

Ludo de Roo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3439-949X>
(Macquarie University, Australia)

Kidlat Tahimik: Metaphorical Journeys in Decolonial Cinema

Abstract

Philippine filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik's debut film *Perfumed Nightmare* (1979) reveals a sophisticated use of what I term "concrete metaphor:" while evoking complex layers of decolonial critique, his 16mm cinematography keeps the metaphorical abstractions firmly grounded in material reality — a stone bridge, tropical foliage, and rustic sounds of nature. This essay considers the complex role of concrete metaphors in Tahimik's evolving style. I start by showing how, on the one hand, multimodal extensions of cognitive metaphor theory (CMT) illuminate the dynamic structure of Tahimik's cinematic metaphors. On the other hand, due to CMT's intrinsic emphasis on universal cognitive structures, I consider its limitation in accounting for geographic specificity — a key factor anchoring Tahimik's cultural critique. Through close analysis of the bridge sequences in *Perfumed Nightmare*, and later a central scene in *Balikbayan #1 Redux VI* (2016), I retrace how Tahimik's aesthetic practice displays a subtle transition in his position in decolonial discourse. His earlier work aims at subverting Orientalist binaries from a universal position, where his concrete metaphors — materially amplified in 16mm cinematography — anchor his critique in its region. Instead, his later work increasingly speaks from the Philippines' Cordillera region; by interweaving celluloid and digital film formats, Tahimik creates essayistic mixtures that are ontologically confounding — here, the material presence of his concrete metaphors generates continuity for his conceptual critique.

Keywords

cinematic metaphor, conceptual metaphor theory, decolonial film theory, film geography, Kidlat Tahimik

“Does the word ‘contradiction’ have anything to do with ‘contradictorship?’”¹⁾

“Sometimes we feel we lost our roots. Neither this, neither that. Neither Western nor Oriental.”²⁾

Introduction

Philippine filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik’s debut film *Perfumed Nightmare* (Mababangong Bangungot, 1979) opens with a simple scene: a stone bridge arching over a tropical river, sounds from the rural setting pervading the soundtrack. Within four minutes this bridge accumulates extraordinary metaphorical weight, evoking colonial history, economic exploitation, and ideological discipline. And yet the bridge never loses its perceptual presence as a material object in a specific place: its solid texture and its surrounding atmosphere remain sensorily present to us through the audiovisual image, even as the metaphorical meaning accrues — conceptual abstraction grounded in rural Philippines.

The first part of this essay examines the bridge sequence in *Perfumed Nightmare* as an instance of Tahimik’s decolonial critique expressed in the cinematic form of what I call “concrete metaphors:” tropes where elemental material anchors abstract meaning in specific places. I propose this notion as an extension of multimodal conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). While CMT clarifies the dynamic structure of Tahimik’s cinematic metaphors, due to its emphasis on universal cognitive structures it cannot account for the concrete situatedness of meaning that is vital to Tahimik’s decolonial discourse. Concrete metaphors address this limitation by binding critique to the physical environment of the Philippines.

In the second half of the essay, I situate Tahimik’s complex position within decolonial cinema, arguing that his subversion of traditional East-West binaries requires understanding his location in the Malay Archipelago. In this period, his 16mm filming of concrete elements emphasizes the material specificity of landscape as site of decolonial critique. I next consider how Tahimik’s later films complicate these aesthetic processes, exemplified by *Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment* (1980–2023): while Tahimik’s positioning shifts from strategic ambivalence to explicit grounding in the Cordillera region, he also increasingly interweaves celluloid and digital formats. This creates an evolved approach to concrete metaphors, sustained through Tahimik’s thoroughgoing use of material elements.

1) Kidlat de Guia, interrogating his father, Kidlat Tahimik, in the section “We Are Colonial Red White and Blue,” in *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow* (Bakit Dilaw ang Gitna ng Bahaghari?, Kidlat Tahimik, 1994).

2) Tahimik, in *Japanese Summers of a Filipino Fundoshi* (1996).

Crossing the Bridge

The bridge in the opening scene of *Perfumed Nightmare* arches over a river in a tropical forest, with chirping birds and croaking frogs pervading the soundtrack. Shot on expired 16mm stock, with abundant foliage concealing much of the frame, only a colorful jeepney crossing accentuates the bridge's curvature.³⁾ The visuals are accompanied by a voice-over, which we come to recognize as Tahimik's voice, first speaking in Tagalog, quickly followed by Tahimik dubbing the same lines in English:

This is the bridge to our village. It is the only way into Balian. [pause; the jeepney re-verses] And it is the only way out. Our bridge is three meters wide by ten meters long. It is our bridge of life.⁴⁾



Fig. 1: An expired 16mm film image showing a bridge perched over a river, as a jeepney crosses the bridge. Screengrab from *Perfumed Nightmare* (Kidlat Tahimik, 1979). [Image courtesy of dafilms.com.]

A fade to black. The next instance shows the bridge filmed from the front, with a large truck loaded with logs of wood. Tahimik's voice-over explains (in English) that this bridge was built by the Spanish colonizers — destroying the bamboo version his grandfather built — and was subsequently expanded under U.S. imperialism. “The bridge is used by everybody. It is used by those who make big profits [pause]” (i.e., the wood industry), and

3) Jeepneys are converted military jeeps, left by the United States army, converted into abundantly decorated, chrome-adorned vehicles for public transport, ubiquitous in the Philippines. As Tahimik explains at this juncture in *Perfumed Nightmare*, jeepneys are “vehicles of war which we made into vehicles of life.”

4) *Perfumed Nightmare*, 0'41”.



Fig. 2: Kidlat Tahimik acting as a four year old version of himself, pulling a toy jeepney over the bridge. Screen-grab from *Perfumed Nightmare* (1979). [Image courtesy of dafilms.com.]

it is used by those who make small profits" (showing a few kids selling ice cream).⁵⁾ Merely ninety seconds into the film, Tahimik has already charged his metaphor ("this is our bridge of life") with both colonial and economic connotations — and this is just the start.

The next scene introduces Tahimik on-screen (a grown-up Philippine man in a colorful shirt and a distinct bowl cut hairdo), traversing the bridge on foot, pulling a small string over his left shoulder. "I first tried to cross the bridge when I was three years old," says the voice-over, now displaying in close-up a tiny toy jeepney, pulled forward by the string. In the next close-up, the protagonist squarely addresses the camera: "I am Kidlat Tahimik, I choose my vehicle, and I can cross *this* bridge."⁶⁾ This scene is repeated twice more, intercut with scenes of local life, with Tahimik's voice-over explaining (accompanying grainy images filmed in hand-held shots, documenting residents' life) that the bridge is used for parades of beauty contests, "those who promote discipline and uniformity" (as images show marching military men), as well as for church processions.⁷⁾ These spectacles are punctuated, however, by interjecting the images of the bridge a few times — Tahimik wearing the same outfit; the pattern of close-ups repeating those of before, the narration virtually reiterating the same lines:

5) Ibid., 1'17".

6) Ibid., 1'52".

7) As Christopher Pavsek points out, this quote echoes "an old propaganda slogan of the martial law regime," which during the time of *Perfumed Nightmare*'s release was still in full form. Christopher Pavsek, *The Utopia of Film: Cinema and Its Futures in Godard, Kluge, and Tahimik* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 159.

Again, I tried to cross the bridge by myself, when I was four years old. “I am Kidlat Tahimik, and I can cross any bridge!”

[...]

Today I am still trying to make that final crossing [pause] to freedom. “I am Kidlat Tahimik. I choose my vehicle, and I can cross *all* bridges.”⁸⁾

In the second recurrence, when Tahimik is supposed to be four years old, he pulls a string with only a slightly larger jeepney model, rolling off the bridge. In the third and final iteration of this act, a mature Tahimik pretends to pull a real-life jeepney over the bridge of life, where the images leave little doubt that the car’s engine is doing the heavy lifting.

— — —

Just four minutes into the film, the sequence burdens the bridge with various abstract connotations, negotiating the protagonist’s comedic maturation with Tahimik’s sociopolitical observations. Through some of the simplest cinematic means — minimalist camera set-ups, editing, and repetition — Tahimik evokes a playful, lively ricocheting of inventive associations that, stupendously, lightheartedly address some of the country’s burdensome history. His rich range of connotations playfully retains its figurative force without undermining any of its various connotations; rather, these inferences effortlessly amalgamate into complexly layered, meaningful musings. To pun: how does Tahimik incrementally increase the burden carried by the bridge (or pull the magnified jeepney), without breaking its arch (or his back)?

It might be tempting to render Tahimik’s unfolding of powerful tropes as symbols, or perhaps even as allegory, but neither aesthetic category fits exactly.⁹⁾ For his crossing of the bridge to be framed as an allegory, the entire film would have to *structurally* elaborate the figure of the bridge, as e.g., the lifeboat narrative does in *Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012). However, framing *Perfumed Nightmare*’s whole story world in one order of narrative meaning (e.g., “escaping” rural Balian) would insufficiently account for these other dominant tropes.¹⁰⁾ Nor is Tahimik’s interweaving of cultural conventions strictly symbolical, as it is precisely aimed at *uprooting* the quasi-established nature that symbols seek to create: that is, rather than fixing meaning, he systematically undermines and contradicts these.¹¹⁾

8) *Perfumed Nightmare*, 2'45"; and *ibid.*, 3'56". Quotation marks indicate the on-screen text uttered by the protagonist, addressing the camera.

9) Thanks to the reviewers for pressing the need for this clarification.

10) Brevity requires me to bracket out such themes — e.g., Tahimik commentators frequently comment on his space travel metaphors; cf. Harrod Suarez, “Among the Sensuous: Listening to Film, Listening to the Philippines,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2011); Pavsek, *The Utopia of Film*, in *passim*; and Charles Fairbanks, “Great Directors: Tahimik, Kidlat,” *Senses of Cinema*, January, 2022, accessed May 25, 2025, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2022/great-directors/tahimik-kidlat/>.

11) Cognitive linguist Zoltán Kövecses states that “symbols” are “well-entrenched metaphors” in culture, see Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65. Similarly, hermeneutician Paul Ricoeur explains that symbols have a “bound” nature, whereas a “metaphor is a free intervention of discourse” (cf. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 53). Thanks to Martin Rossouw for the reference to Ricoeur.

Therefore, I suggest that much of the complex *dynamic process* that produces abstract meaning in Tahimik's film can be explained by turning to the contemporary paradigm of "cinematic metaphor."¹²⁾ Building on the cognitive linguistic framework pioneered by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the central idea of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) is that our everyday thought and action is fundamentally shaped by our use of embodied-linguistic concepts.¹³⁾ In this instance, Tahimik's BRIDGE becomes what Johnson calls a "location metaphor," carrying the "event structure" that conceives of events as *moving along a path* toward some destination.¹⁴⁾ For instance, one of CMT's major schemata, the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, renders the BRIDGE as location and the JEEPNEY carrying the event structure of the conceptual metaphor.¹⁵⁾ This means that Tahimik utilizes the figure of the Balian bridge to map the action as a *structure* from the "source domain" (traditional life in the community, at one shore) to the "target domain" (an as-of-yet undisclosed future, at the other shore).¹⁶⁾ As such, the BRIDGE — literally, a concrete, stable entity — carries the (figurative) aspiration of the film's protagonist: from the rural village to Manila and beyond: to freedom.

But clearly, this initial gleaning unduly relies on Tahimik's verbal expression (i.e., on the soundtrack): by staying within the linguistic basis of CMT, this overlooks what Charles Forceville has called the "multimodal discourse" fundamental to the medium of cinema.¹⁷⁾ Multimodal scholarship on CMT extends Noël Carroll's observation that metaphors in moving images are primarily visual depictions,¹⁸⁾ suggesting that cinema combines — besides spoken words and visual images — also sounds, as well as movements, in a complex, edited form.¹⁹⁾ Such multimodal expansions of CMT help to clarify the *dynamic structure*

12) Cf. Kathrin Fahlenbach, ed., *Embodied Metaphors in Film, Television, and Video Games: Cognitive Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Cornelia Müller and Hermann Kappelhoff, *Cinematic Metaphor: Experience, Affectivity, Temporality* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2018).

13) See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 8 (1980); and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago University Press, 2003) [First published in 1980]. NB. Henceforth I adopt the CMT practice to render metaphors in small caps.

14) "Many of our actions — both physical actions toward spatial locations, and mental actions directed toward abstract goals — are metaphorically construed as journeys toward destinations," see Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 39.

15) Ibid., 39. Below I say more about the JEEPNEY metaphor.

16) In contrast to metonyms, discussed below, in metaphors the "source" and "target" domains are of different orders. See *ibid.*, 39, for more detail.

17) Forceville, "Non-Verbal and Multimodal Metaphor in a Cognitivist Framework: Agendas for Research," in *Cognitive Linguistics: Current Applications and Future Perspectives*, eds. Gitte Kristiansen, Michel Achard, Michel Dirven, and Francisco Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton, 2006), 379–402.

18) My use of "cinematic metaphor" is, however, distinct from Carroll's narrower concept of "strict film metaphor," which relies on what he calls "homospaciality" (where two disparate elements are fused *in the same figure*) that are "physically noncompossible" in the real world. Carroll also discusses what he calls the "concreteness objection," i.e. the concern that photographic specificity resists metaphorical abstraction. I address this below in relation to Kracauer's film ontology, in the section "Concrete Situations of Meaning." See Noël Carroll, "A Note on Film Metaphor," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 212–223, esp. 213, 217–219.

19) The most recent succinct overview of the current state of the field is provided by Charles Forceville, "Metaphor: A Key Instrument to Guide Perspective in Moving Images," *In Media Res (MediaCommons)*, October 6,

of Tahimik's use of metaphors in the sequence described phenomenologically above. In what follows, I provide a detailed micro-level analysis of the opening sequence by highlighting what Cornelia Müller and Hermann Kappelhoff call the "expressive movements" of the audiovisual forms of Tahimik's cinematic metaphor, that is, the temporally structured composition of movement-images that modulate the viewer's affective experience, shaping the dynamic flow from which the metaphorical meaning emerges.²⁰⁾

Multimodal Complications

Let us start with the movement across the bridge. Visually, this is amplified by the playful, reiterated depiction of the jeepney: pulled as toy vehicles over the bridge by an enacted three-year-old, a four-year-old, and later as the matured protagonist inside the motorized car. In multimodal CMT idiom, the visual modality highlights the JEEPNEY as a *moving* object, in contrast to the stable, stagnant entity of the built BRIDGE — which Tahimik emphasizes by repeating the same photographic framing of the bridge (i.e., from the same angle) and a continuous soundscape. The visual comedy comes in combination with other modalities: besides the voice-over ("I choose my vehicle, and I can cross *all* bridges"), we should add the clever editing of interjections (as we shall see shortly). As a *multimodal* conceptual metaphor, then, the JEEPNEY comes to convey Tahimik's development from toddler to adult, indicating the significance of Tahimik's ability to traverse the BRIDGE.

First, the modality of visual movement complicates the application of CMT's (linguistic) LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor mentioned above, turning it into a highly *dynamic* structure.²¹⁾ For instance, its so-called SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema usually implies a single, forward-moving trajectory, where the BRIDGE (location) and JEEPNEY (event structure) stand for leaving the village.²²⁾ Yet committing to a monodirectional reading would result in ignoring Tahimik's powerful evocation of the inverse direction, expressed both visually (i.e., traffic coming into the village) and verbally (recall the opening lines: "It is the only way into Balian. And it is the only way out").²³⁾ Instead, the dynamic bidirectionality provides the tension to the BRIDGE metaphor. Additionally, CMT's LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor also needs to accommodate the figurative weight of the multiple additional connotations that the JEEPNEY metaphor carries, intensified by its multimodal expressive movement. For instance, like the bridge, this motorized vehicle is a relic of an imperial past; at the same time, as it comedically accumulates in size, it dynamically represents the

2025, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://mediacommmons.org/imr/content/metaphor-key-instrument-guide-perspective-moving-images>.

20) My approach takes guidance from the "CinMet" methodology developed by Müller and Kappelhoff (cf. their "Appendix," in *Cinematic Metaphor*, 226–247).

21) Forceville provides a productive reading of this trope in two of Agnès Varda's essay films, recasting the metaphor as A QUEST IS A JOURNEY metaphor, in Charles Forceville, "The Journey Metaphor and the Source-Path-Goal Schema in Agnès Varda's Autobiographical Gleaning Documentaries," in *Beyond Cognitive Metaphor Theory*, ed. Monika Fludernik (London: Routledge, 2011), 281–297.

22) Johnson suggests a moral norm: deviation from the path appears immoral (Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, 43).

23) As I shall show shortly, Tahimik's decolonial discourse relies precisely on the insertions (through his editing) that undermine the monodirectional attempt to "escape" his village.

inflated burden of leaving the rural village. Combined, these multimodal dimensions in Tahimik's sequence turn CMT's LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor into an expressive, polysemic layering of several related conceptual schemas — to which we must still add further modalities.

A second multimodal factor in this sequence is, as noted, Tahimik's clever use of montage. His cinematic metaphor complicates connotations by carrying content across scenes, accruing salience and further polysemic complexity via shot transitions and through scaffolded repetition. Consider the aforementioned series of interjections punctuating Tahimik's figurative maturation — brief interruptions showing rural life in the village. On one level, one might take the *content* of these interpolations at face value, as innocent ethnographic glimpses of the Philippine countryside establishing the *couleur locale*.²⁴⁾ Yet, on closer scrutiny, one cannot disregard that Tahimik's threefold assemblage elicits precisely those social domains that order village life from the outside: i.e., beauty contests (a biopolitical regime introducing Western standards); the national army (at a time when the conjugal dictatorship increased its command on the country), and the Catholic Church (preserving a metaphysical organization justifying foreign habits and worldview). Therefore, the montage of this intricate combination requires a twofold commentary.

First, note that, structurally, each of these interjections operates independently as an autonomous *metonym*; it is Tahimik's sequential juxtaposition that affords them *metaphorical force*.²⁵⁾ That is, taken separately, every interpolation functions *metonymically*, since it maps parts onto a whole *within* one conceptual domain (e.g., the army is part of the authoritative dictatorship). Tahimik's editing combines these into visual parallels, which renders them onto a proper metaphorical structure: i.e., mapping their meaning on a higher conceptual order. This first comment clarifies how his specific series of metonymic interjections become cinematic metaphors precisely by virtue of their multimodal form — setting into motion the gradual escalation that solicits the ideological discourse of Tahimik's decolonial critique. Second, recall that these interpolations not only mirror each other; they also “supercharge” the already-established visual-dynamic BRIDGE and JEEPNEY metaphors: that is, the editing implies a causal relation (or at least a correlation) between, on one hand, these threefold ideological domains and, on the other, the protagonist's emphatic (monodirectional) attempts to *leave* the village as represented by the Balian bridge and Tahimik's jeepney. Combined, these brief sociopolitical interjections signal how, as built infrastructure, the BRIDGE plays a key role in imposing discipline onto Balian, turning it into a “glocal” village.²⁶⁾

24) Catherine Russell convincingly argues against such overly naïve interpretations; see her *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 295–301, to which I return below.

25) The following distinction between metonyms and metaphors draws on Maarten Coëgnarts, “Analyzing Metaphor in Film: Some Conceptual Challenges,” in *Current Approaches to Metaphor Analysis in Discourse*, ed. Ferrando Ignasi i Navarro (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2019), 295–320.

26) Cf. Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernities*, eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage Publications, 1995, 25–44). Tahimik's short film *Japanese Summers of a Filipino Fundoshi* (1996) [henceforth “*Japanese Summers...*”] displays his most explicit critique of the effect of how Western aesthetics alienated Filipino culture from the inside out.



Fig. 3: Brief inserts show the bridge being used by beauty pageant contests, Catholic processions, and here, military parades. Screengrab from *Perfumed Nightmare* (1979). [Image courtesy of dafilms.com.]

In juxtaposition, then, this dialectic progressively invokes — without showing — an imagined reverse, historical trajectory, into the village: to be clear, the conceptual elicitation of the decolonial discourse is only accomplished on a conceptual plain — i.e., fulfilled by the viewer.²⁷⁾ Decisive in making this a *cinematic metaphor*, then, is that the abstract layer of connotation (the conceptual domain) is never explicitly “in” the image: based on the content supplied by Tahimik, the spectator mentally *combines* these metonyms, *completing* them as abstract metaphor.

Decolonial Discourse

Taking stock of my analysis so far, my diagnostic turn to multimodal extensions of CMT has helped to clarify the formal structure of Tahimik’s conceptual metaphor in the opening sequence of *Perfumed Nightmare*. My interpretation has foregrounded the expressive dynamic set up by a push-and-pull tension between the *depicted* source domains (the BRIDGE and JEEPNEY; in conjunction with its counterparts, the three ideological metonyms) that consistently appeal to an inferred target domain — namely, Tahimik’s decolonial critique. And yet, while multimodal CMT accounted for the dynamic aspects of this metaphor, the more culturally specific aspects are insufficiently explained by CMT.

This explanatory gap is quite reasonable, though, given the theoretical premise of CMT: if cognitive linguistics’ chief explanatory power is its *universal application*, inversely

27) Cf. Müller and Kappelhoff, *Cinematic Metaphor*, ch. 3.

its assumed “globality” inevitably subsumes the more idiosyncratic cultural-historical context of an expressed metaphor.²⁸⁾ Film-theoretical proponents of CMT also observe that, since the theory explains metaphors “through the recourse to a physiological level of universal hard-wired cognitive structures,” the theory turns “the *concrete situatedness of meaning* [...] into something secondary.”²⁹⁾ However, as noted, my analysis so far has established that these concrete situatedness of meaning are anything but of a second order of meaning; even if ever so subtly evoked, the various modalities clearly indicate that Tahimik’s anticipated target domain is evidently at the level of *decolonial critique*. At this juncture, it is therefore necessary to expand my multimodal CMT analysis by including the director’s sociohistorical context in his geographic region — the Philippines, situated in the Malay Archipelago, in South-East Asia.

As noted, Tahimik is widely regarded as a decolonial filmmaker.³⁰⁾ In fact, scholars consistently turn to the Balian bridge in *Perfumed Nightmare*: even if their interpretations vary, they consistently interpret the built structure as a decolonial trope. Alison Boldero theorizes it as a “liminal space” in the narrative, while Danielle Bouchard interprets the bridge as a “loaded metaphor of ongoing imperial ‘encounter.’”³¹⁾ Most influential — and also notorious — is, however, Fredric Jameson’s reading of Tahimik.³²⁾ He maps Tahimik along an East-West axis, interpreting both the bridge and the jeepney as facilitating an “exchange” between the Philippines and Europe (and, by extension, the United States). In fact, his observation that a “First-World / Third-World dialectic is [...] inscribed within the film, *in its very form and the structure of its viewing*,” largely corroborates my multimodal CMT interpretation so far.³³⁾ Moreover, Jameson incidentally suggests a relevant, critical expansion of CMT by describing the process set up by a film like Tahimik’s as “cognitive mapping” which he defines as a political aesthetic “pedagogy” that “seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system.”³⁴⁾ His notion captures well how the viewer establishes a connection between the localized experience of the individual while “mapping” it within the globalized totality of the late-capitalist system.

28) For this line of criticism on linguistic applications of CMT, see e.g., Zoltán Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

29) Müller and Kappelhoff, *Cinematic Metaphor*, 19, emphasis added. For other critiques, see e.g. Kathrin Fahlenbach, “Audiovisual Metaphors as Embodied: Narratives in Moving Images,” in *Embodied Metaphors in Film, Television, and Video Games: Cognitive Approaches*, ed. Kathrin Fahlenbach (New York: Routledge, 2016), 33–50; and Maike Sarah Reinerth, “Metaphors of the Mind in Film: A Cognitive-Cultural Perspective,” in *Embodied Metaphors in Film*, ed. Kathrin Fahlenbach (New York: Routledge, 2016), 218–233.

30) See, besides the sources cited subsequently, also Suarez (“Among the Sensuous”), Pavsek (*The Utopia of Film*), and Fairbanks (“Tahimik”).

31) See Alison R. Boldero, “Rituals of Remaineddered Life in the Films of Kidlat Tahimik” (Master’s Thesis, Graduate Faculty Liberal Studies, The City University of New York, 2019), 14; Danielle Bouchard, “The Limits of the Anthropocene: Anticolonial Humanity in Kidlat Tahimik’s *Mababangong Bangungot* [*Perfumed Nightmare*] and Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen*,” *Interventions* 24, no. 7 (2022), 1166. This discussion skips the CMT convention of using small caps for metaphors, as none of these scholars work within this paradigm.

32) Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

33) Ibid., 204, emphasis added.

34) Cf. Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 188–189. The definition I quote from his *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* ([London: Verso, 1991], 54).

Despite its merits, Jameson's interpretations have become tarnished some three decades later, as some of his vocabulary betrays his own colonial prejudice. If Jameson takes the Balian bridge as mediating the different "cultural stages," one might forgive him the superseded idiom (i.e., "Third World" vs "First World") if his temporal hierarchy ("past" and "future") were not as dubious.³⁵⁾ A similar problem is his insistence on framing Tahimik as a naïve "clown," with Tahimik uniquely situated in "the East" [my scare quotes]: he delivers a "particular story" Jameson writes, "one feels like saying, no European or First-World writer or film-maker could tell."³⁶⁾ As Charles Fairbanks points out, some of Tahimik's gags clearly operate in the burlesque tradition of Jacques Tati and Charlie Chaplin in order to "extend their logic, just as children do in an imaginative play."³⁷⁾ Still, this does not justify Jameson's reducing Tahimik's comedic talent to the positionality of the exotic Other. Roland J. Tolentino aptly identifies the problem with this extensive reiteration of *simplified* binary structures: on Jameson's reading, it seems that "the 'First World' remains the site of modernity and rationality while the 'Third World' remains the site of nativism and rituals."³⁸⁾ Indeed, if anything, my analysis of Tahimik's elaborate metaphorical compositions so far establishes that the Philippine filmmaker clearly thrusts his enactment of East-West binaries with not a little frivolous ambiguity. Tahimik's embrace of this binary logic plays out on at least three layers.

On one level, there is an elusive performativity to his on-screen personage, where his "Kidlat Tahimik" is neither fact nor fiction, but instead an abstruse, indescribable in-between.³⁹⁾ This ambiguity is further complicated on another level, as Catherine Russell convincingly argues, by Tahimik's inclusion of "autoethnographic" rituals.⁴⁰⁾ These rituals are ironic, self-aware "performance[s] of the primitive," Russell claims, specifically referring to Tahimik's use of a toy model jeepney as another form of "acting out" and "playing primitive."⁴¹⁾ Third, we must consider Tahimik's intended audience: as Joel David notes, at this point in his career Tahimik "catered more to the tastes of European cineastes rather than of the Hollywood-influenced star- and genre-oriented Filipino moviegoers."⁴²⁾ In short, his witty undermining of conventional Orientalist discourse is anything but straightforward: on the contrary, by embracing global arthouse conventions — diametrically opposing domestic mainstream cinema — Tahimik intentionally *destabilizes* the supposed East-West or First World / Third World binaries.

35) Cf. Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 196.

36) Ibid., 195.

37) Fairbanks, "Tahimik," n.p.

38) Roland B. Tolentino, "Jameson and Tahimik," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 44, no. 1 (1996), 120. See also Deborah Dixon and Leo Zonn, "Confronting the Geopolitical Aesthetic: Fredric Jameson, *The Perfumed Nightmare* [sic] and the Perilous Place of Third Cinema," *Geopolitics* 10, no. 2 (2005), 304.

39) Space does not permit me to say more about this performative character of Tahimik's style; while partially jesting, the multiple personae also partake in the autobiographical essay film, which — as Tolentino points out — reflects on the building of the Philippine nation, cf. Roland B. Tolentino, "Subjectivity and Nation in Filipino Autobiographical Documentaries," in *National/Transnational: Subject Formation, Media, and Cultural Politics in and on the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001), 112–124, esp. 115.

40) Cf. Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 295–301.

41) Russell argues that the inclusions of toy figures is a common trope; cf. ibid., 299.

42) Joel David, *Wages of Cinema: Film in Philippine Perspective* (Diliman, Quezon City: University of Philippines Press, 1998), 69.

This amounts to the observation that Tahimik's geographical positioning in *Perfumed Nightmare* is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, his films speak from the Philippines about the country's complex postcolonial situation: with its diverse Indigenous cultures shaped by Spanish colonization, U.S. imperialism, and ongoing globalization; and political problems during the postwar period, alternating martial law with protracted dictatorship (~1965–1986), amounting to a difficult post-authoritarian transition (~1980s–present). On the other hand, in his early films — such as *Perfumed Nightmare* — he ironically embraces Western discourse and aesthetics to develop a careful deflation of precisely these Orientalist framings. As I shall demonstrate below, what is compelling about Tahimik is how, over his five-decade career, the filmmaker's own relation to — and his positioning within his geographical region — progressively evolves. As we shall see, this is visible in his aesthetic style.

Concrete Situations of Meaning

The best way to ground my argument regarding Tahimik's evolving cinematic aesthetics is to consider one further crucial aspect of *Perfumed Nightmare*. Striking in my phenomenological description is how his imaginative evocations are expressed through a rather modest set of audiovisual techniques. As I shall argue presently, it is precisely this cinematic form that grounds Tahimik's complex compositions of decolonial metaphors in the “concrete situatedness of meaning.”

Notice, first, that the cinematic means he serves himself with are quite minimalist.⁴³⁾ For instance, within the first four minutes of *Perfumed Nightmare* Tahimik emphatically refrains from visually depicting life *beyond* the village.⁴⁴⁾ The screen's granular images remain curiously static and uncommonly repetitive, showing the bridge first from the side (with tropic foliage partially obscuring the view), then from the front, with (as mentioned) a few scenic shots of the village edited into the sequence. Second, it merits emphasis that Tahimik recurrently addresses his spectator directly, breaking the fourth wall, willfully rousing our imagination. As each next interjection adds further metaphorical force onto the figure of the bridge, phenomenologically speaking, each odd, slightly varying repetition of Tahimik's direct appeal lingers a little longer, gradually opening poetic space. Third and finally, on an aural level, *Perfumed Nightmare* is also highly intricate: as Harrod Suarez persuasively shows, Tahimik's shifts between Tagalog and English are particularly meaningful, as in this scene “the volume of his Tagalog is steadily decreased in favor of the English translation” with each next iteration.⁴⁵⁾

43) I save for a later essay the argument that his aesthetic choice arguably stems from his critique of commercial filmmaking, in that his alternative “cups-of-gas” approach delivers yet another form of decolonial critique. Cf. Kidlat Tahimik, “Cups-of-Gas Filmmaking Vs. Full Tank-Cum-Credit Card Filmmaking,” *Discourse* 11, no. 2 (1989), 80–86.

44) Certainly, much of *Perfumed Nightmare* takes place in the Global North, and yet Tahimik always edits it in counterpoint to life in the Philippines.

45) Suarez, “Among the Sensuous,” 73.

Moreover, the coarse texture of his film practice evokes Siegfried Kracauer's ontology of film, where the striking materiality of Tahimik's gritty photochemical film stock lends a strong indexicality to these depictions.⁴⁶⁾ Crucially, the acute physical reality *within* Tahimik's images amplify this very indexicality: compared to other realist film ontologies, Kracauer emphasizes so-called "indeterminate" elements — rustling leaves, undulating waves, moving clouds — as *revealing* worldly phenomena.⁴⁷⁾ As Jordan Schonig clarifies, such incidental elements cannot be staged; they let "the autonomy of the world unfold independently of authorial control."⁴⁸⁾ These contingencies add a radical realism to the photographic image: the incidentals are revelatory of rural life in the Philippines; and, critically, these elemental phenomena are captured by the photochemical process of physical cinematography. As Kracauer explains, these elements "would hardly be perceived *were it not for the motion picture camera's ability* to catch them on the wing."⁴⁹⁾ In *Perfumed Nightmare*, both the photographic materialism of the 16mm film stock *and* the accrued contingent elements (the repeated audiovisual depiction of the stone bridge; tropical foliage; croaking frogs...) lend an *ontological depth* to the images — a realism firmly rooting the abstract connotations of Tahimik's conceptual metaphors in the historical, geographical context of the film's recording.

In fact, we might amplify this claim by considering it as a cinematic version of what I termed a concrete metaphor, an ecomaterialist extension of Lakoff and Johnson's CMT.⁵⁰⁾ Concrete metaphors capture how, in certain material images, a "slippage appears between matter, ideas, and concepts" because the elemental imagery hints "at more abstract notions while also relying on the sheer concreteness of the material elements."⁵¹⁾ Employed as metaphors, the elements mediate between the concrete and the conceptual: distinctive of concrete metaphors is that they set into action a so-called "leap of imagination" of conceptual abstraction, while their elemental nature guarantees the abstraction remains grounded in concrete reality.⁵²⁾ This helps bring out a theoretical tension I flagged earlier, where Carroll rightly associates Kracauer with the concreteness objection: his realist ontology renders Kracauer fundamentally skeptical about film metaphor; for him, every filmed particular refers to a specific specific instance.⁵³⁾ While Kracauer appears unconvinced about conceptual thought in narrative film more generally — a stance that has since been critiqued by a score of film-philosophers — my concept of concrete metaphor

46) Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) [First published in 1960].

47) Ibid., 27–28.

48) Schonig, "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and cgi," *Discourse* 40, no. 1 (2018), 31.

49) Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, xl ix, emphasis added.

50) Ludo de Roo, "The Elements: Threshold Concept, Medium, Metaphor," *Genealogy of the Posthuman*, March 18, 2025, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://criticalposthumanism.net/the-elements-threshold-concept-medium-metaphor/>.

51) Ibid., n.p.

52) Ibid., n.p. The mention of abstraction here does not mean to suggest the idea that metaphorical language is necessarily always abstract. Donald Davidson gives a robust argument for taking linguistic metaphors literally, in Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (1978), 31–47.

53) Carroll, "A Note on Metaphor," 217–219. I acknowledge that this tension requires more detailed unpacking in future research.

specifically accounts for the way concrete instances can evoke abstraction.⁵⁴⁾ I employ Kra-cauer's realist ontology without endorsing his skepticism about film metaphor to bring out the *indexical salience* of the material elements of the bridge of Balian village: the stone humpback construction; the earthen soil of the two connected riverbanks; the stream of water streaming underneath; and the tropical forest environment oozing in the background. These material elements affectively *anchor* the atmospheric context of the bridge's location in rural Philippines, and simultaneously carry the metaphor's source domain of the BRIDGE and JEEPNEY metaphors firmly in its specific, local geographic region. This combination amplifies my assessment of Tahimik's decolonial position, as argued in the previous section: the ontological force of his deployment of concrete metaphors augment his rootedness within the location from which he speaks, in *Perfumed Nightmare*: it is emphatically *from* his specific region — sensorily and affectively emphasized through the natural elements, rendered in 16mm film stock — that Tahimik asks us to imagine his life elsewhere, beyond the bridge, beyond Manila.

Yet, as flagged earlier, over his five-decade career, Tahimik's own relation to, and positioning within, his geographical region progressively evolves, and this is highly noticeable in his aesthetic style. Unlike his earlier work's general "orientation" to Europe, from the mid-1980s onward his films become increasingly *grounded* in Tahimik's native Ifugao province, at the periphery of the country.⁵⁵⁾ As Patrick Campos argues, "chronicling events in Baguio City and Ifugao" in fact *liberates* Tahimik from participating in the "burden of attacking or differentiating against the Manila-centric film industry."⁵⁶⁾ This freer form is especially noticeable in his later shorts (e.g., *Japanese Summers...* [1996], and *Banal Kahoy [Holy Wood]* [2002]), focusing specifically on the Asian Pacific region and Indigenous Ifugao culture, aiming to preserve Filipino traditions before they are absorbed by global monoculture.⁵⁷⁾ His style also comes to rely increasingly on essayist collage meditations, often with longer production cycles, while also combining different cinematic formats over time. This is exemplified by the mid-career film *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?* (henceforth *Why is Yellow...*) (completed in 1994), chronicling major events in the Philippines between 1980 and 1994. While its opening scene is set in Monument Valley — John Ford's emblematic *Western* setting — Tahimik soon spirals back to his country's political affairs in the archipelago: the so-called "yellow revolution" (1986) of the Philippines' post-dictatorship transition. As Tahimik becomes increasingly grounded in his native region, crucially, these long gestation periods result in a few peculiar aesthetic effects. For instance, while an early version of *Why is Yellow...* has Tahimik and his family celebratory supporting the "People Power Movement," this is later revised, "for it was now clear that

54) In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer even categorizes abstract reasoning as "uncinematic content" (262–265). See, for example, Daniel Sullivan, "Kracauer and Tarkovsky's Cinema of Redemptive Estrangement," *Film-Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2025), 50–51. Moreover, Mirian Hansen has explicitly countered the longstanding reputation of presenting Kracauer as a naive realist; cf. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), ch. 1.

55) This is in the rugged Cordillera Region, landlocked in northern Luzon — the country's largest island.

56) Patrick F. Campos, "Kidlat Tahimik and the Determination of a Native Filmmaker," *Kritika Kultura*, no. 25 (2015), 60.

57) For instance, *Japanese Summers...* deals with what Tahimik calls the "Micky Mousification" of native culture; see Campos's detailed analysis (in "Determination") of Tahimik's relation to Philippine Indigenous culture.

Aquino's [the candidate opposing Marcos' regime] promises regarding economic, political, and cultural liberation, land reform, and decolonization have been betrayed."⁵⁸⁾ Akin to the effect of the dialectical interjections in his earlier film (as we have seen in *Perfumed Nightmare*), his arranging of scenes — typically filmed at different periods — enable him to seamlessly insert metacommentaries through cinematic means (rather than voice-over alone). Now, as mentioned, in this period Tahimik also starts combining various cinematic formats, giving Tahimik's later essay style its distinct, indefinable form. As we shall see, these types of revisions and alternating alterations distinctly characterize *Balikbayan #1*.

In the concluding section I will consider this geographic turn in view of my analysis of Tahimik's evolved use of cinematic metaphors. I argue that while his decolonial critique becomes firmly grounded in his home region, his use of concrete metaphors has evolved even more powerfully in his mature style — an argument I exemplify by analyzing a central scene in *Balikbayan #1*, where the mixing of celluloid and digital film formats manifests an even more complex relationship to his use of concrete metaphors.

Geographic Repositioning Tahimik's Later Work

The film project that is now called *Balikbayan #1* started in 1980, with a first version wholly focused on narrating how Enrique, played by Tahimik himself in his trademark self-reflexive way, accompanied Ferdinand de Magellan in the circumnavigation of the globe (1519–1522).⁵⁹⁾ In its various iterations, Tahimik's film recounts the story of Enrique of Malacca, the historical Malay-Philippine help, acquired at fourteen, who accompanied Magellan. The film's subtitle, "balikbayan number one," is a contemporary Tagalog word for "overseas worker returning home." As Magellan died in 1521 in the chiefdom of Mactan (i.e., never returned to Europe), Tahimik's stated goal with *Balikbayan #1* is to revise global history and show that (this historical) Enrique is the first person to traverse the entire Earth *and return home*.⁶⁰⁾

Today, however, seven "redux" versions of *Balikbayan #1* exist (or existed, as one version was lost when Tahimik's film archives burnt down).⁶¹⁾ Remarkable is how every consecutive version of *Balikbayan #1* slightly alters the narrative and appearance by adding new material to existing footage. The multiformat practice might seem to abandon the concrete metaphor framework I have established above, given digital video's different on-

58) Campos, "Kidlat Tahimik and the Determination of a Native Filmmaker," 62. *Why is Yellow...* poignantly documents how Corazon Aquino was elected as first female president of the country, after Ninoy Aquino, her husband and opponent of Marcos, was killed by the regime.

59) Tahimik's topic overlaps with Lav Diaz's recent Cannes premiere, *Magellan* (Magalhães) (2025), which—unlike Tahimik's essay film—is filmed as an epic historical drama.

60) Cf. Christopher Small's interview with Tahimik (Christopher Small, "That's Thirty Years of Footage I've Accumulated": Kidlat Tahimik on *Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment* and His Pioneering Career in the Philippines," *Filmmaker Magazine*, April 16, 2019, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107382-thats-thirty-years-of-footage-ive-accumulated-kidlat-tahimik-on-balikbayan-1-memories-of-overdevelopment-and-his-pioneering-career-in-the-philippines/>.

61) Several versions have been released: the first in 1984 (33 minutes); as well as *Redux III* (2015, 150 minutes); *Redux VI* (in 2017, 159 minutes); and *Redux VII* (in 2023, 180 minutes).

tological status. Yet as the following descriptions reveal, an elemental continuity persists across these different formats, where the medium of water conduits Tahimik's decolonial critique. With original footage for *Balikbayan #1* (thirty-three minutes, exclusively concerned with depicting Enrique's story) shot in the early 1980s, newer versions of the film progressively situate Tahimik's decolonial theme in the context of twenty-first-century issues. As film journalist Olaf Müller suggests, it is as if

the material shot in the Eighties now functions something like a message from an earlier age — a magic artifact unearthed at the beginning, with Enrique/Kidlat now settled in the backwater of Ifugao, carving his story into wood and otherwise enjoying life.⁶²⁾

This progressive revision positions Tahimik uniquely in the essay film genre: as a work-in-progress, each subsequent version offers insight into his ongoing reflection about the decolonial narrative of Enrique. Early footage from the 1980s presents a *fictional* account of historical figures' travels, with each redux version of *Balikbayan #1* adding a commentary layer that shifts between diary form, home movie, non-fiction commentary, and personal reflection. Significantly, each version incorporates different filmmaking techniques accumulated over decades: small-format celluloid film (6mm, 8mm, 16mm) is intercut with digital footage (VHS, Hi-8, mini-DV), and the most recent version even includes footage shot on iPhones.⁶³⁾ This temporal layering of formats mirrors a shift in location: much of the earlier footage included in *Balikbayan #1* (filmed on celluloid) enacts historical fiction, often in indeterminate places (on sea, on the coast) or else in places away from the Philippines (i.e., in Europe); instead, the later digitally-filmed scenes increasingly ground the narrative in Baguio and the Cordillera region. A scene in the middle of *Balikbayan #1 Redux VI* (2017) deserves a detailed phenomenological description, as it is exemplary for demonstrating this curious interweaving of filmic formats, shifting his use of concrete metaphor to execute his decolonial critique.

Tahimik starts with a fictional scene of Enrique (played by Tahimik), staged in the sixteenth century, somewhere mid-journey on a vessel carrying Magellan around the globe.⁶⁴⁾ Enrique prepares a bath for his master Magellan; this was one of Enrique's main tasks for his master, Tahimik's voice-over explains. Addressing Magellan (who remains off-screen until the end of the scene), Enrique pours water into a bath, wondering why "Europeans have to use hot water" for a bath.⁶⁵⁾ Just as in *Perfumed Nightmare*, these early images of Enrique are underexposed, grainy 16mm celluloid, clearly filmed in the 1980s;

62) Olaf Müller, "Lost Horizons," *Film Comment*, May–June 2015, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/berlinale-2015-coverage/>.

63) Few commentators devote much attention to this film, let alone to this multiformat aspect of *Balikbayan #1*. For instance, Pavsek, *The Utopia of Film*, 121–122, but briefly analyses *Balikbayan #1* in the context of his more detailed reading of *Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow*; and Campos ("Portrait," 202) shows how *Balikbayan #1* is incorporated in Tahimik's short mid-career diary film, *Celebrating the Year 2021, Today (1995)*.

64) My description is based on the *Redux VI* version (2017), 52'00"–54'06".

65) *Balikbayan #1 Redux VI*, 52'25".

again, a simple camera set-up, this time consisting of only two medium shots, with sound (Tahimik's voice-over sharing Enrique's thoughts; diegetic sounds of splashing water) seemingly added in postproduction. The instant when, in the fiction version, the historical Enrique takes off his *bahag* [traditional loincloth] to furtively try the hot bath, rather than showing him step into the bath, the next shot jolts into a present-day bathroom — a significant aesthetic shock. Suddenly, the flat digital film image depicts, for two seconds, a shaky, handheld close-up, showing a semi-transparent plastic shower curtain, accompanied by a change in sound quality. Despite peculiarly quick cuts back and forth between these two historical locales, temporal layers, and cinematic styles, the elemental connection — especially the sound of lapping water — seamlessly bridges the two settings: as Magellan calls Enrique off-screen on the staged sixteenth century boat, in the twenty-first century bathroom, Tahimik (now as himself) opens the shower curtain to show a naked toddler (his grandson) in a large red water tub.



Fig. 4: Tahimik playing Enrique de Malacca, filling the bath for his master aboard a vessel. Screengrab from *Babikayan #1 Redux VI* (2017). [Image courtesy of dafilms.com.]

— — —

It is worth considering the powerful effect of the clashing tactile qualities of the footage brought together here: the hard, flat, and partially bleached-out colors of the numerical images clash with the saturated yet underexposed depiction of the scenes filmed on gritty 16mm, in the 1980s.⁶⁶⁾ Here, one should consider that, narratively, the fictional, sixteenth-

66) Notice that since this is in the middle of the film, it is not the first time that Tahimik combines divergent footage in the work; indeed, the preceding hour offers many such film-ontological back-and-forths.



Fig. 5: This sequence alternates material filmed in the 1980 (Fig. 4 above) with digital video (here) showing the Mercator map on the shower curtain, with Tahimik's grandson behind the map. Screengrab from *Balikbayan #1 Redux VI* (2017). [Image courtesy of dafilms.com.]

century bathtub scene seems to take place somewhere on a vessel in an unspecified place on the globe — i.e., in flux, in a non-specific place; alternatively, the contemporary bathroom is clearly set in a domestic setting in the Philippines. As I shall show now, this geographical contrast is directly tied up with — and inverts — the film-ontological basis of both these scenes.

Firstly, much like in his earlier films, the indexical quality afforded by 16mm cinematography is undermined by Tahimik's self-reflective, ironic tone. Yet while in *Perfumed Nightmare* the purpose seemed to destabilize the Orientalist discourse, here its purpose seems to highlight the unmistakably staged character of the footage filmed in the 1970s and 1980s; in this case, rather than giving an objective account of history, Tahimik wants to underline that rewriting history is a *narrative practice*. Hence, for *Perfumed Nightmare* it is crucial to anchor the narration in the region, which, as I have argued above, is achieved by capturing contingent elements on film. Inversely, in *Balikbayan #1*, the indeterminacy of Magellan's bathing scene is clearly staged with an inflated make-believe sense (as if it occurs somewhere at sea, although it is conceivably filmed closer to home). Secondly, this authorial sense of chronicling is amplified by the juxtaposition of the modern bathroom scene. Compared to the staged historical scenes in the older footage, instead a surprising aura of "presentification" pervades the home-movie quality of the present-day footage.⁶⁷⁾ Despite (film-ontologically) challenging Kracauer's insistence on the photochemical in-

67) Cf. Lourdes Esqueda Verano, "Home Movies as Reliquaries of Memory: A Phenomenological Perspective," *Film-Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2024), 350–374.

scription of matter, the shaky, home-made quality of the digital images lends an authentic quality to the contemporary scenes; the fact that they appear to be filmed in the intimacy of the Baguio family home affords them further intimacy.⁶⁸⁾ In fact, Schonig's scrutiny of contingent incidentals' relation to cinematic ontology (considered above) is again insightful, for he has also commented on the oft-expressed contempt for digital cinematic materiality.⁶⁹⁾ He argues that even when elements' unplanned movements are captured by digital film — to take my example the splashing water in Tahimik's present-day scenes — motion is still “inscribed” onto the (numerical) image, which is what I have categorized above (in accord with realist film theory) as the film's indexical quality.⁷⁰⁾ In short, the fact that the two geographically remote settings are filmed in essentially different filmic matter is powerfully eclipsed by the phenomenological impact of the continuity of the contingent element of water. Upon reflection, even the angles of the two shots in fact mirror each other: both subjects are filmed from a high angle; and, despite their dissimilar film-ontological bases, the sound of splashing water in both bathrooms provides further continuity between the two realms.

In other words, the two scenes — including the diegetic four hundred years of history between them — are conceptually bridged by the material means of *water*, a fundamentally dynamic medium providing a continuous flow to these scenes. In line with my interpretation of Tahimik's concrete metaphor of the *BRIDGE* metaphor in *Perfumed Nightmare*, again elemental matter grounds the various domains. As spectators, we conceptually link the fictional-historical chronicle of Enrique's circumnavigation (somewhere on the globe) to Tahimik's domestic scenes of his grandson, at home in the Philippines. Yet simultaneously, we map the source domain of these combined, yet diverse historical locales *onto* the abstract level — Tahimik's ultimate target domain — of decolonial critique. This is evidenced by the continuation of the scene where we left it.

The scene continues with Tahimik lingering a bit longer in the present-day bathroom. He addresses (as himself) the boy, referring to the plastic ball he plays with, a toy-sized Earth. “Oh, yes, the Globe is in the Pacific Ocean, I see,” Tahimik says in a pedagogic tone.⁷¹⁾ “No jet planes back then [...]” he says, as he slowly closes the shower curtain, which now reveals a Mercator map of the world, “[...] then they cross [sic] the Atlantic Ocean [...],” zooming in to the southern tip of South America, showing Terra del Fuego, “[...] finding the Strait of Magellan, then traversing the Pacific Ocean, finally arriving at Limasawa Island [i.e., in the Philippines].”⁷²⁾ The depiction of the shower curtain's Mercator map — incidentally itself a colonial product, like the Balian bridge in *Perfumed Nightmare*

68) This line of thought is inspired by Vivian Sobchack's meditation on Jean-Pierre Meunier's notion of the *film-souvenir*, the neologism he coined for the home-movie. See Vivian Sobchack, “Me Myself, and I: On the Uncanny in Home Movies,” in *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier: Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, eds. Daniel Fairfax and Julian Hanich (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 204–217.

69) Jordan Schonig, “The Haecceity Effect: On the Aesthetics of Cinephilic Moments,” *Screen* 61, no. 2 (2020).

70) Ibid., 264. I retain “indexicality” for consistency, even though it conflicts with Schonig's charge to depart “from theories grounded in the index” (ibid., 256).

71) *Balikbayan #1 Redux VI*, 53'12”.

72) *Balikbayan #1 Redux VI*, 53'51”.

mare — evokes Jameson's cognitive mapping: it concretely places the global trajectory enacted in Enrique's story of servitude (filmed on celluloid as historical fiction) onto the modern-day footage (filmed digitally, as home-movie) in the Cordillera bathroom. Tahimik's pedagogical purpose is evident: by juxtaposing different historical and ontological layers (while connecting them with the medium of water), he prepares us to rhetorically interrogate the historical chronicle from the place of his domestic situatedness. The return to grainy celluloid completes the loop: when Tahimik asks whether his grandson is done with his bath, the next shot — in granular 16mm — reveals the fictional Magellan stepping out of the bathtub.

Tahimik's use of elemental matter uniquely weaves together these film-ontologically distinct scenes. His historic-fictional and autobiographical characters are separated by a couple of centuries and perhaps by half a globe, and filmed on dissimilar formats, yet in this cut the medium of water connects them: from Enrique preparing Magellan's bath aboard a ship, diegetically somewhere at sea, to Tahimik's bathing his grandson in Baguio, the vital presence of water carries the colonial context into his intimately domestic setting. This deceptively simple bathtub scene in *Balikbayan #1* exemplifies the structure of concrete metaphors: the sensory grounding of abstract, conceptual meaning — in Tahimik's case, decolonial critique. This critique is amplified in Tahimik's depiction of the map (both on the shower curtain and in the globe the toddler is toying with) to literally place this story onto the world — while remaining firmly placed in the domestic scene in the Malay Archipelago.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have traced how concrete metaphors operate across Tahimik's five-decade-long career. In *Perfumed Nightmare*, he deploys playful yet precisely calibrated metaphors to deliver cultural critique. My close reading of the bridge metaphor shows how, even as Tahimik's conceptual structure persistently gestures elsewhere (away from the rural Philippines, beyond Manila), his audiovisual style anchors the abstraction in rural Luzon: contingent elements captured on 16mm cinematography (the stone bridge over the river with tropical foliage at the background) root the metaphor in the Malay Archipelago of Southeast Asia.

My notion of concrete metaphor builds on multimodal extensions of conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), which illuminates the dynamic tension between, (a) depicted source domain (a bridge, jeepney, and ethnographic insertions) in the Philippines and, (b) the inferred target domains (i.e., global decolonial critique). Yet CMT's emphasis on universal cognitive structures cannot account for what proves central to Tahimik's filmmaking practice: the concrete situatedness of meaning. His cultural critique emerges from the thrice-colonized Philippines; and as his career develops, Tahimik's geographic concern becomes increasingly explicit: from the mid-1980s onward, his films turn decisively toward the Ifugao province and culture. Shifting away from his strategic undermining of East-West dialectic (as characterized by *Perfumed Nightmare*), his later work clearly evokes global cultural critique while being explicitly located at the periphery of the Philippines.

Crucially, the combination of different film formats complicates his use of concrete metaphors. Whereas earlier work like *Perfumed Nightmare* relies on the indexical presence of 16mm film to anchor metaphor in place, later work such as *Balikbayan #1* inverts this logic. Here 16mm footage filmed in the 1980s stages historical placelessness, while present-day material shot on digital devices amplifies the situatedness of Tahimik's discourse. *Balikbayan #1* exemplifies how in juxtaposing digital and celluloid footage, accumulated over several decades, the use of concrete metaphor as decolonial critique is inverted: while 16mm footage filmed in the 1980s stages historical placelessness, in the present-day material the situatedness of Tahimik's discourse is instead amplified by its being filmed on digital devices. This allows Tahimik's decolonial critique to operate on the global map while remaining rooted in the backwaters of northern Luzon.

Hence, the decolonial critique remains consistent throughout; what changes is his tactical deployment of the concrete metaphor, with the film ontology playing an inverted role in the later juxtapositions. While the physical reality of the photographic image anchored the bridge metaphor of *Perfumed Nightmare* in its region, in *Balikbayan #1* the indexicality of the photographic is purposefully undermined by the digital footage of the contemporary material. The critique persists: the concrete metaphor evolves without relinquishing its elemental matter.

Bibliography

Boldero, Alison R. "Rituals of Remaindered Life in the Films of Kidlat Tahimik" (Master's Thesis, Graduate Faculty Liberal Studies, The City University of New York, 2019).

Bouchard, Danielle. "The Limits of the Anthropocene: Anticolonial Humanity in Kidlat Tahimik's *Mababangong Bangungot* [Perfumed Nightmare] and Souleymane's Cissé's *Yeelen*," *Interventions* 24, no. 7 (2022), 1161–1176.

Campos, Patrick F. "Kidlat Tahimik and the Determination of a Native Filmmaker," *Kritika Kultura*, no. 25 (2015), 46–81.

Carroll, Noël. "A Note on Film Metaphor," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 212–223.

Coëgnarts, Maarten. "Analyzing Metaphor in Film: Some Conceptual Challenges," in *Current Approaches to Metaphor Analysis in Discourse*, ed. Ignasi Ferrando i Navarro (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2019), 295–320.

David, Joel. *Wages of Cinema: Film in Philippine Perspective* (Diliman, Quezon City: University of Philippines Press, 1998).

Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (1978), 31–47.

de Roo, Ludo. "The Elements: Threshold Concept, Medium, Metaphor," *Genealogy of the Posthuman*, eds. Stefan Herbrechter, Ivan Callus, and Manuela Rossini, March 18, 2025, accessed March 2025, <https://criticalposthumanism.net/the-elements-threshold-concept-medium-metaphor/>.

Dixon, Deborah, and Leo Zonn. "Confronting the Geopolitical Aesthetic: Fredric Jameson, *The Perfumed Nightmare* and the Perilous Place of Third Cinema," *Geopolitics* 10, no. 2 (2005), 290–315.

Esqueda Verano, Lourdes. "Home Movies as Reliquaries of Memory: A Phenomenological Perspective," *Film-Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2024), 350–374.

Fahlenbach, Kathrin. "Audiovisual Metaphors as Embodied: Narratives in Moving Images," in *Embodied Metaphors in Film, Television, and Video Games: Cognitive Approaches*, ed. Kathrin Fahlenbach (New York: Routledge, 2016), 33–50.

Fahlenbach, Kathrin, ed. *Embodied Metaphors in Film, Television, and Video Games: Cognitive Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

Fairbanks, Charles. "Great Directors: Tahimik, Kidlat," *Senses of Cinema*, January 2022, accessed May 25, 2025, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2022/great-directors/tahimik-kidlat/>.

Forceville, Charles. "Metaphor: A Key Instrument to Guide Perspective in Moving Images," *In Media Res (MediaCommons)*, October 6, 2025, accessed October 10, 2025, <https://mediacommmons.org/imr/content/metaphor-key-instrument-guide-perspective-moving-images>.

Forceville, Charles. "Non-Verbal and Multimodal Metaphor in a Cognitivist Framework: Agendas for Research," in *Cognitive Linguistics: Current Applications and Future Perspectives*, eds. Gitte Kristiansen, Michel Achard, René Dirven, and Francisco Ruiz (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006), 372–402.

Forceville, Charles. "The Journey Metaphor and the Source-Path-Goal Schema in Agnès Varda's Autobiographical Gleaning Documentaries," in *Beyond Cognitive Metaphor Theory*, ed. Monika Fludernik (London: Routledge, 2011), 281–297.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

Johnson, Mark. *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Kövecses, Zoltán. *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Kövecses, Zoltan. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 8 (1980), 453–486.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago University Press, 2003).

Müller, Cornelia, and Hermann Kappelhoff, *Cinematic Metaphor: Experience, Affectivity, Temporality* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2018).

Müller, Olaf. "Lost Horizons," *Film Comment*, May–June 2015, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/berlinale-2015-coverage/>.

Pavsek, Christopher. *The Utopia of Film: Cinema and Its Futures in Godard, Kluge, and Tahimik* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

Reinerth, Maike Sarah. "Metaphors of the Mind in Film: A Cognitive-Cultural Perspective," in *Embodied Metaphors in Film, Television, and Video Games: Cognitive Approaches*, ed. Kathrin Fahlenbach (New York: Routledge, 2016), 218–233.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark J. Wallace (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

Robertson, Roland. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in *Global Modernities*, eds. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 25–44.

Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

Schonig, Jordan. "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI," *Discourse* 40, no. 1 (2018), 30–61.

Schonig, Jordan. "The Haecceity Effect: On the Aesthetics of Cinephiliac Moments," *Screen* 61, no. 2 (2020), 255–271.

Small, Christopher. "'That's Thirty Years of Footage I've Accumulated': Kidlat Tahimik on *Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment* and His Pioneering Career in the Philippines," *Filmmaker Magazine*, April 16, 2019, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107382-thats-thirty-years-of-footage-ive-accumulated-kidlat-tahimik-on-balikbayan-1-memories-of-overdevelopment-and-his-pioneering-career-in-the-philippines/>.

Sobchack, Vivien. "Me Myself, and I: On the Uncanny in Home Movies," in *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier: Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, eds. Daniel Fairfax and Julian Hanich (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 204–217.

Suarez, Harrod. "Among the Sensuous: Listening to Film, Listening to the Philippines," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2011), 67–84.

Sullivan, Daniel. "Kracauer and Tarkovsky's Cinema of Redemptive Estrangement," *Film-Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2025), 46–71.

Tahimik, Kidlat. "Cups-of-Gas Filmmaking vs. Full Tank-Cum-Credit Card Filmmaking" [sic], *Discourse* 11, no. 2 (1989), 80–86.

Tolentino, Roland B. "Jameson and Tahimik," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 44, no. 1 (1996), 113–125.

Tolentino, Roland B. "Subjectivity and Nation in Filipino Autobiographical Documentaries," in *National/Transnational: Subject Formation, Media, and Cultural Politics in and on the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001), 112–124.

Filmography

Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment Redux III (Kidlat Tahimik, 2015)

Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment Redux VI (Kidlat Tahimik, 2017)

Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment, Redux VII (Kidlat Tahimik, 2023)

Banal Kahoy (Holy Wood) (Kidlat Tahimik, 2002)

Celebrating the Year 2021, Today (Kidlat Tahimik, 1995)

Japanese Summers of a Filipino Fundoshi (Kidlat Tahimik, 1996)

Life of Pi (Ang Lee, 2012)

Magellan [Magalhães] (Lav Diaz, 2025)

Memories of Overdevelopment (Kidlat Tahimik, 1984)

Perfumed Nightmare (Mababangong Bangungot; Kidlat Tahimik, 1979)

Some More Rice (Kidlat Tahimik, 2005)

Why is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow aka I am Furious ... Yellow? (Bakit Dilaw ang Gitna ng Bahnghari?; Kidlat Tahimik, 1994)

Biography

Ludo de Roo obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Macquarie University, Sydney with a dissertation on film-philosophy. His research investigates elemental imagination in film, combining phenomenological film-philosophy and ecocinema theory. Current projects incorporate insights from environmental humanities and comparative philosophy. For *Film-Philosophy*, he has co-edited a dossier on Heideggerian film-philosophy, with other work appearing in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* and *Projections*.

Email: ludo-beau.de-roo@mq.edu.au