

# Philippine Contemporary Regional Cinema: A Narrative Analysis of Regional Filmmakers' Accounts on the Re-emergence of Regional Films in the 21st Century

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**Abstract**— Approached from the perspective established in Teshome Gabriel's *Critical Theory of Third World Films* and Zeus Salazar's *Pantayong Pananaw*, this study explored the insights of seven (7) regional filmmakers, a film scholar, a film curator, and a film festival organizer about the re-emergence of regional films in the Philippines in the onset of the 21st century using Narrative Analysis. This study revealed three main factors that prompted this phenomenon: (a) the filmmakers' need for self-expression; (b) technological innovations; and (c) the initiatives from social institutions. It also revealed that financial limitations, unresolved personal issues, and politics were observed in all three areas of filmmaking: production, promotion, and distribution. The question of authenticity and regionalism were also mentioned as prevailing issues in regional cinema. Finally, although this study revealed four (4) criteria to consider in determining a regional film, it concludes that these criteria will continue to evolve.

**Keywords**— *Critical Theory of Third World Films*, *Pantayong Pananaw*, *Philippine regional cinema*, *regional films*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents and discusses the accounts of regional filmmakers and other experts in the field of Philippine cinema about what prompted the re-emergence of regional films in the Philippines in the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It also presents their perspective of the current conditions of this re-emerging cinema in the country.

The cinema in the Philippines is Manila-centric by nature. Manila's stronghold over the production of films in the country has resulted to the use of Tagalog language in most of the films produced. Consequently, Filipino films have become almost always synonymous with Tagalog movies. This should be a matter of concern for film scholars given that there are several other ethnolinguistic groups in the country whose reality are often muted in these Tagalog films.

More than ten years ago, watching a non-Tagalog Filipino film would be trivial. This was the case until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when films, which later came to be collectively known as "regional cinema", started to gain recognition in both

national and international film festivals. The production of these contemporary regional films reveals an unexplored area of Philippine cinema. Providing an academic space for the study of these films will not only help in understanding the current condition of the country's film industry, but will also reveal the directions that it could take in the future.

## II. RELATED LITERATURE

### *Regional Films in the History of Philippine Cinema*

In a 1986 article in "Movement", a Mowelfund Film Institute newsletter, Teddy Co wrote about films and filmmakers from Baguio, Ilocos, and Western Visayas. In this article, he discussed the significance of a decentralized perspective on national culture and emphasized that the Philippines is a multi-cultural society. He also encouraged the appreciation of films coming from the different regions in the country.

Two other literatures mention the presence of the Visayan film industry that flourished in the 50's and 70's. Patrick Flores, in his essay, "Philippine Cinema and Society" (1998), notes that the Visayan Film industry was characterized by films that were highly accomplished and commercially feasible. However, the industry did not manage to survive after the 80's. In another article, Rabago-Visaya ([www.philstar.com](http://www.philstar.com), 2014) pointed out at least two reasons for this consequence: (1) filmmakers shifted to television due to financial difficulties, and (2) Cebuano actors began migrating to Manila where the movie industry provided more attractive compensation and a promise of national exposure.

Other scholars who have recognized regional cinema in their works are Joseph Palis and Nick Deocampo. In the Chapter Four of his dissertation, "Cinema Archipelago: A Geography of Philippine Film and the Postnational Imaginary", Palis (2008) discussed how Tagalog films have always been dominating the country's cinema. In his correspondence with Nick Deocampo, the country's leading film scholar and film historian, it was revealed that this resulted from the fact that most of these films were produced in Metro Manila – a Tagalog-speaking region.

Deocampo expounds this idea in his book, "Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines" (2003). How Metro Manila became the seat of the country's filmic activities was due to at least two reasons: (1) film was imported into the Philippines through its capital city, Manila; and (2) the limited availability of most filmmaking resources in areas other than the

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country's capital has made the survival of the industry in other parts of the country impossible.

Deocampo has lined up a more detailed discussion on regional cinema and digital films in the last installment of his five books on the history of the Philippine Cinema (the first two installments are *Cine*, 2003 and *Film*, 2011).

### *Emergence of Indigenous Cinema*

There are various emerging indigenous cinemas in the world, and one of the most frequently noted factor that enabled this phenomenon is the availability of democratized filmmaking technology as in the case of the Maori cinema. Emiel Martens (2012) notes that the Maori initiatives to secure their own access to media production has enabled them to speak back using the very tool that has silenced them in the past.

In Faye Ginsburg's article, "Shooting Back: From Ethnographic Film to Indigenous Production/Ethnography of Media" (1999), she described the advent of affordable video equipment as an opportunity that granted individuals from almost everywhere in the planet the capacity for image-making – a capacity that was once monopolized by media industries.

Palis (2008) had the same observation, and added that while digital technology has allowed young filmmakers to create their own films with unconventional themes, local and international film festivals have provided avenues for these films to be screened.

David Bordwell (2005) provides a more profound explanation to this idea, stating that cultural forces serve as preconditions for human activities like filmmaking; while factors like the current state of technology, the individuals' intentions, customary dictates, and structural opportunities provided by institutions, are the more proximate or direct influences that determine these kinds of phenomenon.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teshome Gabriel's Critical approach to Third World Films serves as the foundation of this study. Gabriel introduced in his essay, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" (2000), three phases that cinemas in Third World countries go through: (1) unqualified assimilation phase; (2) remembrance phase; and (3) combative phase. He further describes each phase using three aspects of cinema: industry, theme, and style.

In the unqualified phase, the industry is characterized by its identification with its Western counterpart, Hollywood. It is viewed as a local version of this Western film industry. The business structure and system observed is the same as that in Hollywood. The themes that persist are the ones that are entertaining. This is in connection to the kind of film industry, which is primarily concerned with profit generation – given that entertaining films have the more potential to generate larger profits.

In the remembrance phase, the film industry takes a shift from the mainstream, Hollywood-influenced type to a more indigenized structure. The control of talents, production, exhibition, and distribution are localized. The filmic themes in this phase include a *clash between rural and urban life,*

*traditional versus modern value systems, and folklore and mythology* (Gabriel, 2000). Most films in this phase are based on concepts founded upon indigenous culture and history; while the filmic styles demonstrate the indigenization of conventional styles. Gabriel notes that the problem with this phase is the tendency of uncritical acceptance and undue romanticization of the ways of the past, as well as the inappropriate appropriation of conventional styles.

In the combative phase, the film industry is a public institution operated by and for the people. In this phase, the themes are dominantly about the lives and the struggles of the people. Filmic style in this phase is influenced by the filmmaker's intention to use film as an ideological tool. The stories are presented from an ideological perspective instead of the conventional character-based method that is dominantly observed in Western filmmaking styles.

It is imperative to note that these phases are enclosed in a dynamic that is dialectic in nature. It is common that Third World filmmakers would produce films that demonstrate characteristics observable in phase one, and produce another film that embodies ideologies observable in phase three.

Further, Gabriel presents an analytical construct consisting of three components in approaching and interpreting the three phases discussed above. These components are: text, reception, and production: the 'text' component involves the codes and sub-codes and their relationship with each other, or the general filmic grammar; the 'reception' is the component that presents the role of the audience in the consumption of the text; and the 'production' is the component that raises the concern of what kind of institution is cinema in the Third World.

The text in the unqualified assimilation phase is characterized by mimicking conventional practices that results to an audience that is alienated due to their inability to recognize themselves in the images they see; while the film production is primarily controlled by studio system. In the remembrance phase, the text demonstrates a slight shift from the conventional filmic grammar to one with more indigenized themes. Despite this, the classical formal elements persist. The audience in this phase can locate a diluted traditional identity, while the operation of film institutions is indigenized as well. Finally, the text in the combative phase takes a radical shift from the conventional filmic grammar. In this phase, the audience begin to recognize themselves with the text as it demonstrates their own lived experience, and considering that they take an active role in the production process.

While Gabriel's notion of Third World cinema aid this study in understanding the cinema in the Philippines, Salazar's notion of *Pantayong Pananaw* (PP) provides a framework for understanding the culture of Philippine society within which this cinema persists.

PP was originally introduced as a methodology for Philippine Historiography. Salazar postulates that the best means to understand and interpret Filipino culture and its complexities is by investigating it from within its society using local perspective. The term *pantayo* is derived from the Filipino

word, “tayo” which refers to the speaker and everyone he/she is speaking to; including those who are part of the group to which the speaker belongs to, and with whom the speaker shares the same frame of reference (even those who are not physically present during the dialogue).

There are at least three points about PP that is worth noting. First, a society could only achieve a *pantayo* perspective if the members, through a single code or “equivalence of meaning”, share the same understanding of concepts or notions of reality. With this, Salazar underlines the importance of the use of a single language as basis and transmitter of knowledge. Second, individuals are often oblivious of his/her own lived culture; and unless it is consciously integrated into the formal education system, culture as it is lived by each member of the society is often left unexamined. Another means for one to recognize his/her own culture is to be exposed to different cultural orientations. Finally, PP recognizes, and presents an explanation to, the sense of cultural identity crisis among Filipinos. Salazar acknowledges the presence of the *Great Cultural Divide* in “The Pantayo Perspective as a Discourse Towards Kabihasanan” (2000). This notion presents two cultural orientation within the Philippine society: (a) national culture, or the culture of the society that appropriates the colonizer’s culture, and the (b) *kalinangang bayan* or the lived reality of every Filipino as interpreted by the Filipinos themselves. While national culture is outward looking in search for standards of what is admirable or desirable, *kalinangang bayan* seeks from within one’s own culture for such criteria of evaluation.

Considering Bordwell’s explanation about the emergence of social phenomena such as filmmaking (see II. RELATED LITERATURE), Gabriel and Salazar’s concepts mentioned above provide an explanation about the distal forces, or preconditions, that influenced the re-emergence of regional cinema in the Philippines.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed the Narrative Analysis methodology to enable her to extract essential information from the accounts of the people who were directly involved in the production of contemporary regional films.

The following paragraphs briefly describe how the topic was derived at, the means of how the respondents were selected, and the tools used to collect and analyze the data gathered.

In 2013, the researcher came across an article online announcing the film, “Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim” (2013) as the Best Film in the 36<sup>th</sup> Gawad Urian. The film was directed by Arnel Mardoquio, a native of Davao City and was shot entirely in Mindanao, with locals as actors who used their native tongue in the dialogue. The researcher further investigated if there are other non-Tagalog films that are recognized in national film festivals. Despite the minority in number, similar films have indeed appeared in the list of national film festival awardees. Further investigation revealed that these films were also recognized in international film festivals. The researcher also noticed that these films have

appeared to begin emerging around 2006 onwards. Curious about what enabled this phenomenon, the researcher decided to inquire directly from the filmmakers of these films.

Three types of sampling methods were employed in this research: purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and expert sampling. Purposive sampling is the selection of respondents from the general population based on their characteristics as needed in the study. The researcher contacted the directors of the first four regional films that she came across in her research: Arnel Mardoquio, Christopher Gozum, Ray Gibraltar, and Remton Zuasola. Then, she requested them to refer her to other regional filmmakers that they know, employing the sampling method known as Snowballing – the method used to increase the number of the research participants by asking initial participants to recommend other individuals to become respondents of the study. Finally, from among the individuals recommended by the filmmakers, experts in Philippine cinema were also identified. This sampling method is known as expert sampling. The experts identified and interviewed in this study were Nick Deocampo, Teddy Co, and Ronald Arguelles. Figure 1. shows the Snowball Sampling that was employed in this study, and the brief information about each respondent.

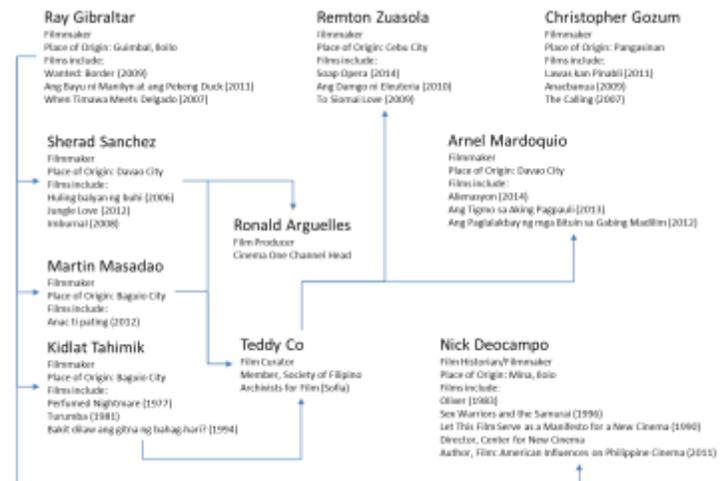


Fig. 1. Snowball Sampling Flow.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each respondent. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: Part I asks about the respondent’s profile, and Part II consists of the following questions:

- 1) What factors prompted the production of contemporary regional films in the country?
- 2) What are your observations about the current condition of regional cinema?
- 3) How do you envision regional cinema in the future?
- 4) How do you define a regional film?

The data gathered were analyzed using the two-stage coding process: open coding, where categories were assigned to represent ideas derived from selected texts from the transcribed

interview; and axial coding, where categories were narrowed down by locating relationships among them, followed by determining the hierarchy of categories in relation with other categories. The relationship was then presented using a logic diagram (Figure 2.)

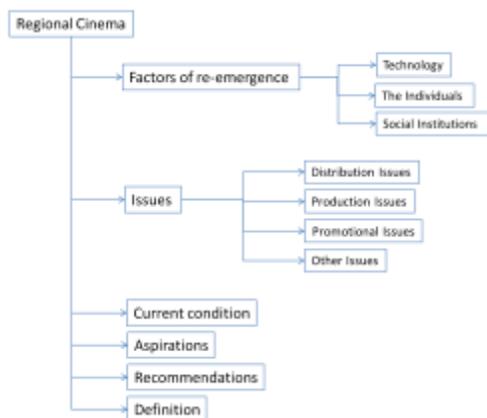


Fig. 2. The Logic Diagram.

## V. RESULTS

As indicated in Figure 2., there are six points about the Philippine contemporary regional cinema that were drawn from the accounts of the respondents in this study: the factors that prompted production of regional films, the current condition of regional cinema in the country, the issues encountered by individuals involved in regional cinema, the aspirations and recommendations of the regional filmmakers and film experts interviewed in this study, and the definition of regional films/cinema.

### *Factors that prompted production*

Three elements were identified to have prompted the production of regional films in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: technology, individuals, and social institutions.

Technology's role in this phenomenon is undeniable. Affordable and accessible filmmaking equipment enabled cost efficient and less complicated film production. With this, more individuals were able to translate their narratives into film. The internet and various social media has also enabled the convenient distribution of films, and the communication of filmmakers from various parts of the world. This allowed them to collaborate on projects without having to meet physically. However, it should be noted that the respondents have varying perspective on the degree of technology's significance in this phenomenon. While most of the respondents proclaim that the availability of digital technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the primary factor that enabled the production of regional films, some would still claim that technology was a mere supplement to the filmmaker's drive to tell their stories through motion picture.

The individuals referred to in this section are classified into two: the filmmakers, and the film festival selection committee members. Filmmakers played an extremely active role in this phenomenon. Their initiative determined the production of the

films; sparked by their intentions – whether personal or societal; and influenced by their cultural orientation. On the other hand, the presence of individuals in film festival selection committee who are amenable to the idea of having regional films programmed in their festivals, enabled the screening of these films to a wider audience. Their recognition of the notion that regional films are worthy of a national audience enabled these films to proliferate in the early of years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Various social institutions were identified by the respondents in this study, namely: the filmmakers' family and friends, film festival organizers, government agencies, media and educational institutions.

The filmmakers' family and friends played a significant role in the process by providing the filmmakers with various forms of support including financial and moral. By providing a venue for the screening and recognition of regional films, festival organizers have helped generate awareness of the existence of these films, and encourage more participants. Government agencies have also provided support to these initiatives regardless whether they were mandated or merely pressured by the proponents of this movement. Government support that were identified by the respondents are in the form of funds, venue and/or facilities. The media corporations' need for materials that have fresh perspective and require minimal production cost provided regional filmmakers with more opportunity to propagate. Lastly, educational institutions took part in this phenomenon by serving as points of convergence for regional filmmakers. They served as venues for regional film festivals as well as trainings, workshops that encouraged local filmmakers – often students – to produce their own films.

### *Current condition, issues, aspirations and recommendations*

Generally, the respondents perceive that contemporary regional cinema remains at the margins of the country's mainstream film industry. However, they recognize that it has altered the landscape of today's Philippine cinema, and it also has the potential to determine the kind of cinema that the country will have in the future.

Persisting issues that were identified by the respondents include financial limitations, unresolved personal issues, and politics among individuals and within the institutions involved. Despite the cost efficiency achieved with the use of modern filmmaking equipment, film production remains to be a relatively expensive activity. The inability of some filmmakers to manage their production funds, as well as the complexities in their personalities and contradicting perspectives have also posed a major challenge.

The question of authenticity in the context of regional filmmaking was also raised. The respondents agree that attempting to achieve an authentic regional film should be avoided for two reasons: the country's cultural orientation is a product of various cultural influences in the past that will always affect the perspective of local filmmakers, and film as a medium is not authentically Filipino in the first place. Lastly, the misconception of the term *regional*, as contradicting to the notion of a unitary nation, is also seen as a hindrance to the proliferation of regional cinema.

The respondents aspire for a decentralized Philippine cinema. This means the recognition of several filmmaking

centers from different parts of the archipelago. They also aspire that these various centers produce films that demonstrate cultural fidelity, sincerity to personal and local experiences, and respect for diversity.

Aside from the individual and local or provincial initiatives, the respondents also encourage intervention of the national government in the institutionalization of regional cinema to ensure its growth and sustainability.

### Definition

This study defines regional cinema as a collection of films produced by filmmakers from regions outside the National Capital Region (NCR), which is the seat of the country's film industry.

Two of the respondents, Tahimik and Co, were careful to note that it is unwise to categorize Filipino films as regional or not; instead, one should inquire the degree of a film's regionality. In order to determine this, four criteria may be used as revealed in this study: geography, or the setting of the film; the filmmaker's cultural origin; the language used in the film; and the filmmaker's point of view as translated into the film.

## VI. CONCLUSION

With the availability of resources and social structures needed to sustain filmmaking in areas outside Metro Manila, the nature and dynamics of Philippine cinema is expected to change. As technological innovations continue, the various social operations around it will also continue to evolve. While these constant changes affect the production and consumption of films, they also influence the kind of stories that are told through this medium.

The re-emergence of regional cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not the end of this movement in Philippine cinema; neither is its institutionalization as a separate sector of the country's film industry. This phenomenon is just one of the phases in the evolution of the country's cinema as it provides a redefinition of Filipino films. For the Philippine cinema to progress from this phase, various issues mentioned in this paper should be addressed. It should also be noted that these are not the only hindrances that could threaten the sustainability of this movement. The more information acquired about this phenomenon through documentation of its various activities will enable a more appropriate approach in addressing these issues.

For film scholars and journalist who have taken part in chronicling this phenomenon, it is imperative to define regional cinema to create a common plane of understanding about the matter. However, this study argues that it is too soon to be conclusive in assigning a definite description for regional cinema and regional films. Given how fast technology innovates, and how quick are the rest of the participants in the movement adopt to these innovations, the characteristics of regional cinema could evolve quickly as well. What may define regional cinema today may no longer apply in the next few years. It is, therefore, very important to simply maintain a constant discussion of its emergence.

The re-emergence of contemporary regional cinema has altered the landscape of the country's film industry. The movement may be slow, and its sustainability may even be threatened. Nevertheless, it has undoubtedly brought to our attention the potentials that the country's national cinema possesses.

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