

Philippine Cinema and the Cultural Economy of Distribution

Michael Kho Lim

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Michael Kho Lim
Department of Communication
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines

and

School of Media, Film and Journalism
Monash University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

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*For my parents, Mariano and Natividad Lim, who wanted me to become
a lawyer or a doctor (of medicine) but allowed me to take a different
path and pursue a career that combines my dad's business acumen
and my mom's artistic flair.*

*For my cinematic father, Clodualdo 'Doy' del Mundo, Jr., without whom
I will not be in the worlds of filmmaking and academe.*

FOREWORD

Interest in the creative industries has been growing apace in the twenty years since the term was coined by the UK ‘New Labour’ Government’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport in 1998. Though intended as a spur to a new kind of post-industrial revolution, where the UK was to become the ‘creative workshop of the world’, the idea rapidly gained traction globally, especially across East and South East Asia. This was to be a new growth engine, one that was environmentally friendly and reliant only on the creative talents of the population. Economically valuable in themselves, they would also catalyse creativity and innovation throughout the rest of the economy. The 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Promotion and Protection of Cultural Expression, which grew out of a longer attempt to place culture at the heart of development, soon joined agencies like the British Council, in promoting the creative industries as a new source of jobs and growth. The criticisms of the creative industries agenda have been well-aired. The reduction of culture to the status of ‘economic sector’, the focus on high-growth sectors, and the conflation of the cultural sector with telecoms and computing, as exemplified by the recent renaming of the relevant UK Department as Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Though the focus was on ‘economics’, there was less interest in understanding how the economies of these sectors actually worked. Investigations into creative labour—that mix of work, play and self-determination—showed precarious conditions, self-exploitation and decreasing levels of social, gender and ethnic diversity. The ever-growing

monopolies of the global digital platforms, along with the return of the corporate ‘dinosaurs’ supposed to have been disrupted and disbanded by the democratising up-swell enabled by Web 2.0, began to tarnish the idea of a sector led by small and medium companies and organised around the flat networks of the information age. And of course, the barriers to entry for ‘developing countries’ should have come as a surprise to no-one, as the new creative industries ran quickly into an already established Global North hegemony. Creative labour was often corralled into digital rendering factories, servicing the new 24/7 economy of the New International Division of Cultural Labour, made possible by global telcoms and the WTO. UNESCO, under the 2005 Convention, looked less to structural change in the global cultural order and more to training programs for ‘creative entrepreneurs’, in local conditions that resembled the creative hotspots of New York and London as little as their Internet connections resembled an information super highway.

So it is with great pleasure that I introduce this timely book, one that I hope will take its rightful place in the growing literature of cultural economy and development in the Global South. The book does three very important things. First, it foregrounds the cultural importance of the cultural industries—in this case the independent film industry in the Philippines. Second, it takes an historical view, making it clear that neither the cultural industries, nor policies to support and promote these, began in 1998. Third, it puts both culture and history into a wider socio-economic and political context under the format of ‘cultural economy’.

Michael Kho Lim’s book gives us an overview of the Filipino film industry, and its complex intersection with colonial, anti-colonial and post-colonial identities. It charts the rise of the ‘indie’ film movement, and questions what that actually means both in a global sense and specifically in the context of a country peripheral to global film making, as with the Philippines, where any local film might be described as ‘indie’. Intertwined with the film making are the policies aimed at supporting, or ignoring, or suppressing, both ‘mainstream’ and ‘indie’ films. The ‘creative industries’ come at the end of a long sequence of such policy interventions. It provides us with an important account of an indie film sector trying to negotiate a space between ‘national’ and ‘Hollywood’ cinemas, a space that is both one of economy—how do we make and distribute such films—and culture—what actually makes an indie film distinct and vital? Of special interest is the focus on film distribution. For though the production of films—both as a cultural artefact and as industry

project—has received a lot of attention, how they are distributed has not. Michael comes from inside the indie film industry, and brings with him a wealth of detailed information as to how a film actually gets out there. The focus is not just particular films but film festivals, DVD sales and latterly, access to streaming services. This picks up on a growing literature on informal circulation in the Global South—‘Nollywood’ is the most studied—and the cultural and economic dynamics of these practices.

All of which brings us to the idea of cultural economy, which we might describe as concerned with the production, distribution and consumption of cultural goods and services, along with the cultural, social, economic and political context in which they are produced on which they have determinant effects. We might describe it as the political economy of culture, but with a more evolved sense of the socio-cultural context of its production and consumption. Michael has opened up the complex landscape in which a film needs to gain its production money and the resources and access required for its distribution and exhibition. He never loses sight of why this is important. Some indie films do make money; some allow those involved to make a living; some go on to project a distinct Filipino identity onto a global public. But ultimately, after the deal-making and the administrative negotiations, it is the contribution of these films to the ‘collective horizon of social experience’ as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge formulated it many years ago, that counts. It is what makes the whole effort worthwhile. And like all good books, this one too is one that always justifies the continued investment of effort in its reading.

Melbourne, Australia
July 2018

Justin O’Connor

PREFACE

The year was 2005. The task was to produce a comedy musical film that is set in the 1970s for PHP 500,000 (USD 9000) within six months. It was a tall order but I am always up for new challenges, and I do not break someone's trust and confidence. So armed with only my student experience as producer for my group's short-film thesis, I started producing the film of my mentor, Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., who was debuting as a feature film director. Several sponsorships, barter deals and special arrangements later, the film *Pepot Artista* (Pepot Superstar) premiered in the first Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival and bagged the best picture.

Not a bad outcome after that baptism of fire, I thought. However, after doing some rounds in the film festival circuit and conducting various school tours, we would encounter questions like: Will the film have a theatrical run? Is the film available on DVD? I realised then that we did not have a distribution plan and did not know much about this aspect. This is a common predicament because in most film school programs, students are trained more on how to make good films by focusing on the aesthetics and narrative but less on how to reach the audience. Back in my undergraduate days for instance, we had an elective module on production management but we did not have anything on distribution and exhibition.

The distribution component also tends to be neglected because independent film production groups are used to relying on grants and subsidies that they do not need to worry about recouping capital investment

or they pass the responsibility of film distribution to distributors. If this mindset continues, they will remain struggling independent players, which is not really a sustainable way of filmmaking; and the question of where to get funding for their next film project will always linger.

The learning gap on film distribution that we need to fill in for ourselves, the challenges of distributing independently-produced films, and the sustainability issue of the independent film sector have led me to take a strong interest in this research area and from which this project begins its investigation. As such, this book aims to analyse and understand the complex interplay of culture and economics in the context of film as a cultural good and economic commodity, its implications to the national government's cultural policy development, and how such policy, if any, affects the growth of the cultural economy of the Philippines.

Melbourne, Australia

Michael Kho Lim

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Film Distribution in Action	1
	<i>References</i>	8
2	Film Distribution in Film Studies	9
	2.1 <i>Film Studies: An Industry Approach</i>	11
	2.2 <i>Distribution in Film Industry Studies</i>	15
	2.3 <i>Distribution Studies: From Political Economy to Cultural Economy</i>	18
	2.4 <i>Framing Philippine Independent Film Distribution</i>	28
	<i>References</i>	31
3	The Making of Philippine Independent Cinema	39
	3.1 <i>The “Independent” Question</i>	39
	3.1.1 <i>Notions of Independence</i>	41
	3.1.2 <i>Independent vs. Indie</i>	44
	3.2 <i>Mapping the Landscape of Philippine Independent Cinema</i>	46
	3.3 <i>Factors of Development</i>	48
	3.3.1 <i>Organisational</i>	48
	3.3.2 <i>Sociopolitical</i>	49
	3.3.3 <i>Economic</i>	50
	3.3.4 <i>Technological</i>	51
	3.3.5 <i>Rise of (Independent) Film Festivals</i>	53

3.4	<i>Conclusion</i>	59
	<i>References</i>	60
4	Now Showing: The State of Philippine Cinema	67
4.1	<i>Emerging/New Industry Players</i>	69
4.1.1	<i>Spring Films</i>	69
4.1.2	<i>Origin8 Media</i>	70
4.1.3	<i>TBA Studios</i>	70
4.1.4	<i>Reality Entertainment</i>	71
4.1.5	<i>Quantum Films</i>	73
4.2	<i>Mainstreaming Indie</i>	74
4.3	<i>“Indiefying” Mainstream</i>	82
4.4	<i>Next Attraction: Charting the Course of Philippine Cinema</i>	88
4.5	<i>Conclusion</i>	92
	<i>References</i>	94
5	Distribution and Exhibition as Intermediary Spaces	99
5.1	<i>Distribution as an Intermediary Space</i>	100
5.2	<i>Exhibition as (Another) Intermediary Space</i>	104
5.2.1	<i>Pre-mall Era and Stand-Alone Theatres (Before 1985)</i>	108
5.2.2	<i>The Rise of the Mall and Age of Multiplexes (1985–Present)</i>	114
5.3	<i>Conclusion</i>	121
	<i>References</i>	123
6	Traditional Film Distribution and Exhibition Platforms in the Formal Economy	131
6.1	<i>Theatrical Release and the Indie Film/Maker</i>	133
6.1.1	<i>Risky Business</i>	135
6.1.2	<i>Industry Practices and Business Culture</i>	138
6.1.3	<i>The Rule of the Majors and Their Rules</i>	140
6.1.4	<i>The “Indie” Brand</i>	143
6.1.5	<i>Unwritten “Policies”</i>	148
6.1.6	<i>Indie Spaces and the Rise of Microcinemas</i>	151
6.2	<i>Non-theatrical Release and the Indie Film/Maker</i>	154
6.3	<i>Conclusion</i>	158
	<i>References</i>	160

7	Emerging Film Distribution and Exhibition Platforms in the Formal Economy	167
	<i>7.1 Digital Evolution, Not Revolution</i>	167
	<i>7.2 Digital Turn in Distribution</i>	169
	<i>7.2.1 The Emergence of New Business Models</i>	169
	<i>7.2.2 Shattered Windows, Broken Gates</i>	172
	<i>7.2.3 The Long Tail in the Long Run</i>	178
	<i>7.3 Digital Turn in Exhibition</i>	182
	<i>7.3.1 The Shift to Digital Cinema</i>	182
	<i>7.3.2 The Rise of Online Cinema</i>	184
	<i>7.4 Emerging Distribution/Exhibition Platforms and the Indie Film/Maker</i>	186
	<i>7.5 Conclusion</i>	195
	<i>References</i>	197
8	The Semi-formal and Informal Economies of Film Distribution and Exhibition	205
	<i>8.1 The Semi-formal Film Economy</i>	206
	<i>8.1.1 Direct Deal with Exhibitor</i>	210
	<i>8.1.2 Academic Market Distribution</i>	211
	<i>8.1.3 Unconventional Venues</i>	212
	<i>8.1.4 Online Self-Distribution</i>	213
	<i>8.2 The Informal Film Economy</i>	216
	<i>8.2.1 Forms of Piracy</i>	217
	<i>8.2.2 The Piracy Discourse</i>	219
	<i>8.2.3 Value of Piracy</i>	222
	<i>8.3 Audience as Distributor</i>	226
	<i>8.4 Conclusion</i>	231
	<i>References</i>	233
9	The Philippine Film Industry, the State, and Cultural Policy	241
	<i>9.1 Locating the Philippine Film Industry</i>	242
	<i>9.2 Philippine Cultural Policy Landscape</i>	250
	<i>9.2.1 Industry Development Strategies and Other Related Policies</i>	253
	<i>9.2.2 State Institutions and Industry Organisations: A Question of Politics</i>	255

9.3	<i>Conclusion</i>	264
	<i>References</i>	265
10	Conclusion: Forward to the Economy, Back to the Culture	271
	<i>Reference</i>	276
	Index	277

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	The cultural economy framework (<i>Source</i> UNESCO's 2009 <i>Framework for Cultural Statistics</i> (24); also cited in UNESCO's <i>Creative Economy Report 2013</i> (25))	25
Fig. 3.1	del Mundo's three areas of filmmaking (del Mundo 2003, p. 168) (Author's visual representation)	40
Fig. 4.1	Shifting movements between the periphery and the centre of mainstream (Author's visual representation)	68
Fig. 4.2	"Main-dependent" editorial cartoon (Orellana 2013, p. 8) (Illustration by Ricky Orellana/Coloured by Ellen Ramos)	81
Fig. 4.3	Star Cinema's 2014 domestic market share (Santos 2015b)	91
Fig. 5.1	Exhibitor groups and their number of screens (<i>Source</i> Movie and Television Review and Classification Board [as of October 2018])	120
Fig. 7.1	Star Cinema's (old) linear release pattern (<i>Source</i> Santos, Enrico. "The New Models of Creation and Distribution of Films." <i>Pinoy Media Congress</i> presentation, 2015)	173
Fig. 7.2	Star Cinema's (new) nonlinear release pattern (<i>Source</i> Santos, Enrico. "The New Models of Creation and Distribution of Films." <i>Pinoy Media Congress</i> presentation, 2015)	174
Fig. 7.3	Chris Anderson's long-tail theory, CC BY 2.0	179
Fig. 9.1	The Philippine IT-BPM Industry (<i>Source</i> IBPAP. "IT-BPM Industry Overview: Philippines." Slide 3, 2018)	246
Fig. 9.2	NCCA organisational structure (<i>Sources</i> http://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/history-and-mandate / http://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-the-arts-sca/cinema)	259

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Philippines' official submission to the Academy Awards	58
Table 5.1	Greater Manila Theaters Association (Roces-Rufino-Yang circuit)	111
Table 5.2	Metro Manila Theaters Association (Dulalia-Go-tong-Tama circuit)	111
Table 6.1	Types of film distribution economy	132
Table 6.2	<i>Kimmy Dora</i> film series budget and box-office sales	142
Table 6.3	Selected films of Lav Diaz released theatrically in the Philippines	147
Table 7.1	Peter Broderick's contrastive chart of old and new world distribution	176
Table 7.2	Summarised list of selected online platforms in the Philippines	188
Table 8.1	Sample list of films' theatrical release vis-à-vis pirated release dates	224
Table 9.1	Philippine creative industries mapping	246
Table 9.2	List of pending film-related House and Senate bills in the Philippines	256