Rituals of Remaindered Life in the Films of Kidlat Tahimik

Alison R. Boldero

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation

RITUALS OF REMAINDERED LIFE IN THE FILMS
OF KIDLAT TAHIMIK

by

ALISON R. BOLDERO

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019
Rituals of Remaindered Life in the Films of Kidlat Tahimik

by

Alison R. Boldero

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

________________________________________    ______________________________________
Date                                            Karen R. Miller
                                                Thesis Advisor

________________________________________    ______________________________________
Date                                            Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis
                                                Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Rituals of Remained Life in the Films of Kidlat Tahimik

by

Alison R. Boldero

Advisor: Karen R. Miller

Kidlat Tahimik, who achieved international renown during the Marcos regime for his film Perfumed Nightmare (Mababangong Bangungot, 1976), is relatively unknown outside of international film circles. Considered a pioneer of Third Cinema in the Philippines, a radical film movement from Latin America that has since inspired similar movements globally, Tahimik challenged cultural hegemony in a postcolonial, post-World War II Philippines through the production of imperfect films. This paper looks to three of Tahimik's films - Perfumed Nightmare, Turumba (1983), and Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow? (Bakit Dilaw Ang Kulay ng Bahaghari, 1994) - for an alternative Filipino narrative as the current president Rodrigo Duterte seeks to overpower an already weak Philippine democracy using shades of the country's traumatic nationalist mythology under the guise of law and order. Using anthropological concepts of body and space in collaboration with film analysis and theory, this paper investigates Tahimik's concern for the rituals and traditions of an other Philippines remaindered by globalization, military occupation, and political upheaval so that we might also confront the same as a form of resistance.
# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. iv  
Table of Contents.................................................................................................................................. v  
List of Figures.......................................................................................................................................... vi  
Introduction............................................................................................................................................ 1  
   (Dis)order from Chaos.......................................................................................................................... 3  
   Locating Ritual in Embodied Space...................................................................................................... 7  
Chapter 1: Bamboo Dreams of Space Travel in *Perfumed Nightmare* ................................................. 11  
   Go West, Young Man .......................................................................................................................... 13  
   Rocket Ships from Bamboo ............................................................................................................... 17  
Chapter 2: Devotional Labor in *Turumba*............................................................................................. 24  
   “The Madonna is Waiting” ............................................................................................................... 30  
Chapter 3: (Dis)placed Attachment in *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* ......................... 36  
   Filipino (Dis)placement of Third Cinema .......................................................................................... 41  
   Ambivalence after Revolution .......................................................................................................... 46  
Conclusion.............................................................................................................................................. 50  
Works Cited............................................................................................................................................ 51
List of Figures

Fig. 1 Still from Tahimik, *Perfumed Nightmare* (0:11:24) ................................................................. 12
Fig. 2 Still from Tahimik, *Perfumed Nightmare* (0:03:45) ................................................................. 13
Fig. 3 Still from Tahimik, *Perfumed Nightmare* (1:16:51) ................................................................. 21
Fig. 4 Still from Tahimik, *Turumba* (1:24:10) .................................................................................... 33
Fig. 5 Still from Tahimik, *Turumba* (1:24:25) .................................................................................... 33
Fig. 6 Still from Tahimik, *Turumba* (1:24:41) .................................................................................... 33
Fig. 7 Still from Tahimik, *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (0:00:51) ......................... 37
Fig. 8 Still from Tahimik, *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (0:47:05) ......................... 44
Fig. 9 Still from Tahimik, *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (1:24:19) ......................... 49
Introduction

Kidlat Tahimik’s work was recommended to me by Aily Nash, a classmate of mine at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), who helped organize a retrospective tour of his work when he visited the United States (U.S.) in 2012 (Nash 74). In an interview with Tahimik featured in Speaking Directly: Oral Histories of the Moving Image, Nash frames her conversation around his trust in the cosmos. She describes how he began making films, his creative relationships with other filmmakers, and his script-less storytelling style. From Tahimik’s answers and in an addendum he sent Nash that she includes in her interview, trusting the cosmos means “weaving the cosmic narrative” in collaboration with the natural world (84). In his search to portray his most authentic story, Tahimik places full confidence in “cosmic detours” or, in other words, the creative deviations that occur organically after a project’s conception during his filmmaking process due to unexpected circumstances.

In “Cups-of-Gas Filmmaking vs. Full Tank-cum-Credit Card Fillmaking,” an essay by Tahimik that he presented at “The Challenge of the Third World” conference hosted by Duke University in September of 1986, he indicates that much of his filmmaking is left up to chance and believes that his “lack of resources can become a blessing because [his] time frame escapes this deadline obsession, and allows [him] to discover motifs” (83). By choosing not to profit from Perfumed Nightmare’s success after his film debuted at the Berlin Film Festival in 1977 and won the Prix de la Critique Internationale and both of the Catholic and Ecumenical Jury prizes (Sison, “Perfumed Nightmare” 182), Tahimik establishes his dedication to a script-less filmmaking style that resists commercial movie production, a decision that is “partly a necessity dictated by Third World realities and partly a choice to avoid the formulas dictated by bankrollers” who finance film industries like Hollywood (Tahimik 82). Although he acknowledges that the proximity of American consumer culture in the Philippines makes it an unavoidable influence, he resists the
mentality that time is money and turns the necessity of needing an open-ended production schedule due to a lack of resources in the Third World into an artistic discipline, requiring patience and a keener eye:

Perhaps because film is the most expensive, most technologically dependent art form, there is a need for some form of discipline. One has to discipline oneself to save up for the next cup of gas, to buy a roll of film. One has to have the discipline to have enough light to enter the filmshutter, or to focus to register a good image. (Tahimik 82)

Tahimik learned how to use his iconic 16mm Bolex camera when he found himself at a commune for artists during the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany (Nash 77), and he filmed *Perfumed Nightmare* on a US$10,000 budget “at a time when the average cost of a Filipino film was US$100,000” (Dixon and Zonn 297). While formulaic blockbuster movies with big budgets are meant to draw bigger audiences in order to yield the biggest profits, Tahimik accepts his craft’s financial burdens and instead regards each unexpected circumstance as *objet trouvé*, a phrase borrowed from Marcel Duchamp’s readymade art meaning “found object” (81). Though Tahimik admits in his essay that *Perfumed Nightmare’s* success could have provided the exposure needed to find Full Tank-cum-Credit Card Fillmaking (FTC) funding, he finds the systematic commodification of culture through film does not align with his artistic intent and contradicts his trust in the cosmos.

Unfortunately, Tahimik’s devotion to his craft has limited his viewership to film festival audiences and film scholars interested in Southeast Asia’s Third Cinema movements. Although many physical copies of his films are only available on Video Home System (VHS) cassettes with restrictions on who can borrow and where they can be viewed, I found after further investigation that *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow? (Bakit Dilaw Ang Kulay ng Bahaghari, 1994)* was uploaded to YouTube, a video-sharing website, on July 29, 2017, while *Perfumed Nightmare*
(Mababangong Bangungot, 1976) and Turumba (1983) are both available as streaming video for those with an Amazon Prime account. Aside from the dubious availability of Why is Yellow?, finding Perfumed Nightmare and Turumba with subtitles was an unexpected boon for my research, and I take this opportunity to highlight that the digitization and online accessibility of film is vital to both the preservation of culture and history as well as the expansion of viewership necessary for justifying the resources needed to preserve this material.

Kidlat Tahimik was unknown to me until Nash shared his work. I lack the “lived experience” of scholars such as Roland B. Tolentino, who study Tahimik from within the Philippines. My relative lack of familiarity with Philippine society, as a Filipino American viewer raised in the U.S., contributes to my anxiety regarding the authenticity of my research (Tolentino 123). Nonetheless, this paper considers Tahimik’s work a paradigm for an alternative Filipino narrative and seeks to understand how it has thrived for decades in the shadow of world wars, under a dictatorship, and through a tumultuous democracy.

(Dis)order from Chaos

Military occupation, colonization, and revolution have constructed a theater of constant and unpredictable change that spans centuries where Filipino people simultaneously negotiate and remember trauma as their lives are altered by those in power. In Perfumed Nightmare, villagers relocate a bamboo hut after construction for a highway forces a rural community to relocate. In Turumba, a boy chooses between his father and his village when foreign markets draw his father to Europe. In Why is Yellow?, Tahimik and his family experience a decade of social and political unrest while they raise their three children. Such scenes depicting the literal displacement of vulnerable characters such as villagers, children, and families, especially against the backdrop of Luzon’s rural provinces, capture a distressingly impermanent quality of Filipino life traceable
throughout the country’s colonial period as subjects of Spain and, after Spain’s forces were driven out during the Philippine Revolution in 1898, the U.S.

Spain had left behind a colonial framework for incoming U.S. forces to build a formal institutional infrastructure that altered Filipino society and allowed for the installation of an Insular Government run by American politicians. A strong military presence supported the Insular Government up until it was decided that the Philippines was capable of governing itself according to Western democratic expectations. Christopher N. Magno and Philip C. Parnell describe several legislative acts in “The Imperialism of Race: Class, Rights and Patronage in the Philippine City” that oiled the path for U.S. colonization of the Philippines in the early 1900s. The Reconcentration Act of 1903, for example, allowed the U.S. military to round up and relocate rural Filipino populations from their homes outside of the army’s reach and into garrisoned villages to prevent pockets of resistance from gaining traction. By corralling the Filipino masses, the U.S. military undertook a “scorched earth policy” outside of these controlled environments by eliminating resources such as crops and livestock to eradicate Filipino revolutionaries. Doing so helped ease the way for infrastructural changes meant to establish what the U.S. government felt was a civilized colony, made in America’s benevolent image, setting “Filipinos on a path that would forcibly induct them into the schools, libraries, and other gateways to western civilisation established inside the urban colony’s walls” (Magno and Parnell 74). Various U.S. policies were passed to exert power over the populace, militarizing law and order to discourage Filipinos from organizing or joining nationalist movements and censoring symbols that have not been approved by authorities so as to control national narratives across media.

Though I previously describe Tahimik's cups-of-gas filmmaking style as indicative of a chaotic environment rife with unexpected “cosmic detours” – creative deviations from an original plan, if any beyond knowing to carry his Bolex camera at all times – this paper focuses on his
portrayal of ritual, an agent of order on the surface, as it is framed by his “cut-n-paste” Third Cinema aesthetic and transformed into disorder for the purpose of imagining and preserving alternative Filipino narratives through film. To define disorder within the context of Tahimik’s films, I look to Nicholas B. Dirk’s chapter titled “Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact” from *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. While he acknowledges the traditional relationship between order and ritual, observations from his time studying the festival of Aiyanar, the principal village deity worshipped by the people of Pudukkottai in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, led him to consider ritual as a site of resistance and disorder when a factional dispute in the village prevented the festival from happening:

> As we increasingly, and from differing perspectives, examine ordinary life, the fixtures of ordinariness thus give way to fractures, and we see that struggle is everywhere, even where it is least dramatic, and least visible. Even in the heart of anthropology, ritual now seems to be as much about contest and struggle as about power and order. Struggle becomes visible where previously we could not see it, a trope for a critical vision of the world. (Dirks 501)

Dirks challenges the notion that rituals are static spaces and not also sites for cultural construction (484). He describes the people’s excitement as ritualistic preparations begin for the festival of Aiyanar, noting how this festival highlights the village’s hierarchy in how those in power participate, and also the disappointment when he finds out that the festival will not happen and what that symbolizes in the case for maintaining local order: “I also learned that while at one level, the festival was about the reestablishment of control over disorder of a threatening nature, it was also about the range of possibilities that existed precisely at the moment of maximal contact between order and disorder” (Dirks 490).

Similarly in Tahimik’s films, we see many festivals and processions, common occurrences
in the Philippines that mark harvests and religious holidays. To establish this paper’s interpretation of ritual as disorder and resistance as argued by Dirks, I point to one of the main plot points of Turumba where the father, in choosing to prioritize his family’s growing business, leaves behind his role in the Turumba festival, triggering conflict between him and his son, Kadu, the film’s protagonist. When Kadu goes against his father’s wishes, symbolizing a resistance to the draw of capitalism, and ultimately chooses to remain at home when his father flies to Munich to expand the family business, Tahimik features a final procession in the rain that is celebratory but bittersweet, an aesthetic we will explore further in this paper’s second chapter. I am interested in how Tahimik portrays rituals as sites for both the preservation and construction of culture. Through his Bolex’s lens, we also see how Filipinos negotiate the changes they endure from outside forces. In Tahimik’s films, audiences see that his examples of trauma - the construction of a highway, the growing absence of the father as he pursues monetary gain abroad, the election of a democratic leader - are not dramatized as one might expect after seeing Hollywood’s films but painted in subtle brushstrokes. These conflicts are then framed by negotiations with globalization, the unrelenting approach of Western progress, and the director’s own struggle to maintain artistic autonomy.

Many of Tahimik’s characters, some he plays himself, symbolize this struggle for autonomy in how they are positioned within each film to portray alternative Filipino narratives in adverse environs. For the purpose of identifying alternative Filipino narratives in Tahimik’s films, I draw inspiration from Neferti X. M. Tadiar’s “Remaindered Life of Citizen-Man, Medium of Democracy” and her examination of “other modes of sensorial experience and perceptibility and forms of human social life, which are remained, devalued and/or rendered illegible in the reconfiguration of natives according to the normative ideals and structures of liberal democracy” (Tadiar 464). She examines how sociopolitical instability in the aftermath of the Philippine
Revolution (1896 - 1898) provided an opportunity for the U.S. to construct both the urban space it would occupy during the insular government’s tenure and notions of identity for Filipino citizens using technologies provided by America’s first Information Revolution. Tadiar considers Filipino film one type of media technology that provides a space “for both the refurbishing and capture of remaindered forms of sociality, sensual being, personhood and mediatic modes” (482). Indeed, her scrutiny of cinema’s role in the emerging media apparatuses of U.S. imperial governmentality exposes the chasm Tahimik must cross as a Filipino artist working in an industry meant to regulate and generate examples of the ideal Commonwealth citizen-subject through the standardization of films for consumption by Filipino people (485).

Locating Ritual in Embodied Space

_Perfumed Nightmare_ begins with a ritual. A voiceover describes a bridge, referred to as the Bridge of Life, and the only way in and out of Balian, a village of Pangil located in the province of Laguna in the Philippines. According to the voiceover, first spoken in Tagalog and then overlapped in the English translation, this bridge was once bamboo until Spanish colonizers destroyed and rebuilt it with what appears to be concrete. U.S. Army Engineers attempted to widen it for military vehicles but could not do so safely due to strong winds from Amok Mountain. Although Tahimik begins to shape for audiences a Philippines that exists in the shadow of World War II and foreign occupation, his Philippines is not necessarily bleak or defeated. Kidlat Tahimik, playing the film's main character of the same name, enters the next scene and says, “I am Kidlat Tahimik. I choose my vehicle and I can cross this bridge.” This declaration establishes the Bridge of Life as a place of transformation and a way out of Balian. Kidlat repeats this phrase again and, as audiences will witness throughout _Perfumed Nightmare_, speaks into existence through the character he plays his ambitions as both a filmmaker and a Filipino.
In “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” Bjørn Thomassen locates liminality as a space instead of a concept and is useful for my reading of Tahimik’s portrayal of rituals within his films. Thomassen's study of liminality and its history in rituals nearly avoids defining the concept entirely but for his conviction that in “liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome” and that liminality “is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and ‘reality’ itself, can be carried in different directions” (5). Tahimik uses ritualistic imagery in his films to tie together his captivation with indigenous traditions and his assertion that art can contribute to their preservation. His art represents the Philippines as a neocolonial state in the decades following independence, challenging dominant ideas about what it means to be Filipino. Through characters like Kidlat, Kadu, and Tahimik’s own neighbors, he demonstrates the postcolonial realities of portraying Filipino cultural history. This paper adopts Thomassen’s concept of liminality as space to locate within the camera’s frame the remaindered Filipino and the transformative possibilities found in Tahimik’s use of rituals, rites, and ceremonies.

In an interview led by Tobias Hering and Tilman Baumgärtel during the 2016 retrospective "Cosmos and Nightmare: The Films of Kidlat Tahimik" in Berlin, Tahimik discusses the Third World circumstances that affected his casting choices when filming Turumba. Although he explains that the decision to cast himself or relatives in his film's leading roles is partly out of practicality, as funding for his films was never certain despite his international renown, his films take on a semi-autobiographical nature through these choices. Inserting himself or relatives into his art through voiceovers, casting, and documentary footage, complicates even the simplest of narratives in the ways he increases his proximity to his art. Typical of Third Cinema’s guerrilla filmmaking style, almost all of the scenes in his films rely on real locations and are rarely shot on constructed movie sets. Though Tahimik acknowledges that a steady source of funds would help him create films faster, independence from corporate filmmaking allows him to focus on the
invisible Filipino. Independent films such as *Perfumed Nightmare*, *Turumba*, and *Why is Yellow?* “do not need as large an audience to repay its costs, [so they] can be more personal and controversial” (Bordwell and Thompson 31). Tahimik “chooses his vehicle” so to speak, calling back to that scene on the Bridge of Life where the character he plays takes control of his journey. This aesthetic choice, borne out of his cups-of-gas filmmaking style and in the tradition of a global Third Cinema movement, allows audiences to view films such as *Perfumed Nightmare*, where Tahimik plays the main character, as ethnographic narratives where Tahimik embeds his own Filipino body in a Philippine space of his creation.

This paper explores what Tahimik is able to achieve in how he positions himself and his art as a conduit through which Filipino history and culture pours. In order to thoroughly perceive the Filipino body and the space it occupies in Tahimik’s films, this paper looks to Setha M. Low’s discussion on “the body as a moving, speaking, cultural space in and of itself” in “Embodied Space(s): Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture” (16). She declares that embodied space “is the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form,” indicating that the physical body’s spatial orientation intersects with more abstract notions of lived experience and agency (10). These intersections create places or dimensions of space as defined by the body’s interactions with the world, a useful paradigm for looking at Tahimik's films critically as well as aesthetically.

I seek to understand how Tahimik’s efforts in controlling the narrative through his rejection of corporate media practices allow for an independent storytelling style that is both representative of the Third Cinema movement’s spirit and authentically Filipino. In an interview with Elvira Mata that Tolentino includes in “Jameson and Kidlat,” a critique of Fredric Jameson’s arguments in his postmodern reading of *Perfumed Nightmare* in the final chapter of his book, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Tahimik explains that *Perfumed Nightmare*
began on the editing table as he pieced together his collection of sequences and shots (121). His collaboration with the cosmos, a phrase Tahimik uses to describe his conviction in his craft as it is tested and shaped by uncertain circumstances brought on by intermittent funding, sociopolitical crisis, and natural disasters, thus embodies Filipino culture’s enduring struggle for autonomy throughout history.
Chapter 1: Bamboo Dreams of Space Travel in Perfumed Nightmare

Perfumed Nightmare, arguably one of Tahimik's most well-known films in the international community, follows the transnational journey of a Filipino jeepney driver played by and named after Kidlat himself. Kidlat, the character in the film, leaves his home of Balian, a barangay or neighborhood of Pangil located in the province of Laguna in the Philippines, for Paris and Munich in Europe. When he is not driving his jeepney, Kidlat serves as the president of the Wernher von Braun Fan Club of Balian and is an avid listener to the Voice of America (VOA), a U.S. government-funded international radio broadcast. Although Kidlat’s patronage of the VOA illustrates a starry-eyed fascination with space exploration and Western technology, his admiration for Wernher von Braun specifically, whose fame from his contributions to U.S. space technology is overshadowed by his allegiance to the Nazi regime as a young scientist in Germany, symptomatically implies that the sort of progress Kidlat is interested in does not always prioritize the good of humanity (Penley 11).

After the opening sequence featuring Kidlat on the Bridge of Life, Tahimik begins the film’s narrative with a montage depicting the everyday lives of Balian’s townspeople. Kidlat’s primary occupation as a jeepney driver establishes his role in the community and connection to his neighbors. The jeepney driver is a vital figure in the rural Philippines, able to transport those who must otherwise walk miles to their destinations along with their belongings. Kidlat jokes that one of his most important passengers is a statue of San Marcos, patron saint of Balian, who is said to have protected the barangay during World War II. The irony of Kidlat’s idolization of von Braun bubbles to the surface here, as audiences are reminded that the Philippines they are watching survives in the shadow of world wars, military occupation, and political unrest. Even the jeepney, which was once a military vehicle but has since been painted extravagantly and is driven by a friendlier face, represents a postwar history salvaged and made useful by those who have been
most affected. By characterizing Kidlat as the president of the Wernher von Braun Fan Club of Balian, Tahimik succeeds in his initial portrayal of Kidlat as earnest but naive. Kidlat’s enthrallment with space travel is represented in the film by a stream of radio broadcasts from VOA reporting advances in American space exploration, which plays over everyday scenes of townspeople going about their daily lives. The way Tahimik layers motifs atop each other using sounds, visuals, and historical subtexts succeeds in creating a lush picture, at odds with his imperfect filmmaking style but more beautiful for it.

Kidlat sends a letter to the VOA asking what the first words spoken were when man landed on the Moon, explaining that he did not have his transistor radio then. He reads his letter in a voiceover layered on top of the short scene pictured above in Fig. 1 where he inserts a magazine cutout of a Miss Universe contestant beside an iconic image of Madonna and Child. The collage’s effect is comedic and achieves absurdity but simultaneously represents Tahimik’s cut-n-paste filmmaking method and the Philippines’ postcolonial, patchwork culture.
Kidlat's journey and his subsequent disillusionment with Western culture in *Perfumed Nightmare* invites audiences to witness Tahimik's own negotiation of Filipino life after World War II. Tahimik locates evidence of military occupation in the cultural society that survived and, less explicitly, in the art that is created by Kidlat and his peers and the artists that came after. The contrast between local Filipino life, characterized by religious traditions and children at play in the street, and the world that Kidlat believes is out there but truly only exists within his imagination creates a sense of longing for adventure and knowledge implied to be unattainable if Kidlat remains in Balian. Although he admires the spirit and ingenuity of his friends and family, Kidlat's aspirations for a life outside of his village are referred to by his crossings of the only bridge into and out of Balian. The film begins with Kidlat describing how he first crossed the bridge alone as a child. “I am Kidlat Tahimik. I choose my vehicle and I can cross this bridge,” he says in a voiceover as his character on screen crosses the bridge pulling a toy car on a long piece of string.
behind him, symbolizing his first crossing at three years old. One municipal parade montage later, Kidlat is shown in Fig 2, crossing the bridge again but this time he literally pulls a full-sized jeepney at the end of a rope wrapped around his body as his character clarifies that he can cross all bridges “to freedom.” The Bridge of Life functions here as a liminal space in the narrative, a stage or altar whereupon Perfumed Nightmare’s protagonist acts out his journey from the Philippines to Europe.

The imagery in Fig. 2 is both comical and uplifting at first but takes on biblical connotations upon repeated viewings of the film, signaled by Tahimik’s portrayal of religious rituals and Catholic processions in the background of scenes from town. Kidlat, who literally pulls his jeepney behind him across the bridge, appears to take on the image of Jesus who carried the cross he would be crucified upon during the procession to Calgary. Audiences can also read Kidlat’s story as similar to the parable of the Prodigal Son, who leaves home and travels to the land of Wernher von Braun to experience Western progress though it is implied that he returns home empty-handed. I introduce these other readings of the film’s opening to consider the symptomatic meanings that appear in Perfumed Nightmare, possibly unintentionally but as a result of similar symbols that reappear. Catholicism resides in Tahimik’s Philippines as simultaneously distinct but commonplace, a familiar feature of the home as seen in the framed reproduction of the Madonna and Child in Fig. 1 and the subject of worship and processions in the streets. Catholic religious imagery, deeply embedded in the Philippine imaginary, appears like a specter in Tahimik’s films either in the periphery or the forefront.

After the film’s introduction, Kidlat experiences a corporeal vision where a white carabao appears to him. Disturbed by this vision, Kidlat drives out to visit his best friend Kaya to discuss the vision’s implications. In “Kidlat Tahimik’s ‘Third World Projector’,,” Pavsek explicitly infers from the dialogue between Kidlat and Kaya that the white carabao functions as a stand-in for U.S.
culture and a “metaphor for U.S. commodity culture” (110):

**Kaya:** The white carabao is rare. It is born against nature. The white carabao is beautiful, but inside it’s cold and aggressive. One day Kidlat, you will understand that the beauty of the white carabao is like the sweetness of the chewing gum the American soldiers gave you. (0:18:47 – 0:19:12)

As if fulfilling his own prophecy, Kidlat begins driving around an American delegate and businessman visiting the area, Kidlat is invited to move with him to Paris where the American, referred to as Big Boss throughout the movie, oversees a gumball vending machine company. Balian marks his departure with a *despedida* or farewell celebration. They create a banner wishing him a safe and enjoyable journey while children perform various programs with dancing and singing. Kidlat, wearing a bamboo hat and a Barong Tagalog to respectfully signify the event’s importance, sits with his family on a raised platform to oversee the festivities and accept the community’s blessings before later boarding his plane. The camera’s quick cut from Kidlat surrounded by his community to Kidlat alone on a plane achieves place attachment in the way it juxtaposes two different affects. Through the abrupt separation between a familiar locale and the unknown, Tahimik establishes Kidlat’s strong connection with and the security he feels among his neighbors as the festival scene cuts from an above shot of the back of Kidlat’s head to him seated on a plane, traditional flute music drowned out by the encompassing sounds of turbulence (*Perfumed Nightmare* 0:53:42). Irwan Altman and Setha M. Low explore the relationship between people and spatial patterns in their book, *Place Attachment*, which provides a framework for understanding some of Tahimik’s choices. Tahimik consistently removes his characters from barangays in the Philippines or introduces opportunities for them to migrate away from these spaces. Tahimik splices the scene on the plane with memories of Kidlat’s life back home, featuring children laughing and interactions with his friends and family to represent the longing and sadness
the character feels he is leaving behind. Altman and Low emphasize that “affect, emotion and feeling are central to the concept” of place attachment. Tahimik represents Kidlat as anxious during his *despedida*, where he is sometimes shown standing to the side observing the festivities. While he has fantasized about exploring places outside of his village and crossing the Bridge of Life, Tahimik suggests that the reality of international travel and overseas labor produces emotions that are far beyond the control of Filipino migrants themselves.

The practice of leaving is a common occurrence for a nation with an economy that relies heavily on remittances or money sent from Filipinos living abroad. The 1970s marked the beginning of contemporary Filipino migration, a phenomenon that began as a temporary labor export policy. When the Marcos administration was unable to establish any long-term plans for boosting the economy, the Philippine economy grew to depend on these remittances indefinitely (Francisco and Rodriguez 360). Tahimik addresses this growing trend through travel narratives depicting similar experiences and related themes in all of his films.

In *Perfumed Nightmare*, Kidlat the character leaves his familiar homeland for Paris, France, and, briefly, Munich, Germany. Although it is never explained how, Kidlat is able to travel to Paris with his jeepney and is given a job refilling gumball machines when he is not befriending locals and exploring the city. Though the streets of Paris are physically different, the people Kidlat encounters are similar characters: children playing, elderly women shopping in open air markets, and vendors selling their wares. Kidlat befriends Parisian locals like the elderly Lola and Coco the cherry vendor in the outdoor market who in turn endear themselves to him through their interactions. By embedding himself in this community, Kidlat creates the beginnings of a new relationship with a place previously foreign to him. In Munich, Tahimik the director draws a similarity between the German laborers constructing a Zwiebelturm, or an onion-shaped tower, and the Filipino laborers who build jeepneys by hand at Sarao Motors. In the film, Kidlat the character
questions in a voiceover how the people he meets in Munich “could be so sentimental about old
technologies” when he explains to them how jeepneys are still handmade in the Philippines
(1:11:02 - 1:11:10). Zwiebelturms were once handmade but their construction has become
mechanized, and “the next Zwiebelturms will be factory-made” says one old man. Seeing how
much work goes into building one Zwiebelturm when a factory can make five an hour, Kidlat
appears to consider this progress, and returns to Paris. Back in Paris, the outdoor market is replaced
with a supermarché, or a supermarket, and Kidlat is outraged. What Kidlat does not see in Munich
but sees plainly in Paris is the destruction of older and traditional spaces, an experience described
by Fredric Jameson in “‘Art Naïf’ and the Admixture of Worlds” as the “late capitalist onslaught
on the classical capitalist city, something like the dialectic self-destruction of the First World and
its own internal social relations” (205).

Jameson considers this spatial performance of separation and attachment both a paradoxical
redirection strategy for addressing the economic changes occurring in the Philippines and as
references to Western schools of thought, which Tahimik would have been exposed to during his
time in Munich during the seventies. We see these themes explored in Tahimik’s films, the effects
of capitalism in Turumba and the political uprisings of the 1980s that changed the landscape of the
Philippines in Why is Yellow?. When Tahimik spoke into existence his agency at the beginning of
Perfumed Nightmare, repeating his name and purpose on the Bridge of Life, he was not only
expressing a desire to experience more than what can be had in Balian but also taking
responsibility for the knowledge he would gain in exchange.

Rocket Ships from Bamboo

Before Kidlat leaves Balian for Europe, his mother tells him the story of his father, who
Kidlat reminds her of. “You’re like your father, fascinated by the white man’s smile,” she says to
him. Although Kidlat believes he will one day be rich enough to take his mother away, she tells him the story of how his father, who was happy enough to drive a horse and buggy as a taxi like Kidlat currently does but with his jeepney, was given a rifle by a smiling Americano and convinced to join the Philippine Revolution rising up against the country’s Spanish colonizers. This story about Kidlat’s father is tied to how the U.S. government, which was unofficially allied with the Filipino people during the Philippine Revolution against Spain, obstructed Philippine independence when it was ceded to the U.S. by Spain as a part of the spoils of the Spanish-American war. When Kidlat’s father attempted to enter Manila, occupied by U.S. military, he was stopped by an American sentry on San Juan Bridge and killed, his corpse returned to his family with a military report attached that said “killed for trespassing on U.S. property” (0:37:18). In telling this story, Kidlat’s mother warns him of America’s duplicity, for to Americans like Big Boss who treats Kidlat as a pet but makes possible his journey to Europe, Filipinos are expendable.

Her story challenges her son’s notion that, like his idol Wernher von Braun who he has described as “that American immigrant who invented the rockets to the moon,” Kidlat would also find success in America one day. Kidlat and his father are not, however, equivalent to what Wernher von Braun was to America. Unlike Wernher von Braun, who the U.S. government allowed across its borders and granted citizenship in exchange for knowledge and technology, Kidlat cannot offer much that the U.S. would consider valuable. Accepting that her son will not be persuaded by her story, his mother gifts him the wooden horse she carved from the butt of Kidlat’s father’s rifle to bring with him on his travels. The scene then abruptly cuts to a close-up of her face as it looks straight into the camera as her voiceover emphasizes how easily the Philippines was sold to the U.S. by Spain, a detail that is repeated when the scene cuts abruptly again, this time to an extreme close-up of a pair of eyes.

These eyes belong to Kidlat’s best friend Kaya, who seems to function as a guiding
presence in his life. During this scene, Kidlat remembers the white carabao again as they walk through a familiar path past a waterfall in the jungle where children play in the pool below. Kidlat explains to Kaya that the first time he saw the white carabao was in a vision from his childhood when he and his friends were circumcised together by the waterfall. During the graphic procedure, Kidlat as a child had focused on the carabao’s strange and wooden shape perched in a leafless tree as he underwent this initiation ritual in the jungle and “became a man.” Pavsek compares this vision to Kaya’s warning, a prophecy fulfilled when Kidlat later sells chewing gum in the streets of Paris before he is disillusioned by the experience, citing the white carabao’s anesthetic properties when he states that the “carabao is a figure for a commodity culture that masks the pain it itself induces” (110).

Big Boss, who plans to sell his gumball vending machine company, invest in a denim factory in America, and take Kidlat with him, organizes a party before their departure where Big Boss invites many important figures who he feels are “more godly than your Wernher von Braun,” a statement that both mocks Kidlat’s idol and his dreams of space exploration (Perfumed Nightmare 1:21:07). During the party, a voice announces the opening of the new supermarché in French, which causes Kidlat to undergo another transformative experience as he begins to question the excesses of Western progress: “If the small chimneys work, why the super chimneys? If the small markets work, why supermarkets? If small airplanes work, why super flying machines?” (1:23:00). This transformative experience, where Kidlat questions the technological advancements that ultimately made possible his journey West, encapsulates what Roland B. Tolentino calls “West as site of realization,” one of five motifs in Perfumed Nightmare he explores in his paper “Jameson and Kidlat Tahimik.” In his article, Tolentino interrogates the authority of Jameson’s voice, noting that Jameson is a foreign critic who lacks familiarity with the nuances of Filipino society and appears to lean on the idea that the First and Third Worlds are separate spaces without overlap.
According Tolentino, the “West as site of realization” in this particular film is made possible through the reification of the First and Third Worlds as a binary structure where:

The “First World” remains a site of modernity and rationality while the “Third World” remains a 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. (Tolentino 120)

Though this reading neatly summarizes Perfumed Nightmare’s plot and marks the settings using familiar labels for a global economy hierarchy, Tolentino argues that reading the First and Third Worlds as only a binary structure diminishes the Philippines into a diluted Third World representation as seen through First World sensibilities. He also takes issue with Jameson’s claim that Kidlat and his jeepney, which he brings over to Europe and is seen driving through the streets of Paris, function only as a medium for bringing the Third World into the First World’s line of vision (Tolentino 119). Tolentino instead refigures the jeepney as a “site of postmodern resistance and complicity,” highlighting the unavoidable contradictions of living in a postcolonial landscape but also recognizing Tahimik’s respect for the jeepney and its history (124).

In “Confronting the Geopolitical Aesthetic: Fredric Jameson, The Perfumed Nightmare and the Perilous Place of Third Cinema,” Deborah Dixon and Leo Zonn agree with Tolentino’s concerns but also seek to understand the film’s position within Third Cinema as an opportunity to better understand the structure for Jameson’s cognitive map of Perfumed Nightmare. They felt that Tahimik’s film is embedded within but also transcends his local and regional cultural context as the director strives to confront and critically meditate on First World economics, technologies, and aesthetics” (Dixon and Zonn 296)
Later in *Perfumed Nightmare*, after the *supermarché* replaces the outdoor shops in Paris, Kidlat weeps and is scolded by Big Boss for crying like a baby. Kaya appears in a vision, staring straight into the camera much like Kidlat’s mother had, and addresses him immediately after in a vision that also appears to the audience. He sits within the camera’s frame, striking as he is shirtless and his butterfly tattoo is displayed prominently across his chest. This waist-high medium shot of his figure is a cinematic shot that typically means the subject is delivering information (Bordwell and Thompson 190):

**Kaya:** The ghost of progress visited us. Dear Kidlat, how are you? Do you remember the forest where you became a man? The government razed down the trees to make way for a new highway for tourists. (1:16:47 – 1:17:11)

The forest where Kidlat became a man is a reference to a conversation they have earlier in the film where Kidlat describes how he was circumcised as a child, a traumatic event he experienced with
his friends who underwent the same procedure together. Here, Tahimik is connecting the
destruction of the Philippine forest where Kidlat was transformed into adulthood to the
supermarché in Paris and the factory-made Zwiebelturms Munich. These links serve to escalate the
film’s tone from impotent frustration, illustrated by Kidlat throwing rocks at the supermarché, to
aggression as Kidlat appears to finally understand the destruction that comes before technological
advancement. A scene portraying a group of people moving a bamboo hut plays as Kaya’s
voiceover explains that the home of Kidlat’s mother had to be moved because of the highway’s
construction. Placing these events in close proximity together draws attention to the developmental
parallels between the West’s capitalist city and Kidlat’s rural Philippines, where spaces like the
outdoor market in Paris are as vulnerable as the bamboo hut. Yet unlike the hut, which was easily
moved with the help of neighbors, the cherry vendor’s wagon is left abandoned on the street in
Paris.

Despite this displacement, Kaya advises Kidlat that “one day [he] will know the quiet
strength of bamboo,” a confusing statement that appears to anger Kidlat, who has seen what
progress does to bamboo (Perfumed Nightmare 1:18:12). “Kaya, you cannot build rocket ships
from bamboo!” Kidlat exclaims, bitterly accepting that the land of Wernher von Braun is not what
he had built up in his mind. Tahimik here also acknowledges through Kidlat’s bitterness that
Western progress is far superior in its efficiency and omnipotence but rails against its eradication of
local spaces. Tahimik's own negotiation of Filipino life after World War II is portrayed through the
progression of Kidlat’s journey in Perfumed Nightmare and addresses this anxiety of moving
forward through Western intervention and technological advancement through the sacrifice of
traditional ways of life. Tahimik’s references to bamboo in his films are not necessarily a
commentary on the literal strength of bamboo as a building material but a meditation on the
flexibility of culture and the strength of home.
Most audiences would not consider that the bamboo hut’s symbolism functions beyond the domestic home or as a casualty of Western progress, lacking the lived experience and local knowledge that Tolentino demonstrates as an intrinsic part of watching Filipino films. The neighbors who moved Kidlat’s mother’s home exhibited a cultural act known as bayanihan or communal spirit, coming together in the face of adversity to bolster the remaindered community as progress pulls it apart (Marshall 7). Though the humble bamboo hut cannot be launched into space, audiences do not look at its thatched nipa roof and connect it to the threat of war, destruction, or the development of weapons.

The bonding rituals of people to places in Tahimik’s films are not only cyclic the way a community moves a home, performs a religious procession, or rebuilds a bridge. Tahimik’s films also explore the displaced attachment, illustrated by transnational travel in many of his films where he or a character he plays leaves his homeland to experience the world and are ultimately disillusioned by what he finds. This is clearly seen in Perfumed Nightmare where Kidlat travels to Europe and finds only disillusionment in Western progress. Although one could disparage this opposition to progress as ignorant or naive, Campos in “Kidlat Tahimik and the Determination of a Native Filmmaker” considers this “a practical critique of what Kidlat calls ‘overdevelopment,’ which has put more importance on expansion, accumulation, and production (i.e., imperialism and capitalism) rather than humanity,” advising audiences to view Tahimik’s films as marking the transnational intersections of power that disrupt and displace lives in both the First and Third Worlds (46).
Chapter 2: Devotional Labor in *Turumba*

Considered one of Kidlat Tahimik’s more straightforward films, *Turumba* is filmed from the perspective of Kadu, a young boy and the film’s narrator, as he observes changes within his family when the handmade papier-mâché crafts they sell during local religious festivities are commodified for profit overseas. The film begins with Kadu introducing one of the Turumba Festival's many religious rituals in voiceover, a strenuous procession completed by the village of Pakil up to the peak of Mount Ping-as. Tahimik features many processions in his films, highlighting the Filipino masses of small villages and chaotic cities marching through jungles and streets to create a turbulence in his scenes that can be celebratory or revolutionary in tone. Though the procession up to the peak of Mount Ping-as is meant to be celebratory as it signals the beginning of the Turumba Festival and involves singing as well as games, the camera conveys the climb’s difficulty by closing in on the faces of tired villagers resting on the ground, especially the elderly and children. Religious rituals in Tahimik’s films, from the penitents self-flagellating in *Perfumed Nightmare* to the crowds that participate in *Turumba’s* many processions, are acts of devotional labor. The villagers stop at “13 altars of palm and banana” where they meditate and sing in recognition of each Station of the Cross, a “breath-taking test of our heart's stamina” according to Kadu's narration. Aiding Kadu’s narration, which switches between English and Tagalog, are burned-in English subtitles which have been hard-coded onto the original celluloid film and appear across the bottom half of the screen in large white font as if painted on by hand. At the 14th and final station, Kadu describes with pride how Romy, who is his father and the *kantore* or the village's lead singer, energizes the villagers with his spirited guidance through hymns and folk songs so that, like rain over crops, their “voices fall like raindrops on [their] 250 year-old church.” This figure of speech repeats in the film’s final scene but literal rain that soaks the villagers taking part in final procession, the imagery of which this chapter will explore further.
In this opening sequence, the downward tilt to his camera adds a weight on screen meant to translate the strenuousness of the procession as participants complete their pilgrimage to the peak of Mount Ping-as and pray at each of altars meant to represent the Stations of the Cross, a reproduction of the path Jesus walked leading up to the site of his crucifixion. Despite the strenuousness of this procession, Kadu and his community consider this labor a celebration of their faith and a sacred duty. Tahimik uses the procession and how the community moves around it to define the phenomenon of Catholicism as it is practiced in the provinces of a postcolonial Philippines. In “Folk Catholicism: Its Significance, Value and Ambiguities,” Antoine Vergote explains that processions as religious rituals either rarely occur in Europe or, if they do, become spectacles for tourists (13 and 16). Vergote denounces the latter, arguing that “tourism often destroys folk religion” in how it trivializes devotion as “odd, if not childish and superstitious” because the rituals were previously unknown:

The people who are look at in that way, easily internalize the look directed at them by others. They can see themselves “through the eyes of the strangers,” and their customs become stripped of their essence. They perceive the commercial gains of rituals-turned-exhibitions, but they lose sight of the interior meaning, the lived content of these practices.

(Vergote 16)

Vergote is concerned with folk religion’s value and dignity, noting that to define a religion as folk means to signify it as a religion of “the people,” which rings similarly to Tadiar’s definition of “the people” as “workers and peasants, who make up 90 percent of the Filipino people” in Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings of Globalization (Tadiar 266). We see in Tahimik’s films, specifically Turumba and Perfumed Nightmare, the careful ways in which he handles the portrayal of religion through the fictional communities he creates out of real people and real places in the Philippines. In the first four minutes of Turumba, he captures the dedication to
and intimacy of a local religious tradition using close-ups of perspiring villagers stopped at each altar through hanging palm fronds and a downward tilt to his camera angles when recording the procession’s steep trek up the mountain path.

Kadu’s family makes and sells handmade papier-mâché toys for the Turumba Festival, a project which Tahimik represents as both their livelihood and a labor of love that they do together. Tahimik films Kadu’s family seated at a bamboo table outside of the nipa hut they live in surrounded by the materials needed to create these toys. Using old newspapers and used ballots from a recent local election, each member of the family participates in preparing the paste, smoothing the papier-mâché, and painting the animal figures. That they are not interested in reading these materials or discussing local governance suggests that Kadu’s family exists unconcerned within their private and domestic bubble. As the storyline progresses, however, it is clear that the old newspapers and used ballots symbolize coming change and that the illusion of innocence and simplicity exhibited by Kadu’s hardworking family would eventually face conflict. As the camera tracks across a collection of finished toys set out to dry, Kadu’s voiceover explains that the Turumba season comes before the second harvest of each year and each year they plan to create around 200 or more toys to sell. His family relies on the profit from these sales until the next Turumba season, which is a way of life that might appear precarious to audiences without similar experiences but is never portrayed as bleak or hopeless. Part of how Tahimik achieves his film’s humble depiction of rural life in the Philippines is his decision to capture it through a young boy’s eyes.

From a child’s perspective, everyday scenes of domesticity in *Turumba* represent rich life experiences for both Kadu and the audience. Christopher Pavsek considers these life experiences part of the director’s didactic style, arguing in “Kidlat Tahimik’s ‘Third World Projector’” that the simplicity of these scenes are deceptive when viewed only on the surface and not for their
allegorical content (122). For example, Kadu’s grandmother, the family’s matriarch, tells a story from her childhood as the camera closes in on her brown wrinkled hands shaping papier-mâché pulp over the wooden mold of a farmer riding a carabao. Her careful, loving work contrasts greatly with the assembly line of workers that appear later in the film, mobilized by Kadu’s father to meet the demands of the German Madame who wishes to commodify the family’s traditional crafts.

When the scene changes, the camera focuses on another set of brown wrinkled hands as they use various tools to chisel away at wood and beat small sheets of metal. A pair of child’s hands - Kadu’s - appear from beyond the frame to assist with the task, holding down the mandrel and hammering at the folded sheet of metal to create a ring. The voice of Pati, a local metalsmith and carpenter who appears to be an important male figure in Kadu’s life, instructs Kadu on the proper technique for shaping the metal. Afterward, the two stand beneath a single lamp in Pati’s workshop as he lights a cigarette with a heated blade. “This machete blade I hammered from the shock absorber of a Mercedes Benz. The best steel I know,” Pati proclaims as he lifts his machete up like a prize. Though Kadu admires his father greatly, evidenced in the film’s introduction where he describes his father’s role as kantore with pride, Pati appears to mentor Kadu throughout the film, providing advice and shelter when the young boys clashes with his father.

Another scene shows Romy and Kadu carrying branches through a rocky path. When they come upon a construction site, they stop to take a break beneath the shade and have a conversation about hydroelectric energy, which Romy explains using a pinwheel made of leaves and wood from a young palm tree that he spins by pouring water over it. Pavsek uses this scene specifically to consider Tahimik’s skill in creating allegorical content in his films, turning a simple conversation between father and son into a representation of encroaching foreign technologies that not only alter the landscape but the local culture. These three scenes featuring Kadu’s grandmother, Pati, and Kadu’s father occur one after the other and are, on the surface, teachable moments from important
people in Kadu’s life but also represent Tahimik’s more significant observations on commodity, technology, and capitalism.

Some audiences might find the carabao, a domestic water buffalo native to the Philippines, a familiar symbol from *Perfumed Nightmare*. Pavsek briefly mentions its reappearance in *Turumba*, seen again when Kadu’s grandmother constructs one out of papier-mâché during her story about her time as a young girl traveling with a theater troupe. He does not, however, explore the intertextual qualities of this symbol. Its appearance in Kadu’s grandmother’s weathered hands suggests a more implicit meaning in relation to the trajectory of *Turumba*’s storyline as Kadu’s family finds fortune in the mass production of its papier-mâché crafts but also risks irreparable cultural dilution. In *Perfumed Nightmare*, the premonitory white carabao functions as a stand-in for sterilizing Westernization and a “metaphor for U.S. commodity culture” (Pavsek 110). Its earliest appearance in Kidlat’s memory occurs during his circumcision as a boy. Kidlat describes this event as when he became a man, suggesting that he considered the traumatic experience an initiation ritual shared between him and his friends. In *Turumba*, the cultural violence heralded by the white carabao lends Western capitalist meanings to the papier-mâché carabao’s painted smiles but also evokes the trauma experienced by Kidlat as a child in *Perfumed Nightmare*.

Kadu, who appears to be of a similar age to Kidlat as a child, is also to be initiated but not so graphically and not before he truly learns what can be lost to progress in pursuit of profit. Later in *Turumba*, at night beneath a mosquito net after selling toys in the market during the festival, Kadu asks his mother about why they will need to make more toys next year, 300 instead of the usual 200. She explains that while goods were cheaper last year, prices are going up and the supplies he needs for school including food are becoming more expensive. Though Kadu might not fully understand the negative effects of capitalism at his age, the anxieties created by an increasingly commodified culture around his family’s way of life and the effect on the local
economies of even the smallest villages is communicated through the adults and later magnified by supply and demand.

Kadu continues to assist and learn from Pati, the metalsmith, who reveals that much of the steel he works with has been reclaimed from military vehicles abandoned after World War II: “If it’s made for war, it’s top quality steel!” (0:31:20). The two hike through the forest of Pi-it to inspect two Japanese war vehicles that Kadu had seen, remnants of a very recent past that reminds audiences that Turumba, which takes place around the same time as the 1972 Munich Olympics, exists in the shadows of war and occupation. Though Kadu’s interest in Pati’s craft stems from more innocent observations, their home and the jungles surrounding it carry relics of a violent past that seems to only exist as shades. In the forest of Pi-it, Kadu leads Pati to a pair of rusted trucks. Together they lift a few pieces of steel protect from the ravages of time and nature from beneath the hood of one truck and walk home. At the end of “Kidlat Tahimik’s ‘Third World Projector’,” Pavsek directs attention to the referential meaning of this scene in its allusion to colonial pasts, the proud labor performed by Pati in Turumba as he shapes tools out of relics from these pasts, and the workers at Sarao Motors who build jeepneys out of foreign military vehicles in Perfumed Nightmare:

This metal, this rust, and this dust and all the byproducts of human history make up “the land,” the environment to which Tahimik wants us to connect, more so than any sublime and sacred space of a conventionally beautiful landscape. (Pavsek 149)

Pavsek looks beyond Turumba’s transparent pastoral scenes to witness how Tahimik films examples of transformativity that do not rely on the erasure of violent histories, instead celebrating the devotional labor needed to reclaim space and create an other Philippines. We explore devotional labor through the lens of folk Catholicism in the following section.
“The Madonna is Waiting”

People begin to gather in town for the Turumba Festival while Kadu’s family loads onto a motorized tricycle, a common form of transportation in the Philippines and other developing countries created by attaching a cart made of reclaimed metal to a motorcycle or bicycle. “Hurry, the Madonna is waiting,” one child says as they clamber over a makeshift bridge and emerge from the jungle onto a main road with their arms filled with papier-mâché crafts. The Madonna they refer to is Our Lady of Sorrows of Turumba, the central figure celebrated during their religious festivals and who they honor during their lively processions through the streets. The title for this chapter is primarily inspired by Tahimik’s portrayal of folk Catholicism in *Turumba*, highlighting how local traditions are scheduled around harvests and also the emergence of socioeconomic patterns as a result.

Antonio D. Sison’s describes postcolonial folk Catholicism in Philippine cinema as indicative of a “Filipino primal religion that the Spanish colonial missionary enterprise was not able to completely vanquish” as evidenced in the “miraculous power believed to be inherent in icons and images” by devout Roman Catholic Filipinos (“Afflictive Apparitions” 422 - 423). Tahimik portrays religion as an inherent part of Filipino society, contradicting the overt nativist tones found in his films. Yet from Sison’s examination of how Philippine cinema has historically portrayed the iconic devotion to religious images, we can begin to understand that a “primal religion was organically imprinted in the way pre-Hispanic Filipinos related with their God, with each other, and with the world” and that this is the indigenous spirit that lived on through the importation of Spanish Catholicism in the Philippines (“Afflictive Apparitions” 424). Sison’s reading of folk Catholicism in Philippine cinema stands in opposition to what other scholars consider thematic contradictions, elevating this chapter’s reading of *Turumba* to consider the significance and Third Cinema aesthetics of its portrayal of religious icons.
According to Nicholas Joseph Santoro in *Mary in Our Life: Atlas of the Names and Titles of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Their Place in Marian Devotion*, there are two sacred images of Our Lady of Turumba found in the Philippines. The first image, Our Lady of Sorrows of Turumba, is a religious icon enshrined in Pakil, Laguna, in the Philippines. It is an oil painting depicting Mary, mother of Jesus, in agony from a dagger in her heart as prophesied by Simeon in the Gospel According to Luke, who foresaw Mary's suffering alongside her son as he fulfills God's work. A second icon, a wooden replica of Nuestra Señora de las Angustias from Spain, features more heavily in Tahimik's *Turumba*. While the oil painting exists as if hung up in a museum, untouched and undisturbed, the wooden replica of the Virgin Mary is paraded around Pakil and carried during processions. She is dressed in intricate gowns by Madame Bernarda, an elderly woman and who is identified as the sole dressmaker for the statue by Kadu: “Ever since I can remember, she has dressed the Virgin. For 40 years Bernarda has sewn Her gowns on every Turumba fiesta. Her grandmother, they say, also sewed Turumba gowns” (0:08:00 – 0:08:26). Kadu’s narration represents oral traditions of record keeping. He speaks this localized knowledge into the film’s mythos an unspoken but ubiquitous understanding that Bernarda holds this particular honor and all know it, highlighting a devotional labor that is strengthened by the ritual performed in dressing their town’s Madonna icon for the Turumba festival. Contributing further to the mythos is a scene that occurs later when Bernarda needs to move out of her crumbling home. She enlists Romy to help her move 200 Turumba gowns to her new home and when he does carry them out with the help of a neighbor, he explains that if it weren’t for the war, there would be 500 gowns. Tahimik calls upon the postwar shadow again and, compared to the first allusion to World War II he creates through Pati’s reclamation of steel parts from abandoned Japanese vehicles, the suggestion that the war destroyed a part of Bernarda’s collection of handmade gowns and disturbed her devotional labor substantiates postwar trauma as an existing theme.
In conversation with other scholars who scrutinize Tahimik’s portrayal of religion in his films, I argue that it would be disingenuous to experience contemporary Filipino history and art without also discussing the impact Roman Catholicism has had on Filipino culture and how, in turn, the culture made Roman Catholicism a part Filipino experience. Pavsek concedes that:

Catholicism is no primordial or originally Filipino tradition in any emphatic sense... [i]t is, in other words, a tradition possessed of its own historicity, one entwined with the history of colonialism; it is a sign of the originary “cross-cultural encounter” which we see repeated in Tahimik’s films over and over again. (Pavsek 133)

According to Pavsek, Catholicism’s historicity in the Philippines depends on the following “repeated re-creation and regeneration of religion as something whose essence resides not in a sacred text or some transcendent God who fills out Being, but rather in the very act of performing and generating religion as a set of acts, practices, and significations” (134). In Turumba, the performance of religion through the processions and rituals of a local community viewed through Sison’s interpretation of the “folk Catholic imaginary” as a relevant heuristic framework allows Tahimik to construct within this material religion a way of life both familiar and unfamiliar to audiences wherein watching his films is also participating in the creation of a historicity future generations of Filipinos can look back on and experience.

Most readings of Turumba focus on its central and most obvious conflict: how over the course of the film, what was once a small family business rapidly expands to accommodate the patronage of Madame, a German buying agent who purchases goods wholesale for department stores. The papier-mâché family is transformed by its sudden access to wealth, their role in the community magnified by the expansion of their home to accommodate more labor and their ability to provide jobs to their neighbors. This chapter closes with an analysis of Turumba’s cinematic aesthetic, focusing on the film’s final sequence.
Fig. 4 Still from Tahimik, *Turumba* (1:24:10)

Fig. 5 Still from Tahimik, *Turumba* (1:24:25)

Fig. 6 Still from Tahimik, *Turumba* (1:24:41)
At the beginning of this final sequence, before the procession in the rain and beginning around 1:23:00, a storm identified as Typhoon Gloria by a voiceover from a weather report on the radio disrupts the departure scene that would have taken Romy and Kadu to Munich. Romy, who Kadu had once looked up to for his dedication to his role as kantore of Pakil, is changed by his growing business and his partnership with Madame, who wants to take him and Kadu to Munich after her wholesale order of 25,000 papier-mâché dachshunds is completed for the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. Although we never see Kadu run away from the airport, we assume that he has left his father's side to return to Pakil. Seen above in Fig. 4 – 6, we see Kadu emerge from inside a darkened tunnel to reverently watch as Bernarda dresses Our Lady of Sorrows in a handmade dress from below her home’s open window in the pouring rain.

The final procession scene in the rain provides an interesting contrast with the opening procession scene on Mount Pang-is, effectively bookending Turumba with two instances where the collective and devotional labor of Filipino people represents a particular essence of being Filipino that Tahimik attempts to capture through Kadu’s rejection of the path his father has chosen to take and his return home. The atmosphere, in comparison to the opening procession, is chaotic but full of joy despite the wind and rain from Typhoon Gloria. The imagery here parallels Kadu’s metaphor from the beginning of the film where he describes their singing during the procession falling raindrops on their old church, suggesting that the ritual they perform acts as a source of life much like rain for crops. The sound of wind, however, is oddly fabricated, a nondiagetic “sound… coming from a source outside the space of the narrative” manifesting here as a whistling noise that cuts across Madame Bernarda’s courtyard and through the streets during the procession (Bordwell and Thompson 503). Through their continued faith, the church and its community live on. Devotional labor, ritualized through repetition and embedded in the land through its connection to the rural communities, manifests without end on a temporal plane in the Filipino imaginary.
The final scene in *Turumba* finds Kadu holding the megaphone speaker beside Pati, who was nominated by the community to replace Romy as the new *kantore*, in the pouring rain as Pakil celebrates Our Lady of Sorrows of Turumba, the wooden replica wearing a new and intricate dress carried by attendants. Due to the quality of the film on the platform I was watching it, I found it difficult to discern whether the *kantore* was actually Pati, if this scene was a memory, or a dream imagined by Kadu who was poised to leave for Munich with his father and Madame in a previous scene. This uncertainty, enhanced by the chaotic atmosphere and the pouring rain, lends the final scene a bittersweet quality that complicates Kadu’s final decision and Tahimik’s message. By not joining his father in Munich and returning to town in time for the procession, Kadu represents a return to traditional values that supports Tahimik’s intent to preserve local culture. Tahimik does not, however, explicitly condemn Romy’s decision beyond illustrating how it polarizes members of his family and takes him away from home.

Though Romy’s growing business sterilizes the pastoral quality illustrated in earlier scenes depicting how his family led a simple life crafting papier-mâché toys only around the festival, the addition of an assembly line to meet supply and demand realistically provides work for his community, a development that one neighbor thanks him for. Tahimik does not paint Romy as a villain but still uses this conflict to address the changes his homeland undergoes through the years as the people prioritize survival and upward mobility over. This realization recalls Pavsek’s conclusion that Tahimik does not want us to only see the natural beauty of the Philippines, because it would mean ignoring a vast landscape of metal, rust, and dust that is also the Philippines. As we will explore in the next chapter, the other Philippines that Tahimik wishes for us to see is a part of his overall critique of progress as it shapes and reshapes his homeland’s topography like a typhoon or an earthquake.
Chapter 3: (Dis)placed Attachment in Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?

By splicing home videos of his family life, news coverage chronicling political upheaval in the Philippines throughout the 1980s, and ethnographic footage of existing indigenous Filipino culture, Kidlat Tahimik succeeds in producing a personal but political film in Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow? (Bakit Dilaw Ang Kulay ng Bahaghari, 1994) that is both critical of neocolonialism and open to alternate futures despite permanent crisis in his country. By permanent crisis, I refer generally to the state of Philippine democracy and economy during this time. The 1980s finds the Philippines in the throes of its first People Power Revolution. President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law on September 22, 1972, after a spate of unexplained bombings that terrorized the Filipino people provided him the opportunity to subjugate an unstable nation with the promise to restore order and security (McCoy 395). During his reign, Marcos instead put to death a weakened Philippine democracy and erected an authoritarian regime that effectively extended his presidential term into a brutal dictatorship, keeping him in power for over 20 years. Citing a desire to protect Filipino citizens from communism and thus appealing to the U.S. and its Cold War anxieties, Marcos was supported by both the U.S. government and a centralized paramilitary police force originally established during the U.S. colonial regime.

On February 25, 1986, the People Power Revolution, also known as the EDSA Revolution after Epifanio de los Santos Avenue where a majority of the demonstrations occurred, challenged Marcos’s legitimacy and deposed his oppressive regime (McCoy 414). Two to three million Filipinos were said to have been in attendance when Corazon Aquino, bespectacled and dressed in the yellow that would be recognized as a symbol of hope for the Philippines, was sworn into office that very day. Although Why is Yellow? attempts to embody this spirit of resistance, explicitly referencing Corazon Aquino’s signature color in its title, it also suggests an alternate resistance that emerges from an evolving revolutionary narrative that audiences are able to witness almost in real
time as Tahimik's cinematic art blooms prematurely in the rising action of People Power but hesitates in its aftermath. In *Taming People’s Power: The EDSA Revolutions and Their Contradictions*, Lisandro E. Claudio addresses this anxiety two decades after Tahimik debuts this version of *Why is Yellow?* by highlighting the stark class divisions and competing ideologies that complicated the People Power Revolution’s legacy and the trope of common victimhood despite shared experiences of colonialism. This paper examines *Why is Yellow?* with the understanding that Filipino nationalist mythology and the mainstream narratives that exist today are complicit in the misrepresentation of People Power’s true motives, encouraging a legendary but sterile revolutionary narrative that marginalizes essential subaltern histories and preserves the political elite’s conservative propaganda to guarantee that members of Aquino’s oligarchy continue to withstand the test of time and upheaval in positions of power. As we will see in this chapter, the trauma experienced under the Marcos regime does not truly end with Cory Aquino and is instead exchanged for a different sort of trauma that continues into our current timeline under Duterte.

![Fig. 7 Still from Tahimik, Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow? (0:00:51)](image)
Tahimik begins *Why is Yellow?*, an autobiographical film essay separated by color-specific chapters that spans more than a decade of his life between the years of 1981 and 1994, with scenes from his time traveling through Monument Valley in the United States of America with his young son, who is also named Kidlat. The iconic cluster of sandstone buttes looming in the background as son plays with toys in the desert sand, seen above in Fig. 7, would be recognizable to audiences familiar with the Western genre of movies that take place in the American Old West. Tahimik, as seen in his earlier films with regards to the prevalence of Western culture in the Philippines, appears at first to be paying homage to the Spaghetti Western, a subgenre of the American Western that became popular around the time Tahimik began making films. In his interview with Nash, he explains that “until the 70s [Filipinos] hadn't developed a local film culture in the Philippines. In terms of intellectual influence ([Tahimik was] never been an avid reader), [Tahimik] was definitely strongly westernized by Hollywood visuals” and "totally captive to Hollywood films" (77 – 79). Common elements of the American Western appear during the second half of “I am Frivolous Green (1981 - 83),” the first chapter of *Why is Yellow?*, but he slowly unravels his fascination with American media and culture to reveal that the intent behind his artistic pursuits is to collect and preserve remaindered Filipino life, displaced by foreign occupation and a struggling democracy but adaptive in nature, as seen in the Filipinization of other cultural imports such as religion and language.

An indication of this unraveling appears almost 35 minutes into the film after father and son have completed their journey across the U.S. before flying back to the Philippines from Japan. Tahimik tells his son that by traveling around the world and through a number of time zones, they have traveled forward in time and gained a day. The younger Kidlat wonders in the voiceover if he would then be one day younger if he had not gone with his father and audiences are left wondering with him as the film transitions into a nightmarish sequence where the spectator is traveling over
the ocean but also down a highway peppered with neon lights as a voice whispers urgently in Tagalog and gunshots are heard. Tahimik splices scenes from his trip with his son with news footage covering the assassination of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr., illustrating a discordant juxtaposition that contrasts a youthful curiosity characteristic of Tahimik's films with the naked violence of political corruption he avoided portraying prior to the production of Why is Yellow?. As if waking from sleep, audiences encounter the inclusion of Ninoy Aquino's assassination as a sobering reminder that, Filipino and non-Filipino alike, the Philippines existed then and now in a state of permanent crisis.

Grounding Why is Yellow? with this particular historical event near the beginning of the film reveals an attachment to the Philippines that uncovers a negative affect previously unexplored by Tahimik in his body of work. Although it is obvious that Tahimik cherishes his homeland, he has controlled his criticisms of its government through the distance he creates by substituting immediate examples of political corruption with less perceptible systems of oppression such as Western capitalism and colonialism. These systems of oppression are only less perceptible because of how embedded they are in Filipino culture. In “Beyond House and Haven: Toward a Revisioning of Emotional Relationships with Places,” Lynne C. Manzo probes negative affect within the context of place attachment, citing Louise Chawla when she considers the “essence of ambivalence where nightmares exist alongside dreams,” and in between nightmares and dreams is a reality that Tahimik must face with his family and community beside him (Manzo 51). While evidence of this ambivalence that Manzo and Chawla believe exists in the dynamic phenomenon of place attachment does not appear explicitly until later in Why is Yellow?, it is an important theme that audiences should be aware of throughout the film.

Negative affect as place attachment in Why is Yellow? provides an opportunity to discuss how Tahimik’s films have internalized the permanent crisis of the Philippines and employ the
aesthetics of Third Cinema to portray the postcolonial displacement of Filipinos. Though Third Cinema has spread across the globe since its inception and radicalization in Latin America, its manifestations at their core work towards the “potential for universal statements about the conditions and causes of human misery and oppression” (Macdonald 37). To help locate Tahimik’s films within Third Cinema’s global movement, this paper considers Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson project studying the condition of postcoloniality. They ask:

To which places do the hybrid cultures of postcoloniality belong? Does the colonial encounter create a “new culture” in both the colonized and colonizing country, or does it destabilize the notion that nations and cultures are isomorphic? (Gupta and Ferguson 7 - 8)

In his films, Tahimik portrays this hybrid culture of postcoloniality through the presence of Western and specifically American influences, from media to infrastructure, and their proximity to local Filipino culture. *Perfumed Nightmare*, which follows his doppelganger Kidlat on a journey to Europe, features the jeepney, a common public transportation vehicle in the Philippines repurposed from abandoned U.S. military vehicles after World War II. When Kadu's family in *Turumba* can finally afford to install electricity in their home, “Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band” by the Beatles plays from a speaker attached to their record player. “In our hut, John Lennon comes alive!” Kadu exclaims as he dances below where his father and neighbor attach an electricity meter to a tree outside his home. Tahimik’s labor as a Third Cinema filmmaker is in unpacking the complexities of this hybrid culture to map topographies of power that intersect with Filipino history as a consequence of colonialism, which, according to Gupta and Ferguson, is the “displacement of one form of interconnection by another” that continues to obscure Filipino postcolonial identity (8). His characters struggle with articulating this postcolonial identity as they navigate their respective conflicts to reach separate but similarly ambiguous realizations.
Filipino (Dis)placement of Third Cinema

Temporal ambiguity in the construction of his films appears at first to be a peculiar component of Tahimik’s style of filmmaking. In Why is Yellow?, we see regularly how he eludes a linear narrative where other storytellers might rely on one considering how this film spans more than a decade of Filipino history. Christopher Pavsek defends Tahimik’s temporal inconsistencies, citing ethical and political principles meant to subvert the First World's dominant cinema, described by Gerald M. Macdonald as a “cinema of profit” most recognizable in Hollywood movies (Mcdonald 29). First Cinema, which requires “massive capital investments [and]... mass consumption on a comparable scale in order to return the desired profit,” is literally present in Tahimik’s films, from cheeky references to an actual scene from Cecil B. Demille's The Ten Commandments (1956) spliced into excerpts of Tahimik’s unfinished movie, “Memories of Overdevelopment,” about Ferdinand Magellan’s slave, which he includes in Why is Yellow? (Macdonald 29). While contradictory, the ways in which Tahimik repurposes commercial films and edits them into his own is considered a political act within the tradition of Third Cinema, a cinema of subversion born out of the colonial filmmaker’s rejection of Western cinema through “direct political engagement with the audience” (Macdonald 35). It is easy for some to look at Tahimik’s earlier work in Perfumed Nightmare and call him a clown, as Fredric Jameson does, but he and others aptly perceive the Filipino director’s awareness of neocolonial systems of oppression as well, which serves to highlight both Tahimik’s connection to Third Cinema and his agency within it as he seeks to subvert conditions of postcoloniality and the bleak themes typified by art that scrutinizes it. In Perfumed Nightmare, Tahimik illustrates Kidlat’s character through how he layers images and sounds as seen in Fig. 1. In Why is Yellow?, similar collages repeat throughout in flashes of newspaper headlines and radio broadcasts, used by Tahimik to position his film with Philippine history but enfolded within home video recordings of his family.
This conscious editing on Tahimik’s part seeks to subvert traditional Third Cinema aesthetic practices. The first chapter of Why is Yellow? titled “I Am Frivolous Green” begins with a typhoon, a common but devastating natural disaster that plagues the Philippines throughout the rainy season from June to November and features several times during the film. The younger Kidlat pulls out one of his baby teeth using string and Tahimik praises him and says, “Galing, Kidlat (Good, Kidlat). You’re a real Third World dentist,” which prompts a conversation between the two Kidlats on what exactly is Third World. The younger Kidlat summarizes his father’s explanation when he says “Third World is people-powered” as opposed to how, for example, First World countries are industrialized and powered by machines or doctors are readily available to pull out baby teeth. Their conversation becomes the voiceover for a scene where a group of men ascend a grassy mountainside carrying a felled tree. As Tahimik explains the importance of relying on your own strength to solve problems when without the help of modern technology, the men in the scene inch up the mountainside and fall beneath the tree's weight but are able to reach their destination where they use the wood as building material.

“Third World is a way of solving problems?” asks the younger Kidlat in a voiceover paired with an image of him proudly holding up his recently evicted baby tooth. His father confirms his son's interpretation. The imagery of the men carrying the tree recalls intertextual references to the devotional labor of processions in Turumba where the villagers carry the statue of the Virgin Mary through the streets and the character Kidlat in Perfumed Nightmare who pulled his jeepney across the Bridge of Life at the end of a rope wrapped around his body. Through these similar images, Tahimik equates independence with devotional labor and bayanihan or communal spirit, a radical message that he transmits in teachable moments with his children. His notion of what is radical, while deceptively portrayed as simple or naive and filmed in fuzzy home video, situates his art within Third Cinema’s global movement but also sets his films apart.
The second chapter, “I Am Furious Yellow (1983-86)” (begins at 0:47:49), signals the rise of the People Power Revolution that will ultimately depose Marcos and replace him with Cory Aquino. Though he includes many examples of political activism in this chapter to contextualize his film’s timeline, Tahimik takes time to observe and interview Lopes Na-uyac, a woodcarver from Asin who keeps to the tradition of his ancestors and builds bridges in the jungle using natural resources. He and his community move boulders for the dam and use vines and bamboo to build their bridges despite knowing that these structures will need to be rebuilt when storms inevitably wash them away. Although government engineering has replaced many bridges across the country, resources are not always available and especially so if the route is not of some importance to those in power. Despite the ephemeral quality of these bamboo bridges, Tahimik understands the importance of initiative and, by extension, the agency through which a small community on the fringes of government funding can still cross rivers. Though this detour from coverage of the growing People Power movement seems out-of-place at first, Tahimik portrays Na-uyac’s bamboo bridges as an alternative symbol of resistance embedded in the local history of Asin’s rivers and jungles.

Rebuilding the bridge becomes a shared experience among those in the community who participate and Na-uyac, who retains his ancestor’s knowledge and preserves it through application when prompted by destructive storms, conceives of a ritual that is not necessarily related to religion but maintains a particular set of practices similar to the devotional labor seen in the festival featured in Turumba. This paper reads this and similar rituals of shared experience in Tahimik’s films through the concept of place attachment or “the bonding of people to places” as studied by Setha M. Low and her peers. Tahimik’s emphasis on observing and recording old traditions, whether they are indigenous or rural deconstructions of imported culture such as folk Catholicism, is itself a ritual of sharing Filipino experience with his audience.
It is interesting to watch *Why is Yellow?* against the timeline of political unrest in the Philippines and know that Tahimik is raising his family within it. “I Am Curious Pink” (begins at 1:16:22), the third chapter, appears to open at the start of Cory Aquino’s presidency when hope was fresh and the people are celebrating. The younger Kidlat participates in a performance at school that reenacts the most recent presidential election, though the young girl playing Cory Aquino does not win. Nonetheless, Kidlat and his classmate’s excitement during the mock election symbolize the energy of the Filipino people at this time. Also energized by the new democracy are Filipino artists, who experience a cultural renaissance according to Tahimik. Young Kidlat’s school presents another performance reenacting what I assume to be either the 1987 or 1988 Christmas ceasefire announced in newspapers for the holiday season. He and his classmates put on costumes and attach badges onto their sleeves before slinging toy rifles over their shoulders to assume their characters. They meet in the middle of the dusty courtyard that has been their stage throughout the film and shake hands, signaling the end of violence and the beginning of peace.
Of course, peace is temporary during these uncertain times and demonstrations go on as
farmers, rebels, and their allies continue their quest for peace. Members of the Sunflower Film
Cooperative, of which Tahimik and his family are a part of, also continue to organize and create art
installations. One installation made of bamboo is a sign that says “PAX CORDILLERA”
suspended over a community courtyard possibly by the Tahimik’s family home. Scenes that follow
show his children playing beneath it. Young Kidlat stands beside his father’s friend and asks if “the
Year of the Tiger is truly behind us” as the older man paints a rabbit on a tapestry. His father’s
friend responds ominously that “tigers are always around” but Young Kidlat hopes for real peace
during the year of the rabbit. I wonder about Tahimik’s timeline here and if *Why is Yellow?* follows
a linear path with events happening in chronological order. Headlines for a Christmas ceasefire
would mean the school’s reenactment took place in either 1987 or 1988, but they begin New Year
celebrations after for the Year of the Rabbit in 1987.

In the film’s next chapter, “We are Colonial Red White Blue” (begins at 1:30:00) Tahimik
spends this portion of his film circling the idea of peace in the Philippines. He ponders the
possibility of peace but explains in a solemn voiceover news of ceasefire violations is reported
every day and from both sides while his son questions President Aquino’s quest for peace because
“it feels like something is missing” (1:56:10), filtering the frustrations of the adults around him for
the Aquino administration’s broken promises. A firecracker is lit during their celebration of the
New Year and Tahimik’s family and friends bang noisemakers and yell, adding to a cacophony of
sounds that makes listening to this portion of the film difficult despite the light content and all the
while Tahimik circles with his camera recording the revelry. Spliced into this home video,
newspaper headlines declare that the “NDF (National Democratic Front of the Philippines) rejects
extension/CEASEFIRE ENDS” while “Cory declares war against insurgents,” warping the family
celebration into a nightmare as Young Kidlat’s voiceover begs for the shooting to stop and calls for
a ceasefire. The figures of Tahimik’s family and friends fade into the black background and a
sputtering firecracker is the only image we can see, an ominous ending.

Ambivalence Following Revolution

“We Are Dis-Harmonious Disney Color” begins almost two hours into Why is Yellow? and
contains a scene where Young Kidlat plays the unnamed messenger boy in a Filipino adaptation of
Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, a play about two men who wait for a man named Godot who
never arrives. When the director, identified by Tahimik as his son's Uncle Ben, encourages Young
Kidlat to call Mr. Godot's name from a balcony above him, his voice echoes loudly against the
building's high ceiling. Young Kidlat is made to repeat this line over and over, applying different
inflections as Uncle Ben rapidly signals him with one hand. Tahimik considers this a good
experience for his son but makes the comparison that “waiting for peace [in the Philippines] is like
waiting for Godot” before transitioning into the next chapter. His son's spirited portrayal of the
unnamed messenger boy creates an interesting juxtaposition within the context of Waiting for
Godot's narrative, where the two men casually discuss killing themselves as they wait seemingly
without reason for a man who never arrives. The comparison is a superficial one suggesting that
there is no purpose or meaning to waiting for peace in the Philippines, but even as a simple analogy
it briefly changes the tone of Tahimik's film from light-hearted and hopeful to uncertain and
fatalistic.

Uncertainty exists throughout Why Is Yellow? less as a weight to be carried and more of a
driving force behind Tahimik's art, which he creates to tell stories about himself, his family, and his
people. This uncertainty constitutes liminal affect, discussed Immediately after the footage of
Young Kidlat practicing lines in Waiting for Godot, the camera fades in from black to a shot of the
island of Mactan on Saturday, April 27, 1521, according to the title card that appears, introducing
the start of a scene from “Memories of Overdevelopment,” an unfinished project directed by Tahimik who also starred in the lead role of Enrique de Malacca, a slave from the Malay Archipelago bought by Ferdinand Magellan as an interpreter. In the scenes that follow, we see Lapu-Lapu, the ruler of Mactan, first attempt to intimidate Magellan and his crew with dissonant sounds from bamboo instruments until he ultimately throws his spear and kills Magellan off-screen for attempting to invade his island, freeing Enrique in the process to return home. “Perhaps the key to peace lies in the old ways,” says Tahimik as he discusses connections to the old land, spiritual string, and medicine men. He relates the story of Lemuria, a lost continent where he believes the Philippines was once a part of but along the western side, that stopped listening to the natural world and was swallowed up by the ocean. Tahimik feels that artists like himself maintain humanity's connection with nature and the natural world. What appears to be a showcase of indigenous art follows as Tahimik's voiceover both laments the loss of old traditions and invokes the artist as shaman of the people. He explains to his son that Young Kidlat's mother, Tahimik's wife, will leave their home to work at the University of Manila to work on an art project related to shaman connections.

Tahimik returns to his third world projector in the desert, emphasizing the creation of art through the reclamation of junk cast off by travelers. It is unclear here if the scenes that follow are someone else’s home movies left behind in the desert or Tahimik’s own film meant to appear like someone else’s. From Pavsek’s piece, “Kidlat Tahimik’s ‘Third World Projector’,” the author argues that:

[H]is usage of the term “Third World,” one could say, is at once realistic and allegorical, designating simultaneously the specificity of particular experiences in the various regions of the Third World as well as the commonality amongst them. It is only through the abstraction from the concretely specific that Tahimik can assert an equivalence - and
ultimately propose an alliance - between the plight of the Igorot in the Philippine cordillera and that of the Navajo in the desert southwest of the United States. (Pavsek 112)

Tahimik features a number of indigenous traditions practiced by the Igorot people from the Cordillera Mountains in Why is Yellow?, emphasizing his worry that their culture will be lost as modern Philippine history moves forward and forgets to look back. Tahimik clearly sees the importance in preserving indigenous Filipino culture and, while some have criticized his participatory style of documentary filmmaking in regards to recording and interacting with the Igorot as naively nativist or impractically nostalgic, scholars such as Campos defend the director’s studies and emphasize the subtlety of Tahimik’s observation of indigenous Filipino culture.

Campos’s own observations in “Kidlat Tahimik and the Determination of a Native Filmmaker” indicate that Tahimik himself has adopted the customs of the Igorot and lives in Hapao, a barangay or village in the province of Ifugao between Baguio where Tahimik grew up and raised his children and the Cordillera Mountains. He lives with limited access to electricity, plants and harvests the rice he eats with the community, and travels as his neighbors walking up and down the mountain or together by jeepney (65). He still films and contributes his own funds to the improvement of Hapao’s rice harvests, practicing in his own way a respect for the land he lives on.

Returning to Why is Yellow?, Mount Pinatubo erupts and covers the land in ash in June of 1991, creating an “instant desert” and signaling the beginning of the chapter “We Are Disastrous Gray (1989 – 1991)” (begins at 2:20:55). Tahimik tells us that the Philippine god Apo Namalyari, whose home is on Mount Pinatubo, is angry. He sits in one scene with his children surrounded by fog, wearing hats and jackets to protect them from the falling ash. They walk through the landscape of what must be home but has taken on an alien landscape in Fig. 9 below. The setting is eerie, as if they have survived an apocalypse, but encapsulates ambivalent affect in its blankness.
Tahimik tells his children about Lemuria again and hopes they do not sink into the sea:

**Kidlat Tahimik:** “I think that the story about Lemuria is not about the continent that sank into the sea or was buried. I think Lemuria is about the superior culture that somehow got inundated - got buried in, well, accumulated ash fall.” (2:21:50 – 2:22:23)

Tahimik repeats this story of the lost continent as a warning, similar to the warnings Kidlat receives in *Perfumed Nightmare* from his mother and Kaya. He seems to consider the ash around him as a sign of the times but, after trusting the cosmos, assures his children that it will not be forever. In the next shot (begins at 2:24:29), the scene opens with a close up of green leaves at the top of a tree in the foreground with a vast mountain range in the background blanketed by smoke or clouds. A rainbow stretches above from the mountains to the top of the screen. Though Tahimik’s uncertainty regarding the political climate imbues his art with an ambivalent affect, he is reminded by the aftermath of Mount Pinatubo’s eruption that his work is unfinished.
Conclusion

Following Mount Pinatubo’s eruption in *Why is Yellow?* is a sequence of blackouts, culminating in the devastation wrought by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake. Campos reads Tahimik’s coverage of these events as possessing symptomatic meaning in relation to the tumultuous Aquino administration. The final chapters of *Why is Yellow?* are arranged almost back-to-back, separated by a brief flash as the colorful title card for “I Am Rebellious Red/ I Am Righteous Blue/ I Am Indigenous Brown” (begins at 2:25:07) is plunged into darkness for a few seconds before “We Are Powerless Black” (begins at 2:25:44) appears. “Blackout again,” Tahimik’s voice says ruefully, indicating that blackouts seem to be a common occurrence. This is followed by footage from the aftermath of the 7.8 magnitude 1990 Luzon earthquake that devastated the Cordillera region where Tahimik and his family live. Though destruction from this natural disaster brought down the walls around them, Kidlat removes the requisite despair and substitutes it with a muted gratefulness that he and his family are alive, focusing instead on his community’s *bayanihan* as people gather to distribute aid and rebuild.

This paper seeks to better understand alternative Filipinos narratives through its examination of Tahimik’s films and his conviction in his filmmaking style. Though critics have discredited his approach to looking at the past, citing specifically his problematic representation of indigenous Filipino culture as misplaced nostalgia, others scholars like Campos and Pavsek assert that Tahimik’s art increasingly endeavors to portray these remaindered histories as dynamically alive and valid examples of resistance. Tahimik’s approach to looking at the past then translates to his approach to looking at the present and the future, with awareness of the history of colonialism that binds them and an openness to both uncertainty and possibility. It is this critical perspective that I wish to apply in further examinations of Filipino culture, a change in my research’s fatalistic tendencies in regards to studying postcoloniality, identity, and narrative.
Works Cited


