

Sino malaya?: Melodrama and the integration of contemporary social issues in Philippine independent films

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Abstract

Researchers such as Baker (2014), Tatcho and Barrias (2016), and Park et al. (2017) have discovered that dominant themes found in independent films are about gender, sexuality, culture, social, and political issues. This study hypothesized that filmmakers have distinctive ways in portraying these issues. Guided by Pathak (2017)'s framework on melodrama, the researchers chose to use melodramatic conventions and techniques to further analyze how these social issues are portrayed in independent films. Data collected underwent a thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2012) work, and were analyzed for codes concerning the social issues covered in the films, which were then separated into themes and the social issues shown by the film. Findings found that the independent films chosen were able to utilize melodramatic conventions in portraying social issues, and analyses showed that (1) the films made use of issues such as family relationships and understanding reality, (2) various cinematic elements were applied in the context of melodrama to deliver the film's message, and (3) setting and physical characteristics were utilized in independent films to display social issues better. This study may be relevant to future research on independent film analysis, the development of national cinema, and the progress of local independent films as a whole.

Introduction

Independent films are unique in a way where filmmakers deviate from common techniques and methods, all while having a limited production budget and manufacturing staff (Lim, 2019). The content of these films aid in acquiring audiences, with the most popular themes being gender and sexuality, culture and social issues, and political issues. These subjects are important to examine since independent filmmakers risk tackling tougher socio-political problems (Bolisay, 2017) in order to shed light on the issues that are currently being resolved.

With this, the researchers aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What contemporary social issues are commonly portrayed in independent films in the Philippines?
2. How do conventions in melodrama influence the portrayal of these contemporary social issues?
3. How do cinematic elements work through the portrayal of these issues in independent films?

Methodology

The researchers' methodology made use of Philippine independent films that were showcased in public events such as Cinemalaya. A total of three films were selected from two different directors, which all contained various social issues present in the Philippines. Then, data was gathered from these films and were analyzed using the thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2012). They identified common ideas and patterns that were evident in the films, and distributed them into codes that were then categorized into general themes based on their similar characteristics. Afterwards, the research questions were each answered using the themes that were collected.

Results

Based on prior analyses of still images taken from the films, these scenes were categorized into different codes that were then used to determine dominant themes according to each research question.

First, the themes of family relationships and understanding reality were drawn. The family structures and relationships presented were in contrast with mainstream media's norms. Along with this, showcased realistic living conditions, stories, family conflicts, and individual journeys.

Next, melodramatic conventions were utilized by presenting situations relating to the audience and drawing emotion through symbolism. Familiar environments, cinematography, landscapes and color, and visual and verbal symbolisms created an empathic connection with the audience and aided in developing the story.

Lastly, the cinematic elements were used to portray issues by reflecting circumstance in setting and character status in physical characteristics. The characters were defined by the setting they were in and their personal adornment or interaction with other characters.

Conclusion

Through thematic analysis, the researchers discovered that the themes of family relationships and understanding reality were present in the films analyzed, they presented situations in relation to the audience and drew emotion through symbolism, and the cinematic elements evident in the films were the utilization of setting to reflect one's circumstance and portrayal of character status through physical characteristics.

With the rising popularity of independent Filipino cinema, filmmakers are given more freedom to express their views on social issues occurring in the country. Their work act as a common ground for both artistic expression and social awareness. Thus, it is important to shed more light on the existence of these types of films.