

Break It to Me Gently: Essays on Filipino Film (Everything's Fine, 2019)

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Break It to Me Gently: Essays on Filipino Film (Everything's Fine, 2019) gathers a selection of around thirty film reviews from critic and academic Richard Bolisay's film blog *Lilok Pelikula*. Bolisay is deliberate when he acknowledges that these essays are borne out of his personal experience during the boom of independent film production at the turn of the 21st century, which has often been dubbed the Third Golden Age of Philippine Cinema. He arbitrarily periodized this era from 2007 to 2017, also the active years of the said blog. The essays are generally fairly short, either focusing solely on a particular film or occasionally adding a few notes about the event or film festival where it was shown. The second section of the book is made up of around a dozen dispatches from film festivals and with shorter and condensed reviews.

The introduction, newly written for the book, reads like a lot of things all at the same time: a manifesto, a laying down of limitations, a love letter, and a nail in the coffin. Bolisay recounts his journeys, the relationships built, the loneliness of writing criticism – all for the love of the cinematic medium during an important cultural moment. The early 2000s saw the democratization ushered in by digital technology in film that also coincided with the rise of long-form blogging as a platform in film criticism. The introduction concisely points out the difficulty of indie films staying in commercial theaters and is parallel to quality film reviews making their way into print.

Publishing blog posts into a book may seem like a novelty, but considering the history of film criticism in the Philippines this is closer to the norm. Books on film are almost always collections of shorter pieces of text that first came out in broadsheets, magazines, student publications, or academic journals. A handful of these books are often out of print, and only accessible in select university libraries. This is true of early film studies publications, such as the anthologies put out by the *Manunuring Pelikulang Pilipino* (The Filipino Film Critics), edited by Nick Tiongson, *Readings on Philippine*

Cinema (1983), edited by Rafael Ma. Guerrero and published by the state agency *Experimental Cinema of the Philippines*, and scholarly writings by in the 1990s by Joel David and Emmanuel Reyes who published single-authored essay collections. Even more common are film critics simultaneously writing about literature, theatre, and popular culture, notably Bienvenido Lumbera and Rolando Tolentino. Unsurprisingly, the predominant mode of Philippine film criticism is academic and, following Patrick Campos (2016), carries a naturalized nationalist tone.

In regards to reception of indie films, the texts published in newspapers and magazines are closer to press releases rather than reviews and are almost always framed by two things: either a film has won recognition in a film festival abroad or it has an urgent social statement – especially about urban poverty, violence, or corruption. This was the paradoxical impression that reached people outside the immediate film communities centered in the national capital, Metro Manila. Independent films are seen as going against injustice, or at least against the hegemony of Hollywood and the local big studios.

With this in mind, Bolisay's essays are refreshing as they zero in on form and problematizing meanings given off by respective films with nuance. It is a step away from the purely academic frame, but not too far into its polar opposite of contained formalism. The language is casual but also literary; it praises when it is deserved and ruthless when it is needed. He also provides context when it is worth discussing, indicating he is in a dialog not just with the film but with other critics as well. This appears to be both inclusive and exclusionary at the same time. For casual readers, it takes effort to relate to film festival atmospheres, in which Bolisay has been both an audience and a juror.

There is no need to rewrite or update Bolisay's reviews, but they would have benefited from postscripts for more context. By letting the reviews stand alone, the unresolved contradictions of the period, such as the tendency to depict the society's underbelly and market it to audiences in festival circuits abroad or the roles that state censorship and award giving bodies play, are still dangling.

Aside from championing indie films and festivals, Bolisay also pays attention to a handful of mainstream films both recent and past, namely Cathy Garcia-Molina's *She's Dating a Gangster* (2014) and Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes's *Aswang* (1992), assessing these commercial films on their own terms, especially the lessons they provide digital filmmakers on mass appeal and genre conventions. This is significant considering the observation that among the effects of the digital wave movement's failure to reach broader audiences is the fetishization of small productions, which, according to Rolando Tolentino (2008), led to the consumption of indie cinema becoming a form of cultural capital. Bolisay also notably does not hold back in writing negative reviews, again with wit and precision. In the introduction, he expressed fears that collecting the essays might "reopen wounds" and "attract unneeded animosity." It is not hard to imagine a backlash against negative reviews at a time when everyone was aspiring to create the Great Filipino Film.

Break It To Me Gently is essential reading because its critical rigor and dedication is as important during a so-called golden age as much as during an industry slump. Reading Bolisay as he oscillates between high- and low-brow films, form and context, past and present, and praise and disapproval, will prevent students, critics, scholars, and artists from the dangers of reverting to nostalgia when looking back at the emergence of digital cinema in the Philippines. This collection is a reminder of the period's dynamism and its still unfulfilled promises.

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