

Writing
Pinas Film Commentary

OTHER BOOKS ***by JOEL DAVID***

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Writing
Pinas Film Commentary

Joel David

AMAUTEURISH PUBLISHING

Quezon City, Philippines

Writing Pinas Film Commentary

Original Digital Edition
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Exclusive distributor:
Pelikulove
San Mateo, Rizal
<https://pelikulove.com/>

Cover design by Paolo Miguel G. Tiausas
Cover painting “Bomba” © 2019 by Mina Saha

The National Library of the Philippines CIP Data

David, Joel.

Writing Pinas film commentary / Joel David. – Quezon City : Amauteurish
Publishing, [2021], © 2021.
52+vi pages ; 30 cm

ISBN 978-621-96191-7-2

1. Film criticism – Philippines – Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Film criticism –
Philippines. 3. Philippine essays (English). I. Title.

791.4370284

PN1995

P120210039

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The entire text of *Writing Pinas Film Commentary* was written during the Covid-19 pandemic that left me (and several other citizens) stranded in foreign locales. The Twosome Place coffeehouse branch of Inha University in Incheon, Korea, became my virtual workplace during the several months it was allowed to operate, under the first-rate management of Lee Sanghun. Affairs in the home country were worked out by my brother Aris David, colleague Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil, and scholars Juan Miguel Manansala and John Cris Velasquez. Upon deactivating from social media and discovering I preferred to remain virtually stranded as well, my connections to the digital world were sustained by a small circle of contacts, primarily Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr. and Jerrick Josue David (not a relation). An accumulation of self-doubt was relieved by welcome news from Louie Jon A. Sánchez. As always I managed to count on my colleague, Ha Ju-Yong, to make sure I could accomplish official work requirements that entail reporting or coordinating in my host country's language (which I still to struggle to learn, embarrassing as that sounds), with Kwon Sungjin and Yoo Hee-chan taking care of the more casual end. The work of scholars from all over such as Patricio N. Abinales, Lulu Torres-Reyes, Caroline S. Hau, and Paul Grant continues to inspire me to be productive, and I share with overseas Filipinos everywhere the fond hope that in a future that ought to arrive soon, we can finally thank everyone who helped us in person, rather than in print.

To the first circle of friends I made in Korea:
박신구, 박해석, 손범식, 유태운.

FOREBEARANCE

Film is an illusion. The audience just sees a lot of shadows on the screen. The emotion is in the audience. The trick is giving them something that unleashes that and suddenly they endow the images with their emotion. My theory is, when people say a movie is beautiful, I don't think it can be unless there is beauty in the audience.

Francis Ford Coppola¹

Essential disclosure first: I've never enjoyed teaching film criticism the same way I relish teaching theories of film (some more than others, understandably). My reluctance in teaching writing that requires the development of personal style is precisely because of what the term denotes: writing style is something that one approaches the same way that one deals with knowledge – incrementally, instructed by the best available models, ideally with sufficiently useful feedback and room for failure, shaped primarily by one's needs and preferences.

Fortunately film programs never want for instructors eager to teach students how to write on film.² From another

¹ From "Life Is a Great Screenwriter," an interview feature by James McMahon.

² Another matter I have tackled elsewhere but can't pursue here: writing on film, to me, involves the widest possible spectrum of activity, including scriptwriting and celebrity-gossip reporting; generally a bad writer in one area will wind up writing badly elsewhere. One may elect to do careless film commentary with the resolve to rein in one's gifts until a "real" industry break comes along or until a "worthy" literary undertaking presents itself, but this kind of cynicism merely masks a poverty of spirit that will always become evident at crucial moments to knowledgeable observers.

perspective, this was the reason I could not take the Paulettes, named after their idol and role model Pauline Kael, as seriously as the original: there has been only one occasion in film history for a female critic with a jazz-inflected writing style who made no bones about the subjectivity of her responses and took to demolishing all opposing opinions mercilessly; no matter how delightfully she wrote and spoke, the act of replicating her quirks and mannerisms in another time and place no longer seemed essential. When I noticed Filipino film students writing the same way that their teachers did, I felt sorrier for their being unable to realize what was delimiting and sometimes flawed about their instructors' prescriptions.

On the other hand, once I had completed the apprenticeship I set out for myself by performing as resident film critic of a weekly newsmagazine in the late 1980s to early 1990s, I became increasingly focused on scholarly writing. As I just finished pointing out, I managed to figure out that, like any other literary genre, film commentary set out an entire clutch of rules to follow, but the basic requisites for competent film writing remained unchanged. Those who have been following my output even during the past few years will also realize that I've allowed myself the pleasure of engaging in scandal discourse, an activity I couldn't get enough of, to be honest about it. Unfortunately the incidence of sensational showbiz developments that could withstand allegorizing as an embodiment of the national condition has been rarer than color celluloid prints from the studio-system era.

TURNING POINT

Caught up in the planning and implementation of book and media projects that university tenure finally enabled me to pursue, I realized only with the approach of my retirement that my work, and concomitantly my output as Pinoy film commenter, is about to end in a few years. I've been able to witness the early part of my film-writing activity – consisting of reviews of recent releases, as well as the middle portion of my series of output, comprising canonical exercises – being replicated in film publications as well as in blogs and even social-media posts. I'm still awaiting a critical mass, pun intended, to take up research-based historicizing, theorizing, and critical revision, plus an upgrade of what we might unfairly regard as “lower” forms like gossip writing and celebrity analysis.

But if anyone tells me I should begin to prepare to accept the end of my contributions and witness how succeeding generations build up, change, or demolish them, all I'll say is that I started doing so already. I'll still need to complete a couple of vital book projects and perhaps a memoir, and prepare for my idea of a hedonistic retirement where I can pick out what I want to write on and attend to it at the pace I feel would be most workable, while mentoring some of the better talents around if they feel that they could be productive with my help, without any promise from me of institutional rewards.

Meanwhile the inevitable question: are there tips for writing film commentary that I can leave behind? Something that any layperson can go over and then approach film writing better prepared than before she read what I wrote (namely, as it turns out, this manual). I wish the answer were as simple as a yes or no, but only partly because of my academic orientation, I must say: it's both a yes and a no. What I mean by this is: I cannot give writing tips other than anything that might arise from direct experience. Which means, that kind of advice will not be useful unless you find yourself in exactly the same situation I once had, dealing with the same personalities during that same period. You can of course watch out for analogous or comparable setups and use any of these lessons as guide, but it will be better to see if another approach will work better so you can be more assured of your capabilities and have something to write about afterward.

INKLINGS

What I will be drawing up will be ten matters to keep in mind. Following these will ensure that you're on the right track, since I came by some of these insights from trial and error and use these as a way of making sure that I remain within a zone of confidence while still allowing myself some leeway for productivity.³

***☞ There is no such thing
as too much preparation.***

This applies to everything in life, not just in one's profession. But it's a simple matter to overlook when dealing with so-called easy material. In fact, people who study everyday "fun" things – food, sex, recreation, pets – will be the first ones to tell you that the ease with which they can be apprehended is misleading. From teaching for the past decade-plus at what is essentially an institute of technology, I've had several exchanges with instructors and students in engineering and the sciences who wind up confessing that they never imagined that film studies could be so fiendishly complicated a challenge.

Just as important is the issue of what preparation is the right kind. I've had students assigned to complete a

³ Acknowledging here the influence of the excellent lecture, "That Crafty Feeling," given by Zadie Smith at the Columbia University Writing Program, where she admits her reluctance to prescribe approaches to writing, and instead proffers a list of markers that she observes when she writes her novels.

semestral project laboring for the first few weeks over what title they wanted to use – when they explained their problem to me, I told them to just go with “Untitled.” Other students I was asked to advise were incapable of tearing themselves away from such long-debunked frameworks like anti-contraception or the validity of Ayn Rand’s ideas or the efficacy of underground “water veins” for health treatments; usually these were imparted to them by well-meaning but horribly incompetent parents, so be careful what you pass on if you’re some impressionable person’s adult authority.⁴ I’ve also been unable to forget a scholar who came all the way from a tropical island, only to complain that his host country’s food was too spicy and the weather was getting too cold (with winter still a few months away), plus his war-trained colleagues were too masculinist.

Always, the common denominator in these cases is an excessive sense of privilege that blinds people into believing that no other questions about their specific set of convictions need to be entertained. The students’ influential figures – family, school, church, sometimes even

⁴ I was still in US graduate school when the tide began to turn against the so-called Satanic Panic trend in North America. This began in the 1980s when day-care centers had proliferated to accommodate children of working mothers. Within a cultural atmosphere of dread and paranoia fed by televangelists who preached about the literal existence of angels and demons, parents, social workers, and investigators “interviewed” children and convinced them that they had repressed memories of their teachers engaging them in devil worship that involved sex orgies, bestiality, human sacrifice, and similar other outlandish claims. Several day-care centers had to shut down, their personnel languishing in prison despite a complete absence of evidence. For a comprehensive account, see David Hechler’s *The Battle and the Backlash*. A number of cases were dismissed and overturned in the 1990s. A direct line may be drawn from this scandal to the conspiratorial QAnon claims of the Donald Trump presidency.

government – misguidedly assured them that they were already equipped for some misplaced reason: they were rich enough, pedigreed enough, “blessed” enough, and so on, so that anything they tossed out in public deserved to elicit gratitude for their sheer effort.⁵

So we may as well begin with the right attitude for this kind of undertaking. In one word, humility. When you think you’ve done your best, be prepared to accept if someone else did better, and take a long hard look at your output vis-à-vis the superior one: inevitably, that one will have had better preparation behind it. Within the circles of doctoral degree-holders, we find this syndrome as well. Most so-called doctors of philosophy (mediocre ones, by definition) will throw their weight around and claim that they don’t need to know more than they do because some higher institution accredited them already; but the very best ones will speak truthfully in saying that they still have a long way to go, even after retirement. The value of the doctorate is in teaching where and how to seek knowledge, how to validate and evaluate it, and how to deploy it in scholarship; in the age of *Google* and *Wikipedia*, only unstable personalities will claim to be stable geniuses who’ll know everything.

⁵ Same reason why I tend to gravitate toward rural and university-belt schools, where there’s less of a hurdle in reorienting young people toward more rational and scientific thought processes. Unfair as it may sound, my once-regular exercise in clearing out cobwebs in my mind’s chambers, prior to starting another academic year, saddled me with impatience in instructing people who still have to be taught this basic exercise in mental hygiene.

A final observation I'll be making is that writing, like any other profession, always presents the danger of rotteness, when you achieve a level of competence that enables you to produce work according to a set schedule, format, vocabulary, etc. Nothing wrong if it's a bread-and-butter activity, and if you made sure that no one else can excel on the same level in the first place. I would argue from long experience, however, that what can be fulfilling about writing – even critical writing – is that every challenge met (successfully or otherwise) is an entirely new experience every time: “I have a smattering of things I've learned from different teachers ... [but] nothing I can count on, and that makes it more dangerous. But then the danger makes it more exciting.”⁶ In that respect, writing is really as much a performing art as anything else, a point I hope to maintain at several points throughout this manual.

⁶ Meryl Streep, as quoted by Karina Longworth (12).

**☞ *Start with the long view:
history, theory, long-form study.***

This is just the beginning of the paradox I mentioned, where something that should be easy because everyone enjoys it requires more intensive preparation compared with some less-appreciated subjects.⁷ Many students of film love to show off technical buzzwords that are now readily accessible in online glossaries – montage, lenses, light sources, transition effects, performative style, and so on. A few others will come prepared with terms like actualities, Classical Hollywood, New Wave (or its foreign-language equivalent), and any number of isms – neorealism, Expressionism, feminism, etc.

These should suffice for any global citizen, but news alert: we are not just “any global citizen.” People of the Philippines bear certain distinctions that mark them off from other population groups – first Far East Asian colony of any European power, first (and only) formal US colony, first (claimed) anticolonial revolution in Asia, and so on. And the invention and propagation of cinema is closely tied in with this history. It is not some benign or neutral technology that lends its usefulness to anyone interested in

⁷ The only review of my book that I felt compelled to answer was ironically an appreciative one, that nevertheless complained that I had a “penchant for unfamiliar words and ambiguous phrases” and named terms that were actually current in film, performance, and cultural studies. I was admittedly harsh but I was probably on alert regarding the implicit attitude of “why give me a hard time when it’s only about movies?” See “The Reviewer Reviewed,” which I posted in the Extras section’s FWIW subsection of *Amateurish!*

facilitating social change. Film history books will say that the first governmental use of film was Vladimir Lenin's declaration that it should be deployed (by the Soviet Union) to promote international socialism, but how many people, even in the Philippines, are aware that Americans were already using it – and declaring its usefulness – to convince people in the US as well as the Philippine Islands that American colonization was morally justified and needed by our ancestors, the very victims of imperialist expansion?⁸

The next obvious question is something that's been so neglected – because it's been unasked, but that's no excuse. What value then should we hold for a medium that has also proved helpful for our own purposes of change? Are we really the ones, or the only ones, entitled to its use? What happens when our own audiences refuse to watch the movies our artists so painstakingly planned and funded and completed, only to discover that foreigners were more receptive to them?

Beyond this last still-vexed question, we have an impasse regarding the status of theory. At some point in the past, right after the people-power revolt in 1986, the local intellectual community was all agog over the emergence of all the “post” theorizing, starting with poststructuralism,

⁸ See Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's “Directives on the Film Business” in *Lenin Collected Works*. For a detailed account of Dean Worcester's photographic and film documentations in the Philippines as well as the *New York Times*'s enthusiastic reception, see Mark Rice's *Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands*; a fuller context is provided in Alfred W. McCoy's *Policing America's Empire*. Note that despite the term “Pinas” in the title of this manual, I do not make a claim for any distinct Filipinoness in what I write, beyond the fact that I identify primarily as a scholar of the country's pop culture.

proceeding to postmodernism, postfeminism, postracism, postgender ... until someone came up with post-theory. And of course, what we know today as film has really been post-film for some time now: celluloid was phased out in Pinas even earlier than in most other countries, while the debates over film specificity (the issue of what technique was essential to defining film) were “answered” with some finality in the 1950s in France.⁹

As you will see, and probably be alarmed by, there is no excuse to be as unaware of these issues regarding film and the theories it raised, as there is no reason to be ignorant of how film (as well as preceding media like photography and print, and succeeding media like radio and TV) was used by all the colonizing forces that occupied the country: the Spaniards (who introduced it, during the eve of the execution of Jose Rizal), the Americans (who reintroduced it and made it a social and industrial institution), even the Japanese. Next time you’re tempted to crow about “film for social change,” imagine first the voice of Donald Trump countering, “You should be glad we bigly developed that unpresidented medium and made it available for the rest of the world, instead of claiming it for yourself. Sad.”

⁹ Several essays by André Bazin, notably “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” “The Myth of Total Cinema,” “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” and “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage” – all in the first volume of *What Is Cinema?* – are regarded as the first in a long line of often contentious give-and-takes on the issue. David Bordwell, namechecked in a mini-appendix, regards Bazin’s theorizations as central to what he termed a “dialectical version” of film history, in *On the History of Film Style* (46-82).

☞ *Look inward*
at your personal motive(s).

All social intercourse necessarily involves a certain degree of narcissism, so it won't be useful denying that fact or decrying its presence in others. It bears repeating, though: narcissism only becomes a liability when it's enabled by privilege – of any kind, even a justified one. I know, a prominent local film authority once went on record to say that film critics should have the proper academic qualification, by which he meant, ideally, a doctorate in film. Bad news: I have one, and I never assumed that I was qualified, even when I still had to get one and knew I'd be able to, if the opportunity presented itself. For all our complaints about American personalities, one of the best cultural takeaways I had was that, in any “best” institution, people called everyone else by the nicknames they prefer.

What this means is that you might have enough of a record to demand respect from everyone else, but if you stumble, you stumble, and you can't expect anyone to say she saw you walk straight unless you bribe or bamboozle her. The informality of American culture ensures this: we called everyone by their first names because if they were professors, they all had doctorates; if they didn't, they could probably earn it eventually; and even if they already had their degrees, someone else will always be able to come along and excel as well as or better than they did, so they were always aware that they had to constantly prove themselves.

You can imagine how this worked out for me in an East-Asian Confucian situation, where people always had to defer to others for being old, or male, or wealthy, or superior in position, and so on. A few people would insist on their privilege, but the outcome was always predictable: these turned out to be the same people who'd never be able to boost their names beyond the degrees that they already had.

We also have to mention here the special case of critics who aspire to make a name so that they can be accepted as auteur personalities. A film critic is always-already an auteur personality, but we're talking about the example of people from an era when the medium was still insufficiently developed, so it was always possible for an aesthete to articulate a vision for improving film practice, then engage in that same area in order to illustrate her point.

If that's what motivates you, well and good if you own up to it, but keep in mind a few things: first, when you want to talk critically about someone's command of audiovisual language, better be ready to prove your own expertise in the present language you're using; second, success in crossing-over will not be predictable even so – Philippine cinema is littered with the figurative corpses of competent film critics who wound up with less-than-impressive movies; third, cynically motivated criticism, where you provide mediocre and/or slapdash output because you're biding yourself for the big industry break, will result in readers so turned off

that they won't want to have anything to do with you.¹⁰ Again, if you're privileged enough not to care, go ahead and write what you want and give yourself the break you think you deserve; but don't be surprised if no one is impressed by the results.

¹⁰ The only instance of a Filipino film critic successfully making a transition to filmmaking turned out to be triumphant at both ends: Ishmael Bernal had been publishing superior reviews during the late New Criticism period, with his other critical colleagues (somewhat dubiously) organizing themselves into the critics circle I mentioned earlier. Further disclosure: I once accepted an invitation to join this same circle, early in my own stage as nationally published writer. On the other hand, if you intend to maintain equal or stronger presence in scholarship, then my advice is to steer clear of the national university's misguided example of granting tenure and promotion points for "creative" output (all the while complaining about the humanities faculty's paucity in research), and look more closely into screen media practice research. Sometimes abbreviated as SMPR, this area of study is fairly recent, although unfortunately its rationale and methods fall outside the scope of this manual.

**☞ *Insist on the use
of basic study tools.***

“Basic” is always relative, but assuming you’re a layperson, these refer to such methods as research, critical analysis, and scientific review. These sound academic, and they are, at least in origin, but people who’ve been working in scholarly disciplines long enough already own the key to making them work for anyone. It has to do with the previous bit of advice – knowing yourself – and making sure, in the face of objections from all over, that this is exactly what you want to do. When that happens, all the negative responses you’ll hear from people forced into the activity (too many things to read and watch, too much theory to work through, too much drafting and revision to undertake, and so on) will not matter. What’s work to others will be fun for you.

And if you think you’ll be “rewarding” yourself by promising that you’ll shift to creative processes later, here’s some bad news that should really be good news except for cynics and cheats: you’ll still continue needing the same tools I mentioned, though not in the same way obviously, and with a different form of end-result. But go ahead, look for the best art practitioners in the field you think you’ll excel in, determine how much productive discourse their work can engender, and see if you can argue that critical thinking had nothing whatsoever to do with it. The less-informed commentators will fall back on the usual magical explanations – that the artist’s a genius, touched by inspiration, lucky to possess good genes, and so on. It’s fine

to dwell on fantastic speculations once in a while, but you'll be fooling yourself if you think great work appears despite the absence of adequate materials that also prove useful in exercises as mundane as scholarly research and publication.

At this stage, we may as well turn to the conclusion that's been obvious to anyone who's practiced in productivity that makes use of critical and creative principles. Word of warning: this will prove so unthinkable that whenever I venture to mention it, I get responses that range from objections to violent denunciations. To be honest, it's usually other academics who feel behooved to register their disagreement, probably because their profession is premised on (the artificiality of) specialization. The only fact I can state in my defense is that it works for me, and for the artists that I count as the best we can identify around us.

The point I'm about to mention is simple: there is no difference between criticism and artistic output. This should be obvious to anyone who regards any kind of writing as literature, but you will find Filipino critics who claim to be fully invested in praxis, who'll nevertheless say otherwise. I've been fortunate though in collaborating with artists and writers who share the same regard for these essential values. This entire text is premised on that belief, so the only real choice for people conflicted about the usefulness of rules imposed in certain professional contexts like newsrooms or classrooms is to regard the prospective result as just another literary genre.

The formal requirements for criticism, like the ones that apply to poetry, fiction, dramatic writing, and so on, are simply sets of rules that any serious practitioner looks into opportunities to challenge and possibly overturn. It bears repeating here, that a teacher who prescribes a fixed approach to writing style is in fact ensuring that none of her students will be able to surpass her, just as she never will be able to surpass herself; although in the end, I always hold the students accountable for studying criticism without being critical enough to see when they've been trapped in someone else's self-imposed strictures.

Break:
But where are the shortcuts?

The short and sweet answer is: there are none. The downside of academic preparation becoming possible for aspiring film practitioners is that graduates get the impression that essential lessons from the past have been codified and handed down to them. But the existential condition is necessarily already absent. When people once envisioned a career premised on film expertise, without the benefit of formal studies, they had to draw up their own personal programs and find ways of identifying possible limits and loopholes in what they studied – and seeking ways to resolve those problems. This explains why a majority of earlier practitioners were lacking in many ways, compared to the pleasing and predictable consistency of applicants since the introduction of film-studies programs in the country. It also explains why (the lesser number of) gifted oldtimers tended to have career longevity, compared to the contemporary wealth of impressive debut outputs that wind up their makers' best work, if not their only one. In effect, the most accomplished among the Golden-Age practitioners had no recourse except (but then also had enough time) to achieve the equivalent of master's degrees before they presumed to knock on history's doors. Given the state of graduate programs in Pinas, though, I wouldn't say that completing a formal one today would provide a useful answer either.

☞ *Review or critique, or is there a difference? (Part 1)*

As in the question regarding the difference between criticism and literature, there should be none in this case. The only trouble is that in practice, most people insist on one or the other type of output, accepting that one (criticism) is superior to the other (reviewing). When in fact the only difference that matters is that between good and bad commentary. No one should be surprised to come across bad criticism just as good reviewing can and does exist. And no, I won't allow us to fall into the trap laid by the late John Simon (unfortunately idolized by an entire generation of Pinoy film critics), that reviewing is just bad criticism.¹¹

We can proceed by viewing each activity in terms of the frame of mind the author brings to it. Reviewing involves a micro perspective while criticism is macro exertion. One will seem easier than the other – except again for the earlier precept I brought up: the seemingly simple or fun diversion is in fact what's fraught with more danger and renders the writer prone to failure and embarrassment. If you need any proof, just take a look at the reviews that the “official” critics circle (there's only one) requires of its members when awards season happens along.

Each member makes a valiant effort to prove the qualification of the author as an expert in Philippine cinema,

¹¹ From page 10 of John Simon's “A Critical Credo” in *Private Screenings*.

but sinks from the homogeneity of the militaristic call to arms to defend the institution's selections. Uniformity only looks impressive on troops, preferably those about to engage in actual warfare, but film commentary made to order to fortify the year's canon fails against the macro challenge of upholding canons in the first place, vis-à-vis the always-urgent need to inspect and figure out the actual preferences of the mass audience ... that the supposedly progressive circle avows as its primary beneficiary.

The surest way I can suggest to determine for yourself if you're ready to embark on an extensive activity of providing film commentary will sound counter-intuitive. You will hear professions of passion, or at least of satisfaction, from nearly all the film appreciators you'll encounter. It's like a declaration of faith: *I'm so into film, I live it and breathe it and can't help but talk and write about it all the time – wait is this real celluloid OMG I just have to kiss it, yakety-yak*. Pay no heed to this buffer-than-thou nonsense. When you find yourself engaged by a film-generated idea *regardless* of whether the film text in question affects you emotionally or aesthetically, then you'll be in a better position to conduct research and evaluation than self-proclaimed film commentators.

On the other hand, if you find yourself impassioned by specific film releases and feel that your audience badly needs to be educated by you or a group you represent, the best course of action would be to pause until the delusion

passes. If it morphs into an overpowering moral crusade, look for the nearest tall structure, climb up, and jump off.

☞ *Review or critique, or is there a difference? (Part 2)*

So micro or macro, which one should be it? Both, whenever possible. The reviewer who overlooks context, history, and the interplay of ideas just because these interfere with the call to provide subjective responses will just as surely fail as the critic who refuses to be honest with herself and dismisses the imperative of engaging the reader. The pros of each activity do not license the commenter to shunt aside the requisites that will ensure a well-rounded piece of work.

Finally, as if we didn't have enough stumbling blocks to watch out for, I'll be pointing out what to me is the most crucial one. This occurs when academically prepared authors venture into writing on pop culture. As I already made clear, I hold no judgment when people from any other (or from no) discipline attempt to tackle film material. The trouble arises when a subconscious form of colonial mentality takes hold, wherein the writer purports to display an expert grasp of existing (usually Western) theory and uses it to size up a local artifact, with the native sample always likely to fail in relation to the abstract ideal.

This would be pathetic if it were not utterly insidious. Any human exertion, in any period and place, rarely measures up to whatever perfect formal counterpart we can conjure up (its ideal essence, as expressed by Plato). This tendency comes from a secularization of biblical hermeneutics, which refers to the struggle to arrive at a

correct and definitive interpretation of so-called holy scripture. Since our and our instructors' training is rooted in theological assumptions, and our cultural capital derives from demonstrating competence in European languages starting with English, preferably prepped in Western institutions, we wind up with scholars who think they've been equipped with critical ideas and methods, eager to present themselves as proponents of whatever may have been hip or cool or edgy in the places where they studied.

We can and should value anyone who elucidates for us any new ideas, from any place, that happen along. But the more valuable critic is the one who realizes that theory, even and especially foreign ones, can be subject to critical analysis as well – can be challenged, modified, overturned, even rejected, depending on its evaluation in relation to urgent contemporary material conditions. (Even scripture should be treated the same way, but that's not the war that needs to be won here yet; or rather, that war's already been won.) So is this the best that any film critic can get – conversant with theory yet critical of it, sufficiently familiar and accepting of the film(s) under study? Not quite. Remember another even earlier point I raised, about humility. That should always remain the first object of any aspirant's critical consideration: oneself.

👉 *Watch and read the necessary texts more than once.*

Pauline Kael, who I mentioned earlier, was famous for, among other things, claiming that she only needed to watch a film once in order to review it.¹² The resultant prose was brilliant, complex, witty, insightful, though sometimes premised on irrelevant detail or a possible misreading. I have read other film philosophers, starting with the foundational authors Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin, and I recall a few instances where they talk about a contemporary or then-forthcoming function of film on the basis of a possibly indefensible assumption. (Speaking of philosophers, be very wary when Marxist-identified thinkers presume to write on film, unless you already subscribe to their ideology and there's nothing else anyone can do for you; in fact nothing I can write about, with all my carefully finessed and updated Marxist notions, will be of help in that case.¹³)

Advanced film thinkers – and I do include Kael in this category, despite the insistent rejection of her by many of my peers – don't really have to be dependent on matching their ideas with any ordinary film release. When you are

¹² See pages 18-19 of George Malko's "Pauline Kael Wants People to Go to the Movies."

¹³ Bias deserves its own extensive discussion. I recognize that it's difficult to function effectively when devoid of it, but what I'd caution against is ideological bias of any kind. Media experts recognize that the most ideologically independent institutions (wire agencies, for example, or top-ranked academic journals) are the ones for whom reliability becomes a primary selling point. In this sense, ideological pandering becomes an easy way out, with sets of more-or-less fixed groups of appreciators and haters.

ready to do some theorizing of your own, after taking a comprehensive survey of film products and mastering all the relevant film and non-film ideas, then you can be dismissive of entire traditions and generations of practitioners if you think your notions will justify such radical purging.

In the meanwhile, you'll just have to take my word for this: nothing will boost the critical credibility of any newcomer as a solid reading of a film-text coupled with a reliable grasp of related material, just as nothing will ensure long-standing embarrassment than a confidently declared conclusion that amounts to fake news. To be sure, a lot of pop-culture products get misread fairly often, by large sectors of the public. Our goal of course is to have, whenever possible, the certainty of accurate perception.

How you arrive at the right number of repetitions will depend on the conditioning you allowed yourself. For people of my generation, when getting to watch a film in itself was a luxury, with the product constantly in danger of getting lost for good, I could allow myself an occasional exception. (Many of the celluloid films I'd reviewed, and many more that I'd seen before I started writing on film, are in fact permanently lost.) But during the present historical moment, when films are increasingly easier to access, two screenings – one for gut response, another for note-taking – should be the minimum requirement.

What if a movie is just not worth watching twice? If your job is resident reviewing, you owe it to your own

mental and emotional well-being to avoid those types of products whenever possible; your first desideration is to convince your superior, or yourself, to focus on titles that you can engage with, and allow yourself to stretch on your own terms. Remember as well that what you find unacceptable may be premised on entirely subjective responses. If you can't stand, say, reptiles, body fluids, poor lighting, screaming voices, slapstick, atheism, or people of a certain race or gender (all conditions I've noted in people I've met through the years), then you'll have to recognize that these may be conditions that don't normally exist in the case of expert practitioners. You'd have to work on your own limitations first, and foreground these same limitations when you write. It would be ethically questionable to keep assailing your pet peeves while keeping your preferences closeted. People will not (and should not) be forgiving when they're able to figure out what quirks you insisted on indulging.¹⁴

¹⁴ The standard realization in psychology, originating from Freud, that hatred is actually a reflection on the state of mind of the hater has finally become acceptable in popular discourse, thanks to the efforts of race and feminist activists. Several Filipino authors and auteurs who traversed this shift in perspective will inevitably manifest reversals in their output. A favorite example of mine in Philippine cinema is Lino Brocka, about whom I've written more extensively elsewhere, most recently in my *Manila by Night* monograph as well as the corrigenda I posted on *Amateurish!*

☞ *Pay attention to your stylistic approach, to determine its adequacy.*

As if working out your ideas weren't hard enough, you'll also have to be careful about how you'll be expressing those ideas. Many starting critics adopt a shoot-from-the-hip approach, in the hope – and even confidence, if they're less bright – that the resultant tone marks them as honest and straightforward. News flash: critics since ancient times have been writing that way, and absolutely no one remembers who they are today except for a few names mentioned in passing by annoyed authors; even worse, no one bothered to preserve what they wrote. The senior authors you may have read writing that way have either paid their dues in better-considered commentaries in their earlier period, or are just slumming around in an area that they think provides easy pickings (and should be denounced for it, but better just leave that to other senior authors like me).

Notice I mentioned tone, a really tricky stylistic permutation that involves the manipulation of elements like diction and syntax. It's easier to achieve when you've attained a level of literary competence that allows you to play around as you write. People rarely display a mastery of tone at the outset, which is a way of saying that most writers have not fully attained the style they aspire to master.¹⁵

¹⁵ The first classroom exercise in my Pinas film-crit courses requires each student to write a personal letter to her best friend in order to point out a socially embarrassing habit that

But here's a secret most successful writers won't tell you: whatever style you think you want for yourself, someone already pulled it off earlier, possibly in an unrelated genre. So part of your preparation, apart from reading the ideas you wish to contend with and viewing closely the films you wish to write about, is to read strictly for pleasure. Check out as many authors as you can read, in the cultural contexts that you find fascinating, until you find a writer whose voice seems to sound like how you would want to be heard by others (needless to add, we're referring here to the printed, or digital, page).

This subjective type of reading should add to your store of ideas, but you should really be doing it in order to study how the author set those ideas down in a way that engaged you, her reader. As if that weren't burdensome enough, I'd add that you should seek at least one other author with an approach opposed to the one you favor, but who also winds up provoking your interest. Meaning, keep reading on – which is why pleasure should be your primary purpose. If you're able to find the best anti-writer to your earlier discovery (meaning someone whose voice you wouldn't mind adopting as well), you'll be able to perceive a dialectical difference in literary approaches, which may be

the friend needs to attend to. This comes directly from my experience of writing negative reviews in formal (a.k.a. "objective") language and then running into the filmmaker in one of the many social occasions that a then-small industry enjoyed sponsoring. I've written elsewhere about their responses, which were always unfailingly fair and professional. I'll be writing more about this, but not for and in the present text.

able to contribute more effectively to the development of your own writing.¹⁶

I'll close with two important pieces of advice along this line, but I'll start with the one that I already mentioned at the start of this manual: never listen to a teacher who tells you specifically how to write, again unless you share enough ideological sentiment with this person and wouldn't mind being considered her clone. But then why are you still reading this?

The second and possibly most important word of advice I as a writer can impart, is: be funny whenever you can. If a situation seems too grim and apocalyptic to laugh at, and you write about it unironically, like some prophet bearing the promise of a solution you somehow arrived at, then you should know that you're already failing. Because you can always – spoiler alert – laugh at yourself. Try it and see: self-deprecation, when pulled off successfully, can ease your readers into some difficult or complex set of ideas that you want to present. And when you start out with that tone, you wind up committing yourself to a project that includes entertainment (at your own expense, if necessary) – always a noteworthy goal, in filmmaking as well as in criticism, despite what awards-obsessed practitioners might say.

¹⁶ Maybe a childhood fascination with cockfights (whose cruel methods appalled me only much later) accounted for this drive to find opposing authorial styles. I remember listing a number of favorite writers, but the ones whom I regarded as equally matched in terms of social awareness and linguistic innovation were Charles Dickens and William Faulkner. Even today when I read anything that reminds me of one, I'd find myself seeking out a sample of the other just to ask myself which one I'd consider more successful.

Break: You call these writing tips?

The mechanics of learning writing is what school attendance is for. Ideally a student should have sufficient competence in at least one language, official or otherwise, by the completion of secondary studies. College-level training could then supply the equivalent of what I endorse for authors anxious about stylistic expertise: the study of literature, to be able to identify models they can emulate and eventually surpass. Before the internet made a wide range of style guides (at least in English) available, I would spend study or work breaks rereading an author I admired, alongside one of many standard writing reviewers. During my earlier years, I would also draw up a list of style questions that I would ask from, starting with my high-school writing mentors. These could probably be served at present by the practice of crowdsourcing on social media, although my own efforts never yielded answers as satisfactory or definitive as when I looked up experts in person. For one practical bit of advice: master an academic stylebook (I'd recommend, for English writers, the Modern Language Association of America's, since it's formulated for humanities authors) and make any adjustments you feel will be useful, so long as you maintain consistency in your writing. Once in a while, look up a much older and necessarily dated reference (such as H.W. Fowler's A Dictionary of Modern English Usage) in order to have a sense of where today's notions of (beyond-political) correctness came from.

☞ ***Be prepared to revise constantly.***

After over four decades of writing, mostly intensively, the danger I'm most wary of is starting off without worrying about how I come across. It's a variation on an earlier anxiety, when I was a practicing journalist for a few years: as a resident film critic, I knew that readers would always pay some attention to what I had to say, so as long as I met my deadlines, no one complained. Imagine my dismay when I started compiling my pieces for book publication for the first time, and realized how extensively I had to revise almost half of them. (For what it's worth, at least polishing my pieces has always been a fun activity for me.)

The worst moment for what in journalism is called lead-writing ("lead" as in lead instrument, not lead battery) came when I had to start drafting my doctoral dissertation. Days of formulating a sentence that sounded both succinct and witty ended with my decision to rethink what I had (sometimes a few pages' worth already) and start from scratch. It had to acknowledge a non-Filipino readership and draw in political relations between the country that (re)introduced film to its first and only formal colony. Finally, possibly because I'd been confronting the problem for over two weeks, it came instantaneously and unexpectedly: "If the field of American cultural studies were to be reconfigured as topographic terrain, then postcolonial studies would constitute its jungle and the Philippines its heart of darkness."

I wish to avoid marvelous claims for the already-difficult act of writing, but once I had set the sentence down, the rest of the opening chapter virtually wrote itself. Maybe this only applies to me (because it happened earlier in the past, and continued to happen afterward). But certain factors had to be in place before I could make it work: I had to be prepared with a sufficient measure of confidence, with as much of my research material as I can assemble on hand, and have the right balance of pressure to attend to writing with minimal worrying over mundane matters like bills, tax deadlines, house repairs, etc. Unfortunately for the peculiarities of my writing habits, I associate quotidian settings with mental anxiety and physical rest – which means I could only work in newsroom-like places, of which coffeehouses may be the closest contemporary equivalent.¹⁷

You may find that this exact combination of elements would not apply to you. But if you write long enough, you will find certain places and conditions more conducive to your productivity. Once you do, try to find a convenient and affordable version of the locale and make sure you have access to it whenever crunch time nears. Fluidity is the benchmark: a work you sweated over while writing will (more often than not) cause the reader to slog through the

¹⁷ An even weirder twist for me is the way that self-rewards function: completing (a draft of) a project is its own reward, so anything extra I promised myself afterward will feel anticlimactic; besides, a sufficiently ambitious project is never really ever finished, so a certain amount of anxiety will always impinge on my enjoyment. On the other hand, I discovered that rewards acquired prematurely, timed during periods when I know I'll be facing writer's blocks, will induce me to buckle down and work even harder, out of sheer guilt. Hey if it works for you, then it works with (maybe only) you so don't let anyone else convince you otherwise.

output in turn; something you felt like you lightly tossed off could also induce the reader to relax while going through it. As long as you made sure that you put in effort where it mattered – in preparing for the writing process – you should have less to worry about, and maybe even enjoy writing your piece.¹⁸

The earlier pointers I brought up would have told you how you could develop a welcome argument. If it's too new or involved, provide the equivalent of a road map in the beginning, after announcing the crisis you want to tackle (yup, I used crisis, a word from narrative writing – just in case we forget again: any difference in these writing modes is artificial; the crisis of a plot would be, in academic terms, its *problematique*).

What I could present as good news to you would be: if you feel you've already completed a complex and thorough presentation, you can opt to end there and then. A “cold” ending is better than an unnecessary summary, as anyone who's ever had to read theses or dissertations published as books, whose editors failed to call for revisions, might recall. On the other hand, if you want to leave a longer-lasting impression, go for a kicker. Insightful humor would be best, or even an unexpected downer if you feel you've been too light-hearted throughout already.

¹⁸ See the end of the very first entry in this list of pointers (titled “There is no such thing as too much preparation”), for a point made by US film performer Meryl Streep. Several other successful pop performers make the same assertion in their interviews.

**☞ *Submit or upload your text,
then attempt further revisions.***

You may think I'm merely fastidious, but you're wrong: I'm hyperfastidious. Unless you can afford an excellent editor, self-editing (including the soul-crushing act of close self-copyediting) will be the way to go whenever and wherever you decide to publish something you've written. When the publication has its own editor and she realizes that you can do as well or even better, you'll enable her to focus on matters specific to the publication. A good editor will be able to create (pardon the buzzword) synergy out of your writing and the publication's agenda, but if you've already maintained that consideration in your writing, you can hope for the even better type of editor – one who'll leave your submitted text alone.

Before you reach this point where you can continually critique and revise (let's call this process C&R) your material after you submit it, you need to guarantee yourself that you already C&R'd it at least once, preferably a few times, beforehand. (I know, I started with the bad news, then announced the worse one afterward – a bit of sadism I enjoy inflicting occasionally.) If you find yourself C&Ring as you write, you don't have to hold yourself back; just be aware that you're slowing yourself down, and try the alternative – drafting everything first before conducting C&R – to see which strategy works better for you. In my case, I can tolerate a mild attempt at C&R during writing, since

lead writing (see the previous entry) already involves an intensive C&R process.

Once you've finished drafting and revising, if you have the luxury of time, tear yourself away from what you wrote. Sleep if you haven't, have a meal and/or a pleasant intoxicant, hang with friends, lose yourself in music or fiction, exercise – whatever you need to forget the trauma of writing. I did go into psychoanalytic matters, because guess what, you have to go back to it yourself in an even more neurotic state. Once you've forgotten what you wrote, prepare yourself anew, this time by imagining that you'll be reading something that someone else wrote. Then reread, and C&R. If you'll be uploading to a blog, then you ought to know that you can make changes on your own post, no matter how long ago you placed it there.

I'll provide a practical method that works for people who started writing when most typewriters were manual because only rich offices could afford electric contraptions. It proceeds from the insight that your text on a printed page looks different. A printout of your manuscript would be a step closer to its published form, even if it will come out digitally, if only because it will not have the same appearance as when you drafted it. I realized once more how invaluable this step was for me, when I retyped, copyedited, and uploaded my out-of-print books on my blog, and occasionally read through articles at random in order to further correct any errors I overlooked. Some time later, I had to print out everything I placed there. That printout

turned out to have at least one error per page, sometimes far more than I could ever allow myself. So if you've never printed out anything you drafted, try it once and see if it better helps you assume the readerly function when you C&R yourself.

☞ ***Own your errors.***

The unreflective film critic, after years and years on the job, will finally sigh and go, *There's no such thing as a perfect film after all.* Aren't we lucky to work in writing, a medium where perfection is possible? "Unreflective" was the word I used: there can be no such thing as a perfect anything. Fortunately, as an atheist, I preclude myself from answering, *well what about god?* Because, as supreme being, I never believed in deluding myself about my own perfection. So there.

We are at the historical stage where Eastern philosophical principles, though still formally unacknowledged in the West, have finally managed to prevail over the old-time tendencies to abhor contradictions and seek so-called stable conditions. The more ambitious a system is, the likelier it is to contain weaknesses or flaws. So it would be no reflection on your hard work and integrity for anyone to definitively argue, sooner or later, that something you wrote can be subjected to a process of deconstruction.

"Own your errors" means being a good sport when someone points them out – or better yet, pointing them out yourself, to yourself, and revising your work if you still can. But if all that involves is self-flagellation, then signing up for a rural Holy Week ritual would be more efficient. Once more, take the longer look. We should not be after the avoidance of mistakes, since the act of learning from errors,

especially published ones, commits us to doing better or else. Ask yourself now, if you haven't done so earlier, what your larger project is. You should always have one, and much as I hate using the modifier, it would be appropriate in this context: your long-term goal should be a worthy one.

Don't allow yourself to get caught up in the social-network game of amassing as much positive feedback for your pieces as you can wangle. Determine the worthy purpose first, so that what you write is actually building up toward it. If you've been in graduate school and getting world-class advice, you'll recognize what I'm saying. You don't start your program like a bachelor's degree aspirant, hoping to be guided toward a topic and shown how to successfully pull it off. On the other hand, if you're in a graduate program where your final research project has remained amorphous for the most part, never interrogated during the application stage, note well what I'll say right now: you're being conned; while claiming to be compassionate, the faculty are taking advantage of your presence to finagle the higher honoraria they'll be getting from grad-level classes and exams and defenses, so the longer you stay the happier they'll be, and they can always dump you later if you don't meet whatever standards they claim to be upholding.

☞ *Careful with claims you make.*

Not a vital piece of advice, since this should be obvious to anyone who presumes to write and publish anything. I claimed to have ten entries and ended with eleven, possibly even twelve (which is something I always do when providing lists of anything). I never claimed to be an expert in math, so when this sort of thing happens to you, you can forgive yourself. I never claimed to be an expert film critic either, but that possibly comes from superstitious observation: over the decades, the few people I managed to observe asserting themselves in the practice tended to crash and burn, for a variety of reasons. For that reason, I never regarded hubris as a friend, except for comic or camp purposes.

A few other things I make no apologies for: aspiring to figure out the popularity of current releases without recourse to the official critics' high-handed call to "enlighten" the local audience via reviews and awards; supplementing my insights with what little anthropological information I can uncover via casual and anonymized conversations with actual mass-audience members; catching myself from declaring that a project should never have been released, with the ethical reminder that most of the people who worked on it were working-class wage earners; championing practitioners who've been handed a raw deal by the country's tastemongers, whose self-serving antics I've seen up close and for which my turn to gossip writing might prove useful eventually.

When you set yourself against a prevalent trend or two, people whose interests feel threatened will find ways to mount hate campaigns. I've seen acquaintances crumple or fight back, but as a media practitioner, I also recognize that such hostility can be helpful. If you're certain of your own assessment and have the confidence of sound analysis, then any opponent will have to begin with the foundations you've laid out (which means, if they're right, you'll be able to correct yourself). When they proceed from a position of hysterical anger, that's a sign that they have nothing substantial to present, and that some covert corruption may be at play. It would be great to command respect across a wide spectrum of the public – great, but boring; better to have negative reactions from people who're saddled with issues that your output provokes to antagonism. The contrast between mercy and meanness would be instructive for an observant public.

PERSISTENCE OF VISION

Your best way to proceed is to start out knowing what kind of final project you'll be writing, and more important, you have to know what kind of intervention you're providing for Philippine film scholarship. It will be a critical project, which is why we're in film criticism (duh), but it will have implications for history, education, archiving, society (if we're lucky), and so on. This is why you cannot just swoop down on the pop-culture field, armed with some conventional tools provided by long-standing institutions, unless you don't mind being ignored or getting blasted by some annoyed expert later. From what you have read, watched, and observed in a comprehensive review of your area of concern (including foreign counterparts when applicable), what do you think requires improvement, and how will you be able to provide that improvement?

Once you have answered that, you can structure your larger goal(s) and the means by which you can get there. Let me provide a sample template, one that has become feasible for me and a number of other contemporary netizens: a volume (or two) covering the issues confronting audiences and/or practitioners and/or producers in the area of independent and/or mainstream and/or regional (including diasporic) Pinas cinema during the millennium and/or the late celluloid era, raising the issue of aesthetics and/or reception and/or industrial processes using a critical deployment of the ideas of some native or foreign school of criticism.

Once you have concretized these elements, you will know as you go along what films will matter and what won't, what issues to raise, what people and texts to consult, and so on. In the (still-distant) end, you can compile your output, jettison whatever may be extraneous or redundant, organize the material, write an introduction, write short or long texts to bridge adjacent sections, draft a conclusion or epilogue, hire an artist or two and an indexing service (if you're self-publishing, with funds on tap). You'll have the volume you planned in the beginning; if you wrote scholarly articles, you'll have a thesis or dissertation. Not as easy as it sounds, but better than stumbling around hoping to be the best film critic you can be.

But what happens if, say, your concern for an area outside critical writing or artistic production becomes too distracting, and promises opportunities for professional advancement as well? The answer should be obvious to anyone who's already familiar with the principles I laid out in this manual. The practice of critical thinking and the ability to work out creative solutions limit themselves to art and literature only in the minds of the hopelessly old-fashioned. Several former students of mine have opted to work in fields as diverse as talent management, archiving, festival organizing, music, porn performance (you read that right) – and made their areas of practice richer by their presence. Find your vocation, make sure it makes you happy and productive, and keep everyone else posted whenever possible.

Mini-Appendix A: Self-Study

There is a wealth of introductory books on film theory, most of which provide an adequate overview of ideas on the subject. I usually recommend Robert Stam's Film Theory: An Introduction for the author's acknowledgment of the interests of non-Western peoples; it is accompanied by a supplement, edited by Stam and Toby Miller, titled Film and Theory: An Anthology. The more comprehensive standard collection, continually updated, is Film Theory & Criticism, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, now on its 8th edition. A still-useful reference would be the two volumes edited by Bill Nichols titled Movies and Methods: An Anthology. A recommendable process would be to complete an overview, read up on the authors who prove interesting and useful, and proceed to these authors' book-length output. (Make sure though to still read up on the other authors later.)

I would also urge any beginner to provide herself with a beyond-theoretical summary of the field; a sample (that badly needs updating) might be The Oxford Guide to Film Studies, edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Considered a basic and vital introduction to film aesthetics would be David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith's Film Art: An Introduction, currently on its 12th edition. Bordwell himself maintains a website that contains his recent articles and updates, as well as an

exemplary blog with Thompson (as primary author) titled Observations on Film Art. I mention this to be able to badmouth all the other film-studies websites that fail to display the same degree of rigor and thoroughness, and these are legion. Avoid getting into those (and writing similar crap later – you’ve been warned) by using Thompson and Bordwell’s material as standard, and focus instead on reading as many entire books as you can find useful, whether for instruction or pleasure.

Mini-Appendix B: Deconstruction

Two French names are central in studying deconstruction (unfortunately still far from being fully assimilated in Pinas education, even in grad-school programs): Jacques Derrida, whose principles were initially reduced to methodological approaches by overeager American literary critics, but who persisted in tackling forward-looking global issues through the turn of the millennium; and Michel Foucault, acknowledged as influential by several new progressive activist movements as well as historians grateful for the opportunity to regard the past in new ways.

Both have been extensively translated to English, with Foucault generally more readable than early Derrida; both are also well-served by scholars who sought to explicate the deconstructive turn, which requires a grasp of interdisciplinary principles drawn from history, literature, aesthetics, sociology, politics, psychoanalysis, and economics. (Sounds intimidating, but it gets easier as you go along.) Read up on as many introductory materials as you can find, then explore each one's body of work before forming your own take on deconstruction and its usefulness for social change. You may even reject it, but if your ultimate motive is to return to an older set of ideas, then save yourself the trouble and find ways to defend an order that has become part of the past.

Your encounter with deconstructive principles will lead you to certain trends and ideas that may or may not be familiar to you, depending on how updated your educational institution was: binary systems, poststructural frameworks, identity politics, and so on. Unlike preceding systems of thought that mimicked monotheistic religions in claiming the finality and correctness of their premises and prescriptions and abhorred all manner of dissent, deconstruction has the potential of operating without end and leading to relativistic, if not nihilistic, conclusions. It can of course turn into its own form of dogma, open to exploitation by both left and right extremists, so the challenge (recognized early enough by politicized thinkers) is in harnessing it to attain progressive social change. At the very least, the excitement of encountering a new set of ideas for the first time will be yours to claim.

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