

Contestable Nation-Space: Cinema, Cultural Politics, and Transnationalism in the Marcos-Brocka Philippines

Rolando B. Tolentino. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014. Pp. 267+xii. ISBN 10: 9715427359; ISBN 13: 978-9715427357.

Reviewed by Joel David, Inha University

E-mail <joeldavid@inha.ac.kr>

doi:10.1017/S1479591416000267

In the final chapter of *Contestable Nation-Space* (hereafter *CNS*), Rolando B. Tolentino's evaluation of the cinema of Lino Brocka vis-à-vis the dictatorship of Ferdinand E. Marcos, the author mentions the limitations in current theories of national cinema, endeavoring to provide a more useful framework by tweaking Aijaz Ahmad's 1960s-based revolutionary orientation and Pathar Patterjee's anticolonial and antistructuralist reconceptualizations (198-200). This attempt turns out to be late in the game, inasmuch as the standard expectation in an intensive study is that the framework would be stated in the beginning, even in rudimentary form and perfunctory manner, and refined as the study progresses. The book, on the other hand, relies on readers sufficiently acquainted with the issues it raises and capable of filling in the missing elements – as befits a study of the creative processes of a transnational, authoritarian system on the one hand, and the artist who spent the bulk of his energy in exposing and opposing its machinations on the other. (*CNS* contains six chapters, or eight if we include introduction and conclusion; the aforementioned six comprise, in chronological order: Articulations of Nation-Space; Working Concepts; Cityscape; Postnational Family/Postfamilial Nation; Mattering National Bodies and Sexualities; and [Third] Worlding Nation/Cinema, where the author discusses his book's limitations.)

In his conclusion, Tolentino summarizes the situation of the Philippines' national cinema, drawing lessons from the preceding chapters and providing recommendations for its betterment. This is where the instabilities that beset *CNS* reach their tipping point. For while relying on an intensive cultural-studies approach to the material, Tolentino had disavowed auteurism (the reliance on acknowledging the director's artistic primacy in film practice) (77-79), notwithstanding the entire book's focus on a singular filmmaker, inclusive of the implications of pertinent details of Brocka's social and psychological biographies. Since the book advanced no other alternative to the author-function, we can only read *CNS* as one more of those "great-men" confrontations that old-line histories, those of the Philippines included, are already replete with.

There are even more disturbing consequences in Tolentino's rejection of auteurism, aside from the fact that it leaves the cultural-studies methods suspended in the book's seemingly idiomatic conceits rather than rooted in Brocka's (and his films') manifold quirks and contradictions. *CNS* was a product of Tolentino's film studies in the US, and was published during his term as mass-communication dean at the national university and as concurrent chair of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino [Filipino Film Critics Circle]. The latter group has undergone increasing attacks from independent critics, including former MPP members, for its near-exclusive reliance on its annual award-giving ceremony as its primary means of validation. (Personal disclosure: I have been referenced by the group, including Tolentino

[2016], by way of reprimanding a critique of the MPP that I had published in 2013 in *The Manila Review*.) As it is, Tolentino already happens to be the most highly qualified member of the circle and the most capable in terms of contemporary film discourse.

Tolentino's refusal in *CNS* to consider auteurist methods could be ascribed to a corrective attempt to temper the MPP's proclivities, if one were to be generous in finding a motive. However, the study as a whole suffers immeasurably as a result. Tolentino revels in provocative cultural studies-inspired premises that turn out to be problematic. Cover-to-cover instances in the book that demonstrate this would be: in the introduction, comparing the digital-independent cinema trend to the 1980s shawarma fad in Manila (14), necessarily ignoring the fact that local shawarma, unlike Pinoy digital films, have never been exported to the West; in the first chapter, claiming that Brocka engaged in the "poverty of aesthetics [of Third cinema]...through dialogues with *cinéma vérité*, documentary, or even dramaturgy" (42) while failing to mention (or probably being unaware) that this was in fact the peak achievement of Ishmael Bernal, Brocka's friendly rival; in the second chapter, asserting that insularity defines Philippine films' libidinal economy (53) despite most other national cinemas sharing this quality, but with Tolentino problematically qualifying that this aligns the Philippines with the cinemas of Japan, China, and India; in the third chapter, imposing the concept of "capital infrastructuring" onto Brocka's city film *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [*Manila: In the Talons of Light*] (1975) (98), even though such a phenomenon could presumably abide with or without any film-text serving as confirmation; in the fourth chapter, suggesting incest as a means of studying Brocka's small-town film-texts (127), using Ferdinand's cronies and Imelda's Blue Ladies as equivalent samples and overlooking the relevant psychoanalytic debates of such anticolonial theorists as Frantz Fanon and Dominique-Octave Mannoni; and in the fifth chapter, deploying cultural studies "body discourse" to evaluate Brocka movies that deal with male and female sex work, still without the close textual readings that the approach calls for. (The sixth chapter and the conclusion deal with study limitations, as I mentioned in the beginning of this review.)

It bears pointing out that when Tolentino discusses Philippine political economy, he proceeds with a confidence that betokens deep interest in and preparation for the subject. When he forthwith moves onto pop-culture territory, such confidence transmutes into an impatience for the material (which, after all, is regarded by orthodox Marxists as less vital to economic determinism). Truth be told, one could catalogue the book's errors of fact and perception and come up with a lengthy additional chapter of corrections. From one chapter alone (the fifth, titled Mattering National Bodies and Sexualities), any local pop-culture specialist could already spot the following: the use of *bomba* [bomb] as a generic term for local sex films (168), when in practice it refers to only the very first (occasionally hard-core) trend (he also misses the opportunity to interpret the trend's marginalizing use of Western-looking types as evidence that the mass audience of the pre-martial law period insisted, for the first and only moment in local history, on movie stars who resembled them rather than their colonizers); the allegation that "Luz Valdez" as proper speak (the practice of using similar-sounding names to substitute for common words, in this case "lose") arose from the actress's popularity as villainess (183), when in fact Valdez was launched with and maintained a wholesome image, even rejecting the title role in Richard Quine's *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) when she found out that she had to kiss William Holden onscreen (Protacio 2014); the avowal that the local slang word *shoke* [gay] was a portmanteau of

“*shota ay kelot*” [his beau’s a man] (184), when the latter slang expression was of more recent origin and (as reliable internet and older living sources will confirm) *shoke* itself was derived from a corruption of *shokoy* [merman].

Perhaps most appalling of all is Tolentino’s contention that the term “fighting fish” to mean Filipino pornographic movies came from the acronym MIFF, with people supposedly replacing the last two words of the early-1980s’ Manila International Film Festival with the euphemism for the doubled-F word (171); a Google search turns up a declassified “Memorandum for the Commissioner of Customs,” ascribed to CIA operative Edward G. Lansdale and dated 29 October 1956, on the subject of “Smuggling of pornographic films (which are copied in the Philippines),” with the first description of fact stating: “An order of more copies of pornographic films (known in the message as fighting Fish [*sic*] film), has been received from Saigon from an American USIS employee” (Harper 2013). More recently but still a decade before the first MIFF, at the height of the hard-core bomba trend, Brocka himself responded to an interview query regarding the Board of Censors thus: “It should be abolished.... Go downtown and you will see, *umaatikabong ganyanan*, FF *na* [it’s nothing but sex, FF already]” (Lo 211).

Tolentino’s misimpressions of the films he rounded up for his study evince certain lacks that auteurism, for all its excesses, would have tempered: he would have had to defer generalizing until he had seen all available Brocka films as well as the large volume of movies that either influenced him or had been influenced by him; as already mentioned, he would have had to anchor his findings in the formal properties of the specific Brocka texts that he opted to focus on; and (as mentioned in passing) he would have had to dwell more intently on the manner in which Brocka’s life, as the country’s most politicized and impassioned filmmaker, intertwined with his cinematic output. The flaw could be as minor as his description of Mel Chionglo’s *Sibak: Midnight Dancers* [*Rentboys: Midnight Dancers*] (1994), intended as a sequel to Brocka’s *Macho Dancer* (1988), as another would-have-been small-town narrative (137) in the manner of Brocka’s *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* [*Weighed but Found Wanting*] (1974) and *Miguelito: Batang Rebelde* [*Miguelito: Rebel Child*] (1985), discussed in the same chapter; as it turns out, the plot of *Sibak* is set entirely in Manila, with the central family depicted as migrants from Cebu – which, though located on a far-flung island, is the second biggest metropolitan center in the country.

Tolentino’s difficulties become more profound when he tackles the two early-career projects that enabled Brocka to become, deservedly or not, an icon of independent production among several current digital filmmakers: the epic small-town and city movies produced in 1974 and 1975 respectively by the production companies he and similarly minded friends set up after he bolted from what he described as an oppressive exclusive contract with Lea Productions. In this instance Tolentino regurgitates standard local and Western conventional-left wisdom about the director as (aptly for a Catholicized country) a messianic rebel, which he modifies in *CNS* by effectively positioning Brocka as David against Marcos’s Goliath-like monstrosity. In truth, Brocka may have been more of a Saul of Tarsus, whose first mortal adversary was himself: he had started out as a reactionary oppressor, forbidding queer behavior (Velasco 1993, 31) and

even conducting an anti-Communist witch hunt at the Philippine Educational Theater Association (Velasco 36), where he became its virtual custodian and primary fund-raiser after its founder, Cecile Guidote-Alvarez, left the Philippines as a US-based anti-Marcos activist-in-exile.

Hence when Tolentino mentions that “Brocka was already making direct assaults” on the Marcos regime during the mid-1970s, he overrides this crucial bit of information formerly known only to inner-left culture circles. But the films themselves reveal enough about the director’s then-conventionalist outlook, and account for his two-year consecutive sweep of the establishment-controlled Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences awards. Although Tolentino describes *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (1974) as “antithetical to Marcos’s idealized society,” the film can be credibly read as a parable on the need to jettison a morally corrupt traditional order in favor of a more enlightened, virile, and better-looking reformer, the same way that Marcos had envisioned his New Society as a rectification of the basic errors of what he had chastised as the Philippines’s “sick society.” In *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975), the standard Brocka angry young man follows a more progressive turn in finding himself and his childhood sweetheart victimized by big-city exploiters. Tolentino rightfully deplores the film’s use of a small-time Chinese merchant as a means of signifying foreign domination of the economy – a telling detail that Brocka continued to rationalize (Sotto 1993, 224) and that was carried over from the source novel of Edgardo Reyes (1966-67).

In the instance of Reyes and his coterie’s denunciation of a Brocka-concocted sequence where the main character gets sidetracked into the demimonde of male prostitution, Tolentino maintains that, “contrary to the novelist’s open criticism of the film’s ‘*pagbabakla sa storya*’ (making gay the story), Brocka differentiates the subculture from the feudal production by laying bare its transformative qualities – [wherein] queerness is parodic, performative, portable, transportable, and provides access to nodes toward a transgressive subculture” (93). Unfortunately, Brocka’s own defense affirms his homophobic intent: “When Julio finally meets Ligaya and sleeps with her in a motel room, he understands her travails thanks to his homosexual experience.... The two know what it means to be dirtied” (Sotto 225). Two matters contribute to Tolentino’s difficulties with this specific film-text, both of them proceeding from the probability that he may not have been able to watch (or remember) the movie’s original-release screening in July 1975. First, the rentboy sequence actually ran for several times longer than it does in all current existing versions, definitely (and ironically, considering Reyes et al.’s complaints) ending on an anti-queer note, with the main character expressing disgust toward his besotted hustler-mentor and walking out on the entire prostitution scene (David 2012, 29); the deletion of the now possibly lost segments may have been part of the settlement proffered by Brocka and the other producers in response to the lawsuit filed by Reyes against the film adaptation. Second, although the film poster was labeled “Manille ’75” during its 1982 Paris screening, the original print opened with a title card (part of the opening credits) that said “1970” – a detail that was noted in most of the major reviews of the time (see reprints of Hernando 1983, 212; and Lumbera 1997, 200); by this means, Brocka had exempted the martial-law regime (which began in 1972) from the movie’s powerful social critique.

Despite his defensive posturing, Brocka remained mindful of critical responses centered on his two early masterpieces, and proceeded to correct the ideological shortcomings in these films and, subsequently, in his activism. The year after *Maynila*, he made *Insiang*, which featured strong women characters surviving in the slums of the city (unlike the peripheral role of women in *Tinimbang Ka* and the helpless victim in *Maynila*); in 1979, he featured a complex and sympathetic lumpen-proletariat character in *Jaguar* (a departure from the murderous sidewalk mob that attacks the main character in *Maynila*); in 1985, he positioned a strong-willed and fearless mother out to reclaim her son from a corrupt mayor in *Miguelito* (in contrast with the mad woman still yearning for her cruel lover in *Tinimbang Ka*); in 1990, the year before he died, he depicted an educated and progressive Chinese family in *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak* [*Dirty Affair*]. His major crack at a queer-positive text, 1988's *Macho Dancer*, was less successful than these other attempts; its gainful US distribution, however, encouraged him to plan a series of similarly themed projects that had to be finished by others after the fatal accident that ended his life and career. After the September 1983 assassination of Senator Benigno S. Aquino Jr., he also began to take an active hand in the anti-dictatorship movement and wound up repudiating the government that replaced it, for being insufficiently pro-poor (Velasco 1993, 37). His most overtly political films, *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* [*My Country: Clutching a Blade*] (1985) and *Orapronobis* [*Fight for Us*] (1988), were produced at this time and would have been followed, had he survived, by increasingly ambitious,

IJAS 14.1: 115.

confrontational, and formally demanding works. A recognition of Brocka's fullest measure could have been a cherishable aspect of any book that purported to tackle his films and their significances; unfortunately, *CNS* will not be such a volume.

References

- David, Joel. 2012. "Thinking Straight: Queer Imaging in Lino Brocka's *Maynila* (1975)." *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 9.2 (August): 21-40.
- . 2013. "Pinoy Film Criticism: A Lover's Polemic." *The Manila Review* 3 (August): 6-8. <https://amauteurish.com/2018/04/15/book-texts-a-lovers-polemic/>. Accessed 19 July 2016.
- Harper, Lauren. 2013. "FOIASourcing: The Lansdale Collection." *Unredacted: The National Security Archive, Unedited and Uncensored* (6 December). Accessed 20 July 2016. <https://nsarchive.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/foiasourcing-the-lansdale-collection/>.
- Hernando, Mario A (ed.). 1993. *Lino Brocka: The Artist and His Times*. Manila: Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas.
- . 1983. "Maynila: Brocka's Best (A Review of *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*)." In *The Urian Anthology 1970-1979*, ed. Nicanor G. Tiongson, 210-13. Quezon City: Morato. Originally published in *Times Journal* in 1975.

- Lo, Ricardo. 1971. "A, Ewan, Basta Kina Direk Pa rin Ako [I Don't Care, I'm Still for the Director]: An Interview with Lino Brocka." *Graphic* (1 December), rpt. in Hernando, *Lino Brocka* 211-13.
- Lumbera, Bienvenido. 1997. "Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag: A Review." In *Revaluation 1997: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema and Popular Culture*, 200-203. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House. Originally published in *Philippine Daily Express* in 1975.
- Protacio, Romy. 2014. "Luz Valdez: A Product of the Silver Screen's Golden Era." *Asian Journal* (25 July). Accessed 15 July 2016. <http://asianjournalusa.com/luz-valdez-a-product-of-the-silver-screens-golden-era-p13649-157.htm>.
- Reyes, Edgardo. 1966-67. *Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [In the Talons of Light]. *Liwayway* serialization. Rpt. in 1986 by Manila: De La Salle University Press.
- Sotto, Agustin. 1993. "Interview with Lino Brocka on *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*." In Hernando, *Lino Brocka* 223-26.
- Tolentino, Rolando B. 2016. "Hinahanap, Kaya Nawawala" [Searched For, Therefore Missing]. Contribution to "A Round Table Discussion on Poetics and Practice of Film Criticism in the Philippines." Ed. Patrick F. Campos. *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 13.1 (February): 178-84.
- Velasco, Johven. 1993. "Brocka's Theater: Something from the Heart." In Hernando, *Lino Brocka* 23-37.