



Towards Another Cinema (After Kidlat Tahimik & Ulrike Ottinger)

What did “Third Cinema” say? According to Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their seminal text, “Towards a Third Cinema,” it proposed “the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point;” in short, decolonizing culture (Solanas and Getino n.p.). It proposed “... making films that the System cannot assimilate and which are foreign to its needs, or making films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the System” (Solanas and Getino n.p.). However, some of “Third Cinema’s” precepts might read archaically to today’s avant-garde filmmaker: they seem to essentialize cultures and nationalities, ignoring the fruits of cross-cultural pollination. Many other scholars have acknowledged certain limitations in the original precepts of Third Cinema: Teshome Gabriel maintains that anyone anywhere can make “Third Cinema” if it “stands opposed to imperialism and class oppression” (Gabriel); Fredric Jameson has put forth an alternative argument for a “geopolitical aesthetic” (Jameson n.p.); Coco Fusco has similarly asserted that “[t]here is no entirely non-Western place left” (Fusco n.p.). On the other hand, Deborah Dixon and Leo Zonn argue for a more nuanced and non-essentializing reading of “Third Cinema’s” goals.

Kidlat Tahimik’s 1976 film, *Perfumed Nightmare*, is widely regarded as a “Third Cinema” film. Meanwhile, Ulrike Ottinger’s 1989 film, *Joan of Arc of Mongolia*, has been criticized by certain film theorists for reproducing the colonialist paradigm (and praised by others for subverting it). Notwithstanding their differences, both films are—to varying degrees—fake orientalist ethnologies. Both depict journeys through a spectrum of urban first world and rural third world landscapes using an unorthodox filmic language of spectacular convergence. I am interested in assessing the respective qualities of these films for a global influx aesthetic; I shall analyze

the creative solutions which each offers for portraying “the other” to a Western spectator and fulfilling Third Cinema’s goals.

Joan of Arc of Mongolia chronicles the voyage of a diverse array of mostly Caucasian, mostly female Westerners who travel east on the trans-Siberian express and are “abducted” by a group of female Mongolian horsewomen. Their aggressions are short-lived: soon both parties are teaching one another their customs and enjoying idyllic festivities together. However, the customs of both are varyingly fantastical performances: Ottinger employs archetypes present in the theatre or cabaret to portray the Westerners and wild elaborations of dress and custom to depict the Mongolians. The film overlaps with and oscillates between seemingly fictional and seemingly ethnographic modes.

On the other hand, Kidlat Tahimik presents *Perfumed Nightmare* as a sort of self-ethnology for the Western spectator. He introduces his hometown of Balian Philippines (“This is the bridge to our village. It is the only way into Balian and it is the only way out”) and tells the story of his coming of age (“I am Kidlat Tahimik. I choose my vehicle and I can cross any bridge”) as a tall tale in the context of the village’s postcolonial past and present. In the shadow of the technological achievement of former colonizing countries, he forms a Werner von Braun club and listens to “Voice of America” on his radio. An American executive brings him to Paris, where Tahimik eventually comes to realize that he rejects the encroachment of technology (both abroad and in the Philippines) and longs for his original home. The film’s rough qualities—it is shot on super 8mm film—undergird the pretense that this a “primitive man” (Tahimik) making his own movie; however, the film’s wit, postmodern deconstructions, and camouflaged critiques of capitalism betray his

sophistication.

One of the most significant differences between the two films stems from the fact that the creator of *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* is from a colonialist country (Germany) while the creator of *Perfumed Nightmare* is from a colonized country (the Philippines). *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* is presented primarily as a drama and does not (directly) thematize the violent history of colonial encounters or Western imperialism. Where *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* seems to celebrate cross-cultural flux with a touch of pastiche eye-winking, *Perfumed Nightmare* stages a “quiet lighting” (“Kidlat Tahimik” means “quiet lightning” in Tagalog) of resistance, subliminally (yet directly) referencing the brutal history of colonialism.

However, the films also have many things in common: both are partial fabrications performed for the Western viewer. Ottinger fabricates the culture of the Mongols just as Kidlat Tahimik fabricates his innocent persona in *Perfumed Nightmare*. Both *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* and *Perfumed Nightmare* contain autobiographical elements, and both subvert their genre by creating a layering of viewing modes. Nora Alter describes how *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* tightly interweaves fact and fiction “to produce an almost seamless—yet chiasmic—postgenre,” and “overcodes transgression (of heterosexual norms) with an ethnographic element” (11). *Perfumed Nightmare* has been described as a “magical reverse ethnography” and “a sui generis mixture

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of documentary, diary film, fictionalized autobiography, cinematic essay, and ethnography (“Perfumed Nightmare Trailer”).

Significantly, both films employ non-naturalistic acting. As the filmmakers were not trained in filmmaking, pastiche and stilted acting might be the inadvertently avant-garde by-products of that lack. Whether avant-garde or amateur, a self-reflexive effect ensues, as characters—by being caricatures—subliminally poke fun at their fictional constructs. This performativity

is both counter-balanced and expanded in the extensive diegetic performances throughout both films. These include musical and cabaret numbers, festival and ritual performances, and even sung messages in the case of *Joan of Arc of Mongolia*, and parades, school dance performances, a wedding, a funeral, and even flagellant men in the case of *Perfumed Nightmare* (not to mention Kidlat’s extradiegetic narration and semi-diegetic re-enactments). All reference a (faux) ethnographic documentary genre despite non-naturalistic acting.

Both filmmakers have extensive relationships with the non-native culture depicted in the films: the real Kidlat completed his master’s degree at the Wharton School of Business at UPenn and is married to a Bavarian woman, Katrin de Guia. Ulrike Ottinger spent many years on site and learned Mongolian. She made an eight-hour documentary, *Taiga* (1992), soon after filming *Johanna d’Arc*, and had her collaborators welcome her back into their homes. In an interview with Patricia Wiedenhöft, Ottinger says, “I laid the groundwork by studying Mongolian culture and literature, the orally transmitted epics and fairy tales [and] the old text on the ‘Secret History of the Mongols’” (“Interview with Ulrike Ottinger”). In a well-known essay of his, “Cups-of-Gas Filmmaking vs. Full Tank-cum-Credit Card Fillmaking”, Kidlat Tahimik writes that he makes up for lack of funding with a relatively free time-frame, which opens him up to cosmic inspiration. Ulrike Ottinger also describes how long she was preparing for the encounter performed in *Joan of Arc of Mongolia*:

China. The Arts - The People, a cinematic travel account which I shot in various Chinese provinces in 1985, is a preliminary study in the sense that it gave me experience filming in China, which was instructive in several respects. Not only was I able to experience and observe other cultural forms and another way of life, living there also helped me revise and enrich my own extensive theoretical preparation. Many personal experiences have affected the scenario for *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia*, which already stood in rough form before my trip. To be sure, one film is documentary and the other fictional, but for me, taking into account the different production methods, both genres underwent a far-reaching transformation. Perhaps one could say that China ... is the encounter with the foreign, whereas *Johanna* ... is the performance of that encounter. But to the extent that both encounters actually take place, a “new realism” arises, which has not been arbitrarily invented, but rather rests on extensive groundwork - on research, experiences, preliminary studies, all those procedures which the preparation of such a project entails. What I mean is: the freeing of enough spaces so that the encounter really can take place (Wiedenhöft).

As she frees spaces for a meeting to take place in front of the camera, Ottinger frees (or demands) time

for the spectator to encounter her subjects: *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* is almost three hours long and her subsequent documentary, *Taiga* (1992), is eight hours long. The spectator cannot quickly consume this spectacle. She must chew on it a long time—the fiber is not thrown out; the work is wholesome.

Just as Kidlat's film subverts a Western perspective, Ottinger's film subverts a heteronormative patriarchal perspective, shifting the paradigmatic encounter between the "enlightened West" and the "exotic East:" the young Mongol princess leading a band of horsewomen and the young French traveler among the Westerners. On the train towards Europe, a Mongolian woman (some critics think it is the Princess) wearing Western attire reveals that she takes a break every summer from her modern job to return to the steppes to keep the culture alive. The representation of the Mongolian nomads is thus further complicated, and women, for once, play warriors and wanderers (Caryn).

Ottinger's experimental work as "Second Cinema." Neither they, nor Teshome Gabriel, the Ethiopian Third World cinema scholar and filmmaker, nor Fredric Jameson, seem to have commented on Ottinger's work, perhaps because she is from a colonialist country.

Perfumed Nightmare is widely considered to be a "Third Cinema" film. Several goals of Third Cinema which it fulfills, and which *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* also achieves, include:

- Long, uninterrupted shots counter quick Hollywood-style editing.
- Frequent wide shots that place characters in the context of their community, fulfilling the Third Cinema goal of de-emphasizing psychological realism.
- Portrays Indigenous cultural events and symbols.
- Non-actors act out dynamic equivalents of their true-to-life roles, for more authentic characterization [although inauthentic characterization also occurs in both films] (Sison)



Ottinger's *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* (1989): Third or Second Cinema?

Does Ottinger's work decolonize culture? In an interview with *Cineaste*, Ulrike Ottinger states:

There is no pornography in art, there are no taboos. Art works in relation to everything, including ethnic representation. These questions, issues of ethnic misrepresentation, always already imply a reduction to or an acceptance of a system that I have never accepted, but which is nonetheless there (Shulevitz and Grundmann).

Ottinger implies that her work employs traditional narrative structures—(traditional) drama and (traditional) ethnographic documentary—as a way of speaking back to them. However, her experimental feminist and queer subversions might not suffice for the Third Cinema movement; Solanas and Getino might rather classify

The last two goals refer to an authenticity which neither of the films in this essay leaves deconstructed. In his now-classic reading of *Perfumed Nightmare*, Fredric Jameson discusses "how a film produced within the 'Third World' does not simply 'represent' that context in particular ways, but is constituted in large part through its deployment of symbols, allegories and techniques that invoke a sense of the global." In other words, cinema in the Third World, rather than aspire to nationalistic myth, can embrace a "geopolitical aesthetic" of the influence and influx of the global on the local. Jameson argues that "*Perfumed Nightmare* is very much a self-conscious exercise that seeks to make a connection

between the localised experience of the individual and the globalised totality that is late capitalism" (Dixon and Zonn 297).

Joan of Arc of Mongolia and *Perfumed Nightmare* do just that: *Joan of Arc* produces colorful cross-cultural fabricated ritual performances to recreate the utopian myth of the crossing of cultures. *Perfumed Nightmare* presents cross-cultural symbols, in a fable of an innocent and primitive young man traveling to industrialized lands. One found symbol, that of the jeepney, makes a case for turning "vehicles of war" into "vehicles of life." Scholars Dixon and Zonn describe Fredric Jameson's analysis:

Because the hand-crafting of the jeepneys involves the continuous recycling of parts, there is no destruction or waste. And, because the jeepney partakes of Filipino, American and Spanish legacies, there is no 'authentic' culture to be commodified and sold. For Jameson, this is an instance wherein a utopian workplace is actually realised, at least on film (Dixon and Zonn 301).

However, they add that Filipino scholars have claimed that Jameson's comment betrays his lack of familiarity with his subject of study: the factories that manufacture these jeepneys in the Philippines are very oppressive workplaces. It is no wonder though that Jameson interpreted the jeepneys as he did: Tahimik—an "authentic" non-Western native—portrayed the jeepney factory as a utopia in his film. At the factory, Kidlat narrates, "where do these jeepneys come from? These are vehicles of war, which we made into vehicles of life." Over footage of a jeepney being hand-painted, he further explains: "an old jeepney never dies, it finds its way into a hundred new jeepneys."

Both Perfumed Nightmare and Joan of Arc of Mongolia are grounded in a positivist outlook, blowing away the ghosts of colonization or orientalism with humour, magic, or idealized reenactment.

Kidlat Tahimik's utopian fantasy of the US becomes a nightmare over the course of the film. Ulrike Ottinger's utopian fantasy of Mongolia, however, remains mythologized. Katie Trumpener and Kristen Whissel have argued that Ottinger's ironic tone does not trump the naïve restaging of yet another Western point of view of the "Orient." Trumpener writes:

It was thus Japan which Admiral Perry "opened" to America, not America which opened itself to Japan, Christianity which was imported into China and India by missionaries, not Taoism or Hinduism into Italy and Spain, England or Scotland. In the light of this history, Ottinger's assertion of cultural reciprocity can at moments seem disingenuous (94).

She argues that Ottinger ignores - and thereby reproduces - an asymmetrical relationship. However, just as Ottinger creates a utopian myth ignoring an imperialist residue, Tahimik creates a myth of the magical powers of the individual to confront it. In the story of his father before American soldiers killed him, his friend narrates:

Your father took a deep breath, he blew with a fury that knocked the guard down, stronger than the winds of Amock Mountain Kidlat. More Americans fell before they finally stabbed your father. Kidlat, when the typhoon blows up, its cocoon, the butterfly embraces the sun. The sleeping typhoon must learn to blow again.

At the end of the film, Kidlat is simply able to blow away the perfumed horror of his American dream:

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 (Sison 12).

Kidlat invokes his imagination to rewrite history, or to reconcile identities just as Ottinger does. At the beginning of *Joan of Arc of Mongolia*, Lady Windemere asks:

Was it a confrontation with reality or with the imagination... must imagination shun the encounter with reality? Or are they enamoured of each other? Can they form an alliance?

The utopian qualities of these two films provide the basis for their subversion. Both *Perfumed Nightmare* and *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* are grounded in a positivist outlook, blowing away the ghosts of colonization or orientalism with humour, magic, or idealized reenactment. On the IMDB website, there is only one review of *Joan of Arc of Mongolia*, which concludes as follows:

As a counter to that age old question, "Can't we all just get along?", *Joan of Arc of Mongolia* provides its two cents: "Sure, why not?"

Not all happy endings are made in Hollywood.

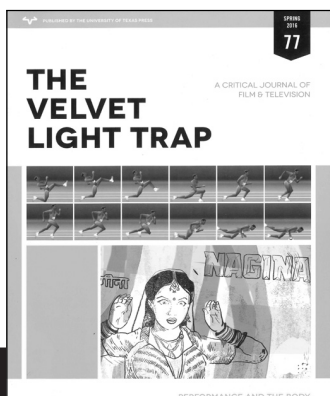
How could a new generation of filmmakers portray "the other" to a Western spectator? Following Tahimik and Ottinger, they might fabricate ethnographies, cultural dress, and rituals, cross genres and genders, paradigms and patriarchies, perform the past: queer it and query it, give and demand (much) time. Moreover, they might unabashedly portray peace. As cash and cameras are more widely distributed, these methods may become mainstream.

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- Leading image from *Perfumed Nightmare* (1976).

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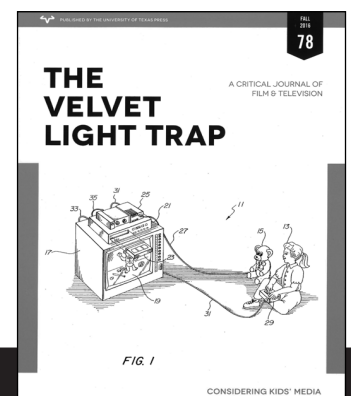
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