

Dating at Galing: Bienvenido Lumbera's Views on Philippine Adaptation Studies¹

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Introduction

Philippine National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera's legacy may be viewed in terms of its dual trajectory: his scholarship's contribution to Philippine Studies in general, and to literature, film studies and popular culture in particular. He did not write specifically on adaptation studies as a site of inquiry but his broader works on film studies intersected with Philippine adaptation studies, and greatly aided in considering the latter as a sub-area of both Philippine film theory and literary criticism. In fact, his seminal work, *Tagalog Poetry: 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences in its Development*, is an important resource on cultural adaptation and the historical and social forces that influenced the rise of certain literary genres and their eventual mutation into other forms.

In tackling adaptation studies, Lumbera may be considered a forerunner, a seminal investigator for a number of reasons. Firstly, he attempted to build a theory of Philippine cinema by using the historical method. Secondly, he advocated the study of specific works that should eventually inform the crafting of aesthetics standards for analysis; some kind of a grounded theory for Philippine cinema studies ("An Approach to the Filipino Film"). Thirdly, he advocated for specific research methods that will facilitate a more systematic study of Philippine cinema such as the production of "an annotated filmography," "a selective bibliography," the

conduct of “oral histories of surviving film workers from the period” and “a film archive” (“Problems in Philippine Film History” 85-86).

Lumbera provided suggestions for the development of scholarship in cinema for the reason that he recognized the difficulty of studying film eras without the archival data and other kinds of data needed to realize such a project. His solid sociological framework, his historicism, and his formal study of works solidified his advocacy for Philippine Studies and this contributed eventually to a widely-recognized postcolonial examination of artistic eras, which included attempts at indigenizing theories and critical approaches.

The key is history and its remnants

Fred Inglis, in his book titled *Media Theory: An Introduction*, claimed that “the best kind of media theory to begin with is a historical one” (4). Although he prefaced this statement with examples of how history had been the product of some subjective means of structuring narratives, Inglis also meant that theorizing is never free from the influence of the seeker’s situation or positionality. The theorist is a historical subject too.

As he further explained:

So it is that we each of us devise from a mixture of folklore, story-telling and such bits and pieces of disciplinary education as we carry around with us in the forms of sociology or history or political economy, a personal version of social theory, itself a broad, ecumenical term which covers most of what the human sciences seek to provide. (4)

Lumbera deployed the aforementioned analytic framework as he navigated the terrain of film studies. Although his point of entry was literature, he later on became one of our foremost film historians; ensuring a prime spot as one of the founding fathers of the *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino*. He never made the U.S. colonial era in the Philippines as the default reason for some of the so-called maladies afflicting Filipino film production in various instances of its history. He would always begin his examination with the pivotal moment of the arrival of film technology in the Philippines

in 1897 and the subsequent adoption of American film practice in the local industry as just that, a historical reality. However, he never capitulated to the temptation of resorting to a wholesale denunciation of the so-called Filipino film's imitative phase. Instead, Lumbera suggested a critical framework rooted in Filipino realities in order to avoid the utilization of the Western formal and aesthetic criteria that were partly made available in the Philippine academy by scholars who were foreign-educated. While Lumbera underscored the importance of being familiar with received/Western film aesthetics, he reminded Filipino scholars of what Homi Bhabha would refer to as the particular "location of culture"; thus:

There is nothing ostensibly wrong with applying "universal" norms in judging the worth of Filipino film art. Putting a film together, whether done in the U.S. or Senegal, involves the same principles of directing, acting, photographing, editing, etc. However, a film is not merely an interplay of light and shadow, of movement and stillness, or of sound and silence. It is about something, and this something is rooted in the realities of the society which produced the film. Subject matter, after all, is always particular, and it is for this reason that the aesthetic criteria applied to American films do not always apply to Filipino films. (194)

History was Lumbera's constant ally, his method, his mode of analysis. It was so important to him that he admitted to resorting to "this repetition of commonplace observations on the local film industry" (195) because he wanted to give the Filipino cinema a fair chance to unravel its constituent elements, its roots. I quoted the passages pertaining to the above-mentioned Lumbera reminder in my book *Pelikulang Komiks: Toward a Theory of Filipino Film Adaptation*, and I am reproducing it again in this paper: "[E]ach time we speak of the art of cinema in the Philippines, it is absolutely essential that we locate Filipino films in the context of our history, noting their peculiar features (faults as well as virtues) as manifestations and effects of traditions and conditions created by our colonial past and by our struggle to exorcise that past" (195).

The subject of tradition is very important to Lumbera. He viewed it as an indispensable resource to a film historian and a film critic. Throughout his

career as a film scholar, Lumbera regarded broad concepts such as “tradition” from multiple perspectives such as the following: (1) As a requirement for a film artist to constantly bear in mind; 2) As a normative practice for the producer to uphold; and, 3) As the film audience’s reading tool.

Corollary to the above, Lumbera linked the disregard for tradition to some perceived limitations of Filipino cinema. In “The Tagalog Film and the Logic of Irony,” he claimed that “the usual Tagalog film is born of a wedding of illiteracies – the illiteracy of the audience, of the producer and of the director” (188). In order to supplant such “illiteracies” with a workable film education, he called on the film scholar to adopt a historical lens in analyzing the film artists’ sense of tradition or lack thereof. He encouraged the critics to seriously underscore the historical forces at play in the movement of trends and ideas in the Filipino film imagery. He affirmed the same idea to me when I brought up the historicist bent of the film adaptation theory that I was attempting to construct in the book *Pelikulang Komiks: Toward a Theory of Filipino Film Adaptation*. When I informed him that the primary argument he outlined in “An Approach to the Filipino Film” was one of the catalysts that made me pursue a theory-building project for adaptation studies, he was quick to give a recapitulation of the passage quoted above:

Para sa akin, history and culture ang nag de determine kung paano tayo kumikilos, tumitingin, nagpapasya. Ano ang history na yon? History ng Pilipinas na nagsimula when we were conquered by the Spaniards. [when] we were taught a new religion. Ang mga values na dinatnan nila ay kanilang tinangkang baguhin sa pamamagitan ng pagpapasok ng relihiyon, paghingi sa kumpisal ng panalangin. Tapos dumating ang mga Amerikano. Iba na namang kultura ang dala ng mga Amerikano. They have a public school. Sa eskwelahan tinuruan ang mga Pilipino ng bagong language. Pinabasa sila ng mga libro na originally ay para sa mga Amerikano. Ngayon, iyon ang tinuturing kong history. Hindi mga dates. Hindi mga pangalan kundi ang dinanas ng mga individual na mga Pilipino sa panahong nagdaan. So maaari nating ma-access ang mga pinagdaanan ng mga Pilipino sa nineteenth century. Sa pamamagitan ng pagbasa ng mga akda ng awtor ng mga akda nung nineteenth century; na

sinulat ng mga taong nag-aral sa kanilang kultura so lahat nang yan ay part ng history na tinutukoy ko. Kultura. So meron dalang kultura ang Kastila. Meron dalang kultura ang mga Amerikano. So, hindi buo at consistent—‘a ito espanol lang ang aking pinagdaanan. A eto Amerikano lang ang aking pinagdaanan.’ Hindi. Halo-halo yan. Hindi natin mapaghihiwalay-hiwalay. So yun ang history and culture na tinutukoy ko.

[For me, history and culture determine how we act, look and decide. What is that history? The history of the Philippines, which began when we were conquered by the Spaniards; when we were taught a new religion and when they tried to alter the values that they saw to be prevalent among the natives. Then the Americans came and brought a new culture. They brought public education. In schools, Filipinos were taught a new language and were asked to read books originally meant for American readers. That was the history I was talking about. Not the history of dates. Not the history of names but the experiences of the Filipinos in eras past. So, it is possible to access the experiences of the Filipinos during the nineteenth century by reading their works, including those written by the Spaniards. That was the history I was talking about. Culture. The Spaniards brought culture. The Americans brought culture. So, things cannot be consistently whole (This is Spanish. This is American.). It is mixed or hybrid. We cannot divide that into parts. That was the history and culture that I was referring to.] (Personal interview, February 3, 2012).

For Lumbera, the most important criterion for proposing or constructing a theory is historical analysis. In fact, he stopped short of saying (in the quotation above and in his other writings) that excavating the past is the only means to achieving a full understanding of indigenous aesthetics and critical practice. Yet that past is only accessible to us through the remaining texts; in the case of my study in *Pelikulang Komiks*, extant *komiks* prints produced in the 1950s and their extant film adaptations. For

Lumbera, the true historical insight is found in the evidence provided by the texts and this should be the fount of any analysis of indigenous cultures. A materialist scholar through and through, Lumbera was quick to point out where I should go and which sources I should consult. (“So ang maaari mong gawin ay konsultahin mo ang listahan ni Momblanco² ng mga pelikulang nagawa sa kasaysayan ng pelikula tapos indicate mo na itong nobela ni ganito. Ito maikling kwento [ni ganito]... Pero mas madalas nobela ang pinagbabatayan.” [So what you could do is consult Momblanco’s list of films produced and then identify which were based on novels or short stories. However, most of the time, films were based on novels]) (Personal interview, 3 February 2012).

Lumbera was a prime advocate for research documentation that he suggested in “Problems in Philippine Film History” one of the priority requirements in conducting a definitive and comprehensive history of Philippine film: “First an annotated filmography. This will not only describe films that have been made in the entire history of the industry, but should also locate copies of films still available” (185).

A comprehensive list of films or an annotated filmography is the same requirement needed in investigating film adaptations of pre-existing sources such as *komiks* serials, particularly if the end-goal of such project is constructing a proposed theory of adaptation. When I told Lumbera that a grounded theory approach in film adaptation studies may not entirely be applicable to my project because I believe that my ideological bias would always intrude into my methods, he was quick to give a reassuring comment that my claims are true of all theory-building projects in cinema studies. He was emphatic on this in the following extract from the 2012 interview:

Unang-una siyempre, hindi naman kasalanan, hindi naman ipagbabawal yung mayroon ka nang (teorya). Siyempre, you are moving towards a particular point. Along the way pwedeng magbago ang mga original intent. Siguro yung sinasabi nila huwag munang i-state black and white kung ano ang iyong theory...kasi dapat isaalang-alang na in the course of your research, you will come upon variations. You will come upon changes. You will come upon new concepts. And that will modify your thesis. Pero don't fear. Huwag kang matakot. Meron kang preconception dahil yan ang iyong gabay towards the point that you are going to make eventually. Ang iniisip ng mga nag-o-observe sa mga

theory-making para bang you start na blangko ang iyong isipan, which is ridiculous dahil hindi pwedeng ganon. Meron ka nang concept na hindi mo pa nalilinawan, yung research mo is precisely to find the data that will make you certain na ang pinupuntahan mo ay tama. So kung meron kang theory o nabubuo [na] ang theory sa iyong isipan, ituloy mo yon. Ihanap mo ng mga katibayan. Now in the course of your process will lead you to modify some of the terms in your theory.

[Firstly, it is not the fault of the researcher if he or she had already a theory or hypothesis in mind. Of course, you are moving towards a particular point. Along the way, the intent may change...you do not have to state the theory black and white because as you go through the research process, you will come upon variations, you will come upon changes, you will come upon new concepts. And that will modify your thesis. But don't fear. You have a preconception because that is your guide towards the point that you are going to make eventually. Those observers of theorists thought that you come to an inquiry tabula rasa, which is ridiculous because it is not possible. You have a concept that is not yet clear on your mind. Your research is precisely to find the data that will make you certain that what you are pursuing is correct. So you have a theory or are constructing a theory in your mind. Follow the lead. Look for evidence to support it. Now in the course of your process, you will be goaded to modify some of the terms in your theory.] (Personal interview, 3 February 2012).

My take-away from that encounter was the re-affirmation of my understanding of the importance of theory-building through massive data research, which Lumbera had been a lifelong advocate of. He was a believer in a nuanced understanding of the marriage between colonial aesthetics and native knowledge. Yet, he was emphatic that any form of conviction must be born out of the evidence from the ground. In "Problems in Philippine Film History," he mentioned that aside from an annotated filmography, Philippine cinema studies should be able to yield "a selective bibliography,"

“oral histories of surviving film workers from the period,” and “a film archive” (186). These sources will bolster the material evidence that will help theorists as they work from the ground.

***Dating at Galing* [Beauty/Impact and Talent]**

Lumbera had specific opinions on the location of culture in unravelling local aesthetics and in crafting standards for judging excellence in film practice. I surmise that these apply, too, to film adaptation practice. In “An Approach to the Filipino Film,” Lumbera noted the importance of unravelling a process of formulating these local standards for judging local films; thus:

Aesthetic standards are formulated after an analysis of specific works located within a *particular* cultural continuum. For this reason, values native to the society in which the norms have been formulated adhere to aesthetic standards. Thus, in using American standards to judge Filipino films, we have been for a very long time measuring the worth of our films on the basis of American values. Many are the occasions when these values have interfered with genuine understanding of Filipino films, leaving our Western-oriented critics baffled and resentful. And often the absence of these values in Filipino films has been mistaken by the younger, more adventurous film-makers for aesthetic failure, and so they force these values into their works regardless of the distortion created in the image of the culture reflected by the films. (195)

That Lumbera was open to the indigenous understanding of beauty and excellence that is almost instinctive came from his long-standing commitment to the location of culture in the native spirit or local categories of thought. It guided him throughout his incursion into the history of Tagalog poetry, his analysis of specific films as a member of the *Manunuri*, and his own conviction to understand the *dating* (the impact of a film or book on the people). This is his bottom-up reading framework—the audience dictating the meaning and the form of the body of works, be they film or another cultural text. He elaborated this to me in 2012 thus:

Yes, I do believe na dapat ganon ang proseso na dapat mangyari. Ang assumption natin ay may pinanggalingang lokal ang mga bagay-bagay na nagmanifest in our art. So yun ngayon ang ating hinahanap. Kung paano yon matatagpuan ay kinakapa natin yan e. Ang sa akin, sa literature, mayroon akong dalawang concepts na attempts at getting the basis at native concepts for the evaluation sa Philippine writing: yung tinawag kong *dating* and *galing*. *Dating*: ano ang impact nito sa mambabasa? We assume na ang mambabasa ay hindi rin blangko. Meron na yang certain experiences that make the reader respond to certain points in the narrative. Yun *dating* sa aking article, sa original article, merong awareness sa history of the Philippines. Hindi siya historian pero meron siyang awareness kung ano ang nangyayari sa kasaysayan. Meron siyang encounter with literature. Meron siyang encounter with tales and sayings. Yung mga yon ay nandoon sa reader. Pag kasi naharap sa isang akda, mayroon siyang marecognize. 'A oo nakita ko na yan. Nadanasan ko na yan.' The reader responds to the literary work. So isang batayan yan ng pagkilala sa katutubong teorya, sa katutubong tunguhin. At ngayon, paano nagagawa ng isang awtor na kilalanin na mahusay ang pagkakagawa nito. Yun yong *galing*. So may ginagamit na techniques ang mga manunulat upang ipakita na ang *dating* at ang *galing* ay magkaugnay.

[Yes, I do believe that the process (is to uncover native aesthetics and critical practice). Our assumption is that there is a fount or source of impulses that make their manifestations in our art. That is what we are looking for. How we will find it is still a work in progress. For me, in literature, I have two concepts that attempt to get at the bases of the native conceptual categories for the evaluation of Philippine writing: what I call *dating* at *galing*. *Dating*: what is its impact to our readers? We assume that our readers are not blank page or *tabula rasa*. They have certain experiences that make the reader respond to certain points in the narrative. With *dating*, in the original article that

I have written, there is awareness of the history of the Philippines. He or she may not be a historian but he/she has this awareness of what is happening in history. He/she has an encounter with literature. He/she has an encounter with tales and sayings. These are in our readers. When they encounter a work, they will recognize something. 'Yes, I saw that once. I experienced that once.' The reader responds to the literary work. So that is a basis for a native theory, a local perspective. Now, how can an author affirm this indigenous knowledge and effectively bring this onto his/her work? That is *galing*. The author deploys techniques to demonstrate that *dating* and *galing* are interrelated.] (Personal interview, 3 February 2012).

The intersection between the experience of the reader/viewer and the effort of the writer or filmmaker is crucial to Lumbera. It requires an understanding of the dynamics of a relationship between the creator of a cultural text and the horizon of experience of the consumer. This hermeneutic of convergence is exactly how Lumbera envisioned his historicist framework. This creative dynamics—when both the communicator and the viewer draw from a historical fount, their previous experiences and their recognition of how culture is located in specific moments where the foreign meets the local, the folk meets the popular, the borrowed meets the native—is the key, Lumbera explained, to a localized theory. Furthermore, he added:

So pag nagkaganon, tatanungin natin. Bakit mo sinasabing ito'y mahusay? Kasiya-siya ang isang likha? Dahil may naramdaman ako nang aking basahin. Maaaring nakita [ko] at mahusay naman ang ginawa ng awtor na ipakita ang aking naramdaman. So yun sa akin ang panimulang pag-arok sa tinatawag mong indigenous culture. Hindi yon batay sa libro kundi batay sa audience na itinuturing mong may karanasan na. At ang iyong akda ay may naaantig dun sa naranasan na ng mambabasa. Ibig sabihin, ang kahulugan ng isang akda ay hindi naka-depende lamang sa sinasabi ng isang awtor na ganito, ganoon, kundi yung [sinasabi] ng audience. Hindi blankong papel [ang] sinusulatan mo bilang awtor. Habang ginagawa mo, o kung may likha ka na

ginagawa, bilang isang awtor, marahil ang awtor na ito may pinagdaanan, marahil may pinagdaanan na katulad ng sa akin. Akin ngayong aantigin ang mga bagay na alam kong magdudulot sa reader ng mga insight, sa reader ng pleasure at yung aking sining, yung *galing* ay aking gagamitin upang mabigyang kaalaman, kasiyahan ang aking mambabasa. So yan ang teorya ko tungkol sa pagtuklas ng pamantayang lokal. Mayroong panahon na nanalig lamang ang mga commentators on art sa mga napag-aralan lamang nila sa unibersidad. E yung napagaralan nila ay teoryang galing sa kanluran, base sa karanasan ng mga taga kanluran na maaaring may point of contact sa mga karanasan ng mga Pilipino pero ang kabuuan noon ay dulot ng kultura nila hindi yung kultura ng mga Pilipino. And by kultura hindi ko tinutukoy yung mga akda, mga paintings, mga musika kundi yung mga bagay bagay na ginagawa ng mga tao sa kanyang lipunan. Yung bunga ng kanyang interaksyon with other Filipinos like...

[So when that happens, we will ask. Why do you say this work is good? Why a work is pleasing? Because when I read it I felt something that the author had been able to project, which coincides with my own feeling. For me, that is the first stage in analyzing what we call indigenous culture. It is not based on the books but on what the audience experienced. The work strikes a chord in the audience. This means that the meaning of the work is not dependent on what the author says. The audience is not a blank sheet. While a work is being produced, the author is able to capture what the audience has also experienced. I will touch on things that will elicit some insights from the reader, some pleasure and I will use my art, my *galing* to provide information, pleasure to my reader. That is the theory about discovering local knowledge. There was a period when commentators on art believed only on what they learned from the university. But what they learned were theories from the West, based on the experience of Western people that had a point of contact with the

experience of the Filipino. Yet, that culture had nothing to do with Filipino culture. And by culture, I am not referring to the works, paintings, music, but what the people accomplished in society. These are the products of their interaction with other Filipinos...] (Personal interview, 3 February 2012)

That conversation with Lumbera at his office at the old Faculty Center at UP Diliman led me to a greater understanding of adaptation studies and the theory of adaptation that I was then attempting to construct. Firstly, he affirmed my understanding that I have to let the data (in this case, the archive) speak for themselves since I can only reconstruct the era (1950s) from the remaining archive or extant works. Secondly, he inspired me to take a second look at how the ordinary Filipinos respond to popular works; that is, the formation of a popular consciousness that academic theory has always looked upon in a condescending manner. Thirdly, Lumbera proved to me that one's honest purpose to unravel the truth about the Filipino sensibility will lead to unexpected and surprising results. In this case, when he embarked on writing his dissertation on modern Philippine poetry at Indiana University in the 60s, and instead ended up with a work on the history and formal analysis of Tagalog poetry was a case of honest and earnest scholarship. He was led to a place of greater importance, a place more beneficial to the Filipino in the process. That understanding taught me that my prospective theory should never aim to prove another supposition wrong; it should actually be aimed at the recognition of the *galing* of both the 1950s komiks writers and the filmmakers who adapted their works and the *dating* of these works to the readers/viewers of the 1950s.

Although we could say that the *komiks* creators and the filmmakers were partially impelled by the commercial benefit that may be derived from this enterprise, Lumbera taught me that somehow, during a brief time during that decade, the artists were successful in reading the experiences of the readers/viewers of their works. The *komiks* readers and film viewers of the 1950s viewed with so much agility the *dating* of the works because they had recognized the stories narrated there as their own. Lumbera taught me not to condescend to the popular bent of such relationship; instead he taught me to look at that dynamic dialogue as an indigenous conversation and to look at it neither with regret nor scorn but with the cheerful understanding of a humble researcher of culture.

As we concluded the interview, I requested the soft-spoken National Artist if I could take his picture (since there was no one in the hall to take our picture together). He obliged willingly and gave out a simple smile. As I left his office, I went away thinking of how his thoughts, delivered in Filipino, with a smattering of English words and phrases, held so much power. It was a lifelong analysis of a theory of culture that held deep respect for its movers, its people. Bienvenido Lumbera made culture his life's work, history his life's method, and love for the nation and its people his guiding spirit.

My then prospective theory sounded so foolish compared to that lovely stance of a scholar who had spent his youth working toward an interest in knowing his people and their literature but came away as a spokesman for their spirit, for their own *dating* and *galing*. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Based on an interview conducted with the late Professor Bienvenido Lumbera on February 3, 2012 at the old Faculty Center, University of the Philippines Diliman in connection with the author's dissertation titled "*Pelikulang Komiks: Toward a Theory of Filipino Film Adaptation*" (UP College of Mass Communication, 2013). The said dissertation won the Best Dissertation Award in PhD Communication in 2013. Its book version came out in 2019 (University of the Philippines Press).

² Prof. Lumbera was referring to Carmencita Momblanco's thesis cited below:

Momblanco, Carmencita. "Philippine Motion Pictures 1908-1958: A Checklist of the First Fifty Years." MA Thesis, University of the Philippines Diliman. 1979. Print.

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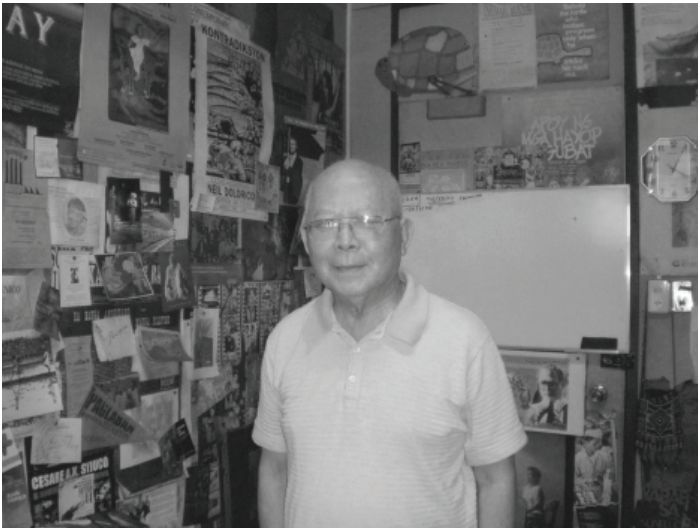


Photo of National Artist Bienvenido Lumbera taken by the author at his office at the old UP Diliman Faculty Center. (Photo taken by the author, February 3, 2012)