

# The Clown in the Carnival of Repetition

by Sarah Jane S. Raymundo

## *Teledisyon: An Essay on Philippine Television*

by Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.

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Nothing would have been more appropriate than describing television as “the clown in the daily carnival of the masses.” As to why, Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr. renders a historical account of the medium by tracing its development from the 1950s to the year 2000 and beyond. Through an essay and a documentary, Del Mundo presents a critical analysis of television, which exemplifies the culture industry thesis put forward by Adorno. Engagingly, the documentary is almost like a nostalgic trip to the old shows that came and left our television screens as socio-economic and political shifts and ruptures occurred within the industry in particular and in Philippine society in general. The documentary features a barrage of images enough to trigger a headache. But the documentary’s approach effectively demonstrates television’s carnivalesque quality, and thus succeeds in arriving at a parody of the medium.

As a study on the culture industry, Del Mundo takes into consideration the particularity of the Philippine context in relation to the mass media, i.e., a client state that consummates the imperatives of cultural imperialism under the ownership of the local oligarchy. This emphasis on Philippine television’s immediate history allows Del Mundo to reaffirm the argument that the media is a tool for civil hegemony. In this way, television networks ensure the extraction of profits through the consolidation of a popular culture that distinctively provides easy access to information, entertainment, political analysis, news, life stories and advertisements of the latest commodities in the market.

In his narration of the beginnings of Philippine television, Del Mundo shows how the medium has always been

a contested ground for the advancement of political and economic interests, thereby dispelling notions of its neutrality. Television was introduced in the country in the 1950s by the Quirinos, who wanted to use the then new medium as tool for former President Elpidio Quirino's presidential campaign. The Quirinos, who owned the Bolinao Electronics Corporation, set up the television station Alto Broadcasting System (ABS), and hired an American expatriate, James B. Lindenberg, to be its manager. It is at this juncture that television was subsumed under the logic of profit. As Del Mundo points out: "As part of a commercial broadcast company, now [ABS] placed a premium on profit than on any other consideration" (7).

More TV stations started broadcasting in the 60s, and local programs began to compete with foreign programs. Del Mundo asserts that these local programs succeeded in competing with the imported ones because of "[t]he rise of television talents" (11) like Pilita Corales, Chito Feliciano, Oscar Obligacion, Dolphy, Panchito and Sylvia La Torre, who displayed their distinctive Pinoy talent on TV screens. Nevertheless, local programs still adopted American shows as their models. Both the importation of American shows in the 50s and the adoption of American prototypes by local shows in the 60s are indications of the television industry's chronic crisis. Echoing Del Mundo's arguments in his essay, Doreen Fernandez (1980) maintains that "[the television] industry was in financial trouble from the start, especially since equipment and television sets all had to be imported; the latter were too expensive for almost anyone except the upper class, and the production of local shows was expensive and lacked trained personnel" (5).

The control of the oligarchic state over the TV industry became more blatant during the Martial Law years. In his discussion of television in the 70s, Del Mundo presents crucial information on how the Marcos cronies entrenched themselves in the media by dislodging competing factions of the ruling elite. Del Mundo's discussion clarifies how profit orientation and ownership of the mass media serve as the 'first filter' in fulfilling its role as an instrument of systematic propaganda in a society where the concentration of wealth and conflicts of class interests must be silenced either by outright repression or excessive aestheticization.

The normalization of repression reached its optimum when the Marcos government formed the Media Advisory Council (MAC) with its objective of "encouraging self regulation" (16). According to Del Mundo, this self-imposed discipline cohered with the slogan of the New Society - "Sa

ikauunlad ng bayan, disiplina ang kailangan.” Also established was the Broadcast Media Council (BMC), which “encouraged the various networks to program the so-called Renaissance Television” (18), in line with the Martial Law government’s vision of development communication. This was, however, a vision that was “virtually impossible to realize since the system remained commercial” (18).

Del Mundo also notes the return of entertainment shortly after repressive measures were institutionalized during the Marcos regime. Political repression and cultural support might seem to be contradictory tendencies, but Del Mundo argues that “from the point of view of propaganda, perhaps it was cunning of the regime to allow the development of cultural programs, even when some bordered on the political (this was more obvious in cinema). This openness announced to the world that the regime was also supportive of cultural programs” (25). Rather than presenting these incompatible elements as separate tendencies, a recuperation of such phenomenon in a dialectical fashion is in order. By locating this in the specific period of a dictatorship, such contradiction may be explained in terms of the polyvalent function of art. The ‘openness’ of the Marcos regime to cultural initiatives followed the logic of fascism that tends to blur the lines between violence and aesthetic pleasure. The emphasis on culture promoted the aestheticization of politics, created a semblance of nationalism and progress, and facilitated the manufacture of consent under nervous conditions.

In describing television in the 80s, which have been typically referred to as the years of awakening and freedom, Del Mundo notes that the first half of the decade still had the media networks that were “in the service of the Marcos regime” (25). During these years, entertainment shows dominated TV programming, and educational and development programs targeted a very specific audience. But these conditions changed when “the regime was ended unceremoniously... as the rising tide of people power could not be contained” (28). Del Mundo describes the post-EDSA scenario as a moment in Philippine history when “freedom was regained ... [and] the rightful owners of the media regained what has been confiscated from them (28).” The signs of freedom, Del Mundo claims, were seen in shows like *The Probe Team* and *Public Forum*. Another sign of the restoration of freedom was the production of political satires like *Mongolian Barbeque*, *Abangan ang Susunod na Kabanata* and *Sic O’Clock News*.

Del Mundo’s assertion of a freedom regained sits well with the discourse of ‘democratic space’ deployed by the Aquino

regime, popularized by the media and legitimized as official knowledge by the academe. These institutions, to a great extent, succeeded in manufacturing consent that benefited the newly installed faction of the ruling elite represented by Corazon Aquino. Without any fundamental changes in the structure of Philippine society, the discourse of democratic space is, invariably, a symptom of triumphalism. Thus, Del Mundo's statement of a freedom regained not only amplifies the triumphalist analysis of post-EDSA conditions. It also negates his critical analysis of television's early beginnings. Del Mundo himself maintains that television in the 50s was used by political elites for presidential campaigns and was dominated by American shows. The 60s may have produced local talents but American influence was so strong that the local shows were actually patterned after American programs. What then was there to regain when Del Mundo himself stresses the profit motive as the primary determinant of television's development? Furthermore, Del Mundo fails to account for that kind of tokenism that was taken for freedom of speech. After all, the shows he mentions did not pose a real threat to a regime that actually administered the low intensity conflict strategy of the CIA.

Del Mundo's appraisal of TV in the 80s may be found wanting but his critique of television in the 90s and beyond demonstrates a sharp analysis of its various dimensions. This period, he asserts, is characterized by a heightened commercialism "that has denigrated Pinoy television" (34). This is clearly seen in, among others, the tabloidization of TV shows, sensationalism in news and documentaries, the concern for appearances rather than professionalism and the exploitation of women's bodies. These tendencies, as Del Mundo rightly observes, are a result of the competition between big conglomerates such as GMA 7 and ABS-CBN. Quite interesting is Del Mundo's interview with Charo Santos Concio and Wilma Galvante, where these top executives attempt to justify their respective networks' interests vis-à-vis the preferences of the *masa* and with the unmistakable symptoms of feminist backlash.

Del Mundo maintains that the functions of television have been redefined through the years. While tabloidization and sensationalism in the field of television journalism and the influence of foreign sources continue, television occasionally grants air time to the analysis of such issues as the wars in Iraq and Mindanao, the marginalized groups and their plight, and other issues of cultural and political significance.

Del Mundo further expounds on television's functions in his characterization of current Pinoy TV. His description

provides significant insight in the analysis of the dialectical relationship between culture and its economic base:

The corporatization of television and its growing business as part of big conglomerates have made television a big source of money. It has become a major function of television to make money, perhaps to a degree that was never imagined during its early beginnings. Television sells airtime, which is a way of saying that it sells audiences, to advertisers. Unwittingly, people are the objects for sale in the economics of television. And television has become big business that competition among networks is the fiercest in the local business world (38).

However, Del Mundo also notes that “in spite of the commercialism that has degraded Pinoy television, there are programs that have been produced to offer good entertainment, if not politically or socially relevant material” (34). He seems to attribute this positive element to “one significant development in 1987 up to the 90s [of award-giving bodies] that took the focus away from individual achievements in television” (34). This celebratory stance towards award-giving bodies does not consider how these formations tend to turn every significant endeavor to distasteful competition between and among broadcasters, actors, directors, producers and TV networks – as though they were horses. The cultural value of an award must be questioned in terms of what it encourages and affirms. As John Berger (2001: 253) cautions, “if [an award] only stimulates conformity, it merely underwrites success as it is conventionally understood.”

Towards the end of his essay, Del Mundo affirms the utopian potential of TV without losing sight of the material conditions that makes Pinoy TV a hope for the hopeless, a help to the helpless. For “with the seeming absence of help from the government, the immediate presence of television appears to be the only resort” (41). He goes on to probe the prospect of a “truly free and liberating Filipino television.” Remarkably, Del Mundo answers this question by extending the culture industry thesis to explain Philippine television:

The core of the free televisual world, like that of the *moro-moro*, values a world of order. After having their fill of fun and entertainment, the *masa* come out of their euphoria and return to their own worlds. A few may even return a million richer,

while most will return not a penny richer but certainly happier for the hours of fun, of *katwwaan*. They return to their poverty that they have forgotten for the duration of the television carnival. The gap between the rich and the poor is not bridged. Each class remains in its place, but status quo has become more tolerable. Order, therefore, is maintained. And the *moro-moro* goes on. The next day always promises a carnival (44).

The prospect of television “serving the objective of capitalist networks” (45) is rather dim yet real. Del Mundo even adds that “it will remain that way” (45). Nonetheless Del Mundo, in the final analysis, maintains the expressive content of dialectical method that informs the culture industry thesis. And like a true dialectician, he does not put his stakes on changing an institution for and by itself. Rather, he affirms what progressives and revolutionaries have known all along about the realization of an ideological/cultural rupture: That “[u]nless a radical change occurs within the system” (45) things will remain the same for Pinoy TV. In other words, a rupture in social relations is necessary for a truly free and liberating culture to flourish. And by then, the clown may already have learned new tricks and discovered new grounds and would not have to go back to that never-ending carnival.

## References

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from the monograph reviewed.

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