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**Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle,
and the World-Media System**
by **Jonathan Beller**

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Book Reviews

JONATHAN BELLER

Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle, and the World-Media System

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006. 344 pages.

Beller argues that the twentieth century has seen a radical challenge to the history of signification and visuality that has cinema as a paradigmatic case. For Beller cinema itself is a mode of production that makes and takes images—as well as our attention and affect, which it captures and generates—in order to turn them into commodities. In this view, cinema or the image itself is a “deterritorialized factory” and its (dis)articulation with global capitalism is a site for potential revolutionary action (cf. J. Beller, “The Cinematic Mode of Production: Towards a Political Economy of the Postmodern,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 44, no. 1 (2003): 91–106; *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*, Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press/University Press of New England, 2006).

Roughly dividing the book into three moments, namely, Neorealism, Socialist Realism, and Syncretic Realism—headings that he adapts from various Filipino critics—Beller finds in the Philippines important traces of the changing role of the visual in history (77) and “conceptual thinking about the world and politics through artwork” (82), which has significance beyond the Philippines. Following Debord and Baudrillard, he looks at the Philippine case to trace the developments of “acquiring eyes”: the capacity to provide forms and images symptomatic, and at the same time critical, of

the means by which reality gets turned into images, circulated, exploited, and consumed in a manner that articulates image production and consumption with the world capitalist system. Against the production of simulacrum and simulacra, Beller traces the various attempts specific Filipino artists have used to address themselves to this visual economy. Following Jameson and Debray, Beller endeavors to explicate the means by which Filipino artists have experimented with the problem of value in and of images, and the resulting political resistance and cognitive mapping in this cultural work.

The book’s first section starts with H. R. Ocampo, best known as a visual artist, but here treated also as a literary modernist. Focusing on the importance of the breakdown of language through visions and specular motifs in Ocampo’s mostly unknown novel *Scenes and Spaces* and then his later more famous abstract works, Beller argues against an art history that merely takes Victor Edades’s 1928 self-conscious adaptation of modernist visual techniques as the origin of Philippine visual modernism. Instead, Beller makes a strong and convincing case for Philippine modernism emerging out of the historical contradictions of American control of the Philippines and the response of a nationalist struggle in the face of this imperialism. Philippine modernity, he maintains importantly, is both an imperial simulacrum as well as an original that manifests critiques of a new emerging regime of perception. Reading Ocampo’s recognition of the failure of words and the primacy of vision as a site of struggle, Beller brilliantly locates the truth of imperialism’s fragmentation of the sensorium in Philippine modernism’s abstraction of stable unities and identities, and its preference for dynamics and movement.

The second section, made up of some essays that have been published previously elsewhere, looks more closely at the work of Kidlat Tahimik, Chito Roño, Ishmael Bernal, and Lino Brocka. Beller situates them within a Third Cinema critique of filmic mediation in a moment of Marcos fascism and emergent transnational capitalism. Brocka’s *Ora prono bis* is taken not as a cathartic melodrama but as a critique of mass mediated totalitarianism. In Beller’s reading the emotional excess generated by the film is directed toward political and revolutionary action. In Bernal’s *Manila by Night* and Roño’s *Curacha*, perception as production is articulated with sexuality and urban development in a manner that has correlates with market competition over attention and affect. In these films Beller sees a clear expression of mediation as contradiction and contestation over the significance and function of the image. Beller reads these films as exposing the symptomatic disjunctures of postmodern and transnational capital production.

Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s–1950s

New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 252 pages.

Those who have written about pioneering Filipino laborers in America and their recreational activities have always seemed to approach the subject from the outside, with a predisposition toward moralizing. Although progressive writers like William Saroyan, John Fante, and Carey McWilliams championed the “Filipino” in various ways, their portrayals nonetheless evinced a mixture of caricature, condescension, and sometimes hostility, unable to escape the colonial and racialized image of the Filipino as “little brown brother.” Meanwhile, Carlos Bulosan, Manuel Buaken, and P. C. Morante, from insiders’ viewpoints, wrote about the injustices faced by Filipino workers, but distanced themselves from their “illiterate” and lower class brethren. In a similar way, perhaps, labor leaders and heads of voluntary organizations, even American and Filipino sociologists in America concerned about Philippine independence and the cause of racial equality, frowned upon the foibles of Filipinos, especially their leisure time amusements, the most visible and notorious being gambling, cockfighting, boxing, loitering, and attendance at taxi dance halls.

Thus with some excitement I read Linda España Maram’s *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles’s Little Manila*, for Maram attempts to do something that others before her have not done: to see the work, community, and especially the leisure time amusements of Filipinos in America from *their* viewpoint. Maram’s contention is that social reformers, political leaders, and church leaders, not to mention respectable Filipinos and Philippine leaders from the 1920s to the 1940s, had always frowned upon Filipino workers for participating in these activities. Their hostility, based upon various forms of racism and class snobbery, could be gauged through their view that these activities promote idleness, laziness, crime, immorality, and many other unsavory traits. More than that, these self-proclaimed leaders, in collusion with the shady Los Angeles Police Department, had always attempted to regulate, if not shut down, working class pursuits, turning a blind eye to their own parallel illegal, albeit high class, activities.

Maram performs a singular task of resignification of Filipino labor history in this book, on several levels. She challenges received views (prejudices

In the last section Beller looks at the work of Emmanuel Garibay. He reads Garibay’s cannibalization of styles and icons as treatments of Filipino painting as a vernacular. In Garibay’s paintings Beller finds that “religion is grasped as a *technology* of domination, a *medium* of confrontation and struggle” (216, Beller’s italics) that “is wrought in solidarity with the socially disruptive power of the masses in search of liberation” (217). Beller astutely sees this artistic practice as following through Brocka’s insistence on forming the Filipino audience to confront them with their *pinagdaanan* (loosely translatable as the pathways of their hardships) in their urban experience.

Some may question Beller’s periodizations and the way he discusses class interests or quibble about other potential readings of the art works he analyzes. (Beller himself significantly cites some of these criticisms, such as that from James Clifford on page 282.) How, for example, might looking at literary experiments in various languages used in the Philippines prior to 1928, or the cultural production of the 1960s, change or perhaps extend his arguments about modernism and nationalist struggles? How might Beller read critique in less obviously protest-oriented early Philippine film, such as LVN’s *Giliw Ko*’s portrayal of the insertion of technology and American imperialism into Philippine life? How would he read the queer excesses figured in the *bakla* or the lesbian in Bernal’s *Manila by Night*? Whatever the answers, these questions gain a new significance in the light of Beller’s powerful work. His overarching argument is compelling and effectively connects the Philippines with global currents and theorizations about a world-media system’s visual economy. In his discussions of empire, value, and affect he persuasively shows how the Philippine experience contributes to theorizations of historic transformations in regimes of perception and organization. He convincingly reads Philippine art practice as a significant manifestation of theorizations about visuality. Against certain trends that speak of the impoverishment of critique, Beller understands Philippine art as salient and powerful affirmative critique. This book will undoubtedly be a reference point for those interested in Philippine visuality and its links to imperial technologies. Perhaps, as its most important labor, it issues a challenge for further critical work to refute, refine, or most likely extend his analysis into other spheres and artifacts of Philippine cultural history.

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