

# “I trust the cosmos.”

## Interview with Kidlat Tahimik

Tobias Hering and Tilman Baumgärtel

The films of Philippine director Kidlat Tahimik constitute a fantastically exceptional oeuvre. The following interview, which was conducted in March 2016 when Kidlat was subject of his first complete retrospective at cinema Arsenal (Berlin) in March 2016 by the interviewers. We tried to cover his whole career in three long interviews that were conducted during the retrospective. Kidlat Tahimik occasionally used German terms in this interview, which we left in this version of the interview that was slightly edited for clarity. Sometimes we translated them, sometimes we did not to preserve some of the idiosyncrasies of his style of speaking.

### How I ended up in Bavaria

**Tobias Hering and Tilman Baumgärtel (TH/TB):** Let's begin with some biographical background. You studied at the University of the Philippines where you were a member of the Student Council from 1962 to 1963, and then at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, before you started to work for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ...

**Kidlat Tahimik (KT):** I was an economist at the OECD in Paris from 1968 to 1972. But I was getting restless. I think in my heart I knew that I was not cut out to be an economist. I wanted to be an artist, and I

did not believe in the growth-oriented prescriptions that Western economists had for developing countries like the Philippines. So in 1971, I tore up my diploma.

**TH/TB:** Did you really physically tear up your diploma?

**KT:** Yes. It was my own, private ritual. And just before I did it, I thought to myself: But I owe this diploma to my parents. They paid for my studies and my plane to Paris before I got a scholarship. So I was asking myself: Am I insulting my parents when I tear up this diploma? I asked the university for a second copy and sent it to my parents. And then I destroyed my own copy.

**TH/TB:** How do you feel about that part of your career, about being an economist?

**KT:** That was my evolution. I did burn my bridges with that profession, to free myself to do what I wanted to do. So it was symbolic for me. It was a decision pro something rather than against something. When I tore up my diploma I threw away a convenient career, because I had a comfortable lifestyle in Paris.

In a way I overdid it because as a filmmaker I could have gotten into a more commercial type of a production, like Werner Herzog or these new French cinema *auteurs* did. They would have regular productions, but they kept it indie. For me it was not only that I did not follow such a formula, but I just allowed time to accommodate my production. With regular film productions, even with indie films, everything's so organized. Every step is measured, and even after the film is finished, everything measured: It will generate so much income because of the TV sales, or distribution contracts. I never made a film this way.

**TH/TB:** At that point you had no experience in film making. How did you get from being an economist in Paris to being a burgeoning film maker in Munich?

**KT:** I was looking for an opportunity to make some quick money, because I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to work on a play that I had in mind. The *Olympiade* in Munich in 1972 had the *Waldi*, a colorful dachshund, as a logo. I always say, I came into Germany not riding on a white horse, but on a *Waldi*. I proposed to the

Olympic committee to produce a version of the *Olympia Waldi*, out of mother of pearl. They let you produce any kind of kitsch, key chains, throw pillows and what not, if you pay them a 20 percent commission on your profits. That later became an autobiographical motive in my film *Turumba*. My Waldi was also a Windspiel in the shape of a Dachshund in the different colors of the rainbow. It had 25 shells, and when the wind would blow, it would make a nice “klingel, klingel” sound. The Olympic committee approved it. Don’t forget that the 1972 Olympics were trying so hard to come across as the rainbow Olympics, because the previous Olympics were the 1936 Hitler Olympics.

I had them produced in the Philippines, and I arrived with 25,000 of those in Munich. In the first week they were selling very well. They became very popular, and I kept getting orders from the shops. Then the Olympic hostage crisis happened, all the optimism was gone, nobody wanted to buy my mascots anymore, and I ended up not being able to send my last 10,000 dogs. And I was stuck in Munich, bankrupt. I had to move in with this commune of artists, who had rented a barn outside of Munich and split the rent there. Katrin, now my wife, and three other women were renting a villa next to it, and they had a spare room and I ended up moving into that. One year and a half later, we had our first kid. I also met a student from the Hochschule für Film in Munich, who did very strange projects, and it was through him that I got my first Bolex camera. And with that Bolex I shot *Perfumed Nightmare* and most of the *Yoyo* film.

## **The Making of *The Perfumed Nightmare***

**TH/TB:** *Perfumed Nightmare* feels fresh and new every time I see it, and I notice new details every time. There was never any attempt to copy and reference the film, and so it is very much a class of its own ...

**KT:** In fact, I am surprised every time I see the film. When I worked on the film I did not have a script, and I allowed all these random incidents to influence the film. Why was my son born during the shooting? Why did I meet my friend Hartmut, who opened doors of the Filmhochschule, so I could use the *Schneidetisch* there? Why did I buy my eggs at the egg lady in Paris? I actually bought these double-yolk eggs—that I mention in the film—from her for five

years, before I asked her to play a part in my film. And then she tells me that she was an actress and a double when she was young. She had been in a dozen films in the 1920s. How did I come across such a person? These ingredients were cosmically thrown at me, when I was shooting the film.

**TH/TB:** Parts of the film were shot in Germany, parts in France, and parts in the Philippines. Can you tell us about the production of the film?

**KT:** With *Perfumed Nightmare*, I always said it would take five months, four months, six months, and it dragged on for two years. I started shooting on expired film stock from students from the Filmhochschule in Munich that I had met in a commune. I taught myself how to make a film while shooting it. Before I had shot a bit of Super-8, but nothing else. Some of my friends knew Werner Herzog. Once I was in a workshop that he taught, and afterwards Herzog asked me if I was an actor. I was flattered but said no. Then he asked me to be in a film he was making, *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*. I played Humbercito, a character who appears in the circus scene. On the set, I discovered a bit about movie making. Then I traveled to France with some friends who were shooting a film in an abandoned mountain village. I drove them in my “jeepney,” the Philippine minibus that you see in *Perfumed Nightmare*. This jeep of mine had come to the Munich Olympics from the Philippines. And eventually this jeep became the star of my film, because people were always so curious about it and reacted to the jeep.

I remember that one night after a projection at the Filmhochschule my wife Katrin threatened to throw the film reels into the Isar, because it took me so long to edit the film. Originally we had agreed that I had a year to finish the film. And then I would take over little Kidlat, and she would do her *Abschluß* at the Kunstakademie. So she was expecting by May 1976 that it would be her turn. But the editing of the film took another year.

I think I finished the almost final version or at least a showable version in April or maybe even March 1977. I started looking for a festival and true to my promise, I told Katrin, I am going to Paris and other places, and I'll bring little Kidlat along. I just had my backpack, and I had Kidlat in one arm and a plastic bag with my two film reels. We jumped on trains, we hitchhiked to Paris, and Avignon, then we were going to London and Edinburgh.

I would just knock on the door and say: "I have a film. Can you look at it?"

For me, I really felt the festival was just a way to get an audience. I never thought of winning prizes. I had a vague idea about distribution, but I really just wanted to fill up an auditorium two or three nights and see how people felt about the film.

**TH/TB:** Did you have a budget for *Perfumed Nightmare*?

**KT:** I once wrote an article on the subject of film financing, that is called "Cups of Gas film making versus "Full tank cum Credit card." I was trying to explain how I put on cup of gas into my vehicle and then I go as far as my cup of gas will take me. Then I beg, steal, and borrow my next cup of gas. It might take me three years from East coast to West coast. The usual way is the efficient way: you have your production money, so you have a full tank and a map of all the gasoline stations, so you can do the cross-country in ten days. I can take my time, and it can take me five years or ten years to finish a film. Or 35, as in the case of my last film. I'm able to do this, because I am not prisoner of a time table. If you make time your ally, things will come your way that will allow you to finish your voyage. That's what happened to most of my films.

But there is one other thing: I come from an upper-middle class family. My mother had the resources to make sure that my children would never starve. So I was able to take risks and take my time to finish my films. In the traditional way of film making, you have a quick, efficient pressure-cooker situation. That's why you need money, because you want to put it on the market right away to earn your billion investment quickly. But since that is not part of my vocabulary, I am able to take my time. I just trust the cosmos.

**TH/TB:** What is the significance of the butterfly that you talk about at the end of the film?

**KT:** That sounds like the riddle of the Sphinx, doesn't it? Even some Filipinos have asked me if that was some old saying from some tribal folklore. For me the butterfly is the symbol of breaking free, of leaving that strange, primitive cocoon to achieve freedom. I don't know where that line came from. But sometimes, in the loneliness of the editing room, when you play ping-pong with your sequences and when you play ping-pong with the energies that enter the film,

your own memories from your lifetime and maybe even from a different lifetime, are criss-crossing in front of you, and that's where this line came from. I am sorry, I don't want to sound mysterious here, but I think that can happen to anyone when you are desperate to tell your story.

**TH/TB:** Can you talk about the connection between the scene about San Juan Bridge in Manila and the scene about harnessing the winds of Amuk Mountain?

**KT:** That is not so much about defeating the colonial power. It was more of finding your strength, an ancient strength our culture had, a cultural treasure that makes us a respectable country. As far as the scene about the San Juan bridge is concerned: It's a historical fact that Filipino soldiers were banned from entering Manila after the Spanish surrendered. And on the San Juan Bridge was a skirmish that started what you call the Philippine-American War. We call it the Philippine-American War, but the Americans call it the Philippines' insurrection. A certain Sergeant Grayson fired the first shot, which resulted in many deaths. That was on February 4, 1899, and on February 25, the US Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris, and one part of this was that the Spanish sold the Philippines to America for 20 million dollars. I actually made a mistake in the film. I say it was 12 million dollars but historians later corrected me. Then the next question is, was that incited on San Juan Bridge rigged? The decision to annex the Philippines was based on that incident: "Wow! Stupid Filipinos are starting a war. Now we have a good excuse for the rest of the world to take over the country so that we can civilize and Christianize the Filipinos and prepare them for self-government." In the film, mentioning that the father was involved in that incident was a way of showing that the father had this cultural strength, and that is something that later Kidlat has to find out in Paris on his own. It's a *balik kultura*, a return of the cultural strength that we lost.

**TH/TB:** Can you talk about the village where the film was shot? You seem to be very familiar with the culture there, the religious traditions, the people ...

**KT:** The village where *Perfumed Nightmare* was shot was the village of my father and we used to go there during the summer, so I had a

strong bond to the place and this bridge. This scene was not in the original concept. There was this bridge that said to me: Film me! And then I found this toy and this small jeepney, and that's how the scene came together. Originally I wanted to start the film by saying "If you cross this bridge, you find your destiny." But then Werner Herzog encouraged me to start to talk in the first person right there, and that's why I say these lines: "I am Kidlat Tahimik, I can cross this bridge." But the visuals developed, just because somebody had a toy, and somebody had built a bridge a century before.

**TH/TB:** What is the music that you used in the film?

**KT:** At that time, the great ethnomusicologist José Maceda had just finished travelling the 7,000 islands of the Philippine, where he recorded the music of the villages and the tribes. I don't know what prompted him to let me copy these tapes. I took them back to Munich with me, and asked Katrin's brother, who was a musician, to pick music for the unfinished film. I tried the music out and what he had picked fit perfectly. It was yet another cosmic incidence.

**TH/TB:** The Kidlat character in *Perfumed Nightmare* is this likeable, open person; he even has been compared with Charlie Chaplin. How did you come up with that character?

**KT:** Just in my personal flow. Maybe I've always had this certain confidence because of my family. My mother was the mayor of the city and she was an accomplished, intelligent person. It was not an accident that she was the first woman mayor in the Philippines. But I think having grown up with that kind of background, I had a certain confidence and maybe social grace wherever I went. Maybe I am likeable, I don't know, but I rarely get into confrontational situations, not like my wife, who is quite frank about everything. I guess that's her Bavarian background. Sometimes I tell her to be more Filipino. But it's probably my training. My parents were both active in the Boy Scouts. I think I have a strong *kapwa*-orientation, and wherever I've gone it opens doors.

**TH/TB:** The Kidlat character in the film is a jeepney driver, he's a "subaltern." You don't seem to mind playing such a lowly character.

**KT:** I have always admired the creativity of the Filipino in making things like the jeepney. So my choice of the jeepney driver was because of this romantic fascination with how Filipinos transform anything into something that they can manage. They have that open attitude. Without any manual they can repair anything. Well, sometimes they also get something totally *kaput*. But in general they find a way to get things running again. I think I have that kind of optimism myself.

I think what comes across in my films, is partly my own openness. A lot of the first critiques I got for *Perfumed Nightmare* called the film a very autobiographical film, and I would really have to correct people and say, "I'm not really a jeepney driver, that's not my village." But I think I could sense it, this discovery, and being able to break out of this colonial straitjacket, breaking out of the cocoon, as the film says. That really was my final way to discover that there's so much strength in our old culture—why not get back to it? And so as Kidlat in the film learns to blow again, I learned to blow again. I think in that sense it's an autobiographical explosion of recognizing one's own potential. I was lucky that I had the Gregors at the right time who snuck me into the Berlinale festival, just at the right moment. That gave me more confidence to stay an indie filmmaker.

## **Alienation, distancing, estrangement**

**TH/TB:** You said Filipinos are good in transforming things, making them their own. And one thing that happens in *Perfumed Nightmare* and that happens in almost all of your films, is that you misread objects that you encounter: these chimneys are really rockets and that root is really Magellan and things like that ...

**KT:** I think it's normal: the outsider sees things differently than people who are used to them and who are jaded.

**TH/TB:** There are these constant transformations in your films: a Zwiebelturm turns into a rocket, the Centre Pompidou turns into a UFO ...

**KT:** In *Perfumed Nightmare*, I had all these rockets technology as a juxtaposition to the first world. Maybe when I had was editing it for a long time I got fascinated with the different shapes. It's like you're

noticing clouds or shadows, when you look to play with your kids. It's like when a child is first fascinated with his matchbox cars and then they become aware of different models of cars or they zero in on what makes one car different from another. When you're editing you go back and forth, and then later you begin to notice all these different *Zwiebels*. I just kept shooting and then suddenly I see: Oh, there's a madonna and her child. Or this looks like King Kong. You get deeper and deeper and play with those nuances as an artist. But it starts with some kind of a childlike framing. You develop a very playful way of reframing things visually. Like, we're eating and then the way you bit bread made a face and I'm always taking pictures of these things.

**TH/TB:** On one level there can be this kind of a childlike wonder. But at the same time there's another perspective. It has to do with distance. As a foreigner, you see other things. In Brecht and his concept of *Verfremdung*, there is this idea that you only understand certain things from a distance. In Brecht's theatre, this means creating a certain technique of seeing things anew as something strange and to get rid of the routine of seeing things or understanding things and only then when we get rid of the routine will we understand. There's been a long struggle over the translation of this term and it's usually translated as "estrangement" or "alienation" and now the common translation is "distancing"...

**KT:** Well, the outsider's eye is distant. It doesn't have the same framing the culture has imposed on people who see these things every day. I'm not trying to distance myself, but my distance allows me to frame things in an unusual way.

**TH/TB:** But you do not look at things in the way an ethnographer would. In *Perfumed Nightmare*, it's like you are make an ethnographic film on Bavaria. But the typical ethnographer would usually attempt to enter a culture and see it from within, he would learn the language, understand every gesture, the objects and the rituals. But you don't try to give up your distance because the way you see things is more useful for your story.

**KT:** That's an interesting observation. I'm always picking up stones and things like that. I guess my eye frames certain things, and maybe it's instinctive. I pick something up, and later it finds its place. It might

be an installation, or it might end up getting filmed. Yesterday, someone was commenting about the little figurine that I use in the language scene in *Balikbayan No. 1*, when I try to learn Russian and Italian. And maybe that was suggested by *Titanic*. But you think it is animistic?

**TH/TB:** There are a lot of these objects in your films. In the *Yoyo* film there is the icon that you find in the fountain. And in *Balikbayan*, there is even a scene, where you say that rocks have a heartbeat and a pulse. And that this is just there, waiting to tell their story.

**KT:** Maybe that's part of my mindset. When Katrin and I would go around the beach where we shot those scenes, I kept looking for stones. Because that particular beach is near a volcano, and a lot of the rocks had these interesting colors and patterns. I thought at one point that I would use the stones as a map, because a lot of them look like maps, islets, and passages. That's why I first began picking up the stones. I see things in the shapes, especially if you are so close that you don't recognize them anymore. That skull with all these canals becomes the moon. You think it's connected to animism? Maybe. (Chuckles)

**TH/TB:** With your films it sometimes seems as if you were amazed by the fact that you were actually making a film. You're not playing by the conventional rules of filmmaking, but you are not even ignoring them on purpose, like Godard for instance ...

**KT:** Because I am working intuitively. Here is a good example for this: When we started to shoot "Perfumed Nightmare", Hartmut would say: "Okay, ready, clap!" So I did the same thing, except that I didn't know that the clap has to be in front of the lens, because it serves a reference point for the sound. So I was like a child copying or mimicking the director. And when I showed the "Zwiebelturm" sequence to some of the students at the Munich Hochschule, while I was working on it, they said: "But that is parallel editing! Nobody does that anymore! Parallel cutting is passé!" (Of course, these are film students that were trying to create new expressions.) And I thought to myself, "Wow. I didn't even know what parallel cutting was." I don't know. I don't belong to that tradition.

I wonder if I had studied film, would I have had the same freedom to express that in the film? Probably not. If I would know

all these techniques of film making to make things visually perfectly clear to the audience—where you show the eyes and then you show what is being looked at—I would not make that kind of organic link quickly, which is what stayed in the film.

## **Charlie Fugunt**

**TH/TB:** Charlie Fugunt is frequently listed as your editor in the credits of your films until 1990, so it seems like he's a very important collaborator.

**KT:** Yes. Charlie had a small sound studio. He was a self-made man; he never went to school. In those days, people just learned their craft and worked for technical companies or big productions. He was working for ARD, for *Die Sendung mit der Maus* (a popular children's program —ed.). He allowed me to use his editing room, but I had to wait until after the last shift. So I would arrive about eight o'clock in the evening, and there were these guys who were editing these porno films.

**TH/TB:** How did you meet him?

**KT:** Originally, there was another filmmaker who allowed me to use his editing room, named H. P. Mayer. I would leave him some Philippine bowls, some ceramics, and other leftover stuff that I had, just so I could use his editing room when he was not using it. And he introduced me to Charles Fugunt. Charlie was this very openhearted person. He never charged me for anything. And he had his connections. He was a Catholic, and he hooked me up with Ambrose Eichenberger from Switzerland who was the head of OCIC organization. They helped me setting up my independent equipment in the Philippines. So in a way, the prize that I won at Berlinale for *Perfumed Nightmare*—although I wished for some cash—was useful in getting set up ...

**TH/TB:** What was his input into your films as an editor?

**KT:** I learned from him how to create a scene so that my mother could understand it. I was always doing structural editing, then he would smoothen it, give it basing, and help me with the sound. Since I didn't have a script, I would just first edit, just to have an internal rhythm

and a sequence. And then I would decide to put the narration. He showed me different tricks, of how to get rid of the oohs and aahs, or how to correct a sentence that was improperly recorded. He was so finicky about that. In a sense he taught me a very German precision. I could feel that he'd be as interested as I am in the final quality.

**TH/TB:** He came to visit you to work on your other films in the Philippines...

**KT:** Yes, he came once a year. It was a very strong friendship; he was a member of the household. He was the godfather of my second son. He would also try to do little projects in the Philippines so he could earn his trip.

### ***Who invented the Yoyo? Who invented the Moon Buggy?***

**TH/TB:** After *Perfumed Nightmare* was so well-received in Germany, where it was even theatrically released, you started to work on your next film *Who invented the Yoyo? Who invented the Moon Buggy?*, which focuses on many of the issues that you already addressed in *Perfumed Nightmare*. Again, the film is about technology, in particular space travel, religion, the differences between Germany and the Philippines. Please tell us about the production of the film...

**KT:** In 1978, we had moved in with another couple. And we moved to Pöttmes and I started just doing the first shots of the *Yoyo* film. It was a continuation of that motive of the Third World looking at space technology, but this time it focused more on the relationship between me and my son in the film. Again, there was no script, I was inspired by the junk I found at the farm.

**TH/TB:** Did you use any footage that you already had from *Perfumed Nightmare*?

**KT:** No. I shot both films on reversal stock, because you didn't have to go through the negative process and were able to view your film almost immediately. All the footage was shot specifically for that film.

**TH/TB:** How long did the production of the film take?

**KT:** I started shooting in 1978, then I returned to the Philippines in late 1979, and then I finished the film in 1981. So it took about four years.

**TH/TB:** It doesn't look like you shot much in the Philippines. It seems as if 80 or 90 percent of footage was shot in Germany.

**KT:** The scenes with my son Kidlat and the space monster and the heat shield look like they were shot at the farm in Germany, but in fact they were already shot in the Philippines. When the film was finished, I felt insecure about it. It seemed like an overextended joke, to deal with the space program again. I never released the film, and it was shown only occasionally. Most of the prints are lost, and the print that is left is from a Japanese archive with Japanese subtitles. It is a fourth-generation copy, so it looks a bit more "Third World" than the original film. The sound is also just a copy of the optical soundtrack, not the original mix.

**TH/TB:** Talking about the "Third World" ... again, the film could be read as a kind of anticolonial "counternarrative" that forwards accomplishments of the Philippines that are little known ...

**KT:** The yoyo really is a Filipino invention. The moon buggy was also conceived by a Filipino working for General Electrics in the USA. So I wanted to say: "Hey, whatever you Westerners think about Filipinos, we also have a contribution to the moon program."

**TH/TB:** In the film the Zwiebelturm that already features prominently in "Perfumed Nightmare" again plays an important part...

**KT:** The Zwiebelturm was an accidental encounter. I drove Hartmut Lerch to Paris, and we passed through Weilheim, and there was this giant onion sitting on the ground, and that was the beginning of this sequence. In *Yoyo*, I had the chance to expand it as a theory of space travel in the medieval ages.

**TH/TB:** Was there any budget for the Yoyo film?

**KT:** No. It was like "Hey, I got an idea!" Then I just I would sell a few more Waldis, and buy another film roll and shoot with my Bolex. Or I rented a sound camera at this rental house in Munich for a long

weekend. I would wait for a four-day weekend, like Ascension, so I could get four days of rental for the price of one.

**TH/TB:** If we compare “Perfumed Nightmare” with “Yo Yo”, the subject of Third World versus First World seems to be much more important in the first. I think “Yo Yo” is also a strong film, but you never released it...

**KT:** I always considered “Perfumed Nightmare” my sophomore film. It doesn’t have the innocence of the fresh one. That’s why I never really presented it. I am sure Les Blank would have included it into his selection.

**TH/TB:** But after the success of “Perfumed Nightmare”, I think it would have been important to have a new film ready for the festival circuit. You also put four years of work into it...

**KT:** If I would think like an MBA that would be right. I would do more pushing, but I felt that the film was not finished. I think the same thing about the “Yellow Film”. I always felt like the last part needed a little bit more work. I had very dark scenes. But I was living life as a father, and I thought I could continue doing other things and I was not stuck on getting this film out right away. Time is so fluid, it feels like rubber to me, and I didn’t even realize how it went by.

### ***Return to the Philippines***

**TH/TB:** Why did you return to the Philippines? At that time you had this unfinished film. You had done relatively well as a filmmaker. Your first work was received favorably at a major international film festival. So why didn’t you stay in Germany?

**KT:** At that time I was not thinking in terms of “Oh, I have an unfinished job to do.” I thought the film would find its own time. Katrin and I had decided that we didn’t want Kidlat to have a Wernher-Von Braun education. There is a technologically progressive, scientific orientation, which I think is a big demand on a child growing up. We wanted him to grow up in a more relaxed, child-rearing country. So we decided to go home. Katrin and I had been in the Philippines before, in the end of ’73. We spent a good month in the Philippines, then we came back to Munich. That was when I had to be in that

film of Herzog on Kasper Hauser (*Jeder für sich und Gott gegeben alle* (1974), English title “The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser” —eds.). Just before we left in December, Herzog came to our commune and said he would like me to play a part in the film.

**TH/TB:** In 1979, you didn’t go back to a tropical, relaxed place; you went back to the Marcos dictatorship.

**KT:** Yes. That’s why I asked Herzog to write a letter telling me to not cut my hair. My hair was really long at that time, and the police were really after people with long hair, because they thought you were an activist. If you have long hair you must be a leftist. If they would stop me, I could say. “Look, I’m supposed to let grow my hair for a shooting.”

I went home in April 1979, Katrin stayed behind a little bit more to finish something, and then we were in the Philippines. I was so lucky that I still had the last snow in Germany before I left, and I was able to shoot the final shot of *Kidlat* running, and I also shot how he watches the space landing on TV. I had at least the beginning and the ending of my film, and what I needed was just time to think about how to build up the story.

My wife was a stained-glass artist, when I met her, and she combined different colored pieces of glass to create a work. I am like a stain-glass artist, and I collect broken glass every day. And one day, I check what is in my box, and I decided what I am going to make out of it—maybe a landscape, maybe a portrait, maybe a flower. And then I decided that I might need some more pieces in blue. So my films come together over a certain period of time, and then I might shoot more material to fill in the gaps. In the case of the *Yoyo* film, I already had my milestones, when I left Germany. In the Philippines, I had a friend, Santo Bose, who did some nice animations for my film to fill in some of the gaps.

**TH/TB:** Did you experience any racism while you were in Germany? Was that the reason why you returned to the Philippines?

**KT:** I knew the dynamics of people sizing up strangers who look different, because I lived in America and I lived in Paris. There are people who do not want to socialize with somebody who’s different, but at the same time there’s also liberal people who try to frame you in a different way. So I could survive in most situations. When I

moved to Munich, it was a very provincial place, but it opened up a little bit because of the Olympics. I was accepted by Katrin's family, but it took them many years until they could defend their daughter's relationship with an *Ausländer*. But we are still together after so many years and have three children. I was aware of the possibility of discrimination, but I never let it be a thing that would spoil my day.

**TH/TB:** Where did you go to in the Philippines?

**KT:** We went straight to Baguio.

**TH/TB:** That means that you went back to a place where you didn't have an editing table or any of the other technical facilities that were available to you in Munich?

**KT:** No, all I had was a Bolex. My editing table only came in 1981, when Ambrose Eichenberger from the Organization for Catholic Cinema was able to find a grant for me, and I opted to get the editing table.

**TH/TB:** So you had a half-finished film and no immediate way to finish it ...

**KT:** Yes. I don't plan forward. I was just thinking: It's not like you've got investors behind you, pushing you, rushing you. It was going to happen on its own time. There was no video at that time, so I had to work with 16 mm. I arranged to have a workshop at my house in Baguio, supported by the Goethe-House in Manila, a film workshop so that they had an excuse to bring in my Steenbeck editing table. That was a big help, because I could not have afforded the airfare. It went through customs without any problems, because it was a Goethe-House diplomatic shipment.

**TH/TB:** Again, the Philippines was under martial law at that time. Did that affect your work or this workshop?

**KT:** Yes, that was still in the martial law period. The workshop was in 1982. We had about 15 people who registered and who later became the film scene in Manila. They spent the whole month in Baguio watching Karl and me edit *Turumba*. I got to keep the Steenbeck and a Cinema Products 16mm camera, which is a silent camera. That was my fee for conducting the workshop. With this I could

shoot *Turumba*. *Turumba* is the only sync-sound film that I ever made. All the other films were shot with my Bolex. I became self-sufficient in Baguio to work on my time. I don't have to worry about renting, or editing or even making my initial transfers, and I could do everything when I was ready. And with my final copy, I could go down to Manila for a sound mix in a big studio.

### ***Yanki Made in Hongkong***

**TH/TB:** There is a documentary from the time, *Yanki Made in Hongkong*, that is very little known ...

**KT:** I've never made a documentary, but then I was being commissioned by the Brot für Brüder, a Christian organizations. Ambros Eichenberger, the head of the catholic cinema organization, put me in touch with them. I thought I might try my hand at a documentary. But I couldn't stay with a straight documentary, coming into the film as a self-confessed *regisseur*. I was already back in the Philippines, so the communication in those days was through Telex.

**TH/TB:** Was the subject matter suggested by them?

**KT:** I think it started with this very generous thing. They wanted to do something about the exploitation of labor, and the double standards of the multinational companies.

**TH/TB:** And it seems that there was also an attempt to stress the activities of the Christian unions that operated in Hong Kong.

**KT:** Yeah, that was their main agenda. So I went on a first visit there. I met these people, they had certain topics, and I met the mother who was working for Triumph, which is a well-known brand. They did not give me that subject. I met those activist Christian groups and there were several possibilities, and I thought this would fit in with what they wanted to do, so I choose those particular protagonists, this family. I chose to focus on the child, and then the incident with the parents. The mother had a labor accident, and in Europe they would have certain compensation schemes. But because of the double standard and because in Hong Kong the law is more lenient to get investments in, they get away with not compensating the women and just letting her go.

- TH/TB:** In the film you keep comparing the standard of living in Hong Kong with that in Europe ...
- KT:** I knew that the audience was living in more comfortable flats. But it was just one of the things where you see the contrast in how people go through life.
- TH/TB:** It seems for that film you had a film crew and the film has a very different look from your other films of that period ...
- KT:** My sister was assisting me, and I had a Filipino cameraman. The crew was half Filipino and half Chinese. Everything was shot from a tripod. I just took the challenge without realizing that a documentary is very different from my free-play theme, and as I was beginning to edit with Charlie Fugunt, I began to think: "Wow, this is a completely different ball game." Charlie started to ask: "Are you sure about this fact? Are you sure about that fact?" I couldn't be as playful, except in the epilogue.
- TH/TB:** Was it meant to be shown on television?
- KT:** Well, it was being commissioned. It was up to them what they'd like to do with it.
- TH/TB:** Were you happy with it when it was finished? Or were you happy to be done with this plain documentary?
- KT:** I can't even remember. This was just before *Turumba*. I never got the feeling that they were breathing over my shoulders. I remember I had to show it in Basel or in Zürich, and they had a few questions, and then Charlie and I just had to do some fine tuning. I think they were surprised to how I would keep coming in. You know that scene with the container, when I started to sing? (Sings) "Love is a many-splendored thing ..." This is how most of us knew about Hong Kong. That film was our first encounter with Hong Kong. So here Hollywood was my reference to deal with Hong Kong ...
- TH/TB:** In the end there is this Chaplinesque scene with you as a tailor. When I watched it, it felt like a relief ...

**KT:** Kidlat: Well, it was a kind of relief for me, after I had to stick to this certain format of a documentary. It was a kind of final joke. And I also had to summarize the film, so that was also one reason why this scene was there. It wasn't that I wanted to be audacious. I did this film before *Turumba*. We edited it at Charlie Fugunt's studio. I did not have my Steenback yet.

**TH/TB:** So that means you kept going back and forth Munich at that time.

**KT:** I think the editing was done in one trip to Germany. We processed the film in a laboratory in Hong Kong. I was flying from Hong Kong to Paris, and from there to Munich, where Charlie and I were supposed to edit for about three weeks. When I landed at the Paris airport, somebody stole my passport when I was in a kiosk paying for my newspapers. Hence I was stuck in Paris for three weeks, and that was actually became my first visit to Cannes. Butch Perez, the director, and his wife, had a scholarship in Paris. They were going to the Cannes Festival that weekend, and they had one more space in the car. So I joined them, and said I'll try my luck. That was the year that Lino Brocka showed his film *Insiang* in Cannes, and he was with Jean Risset. He was Lino's promoter, and he was a very big person in Cannes. But he hated me because he wanted to be the discoverer of Philippine cinema. But I came out in '77 at Berlinale, and then in 1978, Lino was making his debut in Cannes. So whenever they would go, people would say: So how is Kidlat Tahimik doing? He did not like that, and he was trying to create a wedge between me and Lino Brocka.

Lino was my classmate in UP, but he was willing to believe all the stories that Risset would tell him. Like I was going around the festival saying that I was the only filmmaker in the Philippines. And I remember saying: "Look, the Philippines are the third major film-producer in the world after Hollywood and Bollywood." But Risset was trying to make it sound like I was not even considering Lino or Ishmael Bernal and Mike de Leon. This guy just kept repeating that I said: "There's nothing of interest in the Philippines now."

In Cannes I bumped into Tom Luddy, who was working for Coppola. This was the year they were launching *Apocalypse Now*, and Coppola, instead of renting suites, had rented a yacht. And anybody who wanted to see him had to go on the yacht by appointment. Anyway, Tom Vladi told me that he had just decided that he wanted to distribute *Perfumed Nightmare* in America. So

the day I was supposed to meet him at his yacht, we met at the pier to go to the yacht. Lino and I were happy to see each other. We were taken by motorboat to the yacht. And when we arrived there, Risset was really upset to see me. He wanted me to see it. He wanted to introduce Brocka as his protégé. That was that big brouhaha, when we were there.

After that, I couldn't find a place to stay. So I was walking around. Even if I had had money, everything was full. So I went to the beach. I tried to sleep on the beach, but they have patrols, so I kept walking around and I saw this yellow Cadillac on the parking lot, so I crawled under it, and I slept under the Cadillac. The motor was still warm. On six o'clock, I got up and went on my merry Cannes adventure.

**TH/TB:** But since you've mentioned Coppola distributing the *Perfumed Nightmare*, how did he see the film?

**KT:** Again, by chance. I was invited to the Los Angeles Film Festival in early 1978. Now whenever directors are invited to that festival, Tom Luddy, who was the curator of the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley in San Francisco, he invited the directors that were flown in from Russia, from South America or wherever for \$150 to the Pacific Film Archive. I was one of those people who were invited. I showed *Perfumed Nightmare* in the Pacific Film Archives, and then, after that screening, I was going cross country, hitchhiking to the West Coast. I didn't want to carry my film with me, so I left it with Tom, and he was supposed to send the film to the East Coast, once I had an address there. Anyway, while I was away, he showed the film to Francis Coppola. It was the time when Francis Coppola was trying to finish *Apocalypse Now*, which was shot in the Philippines. Everybody always assumes that I had met Coppola in the Philippines, but at that time I was in Munich finishing my film. *Perfumed Nightmare* was shot in Balyan, which is just seven kilometers away from Pagsanjan, where Coppola shot the jungle scenes of *Apocalypse Now*. I don't know if it was the same time, when he shot those big scenes in Pagsanjan. But I didn't even know who he was. I had never met him there.

Tom Luddy showed the film to Coppola. And Coppola liked it so much he borrowed it, and projected it in his home to friends and family. And at that time he was planning to start a distribution company that would distribute films that had a hard time entering

America, and I was on the list. A year later, I got a Telex from them wanting to distribute *Perfumed Nightmare*.

## **Turumba**

**TH/TB:** Your next film, *Turumba*, was produced by a German company and originally created for a German television program ...

**KT:** *Perfumed Nightmare* had won the special jury price by the interfaith groups and that proved to be useful in the longer run. One was finding funding for *Yanki Made in Hong Kong* where the purpose was to highlight the activities of Christian unions in Hong Kong, to bring up the issues that they are concerned with. The production I did with Tellux was in the context of the “Vater Unser” (Father Ours –Ann.). They divided the prayer into six phrases, and asked each filmmaker to interpret it. We had a lot freedom in what we were trying to express in the film. It wasn’t a production to announce what they’re doing. It was more like: “Hey, we’re going to do a nice art film, so it’s up to you what you want to do.”

**TH/TB:** But you still had to give them a treatment, you had to write a script ...

**KT:** Yes, I had to write a script, and that’s the only time I ever wrote a script in all of my works. I had some very general conversations with them, and I build up the conflict between the father and the son, about the growing demands of *Produktion*, that was taking away from their commitments to their community, particularly to the *Rumba fiesta*. So I laid some of those out. But I realized when I was shooting that since these people were not professional actors who would memorize lines, I knew I wasn’t sure whether my lines ... you know, when a script is usually presented it’s very well distilled and they’ve go over and over it too. But I had just a few weeks to finish it. It was just to give them an idea of the flow ...

**TH/TB:** But you finished your script?

**KT:** Yeah, but it wasn’t a distilled script in that sense. If I had offered a distilled script to all these village people, they would just get tongue-tied and trip over themselves. It was always much nicer to allow them to come home to their own expressions. And I think one of

the gems that came out of that was the grandmother talking about her being an actress in her earlier days. Suddenly now, I just realize it's like *lola* in *Perfumed Nightmare*. She had also been an actress in her previous days. We were setting up, and they were just starting to warm up. I told them to do their *papermaché* thing. They started conversing, and all of a sudden that came up. I told the sound man and the cameraman to just take that. We got a little surprise. It's funny. I just realized it's a parallel.

**TH/TB:** How did you do the casting?

**KT:** The family in the film, they are half of a family that actually does papermaché. They're really a family. So it's the mother, and the daughter, and the two grandchildren who are working as a unit. I thought they would feel more at home if we could get them rather than individual actors. Then I added to them Kadu, who's actually my nephew. He's the only import in that film.

Kadu is the son of my sister. He was studying in Manila at that time. I brought him in because he had a really certain slowness. Even though he was a city boy, he had a gentle disposition about him. There were two other girls there who were playing the Mandalinos. They were from two different families, and I thought that maybe six or seven of them could form the papermaché family. I had gone to an earlier Turumba, and I was looking around whom among the vendors could be in the film. I didn't do any screen tests. I just thought that they would look very much like a holistic family. The film was shot in Balyan. It was easier for me. I knew people I could ask for help: could we use your hut? We just had to bring all the actors there. So it wasn't difficult to get the people for the shooting.

**TH/TB:** How long did the shooting take?

**KT:** The main shoot was about a month and a half.

**TH/TB:** So the actors in your film were free to participate in your film for six weeks?

**KT:** As far as the time constraints of working for a living, they are more flexible there until recently. It's not like you have to book them a plane in advance. Except once the harvest season is coming. Then everyone's going to be busy working in the harvest. But apart from

that the kids have school schedules. It's the old people who would be making their papermaché things until the season is close enough to the harvest. This is how cottage industries are in the Philippines. You fill up your time between when where you're needed most to harvest and plant. Then you can engage in handicrafts. That's how I did the Olympia-Waldis. I went to a family that was already making shell lamps or Christmas decors. And I told them: "You have to photocopy the exact shape of the Waldi. The Germans have standards. It's the official *Maskottchen*." So they would follow the exact same thing, but with different colors. And I was like: "No, no, no."

**TH/TB:** There are two different versions of Turumba, one 45 minute version for German television that has been dubbed into German. And the 90 minute version that is typically shown today. Who did the German version?

**KT:** I am not sure. Maybe they had an official translator, but it would go through somebody like Charlie, who was a little bit more familiar with the nuances in the Philippines.

**TH/TB:** The whole plot revolves around these papermaché figure. In almost all of your films, there's always some sort of handicraft involved, usually traditional handicraft, like weaving or carving. Can you say something about that? What attracts you so much into these things? And how does it relate to your own film making?

**KT:** I am a bit romantic about handmade things. That's why I like to go to the flea market. I developed that during those Olympic days. I knew that I offered an organic material souvenir, that was different from all these plastic key chains and mass produced t-shirts. I've known woodcarvers for a long time; it's part of the Baguio tourist industry. But, I think the first time I got engaged with it was for the Olympia mascot, and then one more time when I was making this film.

**TH/TB:** What is it that attracts you about these things? Where is this fascination coming from? Does it have any relation to your own method of film making?

**KT:** Well, people like you or other critics describe my making films as a kind of handicraft process, an organic process. It doesn't follow that usual position of a film production. I realize that maybe it's the same thing as a carver who—even when he's asked to do a thousand Mickey Mouses—each one is still slightly different. And maybe in the middle of carving he decides to eat his meal and to continue tomorrow. So when he finishes tomorrow, there's a different energy to his work and it has a more personal shape than the Mickey Mouse that have been made by a molding machine.

**TH/TB:** I think you documented some things that don't exist anymore. I have never seen such a beautiful chest with mother-of-pearl inlays like the one in *Memories of Overdevelopment*.

**KT:** Ah, the chest with the innate shell. I think traditionally people used to make one or two pieces a month, and maybe they were for you. But whether or not they are for you, you could still give it a large amount of meticulousness. But today, a wholesaler's still going to come between you and the customer and buy these things in bulk. I think that this is the influence of the mass production that has changed the attitude toward what you are making: that the handicraft and the artisanal means of production disappear, but also the whole economic model that goes with it.

**TH/TB:** Do you think that your actors got that? Do you think they got the idea behind the film?

**KT:** Maybe they got an inkling that there are other modes of production. They know that in Manila, production is much more rationalized. In Balyan, you might see a family in their yard doing it, but in the film I created this whole assembly line.

**TH/TB:** How did you convince your actors to participate in the film?

**KT:** Of course, they all received some compensation. But there is also this thrill to be in a movie, you know? It was a combination of something new and exotic. It was like a play. They had that childlike sense of playing and participating in a film.

**TH/TB:** Even the father of the family?

**KT:** Even the father. I think he felt it was a tribute to his profession. In the more urban society, you measure time. You ask yourself: “What’s in it for me? In those villages life was really slow. I think today it’s a lot faster because the city’s really growing toward them. They’re just a hundred kilometers from Manila. More and more people are willing to live out that far away and just commute to Manila every day. The father was the *cantore*, and we were filming not during the *Turumba* season. He still had other musical tasks to do, but he was happy to be involved.

It was a one shot deal though. For them, it was like participating in a school activity, a school drama: “Come on, just play the role. I’ll interact with your child and you.” It was exciting for them to see our lights. We only had two lights, and then we had the tripod, and the camera. The camera looked big, like the ones that we see in major film productions. It’s just that thrill of being on the set, except that there were no major stars.

**TH/TB:** The idea that their craft was being becoming commercialized must have been very far away for those villagers.

**KT:** I think they consider themselves to be lucky to have such a livelihood that they could use for spending. There were no industries in that area. For this family, that is a path to regular cash. It’s a positive sign. I’m the artist who has contextualized it with globalization issues and these fair trade issues. For those who participated, it was an adventure. I spent a month and a half in the village shooting the different scenes, but not everybody was on the set all of the time. All the big scenes were shot in three or four days. Or maybe a week.

**TH/TB:** Couldn’t you also see the plot of the film as something positive: The family is moving up. They’re becoming socially mobile by producing for the export market. What the German lady is doing in the film is not so different from what a lot of NGOs do: teach the poor local folks some handicraft, so they can sustain themselves.

**KT:** In Balyan, there were already several families doing that during the time. They were close enough to the big metropolis, so there was a market for souvenirs. So they were next in line to be socially mobilized and join the middle class. They could become entrepreneurs. Maybe if they were in some remote island and I

would have come into this island, they would have gotten ideas about going into entrepreneurship.

**TH/TB:** But I'm talking about the fable of the film. Them getting involved with this businessman is presented as a fall from grace in a way. Couldn't that also be a good thing? They have money, they go to school, they see the world.

**KT:** I guess the fable of the film probably has happened to a certain degree in that village. Maybe I should think: "Oh God, I introduced something double-bladed, and now they've tasted the forbidden fruit." But Balenos was already becoming part of the urban periphery. Maybe unconsciously I was trying to be a good soldier for the generals of the NGOs that gave me the money.

## **On Religion**

**TH/TB:** In both the Yoyo film and in Turumba, religion is an important subject. Yet, your criticism of Catholicism is rather subdued ...

**KT:** I think I was much more concerned with colonial cultural displacement. I think I prefer to joust with the issue of First World and Third World in very general terms rather than focus on details, like what the Catholics did to our shamans. It is only one of the many elements of cultural imperialism.

**TH/TB:** But it is a very powerful one, especially in the Philippines, a very important one.

**KT:** Definitely. The first thing the missionaries did was to translate the Bible into a local dialect and language. But the kind of spiritualism that the people had was different from the organized religion that the missionaries would impose. There are a lot of Catholic fiestas in my country and a lot of politicians join the holy communion every Sunday, and then steal the people's money on the other six days of the week. I think we were a very spiritual people long before organized religion was introduced into the country. It gives people a very warm connection with nature and the spiritual world underneath the Christian surface.

**TH/TB:** But since we're talking about religion already, what's your take on religion? Are you a religious person?

**KT:** I've become a Buddhist in 1998. I'm not knowledgeable about the dogma. I just like a general feeling that we create our own suffering by our grasping mind. Our mind clings to something and therefore it becomes a reality in our ephemeral state. I follow it because my son was curious about it, when he was in high school. Later I sent him to Takedera (the Japanese bamboo temple featured in his film, *Takedera Mon Amour: Diary of a Bamboo Connection* [1990] — eds.) where he stayed for six months. But after six months he was discontent because Mr. Ono hardly speaks English. I was invited to a conference in India, so I said: "Look, after India let's meet in Kathmandu. I heard that they're English-speaking." And we met there, and I was just accompanying him, and then he decided to seek refuge. In Buddhism, instead of being baptized you seek refuge. I had gotten interested in the very general tenants. I became a Buddhist at that point. Maybe that is my protest against Christianity and Catholicism. I was born and raised a Catholic, and I was very religious through my early days. I even thought I would become a priest one day.

**TH/TB:** So that came from your family? Your family as a whole was religious, or just you?

**KT:** My family was religious, but quite liberal. We would go to mass every Sunday. I became aware of Philippine history much later. I only read Rizal, when I was finishing college, and I understood why he was so angry at the friars.

## **Rizal and Postcolonial Theory**

**TH/TB:** But Rizal is required reading in every school in the Philippines!

**KT:** Yes, I must have read it as part of my class on Philippine history. But it's like my MBA, some things I read just because I had to pass the test. But I didn't take any to heart.

**TH/TB:** Didn't Rizal come back to you when you became a cosmopolitan traveler?

**KT:** Yes, definitely. We visited his statue when we went to Heidelberg. I was feeling that the other day. I asked myself: “Why are the Germans taking my films seriously?” For me, I still can’t digest it. The Arsenal (cinema where the retrospective took place —eds.) for me that’s an iconic symbol of serious films, and there, they are taking me seriously. I don’t want to compare myself to Rizal. But maybe my playfulness in my craft requires a lot of discipline. Maybe that’s what is intriguing to you guys. And this retrospective is probably the first time I am taking myself serious. (Laughter)

**TH/TB:** Where there any other writers that inspired you apart from Rizal? For many people interested in postcolonial theory, Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* was a very important book.

**KT:** First of all, I’m not really a reader. I really very rarely read or finish a book. The significance of Rizal was also coming into me more, when I asked myself how did this guy feel and think and how he had his daily interactions with the natives here in Germany. I was more curious about that than rather than about his political ideologies. Sometimes they frame him as a playboy, with a girl in every port. I don’t think so. I think he probably just had this kind of “kapwa” from Katrin’s book. As a Filipino, he had this including kind of orientation. And that would make him a likeable person. And maybe a lot of these women that he met were not necessarily sex partners as we think of today. They were just friendly connection, like in my film *Memories of Overdevelopment*, with childlike openness.

In all of his pictures he’s very well dressed. And I remember when I was in OECD, I was also one of the best dressed people there. Is that a compensation because you feel smaller, you’re different, you’re brown, whatever. Because of that you overcompensate by trying to be like them. The colonized mind drifts through real tests, until you’re finally live in the culture of the colonialists.

**TH/TB:** *Perfumed Nightmare* is a story of emancipation, but at the same time it’s a very comical film. It tells a story which other people, black people, have told in a much more painful way. I think that’s what made it so different at the time when the film came out: it was not this pain narrative, it made this experience understandable. Like at the end of *Perfumed Nightmare*, the scene with the masks and the fighting back. What you just described is also in the film: You’re being dwarfed by these puppets.

**KT:** That scene was very different in my treatment. In the film, the protagonist wants to go home and there was going to be a party. It was during the last days when we were shooting in the Philippines. I asked Lino Brocka: “Can I use your theater group?” And they just happened to have a workshop on mask making, so they had all these masks. I felt it would be very expensive for me to create a party scene once I returned to Europe. So I thought maybe if I use those masks it’ll come across that they’re the Europeans. That they’re white people and not the brown caste that was behind those masks with the smiles. And then the blowing became a real ending for the film. He is finding his own strength.

**TH/TB:** **These things make sense, even if you had not read Fanon’s book, which is called *Black Skins, White Mask*.**

**KT:** Well, I think there is some kind of osmosis going on: I’m getting things indirectly, not in the usual way, like people who read and follow up. I remember when I was at my first socialist festival in Belgrade in 1979, somebody in the audience after seeing the film said, “Did you read Karl Marx?” And I said, “Well, I know broadly what Karl Marx is about.” I find it difficult to read something, but I sense what he’s all about. They said, “Your film has some very Marxist elements in it.” I probably had to read assignments to pass my exam at UP just to get my degree. Maybe I had to make this film, *Perfumed Nightmare*, as a way to digest all those things, and some of them get mixed up with my own past experiences of having worked in Paris or in an economic organization.

## **Memories of Overdevelopment**

**TH/TB:** **Your next film was *Memories of Overdevelopment*—a historical subject matter. That’s a daring enterprise for an independent film. How did you come up with the subject?**

**KT:** I had just finished my film *Who Invented the Yo-yo? Who Invented the Moon Buggy?*, in which I tried to show some accomplishments of the Filipinos that are not known. For some reason the Philippines are not taken seriously in the family of nations. At that time I came across this news article about a theory that the first men to circumnavigate the globe was not Magellan, as most people think, but that it was his slave. The slave of Magellan could not speak the

language, when they arrived in Waray-Waray, but when they arrived in Cebu, he could speak the language. I cannot make an absolutely scientific case for the historical accuracy. But that he was able to speak the language opens up the possibility that he was the first person to circumnavigate the globe.

Magellan only did 99 percent. He had been to Malacca, but he was killed in Cebu at the hands of Lapu-Lapu, so he had 800 kilometers to return to Malacca and complete his journey. And maybe his slave Enrique had been picked up by pirates as a young boy and was sold in Malacca as a slave, so he had already completed the last 1 percent of the journey already and Magellan took him on the other 99 percent of the trip. At least, that's my little theory. But I am not a theorist and not a historian; I'm just somebody with a woodcarver's tale.

**TH/TB:** *Memories of Over-Development* seems unfinished, like a film sketch. Was it shot in order to attract investors?

**KT:** Yes, at first. I did it as a show reel thinking that maybe Coppola would give me a few thousand dollars or whatever to finish it. But I never got to show it to him. The film became more of an instrument for me to tell people about Magellan's slave in case I would never be able to finish that film. So I would always have it in tow, when I went to festivals or when I would give a lecture.

**TH/TB:** But it does not look like a show reel at all. It looks very polished, with a lot of period details. The production design is very beautiful and full of lovely details. It seems as if a lot of effort went into the props ...

**KT:** I was shooting what I was shooting for the sake of including it in the film. I was seriously doing the film.

**TH/TB:** And the financing came completely out of your own pocket?

**KT:** I knew that I could never go to a proper producer because I didn't have a script, and they need a script in order to measure their potential profit. But I bumped into a bunch of friends in Manila, who were people I've studied with also in Pennsylvania, friends from my college days in UP, fraternity brothers. And a lot of them were curious what I'd do next because most of them were businessmen,

and they were wondering: “Why did this guy turn his back on his work and his diploma? Why is he this long-haired, hippie now?” They probably thought: “This guy went crazy.” But because I had become president of student government, they were also taking me seriously when I said I wanted to go into filmmaking.

That was the time when Lino Brocka, who was a college buddy, made his first successful films. So they wanted to do a film. For them it was like poker money. Everyone put in twenty thousand pesos. It’s not like putting a million, or two million on the table, and if it flops it’s like you lose your shirt on your back. It’s just one night of poker money. If we lose that, it’s not like it’s going to kill us. So that was about four hundred thousand pesos or something like that. That’s where I got my first money to buy good film, not expired film, and then my wife would be able to sew costumes, and I could afford to pay my cameraman. For a good two years, I was shooting regularly. The sequence just started building up the story. In 1983, I had enough to make a show reel, so potential investors could get a feeling for the film.

**TH/TB: Who did you show the show reel to?**

**KT:** I showed it to Tom Luddy, the assistant of Coppola, but I never got to show it to Francis himself. Here’s a great story. That was about 1983, when Zoetrope had just decided to include *Perfumed Nightmare* in their collection. At that time Coppola was doing well with a lot of things. He wanted to be the godfather of indie filmmakers from around the world, so he had this Zoetrope distribution company. It distributed films by indie filmmakers just as Warner Brothers would distribute the films directed by Coppola, and then films produced by him. Like, he produced *Hammett* by Wim Wenders, and then he had it distributed by Warner. Then he also did films like mine, which were not produced by Zoetrope, but which Coppola wanted to be seen in America. So, in 1982 I asked them if they were interested in producing my Magellan film. In these days you would send things by snail mail, there was no email. At Zoetrope they had a telex, which was the fastest way to communicate internationally in those days.

In 2005, I happened to go to San Francisco, and I met with Tom Luddy. His secretary was a Filipina, and she got curious, “Who is this Filipino?” So she went through the filing cabinet, an old folder comes out, and there was a letter that they had sent, signed by

Francis Coppola on Zoetrope stationary. It said, "We're interested in helping you with your Magellan-slave project. We can help you either in two ways: One, we can help you in production to finish the film, or two, we can help with the distribution. We can help you distribute the film, whichever way you want." I said, "God, I never saw this letter." And I asked myself, "What if I had accepted the production offer? What kind of film would this have become?" You know no matter how much freedom they give you freedom, there's a certain limit to the time frame if they're going to put five hundred thousand dollars in to finish the film. But it would have included the whole infrastructure. I would have been looking at this expert's opinion, and that expert's opinion, and that production design. I don't know how I would have survived that, but I would have probably come up with a finished film in 1985 or 1986. I don't know what it would look like. They could have controlled me a little bit or forced me to put things on paper. It limits these cosmic options because you get stuck once it has been written on paper. It would have become a more conventional film.

**TH/TB:** In the 1980s the Philippine government under Ferdinand Marcos actively supported art house cinema and film auteurs. Imelda Marcos organized two big film festivals in Manila and films like *Himala*, *Oro Plata Mata*, and *Virgin People* were produced by Experimental Cinema of the Philippines (ECP), which was headed by Imee Marcos, the daughter of the president and his wife Imelda. There was also an effort to bring international productions into the country. Did it ever occur to you to apply for funding from the government, or was that out of the question for you?

**KT:** What was always holding me back was that I never could write a script. I think my name would have been so big for them. If I had approached them, they would have probably supported my film. Like *Cinemalaya*, it was script-based. They were so used to the usual production, having a script, and a breakdown of the costs.

I was also very much distant from the Marcos regime. Lino Brocka and Ben Cervantes were close friends of mine. I myself am not as leftist as Ben, I'm more left-center. But by that time, filmmaking to me had become this "Do it as you feel it, as it comes" cosmic interaction. Of course, I could have done the usual step-by-step process in which a film is usually approved or gets funding.

Maybe that's an important part of the film industry. Would I have been able to survive complying with those kinds of requirements? So it took me 35 years to cross some kind of finish line ...

**TH/TB:** In the end, we see this stained glass window in the hut of Enrique, but it isn't really clear where it was coming from. Could you comment on this visual metaphor?

**KT:** If I would have finished the film at that time, I would have shot a scene of Enrique pulling it out of the Master's box as a final souvenir. I just thought it was visually interesting, if you see it in the hut. Those were all these little loose threads, but in the end it wasn't really important for me to tighten those threads.

**TH/TB:** And what is the significance of San Sebastian for you?

**KT:** You know, I found out recently that Saint Sebastian stands as an icon for the gay community. This guy wants to die a heroic death, and he smiles like San Sebastian with a thousand arrows. It's just that simple. I'm not part of the European Catholic tradition and I have not studied the saints and whatever meanings they have. It was just playful. It's like a lot of us. We choose our heroes, whether the hero comes from a movie or is a saint or somebody our parents have always talked about.

**TH/TB:** And another thing I'm not clear about: Enrique is an Ifugao, so why does he speak Cebuano, when he arrives in the Philippines on Magellan's boat?

**KT:** That became unimportant for me to explain that. I knew it would raise questions among linguists or by historians. In the completed film he would have spend some time in Cebu, but I did not show that. I was hoping that people wouldn't take that Ifugao-ness literally. It's the people who know the Philippines who say: "Oh, he's from the North and Cebu is over here. How did he get here?" For me, it was a visual of somebody from the mountains who somehow ends up at the sea and somehow gets picked up by the slave traders. I left it vague. I think if I were much more systematic like the Europeans, maybe I would have come back to all those details and put the proper *op. cits* and *loc. cits* to make the film defendable in terms of consistency. If you notice it—bravo! My film making process allows for those lapses.

- TH/TB:** The implication of that Magellan gets to do his big journey because of his slave.
- KT:** Exactly! History is often accidents or created out of certain moods.
- TH/TB:** In postcolonial studies you have the concept of the “counternarrative.” There is the “official” version of history—in your case, Magellan circumventing the globe—and then there is this other “subaltern” version of history, the slave who actually completes the circumnavigation. Was that your intention, to create such a counternarrative?
- KT:** It’s not like I’m trying to show a Third-Cinema-version of history. I put a playful spin on the account of Pigafetta (who wrote a travelogue of the trip —eds.). I am using his writings to focus on the question why this slave is possible first circumnavigator. I am introducing the language problem. By the way, all those silence sequences are just because I lost the sound track. So I thought, “Why not leave them that way?” I think it was enough to become a pattern, it happens three or four times in the film.
- TH/TB:** What is most interesting for me about the film is the depiction of being a slave. Being sold as a slave is not tragic at all in your film. It’s not a drama. You don’t feel very sorry for this slave. He doesn’t lose his agency. Okay, he’s being told what to do, but at the same time he stays who he is.
- KT:** There are films like *Amistad* that are about slavery—usually, they’re made ready with tragedies at the center of the film. For me it’s just a circumstance that he happens to be a slave, in contrast to the master that brought him around. Why would I make it tragic or show how he gets whipped every Sunday? He is a privileged slave who gets to stay in the master’s cabin. I don’t even remember if—when I first started this film—I was open to such kinds of statements, to show how we was exploited or mistreated. It never happened because I guess I got desperate just to try to finish some storyline.
- TH/TB:** So what is the message here? That slavery is not so bad? That if you adapt and if you make yourself useful, you might be the one to circumnavigate the globe? Enrique is not confrontational at all. He doesn’t seem to suffer from his fate, he’s helpful, he’s

**flexible. These traits are also those that Filipinos are characterized by. Is that the message? If you are like that, you might end up circumnavigate the globe?**

**KT:** I'm an actor, but I'm not doing acting that's conventional. There are not many angles or close-ups to heighten the emotion. I'm really just a body that walks through different scenes who pushes the storyline from one scene to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next. It's not based on "Ooh getting in," but he did this, he did that, because this happened and that happened. I don't think that there's any scene in this film that is strongly emotional, except maybe for the scene where I'm declared a free man and I am levitating. But basically, I use my body to transport a story, so I'm not an actor in the conventional sense of the word.

And that's probably why he doesn't come across as a tragic slave or a rebellious slave. I was trying to avoid that kind of cliché. For me it's an incidental circumstance that he's a slave. He's a survivor. He is an easy-going guy, and he does not get mistreated. And at the same time, there is a shrewdness about him that allows him to become the first person to circumnavigate the globe.

**TH/TB:** **There's a saying that you cannot be hero in front of your servant ...**

**KT:** Because he knows you so well!

**TH/TB:** **Right, they know your shortcomings. Was this also an attempt to belittle Magellan somehow, to show that the great adventurer in the end was just an old man who needs a lot of help from his slave?**

**KT:** Magellan's a human as far as this guy is concerned. In a way, I made him look sympathetic. The slave is his closest aid, his valet, he shares a home with him. Maybe he even had some influence on his decisions and serves as a mirror to him. We know that the slave does everything for his master, who even lets him work for other people. Even the king takes in the slave for a short time ...

**TH/TB:** **Was there ever a conscious decision to stop working on Memories of Overdevelopment? Or did it just peter out because of the lack of funds?**

**KT:** In the mid-'80s, I had stopped working on the Magellan film because I had decided I wanted to be a more active father. But the story kept popping up again like pimples in my short films. In 1992, there were big celebrations because of the 500th anniversary of Columbus discovering America. And I thought to myself: Who will remember Enrique the slave in 2021 (the 500th anniversary of Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe —T. B.)? I had gotten a free ticket from American Airlines, and my son and I decided to go around the world and create a ring of trees around the globe. That was in 1992, so in 30 years they would have grown up to a decent size. The concept was to plant a seedling with a wooden sculpture as a guardian, and while the tree would grow the sculpture would slowly crumble because of the weather, the rain, the sun, or the snow. I think we have a ring of twelve trees around the world.

### **“Palusot” and “Bathala Na”**

**TH/TB:** In the end, you get this sense that Magellan's reliance on his slave is also part of his downfall. He cannot do things by himself anymore. He reminds me of these washed-up white guys that you find on the beaches and in the dive-bars of the Philippines. In the end, he sits in his bathtub in the beach and has his hair combed by the slave and he is drinking his beer. He has been spoiled to the point that he cannot defend himself anymore.

**KT:** Oh wow, that's a nice angle. That's what you start to think when you see a film repeatedly.

I think there's a strong survivor in all Filipinos, but an adapting kind of survivor. The Filipinos had to survive, and they survived for 450 years—a new rule, a new religion, or a new way to pay taxes. You know, there's an expression in the Philippines, *palusot*. It means being able to squeeze through and to learn that we are coping with the rules that the colonizers have imposed on us and that there's a way to survive. And I think whether it's me or Enrique or Rizal or any other of these *Gastarbeiter*—you just use the opportunity. You do not see yourself as a victim, you have this attitude: “I will be able to survive this.” This is *bathala na* attitude of Filipinos.

It's like “the devil may care, I'll just do it and let's see what happens.” That is sometimes viewed as the fatalistic attitude of Filipinos and that this is the reason why people say Filipinos will not

progress because they don't want to sit down and plan and try to move according to a road map. But, *bahala na*, I think, comes from *Bathala na*, the upper being. "Leave it to the heavens." *Bathala na* in the old sense meant that you do everything you can to achieve your goal. You use your brain, your brawn, your soul, your spirit ... You do it with everything, but finally you need the cosmic force, and I think this is a very different attitude. People in the West are planning to go around the moon, and it is a calculated risk.

*Bahala na*—it's a total surrender, a humbleness to the cosmos. I have planned everything but I am not God. And I think that's how the Filipino survives. And that's how I think that I eventually finished the film without thinking, "Will I have equipment? Will I have the money?" I just kept doing it step by step. *Bahala na* is a proactive attitudes toward getting your goals.

Do you know the story of Juan Tamad? Juan Tamad is just sitting there, and he is waiting for a mango to fall into his mouth and that's how they described Filipinos. I think that's an anticolonial attitude that many people have picked up. Why make an effort? The profits will go to Madrid or to Washington, to the colonizers. I'll just wait for the mango to fall.

"I should still try my best. I can still master anything." I think Lapu-Lapu has done that. He successfully got rid of Magellan, against all the odds. That's *bahala na*—let's just do it, and see what happens. In World War II, the American generals were very surprised about the bravery of the Filipino soldiers. I think this is about *bahala na* attitude in a way. You're there, required to fight for whatever you're fighting, but against all odds they could hold their ground. You know, Raymond Red did the film *Sakay* about that. I was supposed to be in that film, but my hair wasn't long enough. Guys would find ways to dodge bullets, and they would jump from one tree to the other, and they were suddenly behind that tree. Maybe they were using whatever old spiritual methods to fight the Spanish guns and armor.

## **"I don't think I could ever do an explicit erotic scene"**

**TH/TB:** What is the meaning of the amulet that Enrique is wearing? He once uses it to catch insects in the film and once as a means of navigation.

**KT:** The Americans call it a fertility charm. If you look at it from the positive, it looks like an opening. If you look at it from the negative, it looks like a phallus. It is just something from folklore that gets reproduced as earrings or as necklace. When I mentor, or act as an advisor to young Filipino filmmakers, I keep telling them that we need our own viewfinder to tell our own story with our own ways, not the formulaic stories. So it could become that, and I think that's why I used it.

**TH/TB:** I feel that in your films, there is also a usually funny and light eroticism that is rarely mentioned. You use a lot of imagery, which is never obscene, but which sometimes for me has a strikingly sexual meaning, like the rockets or the Zwiebelturm.

**KT:** I'm not sure about the rocket ships—that I saw them as a phallic symbol. But I guess, in this day and age, there is a preoccupation with sexual nuances. So, maybe, the reference to the virgin moon, that men have trampled all over her, is something that you hear from the feminist movement. Maybe it has an erotic touch.

I thought you were referring to the encounter with the princess in *Memories of Overdevelopment*. Again I'm just finding this out now. We come from a very catholic culture, but it has been imposed on us and it makes us very, very discreet about sexual attraction. Here in Germany people are much more to the point. Katrin's father has a sauna, and the first time we used it I was very self-conscious about exposing myself, but of course my eye was also very curious about the anatomy—the *Vollbusen* culture (chuckles). I don't think I could ever do an explicit sexual scene, but I like the idea of exploration, of children playing. So whatever erotic value this scene has, it's just incidental.

I wanted to show, that the slave, Enrique, has encounters which affect history, but out of a very innocent impulse. We always read history, and we always think that these historic decision that lead to a Waterloo or to scandal or to the fall of a government were premeditated and rational. But I think you have to consider the human factor. The king wants to avoid the scandal, and I wanted to have a playful scene; that's the reason that I put that there.

**TH/TB:** I think the circumcision in Perfumed Nightmare scene is very interesting. It doesn't have a sexual connotation, but it talks about becoming a man, so there's the thin line between the innocence

**and the boys being made aware about their sexual organ. Before the scene starts, there's this close-up of white foam floating on the river and, for me, in a way, it's sort of ejaculation.**

**KT:** I think it was a very innocent intercut to move from one thing to another or to probably start with an image of “What’s this? What’s this?” Then circumcision was just something that we all have to go through and here it’s just the social pressure: “Hey, you’re 12, you’re still *supot*.” *Supot* is a paper bag. So I don’t know why certain cultures make it a thing whether you’re *supot* or not. That was just one of the transitions but to become a man, I don’t think the boys even think about how they’ve joined the club they are already in. They just feel like they have to do it. So it was something that we happened to film because that was usually done on the Easter Saturday.

I don’t know why they do it on Easter Saturday. Maybe that’s the day when the circumciser is free. I’ve always been wondering how people react to that. I know when it’s screened here in Europe, it becomes a very silent scene. I think people are cringing but it’s interesting enough. “Ah, that’s how it’s done there.” But the moment you hear somebody giggling in the audience, you know: “Oh, there’s a Filipino here.” The cultural perceptions of the reception of scenes I’ve seen they’re really a culturally thing. But the one scene that is very universal is the scene with the photograph for the passport. It works in every culture. It has no words, it doesn’t depend on anything. It’s a montage. Maybe that’s why Charlie Chaplin was successful, when he was struggling with a smile.

### **“I didn’t know that the Third Cinema was almost an ideology”**

**TH/TB:** The title *Memories of Overdevelopment* references this Cuban film *Memories of Underdevelopment*. Was that a conscious reference? After all, this film is part of the Third Cinema canon?

**KT:** I think I heard about this Cuban film in the early ‘70s. It just stuck in my mind. I don’t really know that film. It is the same with “I am curious yellow”: It was just a pun. I like to play with those things. When the slave goes to Renaissance Europe, where so many things were happening and when Europe was so rich—what would a slave from the Third World think about that? That was my reference point for the title.

People always put me in the context of Third Cinema. I knew I was a Third World cineaste and that I was one of the first, but I thought I just that I happened to come from the Third World and that my subject matter was the Third World. I started reading up a little bit lately on those Cuban people, like Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. I didn't know that the Third Cinema was almost an ideology. It was a group of filmmakers who were challenging the First and Second World cinema, they were trying to assert themselves. Just for the record: I don't think I ever understood that ideological context of Third Cinema. I don't mind being associated with them. But I don't have the same ideological entry point that they do. I'm left, but maybe I am one of the voices like them expressing objection to uncomfortable phenomena in the world. And maybe, it becomes like the voice of the child who sees the Emperor's clothes are nothing.

## **Why Is Yellow the Middle Color of the Rainbow?**

**TH/TB:** I think of *Why Is Yellow the Middle Color of the Rainbow?* as your opus magnum. It's very long, almost three hours, and it is a very complex film about Philippine history, about Philippine identity, about your family, and again it took over a decade to finish. Can you talk about the production of the film?

**KT:** This film was catalyzed by the events in the early 1980s, when we fought in the People Power revolution, the popular uprising against the Marcos regime. Yellow was the main color of the protest. I thought I had finished the film in 1986, when the dictator fled the country after a real swell in the protest against his dictatorship. But I couldn't let go of the film at that point because too many contradictions were coming back, haunting the new regime, and I think it continues until today. The film was done in a diary style through my children. It's not the usual hard documentary about a people's uprising.

You will see recycled footage from this film in my later films. This film has all these building blocks which came from a lifetime of film making. I think this is the first film that got recycled before it got completed. Originally, the title of the film was *I Am Furious Yellow* as a reference to the Swedish film *I Am Curious Yellow*. But the pun is intended: a furious yellow, because our people's anger had

grown to such proportions that we defied the tanks and cannons of the dictatorship.

By the way, it's probably the only 16 mm account of those yellow days. At that time, all of the major television stations from around the world sent their teams, because they were expecting a blood bath a la Tiananmen Square. But all the teams were there with their video cameras. I have not seen any 16 mm material of that time, but of course this film is an account of a playful filmmaker.

**TH/TB: How long did you work on the film?**

**KT:** Fourteen years. I already had footage from school events and different things that were happening in Baguio. But because of the exciting political situation, I started to add material to put all this material in the context of living in Baguio in those years.

I was trying to get it finished by the end of 1986 for the final victory of the rebels against the regime, and I felt that all I needed was just a few more *Schnitts* (edits —T. B.) to get it out. Everybody was telling me, "You better get it out. Everybody is waiting for anything about Cory, and people power is very hot." The Philippines were the darling of the world in those days. Well, at least the darling of the media, and the media can be here today, gone tomorrow.

After the resumption of democracy, things were not as glorious as we had expected. The military with their machismo could not accept a woman as head of the country. The old political colors began to show, the corruption was coming back, even the elections were marred by cheating. It just showed that democracy doesn't emerge depending on who is sitting in the presidential palace. I began to realize that I could not let go of film. The last four chapters of the film became a reflection of the cultural ingredients of the Philippines. We can't get our act together because we're not on solid ground as far as our cultural strengths are concerned. That's probably why in the ending of the film I decide to get a Master's degree from Lopez Nauyac ...

**TH/TB: The Ifugao wood carver and activist that frequently appears in your film ...**

**KT:** I know that sounds like a pretty romantic statement, like "Let's go back to the Stone Age." I'm not saying that. But the Philippines have become a McDonald's culture. But I think the Filipino people could

add more to the global equation, if we would include our ancestral knowledge and past in whatever we offer. I think that's the advocacy of me and my wife. In these last two decades we've been organizing indigenous conferences just to get the balance back. Maybe that's why I couldn't let go of the film in '86. It took me another seven years, until 1994, to release the film.

As a matter of fact, I only finalized the film because the head of a Japanese film festival said, "Why don't you just close this cycle, so you can continue with the next cycle?" So I let go of the film. But until today, it's my struggle to get Filipinos to accept that the American-Idol way is not the way of life. I am not anti-American, but I think we have to find out who we are as a people, to get back to the true strengths of our forefathers. If we want to modernize, we can still dance to Michael Jackson and we can wear jeans and we can drive cars. But why do we have to throw our culture in the garbage can, because the missionaries and the American public school teachers told us to dispose of it?

**TH/TB:** Your son Kidlat is the protagonist of the film. What happened to him? Do you think being involved in his father's film projects did have a long-term impact on him?

**KT:** Kidlat is a photographer, a video maker, and he is also my technical support. I got stuck with the 16 mm dinosaur technology, and it was hard for me to shift to Final Cut Pro and all of these other digital technologies, so he helped me with that. I think that he has grown to be a very balanced person.

**TH/TB:** Was there ever any rebellion by your kids against being included your films or participating in those Ifugao rituals? I think a lot of teenagers would go on the strike if they were asked to put on these G-strings and dance in a circle ...

**KT:** I think it was easier to ask them to put on their G-strings when they were in high school. My youngest one is still has a romantic attachment to the dignity of the G-string. I think, in the end, they've picked up on this. Maybe they are not as romantic about it as their father, but they have been able to find some kind of inner brakes, that might help them to negotiate life without going the full American Idol path. It's real, they are not doing it to please me.

**TH/TB:** Despite going to McDonald's, as we see in one scene in the film ...

**KT:** On occasion they go, but I made sure they're quite aware of these contradictions.

## **The Ifugao and Philippine National Identity**

**TH/TB:** The Ifugao play a very important part of this film, and also in your other works. Can you talk about your relationship to them? You yourself are not an Ifugao, but they become increasingly relevant in your films.

**KT:** My entry into the Ifugao world was Lopez Nauyac, an Ifugao elder. You see him at the end of my film. He is a modern person. He knows how to turn the shock springs of a Mercedes-Benz into a carving tool, and he has become my main friend, I would even say mentor, over the last two decades. As a matter of fact, I've been adopted in his village in Ifugao. Originally I had a romantic vision of native culture. I think it's become more grounded. I became more familiar with the subtleties of Ifugao culture and their unique balance with the world around them, the environment, nature. Of course, I still have a lot to learn from them. But I really want that the knowledge they have to offer becomes part of our mainstream education. My relationship with them has evolved, and Lopac Nauyac plays a bigger part in my film *Balikbayan No. 1*. Has become more important than the MBA that I got abroad.

I was born in Baguio, and Baguio was really an American enclave. It was created by the Americans to be a summer capital while they were governing the Philippines, so all of our institutions and the lifestyle in Baguio were very much Americanized. My first teachers were Maryknoll nuns, and I did not question the education that I received from them until I entered college in the University of the Philippines. But even then, I didn't understand the cultural nuances of what was then fashionably called "imperialism."

When I worked on *Perfumed Nightmare*, I started to develop an understanding of my ambiguous relationship to American culture. I understood that I have to look back to many things that were erased by the American Idol culture. It has been a continuing topic in all of my films. In the last 20 years, since I got adopted by the Ifugao people, they've become a very good mirror to me, where I can continue to evolve without becoming an aggressive or

an angry “clenched fists”-type of filmmaker. I don’t think we have to be like that as filmmakers in order to make a point. Some people might find my films too humorous and too lighthearted.

**TH/TB:** The Philippines is characterized by the fact that they integrated elements of the culture of two colonial powers into their culture, the Spanish and the American. Maybe that is what constitutes the national identity of the country, this hybridity that can integrate different cultures? And then it would be futile to look for a “true,” but lost national identity?

**KT:** In Tagalog, there is this expression “Ni ha, ni ho,” neither this nor that. The Philippines is like that. If there truly is a place, where East meets West it’s the Philippines, and this hybrid identity can be a strength. The only problem I see is that our leaders like to deny their precolonial side. We have been so brainwashed. And this whole mall culture and hamburger culture has become an unquestioned way of life.

**TH/TB:** The Philippines have has really decayed enormously in the last couple of decades, the destruction of the environment is getting worse and worse in the provinces. On the other hand, in Manila they are building all these shopping malls, and the Filipino youth is, more or less, growing up in these malls. Do you see any hope that this will change, and that there will be more concern for the environment?

**KT:** The moral culture is the epitome of that kind of crass type of consumption overload that America has led the way to. The shopping malls are a big Trojan horse to lure people into consumption. The other big Trojan horse is television. They continue to force this growth model on us, and because of that, we are losing our relationship with nature. A lot of kids have probably been so much in these air-conditioned malls that they don’t ever think of going out into the woods. And then they’re stuck with their gadgets.

I’m only a filmmaker, but my wife and I are also parents and now grandparents, and we continue to orient our kids toward noticing these issues and those brakes that the indigenous cultures have to offer, so that we don’t just see nature as a resource that is to be exploited.

My wife and I keep stressing one part of indigenous psychology that is called “Kapwa.” Kapwa means that you are including the other in any decisions you make. It is a certain kind of solidarity, an open flow between me and the other. My decisions are not just based on the kind of individualism that we find in industrial societies. And it’s this kind of culture that people like Lopez Nauyac still practice. Of course, in the city this virtue is getting eroded. But when you say kapwa, you think of the others, the people in my town, in my family, you think in terms of human relationships. But kapwa also extends to the kapwa forest or the kapwa river. And I think that this attitude will slow down this relentless destruction of nature. But right now, the export of our trees and our ore and the abuse of nature continues.

We have to fight the dictator in us, who forces these ideas of the consumer society on us that we are good citizens of. Maybe we should be listening to chief Seattle or an Amazon leader or an Inuit shaman. They might be able to shake the foundations of the consumer society that we have been living in for the last four or five decades. Lopez Nauyac and a lot of other people have lived a slower life. They don’t consume more than they need and only cut as many trees as they need to build their house or to make wooden instruments. That is this attitude of the elder who said, “Don’t take all the fruits; leave something for the birds.”

In the film I joke about the LSD philosophy, the “law of supply and demand.” If we let that determine our consumption demands, it will create more and more blind abuse of Mother Nature. That’s why I think we have to listen to those voices from the past. I think that’s why I couldn’t finish this film in 1986 when we had gotten rid of the dictator. You can put the Pope in the presidential palace, you can put an Indian chief in the presidential palace, you can put an enlightened Dalai Lama in the presidential palace. But I think as long as Philippine culture continues to function along the LSD philosophy, as it has done in the last 450 years, it will be difficult for us—unless we rethink our ways, aided by the wise, nature-bound indigenous people. This might seem hopeless, but I’m not losing hope.

**TH/TB:** One item that you keep featuring in your short essay films is the bahag, the traditional wear of the Ifugao. The video essay “Japanese summers of a Filipino Fundoshi” is dedicated to a

**comparison of the bahag with traditional Japanese fundoshi, but it also pops up in other films, including *Balikbayan No. 1* ...**

**KT:** The bahag is the traditional wear of our tribal people, a kind of G string. I am not saying we should go back to that, but we also shouldn't be ashamed of that part of our history either. In the past, I have worn my fundoshi at lectures in Berkeley and Harvard, and when I accepted an award in Japan. It's a metaphor for going back to the old balance with nature that our ancestors had. It was also a way of showing my children that there are reasons why cultures develop the way they do, why Eskimos wear fur coats and why the bahag is normal wear in a tropical country. And we should not associate that with backwardness or lack of sophistication. I think we have to overcome that colonial shame.

### **“My Japanese period”: From 16 mm to video**

**TH/TB:** In the late 1980s, you started to work with video, a medium that seems to be tailor-made for your work because of its flexibility and because it allows you to shoot much more without having to think about the high price of film material ...

**KT:** I resisted video for a very long time. But in 1987 I got my first video camera from my best friend in Japan. He is a Japanese monk in a small temple outside of Tokyo, and he gave me my first analog video camera. My film *Takadera Mon Amour* is about him, and it contains both 16 mm and VHS video material. It was my transition bridge into video. My films usually take a very long time to finish, so I joined the JVC video contest every year at that time, because it allowed me to finish something, while I worked on my 16 mm films. The JVC contest was very interesting, because it allowed professionals as well as grade school children to send their films. So I always worked on my films, even if I was not on the festival circuit, and these were smaller, playful projects to see how I could handle that new medium video. They also allowed me to keep my sanity, when I was working on my longer films. I create, therefore I am.

The friendship with Mr. Ono began because of the haiku I wrote. I had never written a haiku in my life, but I was so inspired by my first visit to Takadera, the temple where Mr. Ono is the abbot, that we developed a close friendship. Six month later he visited the Philippines with his family, and brought me my first VHS camera.

I was very self-conscious when I first shot video. I was used to the Bolex, which was a very noisy camera, so it was impossible to get synchronized sound. Some of the scenes, like the bamboo bashing, was shot on 16 mm, but in the end I could not finish the film with the 16 mm material that I got. It was a big thrill to be able to instantly see what you had shot almost immediately with video, and to have sound too. But the picture is very fuzzy and grainy because of this dinosaur technology of VHS video. But at least, I was able to tell the story.

But my relationship with video did not really take off until 1995, when I bought my first digital camera. But I am not known for technical quality, I am a *Dritte Welt Filmemacher*. I would like my pictures to be crisp and clear for the audience, but if it is only so-so, my storytelling will take you to the finishing line. I guess some people might call me *dilletantisch*.

**TH/TB:** Editing analog video is entirely different from editing film. The editing process is very important for your films. How was the transition from film to video in regard to putting your films together?

**KT:** Right now, I wonder how we were able to edit analog video at all. We had this Panasonic machine, that was very complicated. My son, who was 13 at that time, actually helped me with it. My films really grow on the editing table, but with analog video it was very difficult to change the order of the scenes. There were also glitches and technical problems. But I think my *duende*, my inner scriptwriter, creates the connection between certain shots and that evolves into a film.

## Japan

**KT:** Films like *Takadera Mon Amour* and *Bahal* were my Japanese period. Picasso had a blue period and his other periods, so perhaps *Perfumed Nightmare* and *Who Invented the Yoyo? Who Invented the moon buggy?* were my German period, followed by my Japanese period, which was followed by the cosmic period. The family of Mr. Ono and my family had become very good friends, and as a video diary I just kept shooting and shooting, and I accumulated so much material. Mr. Ono liked my primitive calligraphy so much, that he wanted to include me into an exhibition, and I applied for a grant from the Japan Foundation to finish a film for that occasion.

**TH/TB:** What did the time in Japan mean for you?

**KT:** It definitely made me a more grounded person. My films are always about my own evolution. This is a film about me as a film maker absorbing another world and understanding another culture.

## Video Diaries

**KT:** I used to think that it was the convenience of video that made me do these short video diaries. But all of my films are really diaries. In some of the short videos there are shots that are later recycled in my later, longer works. So one shot from one film gets reharvested and planted in another film. I think in film school they tell you that everything has to be new and original, but for me it's just the most natural thing. That's probably the most personal side of my film making. I am just desperate to tell a story with whatever I have.

When I worked on *Roofs of the World, Unite!*, my house burned down and I lost a couple of prints of my films. But it also forced me to look at my archive again, and I discovered that I had so many shots of roofs—*der Zwiebelturm* from *Perfumed Nightmare*, the Japanese roof building, and my son in India. I don't know if it worked for the audience, but these shots just came together by association, it was this stream of thought, and all of a sudden, roofs became a topic. Memories came back—oh, I have this memory in this film can!

Video is less intrusive, video is less aggressive. A lot of times I just hold the camera like this (demonstrates how he holds the camera at hip level), and record everything.

## The Father of Philippine independent cinema

**TH/TB:** What do you think is your influence on the film community of the Philippines?

**KT:** By cosmic chance, I am now called the Father of Independent Cinema in the Philippines. In the last ten years, a lot of young filmmakers from the Philippines have been making waves, like Lav Diaz, Raja Martin, Lav Diaz. They all call me "Tatay" which means father and is a term of endearment. But I don't think I am really their father because of any cinematic genius or whatever. I just happen to be born 30 years ahead of Raymond Red or Nick Deocampo. But

yes, it is a following. I would like to have the big audiences that Lino Brocka or Ishmael Bernal or Mike de Leon had, but I think my role is more to be a Tatay to this new generation, who at last might rethink the motto “Time is money” and settle for less, but make films that are more relevant, local stories.

By the way, in the last couple of years I have been giving out Bamboo Cameras awards to Filipino filmmakers who do really independent work, not the Hollywood formula, sex and violence, but have a real indigenous heart in their films.

**TH/TB:** Is the Bamboo Camera a metaphor for Third World film making?

**KT:** Maybe because I was working as an economist in Paris I saw the beauty of the flexibility of Bamboo. It is organic, a not a very expensive material, and it can survive even the strongest typhoons. In the Philippines, it is a metaphor for being a survivor. An oak tree is resisting the wind, and then it falls down, while the bamboo can bend and therefore survives the strongest wind.

### **“Balikbayan Number One”**

**TH/TB:** Why did you return to the half-finished film *Memories of Overdevelopment*?

**KT:** When we started the film in 1979, there was no video, so we were stuck with 16 mm film. But then all my filmmaker friends started to trade in their 16 mm cameras for analogue video cameras, and I was getting left behind. I refused video for many years. I only got my own video camera in 1995.

I knew I had to come back to film, but how? In 1999, the original Magellan actor died, which created an additional problem. But at that time, I was also almost twice the age that I was in the original film. So I said: To hell with continuity, I wait for the cosmos to finish the film. Sometime in 2010 or 2011, I started to think: Why not reincarnate some of these people some 500 years later and have them meet at the Baguio Flower Festival—which is autobiographical, because we live there.

In 2012 I had four mini retrospectives in the USA, and on my way home I had a 20 hour flight via the Pacific—which was of course much faster than Magellan’s 99-day voyage. I went straight to Baguio, another six hour bus ride, and then to Hapao, where I

wanted to film my son Kawayan who was doing a community art project. And when I was filming in that village, this figure with a heavy beard and long hair passed through my shot. It was Kawayan, and it hit me: “Ah, Magellan!” I had found somebody to reincarnate Magellan looking for a white-haired Enrique, played by me. That was in November 2012, and in November 2013, we started to shoot our first scenes. In 2014, I showed a first version, *Redux II*, in Singapore, which ended where it says “The End” But the film still did not feel finished, so I added more material, some of it shot with an iPhone, that a Korean student had given me.

**TH/TB:** Now there is version III of the film. Do you think you will ever get to finish the film?

**KT:** I might continue it in my next lifetime. So if you want to buy tickets ... When I shot the 16 mm material I also wanted to show Enrique as an economic animal, as a *Gastarbeiter*. So he works as a woodcarver, he works for the king as a baby sitter for the princess, and he models for Hieronymus Bosch. I wanted to show him as the economic asset he is for his master.

Originally, *Redux* had a fairly conventional narrative structure, with a story arc and a climax and all of that. The new material was meant to be a ten minute epilogue to the original film. But then I just kept playing and playing, and it just kept growing and growing. And I realized: “Hey, I’ve shot so many things related to Magellan film,” and it started coming in little by little. I would discover another video essay, and once I let go, I said “Okay, just bring them in, and see where it goes.” There I started looking at some old, old footage, like the shots of the two rocks that look like turtles. I shot that in Indonesia.

I was still not finished in early January 8, 2015, when I got this email from the Berlinale: “We closed our selection already before Christmas, but we saw your Vimeo-Link and we want the film to be finished in two weeks for the festival.” I said: “Yeah, yeah, we’ll finish it in time.” In those two weeks I still kept adding things like my mother’s statement. The biggest thing that I was having quarrels about with everybody was whether I should put the Third World party scene in the editing room in. Everybody was like: “Hey, we’re already near the climax of the film! Everybody wants to rest and go home! Why are you adding that?” But I took that risk.

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