. They are pure hokum all right, but compared to the present shoot-them-for-the-mo-
ron trade dished out practically overnight by our producers, the Fifties brand of horse operas are infinitely blessed with style, charm and childlike gusto.

Eddie Romero’s Ang Huling Mandirigma — which tells about the tribal feud between the Mandayans and the peaceful Subanons of Southern Mindanao — is one of the best examples of the genre. Ang Kampana sa San Diego, Kamandag, Condenado, Venganza, Kilabot sa Makiling and many others treat about simple, humble men-of-peace who become fearless outlaws as a result of the injustices and persecution perpetrated on them and their loved ones by the guardia civiles and the Spanish government.

These pictures stick to the old formula of love-vengeance-violence, like icing to a cake. Even Gerardo de Leon’s much awarded Ifugao uses one of the oldest Western film archetypes, the “cavalry and injun” stuff, the film’s locale as well as characters having been merely transposed to the Philippine setting. Thus the Ifugaos merely replace the redskins to give the picture the local touch. Expensive co-production ventures between local moviemakers and foreign film-producing outfits — like The Day Of The Trumpet, Sanda Wong and Treasure Of Yamashita — also fit into the well-worn groove of blood-and-thunder sagas.

It was also the Fifties which saw a number of “firsts” in local movie history. Premiere made the first quartet — four separate stories in one picture — the historic Apat na Kasaysayang Ginto. Patterned after the British film Quartette

![Eddie del Mar as the Great Malayan in Ramon Estella's Buhay at Pag-ibig ni Dr. Jose Rizal.](image)
which was adapted from four of William Somerset Maugham’s stories, *Apat* had an outsize posse of feature players. It belied the popular opinion among detractors of Filipino movies that local films could never make peaceful bedfellows of box-office and artistry.  
A clutch of omnibus films later came in quick succession after the success of *Apat*. There was *Bicol Express*, also from Premiere, *Casa Grande* and *Medalyong Perlas*, both in Ansco color, from LVN. The last one is possibly the best of its genre. It tells the story of a mysterious pearl and how it affects the lives of those who happen to possess it.  
Other noteworthy “firsts” in Filipino movies were chalked up during this period:

Sampaguita’s *Pagoda* — the first Filipino movie filmed abroad.

LVN’s *Havayana* — the first co-production venture between the Philippines and Indonesia.

People’s Picture’s *Obra Maestra* — the first Filipino movie filmed in five key Asian cities.

Premiere’s *Exzur* — the first Filipino sci-fi photoplay.

LVN’s *Tuko sa Madre Kakaw* — the first local film which deals with an atomic monster.

Premiere’s *Tokyo, 1960* — the first Filipino monster film shot abroad.

Premiere’s *Low-Waist Gang* — the first of a lucrative series which spawned a host of imitations, like *The H-Line Gang*.

The decade was not bereft of its share of controversial films. *Sex Gang* was a good film expose of the white-slave market. A 1957 thriller, *Objective: Patayin si Magsaysay* recounted the plot to assassinate the late President before his untimely death at Mt. Manunggal. Gerardo de Leon’s *Hanggang Sa Dulo Ng Daigdig* started out as a cinebiography of the notorious criminal Nardong Putik.

However, military authorities objected to the project, on the ground that the film might subsequently glorify the criminal and his crimes. After several changes of title and script, the finished product meeged by De Leon bore very little resemblance, if any at all, to the originally-conceived film.

If one were to use the Asian filmfest as gauge for an Asian nation’s artistic maturity in the art of film, the Philippines can indeed be considered as having long “come of age,” as early as the mid-Fifties.

In fact, the Philippines was one of the few member
countries — along with Japan, India and Hongkong — which dominated the annual festival during the late Fifties.

For instance, during the First Asian Film Festival held in Tokyo in 1954, the Philippines collected the Best Screenplay Award for Luciano Carlos’ script of Sampaguita’s *Ang Asawa Kong Amerikana*.

In the second filmfest held the following year in Singapore, the Philippine entry, *Ifugao*, bagged three major awards: Best Actor (Efren Reyes), Best Director (Gerardo de Leon), and Best Screenplay (Cirio Santiago and Ding de Jesus).

1956 was a banner year for the Philippines. Two Filipino entries, both coming from LVN studio — Lamberto Avellana’s *Anak Dalita* and Gregorio Fernandez’s *Higit sa Lahat* — battled it out for the coveted honors in the annual filmfest held that year in Hongkong. Avellana’s film romped away with the Golden Harvest Award for Best Picture, while Gregorio Fernandez and Rogelio de la Rosa bagged the Best Director and Best Actor Awards, respectively.

As though to prove that its winning the major prizes in the prestigious annual event was no fluke, LVN studio again girded itself in 1957 and submitted an entry which was made expressly for the festival, held that year in Tokyo. That entry was *Badjao*, which snagged four plum prizes; Best Direction (Lamberto Avellana); Best Screenplay (Rolf Bayer); Best Cinematography (Mike Accion); and Best Film Editing (Gregorio Carballo).

**Award-studded Years**

The fifth Asian filmfest held in Manila the following year favored the Philippines with three awards: Romeo Vasquez walked away with the Best Actor trophy for his juvenile role in *Ako Ang May-Sala*; perennial screen villainess Rebecca del Rio charmed the jurors with her portrayal of the boozy, slatternly mother in LVN’s *Malvarosa* and capped the Best Supporting Actress Award; Boy Planas was chosen as Best Child Actor for his stint in *Day of the Trumpet*.

The Philippines laid a big egg in the sixth filmfest held in Kuala Lumpur in 1959. However, local producers vindicated themselves the following year in Tokyo when Leroy Salvador, who portrayed a deaf-mute in *Biyaya ng Lupa*, gained the jurors’ nod for Best Supporting Actor, Steve Perez won the Best Black and White Photography for his
work in Isinakdal Ko ang Aking Ama, and LVN’s Bayanihan was given a special award for cultural promotion.

Philippine participation in the yearly event during the Sixties was a veritable series of debacles.

The Fifties’ lasting contribution to the art of the cinema in the Philippines would undoubtedly include Avellana’s Badjao and Anak-Dalita.

*Badjao* — a down-to-earth account of the nomadic life of the local south’s sea gypsies — was not without ethnological, sociological, even scatological, importance. At times, it had the hard-grained realism of a documentary reel.

*Anak-Dalita* — despite its contrived ending and occasional lapses into bathos — still remains a haunting, neo-realistic ballad of the losers and the disenchanted in our society, those who are born on the wrong side of the tracks. Maybe Manuel Silos’ touching *Biyaya ng Lupa* can join this select circle. Other respectable turn-outs of the Fifties include Eddie Romero’s funny and moving *Buhay-Alamang*, and Avellana’s filmization of Yay Marking’s war-time novel,
The Crucible, entitled Cry Freedom.

There were other dramatic films which failed — but were nevertheless interesting, even impressive, failures. Gerardo de Leon’s Bagong Umaga, based on a script by Nick Joaquin, heads the list. Made in a semi-documentary style, the film attempted to dramatize the working men’s plight, how the down-trodden common man can uplift himself from a life of servitude and backbreaking toil.

The story is about a sugar cane plantation worker, a sacada, who establishes a union in the plantation to stop the rampant abuses of the capitalist owner. The union is infiltrated by communist elements, however, so it goes kaput and the poor sacada gets sacked. The film’s main weakness lies in its blatantly propagandistic espousal of the free labor movement.

Slick Propaganda

Lamberto Avellana’s Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay which starred Jose Padilla Jr. and Celia Flor, was another sorry miss. Written by Rolf Bayer, the film treats about the EDCOR experiment of the early Fifties, the effort of the government to relocate reformed members of the dissident movement— in the promised land of Mindanao. Halfway through, however, the film becomes a slick piece of propaganda for the government.

Another Avellana photoplay, Kandelerong Pilak, with Teody Belarmino and Lilia Dizon, shows how a promising beginning can come to naught. The film concerns itself with guerrilla activities for the greater part of its first half, only to degenerate toward the end into a mess of sentimental claptrap.

On the whole, the great majority of the films of the Fifties may be pieces of calculated pseudo-innocence. They may have raised the pablum of romance and adventure to the level of a tic, waved cliches about as if they were victory flags. But for all their supersaturated-crying-towel appeal, they never left the viewer untouched.

It may be the plain instinctive gee-whiz reaction, the old-fashioned gosh or just an oohaah. But in their exquisite escapism, they provided us with plastic dreams to counter the hard edge of reality. After all, when we leave the technicolored intoxication of movie palaces, there are always annoying problems to be lived with, routine jobs to be faced, lonely rooms that await.