

# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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**Eloisa May P. Hernandez's**

*Digital Cinema in the Philippines, 1999–2009*

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Nowhere in the book is Francia most personal than in his pieces about writing and the creative process. These essays, coming from talks for different creative writing classes and workshops, are expositions about various literary genres and how the writer recreates one's self in the act of writing. A number of the essays explain the writing of Francia's memoir, *Eye of the Fish* (Kaya Press, 2001), about exploration and self-exploration, about travelling through the islands of the archipelago and piecing together a self that is restless, unwieldy, and always incomplete.

As readers go through the range of topics, their reactions will be different: delighted, moved, provoked, and angered. But readers of this collection will always find a writer who mines from a cosmopolitan perspective a critical and reflective voice and concern for the country in this new century.

*RE* won the Best Essays in English award in the 35th National Book Awards in 2016.

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ELOISA MAY P. HERNANDEZ

## **Digital Cinema in the Philippines, 1999–2009**

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014. 318 pages.

Eloisa May P. Hernandez's *Digital Cinema in the Philippines, 1999–2009* argues time and again for Philippine cinema's continued life, albeit already in the contemporary era's most transformative and indeed progressive form—the digital medium. Most critics and scholars decry the unending lackluster production of Philippine cinema in general, which logically has led to pronouncements of its death over the years. For Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., for instance, it seems to die over and over again in film scholarship. Hernandez, however, turns to the ever-altering digital medium to trace how it has provided Philippine cinema a new lease on life by radically transforming film production, distribution, and consumption from 1999 to 2009. The book is an important contribution to the already full-bodied corpus of film studies in the Philippines as it not only takes on the argument once again for Philippine cinema, but also properly assesses what has been continually marginalized by the hegemonic, consumer-driven mainstream cinema. The

book lends history to Philippine digital cinema, and this narration seems to extend Philippine cinema's lamented life. This is, I believe, what the book has carved in the still "growing field of Philippine film history," as a work that aims "to proffer a more complex and dynamic study" of the said subject (16).

The book, which consists of a framing introduction, two comprehensive chapters on the history of digital cinema, and a short, summative conclusion, grew out of Hernandez's dissertation on the subject at the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman, under the able guidance of leading art critic Patrick D. Flores. Hernandez is associate professor of Art Studies at the College of Arts and Letters, UP Diliman, and a lecturer of Fine Arts at the Ateneo de Manila University. She earned her BA in Art Studies, MA in Art History, and PhD in Philippines Studies at UP Diliman. She is the author of *Homebound: Women Visual Artists in Nineteenth-Century Philippines* (University of the Philippines Press, 2004) and *Sining ng Sineng Filipino* (UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino, 2009). She is a member of the Young Critics Circle Film Desk, once serving as its president.

Hernandez describes her book as "a culmination of more than a decade of engagement with Philippine studies, art history, film history, and Philippine cinema" (xiii). In studying over the course of its time frame "digitally produced full-length narrative films that have been screened in at least two public screenings: in a regular run or in alternative venues, and in local or international film festivals" (xiv), she traces the beginnings and trajectories of the medium in the Filipino context. She thus offers two periods in what she describes as the "technological history of digital cinema in the Philippines," the period of introduction and the period of innovation (11), the subject of the book's first chapter. In the second chapter, Hernandez strengthens her claims by building on her earlier historical and archival findings through a comprehensive map of the political economy of Philippine film culture, where digital cinema seems pervasive in production, distribution, and exhibition (thus, consumption). By way of the chapters on the history of digital cinema, the book illustrates the interrogations and negotiations by all of the stakeholders in the industry in the process of coming to terms with new technologies, responding to critical and popular tastes shaped by internal and external factors, and attempting to make the industry sustainable.

Hernandez offers a cinematic history in terms of "shifts," which anchors her argument and considers the digital format as the next phase in an ongoing formal

transformation “from celluloid to digital” (15). The book sports an optimistic look by zooming in on the exciting innovations brought about by digital films, which over the years have suffered from being ignored by the public, relegated to usually limiting platforms like high-end film festivals, and drowned by competition with the mainstream. In a way, Hernandez takes an “alternative” look, as it were, at Philippine cinema and shows how it managed to morph into a truly cultural medium by her careful archival synthesis of digital films and their contexts, as well as her critical engagement with the filmic notions of independence, which primarily defines the period of digitization in the Philippines. Hernandez’s most important stance on “independence” and the so-called “indie film” is best summed up as follows:

The emergence of digital cinema in the Philippines and its concomitant modes of production, distribution, and exhibition resulted in the shifting of definitions of “independence” in Philippine cinema. The notion of independence in Philippine cinema has always been fluid. It remains a contentious and debatable concept, a problematic nomenclature in Philippine cinema. (214)

This assertion, which appears toward the last few pages of the second chapter, comes after a sustained illustration of “independence” as it has been understood and practiced in Philippine cinema through the ten-year coverage of the book. It has also been shaped by the primary categories of production Hernandez has observed over the course of the period: “self-productions,” “artist-run production companies and creative partnerships,” “industry-based independents,” and “mainstream film companies, media conglomerate/network-based companies, and institutional support”—all deploying the digital medium to advance filmmaking in the country.

In effect, the book helps to curate and annotate digitally produced Filipino films, ranging from *Still Lives* (1999) by Jon Red, which Hernandez describes as one that “signaled the emergence of digital cinema in the Philippines,” to *Bente* (2009) by Mel Chionglo. A list of the said films is found in an appendix, with dates of exhibition as well as basic entries on direction and production. A cursory look at the appendix signals what came into the storytelling, the “heart,” of these films, despite being told in digital format—experimentals and speculations; Third-World paeans to technological progress (or lamentations about it); explorations on sex,

gender, and performativity; metacriticism of cinematic and media forms and industries; and sharp social commentary, among others. These materials, avoided traditionally in the mainstream, have found form and ally in the digital format. While the mainstream persists in living out its consumerist dumbing down of the cinematic form, digital cinema in the Philippines, if we are to take Hernandez's perspective, is indeed changing the whole industry one film at a time and for the better. It may be a slow process, but one by one these films the author mentions have provided new blood to the larger cinematic corpus, often and popularly understood in terms of star power and box office records.

In this book Hernandez makes a clear and bold statement for digital film, and the digital format, as the future of Philippine visual cultures. Despite its contemporaneity, she gives it a sense of history, and thus form, borne out of an industry's need for a new lease on life, its search for "a more accessible and affordable filmmaking tool" (229), and its desire to contend not only with the technological advancements but also with the ever-changing viewing behavior of globalized Filipinos.

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STEFAN HUEBNER

## **Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974**

Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. 397 pages.

Stefan Huebner received his PhD degree from Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany, and specializes in the history of colonialism, modernization, and development policy. In July 2016 he started a Research Fellowship at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute, where he is based today. *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia* heavily employs his earlier journal publications, such as his article on the sportive "civilizing mission" of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in the Philippines.

Traditionally the academic field of sports history has been centered on Europe and North America. Although some important works exist outside of these regions, most studies trace the dissemination of modern sports by