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## Book review: Making Documentaries and News Features in the Philippines

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**KENNY, James & Isabel, 1996**

**Making Documentaries and News Features in the Philippines,**  
Anvil Publishing, Manila. ISBN 971-27-0568-4

**Review Essay by Chris Nash**

University of Technology Sydney

Arriving in Manila is not what it used to be. The trip into your commercial hub of choice in the sprawling compression of houses and humanities was always a visceral experience, no matter how recently you had made it. Clustered along the main route from Niñoy Aquino International Airport was a succession of urban poor communities spilling their food stalls, footpath enterprises and begging children into the choking noise and black fumes of the roadway. If you were arriving after sundown the kerosene torches danced darkly on glistening red bodies, confirming that this place was yet another level down in the exploration of what man will happily do to his fellow man and woman.

But that has now disappeared, at least from sight if not from mind. Along with Smoky Mountain and the other urban garbage dumps inhabited by successive generations of scavengers, it was not a good look for international visitors. So strategically located parts of the city have been cleaned up, the human refuse relocated to the outer fringe, from where it leaches in small winding trickles back to where there is at least some chance of gouging subsistence on the streets.

This is a society in crisis, never ending and obscene. The tiny elite of the fabulously rich floats amid the rampant corruption, protected by a President who caricatures the small-time crony of the bordello and beer hall; the aspirant middle class are on their knees with interest rates in the double digits, and the three quarters of the population surviving below the poverty line is variously angry, depressed or subtly sardonic, but always desperate.

But it is also a society, like Mexico, that has spawned a marvellously rich and sophisticated intellectual life of dissidence. The young people and students radicalised into subversion under Marcos are now in their middle years, mostly disabused of the blinkered optimism they had invested in a revolutionary movement founded and founded on a fundamentalist Maoism. It is not a richness easily apparent to the casual observer used to the galleries and glossies of more consumer-oriented cultural industries. You find it in some newspaper columns, magazines

and web sites, around dinner tables, in university cafes, among journalists and media people, in the myriad of NGOs working at the coalface of community welfare, and among entrepreneurs working at the international faultline of Western modernity and Asian post-colonialism.

It is the complex personal links with the fractured politics of a mass-based revolutionary movement, growing once again in the grinding mills of abject rural and urban deprivation, that anchors this intellectual and cultural life. It is a climate where one would think the film and video documentary as a genre would thrive. As yet it hasn't.

The reasons for this are no doubt both profoundly cultural and self-evidently economic, and if identified and analysed would themselves make an insightful documentary of Filipino cultural life. In the absence of this larger analysis, but recognising the need to redress the situation, James and Isabel Kenny have authored a book that is at once a detailed, annotated checklist of the documentary production process for newcomers to the field, and also a trigonometric survey of the major local landmarks in the cultural field of documentary.

As a checklist, it is thorough and intelligent. It emphasises the conceptual skills that underpin excellence in production, such as research, structure, directing the performance and filming of actuality footage and controlling the editing and post-production processes to achieve the best relationship between the filmmakers' intentions and the evidence before the camera's eye. As a reference book for teachers and students, or do-it-yourself novices, it will be very valuable.

The Kennys take a very broad approach to the definition of documentary, including even the ten-minute segments that make up programs like *60 Minutes*. This is undoubtedly wise in the context of the Philippines and most Asian, indeed international, film and video distribution systems. There is little or no arthouse cinema distribution, traditionally the mainstay of documentary film, and television infotainment very rarely gets anywhere near independent, in-the-field investigation of an issue, which is perhaps the best definition of documentary that doesn't get embroiled in arguments about form and genre.

It is the bypassing of those arguments that will disappoint academics and aficionados of the documentary form. The rising popularity of infotainment television programming, and the burgeoning diversity in the formats it adopts, not to mention digital Hi-8 cameras and sound, PC-based editing systems and the looming impact of video-streaming on the Web, all open up the documentary to a most exciting period of exploration. The documentary section in the screen studies literature, though small,

reflects this questioning, innovation and excitement.

The Kennys would undoubtedly reply that they have elaborated the basic principles and process that inform any good documentary production, whatever the generic preferences of the producers. While in practice that may be largely true, in periods of innovation like the present it is the scrutiny of fundamental principles that opens new doors.

The second dimension to the book, the triangulation of perspectives on the local scene by prominent practitioners, is where the richness of the local intellectual life is not captured. Anyone who knows the Filipino context will situate each of the contributors in the context of their political and professional histories and allegiances, with all the interesting issues that these raise. To the uninitiated, this is not apparent, quite justifiably because of the need to protect the privacy of those involved, but it results in a certain bland or rhetorical tone to the essays that doesn't do justice to the experience or perspectives of the writers.

This is a problem that documentarists always face when dealing with situations of social conflict and information that can compromise the security of those implicated. It poses major challenges for the representation of testimony when one of the standard forms of verification -- reference to the public status of the informant -- is not available. It is a political problem intrinsic to the social and cultural environment of the Philippines, and is undoubtedly one of the major factors behind the apparent dearth of vigorous mainstream documentaries.

To international arthouse and film festival audiences, Nick Deocampo (who has the first essay in the book) and Kidlat Tahimik, are the faces of independent Filipino documentary. Tahimik is based in the northern Luzon city of Baguio, and his approach to making the political personal has received strong support from Germany. Deocampo has a more eclectic international support base, has taken his camera into some very interesting places, and has a larger concern with institutional support for other independent documentarists through his Mowelfund Film Institute. Both of them are internationally recognised "filmmakers", with everything that implies about their relationships to their local context and how they represent that context rhetorically.

The other essayists will be less well-known to international readers outside their immediate professional circles, though familiar to local Filipinos involved in their areas. Read in context, their contributions are interesting, but don't tap the more intellectually nourishing underground currents of contemporary Filipino culture.

All in all, this book displays the characteristics of its subject

-- contemporary mainstream documentary and information programs – and will suit its intended market well. It gives voice to the major spokespeople in the field, is comprehensive and thorough in addressing the agreed agenda of those in the field, and is well put together to maximise its intelligibility to its intended audience. But whether it effectively addresses the more interesting and urgent questions about the relationship of documentarists to Filipino society is another question.

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