

# Early Cinema History and the Emergence of “Filipino” Film

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A Review of

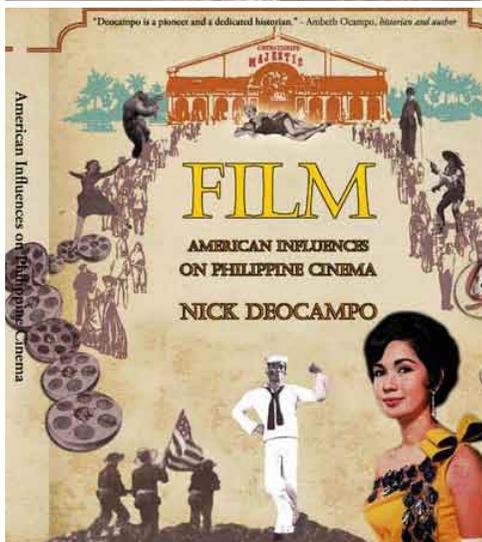
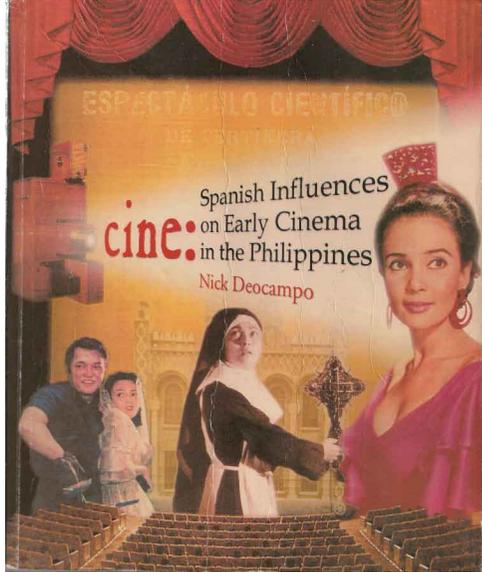
**Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines (2003),**  
 Quezon City: National Commission  
 for Culture and the Arts

and

**Film: American Influences on Philippine Cinema (2011),**  
 Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, Inc.

## History and Histories: at Present

Nick Deocampo’s *Film: American Influences on Philippine Cinema* (2011), together with his previous volume, *Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines* (2003), are thus far the definitive and most comprehensive history of early cinema in the Philippines. “Early Cinema” here pertains to that unique juncture in history from the moment of film’s first inception as an apparatus (or the moment of film’s first importation in a given territory) to its early and yet unpredictable development (Deocampo, 2011). Such a juncture is no longer precisely comprehensible even to the present-day public that engages



with film, because of the cultural, epistemological and phenomenological differences that the arrival and advancement of cinema itself have wrought.

A question as primitive as—“What was it like to see motion picture for the first time, when, shortly before, motion has never been perceived as a faithfully and mechanically reproduced illusion?”—would be impossible to answer without recourse to a combination of empirical research, conjecture, and intuition, which, nevertheless, does not free a historian from his or her “present-ness.” The more political question of—“What effect did film have on its audience?”—which is especially germane to the importation of a breakthrough technology from a colonial origin, would be more important to answer for the postcolonial present. Implicit in the political question would always be, “Who is asking the question, why, and for whom?” Such questions are addressed throughout Deocampo’s historiography: in his delineation of the relationship between the newly-imported cinema apparatus and the Hispanized colonial culture that received it (*Cine*, Chapters I-III); in his assertions on how film was utilized by Americans as a tool for colonization and imperialism (*Film*, Chapters I-VI); in his explication of the rise to dominance of Hollywood cinema and practices in the Philippines (*Film*, Chapters V-IX); and in his drawing of the manner and extent of the appropriation of Spanish and American influences on the nascent Philippine cinema (*Cine*, Chapter V; *Film*, Chapters X-XII).

Deocampo’s *Cine* and *Film* practically supersede previous efforts on the historicization of early cinema. Of course, his volumes benefit immensely from these earlier efforts, as he cites them or quotes at length from them. But his work has the advantage of coming later in time to verify, build on, challenge, and refute earlier claims. His engagements are also all documented and noted in his texts, making the publication of his volumes truly a synthesis of the findings and critiques by historians and scholars such as Renato Constantino, Nick Joaquin, Bienvenido Lumbera, Agustin Sotto, Petronilo Bn. Daroy, Nicanor Tiongson, Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr., Ernie A. De Pedro and Lena Strait Pareja, who have all come up with historical surveys and overviews related to Philippine cinema.

Moreover, Deocampo has made available a wealth of new historical data culled from various archives around the world—data not previously known to or analyzed by other scholars. This is significant, for it increases the purview of possible (meanings of disparate) pasts and makes Deocampo’s conjectures not only more sound but also more available for further scrutiny. A good example would be his qualification of the use of the term “Filipino film.” Whereas the nation-centric view is now routinely used as a “nationalist” tag, Deocampo (2011) is able to note how this notion of “national cinema” was first expressed in the Spanish language (e.g., with phrases like “filmando una

película Filipina” or “industria naciente en Filipinas”) in popular publications for mass readership, during the first few decades of the period of American occupation.

In other words, with such archival materials available, Deocampo is able to undertake a more political or functional historiography, such as what Lumbera (1994) before him initiated; while at the same time he is also able to provide a descriptive historicization, such as the kind of historiography that Sotto (2010) has been known for. The former is necessary for a postcolonial understanding of Filipino cinema, while the latter is still unquestionably necessary for a cinema without yet any standard historical text.

### **A Frame for Historiography: of the Past**

Certainly, *Film* and *Cine* are not definitive in the sense that they are final, as Deocampo himself is wont to ask more questions and to highlight the limitations of his conjectures than he is always ready to conclude. But his questions and conjectures that fill in the historical gaps or disturb long-held conclusions, buttressed by his painstaking archival research and attentive analyses, are what make these two film history volumes immediately indispensable.

One significant example, from *Cine*, is his postulation that, contrary to instituted history, the first “Filipino” film is not Jose Nepomuceno’s *Dalagang Bukid* (Country Maiden) produced in 1919, but *La Conquista de Filipinas* (1912) produced by Chinese mestizo businessmen in the same year as Albert W. Yearsley’s *La Vida y Muerte del Gran Martir Filipino, Dr. Jose Rizal* (The Life and Death of the Great Filipino Martyr, Jose Rizal) and Edward Meyer Gross’ *La Vida de Dr. Jose Rizal* (The Life of Dr. Jose Rizal) (Deocampo, 2003). This is an uncomfortable assertion, not only since the Philippine government has marked and commemorated 1994 as the 75th year of Philippine cinema, but, more importantly, because it undercuts previously held bases for conceiving the “national cinema” of the Philippines.

First, it unseats the notion of the *auteur* as an originary force in the conception of the “Filipino” film and puts in its stead a group of economic benefactors. Is it any less a Filipino film if the initial contribution to cinema by the “natives” is in materially producing but not creatively directing the film? Second, the assertion affords the Chinese mestizos a critical role in the early development of “native” cinema, especially meaningful in light of what critic Caroline S. Hau (2000) refers to as the “conflictive relation between nationalism and the Chinese question” (p. 219) vis-à-vis cinematic representations. Third, Deocampo argues how *La Conquista de Filipinas*, as a pioneering contribution by natives to the history of cinema, valorizes Spanish colonial history and the

Hispanization of culture as a response to the onslaught of Americanization, thereby problematizing the very configuration of the “native”.

*Film*, Deocampo’s second volume, pursues this line of thought—i.e., the establishment of the colonial beginnings of native cinema—as a “trialectic” of cultural confluence, constituted by the earlier and longer-entrenched Hispanismo (the main focus of *Cine*), the eventual dominance of Anglo-Sajonismo (the main focus of *Film*) and the productive (if not always progressive) engagement of these foreign influences in the more hybrid notion of Filipinismo (Deocampo, 2011, 2003). It is in his elucidation of the former two where Deocampo most succeeds at being definitive vis-à-vis the previous historicizations, for he refrains from proffering a merely reflectionist or a simplistically nativist idea of cinema formation and history.

Deocampo audaciously takes on the challenge of defining what critic Joel David (1998) referred to as the “zero point” in film history, from which one considers the foreignness of the film medium and then proceeds to problematize “each and every step at Filipinization” (p. 118). Deocampo (2003, 2011) chronicles the arrival of motion picture, from its heralding in late 1896 and first exhibition in January 1897 (*Cine*, Chapters II-IV) through the periods of the Philippine-American War, the establishment of military rule by Americans, the creation of a colonial government, to the Commonwealth and the eve of World War II (*Film*, Chapters I-VIII); and he posits a complex relationship between film texts/practices and the larger social context of colonial histories. He moves beyond the pageantry of moments and names and trains his eyes instead on the dynamics of cultural—not only cinematic—productions, always concerned with the question of agency relative to process and the politics of representation. For instance, he does not take for granted that the adaptation of Rizal’s novels by the “Father of Filipino Cinema” Jose Nepomuceno in the 1930s is any more Filipino than the American-made biopics of Rizal in 1912; or he highlights how a feature-length spectacle, like *Zamboanga* (1937), is critically legible beside the Orientalizing ethnographic films of Dean C. Worcester shot in the beginning of the 20th century (Deocampo, 2003, 2011). Deocampo, in the process, provides a critical frame by which to view native agency, not merely by stating his assumptions and methodology, but by actually demonstrating how historical processes, such as economic constraints, international market forces, industrial practices and production, distribution and exhibition bureaucracies, are registered on the form, style and content of individual films and on cultural paratexts, like advertisements and newspaper announcements.

## Historicizing Foresight: and the Future

In *Cine*, Deocampo puts forward his presupposition that not only is the technology of film of foreign import with international origins, but, as shared with other historians, the medium has been utilized as a colonial tool. He asserts, moreover, that contrary to nativist assumptions, the process of “indigenization” is not necessarily an act of resistance but merely a stage in the development of cinema toward “nationalism” (Deocampo, 2003; Del Mundo, 1998; Tiongson, 1983). The sections in the volumes ripest for discussion, if not debate, therefore, are those that move beyond early cinema per se and propose a historicized understanding of the “Spanish influences” and “American influences” (headlined in the book titles) that have determined current cinema (*Cine*, Chapter V; *Film*, Chapters IX-XII). This is all the more crucial considering Deocampo’s qualification that he is writing not “the history of Philippine cinema” but the “history of cinema in the Philippines” (Deocampo, 2003, pp. 19-22). Such a qualification owes not least to the fact that only five Filipino films released before World War II have survived, and thus, much of what he draws as “influences” are extrapolations from either non-film sources, Spanish- and American-made films during or about the period of early cinema, or films made beyond the said period.

In this context, it is interesting to notice the rhetorical maneuvers of Deocampo in his accounting for the more contemporary identifiers of “Filipino” film. In *Film*, on the one hand, Deocampo (2011) reckons the extent of the influence of Hollywood on the material production and aesthetics of Philippine cinema, as signified by the studio system, the star system and genre filmmaking. In *Cine*, on the other hand, he provides an explanation for why locally produced commercial films are, as critic Emmanuel Reyes once pointed out, so different from Hollywood films. Reyes (1989) defines (narrowly and problematically) Filipino film form against the Hollywood model, where the former is scene-oriented, overt, excessively talky and star-centered, while the latter is plot-oriented, subtle, economical in dialogue and performance-centered. For Deocampo (2003), as Tiongson and Del Mundo before him, this is explicated by the Hispanized theatrical roots of Philippine cinema.

Such deeply entrenched influences notwithstanding, and as expected of his postcolonial critique, he circumscribes the mode of becoming of Filipino film. Implicit in his elucidation of *Hispanismo* and *Anglo-sajonismo* is the ongoing configuration in Philippine cinema (as far as Deocampo’s historiography of early cinema is concerned) of *Filipinismo*, which, by the end of both volumes, is yet to be fully realized. After all, *Cine* and *Film* are but the first two installments of his projected five-volume history (Deocampo, 2003), which will still detail

cinema's "traumatic period during the Japanese invasion" (Volume III), "its maturity as a Tagalog movie industry" (Volume IV) and – most telling of all as a the focus of the final volume – the "subaltern growth contained in alternative film histories" (Volume V).

Perhaps his project of delineating the process of Filipino-becoming in film are setting the stage for his notion of cinema as revolution, a notion for which he has been clearing a space as a film artist and historian (Deocampo, 2003). Deocampo, of course, was first known as a short filmmaker and advocate of "alternative cinema" with the book, *Short Film: Emergence of a New Philippine Cinema* (1985) and films such as *Revolutions Happen Like Refrains in a Song* (1987). Could it be that "Filipino" identity can be critically extrapolated from the alternative cinema that has questioned the status quo maintained by commercial cinema? How will such a chronicling of alternative film histories come to terms with the contemporary "indie movement" (ca. 2000s), which has both discursively utilized the term "revolution" and practically entered the realm of mainstream practice at the same time (Campos, 2011)? Or could it be, as David (1998) once pointed out, that alternative cinema, climaxing (as Deocampo himself chronicles in *Short Film* in the 1980s, is as much enmeshed, if not more complicatedly so, with foreign influences twice removed from the Filipino mass audience and, therefore, only disputably possible to be historicized as "Filipino"? There are, thus, more reasons to wait for the completion of Deocampo's historiographic magnum opus, other than the most important one: that such an undertaking has been so long in coming and is finally happening.

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