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# PERFUMED NIGHTMARE AND THE PERILS OF JAMESON'S 'NEW POLITICAL CULTURE'

► Felicidad C. Lim  
(Bliss) (ua Lim)

As a rule, "primitive painters strive for realism, whether in rendering nature or their visions and dreams, and it is by this bungled realism that their work most unmistakably declares itself to be primitive".

—Clement Greenberg

More underground than most third world films, ["Perfumed Nightmare"] is far more third world than most underground ones.

—J. Hoberman, "Jungle Fevers"

I JUXTAPOSE THESE TWO UNLIKELY quotes because between them they have sketched the broad categories within which Eric de Guia, also known as Kidlat Tahimik (literally, "lightning-quiet") and his first film, *Mababangong Bangungot* or *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977) have been received by critics in America, whether they write tucked away in the film review sections of New York newspapers or, like academic Fredric Jameson, in the final polemical pages of a book on critical theory. Apparently his status as charming "primitive" film or, in Jameson's words, "art naif" is owing to its having been shot in 8mm color on a home movie camera, non-synch sound (later expanded to 16mm format), on a budget of a mere ten thousand dollars, which explains its reliance on "found footage," characteristic of a truly 'third world' "waste-nothing aesthetic" (Hoberman, 48).

Before going any further we ought at least to have some work-

ing notion of what it is to be "third world," since Hoberman's pithy appraisal of *Perfumed Nightmare* hardly clarifies that quality which makes Kidlat's film so distinguished. We might usefully turn to Madhava Prasad, who defines the third world as

a time-space of subject formation, necessarily determined by imperialism, colonialism, developmentalism and experimentation which bourgeois democracy and other forms of nation-statehood. Not just a geography with its millennia of cultural history... but...after its occupation and transformation by imperialist rule (although precapitalist determinations continue to play a part in this time-space). (58)

Jameson prefers this term because it is able to suggest the "fundamental breaks" between first world capitalism, second world socialism, and the third world "experience of colonialism and imperialism" (67). For the cultural critic, third world as category refers to cultures engaged in "a life and death struggle with first world imperialism," an encounter which parallels the "penetration" of capital into other economic spheres (68). Accordingly, Jameson concludes that

all third world texts are neces-

sarily... national allegories.

The story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society. (Third world literature, 69)

Jameson's use of the third world as a theoretical construct has been critiqued for its "suppression" of "multiplicity" in favor of a homogenizing binary conflict between the first and third worlds (Ahmad 3). It follows from such a binarism then, that third world cultural production will be determined by this struggle and therefore will offer texts which are national allegories (Ahmad 6). But the fact that the first and second worlds are defined by Jameson with reference to means of production (capitalist and socialist), whereas the third world is theorized in terms of forces acting upon it (imperialism and colonialism) is telling - in Aijaz Ahmad's estimation, this amounts to saying that the world is polarized between "those who make history and those who are mere objects of it" (8). This seems to situate the third world "outside" modes of production—and thus, outside of history (Ahmad 17). Moreover, the sweeping statement that third world texts are collective/na-





tionalist, while in contrast, first world texts are private/individualist, not only suppresses the fact that, in the third world, the inroads of capital must have already consolidated distinctions between public and private (Ahmad, 15), but also does not adequately consider that individualism, which according to Prasad was theorized by Volosinov as the "we-experience of the bourgeoisie," is, like collectivism, a social structure (83). Contrapuntal to a division of the globe into three worlds is Ahmad's assertion of a united world which "shares" the experience of colonialism, imperialism, and class struggle, united by "the global operation of...capitalis[m] and the global resistance to this mode" (11). But while Ahmad hastily qualifies that the operation of capital and the resistance to it have specificity in various areas, he risks conflation in his rejection of binaristic divisions.

Yet despite Aijaz Ahmad's now-famous oustage, Jameson persists in retaining the three-worlds paradigm. In "Art naif" and the "Admixture of Worlds," a chapter on *Perfumed Nightmare* in his 1992 book *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Jameson situates his analysis of Kidlat's film in the context of an era in which "the possibilities of

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collective struggle" and of "human agency" have seemingly been overtaken by late capitalism. The euphoric celebration, in the 1960s and 70s, of the potential of the third world to bring forth a powerful and viable alternative to Western capitalist culture is seemingly unsustainable in the face of the problems of modernization, debt and cooptation that plague the third world. It thus becomes possible for Bordwell and Steiger to proclaim that "no absolute, pure alternative to Hollywood exists." Jameson is right to critique eulogies of this sort as reinforcing a belief that the oppressive circumstances prevailing in the world today are natural and incontestable. Jameson thus proposes that what is needed is a reappraisal of our positions and expectations regarding third world cultural production.

*We need to invent some new questions to ask of third world cinema, or of the third world generally, as the last surviving space from which alternatives to corporate capitalist daily life and social relations are to be sought.* (186-188, underscoring mine.)

It is here that we glimpse what Jameson imagines the third world to be, what his reasons are for

thinking that cultural products that emerge from this space are valuable, significant, potentially transformative. Regrettably, while I and many others are equally eager to catch hold of a real promise of resistance to, even rejection or refunctioning of, the dominance of capitalism in all spheres of endeavor, Jameson's project of situating such a promise flatly and necessarily in the third world is unacceptable. As I hope to show, his attempt to discover a new political culture in a 'third-world film' from the Philippines, *Perfumed Nightmare*, is deeply and dangerously flawed.

That new cultural politics to which Jameson looks its primarily an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping"—a cultural politics which, in the complexity of the postmodern situation, will allow the individual a capacity to position herself, to navigate, and finally to oppose the oppressive forces of late capitalism. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson speaks of cognitive mapping in these terms:

*the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold the truth of postmodernity...to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time at which it achieves a break-*

*through to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last in which we may again to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our own spatial as well as our social confusion.* (54)

His confessed interest in discussing *Perfumed Nightmare* is that it is able to "validate" some of this hope, because Jameson sees this film as "inventing new geotypical cartographies" ('Art Naif' 189). Indeed, navigation and negotiation are crucial to this film. Even before the credits parade before us, Kidlat has already introduced himself, strangely enough, in an English voice-over of the Filipino track, which it itself dubbed—thus producing an unsettling effect of the same voice doubling over itself, the English track finally drowning out the Filipino words, a sound track which translates from the Filipino only very selectively (usually preferring to translate only Kidlat). In this twin and nonsimultaneous voice Kidlat says—"I am Kidlat Tahimik. I choose my vehicle and I can cross this bridge."

He repeats this line often in the beginning of the film, until finally the refrain alters—"I can cross any bridge." The bridges



in question are both materially and metaphorically plentiful. The bridge we first see in the establishing shots of the film is the only physical bridge between Balian, Laguna, Kidlat's home town, and the rest of the world. But this one bridge is also many: it is used variously by the Spanish and the American occupying forces; by big capitalists and young children peddling ice cream; by marches in military parades and in beauty contests; and finally, by Kidlat himself, who makes his living via that bridge, driving a jeepney whose route takes him as far as Metro Manila and back. This Kidlat is obsessed with bridges, and with Werner von Braun, "the man who built the bridge to the moon." An avid listener to broadcasts of *Voice of America*, then something of a novelty for Kidlat, who had not yet tired of his new radio, Kidlat writes to the program to ask what the first lines were that Neil Armstrong spoke upon landing on the moon. As president of the local Werner von Braun fan club, which is composed entirely of children, he is able to read his co-members the official reply to his query (punning on his hesitant way of reading "mankee- manki- man-kind") and to rejoice with them when his letter is read on air and



Neil's voice is heard intoning the sacred words. This is not to be his last (nor was it ever his first) contract with America and the European metropolises. His dreams of a white carabao<sup>1</sup>, troping his colonized imagination, find material fulfillment in his acquaintance with an American who offers to take him first in Paris, then to America, where Kidlat will serve as his chauffeur, driving his Filipino jeepney.

This is ironic, since, when asked why he wanted to go to America, Kidlat, who would spend his time abroad driving and filling up chewing gum machines for this chewing gum magnate, replies simply that in America he would have the chance to be an astronaut, not just a jeepney driver. Arriving in Paris, Kidlat is enchanted by the escalators and flyovers ("so many bridges!"). But he does not remain enchanted for long; on a vacation in Bavaria, the pregnant girl he befriends laments that no more handcrafted *zweibelturms* will be constructed in the future. Upon his return to Paris, he discovers that his friend the streetmarket vendor has disappeared, having been edged out by the expansion of a supermarket. The very same day, he receives word from his friend Kaya that the forest in which he was cir-

cumcised had been cleared to make way for a highway. Thus when his American friend invites him to fly supersonic to New York, he turns him down; and, at a party with "big personalities," Kidlat, who is starting to feel small, blows like a typhoon, and, clambering into a chimney shaped like a rocket, finds himself back in Balian again. The end credits are flashed for us on postcards with stamps of rockets in Paraguay, Peru, and other third world countries—but the last stamp, one from the Philippines, is not a realistic rendering but a line drawing of Kidlat on a chimney-style rocket.

Jameson reads these tropes of bridges and exploration as "pre-representational symbols", "naif art" in which "the gap between the image and the intended meaning lies open as innocently as in a child's or a schizophrenic drawing" (*Art Naif* 197)—in short, Jameson is here extolling, in a tone that cannot possibly be patronizing as it is assuredly political, the 'bungling realism' of Kidlat's too-obvious symbols and charming, inadequate line drawings.

Indeed, Jameson asserts that this story of the encroachments of Manila into the countryside, of the first world into the third, and of the complex dynamics

of unequal exchange between the two social spaces are concerns that only a third world filmmaker can tell of, a filmmaker "not uncomfortable with clumsiness" (*Art Naif* 195)—a filmmaker such as Kidlat, the much-prized bungler/clown.

Such a pronouncement echoes strongly with Jameson's confident belief, affirmed elsewhere, that all third world cultural production must be considered national allegories. It has been pointed out that Jameson's pat generalization stem from the assumption that all third world artists, who have in common the experience of the intrusion of capital into indigenous modes of production that were therefore prevented from developing on their own, cannot but see private concerns as inextricably tied up with national problems (Rodriguez, 44).

Hector Rodriguez argues that such generalizations are based upon an imperfect adaptation of Lukacs's formulations on class consciousness in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukacs theorized that the socioeconomic realities particularly to different classes meant that, "in principle", a member of a class may possess a standpoint which is distinct from, and is not available to, individuals in other classes. This is not to say that all





working-class subjects will adopt the liberative "proletarian standpoint"; rather, they all have the potential to do so. This marks the divide between an "actual" and an "imputed" class consciousness, so that the standpoint of the proletariat remains possible for those outside of the working class who possess "the capacity of taking an interest in the emancipation of the exploited—a capacity in principle open even to the members of the exploiting classes" (Rodriguez, 45-46).

In Jameson's reading of *Perfumed Nightmare*, the fact that the voice track for the American magnate hardly sounds like it is spoken by an American, that the segment, of either a world summit meeting or an international Boy Scout gathering attended by European nationals, appears to be played by Filipinos, and that even the white European actors may be performing in ways which would estrange a Parisian or Bavarian audience, signify that the representation of the first world by the third is completely incommensurate with the way the third is represented by the first.

What the first world thinks and dreams about the third can have nothing whatever in common, formally or epistemologically, with



what the third world has to know every day about the first. Subalternity carries the possibility of knowledge with it, domination that of forgetfulness and repression—but knowledge is not just the opposite of forgetfulness, nor is domination the opposite of oppression. ('Art Naif', 199)

And in "History and Class Consciousness and an Unfinished Project", Jameson says much the same thing in more forthright terms—

...owing to its structural situation in the social order and to the specific forms of oppression and exploitation unique to that situation, each group lives the world in a phenomenologically specific way that allows it to see, or better still, that makes it unavoidable for that group to see and know features of the world that remain obscure, invisible, or merely occasional and secondary for other groups. (qtd in Rodriguez, 47)

So, if Jameson is to be believed, then the first world is condemned to blindness and the third is burdened with insight. What Rodriguez calls an "analytical reductionism" on Jameson's part would tend to suggest that the arena of third world cultural production is one of pure progressiveness. If every person from the third

world is to be interpellated as one who perceives clearly and correctly the dynamics of their own oppression, then how to explain the historical existence of the complicitous native elite who inherited the neocolonial state? How can we then begin to speak against the relations of radical inequality, marginalization and exploitation that are at work in the first world as well as in the third? How to explain the colonized nature of much third world scholarship and production, which is precisely what we must remain vigilantly critical of?

Jameson's freezing of political standpoints into predetermined relations can thus account for the uneasy swiftness with which he moves in order to paper over suggestions that Kidlat Tahimik's *Perfumed Nightmare* may not be the voice of that new political culture he so desperately wants to recognize. If we attribute to a third world film the positive qualities of solidarity with popular national concerns, a critique of the networks of consumption, distribution and exchange that so often are to the disadvantage of non-first world nations, and a refusal of the legitimizing gaze of the colonizer in a third world film, then *Perfumed Nightmare* is likely to come up short on all counts.



Kidlat Tahimik's first film was made from a budget of ten thousand dollars which were drawn from his personal funds; Kidlat sidestepped the established Philippine film community to make a film that is, as even Jameson acknowledges, "palpably made for a first world or film festival public." Having won the International Critic's prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 1977, it was taken up by Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Studios and screened in New York in 1980, although it has never been shown commercially in the Philippines. This is not to say that *Perfumed Nightmare* should be discredited as a third world film because it is as unknown in the Philippines as it is celebrated elsewhere (and this is no exaggeration - desperate to find mention of it, Jameson is forced to rely on Isagani Cruz's assurance that although he could only find two references to it in all of Philippine cinematic scholarship, Kidlat is nevertheless looked up to by an anonymous "younger generation of intellectuals."<sup>2</sup> I want simply to point out that, if *representative* is crucial to Jameson's conception of third world artistic production, underpinned as it is by a notion of shared concerns and meanings that are generalizable to national/popular concerns,



then *Perfumed Nightmare* cannot be revalued as one such text. It instead offers other avenues of exploration, for instance, as a text which was first acclaimed in Europe and North America, and which owes what interest Filipino scholars have in it largely to the fact it has become emblematic of an alternative Filipino film practice in the international arena.<sup>3</sup>

Jameson is aware of, but disavows, what might be considered the self-exoticizing moments of the film—for instance, the footage of young boys being circumcised in a glen, chewing on a guava leaf and rushing into the cold river nearby for immediate solace<sup>4</sup>. Jameson wishes to see in one scene in which the village children watch and then make fun of Kidlat's posing for his passport photo a promise that some kind of feedback mechanism like Jean Rouch used for *Chronicle of A Summer* will allow the subjects to critique and participate in their own representation, which has been rapidly touring the film festivals of the world.

The film, in other words, includes its spectator (or narratee) within itself. Palpably made for a first world or film festival public, it also requires its first world audience to look over the shoulder of a third world public at the same



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time, or through their implied point of view. ('Art Naif', 203-204)

But no such mechanism seems to me to be suggested. If we must look for consolation, as Jameson does, to the film itself, then we will remember that when Kidlat, on the voice track, calls a meeting of members of the fan club, he seems to be talking at them, and doesn't bother to conceal the fact that he has sutured together footage of isolated group of children variously smiling or clapping at different things and on different occasions; no community gatherings, of the sort that Jameson wants to envision, are implied in the film. Instead, Kidlat wittingly fosters the impression that he is talking above their heads, which one might argue characterizes his reasoning about his film's lack of popularity in the Philippines.

Apart from this imagined feedback mechanism, Jameson also ascribes to this film a kind of purity by virtue of its "home video" quality:

*Travelogue is here rescued and transformed...by regression to some first and more primal level of the first forms of photography, the family snapshot or the home movie, the wonderment of sheer reproduction and recognition...Kidlat's aesthetic rejoins*

*a whole range of Western avant-garde or experimental projects in which the home video, the non-professional, non-institutional use of the camera symbolically becomes the utopian escape from commercial reification.* ('Art Naif', 203-204)

It is interesting to see the film cast as somehow outside commercialism and commodification, when its distribution via Zoetrope is helped continually by institutionalized academic criticism's valorization of the film (present company not excluded). Indeed, Kidlat's later projects are typically funded by German institutions and created and aired primarily for German audiences (Yuson, 67).

Which is to say that as with many films that are served up as emblematic of oppositional practices, such claims as Jameson's do not stand up under close scrutiny. Cinema novo, for instance, claimed to be the "true Brazilian cinema", whereas its critics alleged that it was hardly representative of popular tastes. Jameson's problem in theorizing about a new cultural politics which will emerge from the third world is that translation dynamics between cultures are unequal. Ahmad point out that the third world intellectual who knows a first world language

is commonplace; but unfortunately, few first world intellectuals can speak an Asian or African language (5). This applies not just to the accessibility of languages, but more to the point, of texts; Filipinos watch American films on a regular basis, but the opposite is not true. As a result, fewer texts from the periphery become accessible to the first world metropolises, and Jameson's theorizing on oppositional Filipino filmmaking is debilitated by this state of affairs. Aijaz Ahmad writes—

*The retribution visited upon the head of an Asian, an African, an Arab intellectual who is of any consequence and writes in English is that he or she is immediately elevated to the lonely splendour of a representative—of a race, a continent, a civilization, even the 'Third World'.* (6)

Jameson writes that Kidlat's film lends itself to the third axis of Marxist interpretation, the more encompassing axis of the "history of modes of production", which Jameson implicitly prefers over the other two axes of the political and the social in the analysis of texts. This momentary privileging of the economic over the political is justified by Jameson in terms of his conviction that the critic's "most urgent task" is to reveal



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that the economic forms that obtain today have a history. They are not inevitable, and therefore they can be supplanted ('Art Naif', 213). What is interesting, when analyzed from the larger perspective of a history of economic forms, is how a text can afford us a possibility of "crisis", when the modes of production which inflect structures of feeling and all the aspects of the quotidian are destabilized by "forms of the new, with new collective structures and new human relations" ('Art Naif', 212).

That new "third term" which *Perfumed Nightmare* offers up, if Jameson is to be believed, is the moment of "industrial production within an otherwise agricultural context." Successfully maneuvering around the binary between first world modern technology and third world native tradition, the segment in which we see jeepneys being assembled at Sarao motors is invested by Jameson with the possibility of "refunctioning." ('Art Naif', 209).

Jameson is here talking about the segment which begins when the American businessman misrecognizes Kidlat's vehicle as a "brightly-colored taxi." Jeepneys, which have their origins in the post-world war II practice in the Philippines of re-



fashioning the abandoned G.I. army jeeps into six- or eight-passenger vehicles and completely transforming their appearance by inscribing them with popular and folk designs (jeepney drivers in busy city areas where that competition was fierce used to say that passengers prefer good-looking jeepneys), are described by Kidlat thus: "These are vehicles of war which we made into vehicles of life." We are then shown footage shot at Sarao motors, even today the company which monopolizes the production of local jeepneys, where a few men sit at workshops pounding at the metal chassis, holding parts of the jeepneys in their hands and appraising them with experienced eyes. A man pounding on a metal cylinder to make it straight motivates the use of ethnic, rhythmic percussion music. On the voice track, Kidlat explains, "Sarao rolls out five jeepneys a week"; there is an abrupt cut-away to a newspaper headline about 6,000 workers at the Benz factory who are being laid off. This is starkly contrasted to the seemingly small-scale workshop, with no more than five men in the frame at any one time, where carcasses of old jeeps lay around the ground being cannibalized. "An old jeep never dies—it finds its way into a

hundred jeepneys," says Kidlat. We are shown him pulling a toy jeep out of the workshop, then painting it himself in the manner of folk decorations. Jameson celebrates this segment as the moment of true *bricolage*. Without falling into the pitfalls of the new vis-a-vis the old of the first world-third world model, this production of jeepneys turns newly-introduced automotive technology into visual texts whose designs have a long popular history; at the same time, old jeepneys are never discarded, but are always put together to form new products ('Art Naif', 209).

From less than five minutes of footage of working conditions in the Sarao jeepney factory Jameson is able to come to the conclusion that

unlike the 'natural' or mythic appearances of traditional agricultural society, but equally unlike the disembodied machinic forces of late capitalist high technology which seem equally innocent of any human agency or individual or collective praxis, the jeepney factory is a space of human labor which does not know the structural oppression of the assembly line or of Taylorization, which is permanently provisional, thereby liberating its subjects from the tyrannies of form and of the preprogrammed. In it aesthetics and production are again



at one, and painting the product is an integral part of its manufacture. Nor finally is this space in any bourgeois sense humanist or a golden mean, since spiritual or material proprietorship is excluded, and inventiveness has taken the place of genius, collective cooperation the place of managerial or demiurgic dictatorship. ('Art Naif', 210)

The above remarks are so poorly grounded in any actual understanding of the material conditions obtaining in a Sarao jeepney factory that the reaction which such a statement would engender if communicated to the actual workers at Sarao factories is impossible for me to conceive. The Sarao factories, which retained sole control of jeepney manufacturing in the Philippines even during the long years of Martial Law<sup>5</sup>, when all large enterprises that did not toe the Marcos line either collapsed or came under government control, cannot responsibly be seen as a liberative workplace free from managerial constraints. For one, the workers at Sarao are wage-earners in a country where the notoriety of the fact that businesses almost never comply with minimum wage requirements makes it a commonplace hardly worth stating. Sarao is privately





owned, and the workers are salaried laborers, not members of a utopic cooperative. Certainly work is fragmented and alienating; the person who assembles the jeep does not also get to adorn it. Jameson seems to have based his assertion that aesthetics and production were no longer distinct spheres on the figure of Kidlat, who pulls a toy jeepney out and paints it in order to give this toy as a gift to his younger sister Alma, because "the American gave me dollars" and Kidlat was suddenly able to afford such a bourgeois gesture.

What this last inaccuracy among Jameson's many problematic formulations concerning the third world indexes for us is the dual peril and promise of terms such as the third world. In an earnest attempt to locate some space in which alternative economic forms might be contrived, Jameson has posited the third world as a site of utopic possibility. Such a framework leads to crucial elisions and misrepresentations of the conditions of third world production, ironically engendering another scholarly colonization of the fictions produced by the third world under the rubrics of "cognitive mapping" or of "a new political culture" in the desperate effort to

decolonize and resist oppressive forces that refuse to be simply and necessarily discovered and positioned. ◀

*Footnotes:*

<sup>1</sup> The brown or black-skinned Philippine carabao is a national symbol that was appropriated by some sectors of the leftist opposition (i.e., led by Sr. Christine Tan) to Marcos as a warning that, like this patient beast of burden and companion to the farmer whose anger, though slow to erupt, is devastating, Filipinos would not endure in silence for much longer.

<sup>2</sup> Jameson mentions this in a footnote referring to personal correspondence with Isagani Cruz ('Art Naif' 213).

<sup>3</sup> Of which my essay is a case in point.

<sup>4</sup> J. Hoberman unfortunately reads this as a "tribal purity rite" (Jungle Fevers 48).

<sup>5</sup> This film was made in 1977. Martial Law was declared Sept. 21, 1971, and "officially lifted" in 1981. The writ of habeas corpus was being suspended, strikes by workers were rare and very dangerous.

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