

## Two papers for the Roundtable Discussion on the Poetics and Practice of Film Criticism in the Philippines

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### On Criticism

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Criticism interrogates. It interrogates our individual and collective experiences with meanings. There are meanings that detain us in the prisons of our oppressors, and there are meanings that tell us which truths are more preferred under the contingencies of our present struggles. The challenge of criticism is to know the co-variances, similarities and differences between and among meanings, to know how to untangle the hidden power of meanings, to know how power is ensconced in those meanings, to know how that power can be unleashed to bring our social lives closer to the world we are redreaming, and to use that power to birth the possibilities of a just future into the present.

Criticism allows us to create new metaphors that speak of the turmoil of the present. It is always provocative, for to be complacent about the colonization of our empirical and imagined realities by unjust discourses and social practices is to invite tyranny and oppression.

Criticism shatters. It shatters the shibboleths of our silenced lives, the deep silences about the wrongs of society. To challenge those silences has often come to mean courting tragedy. Criticism challenges those silences. It breaks silence free from its silence. It proffers breakthroughs that break down debilitating silences, and, in the process, rejoices in the breakdown of unwanted silence.

Criticism is not about answers. It is about questions. The aim of criticism is to offer sheaf after sheaf of provocative questions that negotiate the terrains of the wrongs and the wronged, and the wrongdoers. Why is there too deep a silence about the wrongs of society? Perhaps, because we have been comfortable with the answers—and have been too negligent to ask. To be comfortable with answers is again an invitation to the discomforts of a morbidly terrible silence.

Criticism is about asking. It is not enough to have answers, no matter how approximately true the preferred truths to those answers come out to be. Answers should continually take the form of questions. Criticism asks questions that attempt to bring life back to life. That is why criticism

is a celebration. We feast on questions that can tear to shreds the chilling comforts of silence and the discomfoting decadence of our silenced lives.

Criticism is a festival. It celebrates provocations, welcomes incitement, agitates the world. It is a festival that celebrates war against those who lacerate the soul of the unjustly wounded.

Criticism fortifies the collective heroism of our anonymous revolutions.

### **From Indio to Indie: A Redreamt *Indie*hood and *Indie*geneity**

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Many are of the opinion that independent cinema will save the current state of the Filipino film industry. However, I often lose hope as an academe-based critic in the promise offered by films that we label *indie* or underground or alternative cinema, or whatever category that fits into our notion of this type of films.

Independent films have undoubtedly contributed in transforming film production in the country, but this practice is only one aspect of filmmaking. I do not discount the substantial contributions of new festivals that focus on independent films, the generous financial support by various groups for films that they want us to believe are indie films, the current rate of film output coming from individuals and groups that call themselves indies, and the recognition that indie films get from various international festivals. Indeed, this phenomenon has paved the way for the production of new cinematic forms and aesthetics. In my view, however, many so-called alternative filmmakers have yet to produce social discourses that confront the discourses of the unjust holders of our society's economic and political power.

I contend that there is no significant difference in terms of offering a plurality of visions and options for just and humane social relations from the current output of either alternative or commercial cinema. Except perhaps for the counter-discourses of the films of Kidlat Tahimik, Nick Deocampo, Roxlee and committed filmmakers, particularly those who fought against the dictator—like Joey Clemente and Lito Tiongson—and the promise coming from a few filmmakers of the current generation, specifically Pepe Diokno, seldom do I see in the films of the present breed of independent filmmakers a clearly articulated and politically grounded social consciousness. In

other words, there is no alternative social discourse coming from so-called alternative filmmakers. I argue that the struggle within the commercial film industry by Ishmael Bernal, Lino Brocka, Mike de Leon and Mario O'Hara made more sense—politically—to construct a “just alternative” vision of social relations in Philippine society.

In recasting the experiences of the Filipino people in indie films, we—filmmakers and audiences alike—need to interrogate our place in the country's current political and cultural struggle—and for whom, and why, we need to articulate and pursue this position. If these films—and the framework that guides our reading of these films—if all these do not fit into the alliance of communities of knowledge and interests based on social justice, our *indiehood*, our *indiegenity* is a misnomer. In my view, we do not deserve our *indiehood* or our *indiegenity* as filmmakers or film critics if our positions are no different from the discourse of the current holders of political power whose development agenda disregard social justice for the marginalized. In this sense, our *indiehood*, our *indiegenity* is a negation of the nationhood of the powerless.

The power to create a just and humane world lies at the center of humanity itself—a collective of human beings that knows how to nourish life back to life. How to get there depends on how we ground ourselves in our contemporary social life. The possibilities of the future lie in neither a fossilized past nor in an aestheticized utopia. *The possibilities of the future are always present in the present.* How to translate this vision into economic, political and cultural terms is another struggle altogether. Part of that struggle is to rewrite and refilem the world, to reworld the world; not to redeem the world, but perhaps—to use the phrase by Ben Okri in his novel *The Famished Road*—to redream the world. In my view, that is what life and committed independent filmmaking, in general terms, are all about.