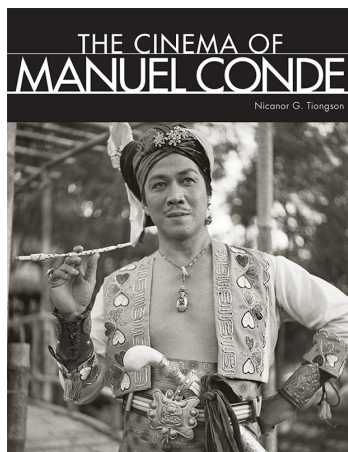


Manuel Conde and Filipino ‘Indie’ Cinema

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Book Review of

The Cinema of Manuel Conde

By Nicanor G. Tiongson

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(280 pp.)

Biography and History as Cultural Memory

Nicanor G. Tiongson's *The Cinema of Manuel Conde* is an invaluable contribution to the exiguous collection of scholarly books on Philippine cinema history and artists. Before it, there had been only one book devoted to a film director, but even this was only an anthology of essays and not a sustained critical appraisal of the director's cinema.¹ A detailed history of Philippine cinema is yet to be accomplished as well, given the absence of a national film archive on the one hand, and the magnitude of unsorted archival materials of popular literature and scattered mementoes on the other hand.² Tiongson's *Manuel Conde* is

therefore both pioneering and necessary. It is the first book-length biography of a film artist, chronicled in the context of film history, and a critical appraisal of the artist's oeuvre.³

The book is also accessible to the general reader and the non-specialist film enthusiast. Sleekly executed as a coffee-table book and designed by Cesar Hernando,⁴ it features hundreds of rare photographs, publicity posters, production stills, periodical clippings, souvenirs and family keepsakes, handwritten pages of shooting scripts, and costume design sketches by Manuel Conde's long-time collaborator and friend, National Artist Carlos "Botong" Francisco. The biography, the history, and the complementary images recreate and encapsulate for posterity not only Conde's legacy, but also the nostalgic glory days of the so-called Golden Age of Philippine cinema which he helped shape. Moreover, the complete and annotated filmography at the end of the book – which lists all films and television programs that had anything to do with Conde – provides researchers with valuable material.

With that said, the purpose of this review is twofold. First, it paints in broad strokes the nationalist critical tradition which animates the project of Tiongson. Second, it provides a meta-critical viewpoint, giving the reader a perspective by which to understand not only Manuel Conde, but also a range of issues in Philippine film criticism. It moves beyond the book and critiques as well the current film culture that has received and defined Manuel Conde, the very film culture that the book also seeks to define.

A meta-critical perspective is in order because, while *Manuel Conde* is an invaluable secondary material, most of the primary sources for investigation (i.e., Conde's films) are no longer available.⁵ In place of a film archive, Tiongson's book fills in the gap, assumes the capacity of a primary source, and preserves a ken of cultural memory. The necessity of writing this secondary material is the necessity of struggling against forgetfulness, which is the struggle of writing "the Cinema of/and the Nation". As such, the determinate value assigned to the absent films by the

critic-historian must be regulated within a critical-historical context, since memory and its evocation are not exactly the same.

The Portraiture of a Filmmaker as Filipino

Though subtly evolving, Tiongson's critical works have had the "nationalist" slant of the nativist-critical tradition which found its seminal expressions in the 1960s and produced its defining volumes between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s.⁶ Notwithstanding differences, critics of this tradition have determined to analyze the many aspects of Philippine historical and cultural experience, especially in the arts, in terms that are anti-colonial and pro- and "uniquely" Filipino.

With such a disposition, Tiongson chronicles the life of Manuel Conde, from his humble beginnings to his fortuitous entry into the movies, initially "as crew, janitor, carpenter, painter, and clapper boy" (16) [1915-45]; from the establishment of his MC Pictures to his excursions to Hollywood and the European film festival circuit [1945-52]; from his commercial successes as studio director of genre films [1953-58] to the creation of his sociopolitical films [1959-63]; and from his extra-filmic endeavors to his gradual retirement from filmmaking [1964-85].

The result is a portrait not only of a filmmaker but also of a fascinating man. The reader finds out, for example, that as a young man Conde was as interested in science as he was in the arts (16); that during the war he was a guerilla-hero, rising to the rank of a major officer in the underground movement (34); that he was a faithful friend in times of poverty (34); and that he once ran for Congress (170). As an artist, he has achieved many firsts. His *Ibong Adarna* [1941] was the first film to be based on a metrical romance and the first "color" movie in the country. His *Prinsipe Paris* [1949] was the first to use real blades in swordplay. His *Genghis Khan* [1950] was the first Filipino film to compete internationally and to have garnered worldwide acclaim.

Foreign commentators compared Conde to Darryl Zanuck, Errol Flynn, Cecil B. De Mille, Orson Welles, and Sergei Eisenstein (69, 75), but he shrugged off the label “genius” by claiming to be one “from hunger” (69). As Tiongson recounts, Conde came home from Europe and America a humble man, fired with patriotic zeal. The director admitted, “I went out of the Philippines like a country bumpkin eager to know more about the art of motion pictures. I found out that the Philippines was a wealthy country in [terms of] culture and traditions.” From then on, he “resolved never to make a movie of foreign origin [again]” (qtd. in 83).

Tiongson’s portrait of Conde explicitly praises the filmmaker’s artistry and implicitly exalts his character as a Filipino. Whether or not he is worthy of emulation as a man (and as far as the book is concerned, he is), the point is that Tiongson is not merely writing a disinterested biography, but exemplifies an affected Filipino.

The Portrait of a Filipino Filmmaker as Proto-Indi

This double-edged project of Tiongson – writing of world-class and outstanding Filipino film artistry *and* of the ingenious artist thriving in his milieu, notwithstanding production pressures, economic limitations, sociopolitical ills – has resonated in relation to today’s cultural idiom of the “indie film”. The discursive association between “indie” and Manuel Conde has transpired inevitably since the book came just when spectators (especially critics) are all eyes on how the current phenomenon of indie films is taking shape, hence defining the book’s reception. It has also been achieved purposively, in the case of the book’s launch in the Cinemalaya congress, which is directed by Tiongson, hence deploying *Manuel Conde* as the critic’s contribution to defining “indie”.

In the first case, critic Mike Rapatan opines that Tiongson’s assessment of Conde’s “strong independent aesthetic sensibility” is “persuasive”. He writes that “[for] Tiongson, Conde’s progressive

thinking and resistance to the demands of the commercial studio system in his time parallels and even anticipates or predates the non-mainstream efforts of today's independent filmmakers". Meanwhile, critic Rolando Tolentino writes that as "an auteur...Conde's multi-faceted life provides lessons and is an inspiration to the younger generation of independent filmmakers." These assertions seem peculiar, since Conde's cinema and contemporary indie cinema are incomparable in form and content, but the comparison bespeaks the critical engineering of a usable and exemplary past for present-day emulation in pursuit of a Filipino cinema.

In the second case, *Manuel Conde* was launched in the context of 'Juan Tamad Goes Indie,' "the tribute given by the 2008 Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival to Conde, the acknowledged pioneer of Philippine independent filmmaking."⁷ The cementing of the link between Conde and indie, through the Cinemalaya tribute and the heralding of the book launch in press releases and websites,⁸ sheds light on how film culture is being shaped and clarifies the book's arguments.

In the concluding chapter of *Manuel Conde*, which evaluates Conde's cinema as a foundation to the essence and character of Filipino National Cinema, Tiongson differentiates his presuppositions from critic Clodualdo del Mundo Jr.'s. According to Tiongson, Del Mundo draws a bold line between what constitutes the "national cinema" (art films) and the "film industry" (popular films), thereby underestimating in principle the significance of many of Conde's films (183). In current parlance, the films that constitute the national cinema for Del Mundo are "indie" *vis-à-vis* the mainstream films.

On the other hand, Tiongson takes great pains to demonstrate how genre or Hollywood-inspired films with box-office appeal, like comedies, love stories, or swashbucklers, can also be part of the canon, as long as they remain "indie". For him, a picture of triumph in Philippine film is Conde's *Juan Tamad Goes to Congress* (129-143). The comedy was independently produced

by Conde so as not to be constricted by studio whims. It was cited by critic Nestor Torre as “the best satire that the Filipino film industry has produced” (qtd. in 136). It was a bold and on-the-mark attack on the “misdemeanors of politicians” (129). It appealed to “ordinary people and to the ‘intelligentsia’” and earned a historical high in box office receipts (136).

In other words, “indie”, for Tiongson, is not necessarily the antithesis of commercial success or formula. “Indie”, as exemplified by Conde and his cinema, is equated less with form (e.g., indie as art films [for Del Mundo], indie as anti-commercial and alternative format films [for Nick Deocampo], indie as anti-establishment films [for Tolentino]) than with the artist, who engages (sometimes against the odds) but is not constrained by economic, political, and cinematic conditions and restrictions, and, at the same time, who is interested in finding a big audience. Tiongson attempts to enlarge the conceptual net to include what “indie” has tended to marginalize or disdain with or without meaning to – the “bakya” crowd (183). By doing so, he equates “indie” less with specific films than with artistic practice, bringing to the fore not only the idea of the “indie film”, but also of the elusive “indie spirit”, which is conceptually more accommodating of both filmmakers and viewers.

Tiongson praises Conde’s cinema for its “reevaluation of customs and traditions” (188-190), “examination of Philippine [sociopolitical] issues” (191-196), “innovation on the genres” (196-199), and “for opening Filipino cinema to the world” (200-202). These may be said to be the points of intersection between Tiongson and other critics (e.g., Del Mundo, Deocampo, Tolentino) in their assumptions about “indie”; if so, their differences are of degree and not in principle.

What sets Tiongson’s project apart is his underscoring of and unquestioned positive regard for Conde’s “transmission and revitalization of Philippine folk literature” (184-188) as a cornerstone of his cinema as being Filipino. Tiongson’s inclusion of the “bakya” in his framework is a critical necessity in his

championing of folk culture as the wellspring of Filipino identity. Hence, he does not dismiss current pop culture as “mass culture” in the negative sense, since what connects popular and folk cultures is presupposed to be definitive of what is essentially Filipino.

In Tiongson’s nationalist project, therefore, continuity from the Golden Age to the present “Pinoy indie digi movement” is not everything. Continuity from folk culture to popular culture is as important. Such an insistence on continuity then precludes, as far as Manuel Conde is concerned, the valuation of complete rupture and revolt as a basis for a truly great Filipino film.

Notes

- ¹ See Mario Hernando's *Lino Brocka: The Artist and His Times* (1993).
- ² Most of the literature related to the history of Philippine cinema are only anthologized periodical articles, short historical surveys in pamphlets, or one or two chapters in books of criticism. The heftiest collection of these historical overviews is found in *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art: Philippine Film*. Nick Deocampo, whose earlier critical project was on the alternative short film, is currently working on a projected five-volume cinema history, of which only the first volume, *Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines*, has been finished.
- ³ The volume is the first of the projected 12-part Filipino Film Directors Series, supported by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and conceived by the book's project director, Cesar Hernando. Later volumes are to be devoted to Lamberto V. Avellana, Ishmael Bernal, Lino Brocka, Gerardo de Leon, Eddie Romero, Richard Abelardo, Susana C. de Guzman, Ramon Estella, Gregorio Fernandez, Manuel Silos, and Mar S. Torres (10-11).
- ⁴ Hernando as designer and Tiongson as editor-writer have previously collaborated on equally handsome and indispensable publications on Philippine cinema, specifically the *Urian Anthology: 1970-1979* and *Urian Anthology: 1980-1989*.
- ⁵ In writing the book, Tiongson was only able to see seven of the many films listed in the complete filmography of Conde.
- ⁶ Some of Tiongson's key contributions on theater and film during this period were *Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Sinakulo at Iba Pang Dulang Panrelibiyon sa Malolos* (1975), *Kasaysayan ng Komedyang sa Pilipinas: 1766-1982* (1982), and the essay "From Stage to Screen: Philippine Dramatic Traditions and the Filipino Film" in *Readings in Philippine Cinema* (1983).
- ⁷ "Tiongson's Book On Manuel Conde Launched." *CMC Balita*, See also note 8. Cinemalaya, aside from conferring grants and holding an annual film competition-festival, has been conducting film congresses since 2005. Tiongson is one of Cinemalaya's co-founders, one of its Foundation's board members, and its congress director. In the context of the tribute, six of Conde's extant films were screened and an exhibit was also mounted.

- ⁸ See, for example, press releases and related articles featuring the book launch, like Crispina Martinez-Belen's "Coffeetable Book Pays Tribute to the Great Manuel Conde" in *Manila Bulletin*; "Cinemataya Pays Tribute to Manuel Conde" in *Business Mirror* and *ClickTheCity.Com*. Notably, one posting of the standard press release in the web portal *PinoyFilm.Com*, reputed to be in support of "indie" cinema, has the altered title, "Cinemataya Pays Tribute to Manuel Conde, Father of RP Indie Cinema."

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