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Perfumed Nightmare and Negative Experiences of Contrast: Third Cinema as Filmic Interpretation of Schillebeeck

Abstract

In this paper I propose that the stylistic signature of a film may represent its theological meaning just as much as more apparent thematic/narrative considerations. For this purpose, I choose to analyze *Perfumed Nightmare*, a Filipino film (aka *Mababangong Bangungot*, directed by and featuring Kidlat Tahimik, 1976, 91 min., color). This film, lensed originally on Super 8mm at minimal cost, has received critical praise. It was the winner of the Berlin Film Festival International Critics Award in 1977 and is classified under an evolving research category known as "Third Cinema". I present the argument that *Perfumed Nightmare* analyzed as Third Cinema, may provide a filmic interpretation of the eschatological concept of "Negative Experiences of Contrast" as proposed by the Roman Catholic theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P.

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The Sleeping Typhoon

The film *Perfumed Nightmare* opens with the image of a jeepney, that famous Philippine taxi originally recycled from the wreckage of an American military jeep, moving back and forth across a crude concrete bridge. The voice of Kidlat, the film's protagonist, narrates how the bridge serves as the crucial link between his quaint Philippine barrio and the rest of the world, "our bridge of life."

Kidlat is president of the Werner von Braun Club of Balian, a parodic organization honoring the developer of the first space rocket to the moon. The club's members are a motley crew of giddy village children. Kidlat's idolization of Von Braun is an example of his many idolizations of Western culture, including the radio program 'Voice of America,' the Statue of Liberty, bubble gum machines, and the Miss Universe beauty pageant. All are symbols of the progress and wealth that make up the "American Dream."

Kaya, Kidlat's friend, inspires him to draw strength from the subversive memory of his late father, a local war hero who fought in the revolution against the Spaniards and who was later killed by the soldiers of yet another colonizing power, the United States. He describes how Kidlat's father literally blows away fifteen American soldiers before he was finally killed. He concludes with a pithy reminder - "the sleeping typhoon must learn to blow again."

Kidlat takes on a job with an American who owns a chewing gum business. The foreigner takes him to Paris and also takes along a Philippine jeepney. The French capital would be for Kidlat a springboard to his dream destination, the United States, site of Cape Canaveral. Recalling Charlie Chaplin's bewildered encounter with industrialization in *Modern Times* (1936), the provincial lad is stunned by the high-tech Charles de Gaulle airport and the countless bridges he sees while being driven through the city. In Paris, Kidlat drives the conspicuous jeepney as he happily goes about his task of refilling gum machines at various points in the city. One day, he meets a market vendor whose small-scale business is threatened by the impending opening of a gigantic supermarket complex. Coupled with news from back home of his mother's hut being displaced by the construction of a highway for tourists, Kidlat undergoes a crisis of belief. Indignation and protest over the inhumanity of First World style development awakens in Kidlat for the first time. In a startling series of sequences presented as magic realism, Kidlat literally blows away symbolic images of western socio-cultural domination during a mock farewell party organized by his boss. He is then seen converting a huge metal chimney from the Supermarket construction into a space ship, propelling it into the sky with the power of his breathe. Kidlat's actions evokes the implausible exploits of his father during the Philippine-American war - the sleeping typhoon awakens and blows again. Kidlat disappears from the film after this scene, as

Perfumed Nightmare closes with a silent, open-ended scene of Kidlat's mother slowly closing the window of her hut in the Philippines as a young girl passes by.

The quest for identity and justice, indeed, for human liberation, is presented in the richly symbolic, Chaplinesque images of *Perfumed Nightmare*. This film emerged from the context of the apex of the infamous Marcos dictatorship and its dependency on U.S. hegemonic presence in the Philippines, *Perfumed Nightmare* has been noted for its veiled satirical barbs against the oppressive dictatorial regime and the fragrantly masked American cultural dominance it perpetuated. The film won the coveted Critic's prize at the 1976 Berlin Film Festival and was received enthusiastically in the European film festival circuit. Ironically, *Perfumed Nightmare* never found its way to mass audiences in the Philippines due to its non-affiliation with any mainstream production studio. Yet it continues to generate cult following in international art house circles. Kidlat Tahimik (whose name translates as "Silent Lightning") is both the director and lead character of the semi-autobiographical film. He has always been noted for his commitment to working in the fringes of filmmaking and subverting commercial Hollywood conventions that so heavily influence mainstream Philippine films.

***Perfumed Nightmare* as Third Cinema**

Alongside other Third World directors such as Indian Mrinal Sen and Senegalese Ousmane Sembene, Kidlat Tahimik is included in the research category known as Third Cinema.¹ The classification does not so much allude to the geographical origins of a given film as it does the film's dedication to an authentic representation of Third World peoples who struggle to become agents of their own history in the postcolonial aftermath.

What determines Third Cinema is the conception of the world, and not the genre or an explicit political approach. Any story, any subject can be taken up by Third Cinema. In the developing countries, Third Cinema is a cinema of decolonisation, which expresses the will to national liberation, anti-mythic, anti-racist, anti-bourgeois, and popular.²

Founded by Latin American filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in 1968, Third Cinema began as a social and artistic movement with a combative Marxist agenda, that of launching a "guerilla cinema" hostile to the dominance of Hollywood and driven to de-colonize culture. As such, "The camera is the inexhaustible expropriator of image-weapons; the projector, a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second."³ Later developments in Third Cinema, particularly the critical, comparative method of Teshome Gabriel, have become less combative and more methodological. Gabriel, an Ethiopian film scholar, is credited for his groundbreaking work on the development of a critical theory of Third World films.⁴

His work exhibits a careful, critical approach to analyzing Third Cinema. He speaks of "the Aesthetics of Liberation,"⁵ where cinema is "moved by the requirements of its social action and contexted and marked by the strategy of that action."⁶ He notes further - "A study of style alone will not engender meaning ... Style is only meaningful in the context of its use - in how it acts on culture and helps to illuminate the ideology within."⁷ Gabriel's method examines thematic representations alongside formal filmic elements such as editing, camera angling, and music; and analyzes how they work together to communicate an ideological position that runs counteractive to the normative western ideological stance of mainstream First World films.

Ideologies are political agendas that serve to encourage or to destroy inequities in a society. Connected with its definitive themes of decolonization and human liberation, *Perfumed Nightmare's* categorization as Third Cinema is also based on a consideration of its ideologically determined stylistic elements. These include:

- The intentional employment of High/Low Camera angles to portray the disparity between the holders of power and the oppressed subalterns in a lopsided socio-political equation.
- The frequent choice of wide angle shots over close-up shots to situate the characters in a communitarian context. Gabriel attributes this to the de-emphasis on psychological realism in Third Cinema. When close-up shots are in fact used, they serve to provide social comment.

- The strategy of having characters look directly at the camera, communicating involvement with the audience. Gabriel points out that this is akin to the conventions of the oral narrative, a mode of communication that still thrives in most Third World countries.
- The utilization of indigenous musical variations and actual dissonant ambient sounds contrasted with periods of silence. This presents a stark contrast to the mood enhancing musical scores and sound designs typical of Hollywood.
- The ideological use of dynamic editing, at times, violating rules of time and space, to delineate socio-political contrasts.
- The employment of the long uninterrupted take to emphasize an alternative concept of screen time that differs from the posthaste western standard.
- The portrayal of indigenous cultural events and symbols to emphasize identity.
- The deliberate use of non-synchronized English voice-over while still audibly retaining the original Filipino dialogue.
- The use of non-actors acting out true-to-life roles or at least, their dynamic equivalents, resulting in more authentic characterization. Among more recent examples of Asian Third Cinema that use the same casting strategy are Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (China, 1992) and his *Not One Less* (China, 1999), as well as Carin Nugruho's *Leaf on a Pillow* (Indonesia, 1998).

Some of these ideologically marked cinematic codes will be taken into account in the subsequent discussion.

Bridging *Perfumed Nightmare* and Schillebeeckx's

Conception of Negative Experiences of Contrast

The universe of *Perfumed Nighmare* is continually haunted by a recurring fever, the pervading negativity produced by certain societal forces that threaten the very humanity of the key characters.

This is palpable in the narrative theme of colonialism in the film's first half. Prior to Kidlat's departure for Paris, there is a scene where Kidlat's mother relates the story of how Kidlat's usually jovial father is pressed to join in the fight for liberation against the Spanish colonizers. Jubilant over the ratification of the Treaty of Paris, Kidlat's father tried to enter liberated Manila only to be killed by an American sentry - "Killed for trespassing on US military property was the official military report attached to his corpse." This pervading negativity can be seen in yet another theme - the impact of first world progress on a third world village. The "phantom of progress," the alienating inhumanity of rapid western-style industrialization, disenfranchises the "small" people who occupy the weak base of the power pyramid. In the film, Kidlat's home village, site of all the meaningful idyllic haunts of his childhood memories, is all but flattened to give way to a highway built in the name of tourism. On a smaller scale, the same damaging impact of progress is seen when Kidlat encounters the Parisian vendor who is displaced by the overpowering entry of a herculean supermarket in the urban landscape of Paris. And then there is the theme of the empty promise of technological progress that soon gnaws at Kidlat's utopic American dream.

Whether they be the phantoms of colonialism or first world progress, these forces are the shadows that indicate the out-of-jointedness of *Perfumed Nightmare's* universe; there is a pervading negative force that threatens the very humanity of the characters.

It is notable however, that *Perfumed Nightmare* is not so much about the onslaught of phantoms as it is about an abused people treasure-hunting for the positive amid the negative, the quest for the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. This theme is worked out in the resistance and protest exhibited by key characters at the precise narrative turns when negativity seems to be the order of the day. When Kidlat's father is intercepted by the American soldiers, he magically blows them away in defiance. When the village is threatened by the construction of the highway, Kaya revives the subversive memory of Kidlat's father, reminding Kidlat that "the sleeping typhoon must learn to blow again." When the helpless vendor is displaced by the supermarket, Kidlat pelts the unfinished building with stones. Finally, when Kidlat's eyes are opened to the perfumed horror of his American dream, he irrevocably "resigns" as president of the Werner von Braun club and eventually blows away the masked Western guests of the mock farewell party, exactly as his father did to the Spaniards. The light at the end of the tunnel comes in the form of the dogged refusal to passively submit to the threatening negativity

and suffering, whether the resistance is portrayed as actual, imaginary, or conceptual.

I contend at this point that the thematic, narrative weave of *Perfumed Nightmare* brings to light an aspect of Edward Schillebeeckx's eschatological perspective which he terms as Negative Experiences of Contrast.

Schillebeeckx speaks of the humanum, the vision of a full humanity that is not antecedently given by God but remains as a goal to be sought after and struggled for in a world that often opposes it.⁸ Inextricably linked with the concept of the quest for the humanum is advocacy for justice, a concept rooted in the symbol of Basileia tou Theou or Kingdom of God. According to this New Testament symbol which was central to the praxis of Jesus as the Eschatological Prophet, true justice takes a preferential option for the defenseless: "The eschatological blessing is for the poor, hungry and sorrowful."⁹ Clearly, the first beneficiaries of the practical imperative of the Kingdom are the weakest members of a society. But the fact remains that meaningless suffering and injustice flourish and if the poor and defenseless are anything in the prevailing scheme of things, they are not first beneficiaries but first victims. There exists, then, a dialectical tension between the human quest for justice and a world that is running short of it. Schillebeeckx argues that it is the very experience of injustice that yields cognitive power when it brings about indignation and protest - the refusal to acquiesce to situations of meaningless

suffering and disordered relations. The experience of a positive moment found within the crucible of critical negativity provides the oil for the rekindling of human hope and for the possibility of practical solutions. This is termed by Schillebeeckx as Negative Experiences of Contrast.¹⁰ In *Perfumed Nightmare*, Schillebeeckx's intellection of Negative Experiences of Contrast is annotated by the thematic portrayal of the characters' protest and resistance in the face of structural injustice.

But over and above apparent thematic considerations, I am convinced that the stylistic conventions of Third Cinema present in *Perfumed Nightmare* further interprets in truly filmic fashion, Schillebeeckx's idea of Negative Experiences of Contrast.

First, there is the utilization of key symbols as part of the film's mise-en-scene. These symbols point to the same thing - critical negativity providing a paradoxical well from which hope and the possibility for justice can be drawn. This can be seen, for instance, in the central leitmotiv of "the bridge," which among the other meanings it may convey, symbolizes the movement from the oppressive status quo towards a better, alternative future, a link between the "is" and the "ought." The crude bridge of Kidlat's hometown, for instance, was used by the colonizers for their own purposes. Kidlat, however, would quickly assert "I am Kidlat Tahimik, I choose my vehicle and I can cross this bridge." In striking parallel, Schillebeeckx himself validates the image of the bridge as a symbol of

Negative Experiences of Contrast - "And on the other hand, precisely with respect to contrast experience and critical negativity, the suffering experienced lays the bridge over to a possible praxis, intended to remove both the suffering and its causes."

Another symbolic element in the film's mise-en-scene that elucidates Negative Experiences of Contrast is the wooden horse-figure. Carved by Kidlat's mother from the butt of the rifle of Kidlat's father after he is killed by the American soldiers, the symbol would become for Kidlat a dangerous memory. "Take this horse on your travels. One day you might need him to help you find the path to freedom."

And then there is also the symbol of the jeepney, "vehicles of war which we made into vehicles of life."

The filmic representation of Negative Experiences of Contrast can also be noted in the aspect of camera angling. In the mock Farewell Party scene, the masked western guests are shot in a low camera angle as they greet Kidlat with their cutout smiles in the reception line. This makes the guests look larger and taller than they actually are. In contrast, when the camera cuts to Kidlat, he is seen from a high camera angle, dwarfing him to Lilliputian proportions. Kidlat would then narrate, "Why is everybody staring at me ... I feel I am getting smaller."

When Kidlat blows away the western guests, camera angling is restored to normal eye-level; the guests and Kidlat now appearing on equal footing. The shifts in camera angling stylistically convey the quickening of Kidlat's character towards resistance and defiant opposition in the face of a lopsided one-up-one-down social equation. I present the argument that this ideologically determined use of camera angling can be a filmic representation of the concept of Negative Experiences of Contrast. As Schillebeeckx would clarify, "The prophetic voice that rises from the contrast experience is therefore protest, hope-inspiring promise and historical initiative."¹¹

There is also the sparse but pointed use of the close-up shot in the film. In the last quarter of the *Perfumed Nightmare*, the camera registers a peculiar close-up shot of the character of Kidlat. Appearing at the juncture when the protagonist's protest builds up, the close-up reveals the pensive expression on Kidlat's face as he looks directly at the camera. The voiceover of Kaya injects, "Where is your true strength Kidlat? The sleeping typhoon must learn to blow again." In an instant, Kidlat can be seen breaking into a wide smile and then into mocking laughter. The confluence of these subtle elements converging in a close-up shot conveys the incongruent blending of a situation of injustice with human laughter. This reflects the dynamics present in the Negative Experiences of Contrast where the presence of "hope-inspiring promise" militates against oppressive relations. As Third

Cinema, *Perfumed Nightmare* takes the close-up shot further by featuring Kidlat looking at the camera - here a stand-in for the audience - straight in the eye. The praxical imperative springing from Critical Negativity then diffuses beyond the diegetical world of the film down to the normally uninvolved audience.

Finally, I note *Perfumed Nightmare*'s employment of the uninterrupted long take in one of the final scenes. The wooden horse-figure, symbol of resistance and freedom, is shown continuously moving slowly against the contrastingly static, dystopic backdrop of construction rubble in Kidlat's Paris. The portrayal of the polarity of mobility in the midst of stasis, the liberative journey in the face of the destructive phantom of progress, comes into sharp focus in this long take. Again, I see this as a filmic rendering of Schillebeeckx's Negative Experiences of Contrast.

Through the examples cited, it can be seen that the stylistic signature of Third Cinema in *Perfumed Nightmare* figures constitutively as much as the film's thematic elements in bringing to light a certain theological concept. Perhaps, as I have attempted to illustrate in this paper, a more regardful consideration of the filmic style could lay a meaningful, alternative bridge in the ongoing Theology-Cinema dialogue.

Concluding Reflection

The hard facts of history do not in themselves offer any guarantee or hope that ultimate shalom and reconciliation are possible. We humans are good at making our history on this earth go wrong or allowing it to do so. Shalom, universal meaning and reconciliation can therefore be articulated, given our negative contrast experiences, in parables and eschatological symbols, in images of promise and admonition, finally of God's kingdom or God's rule, of forgiveness and metanoia.¹²

Schillebeeckx emphasizes the eschatological dimension of Negative Experiences of Contrast as history attests to the seeming absence of redemption in a wounded world where structural injustice, abject poverty, and other forms of suffering continue to thrive. The movie in my mind accurately represents the current scene in my home country, the Philippines. Racked by the baggage of centuries of colonization and barely surviving the blistering pace of "progress" spawned by the global socio-economic divide, the exchange rate to the US dollar at the time of writing is a telltale sign - (only) 1 US dollar = 53.71 Philippine pesos.

The eminent Dutch theologian, however, would be prompt to conceptually build a "bridge" from the ruins of history by using the Kingdom of God as a symbol and source for hope and promise. Perhaps the hope-inspiring protest of our Negative Experiences of Contrast symbolically resonates whenever a church in Manila bursts each Sunday at the seams with singing worshippers amid the backdrop of harsh socio-economic realities. Or it just might be articulated by the

spontaneous congregation of "humanity on the streets," gathered in "People Power" to oust from power yet another corrupt ruler.

Such hope and protest still and very well might be symbolized in filmic language ... in a thoroughly original \$10,000 Filipino film with a dangerously brilliant title - *Perfumed Nightmare*.

¹ Stephen Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinema" in John Hill and Pamela Gibbon, eds. *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 390.

² Michael Chanan quotes Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in *Screen* (Winter 1997) 4 vol. 38.

³ Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," in Simon Field and Peter Sainsbury, eds. *Third World Cinema* (London: Afterimage Publishing, 1971) p. 29.

⁴ Teshome Gabriel, "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" in Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, eds. *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1994) p. 30-51.

⁵ Ibid., p.16.

⁶ Ibid., p.40.

⁷ Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: An Aesthetic of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982) p. 41

⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995) p. 479.

⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁰ Schillebeeckx elaborates on Negative Experiences of Contrast with reference to the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. Ibid., p. 621-622.

¹¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward) p. 158.

¹² Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, p. 620.