

PHILIPPINE FILM

Of the arts in contemporary Philippines, film has the broadest audience. Nationwide, there are more than 1,000 movie theaters. Early in the 1980s, it was estimated that in Metro Manila alone, there were around 2.5 million moviegoers. Of this figure, the great majority patronizes Philippine-made movies.

The size of its audience and the great diversity of its composition are at the root of the strengths and weaknesses of motion pictures as a Filipino art form. Film producers look at their products as commodities needing to be marketed effectively. From their point of view, the best way to ensure marketability is to find the lowest common denominator in the audience and to aim the product at this theoretical individual. Therefore, the content of a film seeking to be popular with audiences is usually spelled out in the most simplistic and obvious way. In this manner, the typical product of the industry turns out to be a movie hewing closely to an established formula of the industry, purveying well-worn clichés and platitudes in lieu of rigorous thought and earned sentiment.

The Filipino film has shown an entire society working together and moving in concert to attain dreams the people hold in common. It has also shown itself capable of great intimacy, allowing us to witness an individual's joy and pain and involving us in the workings of a particular character's heart and mind.

Sister Stella L., 1984, by Mike de Leon, made during the period when the Philippines was under the Marcos dictatorship, tells the story of a nun who witnesses actual cases of human rights violations committed against workers striking for better wages, and finds herself shedding personal problems and fears to commit herself to the struggle of the oppressed against those who wield power unjustly in our society. There are films, on the other hand, that give us an intimate glimpse into the lives of individuals. Laurice Guillen's *Salome*, 1981, is about a young countryside wife who gets attracted to a young engineer visiting from the city, and how the torment of passion and guilt triggers off a tragedy that ruins the lives of husband, wife, and lover.

Filmmaking in the Philippines has entered the 70th year of its history. Filipino artists have been making movies since 1919. That is long enough for an art form to reach a high level of maturity and relevance. That the Filipino film industry has produced only a handful of works of enduring interest and value may disappoint the film historian who approaches the industry without understanding the relevant context. It is, therefore, important to note that the beginnings of the industry arose, not from a local felt need, but from the initiative of foreign entrepreneurs. In this way, the problems of the Filipino film industry vis-à-vis its counterpart in the West, particularly the United States, can be better appreciated. Two Swiss entrepreneurs introduced film shows in Manila as early as 1897, regaling audiences with documentary film clips showing recent events and natural calamities in Europe. At this time, the Filipinos were waging a revolutionary war against the colonial rule

of Spain.

But film clips can hold the attention of audiences only for the duration of their novelty. Thus, the making of the first feature films boosted the dwindling interest in film showings. In 1912, two more foreign entrepreneurs, this time Americans, created a sensation in Manila when they put on film the story of Jose P. Rizal's execution. Here was material close to Filipinos, subject matter which guaranteed ticket sales.

The role of foreign business in the introduction of filmmaking in the Philippines highlights the dependency that was to limit the growth of the industry in terms of technological competence and artistic quality. It was a time of rapid growth in the technology of filmmaking. Enormous capital was needed so the industry could keep up with Hollywood in the employment of new equipment. Investors with the required capital were hard to come by. Consequently, up-to-date technical polish in local films was an ideal all but impossible to attain. Similarly, generous investment was needed to make quality pictures, and in the absence of unlimited capital, filmmakers had to be content with what was deemed *pwede na* (passable). These two problems—expensive technology and inadequate capital—haunted the early producers and continue to haunt present-day filmmakers.

One of the first Filipinos to make movies was a photographer who sold his profitable photo studio so he could go into filmmaking. His name was Jose Nepomuceno, whom historians of the Filipino film industry were to tag as “Father of Philippine Movies.” Nepomuceno's first film was based on a highly acclaimed musical play of the day, ***Dalagang Bukid*** (Country Maiden) by Hermogenes Ilagan and Leon Ignacio. Since sound had not yet been incorporated into motion pictures in 1919 even in the United States, Nepomuceno had to resort to what must have been quite a novelty at the time. During screenings of the movie, the singer-actor Atang de la Rama stood behind the screen to sing the theme song “Nabasag ang Banga” (The Clay Pot Was Broken) to the accompaniment of a three-person band consisting of a violinist, a trumpet player, and a pianist.

In those early years of filmmaking, Hollywood invariably provided the examples local directors could learn from. Thus, it ought not surprise anyone that genres and trends in the local industry had been set by American feature films. But working with outmoded equipment and hampered by limited budgets, Filipino directors found themselves unable to measure up to the standards set by Hollywood. On the most basic level of all, that of technical polish, local products could not compete against movies made by a giant industry fueled by seemingly inexhaustible funds and reaching out to a worldwide market.

There was one advantage that Filipino movies enjoyed over foreign movies. They drew their narratives and themes from the lives of Filipinos themselves. For instance, Vicente Salumbides, a contemporary of Nepomuceno who had spent some years working in Hollywood, was assured of audience appeal for his ***Miracles of Love***, 1925, where he portrayed young upper-class Filipinos rebelling against the tyranny of

conservative parents. When talking pictures came to the Philippines, the language of Philippine movies gave them another advantage over foreign competition. Tagalog was to allow local movies to reach the vast majority of the population, giving them exclusive access to those Filipinos who had not learned English well enough to understand dialogue in Hollywood movies.

Another director went back to history and showed the valor and determination of Filipinos who struggled against Spanish colonial rule in the film *Patria et Amore* (Beloved Country), 1929. Julian Manansala made other movies, but he kept to the example of *Patria et Amore*, mining history for appealing narratives for such works as *Dimasalang*, 1930, *Mutya ng Katipunan* (Muse of Katipunan), 1939, and *Tawag ng Bayan* (Patriotic Duty), 1940.

Starting with *Dalagang Bukid*, early films dug into traditional theater forms for character types, twists in the plot, familiar themes and conventions in acting. The *sarswela*, a musical theater form newly introduced at that time but already a favorite among elite theatergoers, yielded many contemporary romantic and comic characters for narratives spiced up with songs and happy endings. The film *Pakiusap* (Plea), 1940, is recognizably a movie equivalent of the *sarswela*. From the *sinakulo* or passion play, many film melodramas have derived a variety of characters based on the Virgin Mary (the all-suffering, all-forgiving Filipino Mother), Mary Magdalene (the “prostitute with the golden heart”), Judas (the original, unmitigated villain) and of course, Jesus (the savior of societies under threat, redeemer of all those who have gone wrong). From the *komedya*, the typically Filipino *aksyon* movie was to develop. The dividing line in the *komedya* between the good men and the bad men was religion, with the Christians presented as the forces of good and the Moros as the forces of evil in line with the propaganda of Spanish missionaries. In present-day *aksyon* movies, that dividing line has become the law and the two sides could be two families fighting over political power or two factions waiting over economic advantage. The hero is as invincible as the gallant warrior-knight of the *komedya* and the heroine as virtuous as the beautiful princess in the traditional stage play.

Specially during the early years of the film industry, Philippine literature was a rich source of subject matter and themes for movies. Two writers from the 19th century have been the chief sources of tradition. Francisco Baltazar and Jose Rizal, through the classics for which they are famous, have given the industry situations and character types that continue, to this day, to give meat to films both great and mediocre.

The poem *Florante at Laura* (Florante and Laura) provides filmscripts with such familiar characters in romantic melodramas as the jealous lover and the ever-faithful lady-love. Aladin and Florida, the kind-hearted Moor and his courageous princess, have served as prototypes of the “good people from the other side.” A pre-Pacific War version, 1939, and a postwar version, 1950, of Balagtas’ masterwork attest to the poet’s contribution to the literary tradition that informs the Filipino film industry.

But more than Balagtas, it was Rizal who has enriched the content and theme of

Filipino films. Both the *Noli me tangere* (Touch Me Not) and *El filibusterismo* (Subversion) have been made into movies. Even before movies had begun to “talk,” a film version of the *Noli* had been made in 1930. It was the master director Gerardo de Leon who gave the two Rizal classics consummate artistic treatment by turning both into award-winning films in the 1960s. Aside from their narratives, the Rizal novels also gave to Filipino movies distinctive character types like Maria Clara, Sisa, Elias, Padre Damaso, Doña Victorina, and, of course, Crisostomo Ibarra and Simon. Indicative of the pervasive influence of Rizal is the fact that each time scriptwriters dip into the Spanish past for themes, the struggle of the Filipinos for reforms under Spanish colonialism as portrayed in the *Noli* and the *Fili* never fails to be evoked and even recreated.

Contemporary popular novels followed from week to week by avid readers of *Liwayway* magazine were ideal materials for mass entertainment. With their own audience following, these novels when transformed into movies, drew into the movie houses readers interested in seeing their favorite characters turned into almost flesh-and-blood people moving and talking on the screen. *Punyal na Ginto* (Golden Dagger) by Antonio G. Sempio was made into the first talking Tagalog movie in 1933. Serialized novels proved to be very profitable materials for movies, so that it was not unusual for a film to be built up in advertisements as a movie version of a well-known novel. Many times, the name of the novelist was featured more prominently than the names of the lead stars or of the director. Thus did prewar movie goers become familiar with the names of Lazaro Francisco who wrote the novels *Ama* (Father), 1936, *Sa Paanan ng Krus* (At the Foot of the Cross), 1936, and *Bago Lumubog ang Araw* (Before the Sun Sets), 1938; Teodoro Virrey who penned *Lihim ni Bathala* (God’s Secret), 1931, and *Gamugamong Naging Lawin* (Moth that Turned into a Hawk), 1937; Fausto Galauran who published *Lagablab ng Kabataan* (The Raging Fire of Youth), 1936, *Birheng Walang Dambana* (The Virgin without a Shrine), 1936, and *Hatol ng Mataas na Langit* (Judgment from Heaven Above), 1938; and Iñigo Ed Regalado who popularized *Sampaguitang Walang Bango* (Sampaguita Without Fragrance), 1937.

Other literary sources were readily available. Folklore familiar to the populace was a mine of character types and situations for comedies and fantasy films. Enchantresses like Maria Makiling and picaresque adventurers like Juan Tamad appeared under different names and guises in films that capitalized on audiences’ familiarity with folk heroes and heroines.

Competing with Hollywood movies for patronage was a tough test for local movies. Hollywood movies enjoyed huge budgets and saturation advertising. That local movies survived was due less to a miracle than to a cultural exigency resulting from the failure of the majority of Filipinos to learn English well enough to appreciate Hollywood films. The industry did not only survive, it flourished with great vitality. Shortly before the outbreak of the Pacific War, no less than six active film companies were making more than 50 films per year for Filipinos who preferred to watch Filipino movies because these were the movies they could relate to and understand. These were: Philippine

Films, 1934; Parlatone Hispano-Filipino, 1935; Excelsior Pictures Incorporated, 1937; Sampaguita Pictures Incorporated, 1937; LVN Pictures, 1938; and X'Otic Films, 1939.

A clear sign that the film industry had carved out its own share of audience for movies was the acclaim local movie stars received from the public. In less than 20 years of existence from 1919, the industry had built up its own firmament of stars whose glitter and glamor filled popular magazines, and made their photos (as reproduced in magazine covers) standard wall decor in the homes of the moviegoing masses. As the decade of the 1930s came to a close, there was no doubt that moviegoing had established itself as a national pastime among Filipinos.

The Pacific War brought havoc on the industry. The Japanese invasion put a halt to film activity when the invaders commandeered precious film equipment for their own propaganda needs. The Japanese brought their own films to show to Filipino audiences. However, these films failed to exert the same appeal as the Hollywood movies which continued to circulate among moviehouses during the early part of the Occupation. Later, the Japanese propaganda office recruited some local filmmakers, notably Gerardo de Leon, to make movies with propaganda content. *Tatlong Maria* (Three Marys), 1944, a movie intended to give an idealized picture of the country as it had been purged of corrupting American influence, was conceived as a grand production bringing together in one movie some of the best-known names in the prewar industry.

When moviemaking ground to a halt in 1942, movie stars, directors, and technicians found ways of employing themselves in jobs related to their work background. Fortunately, live theater had begun to flourish again. Audiences had tired watching the same Hollywood movies over and over again. No new films were coming in from abroad and no new ones were being made in the Philippines. "Stage shows" began to take over as entertainment fare in moviehouses in Manila. It was by appearing in these shows that unemployed movie stars found a way of keeping their fans from forgetting them, at the same time that they were trying to survive the hard times.

In 1945 when the ruins of war still lay in mounds and mountains, the film industry was already staggering to its feet. The entire nation had gone through hell and there were many stories to tell about heroic deeds and dastardly crimes during the three years of Japanese occupation. A Philippine version of the war movie had emerged as a genre in which were recreated narratives of horror and heroism with soldiers and guerrillas as protagonists exacting justice and vengeance from the Japanese invaders. Movies like *Garrison 13*, 1946, *Dugo ng Bayan* (Blood of the Country), 1946, *Walang Kamatayan* (Deathless), 1946, and *Guerilyera*, 1946, told stories familiar to all who had gone through the Occupation years, and audiences hungry for new local movies and still fired up by patriotism and hatred for the foreign enemies did not seem to tire of recalling their experiences of the war.

The 1950s were years of rebuilding and growth for the nation. The decade saw frenetic activity in the film industry which yielded what might be regarded as the first harvest of distinguished films by Filipinos. Two studios active before the war had reestablished

themselves. Sampaguita and LVN had bounced back from losses suffered during the war and were turning out a steady stream of movies. A new studio had been set up, Premiere Productions Incorporated, and it was earning a reputation for the vigor and freshness of some of its films, particularly the action films. This was the period of the “Big Four” when the industry operated under the studio system. Each of the four studios—Sampaguita, LVN, Premiere and Lebran—had its own set of stars and directors, each one engaged in long-range planning, with movie projects lined up for the entire year.

The first harvest of films that would not resist the label “artistic” might be said to be due in large measure to the workings of the studio system. The system, after all, assured moviegoers of a variety of fare during a specific year and allowed stars and directors more room to develop their skills and talents in movies that did not latch on to current trends for audience appeal.

Awards for excellence were first instituted during the decade. First, the Manila Times Publishing Company set up the Maria Clara Awards. Two years later, in 1952, newspaper people in the movie beat constituted themselves into what is now known as Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences (FAMAS) and handed out the first batch of trophies that have since become in the industry much-coveted symbols of recognition or achievement.

More than the awards system at home, it was the honors won by Filipino entries in the first years of the Asian Film Festival that endowed the Philippine film industry with respectability in so far as the snobbish intelligentsia was concerned. This sector of educated Filipinos had consistently ignored local movies, preferring American and other imported films which carried with them the sophisticated aura of cultural items approved by media here and abroad. The awards won by Gerardo de Leon’s *Ifugao*, 1954, Lamberto Avellana’s *Anak Dalita* (The Ruins), 1956, and *Badjao*, 1957, and Gregorio Fernandez’s *Higit sa Lahat* (Above All), 1955, established the Philippines as an important filmmaking center in Asia. Earlier, in 1952, Manuel Conde had earned celebrity status when *Genghis Khan*, 1950, was accepted for screening at the prestigious Venice Film Festival. In 1953 Luciano B. Carlos won the best screenplay award at the first Asian Film Festival for *Ang Asawa Kong Amerikana* (My American Wife). The cumulative effect of these honors won by Filipino directors was to claim for Filipino films their share of attention from Filipinos interested in culture and the arts.

If the 1950s were an auspicious decade for Filipino movies, the succeeding period was a time of uncertainty. The studio system came under siege when the growing labor movement in Manila organized studio hands, and demands for better pay and working conditions resulted in labor-management conflicts. The first studio to close shop was Lebran followed soon after by Premiere Productions. Investors in these companies resurfaced afterwards as heads of different smaller companies, making way for the beginnings of the independent producers. Sampaguita Pictures and LVN Pictures followed the example of the two studios, and soon enough a new generation of film producers made up the film industry.

Even in a period of decline, however, creative genius would assert itself in the exceptions to the mindless products of mainstream filmmaking. Gerardo de Leon would bring to the screen both of the Rizal novels *Noli Me Tangere* in 1961, and *El Filibusterismo* in 1962. Earlier, de Leon and the younger Cesar Gallardo came up with artistically crafted melodramas— *Huwag Mo Akong Limutin* (Forget Me Not), 1960, and *Kadenang Putik* (Chain of Mud), 1960, both tales about marital infidelity, but told with insight and cinematic import.

The independent producers made movies on a per-picture basis, and to make sure their investment would bring in profits, they geared production to what the audiences were gobbling up at any given moment. They took their cue from the foreign films which were drawing crowds in local moviehouses. This was the period of the softcore sex films from Europe, Italian **cowboy movies**, American James Bond-type thrillers and Chinese/Japanese martial arts action films. The genres that developed—the *bomba* films, the **Pinoy cowboy movie** and the *secret agent thrillers*— were local versions of what were then in vogue.

The decade also saw a worldwide youth revolt best represented by the Beatles and the outrages on adult-sponsored institutions and conventions that these cheeky pop musicians perpetrated. The popularity at this time of certain established film genres owed much to that revolt. *Fan movies* or movies aimed at the fans of certain young stars had been part of the output of the industry during the days of the studios. The “Tita-Pancho” movies

of Sampaguita and the “Nida-Nestor” films of LVN were the forerunners of what were to be the principal youth movies of the new decade. Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos, along with Tirso Cruz III and Edgar Mortiz as their respective screen sweethearts, were callow performers during the heyday of fan movies. Young audiences made up of vociferous partisans for “Guy and Pip” or “Vi and Bot” were in search of role models who could take the place of elders whom the youth revolt had taught them to distrust.

Related in spirit to the fan movies were the *child films* of the period. *Roberta*, 1951, of Sampaguita Pictures was the phenomenal example from an earlier period of the drawing power of movies featuring child stars. In the 1960s movies of this type seemed to have touched a responsive chord implying rejection of adult corruption and insensitivity as exposed by the innocence and candor of child protagonists.

As though to chide those claiming to represent “normal” society, social misfits portrayed by comedians Dolphy, Chiquito, Panchito, and Cachupoy in *slapstick comedies* invariably put “normal” people in embarrassing situations. Slapstick comedies have been perennial favorites among mass moviegoers, and it was not unlikely that the reason for their popularity had to do with their social function.

Directly reflective of the disaffection with the status quo were the genres that formed

the chief contribution of the 1960s to the development of film in the Philippines. Action movies with Pinoy cowboys and secret agents

as central figures depicted a society ravaged by criminality and corruption. These movies connected the make-believe world of movies with the social realities of the times. Institutions and communities that were witnesses to the adventures of these figments of the scriptwriters' fantasy worlds suggested a search for heroes that would rid society of hated warlords, avaricious bureaucrats, and money-crazed merchants.

The most notorious genre of the period emerged at the close of the decade. Bomba refers to what was actually melodrama heavily laced with sex. The explicitness with which the sex act was portrayed or problematized came at a time when a social movement had begun to grow beyond the walls of campuses in Manila and surrounding cities. In rallies, demonstrations and other forms of mass action, the national democratic movement presented its analysis of the problems of Philippine society and posited that only a social revolution could bring genuine change. The bomba film was a direct challenge to the conventions and norms of conduct of the status quo, a rejection of the authority of institutions in regulating the "life urge" seen as "natural" and its free expression "honest" and "therapeutic." Looking beyond its exploitative intentions as a product of a profit-oriented industry, one may now make a case for the bomba film as a subversive genre in which the narrative pretends to uphold establishment values when it is actually intent on undermining audience support for corrupt and outmoded institutions.

Ferdinand Marcos' response to the clamor for change was to place the country under martial rule. In 1972, he sought to contain growing unrest which the youth revolt of the 1960s had fueled. Claiming that all he wanted was to "save the Republic," Marcos retooled the liberal-democratic political system into an authoritarian government which concentrated power in a dictator's hand. To win the population over, mass media was enlisted in the service of the New Society. Film was a key component of the media industry in a society wracked with contradictions within the ruling class and between the sociopolitical elite and the masses.

Accordingly, Marcos and his technocrats sought to regulate filmmaking. The first step was to control the content of movies by insisting on a form of precensorship. One of the rules promulgated by the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (BCMP) stipulated submission of a finished script prior to the start of filming. When the annual film festival of the city of Manila was revived, the censors blatantly insisted that the "ideology" of the New Society be incorporated into the content of the entries.

The requirement of a script prior to the start of filming was actually a welcome innovation in the Philippine film industry, which had practically made a tradition of improvising a screenplay during the filming process. Although compliance with the requirement necessarily meant curtailment of the right of free expression, the BCMP, in effect, caused the film industry to pay attention to the content of a projected film production in so far as such is printed in a finished screenplay. In this way did fresh talent from literature and theater find its way into filmmaking.

The contribution of Ricardo Lee, Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., Jose Dalisay Jr., Jorge Arago, Jose N. Carreon, Jose F. Lacaba, Edgardo M. Reyes, Marina Feleo-Gonzalez, Lualhati Bautista, et al. to the growth of a new Filipino cinema, may be gauged from the crop of movies they helped make possible. To that crop belong outstanding films whose respective directors found in the screenplay plots and characters they could turn into images of human anxieties and achievements.

The 1970s saw the ascendancy of young directors who entered the industry in the late years of the previous decade, specifically, Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, and Celso Ad Castillo. By virtue of his auspicious reentry into the Philippine industry in 1976, Eddie Romero, though he properly belongs to an earlier generation of directors, earned the right to be classified among the makers of a **new cinema** in the Philippines. ***Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?*** (This Was How We Were, What Happens to You Now?), 1976, left no doubt that Romero is an elder master among the young directors. The succession of films he made in the 1970s shows him preoccupied with grand themes about nationhood, the fallibility of human beings and despair, survival, and hope in a corruptible and yet unrenounceable society. ***Sino'ng Kapiling, Sino'ng Kasiping?*** (Housemates, Bedmates?), 1977, ***Banta ng Kahapon*** (Threat From the Past), 1977, and ***Aguila*** (Eagle), 1980, reveal a breadth of vision hard to equal in the local film industry.

Lino Brocka came into film from theater, and this is immediately obvious in his preference for material that plays out vivid conflicts among characters who are all reaching out for a person's share of love and affection in a hostile social setting. The characteristic Brocka film, as delineated by the best of his works, revolves around a victim of oppression by another person or by an institution, culminating in an eruption of revolt by one who had all along seemed passive and patient. ***Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang*** (You've Been Weighed and Found Wanting), 1974, ***Maynila, Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*** (Manila, In the Claws of Light), 1975, ***Insiang***, 1976, ***Tahan na, Empoy, Tahan*** (Stop Crying Now, Empoy), 1977, ***Jaguar*** (Guard), 1979, ***Bona***, 1980, and ***Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim*** (My Country: Gripping the Knife's Edge), 1985, are among Brocka's best.

Ishmael Bernal entered the industry at about the same time as Brocka. He had majored in college in literature and this often surfaces in his films where the director shows fondness for carefully worked-out patterns of symbolic details. ***Pagdating sa Dulo*** (At the End), 1971, ***Nunal sa Tubig*** (Mole in the Water), 1976, ***Aliw?*** (Do You Want Some Fun?), 1979, ***City After Dark***, 1980, and ***Himala*** (Miracle), 1982, allow us a glimpse of the intellectuality that is at the heart of Bernal's finest achievements in film.

Celso Ad Castillo has a penchant for social subject matter, but this is often obscured by a characteristic flamboyance in approach and style. ***Asedillo***, 1970, ***Daluyong at Habagat*** (Tall Waves, Wild Wind), 1975, ***Burlesk Queen*** (Burlesque Queen), 1977, ***Pagputi ng Uwak, Pag-itim ng Tagak*** (When the Crow Turns White, When the Heron Turns Black), 1978, and ***Ang Alamat ni Julian Makabayan*** (The Legend of Patriotic

Julian), 1979, show Castillo's daring in his choice of subject matter. Revolt, labor unionism, social ostracism and class division—these are stuff from which even the most mettlesome directors in the industry would stay away. In his works in the 1970s, adventurousness was the essence of the Castillo style.

The surge of creative energy occasioned by the new films encouraged optimism that the industry was ready to gamble on new subject matter, vital themes, and innovative technique. This attracted a new generation of directors. These filmmakers had their start in the industry only in the late 1970s, but already each of them has produced works that leave no doubt about his/her talent in using the camera to weave a tale or statement about the human condition in the Philippines in our time.

The new generation consists of Mike de Leon who did *Itim* (Rites of May), 1976, *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* (Thrilled?), 1980, *Kisapmata* (Split-Second), 1981, *Batch '81*, 1982, and *Sister Stella L.*, 1984; Marilou Diaz Abaya who directed *Tanikala* (Chains), 1979, *Brutal*, 1980, *Moral*, 1982, and *Karnal* (Carnal), 1983; Laurice Guillen who did *Kasal* (Wedding), 1980, *Kung Ako'y Iwan Mo* (Should You Abandon Me), 1980, and *Salome*, 1981; Peque Gallaga who directed *Oro Plata Mata* (Gold Silver Death), 1982, *Virgin Forest*, 1983, and *Scorpio Nights*, 1984; and Mel Chionglo who did *Playgirl*, 1981, and *Sinner or Saint*, 1984.

At present, there is no denying that Filipino films have achieved intellectual respectability among Filipino viewers beyond what they gained in the 1950s. This time, it is not only in Asia that Filipino filmmakers have made a mark; they have been recognized in the West as well. So far, five of Brocka's films have been exhibited at the Cannes Film Festival in France, earning for him an international reputation that has brought offers to make films outside the Philippines. Two of Mike de Leon's films have been featured at the same festival. The acknowledged master among all Filipino filmmakers, Gerardo de Leon, has been accorded posthumous honors at the Nantes Film Festival in France and at the Hongkong Film Festival. International recognition of the talent of Filipino directors has attracted students and young professionals and their families, adding a dynamic component to the crowd that used to be disparaged as an "uncultured" audience. Their presence in the consciousness of the new filmmakers has made possible more quality pictures from the local industry.

In addition, the establishment of the critics' group known as Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino in 1976 has further buttressed the new-found status of film as a Filipino art form. Over the years, the Urian Awards have been able to intensify awareness of high artistic and sociocultural standards against which the very best Filipino films have been measured. Reactions pro and con to the annual awards tend to confirm that indeed, the audience for Filipino films has changed.

Fresh talents and a new audience with them have emerged. The chieftains of the industry, however, have remained unduly cautious, guarding their investments and continuing to assume that the consumers for their products have remained as static as they have. Thus, mainstream cinema in the Philippines continues to thrive on clichés

and formulas originating in the primeval times of local filmmaking.

Outside the industry, talented young filmmakers have held out against the crass commercialism of mainstream cinema. In 1977, news from the Berlin Film Festival about the International Critics' Prize for a film from the Philippines with a rather bizarre title ***Mababangong Bangungot*** (Perfumed Nightmare) by a young director with the equally bizarre name of Kidlat Tahimik came like a dispatch from the moon. Kidlat Tahimik turned out to be Eric de Guia, a young man with an economics degree from Wharton College in the United States, who turned his back on a career in business and industry to make movies. He was a total unknown as far as the Filipino film industry was concerned, but his film had been ranked in the United States among the very best in the contemporary film scene.

Kidlat Tahimik's unheralded rise to international fame underscores the distance between mainstream cinema and what has been termed as **independent cinema**. Where the former has the potential of reaching a vast audience but is subject to the whims and dictates of profit-oriented producers, independent cinema is free to explore all types of subject matter and approaches but accessible only to a limited though highly discriminating audience.

Out of the short film festivals sponsored by the University of the Philippines Film Center and by the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, young filmmakers have joined Kidlat Tahimik in the production of movies that, by their refusal to kowtow to the traditions and conventions of mainstream filmmaking, signify faith in works that try to probe deeper into the human being and into society. Nick Deocampo's *Oliver*, 1983, and Raymond Red's *Ang Magpakailanman* (The Eternal), 1983, have received their share of international attention in festivals abroad.

The Philippine film industry makes on the average 150 movies a year. From this output, it is perhaps reasonable to expect that 10 movies might be picked out at year's end as creative works that say something worthwhile if not necessarily significant. If the number of films up for awards in the five annual award-giving ceremonies is a reliable index, only about five percent of the industry output passes reasonably high standards of artistic excellence.

The meager yield is itself an indictment of an industry that has been terribly behind its artists in growing up. It points to many crimes both of commission and omission that producers, distributors, promotions planners, and others have perpetrated against the paying public. Chief among these crimes is the continuing reification of the audience and then blaming that audience for the industry's own refusal to mature. Fortunately, social realities cannot be permanently shut out from products of the film industry. The filmmaker is immersed in the realities of his society whether he is aware of it or not. And film is a voracious medium that takes in whatever the camera can record even when the men behind that camera are focusing on something else they would rather project. Consequently, even the most vicious proponents of mindless entertainment for the masses in the industry have not been too successful in editing out social problems and

issues from the movies they have produced.

The martial law years under President Ferdinand Marcos were a period of media repression that saw radio, television, *komiks*, and film kept under constant surveillance with the collaboration of media owners and practitioners as well. Nevertheless, some filmmakers were not daunted by the state's veiled terrorism. Realities the martial law government wanted to gloss over or conceal appeared in various guises in a number of feature films, such as *Hubad na Bayani* (A Hero Stripped), 1977, about a peasant revolt; *Sakada* (Seasonal Cane Workers), 1976, about unrest among sugar workers; *Batch '81*, 1982, an allegory about fascism; *Manila by Night/City after Dark*, 1980, about the seamy side of Imelda Marcos' "City of Man"; *Minsa'y Isang Gamugamo* (Once a Moth), 1976, an exposure of the ill effects of the US bases; *Broken Marriage*, 1983, touching on media repression; *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (My Country: Gripping the Knife's Edge), 1985, focusing on the suppression of workers' rights; and *Sister Stella L.*, 1984, on media repression and violence against striking workers.

By all indications, since 1974, when Lino Brocka's *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* appeared, a "new Filipino cinema" has been in the making. The works that compose its canon have been created under conditions almost prohibitive of artistic quality. Not one of them has escaped certain telltale marks of a commercial product. What matters, however, is that these atypical products of the industry have sharpened the consciousness of audiences that films need not be dull to be relevant nor inaccessible to be artistic, and that, above all, films that entertain can also be a source of light.

- B. Lumera