

Spike Island

I AM FURIOUS YELLOW On Kidlat Tahimik's *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (1994) By Tendai John Mutambu

Third World is a term scattered throughout much of *Why is Yellow...?*'s first ten minutes, its assonant ring repeating like a refrain of sorts. The younger Kidlat has just learnt the term and like any young mind preoccupied by a novel sound or idea, his obsession wraps its tendrils insistently around every inch of his world. So the family pets have been pronounced as a *Third World cat* and a *Third World bitch*, and the younger Kidlat has himself become, in his quest to remove a loose baby tooth, a *Third World dentist*. The tone is one of sardonic amusement. Is the elder Kidlat wryly sending up these taxonomies of 'First' and 'Third World'—categories to which we once crudely attached disparities wrought by centuries-old colonial violence and imperialist exploitation?

'In the land of plenty, junk gathers dust,' the younger narrator informs us. 'In the land of not-so-plenty, wipe off the dust and what do you have? A rusty Third World projector.' We are reminded of the resourcefulness that is the mainstay of art-making for the subaltern. Take as a case-in-point Kidlat Tahimik (born Eric Oteyza de Guia, 1942) whose debut feature, *The Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), was shot on expired rolls of film gifted by fellow students at the University of Film and Television in Munich.

(Tahimik's film would go on to be awarded the International Film Critic's Prize at the Berlin Film Festival where it premiered.) The following year Werner Herzog and Francis Ford Coppola oversaw its distribution in the US where it caught the attention of several prominent figures, among them Susan Sontag, for whom it was a reminder that 'invention, insolence, enchantment—even innocence—[were] still available on film'. As for the Marxist philosopher and critic Frederic Jameson, *The Perfumed Nightmare* was an exemplar of how the politics of culture and of daily life were much more than a footnote to capital 'P' Politics. But it was the film critic J Hoberman who perhaps gave the film its most notable praise by announcing the likelihood of its becoming, in his words, 'some sort of classic'.

But Tahimik, the Third World cineaste, was concerned with more than just first-world approbation. *Why is Yellow...?*, lesser known than *The Perfumed Nightmare* but no less daring, bears testament to the budding auteur's commitment to the peoples of the Philippines, their cultures, and their struggle against foreign imperialism and local autocracy. Over a period of ten years, Tahimik poured the granular detail of the everyday, the domestic, the local

into the vast, turbulent waters of political corruption, assassination, protest, thwarted ceasefires, and the severe natural disasters, from earthquakes to typhoons, which levelled vast swathes of the Philippines' built environment. Yet strewn amongst these records of calamity are victories and pleasures, big and small. Like the resplendent political gatherings and rallies, festooned with sunflowers, held in honour of then-presidential candidate Corazon 'Cory' Aquino, widow of the slain political dissident Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino, and a revered political figure in her own right; or the many artistic happenings, installations, and performances that punctuate Tahimik's life as they do his filmmaking.

In *Why is Yellow...?* sequences of montage often appear like minute convulsions of grainy images. Colour flashes and animations pulse and flicker; they are what lend the film its preternaturally ludic energy. So, too, does Tahimik's signature wit, his taste for puckish wordplay, for example. Like making the acronym LSD a stand-in for the 'law of supply and demand,' or turning 'IMF', in the slogan 'I am mortgaged to the IMF' on his son's t-shirt, into shorthand for 'I am Furious Yellow'. The latter phrase becomes, *inter alia*, an alternate title to the film; a reference to the Swedish director Vilgot Sjömans's contentious films *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967) and *I Am Curious (Blue)* (1968); and, possibly, a reminder of the righteous anger of the many who wore yellow and rallied in support of Ninoy and Cory Aquino in the struggle for democracy in the Philippines. As he does with the written and spoken word in its many forms—as slogan, as title, as rallying cry—Tahimik reframes objects and images, endowing them with new lives. Witness the virtuoso filmmaker, the DIY maverick, the archivist of insurrection as a creator of words and worlds beyond those we have already known.

Essay by Tendai John Mutambu

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