

# Cracks in Censorship: The “Uhaw na Bulaklak” Controversy and Film Regulation under the Early Marcos Dictatorship

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## ABSTRACT

It is no secret that the Marcoses have a strong affinity with cinema. During the Marcos dictatorship, the state actively sponsored different programs and institutions to develop the local film industry. During the first few years of Martial Law, Marcos assigned this task to the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures. From 1972-1976, censors functioned as conservative moral guardians and liberal purveyors of cinematic development. By 1976 however, a controversy brought by the release of *Uhaw na Bulaklak* Part II led to a complete overhaul of the state's film regulation policy. This article examines the different discourses about the state of Philippine cinema before and after this controversy. It argues that the public reaction to *Uhaw na Bulaklak* is a product of the inherent contradictions of film regulation during the early Marcos dictatorship. These contradictions stem from the need to project the Marcoses as patrons of cinema while pandering to conservative sectors through the promise of disciplining the film industry.

**Keywords:** *State Censorship, Cinema, Bomba Films*

**T**he year 1976 is one of the best years for Philippine cinema. Nineteen seventy-six saw the release of classics like Lino Brocka's "Insiang"; Ishmael Bernal's "Nunal sa Tubig"; Mario O'Hara's "Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos"; Behn Cervantes' "Sakada", and Eddie Romero's "Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?" Yet, arguably the most consequential release for the film industry that year was that of Danilo Cabrera's "Uhaw na Bulaklak Part II." The exhibition of this critically-panned but popular erotic film spurred condemnation from different civic and religious groups. The state responded by arresting its producers, while the Metropolitan Command

closed theaters that screened the film. Censors that approved its release resigned, and further investigation revealed the widespread corruption within the film industry. The controversy stained the image not only of Philippine cinema, but also of its primary patron, the Marcos family.

The strong affinity of the Marcoses with cinema dates back to the release of *Iginuhit ng Tadhana*. The film chronicles the life and political career of its patriarch, Ferdinand Marcos Sr., as well as his romance with Imelda Romualdez. It presented Ferdinand as a man of talent and wit destined to lead the Philippines to greatness. He is wedded to an ambitious Imelda, whose determination manifests a vision of a 'modern' Filipina. Through their marriage, destiny and ambition merge, creating an image of an extended Filipino family with themselves functioning as its parental figure. Such a narrative simulates a patron-client relationship that strengthens and sustains the Filipinos' fascination with the Marcoses.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the power of cinematic images, Ferdinand Marcos forged a strong relationship with the film industry. Under his administration, the state actively supported festival circuits and established institutions to support the development of the local industry. In effect, the Marcoses have fashioned themselves as patrons of the silver screen.

Upon declaring Martial Law, Marcos tapped the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (BCMP) to develop a national cinema that aligns with the vision of the "New Society." He tasked its chair, Guillermo de Vega, to transform the film industry into a state apparatus that produces, reproduces, and disseminates Marcosian ideas in the public sphere. De Vega envisioned the board as a "moral guardian" that filters images considered subversive, immoral, and dangerous by the state. At the same time, he encouraged the censors to take the lead in helping local film production develop into a world-class industry, by disciplining filmmakers to self-regulation.<sup>2</sup> With these two goals in mind, the censors under De Vega heavily regulated the industry. The board specifically targeted erotic films called *bomba*, the genre that became the symbol of the nadir of Philippine cinema before the dictatorship.

This essay investigates the problems and contradictions of film regulation during the first few years of the Marcos dictatorship, particularly, it will use the controversy brought about by the release of *Uhaw na Bulaklak Part II* to

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<sup>1</sup> Vicente Rafael "Patronage and pornography: Ideology and Spectatorship in the Early Marcos Years," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, no. 2 (April 1990): 282-304.

<sup>2</sup> Guillermo De Vega, *Film and Freedom: Movie Censorship in the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1975).

analyze the different discourses about the state of Philippine cinema under the Marcos dictatorship. The writer argues that the scandal exposed the inherent problems of the state-led regulation, where censors function as conservative moral guardians and liberal purveyors of film development. This contradiction stems from the regime’s attempt to maintain its image as a patron of cinema and the arts while pandering to conservative sectors of Philippine society, as the head of the extended national family.

### Philippine Cinema at the Advent of Martial Law

During the 1950s, the Philippine film industry relied on big star-driven productions to attract loyal working-class patrons. The big four studios of LVN Pictures, Sampaguita Pictures, Premier Productions, and Lebran International control most of the local market share. As with their Hollywood counterparts, these studios exercise a vertical monopoly over film production, distribution, and exhibition. The system ensured a stable supply of films for theaters and kept most actors and actresses employed under exclusive contracts. This studio system kept the local industry afloat for most of the decade regardless of the competition from Hollywood and Hong Kong films.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the stability it provided for the industry, the studio system was not profitable for the film studios. Lebran closed its studio lot in 1956, followed by Premier two years later. Sampaguita Pictures cut down its production by half from 1958 to 1970.<sup>4</sup> The decline and eventual collapse of these studios changed the inner workings of the industry. Small independent production units replaced the major studios in the production cycle. Lacking the capital and resources of the older industry players; these companies moved away from elaborate productions headlined by expensive stars.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they prioritized films that could be quickly and cheaply produced, thus warranting high-profit margins. It is within this context that bomba productions entered the film scene.

Bomba films are sex-themed pictures with graphic portrayals of naked bodies and sexual acts that primarily appeal to prurient sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> The term bomba originally refers to scenes of sexual intercourse inserted in projectors during

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<sup>3</sup> Boy Villasanta, *SekSinema: A Historical Survey of Sex in the History of Philippine Cinema* (self-pub., The World Publishing, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Villasanta, *Seksinema*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Justino Dormiendo, “Seks sa Pelikulang Pilipino.” *Sagisag*, July 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Joel David, “Pornography and Erotica,” in *Wages of cinema: Film in Philippine Perspective* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998).

film exhibitions. It emerged at the time when the sexual revolution moved sexual discourses away from shame and denunciation and toward public celebration. Embodying this spirit, erotic films from the United States, Europe, and Japan flooded the local market, enjoying the patronage of young moviegoers. Local producers caught up with the trend, producing bombas that feature youthful *mestizas* to cater to local sensibilities. Because production was cheap and demand was high, these films made filmmaking profitable once again.<sup>7</sup> Bombas helped revive the struggling industry and introduced a new generation of movie patrons.

By 1970, Ruben Abalos transformed bomba into a full-fledged film genre through the film *Uhaw*. Adapted from an erotic comic, *Uhaw* tells the story of a beautiful wife, played by Merle Fernandez, who is discontented with her sex life after her husband is rendered impotent by a shark attack. The film introduced a more sexualized image of a movie star. Unlike her predecessors, Merle rejects sexual passivity in favor of embracing her libido. She typifies the idea of a new and modern actress, ambitious in moving up the hierarchy of stardom and rebellious to the established norms of the industry. Merle's performance and the film itself received scathing reviews. Despite this, *Uhaw* became a huge box office hit and inspired a wave of copycats. Its success solidified the place of bomba films as a mainstream genre in Philippine cinema.<sup>8</sup>

At first, the state mostly ignored the proliferation of bomba films. In the years leading up to Martial Law however, questions about its moral impact and artistic merit inspired calls for more government regulation.<sup>9</sup> There were concerns that bomba films exposed the youth to liberal sexual values that reject traditional norms on family and sexuality. In particular, civic groups protested against the depiction of women in bomba films, pointing out that they were not good role models for young Filipinas. Proponents of national cinema also argued that the genre had a detrimental effect on the development of the film industry. Bomba films are notorious for prioritizing titillation over good storytelling. At the same time, a limited budget means that bombas often suffer from poor production value. It is not surprising then that industry insiders saw the bomba genre as a malaise of Philippine cinema.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dormiendo, "Seks sa Pelikulang Pilipino."

<sup>8</sup> Clodualdo del Mundo, "Uhaw: Unang Bomba." *Pilipino Reporter*, November 10, 1970.

<sup>9</sup> Tezza Parel, "Eros and Experiment: Is the ECP "Expanding the Parameters of Human Experience" or Promoting Sexism and Pornography?" *National Midweek*, November 6, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Clodualdo Del Mundo, "Towards the Development of Filipino Film." *Philippine Daily Express*, July 4, 1990.

Defenders of the genre on the other hand, argue that bomba films give greater visibility to more varied sexualities. In this case, the genre can become a catalyst for greater tolerance and understanding. For De Vega, the popularity of bomba films shows that the Filipino audience can now handle a more mature and scientific conversation about sex. He argued that bomba films in themselves are not the problem. Instead, the genre lacks artistic integrity because producers failed to incorporate a moral framework that can help audiences identify themselves with the characters. In his eyes, the rebellious tendency of bomba films is just a reflection of the desire to visualize Filipino sexuality on the silver screen. The youth patronize the genre because their identity is incomplete. Centuries of colonial rule instituted a standard of beauty and sexuality that champions the colonizer. Insecure with their own body, the youth struggles to reconcile their sexuality with their national identity.<sup>11</sup> De Vega believed that through censorship, bomba films become a vehicle that fills this lack. As Espiritu pointed out, De Vega’s cultural policy framed censorship as a tool that completes the ‘incomplete nationality’ of the Filipinos.<sup>12</sup> The goal is not to suppress the erotic but to coopt and refashion its subversiveness in service of official nationalism. What was once rebellious and destructive can become docile and productive.

### Film Regulation under De Vega

Martial law provided De Vega an opportunity to implement his censorship policies. On September 29, 1972, Marcos released Letter of Instruction No. 13, ordering BCMP to ban films that have a negative influence on the Filipino youth. It laid down seven parameters considered objectionable to the moral order promoted by Martial Law.

1. Films which tend to incite subversion, insurrection, or rebellion against the State
2. Films which tend to undermine the faith and confidence of the people in their government and/or duly constituted authorities
3. Films which glorify criminals or condone crimes
4. Films which serve no other purpose but to satisfy the market for violence or pornography
5. Films which offend any race or religion

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<sup>11</sup> De Vega, *Film and Freedom*, 111-115

<sup>12</sup> Talitha Espiritu, “Social Conduct and New Society”, In *Passionate Revolutions: The Media and the Rise and Fall of the Marcos Regime* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2017), 54-83.



6. Films which tend to abet the traffic in and use of prohibited drugs
7. Films contrary to law, public order, morals, good customs, established policies, lawful orders, and decrees or edicts; and any or all films which in the judgment of the Board are similarly objectionable and contrary to the letter and spirit of Proclamation No. 1081

These parameters suggest that the Marcos regime views film regulation as a cultural *and* security issue. The state treated cinematic images of violence, crime, and pornography as existential threats that censors should eliminate or tame for the nation to survive. Such securitization opened the doors for a militarized form of cultural regulation. Marcos tasked the censors to coordinate with the Department of National Defense to determine which films were considered subversive. The Philippine Constabulary and Metropolitan Command became the implementing arm of BCMP, closing theaters and production companies that violated the board's rules and regulations. The involvement of these institutions effectively blurred the lines between regulating and policing. After 1972, BCMP ceased to function as a mere regulator. Censors became an unofficial part of the state's security apparatus, tasked with policing cinema for the regime.<sup>13</sup>

Encouraged by its expanded police power, BCMP significantly increased its control over the industry. The board required producers to submit screenplays during the pre-production process. Filming could not commence if censors did not approve the shooting script. The board weeded out objectionable scenes and recommended changes to improve the screenplay. After this, they may allow or reject the release of a shooting permit. Once the film was ready for exhibition, producers would send a complete copy of its print to the censors for classification. The board uses two ratings to classify films. A rating of 'General Patronage' allowing theaters to exhibit the film to all audiences without age restrictions, and a rating of 'For Adults Only' indicating that only viewers of 18 years old and above can watch the picture. After classification, BCMP will issue an exhibition permit for theaters. Exhibitors must show this permit in front of theaters. Distributors also have to print the rating and seal of approval from the censors in the promotional materials of a film. Finally, the board requires producers to deposit all uncut original film prints in the BCMP office for safekeeping.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Talitha Espiritu, "National Discipline and the Cinema", In *Passionate Revolutions: The Media and the Rise and Fall of the Marcos Regime* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2017), 84-115.

<sup>14</sup> De Vega, *Film and Freedom*, 155-169.

De Vega has implemented what Irah Carmen refers to as pre-censorship. It is a form of censorship where censors weed out undesirable images, narratives, and content before filming. Pre-censorship places the censorial process out of public sight and conceals the influence that the censors had over the content and aesthetic of a film.<sup>15</sup> By covertly guiding the artistic process, censorship boards do not only define obscenity, but also dictate what can be considered art in the public sphere. In the case of the BCMP, De Vega promoted the use of *contemporary Filipino values* to identify the artistic integrity of a screenplay. By this, he meant that images of violence, sexuality, and criminality are art if their goal is to reflect on the morality of their time. Erotic images are not pornographic if they align with the national sexuality promoted by the Marcoses. Violent scenes are not dangerous if they conform to the order and discipline promoted by the state. Narratives of rebels and criminals are tolerable so long as filmmakers present them as undesirable and contrary to the moral order. Such a policy, while highly repressive, left spaces for subversion. Subversive images, however, must not go against the dictatorship's vision, message, and ideology.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 1. Number and Market Share of Local Films<sup>17</sup>

YEAR	NUMBER OF LOCAL FILMS	MARKET SHARE
1970	245	33.1
1971	268	32.2
1972	201	27.0
1973	160	21.0
1974	143	19.1
1975	155	24.4
1976	175	27.1
1977	162	26.2
1978	139	22.6
1979	170	23.9

As Figure 1 shows, if one considers the number of films produced annually and the market share of Filipino movies, stringent censorship may have harmed the industry. The number of local productions reviewed by BCMP declined from

<sup>15</sup> Irah Carmen, *Movies, Censorship and the Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> De Vega, *Film and Freedom*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Leonardo Garcia and Carmelita Marasigan, *An In-depth Study on the Film Industry in the Philippines*, <https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/tapspp0103.pdf>

268 in 1971 to 143 in 1974. Likewise, the market share of Filipino pictures fell from 32.2% of the local box office to just over 19.1%. Del Mundo attributed this decline to the need for the film to adjust to the strict martial law environment.<sup>18</sup> Despite the shrinking number of annual Filipino productions, De Vega argued that censors have successfully raised the quality of Philippine cinema. For him, the films produced after 1972 projected a more positive image of Filipino culture. He pointed out how new fantasy and action movies captured the scenic allure of the Philippine countryside. He also praised local producers for introducing folk dances and myths in their films to showcase local cultures. The most evident sign of progress for De Vega was the entry of new talents into the industry. He hailed beauty queens turned actresses like Gloria Diaz and Margie Moran for exposing the ‘true Filipina beauty’ on the silver screen. Films featuring these actresses became hits, and De Vega viewed this as a sign of the Filipino’s improving cinematic taste.<sup>19</sup>

The industry, however, needed more profitable films to compete with foreign pictures. Because the subversiveness of sex sells movie tickets, filmmakers began introducing techniques that would showcase the erotic within the limited spaces of subversion allowed by the board. In 1974, Celso Ad Castillo introduced the ‘wet-look’ through the film *Ang Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa*. It starred Gloria Diaz as a beautiful temptress that brought evil and insanity to a peaceful town. In one of the film’s classic moments, Diaz surfaced from the beach wearing just a sleeveless *kamison*. The wet undershirt outlined her body, allowing the audience to see her breasts. Castillo never showed Diaz in the nude but successfully titillated movie patrons by leaving the erotic within the realm of imagination. Through technicalities, the director managed to depict sexual images without violating censorship rules.<sup>20</sup> De Vega himself has a favorable view of the film, praising the beauty and talent of Gloria Diaz in particular. With a graceful ‘brown’ body and a mature demeanor, Diaz personifies the aesthetic of national sexuality that De Vega and the Marcoses championed.<sup>21</sup> She became the first in the long line of bold stars that replaced the bomba actresses of the pre-dictatorship years. The bold here describes the beautiful bodies the actresses possess and the ambition that drives them to film scenes that only their foreign counterparts dare to do. In this effect, the bold star embodies the ‘native’ and ‘exotic’ beauty of the Filipinas and the national desire for global recognition for Philippine cinema. By focusing on the body rather than the sexual act, the

<sup>18</sup> Del Mundo, “Development of Filipino Film”

<sup>19</sup> De Vega, *Film and Freedom*, 45-47.

<sup>20</sup> Rolando Tolentino, “Bomba, Babae at Lipunan,” *Filipino Magazin*, May 5, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> De Vega, *Film and Freedom*, 48



transgressions of erotic cinema became a vehicle to express the national ideology of the state.<sup>22</sup>

Following Castillo’s lead, filmmakers began creating bolder ways of depicting sex on screen. They circumvented prohibitions on the long exposure of breasts by teasing viewers with quick shots of the exposed chests of actresses. Naked bodies were shot in the dark to create a veneer of artistry. The more scandalous the depiction, the more interest it generates amongst moviegoers. The new vigor over producing sex films helped the industry recover, increasing the market share for local films to 27.1% in 1976. But it also encouraged filmmakers to test the limits of permissiveness to help market their movies. Four years after the declaration of Martial Law, bomba films, now referred to as bold films, have returned to theaters.

### Uhaw na Bulaklak

De Vega did not witness the return of bomba films. On October 27, 1975, a film producer shot De Vega dead in his office in Malacañang.<sup>23</sup> The circumstances of the murder remain a mystery, but his death left a void in the censorship board. Ma. Rocio Atienza de Vega, the wife of the late chief censor, became the new chair of BCMP. Under her leadership, the censors mainly continued the strict censorship policy introduced during Martial Law. Controversies, however, marred her tenure as board chairman. The most contentious problem came from the public outcry over the release of *Uhaw na Bulaklak* Part II.

On July 16, 1976, Lyra Pictures, a small independent studio specializing in bold films, released *Uhaw na Bulaklak* Part II in movie houses around Metro Manila. The film is a loose follow up to the 1975 box office hit *Mga Uhaw na Bulaklak*, which starred notable actors and actresses such as Boots Anson-Roa, Rosanna Ortiz, Liza Lorena, Marissa Delgado, Chanda Romero, and Michael de

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<sup>22</sup> Rolando Tolentino, “Bomba, Babae at Lipunan”

<sup>23</sup> The assailant, Paulino Arceo, is a film producer and tabloid writer. According to official reports Arceo is petitioning to De Vega for forgiveness of a 30 percent entertainment tax for a magic show that he sponsored. The show flopped and bankrupted Arceo. Aside from being the chair of BCMP, De Vega also functions as a presidential assistant with a rank comparable to a cabinet member. This created rumors regarding the motive of De Vega’s assassination. Primitivo Mijares claimed that De Vega offered him \$50,000 to refuse to appear in a US Congress session about the corruption within the Marcos dictatorship.

Mesa. Part II tells the story of male prostitutes and nightclub hostesses forced to give sexual favors to predatory customers to survive their grueling life in Manila. It has a lower profile compared to the original. Lesser-known stars such as Ernie Garcia, Nympha Bonifacio, and Trixia Gomez headlined the film. Top-billing went to Alona Alegre, a former child actress who became one of Philippine cinema's most prominent sex symbols before the dictatorship. Danilo Cabrera directed parts I and II, but the sequel has a different screenwriter, editor, and production designer.<sup>24</sup> In effect, *Uhaw na Bulaklak Part II* was only a sequel by name as it featured a different set of talents on and off the camera and has no connection to the story of the first film. At the same time, it depicted erotic scenes considered excessive and exploitative even in the pre-Martial Law years. There are graphic portrayals of nudity and sex, including images of simulated rape and active prostituting. One such scene shows a mother (Mona Lisa) forcing her daughter (Brenda del Rio) to sleep with a man to pay their bills. Another showcased a desperate wife (Nympha Bonifacio) who prostituted herself to save her husband (Ernie Garcia) from a disease he got from working as a gigolo. As Del Mundo observed, the conflicts within the four different stories just became excuses to insert titillating images and naked bodies in the picture.<sup>25</sup>

Unsurprisingly, conservative civic groups reacted negatively to the release of *Uhaw na Bulaklak*. In particular, the Civil Assembly of Women (CAW) called on the president to ban all movies, comic books, and live shows that appeal to prurient sensibilities. They argued that Martial Law was supposed to impose strict discipline to reform the old society and attain moral renewal. Reforms must include the prohibition of obscene and lewd materials. But the release of *Uhaw na Bulaklak* showed that bombas were still a prominent part of the film industry. For groups like CAW, Philippine cinema seemed to be regressing rather than progressing.<sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> Different articles published in broadsheets owned by cronies of the Marcoses reflect the same sentiments:

MY TELEPHONES never stops ringing and telegrams keep coming from worried parents protesting “*Uhaw na Bulaklak Part II*” showing in many Manila moviehouses. This film is far more lewd than “*Uhaw*” of premartial law days. The message from the

<sup>24</sup> “A Talk with the Scriptwriter of *Uhaw na Bulaklak, Part II*,” *Philippine Daily Express*, June 19, 1976, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Del Mundo, “Development of Filipino Film”

<sup>26</sup> “Marcos dismisses Censors,” *Philippine Daily Express*, June 23, 1976, 1-2.

<sup>27</sup> Tedoro Valencia, “*Uhaw* Imbroglio far from Settled,” June 23, 1976, 6.

parents is: Whatever has happened to the vaunted discipline of martial law? I have no answer. I only join the protests.<sup>28</sup>

Ano nga ba ang nangyari sa pelikulang Pilipino? Bakit nagkakaganyan ang mga palabas? Nakalulungkot ang mga panyayaring kung kailan pa dapat umunlad ang ating industriya ng pelikula ay tila paurong ang nangyari.<sup>29</sup>

As pressure mounted, Marcos halted the screening of *Uhaw na Bulaklak* and promised to stop the proliferation of bomba films. The Metropolitan Command stormed film theaters around Metro Manila to arrest theater managers and projectionists that screened uncut versions of the film. Several days later, the Philippine Constabulary (PC) conducted similar raids in provincial moviehouses. The PC also detained officers of Lyra Pictures in Camp Crame and arrested film personnel involved in the picture’s production. The charge against erotic images eventually spilled outside the film industry as Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile ordered the police to monitor publishers releasing erotic materials and nightclubs operating obscene fashion shows. All members of the BCMP except Chairman De Vega resigned due to the controversy.<sup>30 31 32</sup>

Marcos formed a committee to investigate how *Uhaw na Bulaklak* managed to pass the screening of the censors. The committee findings provided two reasons for the proliferation of bomba films. First was the widespread corruption within the board of censors due to their heavy involvement in the industry as producers and film financiers. The second was the foreign ownership of small movie theaters that encouraged the production of cheap highly-profitable movies.<sup>33</sup> These findings inspired calls for the nationalization of the film industry. As columnist Teodoro Valencia suggests:

Instead of censorship, let’s have development – to be promoted by the industry, not government officials with scissors. The industry will pass on scripts, not the government. The government’s job will be to protect the industry committee and the industry form “independents” who may not want to join the industry organizations. The old board of review for moving pictures, abolished to give way to the board of censors, should be revived. That is composed of members who don’t get paid for their work.

<sup>28</sup> Teodoro Valencia, “Worried Parents Hit Censors,” *Philippine Daily Express*, June 21, 1976, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ligaya Perez, “Ang tawag nila ay Bomba,” *Philippine Daily Express*, June 27, 1976, 5.

<sup>30</sup> “9 arrested in porno film case,” *Philippine Daily Express*, June 23, 1976, 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> “Olivas confirms existence of bomba films syndicate,” *Philippine Daily Express*, June 30, 1976, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Dormiendo, “Seks sa Pelikulang Pilipino.”

<sup>33</sup> “Probe of censors ordered, 18 more arrested,” *Bulletin Today*, June 24, 1976, 1 and 3.

We must nationalize the motion picture industry, including the booking and exhibition end. Right now, aliens who dominate the motion picture theater chains dictate on producers to make those “bomba” movies..... Aliens who dominate the distribution and exhibition of pictures don’t care about national values and the image of our country. Producers, who are Filipinos, sell their souls to these aliens – for cash, like the characters they portray in their films.<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to what Valencia implied, nationalizing the film industry will only increase government intervention in regulating and developing cinema. BCMP was not just a censorial institution. It functions as the extension of the president in the cultural sphere. Because of this, censors must follow the vision that the Marcoses have for the film industry. As the head of the national family, conservative groups expected the Marcoses to discipline cinema along traditional values. But the industry hoped that the government, as patrons of cinema, thrust local films onto the global scene by embracing liberal trends.<sup>35</sup> In trying to appease both sides, the Marcoses pushed the censors to accept two contradictory roles. In this sense, the corruption and contradiction of the board of censors were the product of being deeply embedded in the cultural and security apparatus of the regime. Instead of helping the industry develop, direct state intervention only encouraged further commercialization of Philippine cinema.<sup>36</sup>

### **How Effective was the Marcos Patronage of Cinema?**

The Marcoses have always been vigorous in supporting Philippine cinema. Indeed, the second golden age of Philippine cinema emerged during the Marcos dictatorship. But it is also glaring that most of the classics released from this period were critical of the regime. The films that embody this golden age reject the notion of values, sexuality, development, and nationality of the Marcos regime. If this is the case, how impactful and effective is Marcos' patronage of the silver screen in transforming national cinema into a state apparatus? What is the effect of their patronage to the development of the film industry in the early years of Martial Law?

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<sup>34</sup> Teodoro Valencia, “Why not nationalize the film industry?” *Philippine Daily Express*, June 27, 1976, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Espiritu, “National Discipline and the Cinema,” 114–115.

<sup>36</sup> Del Mundo, “Development of Filipino Film”

If one considers film discourse in the aftermath of the Uhaw na Bulaklak controversy, then the involvement of the Marcoses in the film industry failed to transform cinema into a state apparatus. The outrage over the film showed the problems and contradictions of state-led censorship that needed to uphold the image of the Marcoses as patron of cinema while securing the position of the censors as the society’s moral guardians. Direct censorship of cinema tied the state not only to the positive developments of the industry but also to the controversies that censorship would entail. The visibility of the state’s participation in the censorial process put all of the blame for the Uhaw na Bulaklak controversy on the dictatorship. Prohibiting the industry from developing new techniques to express erotica undermined the narrative that the state needed to participate in film regulation to promote innovation and development. Yet, allowing erotic pictures to “titillate” the audience ran contrary to the belief that the censors were guardians of morality. Occasional violations and the tendency of filmmakers to test the limits of permissiveness put the viability of the censorial process into question. It also undermined the attempt of the dictatorship to promote cinema as an ideological apparatus. Instead of shielding the regime from dissent, state censorship made the dictatorship susceptible to criticism.

Regarding the development of the film industry, strict government regulation led to decreasing market shares for local films. Censors resolved this issue by reversing their policies regarding the ban of 'dangerous' and 'pornographic' images. Hence, censorship yielded negative results on the commercial side of cinema, at least for the first few years of the dictatorship. Even outside the box office, film regulation has an opposite outcome to what De Vega originally intended. The innovative techniques and gripping narratives that he attributed as a product of film regulation were, in fact, attempts of the filmmakers to subvert the censorial process through the limited spaces of dissent. It was not surprising then that the national cinema that emerged was anti-state and anti-dictatorship rather than a purveyor of the Marcosian ideology that De Vega envisioned.

Despite this, the Marcoses cannot surrender their status as cinema patrons. Much like infrastructure development focused on creating political capital for the regime, becoming patrons of cinema showcased the glamour of the family, providing them a sense of awe and legitimacy. After the dust settled over the Uhaw na Bulaklak controversy, the dictatorship spent the next four years reorganizing the board of censors into the Board of Review for Motion Pictures and Television (BRMPT). The new board continued its function as a moral



guardian while the newly-established Experimental Cinema of the Philippines became the purveyors of film development. By dividing the original role of BCMP into two different institutions, the Marcoses hoped to avoid the contradictions that led to the dissolution of the original board. The new policies tied the film industry to the dictatorship while keeping the state's role in the censorial process less visible from the public view. In doing so, the Marcoses can bask in the allure of showbusiness while avoiding the controversies that might befall the film industry. But as the *Uhaw na Bulaklak* controversy shows, it only takes one bad film to pierce through the glamour of showbusiness and see that the main patron of local cinema has no clothes.

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