

**In the Intersections of Cinema and Cultural Politics: A Book
Review of *Scenes Reclaimed: CCP 50 x Cinemalaya 15* by Patrick
Campos, Karl Castro, Tito Quiling Jr., and Louise Jashil Sonido**

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The substantial book-cum-catalog *Scenes Reclaimed: CCP 50 x Cinemalaya 15* is an urgent interrogation of Philippine cinema's history as well as its socio-cultural and political implications. The work situates the film industry during the conjugal dictatorship of former President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda, and the present machismo populist government of President Rodrigo Duterte. This accompanying volume to the 2019 Cinemalaya Film Festival exhibit of the same title is authored by film critics and educators Patrick Campos, Tito Quiling Jr., and Louise Jashil Sonido, while artist Karl Castro is its book designer. Campos is also the overall editor of the book, which was published in limited copies by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in 2020.

The book takes on a similar style that will remind readers of critic Raymond Williams's classic work, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, but written in the context of Philippine cinema and cultural politics. *Scenes Reclaimed* emulates the experience of exploring the painstaking archival research done by the authors in the 2019 exhibit, as the book's format consists of keywords which represent pivotal developments in Philippine cinema. Other catalogs that were written in conjunction with curated exhibits such as *Tirada: 50 Years of Philippine Printmaking 1968-2018*, or *Poster/ity: 50 Years of Art and Culture at the CCP*, feature vivid photos of the displays along with insightful and comprehensive commentaries or critical essays which examine the artworks from the event. *Scenes Reclaimed* takes it a notch higher by engaging with individual issues about the archival displays in the 2019 exhibit instead of presenting related commentaries about these archives collectively, which lends to more in-depth discussions on the development of Philippine cinema and its overall significance in the evolving socio-political and cultural environment of the nation.

The book's keywords or main themes revolve around two landmark achievements in Philippine art: the celebration of CCP's fiftieth year and Cinemalaya's fifteenth anniversary. The authors use a Marxist approach to analyze the events during Martial Law up to the rise of independent filmmaking, when film was solidified as a tool for expressing dissent. *Scenes Reclaimed* broadens perspectives on contemporary social issues in the twenty-first century and contests existing notions about heroes, nationalism, or independence, among other topics, making the book significant not only for film critics or cultural workers, but also more importantly for film or media educators and students.

These keywords, when seen in relation to Philippine cinema and society, provide readers an opportunity to think critically about cinema's intersections with cultural politics. Moreover, the book reiterates the significance of returning to the historical archives, particularly about Martial Law, to counteract the disputes brought about by historical revisionism in the present political landscape. The critical conversations that the short essays focus on underscore the significance of film as a cultural product.

Each section of *Scenes Reclaimed* is thematically arranged, with every entry featuring critical commentaries about the parallelism of the Marcos and Duterte administrations. Part One contextualizes Philippine cinema when CCP was built during Martial Law. This part investigates the issues propelled by CCP's inauguration, from the Marcos administration's blatant media manipulation to the intertwined relationship of politics and show business. The essays in this chapter also foreground the idea of reclamation and state that CCP has become a site for exploring "critical discourses on culture that are imbricated in the continuing struggles of the Filipino people" (Campos et al. 10). Part Two includes key terms that define the scope of Philippine cinema. Part Three explores the factors that advance the knowledge and production of culture and the arts, while Part Four dovetails into a transition between the past and present, with key concepts revealing similar controversies between Marcos's and Duterte's style of governance. The book's retrospective insights on the Second Golden Age of Philippine cinema from the 1970s to the 1980s and its links with the development of independent cinema is a necessary interrogation of the political and cultural connections of film with Philippine society, providing readers with a more nuanced view of the present, and ultimately, the future, of Philippine art, culture, and society.

The various contradictions associated with the inauguration of CCP are detailed in Part One. The first four keywords/concepts ("Reclamation," "Scenes," "Patronage," and "The True, The Good, and The Beautiful") explain the struggles at play in the Philippine film scene during the Martial Law era. Some examples of these points

include how the Marcoses used art to build a good image and to hide the horrors of the dictatorship, and how the government-owned Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP) managed to produce films that criticized the administration. Although this part is more focused on the events of the Martial Law period, readers can immediately identify the relationship of these issues with current events. The censorship imposed during Martial Law has implied similarities with the shutdown of the local media company ABS-CBN, a staunch critic of the Duterte administration. The shady politics exhibited during the Marcos regime also parallel the political scandals in the present administration, such as the Bureau of Customs former commissioner Nicanor Faeldon's involvement in the dispute concerning billions of smuggled shabu from China in 2017, among other controversies.

Meanwhile, the remaining concepts ("Edifice," "Elite/Popular," and "Showbiz") suggest issues that perpetuate class struggle, like the construction of large architectural structures that disenfranchise the poor, the tensions between high and low art, and the existence of political dynasties. The critical discussion on edifices, which refers to the physical infrastructures that alienate and displace the marginalized as well as the arrogance and pride of the Marcos administration, stands out in comparison with the discussions of "Elite/Popular" and "Showbiz." The short essays on these last two keywords could have provided more in-depth explanations elaborating on the role of political dynasties and showbiz in securing a spot in electoral positions (that is, based on merit and excellent political record instead of mere popularity). However, since brief examples instead of longer analyses are given about the elite, the popular, and show business, the readers should think critically about how these aspects relate to Philippine cinema and society. The role of the entertainment industry and political dynasties in the Philippine government certainly demands further scrutiny, especially in light of controversies involving government officials such as Bong Revilla Jr., also a popular action star, who was charged but later acquitted over the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) scam, or former Ilocos Norte governor and now Philippine Senator Imee Marcos, who was caught in the alleged misuse of their region's tobacco excise funds.

Part Two builds on the crucial trajectories of Philippine cinema as shaped by the contradictions that also enrich it, as elaborated in Part One. Here, Philippine cinema is emphasized as a popular art form and a discursive space where compelling arguments on what defines the cinema industry may be examined. The entry "Independence" locates Philippine cinema as it departs from the limitations of censorship, with artists using film as a means to expose the realities of oppression. In the entry "National/International," the binary concepts refer to the networks available for filmmakers to exhibit their films in and out of the country. The discussion of these keywords, although primarily referring to the advancement

of independent filmmaking in the Philippines and the transnational links built through international festivals, also lets the readers think about the true sense of the term “independence.” Filmmakers may experience more creative autonomy as they become less reliant on commercial corporations that provide funding for film production, but in reality, we live in a country that is still plagued with ideologies of colonialism and tyranny.

Another essential entry in Part Two is “Indigenous,” which discusses the rise of filmmaking in the regions. Regional cinema is generally defined by renowned critic Miguel Rapatan in the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art* as films that are done outside Metropolitan Manila by filmmakers from the regions who depict the nuances of experiences in these areas (82). This is an important development in Philippine cinema that may end the stereotyping of and false assumptions about the regions and their people. Regional films are also essential to expand “the people’s notions of who are included and excluded from the Filipino national imagination” (Campos et al. 40). The timely discussion of regional cinema in the Philippines also fosters a more inclusive idea of “national cinema” that hears out the narratives from the different localities of the archipelago.

Part Three reviews keywords related to the establishment of CCP and Cinemalaya, the main topics of the exhibit. The entry “Anniversaries” notes how the anniversaries of CCP and Cinemalaya paved the way for more critical discussions on art and cinema, especially during the twenty-first century. Since the Marcos administration imposed severe limitations to freedom of expression when CCP was inaugurated, CCP’s current role as an ideological space where intellectual exchange is possible is a reclamation of the space deprived of revolutionary artists. After Martial Law, these growing conversations about Philippine art led to CCP’s publication of vital texts such as *Tuklas Sining* and *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*. Both of these works engage readers in relevant discourses with their focus on the development of art and consideration for present advancements in technology and the surrounding socio-political issues that shape artistic themes. In the entry “Technology,” the role of technology in giving filmmakers more avenues to create their works is discussed to encourage readers to think of the future routes of digital cinema while also considering the challenges filmmakers face regarding production, distribution, and exhibition, among other concerns. It also provides the younger generation a glimpse of the earlier technologies used in filmmaking which they may no longer be familiar with. In the entries “Agencies” and “Awards,” critical questions on agencies, which refer to the organizations in charge of upholding the value of film and awards, which are intended to recognize merit and excellence in cinema, are also dealt with. The discussions of these two keywords problematize what is judged as “quality” work in Philippine art and other related issues such as the role of censorship in

Philippine media and the function of (or even the validity of) award-giving bodies in ensuring the quality of films.

“Heroes,” another keyword in Part Three, is a crucial interrogation of the kinds of leaders Filipinos look up to. However, its inclusion in Part Three seems a bit off, since the term “heroes” deals with a concept that is not directly related to the main topic—the establishment of CCP and Cinemalaya. The keyword may have been better positioned as an introductory concept to Part Four, the last section of the book, where the significance of “heroes” in Philippine society could have been magnified when juxtaposed with the analysis of other problems, such as corruption, debt, or the war on drugs.

Finally, Part Four expounds on the keywords “massacre,” “tokhang” (Duterte’s war against drugs program), “ghosts,” and “debt” in connection to the leaders we elect in our society. The parallel killings during Martial Law and the present-day war on drugs target anti-government individuals and the marginalized. The dissent during Martial Law led to political leaders being jailed, or worse, tortured and killed, while many political activists in the current administration are illegally detained or murdered. Meanwhile, the victims of extrajudicial killings are from the marginalized class, who are often summarily eliminated or executed. Both Marcos and Duterte administrations failed in properly allocating budgets to various sectors, which has led to increasing foreign debts.

Campos, Quiling, and Sonido also suggest that the reflections on Philippine cinema and its connection to the country’s social, political, and cultural environments will be in vain if these recurring problems are not addressed. If people do not learn from past mistakes, these unresolved issues will continue to haunt us. The discussions of the keywords “massacre,” “tokhang,” “ghosts,” and “debt” in Part Four are timely especially during this global pandemic, when government officials’ corrupt agenda is prioritized over health and economic matters. These issues bring the readers back to the notion of independence and heroes, letting them ponder upon the role of good leaders in asserting the country’s independence. As implied in the selection of keywords and the corresponding short essays in *Scenes Reclaimed*, the tyrannical abuse and blatant corruption of leaders still prevail, leading us to “remember the cost and value of independence, in and beyond cinema” (Campos et al. 93). The book implies that more than being familiar with the development of Philippine cinema, it is imperative for readers to correlate the issues presented in films with the ongoing socio-political turmoil in the country. As people are able to determine national issues and actively address these problems, cinema helps its viewers to be free from those who oppress them.

Young scholars who are just being introduced to Philippine cinematic history and who are more knowledgeable about popular foreign entertainment may not be familiar with the films and television shows mentioned in some parts of the book. This notwithstanding, the book is still an essential introduction to Philippine cinema since it is a rich source of archival references that will encourage early scholars to broaden their research on cinematic heritage. Overall, *Scenes Reclaimed* contributes to relevant conversations on the intersections of cinema and politics in the Philippines.

Being constantly aware and critical of the issues in our society is extremely important, especially in these uncertain times when the pandemic has brought to the surface societal problems that have always existed but have also been unconsciously (or even consciously) neglected. *Scenes Reclaimed* fulfills its aim to use cinema as a take-off point in discussing social and political issues, while also emphasizing how cinema plays a crucial role in enriching culture. However, the book was published with limited copies in 2020. Hopefully, CCP will be printing more soon for wider distribution since it is a rich pedagogical material that can be used in film and media literacy classes. Offering a digital open-access version of this book may better serve its pedagogical purpose, and doing so will reach a larger audience, especially those in the education sector.

Scenes Reclaimed has the potential to engage young learners in this era of historical revisionism, fake news, and disinformation, carving out its importance not only as an introductory reference in Philippine film studies but also as an educative material that motivates critical thinking.

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