

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines¹

Louise Jashil R. Sonido

Abstract

“De Espectáculos” (The Shows) is the earliest known film review column in the Philippines. Published in the Spanish-language Catholic magazine *Cultura Social: Revista Catolica Filipina* from 1913 to 1914, “De Espectáculos” articles were written by two priests under the pseudonyms Alonso de Mudarra and Filadelfo. This essay examines the column using realist historiography draw out the content and context of early film criticism in the Philippines, and to glean an ethnography of critical practice during this early period of cinema. This study activates historical anthropology toward a rehabilitation of cultural memory, as part and parcel of the struggle to rename archival absence in Philippine film historiography into a generative condition for discursive agency.

I. Points of Departure

In 1913, a priest started the earliest known film column published in the Philippines: “De Espectáculos,” or, “The Shows,” a regular monthly column included as a part of the Spanish-language Catholic magazine, *Cultura Social: Revista Catolica Filipina* from 1913 to 1914. This essay examines articles from “De Espectáculos” through the lens of realist historiography and historical anthropology to draw out the content and context of an early kind of film criticism that made a bid for the controlling narrative that would eventually define critical practices and traditions in Philippine film and, to an extent, Philippine studies in general. Through an ethnography of critical practice pieced together from the writings in *Cultura Social*, it activates historical anthropology toward a rehabilitation of cultural memory, as part and parcel of the struggle to rename archival absence in Philippine film historiography into a generative condition for discursive agency.

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

A realist mode of historiography, as defined by Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery in their seminal work *Film History: Theory and Practice*, enables the current metacritical project of drawing history from written history. In the absence of primary evidence, such as recordings of early cinema audiences or early film reels, this study anchors on textual analyses of early film writings in “De Espectáculos” to glean, first, how film was discursively produced during these early years as scientific technology, art medium, and cultural object; and, second, how film was imbricated, through the critical language of these early writings, into specific historical narratives that would germinate some hegemonic critical traditions in Philippine film criticism.

In this pursuit, an interdisciplinary approach to the historical study of film in the Philippines is less a challenge than it is a necessity. “Research on Philippine cinema,” as Bliss Cua-Lim describes it, is “circumscribed by the acute temporal pressures of archival crisis,” whereby an estimated 37% of films produced in the country have been lost to the ravages of time, and among the oldest preserved date back only to 1936, over two decades since film production was in evidence in the Philippines.² Because “what we can know of the past is limited to the historical traces of it that exist in the present,” this “absence or inaccessibility of traditional sources of data should be an invitation...to look for evidence in unusual, if not exotic, places.”³ Ironically, then, the absence of a film corpus becomes the enabling condition for contemporary scholars to employ innovative interdisciplinary strategies to study Philippine film and history in/through literature.

Allen and Gomery conceive of a realist method of film historiography that offers the prospect of fashioning an approach to history which preserves the notion of an independently existing past, while taking into account the necessity and complexity of theory in historical explanation. Realism is offered here not as a final solution to the empiricism/conventionalism conflict or as the way to conduct film history, but rather as an emerging (and hence preliminary) alternative philosophical formulation that seems particularly applicable to film history.⁴

The “fundamental agreement with empiricism”⁵ in realist historiography is tempered by the awareness in historical anthropology that while texts “produce their objects as real, that is, as existing prior to and outside of discourse... [r]ather than the study of a people in a particular place and at a certain time, what is at stake in historical anthropology is explaining the production of a people, and the production of space and time.”⁶ In this study, the materialist impulse of realist historiography is thus premised on the reflexivity of the historical anthropological view to understand the writings being examined as both objects of history and producers of it.

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

The corpus of the study itself may be deemed, even within Philippine literary studies (or at least until recent history) “exotic”: magazines and periodicals, like films, have had to fight seriously for recognition and legitimacy as objects of critical value. A Catholic magazine like *Cultura Social*, with its unapologetic moral bias, is likewise vexed: “popular” in the sense that it may be deemed as unscholarly, unscientific, and given to religious propaganda. As one of the few remaining means to study film at the beginning of the twentieth century, it poses questions to what can be considered in scholarly studies as valid texts for analysis.

But an interdisciplinary approach circumvents the question of validity in order to, more importantly, “[increase] our sense of the participants in history,”⁷ and allow us to understand cinema as located and produced within a broad and complex web of discursive practices, including critical literatures, fan cultures, academic iterations, industry mores, and legal codes. The work of examining film through archival writings “[expands] the number of interpretable texts...to begin to chart the relationships between, and make meaning from, various discursive practices...to treat movies as aspects of a complex system of cultural production.”⁸

The writings in “De Espectáculos” do not just generate discourse but, especially for the twenty-first century reader who has no access to primary archival evidence of early film audiences, produce real people—the textual and the discursive are involved in the material production of life. Likewise, historical anthropology anchors the reader on an awareness of the text—of history—as a field of power, in which facts about human life are emplotted in narratives that do not just represent but *produce* social norms and relations. Film writings being examined in this study are understood to create a historical narrative that attempts to both examine and determine cultural behaviors.

The insistence on the literary as real, in the reflexive sense that the real exceeds the figurative and discursive—even as undocumented and historically absent film audiences can only exist figuratively and subversively—is powerful as both a critique and strategy of historiography. In reading the column not just as normative discourses about film but as evidence of early film audiences, the surfacing of residual imprints of what existed outside of the text creates an important counterpoint to the disciplining, normativizing language of the writings.

Thus, toward a view of the texts as material agents in the production of knowledge, this study employs the strategies of rigorous textual analysis of archival writings on cinema, to offer itself as three things:

- (1) a theoretical contribution toward an interdisciplinary handling of textual criticism;
- (2) an attempt at a reflexive history of knowledge, particularly of cinema, in the Philippines; and

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

- (3) an interrogation of critical practice itself by looking at the questions asked of dominant traditions of (film) criticism by archival evidence and archival absence.

II. *Cultura Social*: A History of a Short-Lived Film Column

Cultura Social (Social Culture) was a conservative Spanish-language magazine endorsed by the archbishop of Manila, and it published from 1913 to 1941, with the first article in Filipino appearing in 1922. It was a principal title among several “*menores, bastante estables por lo general*” (small but relatively stable)⁹ periodicals that published in limited circulation during that period—a decade since Spain ceded the Philippines to its new American colonizers. The Catholic press continued efforts to expand within the new colonial structure, driven by a Church that had overcome the difficult early years of the century yet still contended with strong anticlericalism emphasized by the clergy’s association with the previous colonial regime.¹⁰

The conditions of writing during these early years must be examined with some more depth before any discussion of the film writings themselves. In a country where formal education was still narrowly confined to the upper classes during this period, one cannot exaggerate the influence of a periodical such as *Cultura Social* that required more than a minimum of literacy and numeracy to be read. As Resil Mojares describes the early twentieth century in the Philippines, “[w]ith Spanish as dominant medium, limited literacy, and urban bias, periodical circulations were not large.” However, ideas within such periodicals did circulate in a myriad of other ways: “[t]he influence of newspapers...extended beyond readers, they were relay points in the oral transmission of news, rumour, and gossip.”¹¹ As a magazine produced with the support of the archdiocese, *Cultura Social* espoused ideas of the Catholic Church that were propagated broadly outside the periodical itself.

A total of fifteen “De Espectáculos” articles, published between January 1913 and September 14, were recovered for this study. This count excludes the June and July 1913 issues, as these were missing from the microfilm archives of the University of the Philippines and the University of Santo Tomas. Notably, other writings on film included in *Cultura Social* were published under another column called “En pro de la moral” (In pursuit of morality) which focused on reporting and endorsing censorship policies implemented to uphold morality in European nations.¹² This promotion of foreign legislation for the Philippine setting fulfilled the cultural agenda of the Catholic Church to secure its position in

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

the sociopolitical life of the new colonial regime and to reinforce what it had systematically entrenched in Philippine life as a hegemonic morality based on the values of Catholic doctrine. Evaluations of films based on this political and moral agenda were then demonstrated in “De Espectáculos.” Two priests wrote for the column during its period of publication: Alonso de Mudarra (also referred to here as Mudarra for brevity) wrote consistently month after month during his period of tenure, while Filadelfo, his successor, wrote less and less regularly until his contributions stopped entirely in 1914.

The column’s life was short-lived, but its emergence represented a significant period for Philippine cinema. Because of the narrativization of films through the cinematic adaptation of many literary and theatrical pieces, moviegoing had become a popular cultural activity in the public life of the city, and its increasing market was likewise seeing the rise of more cinemas and a growing industry of film workers, programmers, importers, distributors, and so on. These were also years when innovators were experimenting more and more with sound-on-film technologies, one of the effects of which was increased realism in cinema that continued to fascinate viewers. After 1909 were also the years described by film historian Charles Musser as “the emergence of Philippines-based filmmaking,”¹³ with the release of Yearsley’s *El Fusilamiento de Dr. Jose Rizal* (The Shooting of Dr. Jose Rizal) and Brown, Molina, and Gross’s *La Vida de Rizal* (The Life of Rizal) in 1912, and the subsequent period of activity of the Rizalina Film Manufacturing Company. The Company had produced a good number of films featuring “the biggest star of the silent film era”¹⁴ Juana “Titay” Molina—zarzuela actress, Edward Gross’s wife and collaborator, and accomplished filmmaker in her own right.

Observably, however, there was an absence of locally made productions reviewed in *Cultura Social*, giving rise to questions that reflect on the historical roots of critical practice. While the dominance of foreign films in the “De Espectáculos” columns certainly gesture toward political and sociocultural biases that determined what objects the writers deemed to warrant review, the gap may also have more fundamental and material reasons: were local films accessible for review? In what manner were they available to the columnists?

During the period of early cinema in the Philippines, theaters changed their film programs often, changing shows every three to five days. As an example, in Alonso de Mudarra’s May 1913 column, *La Viuda Alegre* (The Happy Widow)¹⁵ is described as an example of a resoundingly successful film: screened simultaneously in at least two theaters in a span of four days.¹⁶ This is arguably a rather narrow window of exposure, especially considering the amount of competition among theaters during this time. The different theaters also targeted different clientele and

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

adjusted their film selections and programs accordingly, such that Philippine-made films were likely screened only in cinemas with aligned programming, and they may have been easy to miss if these were not the theaters that the review columnists frequented.

Clayton and Klevan, in their examinations of the style and aesthetics of film critical language, point out that film reviewers typically choose to review objects that can “[f]or the most part [be] used illustratively (valued primarily for their usefulness) rather than engaged with critically (valued for their achievements).”¹⁷ If the “De Espectáculos” column was established to illustrate the moral criteria of the Catholic Church in the understanding of films, then popular films of questionable moral content were likelier to have been chosen for review. If locally produced films were unremarkable in these respects, they might have garnered little critical attention.

The moral agenda of the *Cultura Social* writers was also tightly enfolded in their apparent cosmopolitanism, with their writings assuming the voice of “citizens of the world” that looked to Europe as the model of civil society. In their writings, they frequently endorsed policies and trends in European nations and referenced great books of the West, repeating the civilizing discourse of colonial Catholic morality which likewise gestured toward the cosmopolitan nature of Catholicism itself. Read from the present, their film reviews also still echo the “refined” views of the great European civilizations. For example, in Mudarra’s appraisal of Russian films, he observes in his April 1913 column, “*En ellas se refleja el ambiente pobre y semibárbaro de Rusia, que no tiene nada de agradable y que contrasta abiertamente con el refinamiento de vida y de costumbres que ofrecen las películas francesas*” (the poor, semi-barbaric, and unpleasant ambience of Russia are reflected in these films, in stark contrast with the refinement of life and customs proffered in the French films). With the same ardor for elite Europeanness, his February 1913 column credits Gaumont and Pathé for bringing knowledge of the world to the Philippines and describes how “*las revistas gráficas*” (graphic reviews) of the two production companies “*nos ponen al corriente de los principales sucesos del mundo y ... son una verdadera galería de trajes, usos, y costumbres*” (keep us updated with current events around the world and are a true exhibition of garments, uses, and customs).¹⁸

The writers of “De Espectáculos,” in their moralism and cosmopolitanism, provided a vivid contrast to the inward-looking cultural nationalism more strongly espoused in periodicals that would eventually be canonized to shape Philippine critical traditions, such as the preponderant *El Renacimiento/Muling Pagsilang and Renacimiento Filipino*. The erasure has not been for lack of effort to participate in the impulse to build the nascent

The Materiality of Criticism: Lining Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

Filipino nation at the beginning of the twentieth century: the *Cultura Social* writers certainly articulated their concern for the “*naciente ideario de pequeño ciudadano*” (nascent ideology of a small citizenry)¹⁹ and attempted to steer the imagination of the nation toward a moral and cosmopolitan outlook, insofar as Western, particularly European, cultures had been (and still continue to be) imagined as centers of modernity, sophisticated thought, and enlightened civility.

But for speaking through the voice of the Catholic Church, still regarded by many as colonial, Hispanist, conservative, and unscientific, these perspectives toward cinema and popular culture would be forfeited in national(ist) intellectual history. It is a voice that, over a century hence, this study now attempts to recover to listen for stories about ourselves that we have not yet heard.²⁰ In this way, it also recognizes and comes to terms with the fact that much of what we can appropriate for cultural self-definition is swathed in colonial wrappings and must necessarily be assembled from “an archive at once corrupt and indispensable.”²¹

III. Exhuming History, Materializing Voice

The language of the “De Espectáculos” column, like any critical language, participates in producing, as Resil Mojares writes, a “discourse of rulers and ruled [that] is not an academic conversation in a parlor but a deep, asymmetrical struggle for power.”²² It assimilates cinema into its particular construction of “disciplined” identities through textual emplotment of the colonized; yet, in doing so, it materializes the body that it seeks to control and affirms the existence of its own discursive excesses.

It is difficult to determine whether Alonso de Mudarra and Filadelfo were both Spanish, Philippine-born Spaniards, or Filipino *ilustrados*. Given their language (both wrote exclusively in Spanish), choice of pseudonyms (masculine in their grammatical register), and religious affiliation (Catholicism, infamously patriarchal in structure), they may be safely assumed as male and upper-class. Otherwise, very little else can be known of their historic personages.²³ But while historically verifiable evidence remains elusive, their writings are examined here within view of how Richard Combs observes that critics “carry with them as a structure where they came from, where they are, and whom they are addressing. This is an aesthetic strategy, or a theory of sorts, [that] ... comes with their territory...”²⁴

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

In this regard, the pseudonyms of two *Cultura Social* writers bear some discussion. Alonso de Mudarra's name, broken down, may be translated as "one who battles for change," from "Alonso," meaning "eager for battle," and "mudarra," which has no direct translation in Spanish but might be derived from the verb "mudar," meaning "to change." Its conjugated form "mudará" means "will change" in third-person future tense or in a subjunctive mood. Filadelfo, on the other hand, is a common name likely derived from the Greek words "phílos," meaning "love," and "adelphós," meaning "of the same womb" or "brother," to mean, consequently, "brotherly love."

The writing styles of the two writers are remarkably consistent with their choice of names. The combative cast of "Alonso de Mudarra" suits a writing style distinct for its dramatic tendencies, cutting repartees, and tart remonstrations. Mudarra, beyond simple didacticism, interspersed his commentaries with diary-like musings and anecdotes, with a penchant for emotional embellishments. His language is vivid and colorful, profuse in its praise of films that he viewed as commendable and scathing in its disapproval of films he viewed as harmful, characterized by what Mojares described as "rhetorical excess" that made 19th-century Spanish polemics distinctive,²⁵ employing a "voice of authority" in his value-judgments of films and brooking no argument.

In contrast, the gentle forbearance of "Filadelfo" is distinctly reflected in his more measured expressions. While equally adamant in his espousal of conservative Catholic views, Filadelfo strived toward a more sympathetic mode of argumentation in his writings, making a point of citing both good and bad aspects of cinema. In contrast to Mudarra and his default suspiciousness of the medium, Filadelfo's reviews indicate that he strived to understand the appeal of cinema to its audiences, building his criticisms, not on the aesthetic quality of films but on how they affected their vulnerable audiences, the corruptible children and uneducated classes. While Mudarra was unapologetically subjective, Filadelfo was more scientific in his anticipation of counter-arguments and more cautionary than vilifying in his judgements, though not completely resistant to oratorical embellishments.

Their choice of names distinctly reflected in their writing styles and attitudes toward cinema, corroborating what Clayton and Klevan describe as the construction of a clear persona in many film reviews: "[t]he individuality and personality of this critic is watching and writing, in this way, now" such that one recognizes from the aesthetic qualities of a work that "this is *his*...criticism."²⁶

Between the two columnists, it was arguably Mudarra who closely approximated the values of the

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

contemporary film reviewer/critic. He wrote far more regularly on film during his tenure as columnist than Filadelfo, who took over the column in November 1913. Mudarra's writings leaned heavily toward aesthetic criticism, with a "formal demeanor" toward films that evaluated aesthetics and plot with a certain rigor imposed by his proselytism and moralism, but also a distinct method that showed, beyond matters of theme and storyline, an awareness of film elements and the difference of cinema from established art forms such as theater and literature.

From his writings, Mudarra's aesthetic criticism is interested largely in the *verísimo* (plausibility) of the plot, sniffing at unconvincing films full of convenient "*coincidencias*" (coincidences) in the plot and implausible characterization, picking apart details such as the costume and production design. In his review of *El Lechero Millionario* (The Millionaire Milkman) in February 1913, he calls out its American producers for failing to render a realistic response to a breakup:

Queremos hacer a los americanos el favor de creer que en su tierra, por mucho que domine el interés, no pasan las cosas de ese modo, porque eso es ya cuestión de urbanidad y no hay en el mundo quien en un caso semejante no busque un pretexto para el rompimiento.

We'd like to do the Americans a favor and—as much as it's of interest—tell them, don't let things happen this way. There is nowhere in the world where a person in a similar situation wouldn't look for a pretext of some sort for a breakup.

It is the same proto-realist impulse that makes him complain in his March 1913 column how *Una Fuga Interrumpida* (An Interrupted Fugue) is a love story but doesn't feature a single kiss, even though one might expect a conservative clergyman to be relieved that the film spares its audiences such intimacies.

Mudarra's droll peevishness is not uncommon in his reviews. His critiques are rendered in highly editorialized summaries of the films being reviewed, demonstrating what film critic Adrian Martin describes as "the possibilities—or impossibilities—for discourse to intervene in what unfolds on screen,"²⁷ such that even the summarizing of plot becomes a practice in ekphrasis—a redescription that is "neither literal nor naively representational."²⁸

Criticism...begins at a stage that...amounts to a secondary elaboration, after the primary

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

elaboration of the film-work itself; it takes on the necessary, even sometimes militant, function of *re-describing* what has already been etched into the screen...

Criticism, in this sense, doubles its object, ghosts it in a process that art critic Edward Colless describes as *superabundance*. There is always something excessive, something strictly unnecessary, perhaps even something a little diabolical...in critical description.²⁹

Likewise, Mudarra's representational descriptions of the film narrative are certainly implicated in his, and *Cultura Social's*, own political project and cultural agenda.

It must be said that Mudarra's dissatisfaction with unconvincing and implausible films seems to be underpinned by a nascent realism that would only much later be theorized and articulated by the likes of Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin. Mudarra did not theorize the medium-specificities of cinema during his period, but his insistence on cinema's fidelity to the world it is referencing appeals for cinema to "record and reveal physical reality"³⁰—an expectation premised on a notion, albeit still loose, that it is this realism that defines cinema's "aesthetic legitimacy"³¹ as a medium of cultural import.

Mudarra's proto-realist expectations are more discernible as a critical aesthetic in his review of *Quo Vadis* (Whither goest thou?) in his August 1913 column, where he sets aside his Catholic conservatism toward violence and immorality to praise how admirably the film portrays the novel and its narrative of redemption, when an agnostic Roman general falls in love with a Christian girl despite the intense persecution of Christians during the last years of Emperor Nero's reign:

En la imposibilidad de describir toda la cinta, citaremos como más salientes la escena del banquete en el palacio de Nerón con un final de orgía discretamente crudo, la bellissima presentación de los mártires en el circo y, sobre todo, el momento solemne de dar suelta a las fieras y de dirigirse éstas contra sus víctimas, la aparición del Señor al Apostol y el incendio de Roma, sin que esto sea negar su mérito a las demás, tan bien hechas algunas como la desdichada muerte de Petronio.

In the impossibility of describing the entire film, we will cite salient scenes of the banquet in the palace of Nero which ends with a discreetly crude orgy; the beautiful presentation of the martyrs in the circus; the solemn moment in which the beasts were freed and directed

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

against their victims; the appearance of the Lord to the Apostle; and the burning of Rome, as well-done as the unfortunate death of Petronius.

He forgives the explicit and grisly content, including *suicidos* (the death of Petronius by cutting his wrists), *incendios* (fires), and even a “*discretamente crudo*” orgy, because “*no hay nada tan cerca de lo vulgar como lo sublime*” (there is nothing so close to the vulgar as the sublime).

Of course, this deviation from his moral criteria for a film like *Quo Vadis* can also be attributed to a preference for religious and pro-Christian themes, because otherwise Mudarra categorically denounces excessive violence in films. In his May 1913 column, he describes such films as “*más dañinas que la peor literatura sensacional que tan a menudo se deplora*” (worse than the worst sensational literature that are so often deplored). This view foregrounds the more visceral impact of cinema on its audiences than of literature on its readers, such that film’s aesthetic quality, as a medium that both references and affects life, amplifies by “making real,” on screen and in real life, a film’s moral values. Mudarra’s concern that film reality depicts lived reality as “*mas horribles*” than it “truly” is, is underpinned by a belief that film, because of its unique relationship with life/reality, is able to imbue its depictions with life—a belief that links and necessitates, by consequence, the censorship and control of film in order to control life.

In the same vein, Mudarra is concerned about the effects of cinema on literature itself: he complains in his January 1913 article how “*los malos cinematógrafos formentan las malas lecturas*” (bad films encourage the growth of bad literature). During this period, cinema had begun to rely heavily on literary classics such as *Don Quixote*, *Les Misérables*, and *Quo Vadis* for inspiration, and Mudarra correctly perceived this relationship between film and literature as both material (or economic) and moral, with their shared audiences, shared income, and shared values. In terms of critical practice, this early privileging of the narrative, which Mudarra likewise underscored as cinema’s responsibility for the promotion of good literature, would also contribute to the eventual dominance of narrative cinema as the proper object of film criticism.

Filadelfo took over the “De Espectáculos” column in November 1913. Notably, unlike Mudarra, Filadelfo tended to examine broad genres rather than particular films: for instance, he wrote articles dedicated to what he called “*obras de sentimiento*” (works of feeling, or, sentimental works) and “*apachista*”³² films, which are described to depict what we now recognize as Western films. This broad-strokes criticism was useful to

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

him as a rhetorical strategy to critique, not just particular films, but cultural attitudes and societal tendencies depicted in the films or felt during the viewing experience. He mentioned the comedy *Salustiano y el Hormiguera* (Salustiano and the Anthill) to talk about the appeal and positive effects of good humor on the human spirit and commended emotional restraint in *obras de sentimiento* such as *Amor de Madre* (Mother's Love).³³ Filadelfo, it seemed, was less interested in segregating good films from bad films than in understanding and evaluating trends in Philippine popular cultural life.

To this end, Filadelfo took a more sociological, quasi-scientific route in his criticism, tempering his moral claims with "objective" argumentation, underpinned by a view of cinema's influence as not by default harmful but potentially educational. In his February 1914 article, he writes that film "*se encierra un auxiliar muy valioso que debe aprovecharse como todo sistema moderno, progresivo, sintético, de representación objetiva*" (is a very valuable auxiliary that must be used like any modern, progressive, synthetic system of objective representation).³⁴

This claim to impartiality may be read within the context of the period as an effort on the part of the clerical intelligentsia to assimilate aspects of the modern preoccupation with scientific and rational thought into Catholic discourse. During these decades, the Catholic Church was waging a battle against "European Enlightenment that... [had taken] a decidedly anti-Catholic cast," and Catholic devotees needed to contend with intellectual trends that rejected the traditional teachings of the Church.³⁵ The attempt in Filadelfo's writings to be impartial while continuing to espouse correct values of morality, truthfulness, and civility in the final evaluation, can be read as an attempt to argue and demonstrate that, "[f]ar from being a closed, medieval system...Catholicism was a tradition of thought capable of renewing itself and assimilating modern science."³⁶

Yet Filadelfo's "objective" critiques of "typical" films also provided the rhetorical function of giving his moral-ideological propagandizing illocutionary force. In his article on *apachista* films in February 1914, he describes a film done in the style of *apachismo*, seemingly an early reference to the Western crime genre, and counts—presumably for good scientific measure—"tres escalos, dos robos, un envenenamiento, un secuestro, dos evasiones, un suicidio frustrado, dos asesinatos y un incendio" (three hikes up a mountain, two robberies, a poisoning, a kidnapping, two escapes, a frustrated suicide, two murders and a fire). Yet this description does not continue into a genre critique. Instead, he begins to describe a boy around eight years old who sat next to him in the theater and was so anxious and fearful throughout the viewing: "*se levantaba, se ponía de puntillas, aplaudía, se volvía a sentar, golpeaba con los pies el asiento de*

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

delante, reía nerviosamente, se estremecía, en fin, todo” (he would get up, tiptoe, clap, sit back down, hit the seat in front of him with his feet, laugh nervously, shudder—in short, everything). By the end, the “*chiquillo*” had buried his face into his mother’s lap, “*fatigado por la violencia*” (exhausted by the violence) only to calm down later toward the film’s victorious ending when he was “*arrebatado por esa fuerza de sumaria justicia*” (captivated by the display of justice).

“All description is a species of fiction,” ³⁷ writes Adrian Martin, and in this instance, the “fictional impulse”³⁸ in Filadelfo’s sensory descriptions of his young seatmate clearly functions to evince his emotional argument of children’s suffering to advance his advocacy for proper Catholic-Christian education for children and responsible Catholic-Christian parenting.

Al pequeño espectador cuyos padres por abandonado o ignorancia dejan frecuentar los “cines” sin previo examen de lo que van a presentar, le pueden ocurrir dos cosas: que sufra constantes sacudidas nerviosas que pongan en peligro su salud si el niño es débil, impresionable y de rica e inquieta fantasía, o que llegue á familiarizarse con el espectáculo de las crueldades, las violencias, las arriesgadas audacias del delito, atrofiando, perturbando, agostando, los nobles sentimientos que florecen en el alma del niño. En cualquiera de los dos casos el daño es incalculable.

Two things can happen to the little viewer whose parents, in their carelessness or ignorance, let him go to the cinemas without prior examination of what they are going to see: he may suffer constant nervous shocks that can endanger his health if he is weak, emotional, and of a rich and restless fantasy. Or he may become accustomed to the spectacle of cruelties, violence, the daring audacities of crime, atrophying, disturbing, exhausting the noble feelings that flourish in his soul. In either case, the damage is immeasurable.

Filadelfo’s fictionalization of the child writes and interpellates him within the discourse of Filadelfo’s colonial-Catholic logic—a description with the political impulse “to produce and place the audience in a certain way,”³⁹ as Richard deCordova would observe in later studies on children’s cinema. Again, this harks back on the strategy to wield literature and criticism to control and manage people’s cinematic experiences, extending, consequently, to the control and management of the reality that cinema depicts.

But certainly these languages of critique materialize, not only the discursive gaps through which what

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

they say can be understood as generating excesses to their own discourse, but also the very audiences whose lives these disciplining languages attempted to manage by constructing them discursively. In the severe lack of archival evidence of these early audiences of cinema, literature in effect critiqued and constructed them, but at the same time exhumed and surfaced them. The writings of *Cultura Social* disciplined colonial bodies by way of fictionalized descriptions of early film viewers. However, read critically as historical evidence more than a century since, they enable us to juxtapose anthropological data in the literary text with the reflexivity of literary analysis to recognize the ways that the discursive power of *Cultura Social*'s disciplining language has likewise signified the ways that film audiences had in fact remained unruly and resistant to colonial discipline.

As such, this study is as much a study of cinema as it is a study of critical language and, just as well, critical practice in history. It has strived to demonstrate that languages of critique may and sometimes must be understood as specifically located discursive instances and as historical evidence. Words belong to and *participate* in material worlds, and when they echo voices of audiences long silenced by archival absence, the work of criticism becomes imbued with the responsibility to listen, and reading moves beyond intellectual exercise into a sensory performance of hearing, feeling, restoring, and reforming.

IV. Epilogue: Notes on Interdisciplinarity and/in Literary Criticism

In the same way that I have explored in this study what archival writings reveal of early film cultures and early cultures of criticism, we can explore in what myriad ways knowledge of literature has been and can be created and consumed in the Philippines. What languages, registers, and strategies of critique have we used and *can* use to study Philippine criticism itself?

A materialist intellectual history of Philippine literary criticism, using the methods of realist historiography, may yield exciting reflections on the conditions of writing and the cultures of critique they have enabled through the years: what evidence of early writing cultures are revealed in archival literatures? How do writers create knowledge in the context of the academe, of the criticism workshop, of commercial publishing, of revolution, of hashtag activism? How do critics contend with each other, how do they construct or discipline their audiences, how do they produce new readers and consumers of literature, with a capital L or otherwise? How have newspaper

The Materiality of Criticism: Limning Evidence from Absence in Early Film Writings in the Philippines

reviews, book clubs, literary awards, Twitter spats, citation scores, and keynote lectures created different kinds of writers and public intellectuals? How have they involved new participants and new modalities of participation in literary and critical practices? How is literature experienced sensorially, as printed text and as digital pixels, as transmedial adaptations and as Instagram quotes, as collectible items and limited editions, as convenient quotations for erudite speeches?

Ultimately, at the heart of this foray into an interdisciplinary handling of critical texts lies a proposition for new modes of critical and historiographic inquiry: to provide material force to our rewritings and reorientations of historical narratives in our favor, and to seek accountability for the ways that discursive articulations—and the cultures of critique that produce knowledge, memory, identity, imagination—have been driven by material action, are imbricated in acts of power, and continue to open up new paths to our pasts and futures.

Notes

¹ This research forms a part of my MA Media Studies (Film) thesis, “The Sense and Sensation of Cinema: A History of Early Film Writings in the Philippines”(master’s thesis, University of the Philippines, 2018). All translations from Spanish are mine. Elements of this article appear in a modified and abridged version published as “In/Vestments in Culture: Two Catholic Priests on Early Cinema in the Philippines,” *Pelikula: A Journal of Philippine Cinema*, no. 5 (2020): 52-57, <https://www.pelikulajournal.com/volumes>.

² Bliss Cua-Lim, “Archival Fragility: Philippine Cinema and the Challenge of Sustainable Preservation,” *Kyoto Center for Southeast Asian Studies Newsletter*. no. 67 (Spring 2013): 18, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47t0f9r0>.

³ Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 41.

⁴ Allen and Gomery, 14.

⁵ Allen and Gomery, 14.

⁶ Brian Keith Axel, “Introduction: Historical Anthropology and its Vicissitudes,” in *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and its Futures*, ed. Axel (Durham and London: Duke University Press), Kindle.

⁷ Jon Lewis, “Introduction: The History of Film History,” in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, eds. Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 19.

⁸ Lewis, “Introduction,” 18.

⁹ Antonio Checa Godoy, “La Prensa Filipina en Español entre Dos Guerras (1899-1941),” *Revista Internacional de Historia de la Comunicación* 1, no. 4 (2015): 39, Accessed 14 Nov 2022, <https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/RiHC/article/view/6265/5545>.

¹⁰ Godoy, “La Prensa Filipina,” 39-40.

¹¹ Resil Mojares, *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes, and the Production of Modern Knowledge* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006), 431.

¹² The column “En pro de la moral” functions to set a kind of framework for examining films in its endorsement of censorship policies that were then being implemented abroad. In *Cultura Social*’s first year, “En pro de la moral” published three times: first, citing a government circular in Spain which campaigned against pornography; second, condemning “*la ola pornográfica*” (the pornographic wave) in cinema and applauding the “*acertada disposición*” (right disposition) of the governor of Valencia Luis López García in his implementation of a new circular prohibiting pornography; and third, listing in detail six rules of censorship that had been implemented through a government circular in Italy.

¹³ Charles Musser, “Nationalism, Contradiction, and Identity; or, a Reconsideration of Early Cinema in the Philippines,” in *Early cinema in Asia*, ed. Nick Deocampo (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), 77.

¹⁴ Lena Strait Pareja, “Roles and Images of Woman in the Early Years of Cinema (1912-1941)” (PhD diss., University of the Philippines, 1998), 29.

¹⁵ The film titles used in the article borrow from the titles as reflected in the “De Espectáculos” articles. However, many of these had been translated into Spanish from the original German, Italian, or other languages.

¹⁶ Alonso de Mudarra. “De Espectáculos.” *Cultura Social Revista Catolica Filipina*, May 1913.

¹⁷ Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan, “Introduction: *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*,” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, eds. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (New York: Routledge), 2.

¹⁸ Alonso de Mudarra. “De Espectáculos.” *Cultura Social Revista Catolica Filipina*, April 1913.

¹⁹ Filadelfo. “De Espectáculos.” *Cultura Social Revista Catolica Filipina*, November 1914.

²⁰ In fact, Resil Mojares points to the limits of the nationalism espoused by the *El Renacimiento/Muling Pagsilang* writers and intellectuals. He says, “Scholars (most notably, Teodoro Kalaw and Epifanio de los Santos)” — *El Renacimiento*’s editor and founder, respectively — “built a canonical understanding of the revolution and its pantheon of heroes as mental and moral foundation of the new nation” but, in these efforts at codifying the nation, “mutated” revolutionary nationalism into

“Filipinism” (*filipinismo*), a benign and conservative view of recovering, preserving, and promoting native traditions in combination with the best in Western (specifically, American) culture... Filipinism was a form of nationalism perfectly congruent with the dominant politics of “constructive partnership” with America. (Mojares, *Brains of the Nation*, 494-95)

²¹ Resil Mojares, *Isabelo’s Archive* (Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2013), 5.

²² Mojares, *Brains of the Nation*, 500.

²³ Alonso de Mudarra was likely of Spanish descent or of the *insulares* (Philippine-born Spaniards, to whom the term “Filipinos” originally referred); he often wrote protectively of Spanish representations in cinema. In his March 1913 column, in which he writes on a French adaptation of *Don Quijote*, he complains that the film in no way resembles what Cervantes had written or imagined. Although he writes amicably of France as “*amiga y aliada*” (neighbor and ally), he grumbles of the stereotypical depictions of the Spanish characters. He also writes of a film that “correctly” represents bullfighting and bullfighters in Valencia and shows Spain’s colonies, such that “it made the audience consider, for a moment, about moving to the lands of the nation,” a clear identification with Spain rather than the Philippines.

²⁴ Richard Combs, “Four Against the House,” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 122.

²⁵ Mojares, *Brains of the Nation*, 462

²⁶ Clayton and Klevan, “Introduction,” 3.

²⁷ Adrian Martin, “Incursions,” in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, 56.

²⁸ Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros, “Descriptive Acts,” in *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance*, eds. Lesley Stern and George Kouvaros (Sydney: Power Publications), 16.

²⁹ Martin, "Incursions," 57.

³⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), xlix.

³¹ Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 38.

³² This is likely a reference to Apache Indians, as indigenous American natives feature prominently in Western genre films featuring the old American Western frontier.

³³ Filadelfo. "De Espectáculos." *Cultura Social Revista Catolica Filipina*, November 1914.

³⁴ Filadelfo. "De Espectáculos." *Cultura Social Revista Catolica Filipina*, February 1914.

³⁵ Mojares, *Brains of the Nation*, 461.

³⁶ Mojares, 461.

³⁷ Martin, "Incursions," 57.

³⁸ Stern and Kouvaros, "Descriptive Acts," 17.

³⁹ Richard deCordova, "The Child Audience, the Hays Office, and Saturday Matinees," in *Looking Past the Screen*, 232.

Bionote

Louise Jashil R. Sonido teaches at the University of the Philippines' Department of English and Comparative Literature. As a teacher, scholar, multimedia artist, and cultural worker, she has a range of research interests transecting literary criticism, intellectual historiography, media and film scholarship, performance curation, and ethnographies of multimedia production.