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# Jameson and Kidlat Tahimik

Roland B. Tolentino



Fredric Jameson culminates his discussion of selective contemporary cinema in his book, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, with a critique of a work by Filipino independent filmmaker, Kidlat Tahimik. Marking the last chapter as “provisional ending” to the postmodernist reading of Kidlat’s film, this is by far the only critique done on Philippine cinema by a foreign critic of Jameson’s stature. However, Jameson’s engaging discourse could not escape reifying the conventions of marginalization and disenfranchisement. His attempt to provide a cognitive mapping of a “Third World” text has not reached the desired destination.

Jameson’s construction of a “Third World” reconstitutes the “First World/Third World” dichotomy. This note examines Jameson’s construction of Kidlat Tahimik’s text in the postmodern context, or as a “First World” representation of a “Third World” text. It situates Jameson’s construction of a “Third World” text to comprise a body of engagements in his “Third World” project, and examines how Kidlat Tahimik and his text are “placed at the intersection of critique and complicity with the structures it attempts to overturn when necessary, and embrace when vital” (Cabanillas 1993, 1).

For the purposes of this note, “First” and “Third” worlds refer to advanced capitalist countries and to imperialised formations, respectively. The terms “Third World” and “First World,” however, embody serious limitations. The terms have so homogenized that these fail to reflect other significant meanings: the various kinds of “Third Worlds” and “First Worlds,” the presence of the “Third World” in the “First World” and vice-versa.

## The Third World

Jameson analyzes Kidlat’s *Perfumed Nightmare (Mababangong Bangungot)*, a film that narrates the journey into the worlds—from

the "Third World" to the "First" then back again—of a jeepney driver, portrayed by Kidlat Tahimik. Kidlat's enthusiasm for the West is depicted in his fascination with the US moon landing which has led him to organize a Werner Von Braun fan club (in honor of the German immigrant, inventor of the rocket) among the village children. His journey eventually brings him to Paris, courtesy of an American entrepreneur. He sees modernization for himself, witnessing how "older markets were being supplanted and destroyed by hideous concrete supermarkets" (Jameson 1992, 190). He then sheds his enthusiasm for Western technology and returns to Balian, his native land, to commemorate his heritage: the martyrdom of his father killed by American soldiers during their conquest of the Philippines, the wisdom of the mother so firmly rooted in the village environment, and the myths and rituals of his hometown.

As analyzed by Jameson, Kidlat is positioned as a "Third World" filmmaker, and his film as a "Third World" text. After all, the "Third World" has played a crucial role in Jameson's career. "Third World" studies, as Walter Cohen notes, are part of the second phase of Jameson's trajectory. Published by the Modern Language Association of America in 1992, Cohen's article is positioned as somehow the "official" state-of-affairs of marxist discourse in English and American literary studies. Together with "emergent fields" such as film criticism, cultural studies, "Third World" studies indicate Jameson's shift from the dominantly literary to the dominantly cultural studies. In periodizing Jameson, Cohen is using the "Third World" as a transitory phase to mark-off, for the moment, postmodernism as the logical culmination of the Jamesonian project. Cohen foregrounds the marginalization and the disenfranchisement of the "Third World" in the Jamesonian project. He restates Jameson's definition of postmodernism as a consequence of a completed modernism, "when the commodity has penetrated and colonized previously impervious arenas of life, including culture and the psyche, so that there no longer is any outside" (Cohen 1992, 337). The "Third World" has been engulfed in a position inside postmodernism. Some critics would even go further: the "Third World" has disappeared as "first among the visible manifestations of late capitalism" (Colas 1992, 260).

There is a growing literature of engagement with Jameson's postmodernism and the "Third World." The pre-figuring of the "Third World" is not new to Jameson with his critiques that have implicated the "Third World" for the "First World." He sought to posture a homogenized reading of "Third World" literatures as necessarily

national allegories (in "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," 1986) and to eradicate the category/realm of the "Third World" as a consequence of late capitalism (in *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1982 to 1991).<sup>1</sup>

Jameson reifies totality as a necessary frame for analyzing the postmodern, and consequently its implications for the "Third World" in *Geopolitical Aesthetic*. In mapping the postmodern through cinematic space, Jameson relates the discursive use of the filmic text to the social text. He counts space and the process of spatialization as those which can shed some light on our notions of the past or the perpetual present. In the book's first part, he analyzes American conspiracy films using conspiracy as a third term that negotiates between the rigid oppositions of the private/public spheres. In the second part, four bodies of films/filmmakers are elaborated as representatives of certain world formations. Soviet science-fiction films, for example, are problematized as a second world allegory. Jameson problematizes the removal of the marks of socialism in these films. Then a Taiwanese film, *The Terrorizer*, is problematized in relation to the geography of Taipei. Taipei is remapped as a city within China, in a country that has achieved "First World" status but can only remain a "First World" (Japanese) satellite. The high Godard film, *The Passion*, provides a model for grasping high modernist structure. The last chapter is Jameson's analysis of a "Third World" film, *Perfumed Nightmare*. This film, for Jameson, has gone beyond the notion of "Third World" cinema and its nondelivery of new alternative forms.

### Third World Critics

One then skeptically asks: has a new/neo/post- "Third World" cinema of the postmodern age just been announced? There arises a need to further situate this engagement in the already ongoing discussions between Jameson and some of the "Third World" critics. In "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Jameson (1986, 69) presents the strategy of reading third world literature as national allegories, "necessarily projecting a political dimension: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society." In the following issue of the journal where Jameson's essay was published, Aijaz Ahmad (1987) questions the suppositions of Jameson's strategy. Pointing out that Jameson only mentions the

focus of his project ("a theory of cognitive aesthetics of third-world literature") in the last sentence of the last footnote, Ahmad cautions that the project inevitably rests "upon a suppression of the multiplicity of significant difference among and within both advanced capitalist countries and the imperialised formations" (Ahmad 1987, 3). This construction is further reified in the notion of "three worlds." Whereas the "First" and "Second" worlds are defined by their modes of production (capitalism and socialism, respectively), the "Third World" is defined in terms of an "experience" of externally inserted phenomena: "the experience of colonialism and imperialism" (Ahmad 1987, 3). This experience, however, is effected in differentiated contexts in all three worlds. Jameson's brief response to Ahmad's critique (of which I barely scratch the surface here) is only to emphasize that the essay "was intended as an intervention into a "first world" (he now applies Derrida's *sous rature*) literary and critical situation" and to reemphasize some finer points raised by Ahmad which Jameson feels he has, in one way or another, already mentioned in his text (Jameson 1987, 26).

It is interesting to note that even when critics are "sympathetic" to Ahmad's point, certain slippage leads them back to Jameson's logic and the "three worlds" paradigm. Robert Stam's review essay of books on Third Cinema, for example, explains Ahmad's argument: "that the "three worlds" notion suppresses a multiplicity of significant differences among and within the advanced countries *as well as within* (italics provided) the "Third World."<sup>2</sup> Stam emphasizes the differences among and within advanced countries, but he ignores the differences *among* "Third World" countries. In Stam's phrasing of Ahmad's position, he presents the "Third World" as corollary ("as well as . . .") to the phenomenon of difference. The "Third World" is again amassed in the singular notion of difference. Some critics altogether ignore Ahmad's point. Ella Shohat, in positing alternative frames (feminism and postcolonialism, or multiculturalism), also refers to Jameson's national allegorical reading of "counter-narratives" to and within American cinema. She does so without problematizing the notion.<sup>3</sup>

Santiago Colas (1992) furthers Ahmad's points by providing a deconstruction of Jameson's postmodernism. Colas exposes Jameson's usage of presence-absence of the "Third World." He roots this strategy in Jameson's *Periodizing the 60s*. Though acknowledging the roots of sixties' radical politics to the "Third World," the dominance of the global economic crisis immediately preceding the decade emphasized

a new stage in capitalism. "Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment when the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the 'Third World' and the unconscious" (Jameson 1988, 207). With this, Jameson constructs, as Colas points out, the distinguishing mark of late capitalism, "namely capitalism's final saturation of the previously colonized, but presumably untransformed, agricultural spaces of the "Third World" (Colas 1992, 260). Jameson then provides the features of the cultural logic of late capitalism:

a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity, both in the relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality. . . (Colas 1992, 6)

Colas is specifically interested in the equivalence of the "Third World" with the "weakening of historicity." This weakening, consequently, leads to the eventual disappearance of the "Third World" with the "First World's" "incapacity to think historically" (ix). The "Third World," however, returns "evidently politically oppositional, but not postmodern" enough (Colas 1992, 263). "It is the "Third World" that provides spaces and cultural expressions of opposition to the logic of postmodernism, by which the "First World" subject can begin dimly to recall his or her former capacity to think the present historically" (Colas 1992, 263).

There is another reaction with regard to Jameson's usage of the "Third World" in postmodernism—"to pose alternatives" to the totalizing "mainstream" postmodernity as it had been constructed by Lyotard, Jameson, and their predecessors. George Yudice (1992) doesn't jettison Jameson or postmodernism altogether. He constantly engages these in a critical interrogation of "mainstream" postmodernism as can be inferred in the dynamics of Latin America. Other engagements with Jameson's texts have been directed to the prominent features of his theory—"his analysis of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, of the nostalgia mode in fiction and film, of schizophrenia, intensities and the postmodern sublime, of "the waning of affect," and so on" (Colas 1992, 250).<sup>4</sup>

No one of these critics would deny a global unity caused by the "irreconcilable struggle of capital and labor" (Ahmad 1987, 25). They are attempting to specify and historicize the determinants of this

totality based on new social movements' agenda or specific community's interests. How various groups come into contact with modernity and postmodernity vary, not only in terms of manifestations but also in terms of the diverse responses and propositions in which (primarily) modernization has been undertaken on them (Yudice 1992, 4).

In mapping Kidlat Tahimik's *Perfumed Nightmare*, Jameson (1992, 209) again provides a totalized view of a "Third World" film, as a "moment of industrial production within an otherwise agricultural context." Jameson (1992, 187) foreshadows this "Third World" film as one product of "precapitalist societies who came to modernization only in relatively recent times" and a rare product at that in a "Third World" 'culture' . . . absorbed by the international entertainment industry." For Jameson (1992, 211) this poses the need to "invent some new questions to ask of Third-World cinema and of the "Third World" generally. However, he has laid the grounds that have (hastily) circuited the film to the network of the postmodern space. By infusing subreferents (e.g. sociopolitical experience and Kidlat's filmmaking strategies), one can then investigate the modes of refiguring Jameson's postmodern "Third World" / "Third World" in the postmodern.

Kidlat and his films do not make a tight fit with the mold Jameson has positioned them. Jameson's treatise of Kidlat's text begins with his own feeling of new forms of political art within the modern as one "dimly stirring in the general area of the didactic" (Jameson 1992, 188). By cognitive mapping, harnessing the energies for the higher cognitive function, the idea "has the advantage of involving concrete content (imperialism, world system, subalternity, dependency and hegemony) while necessarily involving a program of formal analysis of a new kind" (Jameson 1992, 189). Such is the interest in Kidlat Tahimik's films. These films explore new cartographies which take cartography and circumnavigation as their own themes. Kidlat has four full length films and one work-in-progress, *Magellan's Slave*. Together with *Perfumed Nightmare*, he has done *Who Invented the Yoyo?*, *Turumba*, and *Yankee*.

Kidlat himself makes the journey into this world. After he tore his Wharton MBA diploma in 1972, he went to Norway and worked in a farm. He then moved to Germany for the Olympics, hoping to make a fast buck and have a whole year's vacation afterwards (this got hitched with the Israeli massacre). He then moved into a hippie commune where he found "cosmic intervention" and consequently, his artistic direction. That was when he decided to return to the Philippines and finish *Perfumed Nightmare* in 1977.

Most of Kidlat's films journey to the "First World" or are wholly set in the "First World." The center becomes the locus of "Third World" realizations of the knowledge on technology and traditions. This cast a new dimension to Jameson's valorization of Kidlat's cartography. As a "Third World" cultural representative, Kidlat's value becomes a site of contestation. Jameson (1992, 211) envisions Kidlat's *Perfumed Nightmare* as "another jeepney that ferries its way back and forth between First and Third Worlds." From the vantage position of my own subject position, however, this dimension results in the problematic of a Philippine cultural representative of the "Third World." This can be taken as either the cultural representative isn't representative enough/at all or that the cultural representative has become a "Third World" transcultural subject for the "First World" critic.

### Five Motifs in "Perfumed Nightmare"

With this caution in mind, let me now raise five interrelated motifs that Jameson also discussed in his analysis. The discussions of these motifs—the jeepney, West as site of realization, Kidlat-as-clown, the body, and the travelogue—provide issues of local social and cultural conditions out of which Jameson and Kidlat's texts emerged. The first motif, the jeepney, suits Jameson and Kidlat with a postmodern/"Third World" metaphor. The jeepney, a reinvention of the G.I. jeeps left behind after World War II, has been rehashed to fill the demand for transportation. The jeepney remains as the primary form of local transportation in the Philippines. The jeepney, in time, is transformed from parody (making good sense out of a technology for war) to pastiche (as jeepney decor has combined religious icons with Hollywood iconography with other personalized cultural and economic emblems of the time). Thus for Kidlat, the jeepney is parody; for Jameson, it is pastiche. Through this pastiche, the "Third World" is transported in partial/full view for the "First World." The cultural artifact is further engaged in a "Third World-ing." Again recall Jameson's reverberating words: "The film is another jeepney that ferries its way back and forth between First and Third Worlds." The film is reduced into pastiche, yet the only revelation admissible in this pastiche serves the need of the "First World." The film becomes a "First World" medium to transact with the "Third World." Kidlat's film is used as a service vehicle for delivering the "Third World" goods to "First World" sites, and the "First World" goods

to "Third World" sites. Economic zones and power divides are reified in this version of comprador and transnational cultural practices.

Furthermore, in *Perfumed Nightmare*, the journey begins and ends in a Philippine village. The realization of modernism and traditionalism, however, occurs in the "First World." The binary structures are reified: "First World" remains the site of modernity and rationality while the "Third World" remains the site of nativism and rituals. Both are equally marked in nostalgia: the site of modernity becomes the site for mourning its loss; the site of nativism becomes the site for mourning the non-existent pure. Kidlat's journey in *Perfumed Nightmare* leads to disavowal of Western technology and the reinforcement of fictional and religious lores as the defense against its intrusion.

This leads to another motif already mentioned—where the space of realization is laid out and staked. "The lesson is learned in Paris instead of Manila" (Jameson 1992, 198, 203–5). Jameson mentions this in two instances and allegorizes the site in terms of substitution of referents, eventually to become a didactic "Third World" lesson to the "First World." He says, "we ('First World') are free to attribute our amusement to the 'objective situation' or to the absurdity of its protagonist indifferently" (Jameson 1992, 194). Through the gesticulations of the clown (the "narcissistic sentimentalism of the Kidlat persona"), the "First World" audience is empowered to act with greater rationality. The "Third World," as metaphorized in the jeepney-as-ferry, becomes the agent for greater postmodern enlightenment of the "First World." While for the native, as Franz Fanon said, "objectivity is always against him (sic)."

This reification of the "First/Third World" binary is also problematic in Jameson's likening of Kidlat as "first and foremost a clown" (like Chaplin) which "underscores his essential distance from all contemporary filmmaking" (Jameson 1992, 190). Jameson further adds that through the "elasticity of the clown's body," the significant tactile interiors of the postmodern landscape are laid bare for exploration and articulation. Jameson makes a thorough argument about this which also posits the problem of the academization of the "Third World." Interpreters of Jameson have lauded this complicity. From the Jamesonian centerpiece, for example, Cohen (1992, 339) concludes that "Marxist work is a sign that the generation of the 1960s has come of academic age."

Jameson is specifying a model of articulating the liberatory potentials in the space of self-reflexivity which can direct to individual

and social liberative agenda. However, where actual people are concerned, the figure of the clown is problematic. In the instance where the "Third World" filmmaker is able to play with Jameson's graces, the figure of the clown works well, as in Kidlat Tahimik's filmmaking strategy for *Perfumed Nightmare*:

It started with a broad, broad storyline. I know my beginning, middle and end. But most of my film start in the editing table. I collect sequences and shots. Once I'm on the editing table, I start to connect them . . . What do I see, it maybe a landscape. And when I reshuffle, maybe I'll see a portrait. (Mata 1993, 44)

Kidlat then becomes true to Jameson's words, "the jeepney that ferries its way back and forth between First and Third Worlds with dignified hilarity." However, that Kidlat has made the film foremost for the "First World" is something else. Kidlat gets his financing from institutions in Germany, Europe and the U.S. This film has become his calling card in generating funds for current and future projects. Consequently, Kidlat's works attract the film festival audience. The film is hardly seen in the Philippines except in rare festival circuits and small screenings. And when it is seen, it is mostly by the elite intellectuals of the middle and upper class. The usage of English, furthermore, has locally narrowed the audience reach of the film. This then is not at all totally amusing. That Kidlat speaks to "First World" audience is an equally valid voice. That Kidlat is making films foremost for "First World" validation is problematic. Kidlat then constructs himself as the transcultural "Third World" subject able to do the ferrying of wares, and as alluded to, one that does not reciprocally rebound to equal benefits between "First" and "Third" worlds. As Ahmad (1987, 210) has pointed out in Jameson's reinclusion of the "Third World" in world literature, "instead of claiming straightforward exclusion (or inclusion in Kidlat's case), it is perhaps useful to inquire how the principle of selective incorporation works in relation to texts produced outside the metropolitan countries."

The body of people, as Jameson too has noted, becomes the absent other of social reality. This is the fourth motif. The "Third World" body is distinguished in rituals from the "First World" corporate body. For Jameson, this gives Kidlat the upperhand when compared to Godard's "pointless explosion of violence and scandal" (201). Through the agent of the clown, the body is reinscribed in the place of rituals. Kidlat uses the ritual of circumcision in refiguring

the "Third World" body. Jameson excessively uses still photos of the circumcision ritual in refiguring the "Third World" body. Furthermore, Jameson's absence of commentary on the feminist angling of this ritual reifies the structuring of the masculinist and colonialist imperatives on the "Third World" feminine. In the film only men speak, only men are transformed. The mother and Virgin Mary figures hold the place of the symbolic which catapult the men to the essential realization on technology and traditions.

The body becomes the site of the travelogue, the last motif. Though Jameson thinks the film is not a travelogue, the very process of inclusion/exclusion of images directs attention to this narrative mode. The geography of a Philippine village is reinscribed in the "Third World" body. Scenes of men's flagellation of their bodies, schoolchildren's bodies performing mass exercise drills, beauty queens' bodies on parade floats, have all localized the geography of the Balian in summer in the bodies of men, women and children. The configuration of bodies and its condensation in a temporal span lead Jameson to theorize its connection with a utopian space.

The jeepney factory is valorized as a space to counter the effects of postmodernism. Jameson thinks that this space offers an alternative labor-capital relationship: "the jeepney factory is a space of human labor which does not know the structural oppression of the assembly line . . . thereby liberating its subjects from tyrannies of form and of the pre-programmed" (Jameson 1992, 210). Jameson is completely wrong to create and believe in this utopia. The jeepney factory may be a site of "Third World" innovation of bodies in production, but the laws that govern the site are still those of labor and capital. Jameson's academic fictionalization of the jeepney factory is similar to the way travelogues have been used to ply the tourism trade. The exoticized other is transformed to a utopian space (whether as utmost site of liberation for the academe and new social movements or leisure for the tourism enterprise).

These motifs then have a commonality—they act as mediation for Jameson between the "First" and "Third Worlds." This ferrying, the dropping off and picking of produce, however is still tied to the colonial/neocolony relations. The "Third World" is made to act as market for source of raw materials and market for finished goods in imperialist fashion underlying this academic discourse.

However, what Kidlat and Jameson have prefigured in their texts are significant interventions to the still lacking involvement with the "Third World." "First World" involvements in the past have gener-

ally been those marked by continued exploitation of the "Third World." This residual, however, remains in their texts. Kidlat of the "Third World" makes a film using the resources and technologies of the "Third World" and the finance backing of the "First World." Kidlat shows his film in the "First World." The "First World" likens it to a "Third World." The "First World" critic incorporates and distinguishes the film in its academic circuits. The problem seems to be systemic. The reification and transformation of the structures involve yet are "beyond" Jameson and Kidlat's texts.

Postmodernism calls for some specifying and historicizing modes. When Jameson mentions that *Perfumed Nightmare* is not a direct intervention to Marcos' dictatorial regime because of its lack of connecting images to the regime, he is limited by his lack of a "native informant" position. In the film, the town's patron saint is St. Mark, known locally as San Marcos. The cultural regime of rituals can therefore be paralleled to the political culture of the Marcos dictatorship. Thus one must always foreground one's own subject position in relation to the text under consideration. This is especially true as Kidlat engages in a kind of strategic essentialism with his own text.<sup>5</sup> Thus, I too have exposed my contradiction, earlier describing Kidlat as working solely for the First World audience. His films do allow for a certain localized reading, one that I myself have generated based on my subject position.

## Conclusion

This note, hopefully, has become another engagement with Jameson's text. Specifically dealing with the Kidlat chapter in *Geopolitical Aesthetics*, I tried to resituate the film in the local social and cultural conditions out of which the text emerged. My position, informed by my lived experience in a "Third World" center (Manila, a historically privileged and problematic national position in the Philippines), is to review Jameson's points as a way of interrogating his assumptions of a "Third World." My point was not to inevitably conjure a specialized fantasy of a national Filipino identity nor to interrogate Jameson's discourse from a "neutral" position. Jameson presents a doubling of the "Third World," bringing forth a strategy of eliminating the "Third World" as the logic of late capitalism yet at the same time staking political potentials for postmodernism in the "Third World."

Perhaps then the jeepney can be refigured as a site of postmodern resistance and complicity. The coordinated jeepney strikes mark the actual effecting of the protest in very base terms. Protests of this kind usually are linked to imperialism (rise of oil prices, International Monetary Bank-World Bank policies, cultural imperialism, etc.). The ingenious reinvention of the vehicle of war is further reproduced as site of community and national protest. The lesson learned is that the protest will not be felt if there is no unity in the call for action. However, it is also the site of complicity. The jeepney strike is class based. The marginalized are further burdened in the politicization of the circuits of this public transportation network. In the protest, they are forced to walk while the middle and upper class are ferried by private cars and taxis. The strike is also gender specific. Women experience greater harassment from the walk home and are still expected to do household work.

Jameson does not know this (yet). Writings such as his forewarn future engagements in the unproblematized acceptance of the "Third World" and another term, "geopolitical aesthetics." Jameson derives this aesthetic strategy from the interventionist ideology of the Cold War era: "geopolitics began with the premise that new technology had so narrowed the gap between nations that developments half a world away could, as never before, vitally effect national security" (Hunt 1987, 152). Thus, in the name of national security, the industrial military establishment intervenes to contain any threat. As the Cold War discourse is replaced by postmodern rhetorics, the critic then reifies the colonialist position, intervening and conquering the "Third World" (again!) for the "First World."

### Notes

1. The essay is based on a paper he read in 1982 and originally published in *New Left Review*, 1984.

2. Refer to Stam (1990). The article was published in this special issue, "Discourse of the Other: Postcoloniality, Positionality and Subjectivity," ed. Hamid Naficy and Teshome H. Gabriel.

3. Refer to Shohat (1990; 1991).

4. Examples of these engagements are Davis (1985); Preziosi (1987); and Kellner (1989).

5. "Foregrounding one's subject position" and "strategic essentialism" are concepts indebted to Gayatri Spivak.

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