

B O O K

**Critical of the “Critical”:
A Review of *Kritikal na Espasyo ng Kulturang Popular*
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Kritikal na Espasyo ng Kulturang Popular (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015) is commendable for situating the study of popular culture within a critical tradition of Philippine cultural analysis. While most of the essays are theoretically and methodologically inspired largely by Marxist and critical theories from the West (as espoused by the likes of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, and Hall), they crucially localize these theories, break them away from their Euro-American tradition, and further make sense of them through Philippine cases. The essays span four decades of scholarship and research, covering broad topics such as spaces and places; counter-hegemony; the nexus of the local, the national, and the global; and body, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, they analyze films and TV shows, online sites, visual artifacts, modes of transportation, music, language, printed texts, architecture, and food. They also deal with the lifestyles and the logics of practice of certain social classes such as the *jologs* and the petty bourgeoisie.

Putting together some established and emerging names in Philippine cultural and literary studies, the anthology lays bare structuralist, Marxist, and postmodernist approaches in further explaining the Philippine nation and the Filipino people’s ways of life. The essays written by Sarah Raymundo on the now-defunct Philippine noontime show *Wowowee*, Alvin Yapan on tourist gazes in Olivia Lamasan’s films, Rolando Tolentino on the service economy of SM malls, and Galileo Zafra on the discourse of travel in the age of colonialism and globalization are remarkable for their methodological skillfulness, analytical rigor, and theoretical depth. Clear and creative in constellating their objects of analysis, rigorous and sensitive in their unpacking of the nuances of their material, and unstinting in their sociopolitical conjectures and critique, these essays do not foreground flimsy or facile conceptualizations of Filipino nationalism or identity. Rather, they successfully entangle the Philippine nation with global capitalism and diaspora.

Some essays are also laudable not only for their careful reading of representations but also for their trenchant investigation of the machineries of representation. Works by Ruben Ramas Cañete on commodified masculinities, U Eliserio on blogging and struggle on the Internet, and Edgar Calabia Samar on human bodies in various popular texts locate representational acts and

outcomes within sociohistorical, aesthetic, and political milieus and interactions. These essays reveal how mass media re/present fraught realities within the procedures of mediation.

But in totality, how can the critical space the anthology opens up or the critical stance that it assumes be interrogated? Furthermore, how can this anthology, as a convergence (“pagtatagpo”) and a meeting place (“tagpuan”) of critics and theorists, be evaluated?

I want to take a critical gesture toward some essays in the book. First is the currency of their ideological and methodological operations in analyzing the complicated composition of popular culture in the country. For example, what do readers make of some essays’ insinuations about false consciousness among audiences and consumers, such as those in Bienvenido Lumbera’s “Edukasyon para sa Iilan: Kung Bakit Asal-Mayaman si Pedrong Maralita” and Nicanor Tiongson’s “Si Kristo, Ronnie Poe, at Iba Pang ‘Idolo’: Apat na Pagpapahalaga sa Dula at Pelikulang Pilipino.” In both these analyses, consumers are rendered passive, without agency, and at the beck and call of state apparatuses and social structures that purportedly subsume them. However, if false consciousness were true, then how could the mechanisms of power that fail in the market, or popular expressions or commodities that get lukewarm if not totally cold reception from consumers, be explained? With this outlook, the flow of popular culture is unidirectional—from producers to consumers, from sellers to buyers, from capitalists to the masses—and the market is monolithic and devoid of any negation or contradiction. These overdrawn ideas are flawed precisely because they put forward crude dichotomies, fail to consider interventions or disjunctures in the creation and circulation of popular culture, simplify powers struggles and resistances, and highlight if not advocate an a priori teleology of culture, identity, nationalism, and the world.

Another issue that some essays need to address is the absence of the audience in their analyses. This absence is symptomatic and consequential of the high premium scholars give on textual productions. If we were to account for a thorough and critical elaboration of popular culture, particularly how its life cycles get produced and circulated within society, then the importance of audience—their reception, their alignments and non-alignments with markets and institutions, their personal encounters with texts and commercial products, their embodied cultural and political practices—cannot be and must not be circumvented. In other words, how can critical evaluation of popular culture be possible when some scholars only focus and elaborate on the text or the image alone at the cost of the consumers of texts or the doers of practices?

This heavy reliance on the written word (in the case of literary expressions) or the visual or spectacular image (in the case of spectacles and performances)

tends to elide the ethnographic, an important component in laying bare the networks in which popular culture is produced, disseminated, and consumed. Without ethnographic endeavors to describe the channels of the popular, as well as the consuming population's attitudes and behaviors, critical analysis and theory may easily fall prey to if not reinforce sweeping generalizations and stereotypes. Furthermore, without the thick description that ethnography affords, analysis tends to be disembodied, ungrounded, and disconnected from people on the ground. While textual, semiotic, and critical analyses are appreciated especially in laying bare the workings of capital, the inconsistencies in the narratives of novels and the lyrics of songs, the ideological implications of visual artifacts, the symbolic structure and signification of architectural designs and archival materials, they also have to contend with and account for more embodied elements of popular culture that escape documentation or textualization.

Some of the essays' emphasis on the role of capital in the pathways and trajectories of popular culture is also intriguing. Capital controls the culture industry, the popularity of cultural practices, and the preferences or tastes of audiences. Is there a way out of capitalism? Can the "popular" be only imagined from the point of view of capital? Can the "popular" be only intuited and practiced within capitalist spaces? The anthology has to further take into account other factors that determine the "success," "failure," and life cycles of the popular. I believe it is not only capital and its brokers that set popular culture in motion. There, too, are people's affective relations with things; the conspiracies of local, national, global, and transnational networks; the new dispensations of power and public life; the relationships between entrenched and emergent markets; the dispersals of people (such as migrants and immigrants), the new configurations of crowds (such as the so-called "millennials"); and the new channels of communication (such as online or new media). In other words, the anthology can be more current and relevant if it further reconsiders and reflects on the expanding operations of capital and capitalism, the transnational(izing) reach of producers and brokers of culture, people's manners of consumption, and the circuits that constitute and reconstitute the "popular." If the spaces from which popular culture is constructed and disseminated are almost always corrupted or corruptible by capital, then how can we still expect or produce popular culture that is responsive not to capitalistic practices but to the urgent needs of people, especially of the masses, in our most beleaguered times?

To attain this end, *Kritikal na Espasyo ng Kulturang Popular* has to deconstruct not only the popular in culture or the spaces in which this is produced. Rather, the anthology also has to unpack the very notions of criticality that theoretically inform cultural analysis. Inasmuch as critiques of capitalism, culture, and politics demystify the factors that entrap society, as well as map the contentious ground

on which various stakeholders of culture stand, they also have to provide redemptive spaces and account for agentive exercises that emphasize the fact that bodies engaging (in) popular culture do not simply capitulate or adhere to the rulings of capital and capitalists. Ultimately, a more enabling analysis of popular culture has to entangle political economies with lived experiences, as well as imagine more creative and equally committed ways of making sense of social actors, structures of feeling, and ideological state apparatuses.

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