FORUM KRITIKA: FIRMAMENT OCCUPATION

An Introduction

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About the Author
Joel David is Professor for Cultural Studies at Inha University in Korea. He holds a Ph.D. in Cinema Studies at New York University and was founding Director of the University of the Philippines Film Institute. He is the author of a number of books on Philippine cinema, now archived at his blog Amauteurish! <http://amauteurish.com>, where his latest volumes are also posted as some of the country’s first exclusively open-access solo-authored books.

Forum Editor’s Note
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INTRODUCTION

“Forum Kritika: Firmament Occupation” underwent a few permutations that might serve to emblematize the difficulties that Philippine star-text studies confront. Originally titled “Guy on the Edge,” the feature intended to focus on only one star, Nora Aunor, who at that time was about to experience the current Aquino administration’s controversial rejection of her nomination for National Artist. Several individuals enthusiastically responded to the call for papers, with a couple of unsolicited contributions that polemicized in favor of Aunor receiving the honor. When I requested that the articles be steered away from hagiography into more scholarly pursuits, however, the authors stopped responding. The same result obtained with those who proposed to write papers.

Believing that the sudden shortage might have been due to overlaps with other specialized publications on Noranian issues, I requested the Kritika Kultura editors to approve an expansion of the topic, this time to cover Filipino movie stardom. This ought to have proved to be a surer undertaking, since, as film specialists, I and several acquaintances could identify several scholars covering individual stars aside from Aunor: Vilma Santos, Fernando Poe, Jr., Ramon Revilla, Dolphy, Gloria Sevilla, among others; unfortunately I could not pinpoint anyone interested (yet) in Joseph Estrada, Maricel Soriano, or anyone identified with either the 1950s (a.k.a. the First Golden Age) or the new millennium, but people’s level of excitement in the project again gave me hope that a handful of new material might come our way.

Once more, the deadline came and went, was extended a few times, and still yielded nothing, except for the two additional (non-Aunor) studies included in the current issue. The opening essay I wrote (rather presumptuously appropriating the title of the forum) attempted to explain the peculiar complications confronting local scholars when they finally set out to tackle Philippine star texts: first and foremost, Nora Aunor looms as an unavoidable presence, and her achievements are so thorough and pervasive – hegemonic, in a manner of speaking – that not only would non-Aunor star studies be expected to signal her influence, whether favorably or negatively; they would also have to make a conscious effort to break out of the auteurist mode that her track record imposes.

Nevertheless, Aunor’s auteurism remains productive even if (in the article I wrote) we ferret out previously unseen work from her, or (in the case of Patrick D. Flores’s “Fall of Grace”) we consider previously and extensively evaluated material such as, in this instance, Ishmael Bernal’s Himala (1980). Literary essayist Wilfredo Pascual demonstrated the wealth of Aunor material from a different direction: he started writing about meeting Aunor as expatriate during his own peripatetic years,
and wound up with a global counterpart to his celebrated “Devotion” essay, calling it, inevitably, “Devotion II.”

The non-Aunor articles provide valiant samples of how necessarily youthful scholars can break away from Pinoy film stardom’s Aunor-centrism. “Dulsita” by Jerrick Jose David (not a relation of mine) commences with a contestation of Sharon Cuneta’s alleged sugar-and-spice public image and argues that her choice of film roles evinces a careful but deliberate divergence from her leadoff persona, complemented by a progressive revelation of her real-life confrontational character. In contrast, Louie Jon A. Sánchez’s “Si Judy Ann Santos at ang Wika ng Teleserye” looks outward, toward the star subject’s choice and handling of multi-installment projects, in effect redefining the notion of a successful teleserye (TV soap) performer – one of the few areas of performing-arts media specialization that Aunor had not specialized in.

Interestingly, the latter two non-Aunor star studies were conducted in Filipino, raising the (possibly coincidental) question of whether this might be one way of evading, building on, or even challenging the Noranian imaginary. Certainly the creative pleasures bequeathed by movie stardom require concomitantly creative solutions to the multifarious complications presented by the star system (or subsystems, as I explain in my opening article), and the work that the present forum hopes to open up promises as much difficulty as delightfulness in the process. We look forward to a future when calls for star-text studies will be answered in the same excited manner as before, and also with as much cultural expertise as the field fully deserves.