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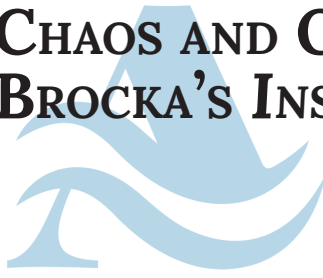
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CHAOS AND ORDER IN LINO BROCKA'S *INSIANG* (1976)



Josen Masangkay Diaz

ABSTRACT. The Marcos regime's seizure of culture® and the first couple's promulgation of "truth, beauty, and goodness" as guiding cultural principles® was more than an act of political repression. It was the purposeful and incisive reimagining of Filipino subjectivity for the global capitalist paradigms of the cold war order. This essay analyzes Lino Brocka's 1976 film *Insiang* as a visualization of authoritarian violence that acknowledges the insidiousness of Marcosian cultural reforms and their adamant demand to affect and seize Filipino sensibilities. The film illustrates the ways that Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos's mandates for morality, beauty, and humanity were impossible within the impoverished conditions of Manila's urbanity. More importantly, I argue that the film disrupts the coherency of the Marcoses' renditions of Filipino subjectivity by making a case for lifemaking practices bred and cultivated by chaos itself.

In the 1976 film, *Insiang*, Philippine filmmaker Lino Brocka's titular character explains to her mother as she visits her in a prison cell after she has brutally stabbed her mother's lover and her own rapist: "I wanted you to lose all reason. I wanted you to kill him." In his 1973 treatise on martial law, *Notes on the New Society of the Philippines*, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos attempted to galvanize the private citizen by warning that "[h]is indifference to his civil responsibility will, under martial law conditions, lead to the alternative that martial law intended to prevent: chaos."¹

Marcos's statement illustrates the logic that he used to mobilize the national citizenry around his dictatorship—an authoritarian state would be the only safeguard against the chaos and "bloody revolution" proposed by the political left's most radical factions. Brocka's *Insiang*, on the other hand, seems to embody the very threat that Marcos described to his readers: a disorder that ultimately leads to bloodshed. For Marcos, the work of crafting a narrative of providential

1. Ferdinand Marcos, *Notes on the New Society of the Philippines* (Manila, Philippines: Marcos Foundation, 1973), 99-100.

instruction, political fate, and dictatorial order was just as necessary to maintaining a stronghold over the presidency as were the elections that he fixed and the voices of dissent that he silenced. Brocka's story is similarly outlined with the kind of melodramatics so familiar to Filipino audiences accustomed to absorbing aesthetics that might adequately illustrate the theatrics of everyday life. Presented together, *Insiang* responds to Marcos's cautionary statements, and it is worth pursuing where and how Marcos's and Brocka's visions of chaos and disorder converge and diverge.

Marcos's use of chaos above refers to the threats of communist and leftist insurgency that he warned would destroy the Philippine democratic republic. His declaration of martial law would be a means to an end: it would not only protect the republic from such threats but would also see his New Society into fruition. The New Society, or Bagong Lipunan, was the logical end of a series of developmental reforms that would align the country with the demands of global modernization. Marcos not only articulated chaos as a threat to civil life but also promoted the active reorganization of that life to quell those threats. His mandates criminalized everything from youth protest to the offensive sight and smell of the urban poor. Meanwhile, First Lady Imelda Marcos, as the Governor of Metro Manila, the Minister of Human Settlements, and the Patroness of the Arts, orchestrated the country's cultural reforms. Touting her deep sense of "compassion," she remained fixated on the Filipino soul as the avenue through which the republic would be saved. Her programs focused upon the refinement of Filipinos' sense of truth, beauty, and goodness.

I turn to the Marcoses' cultural projects as avenues for analyzing some of the specificity of authoritarian violence in the Philippines. Situating Marcosian politics within the larger arena of the Cold War, the development of an increasingly globalized and militarized world order, and the progression of late capitalism means understanding that the Marcoses' seizure of culture was more than an act of political repression. It articulated and presented Filipino subjectivity as a medium of third world (re)production. The Marcoses centered Filipino subjectivity as the object of national reform. In so doing, they emphasized the development of individual will and duty through sentimentalist conceptualizations of selfhood rooted in a universal humanity to demonstrate the strength of the Philippine nation in a globalized world. By focusing on Filipino subjectivity as the object of reform, the Marcoses named what was at stake in the redevelopment of the republic and lodged a campaign of the most insidious violence: the power to dictate how Filipinos understood themselves and of what they believed they were capable.

Brocka released *Insiang* during what is often nostalgically referred to as the golden age of Philippine cinema, which lasted from 1975 to 1984.² Emerging during the authoritarian period, these films

2. Patrick F. Campos, "The Intersection of Philippine and Global Film Cultures in the

felt the heavy hand of dictatorial censorship and also operated as a significant vehicle of critique against the regime. The period witnessed the rise of several acclaimed filmmakers and artists, including Lino Brocka. Brocka's body of work illustrates the contradictory elements that comprised the cinematic culture of the Marcos era. While Brocka is largely understood as one of the Marcoses' most stringent critics, lodging scathing evaluations of the Marcos administration's inability to enact effective and lasting change against the material conditions that structured Filipino lives, his films were also popularly received in the Philippines throughout the martial law period and garnered international acclaim when Cannes selected *Insiang* as part of its film festival (this recognition coincided with the first lady's aspirations to cultivate a global Filipino culture). In his discussion of Brocka's place within the larger history of new wave and new nationalist cinema that emerged throughout the world from the 1930s into the 1960s, Patrick F. Campos incisively explains that it was "the political milieu in the Philippines and the discrepancy between Imelda Marcos's 'spiritual' [...] and 'global' [...] 'City of Man' and the city-images depicted on film that situates and differentiates Brocka from his precursors in world cinema."³ Brocka's urban-realist films did not simply follow the trajectory of global cinema but also helped to cultivate social realism as an arena upon which to wage political struggle. Campos, citing Rafael Ma. Guerrero, explains that it was Brocka's "dramatic sense" coupled with "his documentary aspiration" that exposed the blatant contradictions of Imelda Marcos's cultural-urban reforms in Metro Manila—a forceful insistence to eliminate urban poverty and political inefficiency in the name of spiritual transformation.

Brocka's realism conceptualizes authoritarian violence as a mandate for political order in ways that affect and seize Filipino subjectivity. When *Insiang* explains to her mother, "I wanted you to lose all reason. I wanted you to kill him," Brocka presents a sharply multifaceted critique. Placed in juxtaposition to the president's insistence that the private citizen plays an important role in the protection of the republic against bloodshed and the first lady's fixation with a kind of universalist moral order, *Insiang*'s confession becomes a deliberate call-to-arms against the president—*himself* the provocateur of bloodshed—and a deliberate attack upon his instruction for order with a demand for chaos itself. Yet, *Insiang*'s statement, in her clear articulation of losing—in fact, ridding one's self of—reason, suggests a dissolution of the good, rational citizen-self who heeds the state's calls for obedience. Given the unyielding political terrain upon which Brocka found himself as a filmmaker throughout the Marcos era, the incisiveness of Brocka's critique of authoritarian violence in *Insiang* lies not only in a condemnation of the president wrapped in a blanket of artistic subtlety. It is an analytic that attempts to tear

New Urban Realist Film," *Plaridel* 8.1 (2011): 1-20, 4.

3. Campos, "The Intersection of Philippine and Global Film Cultures," 6.

loose the potential for chaos to challenge the suffocating rigidity of the liberal freedom that the Marcoses promised in their insistence on civic responsibility, spirituality, and humanity. It illustrates what kinds of things are possible when that chaos is loosened.

Insiang wields tropes of ugliness, deceit, revenge, and utter madness to showcase ideas of collective struggle against racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence enforced by authoritarian, patriarchal power. As the Marcoses sought to define the Filipino as an individualized citizen-subject in contradistinction to the chaos of political disorder, Brocka disrupted the coherency of this subjectivity by making the case for a Filipino social formation bred and cultivated by chaos itself. *Insiang*, with its focus on the devolvement of morality and rationality, upturned the Marcoses' insistence on reinventing the national citizenry and reclaiming the Filipino spirit and soul from the dregs of its debilitating past. By illustrating the ways morality, beauty, and humanity were impossible within the impoverished conditions of Manila's urban slums, the film exposed the methods by which the Marcoses' rhetoric advanced mandates that restricted the lives of Manila's urban poor.

The Filipino Spirit

Throughout the 1970s, Marcos, through his New Society platform, committed his presidential power to modernizing the Philippines by adhering to the dictums of a new world order. His declaration of martial law in 1972 sought to contain the fervor of the seemingly ubiquitous third-world struggles for self-determination occurring all over the globe by transforming the Philippine political order, ruling by extrajudicial force, and maintaining the Philippines' commitment to development and modernization paradigms organized by international governing institutions.⁴ Marcos established a crony capitalist state that remained wed to the perpetuation of global trade and foreign investment: he promoted multinational strongholds over national industries, advanced privatization as an economic principle, and often

4. Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns contextualizes the Filipino American organization *Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino* (KDP aka Union of Democratic Filipinos) and its cultural arm *Sining Bayan* as emerging from a radical rearticulation of the liberal, white subject among specific liberation movements in the United States. Burns writes that the 1960s "witnessed a new phase of racial awareness with political projects such as the Black Power Movement, the American Indian Movement, and *La Huelga* Movement that were not simply identity-based calls for inclusion of the black community, the Native American community, and the migrant worker in the American social fabric. These movements pushed for a radical reimagination of subjectivity that took to task the white, liberal subject as *the* marker of not just who is an American but who is *human*." Burns's discussion here offers a helpful way of conceptualizing the Marcos period in the Philippines within a larger struggle over the limits and possibilities of subjectivity as the locus of colonial and anti-colonial power. *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 83.

remained loyal to the dictates of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. This economic system resulted in the construction of the Philippines' export economy and the practice of extracting and deploying labor especially from the country's most vulnerable populations. Marcos maintained ties with the US military and sanctioned the deployment of Philippine troops to Vietnam in support of US military efforts.⁵

While he promised several policy reforms in the fields of infrastructure, trade, and foreign relations, he concurrently insisted upon the spiritual transformation of the Filipino people, the liberation of the Filipino spirit from the prison of its despondent past. In his 1969 speech to Congress, Marcos instructed that “[t]his transformation is essentially spiritual” and that “[i]t is a prophecy come true.”⁶ Marcos's invocation of spirituality more broadly, and transformation more specifically, activated a longstanding Philippine religious tradition by usurping familiar tropes of sacrifice and renewal—the tenacity to weather the *gulo* or chaos of upheaval—to suggest the continuity between his leadership and the dawn of a new, fated political era that would be better attuned to the Filipino revolutionary spirit.⁷ Yet,

5. Rolando Tolentino explains: “Neocolonialism, the postindependence condition(s) arising from the shift from colonialism to postcolonialism in the era of late capitalism is translated through multinationalism, militarism, and transnationalism. While multinationalism and transnationalism present seemingly divergent patterns of economic development and capital movement, for the purposes of this chapter ‘multinationalism’ refers to the operations occurring in the national spaces, while ‘transnationalism’ refers to those occurring in the international spaces. However, the areas differentiating the two processes inevitably collapse in practice. Both are examples of attempts to master and command space as a means of controlling class struggle. Among the tactics employed by multinationalism and transnationalism are geographical mobility and decentralization, deindustrialization and industrialization, and capital investment and flight.” Tolentino's definition of multinationalism and transnationalism is central to my understanding of neoliberalism. However, I use neoliberalism specifically here to highlight the Philippine state's fixation on the necessity of the liberal, free self to the proper functioning of these political, economic, and social systems. “Bodies, Letters, and Catalogs: Filipinas in Transnational Space,” *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and the Public Sphere*, edited by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Larry E. Smith, and Wimal Dissanayake (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 46.

6. Ferdinand Marcos, *New Filipinism: The Turning Point: State of the Nation Message to the Congress of the Philippines, 27 January 1969* (Manila: Office of the President of the Philippines, Public Information Office, 1969), 2.

7. As Reynaldo Ileto explains that the importance of spiritual and divine light has been important to the legacy of Philippine struggles for independence from colonial Spain and the United States. In *theorizing an awit (or “metrical romance”)* written by Eulogio Julian de Tandiana about the war with Spain, Ileto describes de Tandiana's metaphorical deployment of a storm through the notion of *gulo* or chaos: “The final appearance of the storm/chaos theme is in the treatment of the Apocalypse. *Gulo* is a sign of the second coming of Christ. As the *pasyon* describes it, the earth and even the heavens will turn into *gulo*. The sun will darken, the sky turn bloodred. Stars will flicker and fall to the ground. Wild animals will swarm into the towns. Huge tidal waves will inundate the land, and terrible sounds like that of armies clashing will be heard [...] Other aspects of the *gulo* will be the appearance of traitors and anti-Christ. Those who oppose the anti-Christ will suffer martyrdom. But this *gulo* is also a sign of the

Marcos's usurpation of *gulo* was never only an abstract commentary on the state of the national citizenry. It positioned his administration as a messianic endeavor that could protect the country from all that sought to harm it. His statements were deliberately and carefully crafted *mis-readings* of legacies of Filipino anticolonial resistance. Indeed, at the end of his speech, he explained that “[t]he experience of the past three years, combining a number of small and big breakthroughs in our national life, shows that the central factor for our progress is still the Filipino; that the Filipino transformed means a nation transformed; that the limit of what we can achieve for ourselves are fundamentally a matter of character—a moral and spiritual limitation.”⁸

A year after declaring martial law, Marcos published *Notes on the New Society of the Philippines*, explicitly warning of the dangers that threatened to undermine the Filipino spirit. Justifying the authoritarian state, he condemned the chaos provoked by radical insurgents who threatened the solidity of the nation. He explained that the various factions that seek to inhibit the realization and success of the New Society attempts to wage an unsatisfactory rebellion from below that aims to transfer power from one group of elites to another group of elites. He prescribed a different kind of struggle for the Filipino dilemma. He wrote:

Moral realism requires this ideological basis: the consciousness of the poor permeates them with a profound sense of being oppressed, and not simply because the rich oppress them brazenly but because it is *poverty itself* that oppresses them. To be poor is to be *without*, and therefore, to be *an outsider* in the vibrant and meaningful political, economic, and social life of modern human community. Above all, being poor is being invisible; violence makes them visible [...] Of what good is democracy if it is not for the poor?⁹

The rebellion that Marcos proposed required the temporary enactment of martial law to realize a full-scale transfer of power from the elites to the masses. He suggested that the interiority of the

coming of the Kingdom. Forty days will pass in which men will be given a chance to change their *loób* and share in the coming victory. Storm and chaos thus provide the context in which men come together in Christ.” With vivid imagery, Ileta describes the extent to which the masses envisaged the revolution as a new order that would emerge with the second coming of Christ. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979), 138.

8. Marcos, *New Filipinism*, 116. In many ways, the promise of the Filipino has been the guiding principle behind resistive—and, perhaps, even revolutionary—movements against colonial and authoritarian violence. One must only consider that at the verge of the 1986 People Power Movement and the ousting of the Marcoses that Ninoy Aquino’s sentiment that the “Filipino is worth dying for” became a kind of rallying call that organized the ideological structure of the movement itself and, yet, remained uncertain and malleable at the inception of the new administration.

9. Marcos, *Notes*, 71.

poor—their very comprehension of self—must be the focal point of a transformative politics and the avenue for the reestablishment of political order. He posited that the plight of the masses is characterized not simply by the oppressive forces of the rich but by the inner turmoil precipitated by the depleted consciousness of the poor. The plight of the poor is defined by their forcible exclusion from the “vibrant and meaningful political, economic, and social life of modern human community.” Marcos thus reasoned that his own rebellion necessitated the work of shepherding the poor masses into the “modern human community.” New Society reforms focused upon transforming the majority of Filipinos into a modern human community.

The Marcoses’ Cultural Regime

The regime institutionalized culture as the avenue through which it could provide both the ideological and material instructions for a modern human community of Filipinos. In what is often referred to as one of the Marcoses’ most ostentatious displays of power and wealth, a 1966 presidential decree (P.D. No. 20), ordered the “reclamation” of Manila Bay as the site of the First Lady’s “City of Man” project, which sought to develop numerous national arts and culture centers that celebrated the artistic achievements of the Filipino people. The reclamation of Manila Bay proposed to expand Manila’s land area from “barely 15 square miles to 264 square miles.”¹⁰ The Marcoses’ ability to “reclaim” land from the sea illustrated a mastery over both the unwieldy political and topographical elements that surrounded the administration. It sought to establish order over the disorder of Manila and the inassimilable elements that constituted it. An important part of building the City of Man was the beautification of the unseemliness of Manila’s urban poor. One solution for remedying the ghastly aspects of Manila was the construction of the grandiose Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) complex, which included the establishment of the Theater of Performing Arts (1969), Folk Arts Theater (1974), Manila Film Center (1982), Philippine Plaza Hotel (1976), and the Philippine Center for International Trade and Expositions (PHILCITE) (1976).¹¹ The Annual Meeting of the IMF-World Bank took place at PHILCITE in its inauguration year, signaling Marcos’s commitment to international trade and business. The CCP complex stood as a stark contrast to the desolation of Manila’s poorest slums and a symbol of the power of the regime itself.

Imelda Marcos explained that the CCP would become the “sanctuary of the Filipino soul,” a place where Filipinos could not only take pride in their artistic achievements but also realize a more

10. Gerard Lico, *Edifice Complex: Power, Myth, and Marcos State Architecture* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), 84.

11. Lico, *Edifice Complex*, 99.

definitive sense of their own selves. In her remarks at the formal dedication of the CCP in 1969, she explained:

We are young and struggling to understand ourselves, trying to construct the nobler meaning of our race. Our greatest strength lies in being truly what we are: by nature and by grace, one people; by fortune and by fate, Filipinos. Yet so long as we know not ourselves, we face the dangers that face the very young—a lack of soul, a vagueness of values. It is the purpose of the Center to enrich the minds and spirit of our people and to foster among other people a true understanding of the Filipino self.¹²

In conjuring the solidity of a national and racial identity forged “by nature and grace,” the first lady also indirectly called attention to the instability of that identity. Her statement is simultaneously instructive and cautionary. She points to the cultural work that needs to be accomplished in order to solidify the coherence of that identity.

Marcos intended for the CCP to become the bastion of Philippine modernization; her articulation of danger lies in the risk of remaining tethered to the dregs of a pre-modern past. The past that Marcos invokes here is a “new” past, a solicitous identification of particular elements of a pre-established historical narrative that reconfigures a more appropriate past to which to return. While Marcos encouraged an investigation into and appreciation for a shared past, only certain elements of it would be acceptable. In the construction of the CCP complex, builders paired the *bahay kubo* or nipa hut with classical Greek architecture, and instructors matched the *kulintang* with other instruments from world music in the indigenous or *katutubo*-styled curriculum offered by the Marcoses’ Philippine High School for the Arts.¹³ Marcos’s conceptualization of a Philippine past grounded in this type of Philippine “indigeneity” provided an ahistorical conceptualization of the past as the administration simultaneously dispossessed Indigenous people throughout the country.

When the president, in 1973 in his treatise on martial law, explained that he would make it his central concern to introduce the poor masses to the “modern human community,” the first lady delivered a speech at the groundbreaking of the National Arts Center on Mount Makiling. She argued that “beyond our national identity is our profound human identity. She bestowed onto the CCP the motto “Katotohanan, Kagandahan, Kabaitan” or Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, a philosophy that she borrowed from ancient Greek ideals and one that she would

12. Imelda Marcos, *The Compassionate Society and Other Selected Speeches* (Manila: National Media Production Center, 1976), 19.

13. Pearlie Rose S. Baluyut, *Institutions and Icons of Patronage: Arts and Culture in the Philippines during the Marcos Years, 1965-1986* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2012), 74, 54, 60.

use throughout her political career. According to Marcos, these ideals were intrinsic to modern humanity, and building the CCP upon this moral foundation was a prerequisite for entrenching the CCP within the humanist sphere that Marcos adamantly believed would be critical to the nation's success. *Katotohanan* (truth) suggested a commitment to the nation's past as a way to gain knowledge of its origins and to facilitate the progressive development of the self. *Kagandahan* (beauty) described the purity of the human spirit as inherently connected to an aesthetics of modernization. *Kabaitan* (goodness) articulated a fixation with compassion and reciprocity as motivating forces behind national policy. Officials also incorporated *Katotohanan*, *Kagandahan*, *Kabaitan* into the CCP logo, which depicted three Ks written in *baybayin* script. The *baybayin* "ka" is reiterated three times and connected in a circle to represent the unity of truth, beauty, and goodness. The logo referenced the early flag(s) of the Katipunan revolutionary society, which illustrates three Ks on a red backdrop. The logo articulated the Marcoses' conception of modernity through the fusion of a recognizable Philippine narrative (Katipunan society) and the modern, humanizing Ks of truth, beauty, and goodness. This expression of modernity, however, usurps and reclaims Philippine historical struggle in the name of progress. The logo does not necessarily celebrate the "traditional" more than it obfuscates an anticolonial framework in the advancement of a liberal humanism geared for the global economy.¹⁴

More than the act of rewriting a more easily digestible history, CCP narratives cleared the ground for the cultivation of a Filipinoness more readily capable of seizing the fruits of a modernized future. In her 1975 address to the 30th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Marcos explained that the "new world economic order" called for structural reforms that could only be undertaken with the necessary support from respective national citizenries, "Our appeal therefore must be directed to peoples, to their sense of what is right and fair, including those of an economic nature, cannot be reduced to mere material terms. The solutions to the world's economic problems must have a moral basis."¹⁵ Marcos's philosophy of truth, beauty, and goodness expressed a "return" to the human and self as the basis for

14. Iletto describes a Katipunan manifesto as such: "Bonifacio speaks to the 'light of truth' (*liwanag ng katotohanan*) that will rise [...] This *liwanag*, then, reveals an image of the possibilities of existence that will be realized in the redemptive process, an image of a condition that was lost when the Tagalogs succumbed to the sweet words of Spain [...] This *liwanag*, concluded Bonifacio, is the Katipunan." Whereas Imelda Marcos described *katotohanan* (truth) as an intrinsic quality that is always already present in the Filipino, the Katipunan conceptualization of *katotohanan* is emergent, on the verge, and not yet realized but latent in its imagination of an anticolonial future that can only be realized through collective struggle against the "sweet words of Spain." The Marcoses' usurpation of the history of the Katipunan was not only a diffusion of this emergent energy but a deliberate containment and then pronouncement of what it might be capable of enacting within the prescribed tenets of progressive reform. Iletto, *Pasyon and Revolution*, 88.

15. Marcos, *Compassionate Society*, 97.

economic reform. It was a universalizing philosophy that transformed the very core of the Filipino—a basic sense of morality and sense of self—into currency that could be circulated within the emerging global market.

With the three Ks of *katotohanan*, *kagandahan*, and *kabaitan*, Imelda Marcos created an elaborate veneer of modernization and progress that told the story of a utopian City of Man built on the Manila Bay by the sheer will of the Filipino people. Throughout the martial law period and well into the end of the Marcos regime itself, the idea of truth, beauty, and goodness as interlocking parts developed into an outright and carefully crafted theoretical framework with which the first couple imagined and deployed authoritarian power over the Philippines—a nation so deeply immersed within the neocolonial dictums of foreign investment and militarized governance and so intimately haunted by a genealogy of radical contestation and resistance. The first lady's instruction to “know ourselves” functioned as a search for origins that is itself a troubling endeavor.¹⁶ Truth, beauty, and goodness envisioned the Filipino as the sum and realization of postcolonial aspirations rather than the definitive limits of subjectivity in the new world order.

The Great Filipino Audience and *Insiang*'s Devolvement

Film became an important avenue through which the regime advanced the three Ks of the cultural reform. Bienvenido Lumbera described the period of 1960 to 1975 as a one of “rampant commercialism and artistic decline.” Lumbera attributed this to the rise of independent film companies that capitalized on the “audience-drawing trend[s] of the time,” often allowing the *bakya*, or the unsophisticated, uncultured audience mentality, to dictate the direction of filmmaking. In the early 1960s, the nation's youth, stirred by an emergent national consciousness, began to turn to local films to better connect themselves to the struggles of the masses. A renewed interest in *bomba*, or pornographic, films reflected audiences' rebellion against socially accepted conventions.¹⁷

Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972 placed stringent mandates on the film industry. Nearly a week after he instituted martial law with Proclamation 1081, he issued Letter of Instruction No. 13, which ordered the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (BCMP)¹⁸ to

16. See Michel Foucault's theorization of the concept of origins. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164.

17. Bienvenido Lumbera, “Problems in Philippine Film History,” *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, edited by Rafael Ma Guerrero (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 67-79, 74-9. See also Vicente Rafael's discussion of Philippine film during the Marcos era in *White Love: And Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

18. According to Lumbera, the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures (BCMP) was

enact a set of regulations to direct the content of Philippine cinema.¹⁹ The attachment of Letter of Instruction No. 13²⁰ to Proclamation 1081 illustrates the ways that film culture and its circulation and consumption of ideas were inextricably tied to the enactment of extrajudicial power in the Philippines. In a speech delivered to the Filipino Academy for Motion Arts and Sciences (FAMAS), the first lady explained that “[f]ilm-making is not just an art, it is also a business.”²¹ Cinema under the Marcoses would no longer be confined to the particularities of the *bakya* sensibility but would garner an international audience whose engagement (and returns) could speak to the Marcoses’ global aspirations. In that same FAMAS speech, Imelda Marcos explained that the mission of the film “is to project the authentic image of the Filipino, to transmute into living art his genuine longings and aspirations, his joys—and even his sufferings.”²² Insofar as the first lady surmised that the purpose of cinema is to express the truth of what it means to be Filipino, the president’s mandate that cinema be contained within the “letter and spirit of Proclamation No. 1081” contained Filipino subjectivity through the dictates of the New Society.

Brocka emerged during the martial law period as one of the Philippines’ most talented young filmmakers, re-invigorating Philippine cinema with his supposed “return” to artistry and casual disregard of the trends of the mass market. While Brocka became a vocal critic of the Marcos regime, his films were well-received during the period. This remains a quandary of the period—how films that posed seemingly incisive critiques of the government thrived despite these critiques. Some critics pointedly urge that the regulations of the BCMP made it so that critiques of the presidency were lodged in more subtle ways. José B. Capino importantly notes that “[w]hile the authoritarian state anxiously holds vigil over insurgency, it often lacks the power and imagination to deal with peculiar forms of resistance.”²³

established before Marcos’s presidency and played a significant role in the 1950s, during the time of the Hukbalahap insurgency.

19. See Talitha Espiritu’s discussion of the Philippine film industry under Marcos censorship. *Revisiting the Marcos Regime: Dictatorship, the Media, and the Cultural Politics of Development*. Diss. New York University, 2007 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2007).

20. Letter of Instruction No. 13 ordered the BCMP to ban (1) Films which tend to incite subversion, insurrection or rebellion against the State; (2) Films which tend to undermine the faith and confidence of the people in their government and/or their duly constituted authorities; (3) Films which glorify criminals or condone crimes; (4) Films which serve no other purpose but to satisfy the market for violence and pornography; (5) Films which offend any race or religion; (6) Films which tend to abet the traffic in and use of prohibited drugs; (7) Films contrary to law, public order, morals, good customs, established policies, lawful orders, decrees or edicts; any and all films which in the judgment of the Board are similarly objectionable and contrary to the letter and spirit of Proclamation No. 1081.

21. Marcos, *The Compassionate Society*, 58.

22. Marcos, *The Compassionate Society*, 59.

23. José B. Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama: Lino Brocka’s Cinema Politics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 50.

The skill of filmmakers like Brocka and Ishmael Bernal was often evident in the creative ways with which they could present social and political conditions while also meeting the demands of the BCMP.

In an article that Brocka penned for a 1974 issue of the *Manila Review*, he discussed the “problem” of the *bakya*, a Filipino cinematic taste that craved the “kiss-kiss, bang-bang, zoom-zoom, boo-hoo, song-and-dance flickers” of highly commercialized cinema. He explained the task of the filmmaker:

One must therefore first build his own audience: by gathering experience that is not alien to the majority of Filipinos at a particular time; by compressing and systematizing this experience for them; and by giving back this now crystallized experience to them in films they would enjoy and be moved by and take as their own. It is a slow but continuous process, and one’s work gets better and becomes more challenging each time. Somerset Maugham has said that one should have minor works on which to build one’s major works. And the sincere Filipino film-maker should get over his hang-up about making the Great Filipino Film; he should, instead, think seriously about developing the Great Filipino Audience.²⁴

Brocka addressed the very narrative that the Marcoses espoused with their declaration of the New Society. By synchronizing the Philippines with modern time and space, the regime sought to regulate and define the Filipino according to the demands of the global market. In contrast, Brocka called not for a critique of Filipino sensibilities but for a deliberate reconsideration of the Filipino based on the conditions of Filipino lives. Placing importance on “gathering experiences” that are not “alien” but of a “particular time” and situated in the historicity of “the majority of Filipinos,” Brocka offered a language for these particularities, one that an audience “enjoy[ed],” “[was] moved by,” and “[took] as their own.” He also described the act of filmmaking itself as a process moved not by the production of any single body of work but by the energies of “protracted struggle.”²⁵

In his discussion, Brocka decentered the object with which artists are fixated (the Great Filipino Film). Instead, he focused on the ways that a collective body forms (the Great Filipino Audience). If, for the Marcoses, the Filipino needed to better comprehend his noble past to assume his proper place in the realm of a worldwide humanity, then Brocka insisted upon wrestling this Filipino from the regime to better situate the Filipino within the realities of its present conditions. He collectivized the individualization of the Filipino. The incisiveness with

24. Lino Brocka, “Philippine Movies: Some Problems & Prospects.” *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, edited by Rafael Ma. Guerrero (Manila, Philippines: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 259-262, 261.

25. Brocka, “Philippine Movies,” 260.

which Brocka organized his critique of the Marcos regime lay not in any obliteration of the regime itself but in the enactment of his own careful *mis*-reading of New Society dictates.

Insiang was released to positive reviews from critics and audiences.²⁶ The film follows the story of the beautiful and chaste Insiang as she navigates the difficulties of life in Tondo, one of Metro Manila's poorest slums and home to what would later be referred to as Smokey Mountain, Manila's waste dump. Insiang lives with her mother, Tonya, and her father's relatives. Her father has abandoned the family for another woman, and Tonya continuously mistreats her daughter and in-laws because they remind her of her husband's infidelity. Tonya resents her in-laws' inability to pay their own way and eventually evicts them from her home after a nephew angers a neighboring store owner. Once the in-laws move away, Tonya brings her lover, Dado, into her home. Dado is a local gangster and holds a reputation as a sleazy criminal. Insiang fascinates him, and she constantly refuses his sexual advances. Insiang, meanwhile, attempts to maintain her relationship with her boyfriend, Bebot, who is increasingly agitated by Insiang's refusal to have sex with him. Insiang explains to Bebot that she cannot meet him for their dates because of Tonya's strict surveillance over her behavior. At the climax of the film, Dado rapes Insiang but manages to convince Tonya that the rape was Insiang's fault because he is "only a man" and that Insiang repeatedly teases him with her body. Insiang turns to Bebot for help, asking him to take her away from her abusive home and marry her. Bebot promises to take her away from Tondo and marry her only before bringing her to a motel, sleeping with her, and then abandoning her before morning. Distraught by these multiple violences, Insiang plots a plan of revenge against all those who have wronged her as she begins to trek back to her mother's home. She first manipulates Dado into thinking that she has fallen in love with him and then her mother into believing that Dado never loved her and plans to leave her. In a fit of maniacal rage, Tonya stabs Dado to death. The final scene of the film shows Tonya locked in a prison. Insiang confesses her plot of revenge to her mother and then leaves. Tonya peers out of her jail cell and watches Insiang walk away.

The film forebodingly opens in a slaughterhouse and uses swine to weave an introduction that is both curious and disturbing. In the first scene, Dado and his fellow workers systematically butcher pigs. These shots, taken from various parts of the slaughterhouse, are rapid in their depiction of the process by which live pigs enter the factory, are boiled, skinned, and prepared for eventual consumption. There is no dialogue; only the shrieks of the pigs permeate this first scene. The butchering of the swine itself is made to be shocking: their squeals

26. Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama*, 54. Capino's incisive study of *Insiang* offers an important look into the film's reception among "critics and viewers who appreciated the quality of his commercial films" as well as French and other European critics who viewed the film at Cannes.

are deafening, and the process itself is grotesque—blood is spilled on the floors, and the veteran butchers barely flinch. The film quickly turns to Tonya as she sells food and barter with customers in the *palengke*. Likewise, the only audible sounds here are those of the busy but incomprehensible chatter of the marketplace. The juxtaposition of these two scenes makes indistinguishable the pigs, butchers, and marketgoers.

The film cuts to almost-still shots of Tondo, filled literally to the brim with urban waste. Aside from music that plays in the background, these slow shots of Tondo do not contain the same “noise” of the previous scenes. The people of Tondo, much like swine, rummage for scraps; their faces are unnamed and haggard. The slaughterhouse and *palengke* scenes, in their noisy disarray, seem awkwardly sutured to the quiet introduction of Tondo’s landscape. The first instance of dialogue does not occur until Insiang returns home after her long trek from her laundering job. Insiang leads the camera to the crowded home that she shares with Tonya and several of her relatives. As the camera showcases the family’s cramped quarters, a lone pig eats scraps of food while one of Insiang’s youngest relatives bathes next to its quarters. Placed side-by-side, the naked child and the pig illustrate the depths of the family’s poverty, indistinguishable from the squalor in which the animals find comfort.

The deliberate lack of dialogue in the opening scenes speaks to the unspeakable conditions of urban poverty in the Philippines, that is, to the deliberate silencing of the community even as it may be given symbolic power. And, still, the quick and jolting noise that foregrounds the silence illuminates the inassimilable facets of the urban poor for which the Marcoses’ projects could not account. By bookending this introduction to the main characters of the film with the life and death of these animals, Brocka illustrates the living conditions of Manila’s urban poor—simultaneously removed from the category of humanity even as the regime touts a homogenous and all-encompassing humanity to which they all belong. This illustration reveals the contradiction between the Marcoses’ narrative of uplift and its eventual unfolding.

The opening of Brocka’s film takes great pains to illustrate the specificity of the Tondo landscape. Brocka’s treatment of this location reflects the politics that surround it; yet, it also reconfigures the political. In 1974, by presidential decree (P.D. No. 570), Marcos created the Tondo Foreshore Development Authority to oversee the development of an urban renewal program in Tondo. Again, in 1975, with Presidential Decree No. 814, the president prescribed a land tenure system known as the Tondo Foreshore and Dagat-Dagatan Urban Development Project (TFDD). Funded by the World Bank, the project aimed to decrease poverty and create better living conditions for residents by developing a system of community involvement that granted to local *barangay* officials jurisdiction over the administration of land.²⁷ Control

27. The *barangay* system, which refers to small, governing bodies relegated to specific

was concentrated among wealthy urbanites who best complied with the president's prescribed goals for redevelopment.²⁸ Marcos's call for community uplift through the betterment of living conditions became entirely inaccessible to the majority of Tondo's residents, who were forcibly displaced from their homes. This precariousness is illustrated quite lucidly in Brocka's treatment of displacement. The characters are often positioned within the same frame, denoting the dangerously claustrophobic and chaotic conditions of their lives. Insiang's relatives are evicted by Tonya at the beginning of the film, which allows Dado to move in with Tonya and Insiang. Insiang later attempts to run away from home with Bebot but is forced to return home after he abandons her. The characters move but do so in restricted frames and spaces. This movement is characterized by a desire and necessity to leave but also an inability to do so—reminiscent of Marcos's urban development programs and the ways that they deliberately restricted mobility.

The TFDD project and the 1977 reclamation of Manila Bay (P.D. No. 1085) have often been described as part of the Marcoses' beautification projects, as Imelda Marcos's transformation of Metro Manila into the "City of Man," and as the work of ridding the city of its most unsightly and ghastly parts. Both reforms purported a narrative of uplift that was, in fact, based primarily upon systematic efforts to remove the urban poor from the land. For TFDD, the reallocation of power from the Marcos administration to *barangay* officials was an attempt to appease community organizers who were worried about the displacement of residents. It offered a semblance of self-determination for this community that was made meaningless within the larger scheme of urban development. These two projects reveal that the livelihood of the Filipino would be at the center of development efforts. The establishment of the Zone One Tondo Organization (ZOTO), for instance, would struggle tirelessly to inform residents of impending development sanctions by the Development Authority and to halt demolition efforts, serving as a continuous reminder to the Marcoses of the tenacity of resistance efforts against their reform projects.²⁹

Brocka's decision to use Tondo as the setting of the film instead of the originally intended Pasay was a calculated one.³⁰ In a review of the film, Noel Vera writes, "The slums of Pasay, where O'Hara had originally set the film, are full of prostitutes, bargirls, transvestites, what-have-you; girls, even girls as beautiful as Koronel, are a dime a dozen there. Brocka set the film in Tondo's slums and nearby Smoky

provinces, was a main unit of governance under the Marcos administration.

28. See Mary Racelis's "Community Empowerment, People's Organizations, and the Urban Poor: Struggling for Shelter, Infrastructure, Services, and Dignity in the Philippines," *Southeast Asian Urban Environments: Structured and Spontaneous*, edited by Carla Chifos and Ruth Yabes (Tempe: Arizona State University Press, 2000).

29. See Mary Racelis and Janess J. Ann Ellao's article "Trining Herrera and Her Memories of the Urban Poor Struggle Under Martial Law" at *Bulatlat.com*.

30. The film is an adaptation of Mario O'Hara's play *Insiang*, which was set in Pasay.

Mountain because he wanted the visual impact of Koronel's beauty against Tondo's spectacular squalor."³¹ Herself plucked by Brocka from the slums of Angeles City in Pampanga, the teenage Hilda Koronel, who played Insiang, quickly rose to cinematic stardom after Brocka featured her in several of his films. Koronel's "beauty" became Brocka's muse, and Vera's insistence upon and Brocka's attention to this distinct beauty is less an acknowledgment of any naturalized claim to virtue but a deliberate reconstitution of an aesthetic sense based on the interrogation of the very conditions that made squalor possible. The first half of *Insiang* focuses on the dissonance between Insiang and Tondo itself. At the start of the film, Insiang emerges a lone figure from the silent desperation of Tondo's dirt streets, sun shining onto her lone body as she walks with a tired yet resolute firmness that contrasts the languid stoicism of her counterparts. Her income as a launderer provides the livelihood for her family, and she serves as an intermediary between her mother and her father's relatives, whom her mother has reluctantly housed. The audience is, once again, alerted to Insiang's distinguished character as the camera catches Dado's penetrating eyes from the rearview mirror of his vehicle, lustfully fixated on her as she walks past him. Dado eventually rapes Insiang, and she subsequently attempts to escape Tondo with Bebot, who ultimately abandons her in a motel. Insiang is thus marked by her capacity to enact physical, affective, and sexual labor as a way of ensuring the ordered hierarchy of the film. The rape is the violent penetration of Insiang's body and the forcible extraction of her labor, all of which incite her desire to escape these conditions yet ultimately reveal the very inescapability of this circuitousness.

In a 1969 speech to the Philippine Women's University upon its conferral of an honorary degree to the First Lady, Imelda Marcos described the basis upon which the "new Filipina" will be cultivated: "It is [...] love that will most characterize and direct her activities in the world outside. She will be primarily concerned with the areas of basic human needs [...] to be what God intended her to be—a help to all who need sympathy, tenderness, compassion, and love. This is why God made her."³² This would be a modern Filipina womanhood that did not abandon ideas of women's equality so characteristic of liberal philosophy but one that took seriously a new responsibility of compassion for humanity. As Neferti Tadiar explains, "This widespread freeing up of females from their supposed traditional social ground and the consequent commodification of their individuated bodily beings comprised precisely the general 'prostitution' of Filipinas accomplished through the modernization schemes initiated by the Marcos regime."³³ Prostitution, according to Tadiar, denotes

31. See Noel Vera's March 8, 2002 post in *Pinoy Exchange*: <http://www.pinoyexchange.com/forums/showthread.php?t=35321&page=2>.

32. Marcos, *The Compassionate Society*, 26.

33. Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away: Philippine Historical Experience and the Makings*

the nation's subcontracting of female bodies in order to sustain the operation of its export industries.³⁴ Vera's statement about the multitude of "girls" available for work in Pasay points precisely to the veracity of Tadiar's postulations here, both arguing that the "availability" of women signals not merely the coincidence of their number or presence but, rather, the force with which Marcos's many projects of modernization and development fell onto the bodies of poor, laboring women. Imelda Marcos reportedly once said, "I do not just give: I give until it is beautifully given."³⁵ Marcos valued beauty as an indicator of her humanist care for others and as a quality that would outline her cultural projects. Her conception of beauty was defined by a set of aesthetic standards dictated by excess and all things that remained palatable to modern sensibilities of cleanliness and order. Creating Insiang as both the bearer of care and sexualized violence, Brocka makes painstakingly clear his visualization of Koronel's distinct beauty as a canvas that makes lucid the intimacy and complexity of Filipina subjectivity. His treatment of Insiang dismantles beauty as a veneer through which violence masquerades itself. This violence is defined by the restrictive and claustrophobic conditions imposed onto women by a Marcos regime that used urban development projects as a vehicle of patriarchal guardianship.

What remains perplexing in *Insiang*, however, is not that Insiang remains separate from Tondo but that she eventually becomes embedded within it. The precision of Brocka's critique here lies in the failure of the self to truly cohere—the radical devolvement of the characters into what appears to be a downward spiral of immorality. After Dado rapes her, Tonya betrays her, and Bebot abandons her, Insiang transforms into an almost unrecognizable version of herself, offering little dialogue and no sense of desire to live. She seems to have resigned herself to a life of loneliness and misery. As it turns out, she has employed a plan for revenge against her abusers. She cultivates a way to make Dado believe that she has fallen in love with him, motivates him to beat Bebot senseless, and forces her mother to believe that Dado will eventually leave her for Insiang. Dado eventually resolves himself to Insiang and confesses to her, "I am in love with you." This confession of dependence by Dado to Insiang sparks within her a glimmer of motivation, a spark, that signals not only that her plan of revenge is working, but that she may gain access to something that she actually desires. Dado's concession of his "I" here is important, for it illustrates his culpability within the general interweaving of this bizarre narrative. This concession makes certain that each of the characters falls in a fantastic display of devolvement. In the final act of bloodshed, Tonya stabs Dado to death, Dado falls helplessly to the floor

of Globalization (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 69.

34. Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 29.

35. James Hamilton-Patterson, *America's Boy: A Century of United States Colonialism in the Philippines* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999), 251.

as he writhes in pain, and Insiang remains emotionless as she watches her plan reach its height. For Brocka, this is not Insiang's redemption. While audiences and critics alike may empathize with Insiang (she is the titular character after all, and the audience watches the narrative through her vision), it remains unclear as to which of the characters' motivations is more redeemable than the other. Brocka does not tell the tale of an insurmountable human maliciousness. The focus, rather, is on the conditions that make the human ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness, so touted by Imelda Marcos, impossible. The independent, self-determined entity that the Marcoses postulated would be the cornerstone of their developmental reforms is veritably deconstructed here by Brocka's insistence on the mutuality of experience propagated by urban poverty amidst global modernization. Not only are Insiang, Tonya, and Dado intimately connected to their neighbors who do not have the privilege of entering the visual frame of this cinematic triangulation, but their lives are intertwined with and shaped by the demands of modernization that have dictated these very interactions.

Both Insiang and Tonya devolve into an unruly madness that is less a response to betrayal and violence as it is a resurgence of energies lost and stolen by violence itself. Near the beginning of the film, Insiang's cousin Edong explains that he can no longer stomach living amidst such depraved conditions and that he is often tempted to commit terrible acts of violence. Insiang urges him to restrain himself and hold onto his goodness a little bit longer. It is, in fact, Insiang who cannot restrain herself. By the end of the film, it is the loss of her recognizable self at the hands of her abusers that facilitates the creative re-imagining and transformation of her social conditions—namely, the vengeful murder of her rapist and the incarceration of her abusive mother. Insiang thus employs a reorganization of power while paradoxically retaining a connection with both Dado and Tonya.

The film was originally intended to end as soon as Tonya stabbed Dado to death; however, the BCMP ordered that Brocka alter the ending to offer a familial resolution between Insiang and Tonya.³⁶ While Brocka did offer a meeting between the mother and daughter at the end of the film, the film's final lessons remain inconclusive. There is no tidy reconciliation here: even as Tonya and Insiang recognize their familial ties at the end of the film, they approach each other with a kind of unrecognizability provoked by the heinousness of the violence that structures their lives. The language of humanity is indecipherable here—not only for making sense of this violence but also for imagining an accountability that would lead to an effective solution for punishment. Herein lies the precision of Brocka's critique to be able to disarticulate the Marcoses' cultural paradigm and its concomitant developmental trajectory. Rather than contain the chaos through the contours of modernization and development, as

36. Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama*, 49.

Marcos had instructed, Brocka renders the chaos palpable, as the very composition of Philippine experience.

Insofar as the Marcos regime instituted measures that set the stage for the current unfolding of Philippine political and social life in general, the necessity to continue to problematize Filipino subjectivity has only been aggravated with time and therefore remains a pressing concern in the present moment, when one must continue to be vigilant against the types of tempting neoliberal reforms that value representation as solutions to social inequalities and uncertainties more than the refashioning of the very questions themselves. To continue to interrogate the solidity of the Filipino is to acknowledge that the marker signifies more than an identity formed around a common set of struggles but must, instead, direct us toward the contestation of the social conditions that have borne those struggles.

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