

Reviewed by Elmo Gonzaga

City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture

by **Jasmine Nadua Trice.**

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Jasmine Nadua Trice's *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture* is an eloquent, thought-provoking work that scholars of film, media, urban studies, and Asian studies will debate for a long time. This pioneering monograph about alternative film cultures in Metropolitan Manila from 2005 to 2012 joins the growing scholarship about understudied contemporary Southeast Asian cinemas that includes Patrick F. Campos's *The End of National Cinema*, Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly Desires*, David Hanan's *Cultural Specificity in Indonesian Film*, Alicia Izharuddin's *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema*, Thomas Barker's *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order*, Matthew Hunt's *Thai Cinema Uncensored*, and Katrina Macapagal's *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema*.¹ *City of Screens* could also be juxtaposed with recent books studying neoliberal spaces in millennial Manila

1 Patrick F. Campos, *The End of National Cinema: Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2016); Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); David Hanan, *Cultural Specificity in Indonesian Film: Diversity in Unity* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017); Alicia Izharuddin, *Gender and Islam in Indonesian Cinema* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Thomas Barker, *Indonesian Cinema after the New Order: Going Mainstream* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019); Matthew Hunt, *Thai Cinema Uncensored* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021); and Katrina Macapagal, *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

from the fields of geography, sociology, and literature, such as Arnisson Andre Ortega's *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines*, Marco Z. Garrido's *The Patchwork City*, and Gary C. Devilles's *Sensing Manila*.² Moreover, its astute analysis of the emergence of counterpublics from sites of exhibition, distribution, and consumption in the global southern metropolis places it in dialogue with newer, historically situated critical interventions about media and modernity such as Ravi Sundaram's *Pirate Modernity* and Joshua Neves's *Underglobalization*.³

Trice cogently and provocatively argues that alternative film cultures imagine, contemplate, anticipate, and cultivate cinematic audiences as speculative publics in an inchoate and discordant national community. According to Trice, these alternative cultures emerge from "distribution and exhibition channels" that provide opportunities to audiences to view works that are not screened in "mainstream" theaters operated by state institutions or private corporations.⁴ In its heyday, the Philippine movie industry was one of the largest producers of films in the world. After the decline of mainstream commercial studios in the 1990s, Philippine cinema has experienced a renaissance over the past two decades thanks to the support of film funding competitions and accessibility of video production technologies. Set in the long global 1990s, *City of Screens* explores the "technological, cultural, and institutional transformation" in Metropolitan Manila during the aughts, a time of naive optimism about the possibilities of neoliberal capitalism and social networking.⁵ Trice's monograph ably documents this "transition period" in the rise of digital culture, before the dominance of 3G smartphones and streaming services, when VCDs and DVDs were still the principal sources of transnational media content. One of its most fascinating aspects is the importance *City of Screens* accords to "transitional" or "ephemeral" sites or events as constitutive of the dynamism of the global south metropolis. In Trice's analysis, well-meaning initiatives for fledgling film festivals, cinema-theques, and screening rooms with "short lives" widen the scope of possibility while seemingly resulting in failure.⁶

As its most significant scholarly intervention, *City of Screens* introduces and expands the concept of *speculative publics*, which, for Trice, allows it to transcend the limiting dichotomy of national and transnational by exploring their coexistence and interaction.⁷ Each chapter looks at a different exhibition space or cultural institution that contributed to the cultivation of prospective, speculative publics and their networks, such as the mall multi-

2 Arnisson Andre Ortega, *Neoliberalizing Spaces in the Philippines: Suburbanization, Transnational Migration, and Dispossession* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016); Marco Z. Garrido, *The Patchwork City: Class, Space, and Politics in Metro Manila* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); and Gary C. Devilles, *Sensing Manila* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020).

3 Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Joshua Neves, *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

4 Jasmine Nadua Trice, *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 3.

5 Trice, 4.

6 Trice, 4.

7 Trice, 4.

plex, film festival, art house cinemathèque, censorship board, and informal market. Trice explains how the dearth in viewership of art house and independent cinema in the Philippines has caused artists, critics, and scholars to lament the absence of a “national audience.” Characterizing speculative publics as “asymptotic” because they bear “unrealized potential” but stay “not fully formed,” she explores how their contingencies and frictions create competing ideal futures for city and nation often in opposition to a perceived mainstream or state.⁸ Trice’s book stands out because it filters its sharp, critical observations through the author’s own experiences of the DIY vitality and passion of millennial Metro Manila’s democratic public sphere, which flourished before the violence, cynicism, and hate of Rodrigo Duterte’s authoritarian regime.

Focusing less on textual analysis or ethnographic description than on an innovative, interdisciplinary approach that draws on urbanism, geography, and anthropology, Trice emphasizes that her work diverges from most scholarship on Philippine cinema by studying the paratexts that circulate within the spatial environments in which they are produced or among the mass audiences to whom they are addressed.⁹ Illustrating an expansive understanding of film culture, her method de-emphasizes close readings of films and concentrates instead on the “rhetorics” of promotional materials, public speeches, and mission statements of cultural institutions and film organizations. The book’s two most compelling chapters thus look at the Mogwai bar in Cubao and DVD markets in Quiapo as cosmopolitan sites of cinephilic accessibility; they deftly demonstrate Trice’s approach of examining multiple paratextual discourses produced by music videos, programming notes, advertising billboards, and discussion threads to uncover their cultural imaginaries and contrapuntal temporalities within millennial Manila’s variegated urban rhythms.

Trice self-consciously highlights her positionality as an academic based in the United States and Singapore engaged in knowledge production about the Philippines. It is this positionality that is the source of new insight from the book, which allows her to bring fresh perspectives to heated debates about the possibilities of national cinema and its fractured audiences. Because concepts such as *revanchism* and *authenticity* are infrequently cited by local scholars and critics, Trice’s use of them seems “contradictory” at first, as she admits, but they nonetheless open up unexplored avenues of inquiry into long-standing questions about urbanity and spectatorship.

One of the book’s strengths is Trice’s ability to pinpoint relevant global scholarly discussions that resonate with the local historical and social conditions she examines. However, the book would have benefited more from less emphasis on dominant strands of critical theory and closer dialogue with the already extensive body of film and cultural studies about public and media cultures in Asian cities. Because of *City of Screens*’ vernacular orientation, I was eager to learn how it builds on Sundaram’s and Neves’s ideas about how fantasies of development in global southern metropolises, such as Delhi and

8 Trice, 21, 46.

9 Trice, 12.

Beijing, are entangled with blueprints of urban renewal and infrastructures of media piracy. I would have especially liked to see a deeper engagement with the important work of the Manila-based scholar Patrick Campos, who is interested in many of the issues about alternative film cultures in the Philippines during the post-millennium period that Trice spotlights.

Trice has such a masterful facility for analyzing theoretical sources that I also hoped to hear more of her own thoughts about significant ideas that are given less emphasis in her book. For instance, the alternative scene she describes is presented as a foundational rupture; this approach affords little room for tracing the subversive film cultures in existence before the twenty-first century. Also, the authority, efficacy, and influence of the Philippine government are overstated in the later chapters, which seem to assume greater continuity between the oppression of the Martial Law dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos and the instability of the neoliberal state under Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Conversely, Trice arguably understates the social dominance of Catholicism in the Philippines, even as its indigenization has informed cultural imaginaries of Quiapo and its conservatism has permeated political policies on censorship. Responding to Campos's ideas about the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival would have enabled Trice to grapple more with its contradictions as a cultural institution and exhibition space. Instead of viewing the festival as an extension of the state, Campos describes it as being entangled with both the public and private resources of its diverse stakeholders. Engaging with Campos's incisive exposition of the contrasting meanings of *alternative* and *indie* for various artists and critics as being democratic and revolutionary would have likewise allowed Trice to further advance her argument about the inchoateness of mass audiences as asymptotic speculative publics. Such scholarly connections might have enriched the work, but their absence does not diminish the originality and complexity of Trice's critical intervention.

Trice displays a generosity to her marginalized objects of study by offering possible questions and connections instead of forcing predetermined approaches and interpretations. Her book is distinguished by its careful selection of less obvious examples, which are described and analyzed in rich language that yields compelling insights with every reading. Like any path-breaking work that stakes out new ground, *City of Screens* puts forward observations and arguments that are bound to be provocative and disputed. With its innovative methods and unexpected ideas, which distill the lost vibrancy of a transitional historical moment, this monograph will reverberate with readers yet to come.

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