

QUESTIONS FOR *PERFUMED NIGHTMARE*

Here are a few of the things worth paying attention to as you watch Tahimik's film and think or write about it afterwards:

Keep track of some of the more obvious visual and narrative symbols: do they evolve (i.e., change in meaning) over the course of the film?

- Bridges
- The Jeepney (and other "vehicles")
- The White Carabao
- Bamboo
- The Supermarket
- "The winds of Amulk Mountain"

What's the effect of Tahimik's narration: do you find it generally earnest, or ironic, or both? What do you make of his presence, his "persona" in the film? (And how does it compare to the apparently naive narrator of *Saeed the Pessimist*, for instance?)

What other humor is there in the film, especially humor that's accomplished by the camera alone—through framing, cross-cutting, panning, camera angles and/or point-of-view? How important are issues of "perspective" and "scale" to this story, generally?

How does the soundtrack work—especially things in the background, like the Voice of America radio broadcasts?

Why the fixation on Werner von Braun and the U.S. space program? Is this film strictly anti-technology, anti-development?

How important is the figure of Kaya, the bamboo-hut builder?

What's the significance of the story of Kidlat's father, and why do we get two different versions of it? Would you be inclined to make anything of the resemblance between the second version of that story and the films on the "Philippine Revolution" page of "The Spanish-American War in Motion Pictures" site (in the Internet Resources column of the *Perfumed Nightmare* page of the Course Reader)?

Andrea Strout, "Coppola's Filipino Coup." *American Film* 6:6 (1981).

The two men met at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979. Both had made films in the Philippines, fifty miles apart, about imperialism, technology, and the myth of Western infallibility. One was Francis Coppola, whose \$31 million *Apocalypse Now* would go on to share the top prize at Cannes that year. The other was Kidlat Tahimik, a frail-looking Filipino filmmaker whose first feature, *The Perfumed Nightmare*, was shot for a miserly \$10,000. A fan of Tahimik's film, Coppola said he would do what he could to get it seen in the United States.

It turned out to be more than festival talk. Under the Coppola banner, *The Perfumed Nightmare* opened a few months ago at New York's Bleecker Street Cinema, garnered good reviews and an audience, and traveled on to Toronto and San Francisco. Coppola first heard of the film from Tom Luddy, his director of special projects, who in turn had heard about it from German director Werner Herzog.

Herzog some years ago became Tahimik's "angel" when they met in Germany. He purchased Tahimik's jitney (a fantastically festooned army jeep-turned-taxi), thus providing him with the hard cash he needed to finish editing the film. Through a series of other unlikely events, *The Perfumed Nightmare* went on to win the International Critics' Prize at the 1977 Berlin Film Festival.

Shot with an old Kodak 16mm camera, *The Perfumed Nightmare* is the whimsical story of a young Filipino jitney driver (played by Tahimik) who is the president of the Wernher von Braun Fan Club in his village. Entranced by "Voice of America" reports about the United States and high technology, he dreams of leaving his bamboo hut for the home of Saturn 5. But the offer of a job filling gum ball dispensers takes him to Paris instead, where he lives in squalid quarters in a tower resembling a von Braun rocket. A scant three thousand miles away from the technological paradise of his dreams, he is happy—for a while. Finally, given the opportunity to voyage to America on the Concorde, or, as it's put in the film, to be "the first Filipino to fly supersonic," he chooses instead, in a surreal sequence, to blast off from atop the Pompidou Center inside a funnel.

Despite the positive reception *The Perfumed Nightmare* has received in New York, no offers of regular theatrical distribution have turned up yet. "We're not interested in distributing films that other people could just as well do," Luddy says. "Every time we do it and have some success, I think it helps prove to the distributors that they can take more chances." Back again in the Philippines. Kidlat Tahimik has shot two more films. Whether those films will be seen by U.S. audiences may depend on Coppola, or perhaps on others who thrive on risks. Of those who cannot see beyond *The Perfumed Nightmare's* lack of polish, Luddy concludes, "It just tells you who has a good eye, and who has a good soul."

Amy Kaplan, from "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture." *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993): 3-21.

The divergent yet intertwined histories of American and European imperialism might be found to cross paths where Perry Miller first conceived of the "meaning of America": the banks of the Congo.* In a recent revision of Conrad's classic text of European imperialism, the documentary film *Hearts of Darkness* by Eleanor Coppola relocates the African site to Vietnam and the Philippines. Francis Ford Coppola would probably view *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as the reversal of Miller's paradigm of the denial of empire, as the antiwar film exposes the horrors of American imperialism in Vietnam. Furthermore, Coppola might be seen to counter American exceptionalism, by scripting the war through Conrad's text, and placing the Vietnam war in relation to the history of European imperialism. The documentary on the making of the film, however, which stands awkwardly between an exposé and a publicity reel, refuses recognition of the film's complicity with the imperial context that enables its production, at the same time that context is paraded dramatically on the screen.

Coppola located his "Congo" as the setting for his exploration of the meaning of America in the late 1970s, neither in Africa nor in Vietnam, but in the Philippines, a former United States colony with ongoing strong ties to the United States through the repressive regime of President Ferdinand Marcos. There for great sums Coppola bought the support of the regime, borrowed Marcos's bodyguards, and rented military equipment from the U.S. built army of the Philippines (since the U.S. military would not rent them equipment for an antiwar film). As the documentary covers the shooting of the famous scene of the helicopter attack on the beach, we watch the Filipino helicopters suddenly turn out of line as they are radioed by their commanders to fight a political insurrection in the immediate vicinity. The breakdown between fiction and history in these glaring parallels between the present in the Philippines and the past of Vietnam do not make Eleanor or Francis Coppola reflect on their participation as film makers in the dynamics of empire which the documentary explores as history. Instead, the blatant evidence of the surrounding reality of imperialism generates excitement in the voice-over about being in the "thick of the jungle," about being so close to a real battlefield. They find in the Philippines a way of retrieving nostalgically the intensity of the battlefield experience they may have rejected on political grounds. By turning the Philippines into a timeless "jungle" backdrop, outside of history, like the African "jungle" of Miller, the Coppolas deny the imperial history which brings them to the Philippines. Yet, like the setting of Africa, the backdrop of the Philippines speaks out of the cultures of U.S. imperialism which enable the production of this American epic film—as the helicopters break through the stage set to fight a real war....

* The reference is to American Studies scholar Perry Miller's famous "epiphany": as a merchant-marine in the 1920s, Miller found himself unloading drums of oil at the mouth of the Congo River. What he rather disappointedly perceived as the blankness of the African "jungle" inspired him to conceive of the thrust of American history and culture in terms of what he called, in the title of one of his classic texts, an *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956).