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Jonathan Corpus Ong

The Poverty of Television: The Media of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines

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However, the book could improve on four key areas. First, it could have been situated within the wider literature on terrorism and the ASG. Previous studies by Alfredo Filler, Zachary Abuza, Steven Hutchinson and Pat O'Malley, Lesley Brown and Paul Wilson, Eduardo Ugarte, and Renato De Castro have provided valuable insights on the organizational dynamics, perceived ideology, networks, and the leadership of the ASG. The book could have built on these studies to give readers a better understanding of the group's history and motivations. Second, the assertions made in the book would have been more convincing if these had been supported by citations or clear sources of information. For instance, East's assertions about the ASG's command structure and its purchase of weapons from Philippine government forces required citations to establish credibility. Third, the book could have been more comprehensive if the author had made an assessment of the different government responses (Philippines and Australia) to Rodwell's kidnapping. Despite the media blackout, additional interviews in both countries could have supplied the needed information for the author to make this assessment. Fourth, the author could have offered recommendations to improve the counterterrorism and antikidnapping efforts of the Philippine government, including appropriate responses to situations such as the capture of Warren Rodwell.

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JONATHAN CORPUS ONG

The Poverty of Television: The Media of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines

London: Anthem Press, 2015. 215 pages.

Why only now? As with studies that seek to fill in the gaps of existing literature on a certain subject matter, the book necessarily comes late. But reading through the work, one senses the consequences of being able to only belatedly think about Jonathan Corpus Ong's subject matter—the "poverty of television." After all, he is not simply writing about television, but

flesh-and-blood people with histories and everyday lives imbricated in the everyday mediation of suffering, a dynamic of mediation that has itself been entrenched in a long history of class division. The suffering of the poor has long been “spectacularly displayed” and “over-represented” in Philippine media (2), and yet Ong’s ethnographic work on television may be considered a first. *The Poverty of Television: The Media of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines* is based on the dissertation of Ong, a media sociologist who obtained his PhD from the University of Cambridge and currently lectures in Media and Communication at Leicester University.

Ecstasy and locality are two spatial concepts one can use to appreciate Ong’s simultaneous contributions to different fields. Jean Baudrillard posits the paradoxical imperative of ex-stasis in communication, where one has to stand outside of oneself to be able to communicate. Baudrillard asserts this point in the context of the “obscurity” of contemporary media, which no longer keep secrets, including the suffering of many. Ong contributes along this now mainline thought, but he does so counterintuitively and, hence, productively, by situating himself and his subjects in multiple spaces outside.

In chapter 1, “The Moral Turn: From First Principles to Lay Moralities,” Ong surveys the literature on media ethics and suffering and finds that the text-centered and philosophically normative works that dominate the field are themselves not sufficiently hospitable for understanding the mediation of suffering on Philippine television. Ong argues that it is necessary to step back to consider the other dimensions of the subject. First, he asserts, the question cannot be about media ethics in general, but about the ethics of everyday media practices. Second, it cannot be media ethics based on the text and the producer alone, but ethics based on the consumption and reception of media audiences. And third, it cannot be about responding to “distant suffering,” as mapped out by Western scholarship, but coming to terms with the nearness of suffering, the immediacy of mediacy.

As a response to these limitations, Ong clears a new situation from which to ask the fundamental question of his whole project: “How do audiences in their different contexts respond to televised suffering” (169)? He proposes in chapter 2, “Theorizing Mediated Suffering: Ethics of Media Texts, Audiences and Ecologies,” that the inquiry should begin in the gaps within three separate debates, the debates on textual ethics, audience ethics, and reception ethics. Ong puts these three debates in dialogue with each other by considering them from the viewpoint of a peculiar media culture, Philippine television.

The peculiarity is put in relief because the canonic literature cannot fully account for the Philippine situation. What kind of ecstasy is enacted in this specific media locality? And through Ong's careful nuancing of local media, one is able to hover outside the media landscape and notice its peculiarities from some distance, such as its prevailing business model that represents the underclass in order to profit from the same underclass and, ironically, its institutionalization of charity that seeks to directly intervene in the suffering of the underclass where the state fails to do so. Herein lie the undeniable contributions of Ong—to underline the consequences of Western scholarship on actual suffering subjects that are homogenized and rendered absent and to afford a concrete presence for the Philippine subject in television studies. The latter is crucial, for there are no television studies to speak of with clear shape, history, and direction in the Philippines. Ong's study, thus, sets the agenda for future researches.

In chapter 3, "Audience Ethics: Mediating Suffering in Everyday Life," Ong begins to demonstrate how "anthropological ethics" sensitive to "lay media moralities" can generate more practicable data that are not only useful for making sound recommendations on media practices but also, and more importantly, to let the voices of actual people, especially those who themselves suffer and are represented televisually, to be heard. In short the bottom-up methodology Ong employs is itself ethical and gives marginalized voices—voices from the outside—a say in media ethics.

Chapter 3, along with chapter 4, "Entertainment: Playing with Pity," and chapter 5, "News: Recognizing Calls to Action," presents ethnographic data gathered from interviews with lower-, middle-, and upper-class audiences. His findings challenge the accounts of Western literature on "compassion fatigue" that supposedly leads viewers to "switch off" the images of suffering that appear "too strange or too far" (157).

In "class-divided Philippines," this fatigue and switching off, Ong shows the reader, are not the uniform response of Philippine viewers to suffering repeatedly shown on television but only of upper-class audiences who find sufferers to be "too threatening, too many and too near" (157). The irony, of course, is that the upper-class owners and producers of media are responsible for the representation of suffering on television. In this context the representation of suffering functions as a claim for public space by the underclass who would otherwise not have the voice to make such demands, while the rote argument against the sensationalism of suffering implicit in

Baudrillard's notion of obscenity provides a moral justification for the upper-class to look away.

Ong also shows how media charities that are routinely dismissed as encouraging an attitude of mendicancy attract "low-denomination donations, presumably by low- to middle-income donors, rather than substantial donations from well-off viewers" (161). While doling out help, especially in small amounts, cannot change anything structurally, one sees in these findings the dynamics of class solidarity and the implicit bases for the sustenance of social inequalities. Perhaps the most precious insight on the varied class-inflected responses of people to mediated suffering is the knowledge that lower-class viewers neither avoid nor try to escape from images of suffering on television but "actively seek" them out to find "compassionate practices of recognition and redistribution for sufferers like them" (157). These images are "symbolically and materially beneficial [for them] but [they] hope that only the authentic and deserving sufferers are given visibility and granted reward" (157). While we can argue about what constitutes authenticity and deservedness, there is no question in these findings as to which class possesses a more acute sense of justice and solidarity with others.

Throughout the book we see how ethnographic data are able to provide insight into media practices that we would presume to understand, but actually understand only from our particular locations in society. Reading the words of the respondents, we hear echoes of our own rationalizations couched in learned language and discern the moral reasoning of people who are not part of our socioeconomic class. For a conscientious Filipino reader who cares about social justice and the role of media in its realization, one wishes that the book had come earlier, for it could have tempered the "noble intentions of engaged media criticism [that] further totalize[d] and victimize[d] the audiences whose poverty forms the basis for [a] moral community" (167).

The overrepresentation of suffering in media, no matter the shifting moral responses of various classes of people to it, makes it impossible for any Filipino to deny or feign ignorance of the class division that continues to cause the suffering of many. Ong's work acknowledges what other scholars and critics have asserted in the past, that "class influences television consumption as much as television shapes and reproduces class" (154). However, *The Poverty of Television* facilitates the reader's careful attention to "class" not as an abstract concept but as a term populated by individuals with names. The book, therefore, tempers our ecstasy, the standing outside

of oneself, by allowing us to stand not too far from the locality of the sufferer. It gives us more reason to be sensitive and ethical in our modes of caring for the suffering and a more nuanced conviction to break down the barriers in class-divided Philippines.

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VICENTE TIRONA PATERNO

On My Terms: The Autobiography of Vicente Tirona Paterno

Mandaluyong City: Anvil, 2014. 284 pages.

Having participated in a three-year research project entitled “Economic Policymaking and the Philippine Development Experience, 1960–1985: An Oral History Project,” which involved interviews of martial law technocrats, I am interested in Vicente Tirona Paterno’s autobiography, particularly with regard to his emergence and evolution as a technocrat who segued from Marcos’s pre–martial law administration to the martial law regime. This book definitely fills in a lot of details and insights that were not captured in the interview that Yutaka Kutayama, Temario Rivera, and I conducted with him in 2008 for the said project. The book’s importance becomes apparent when one traces the rise of technocrats, with a focus on their family and class and educational backgrounds and their transition, in the case of Paterno, from the business community to government service.

Paterno’s personal and professional background provides valuable insights on the country’s political economy during the 1950s and 1960s. He narrates, for example, his direct and indirect relationship with the country’s politicoeconomic elites like Vicente T. Madrigal, a member of the landed sugar elite who was married to Paterno’s paternal aunt Susanna, and his experiences in the Philippine Investment Management Consultants (PHINMA), a major investment firm in the country, and Meralco, the premier electric power company in the country owned by the Lopezes of the sugar elite clan of Iloilo and Negros Occidental. Paterno brings forth his critical insights on his personal and professional relationships, such as with the Lopez patriarch Eugenio Lopez Sr., for whom he worked when he was