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## ÁMAUTEURISH!

“It is the will of God that we must have critics, and missionaries, and Congressmen, and humorists, and we must bear the burden.” – M. Twain

June 7, 2014

# The National Pastime – Directors 3: Bernal/Brocka

By Joel David

Valiant Try

Aliw

Directed by Ishmael Bernal

Written by Cecille Lardizabal (Franklin Cabaluna and Ishmael Bernal)[1] (<https://amauteurish.com/2014/06/07/the-national-pastime-directors-3/#1>).

Ishmael Bernal will be assured of major significance as a Filipino filmmaker by, among other films, *Aliw*. The same director who claimed in an interview last year that he makes films to express himself can now be said to have recognized his responsibility toward the moviegoers who support his work. The urbane obsessions which characterized *Dalawang Pugad*, *Isang Ibon*, *Ikaw Ay Akin*, *Menor de Edad*, and *Salawahan* have been set aside, while the misfire of *Boy Kodyak* has been reloaded more carefully. In *Aliw*, Bernal manages with three characters what he had difficulty pulling off with one (Alma Moreno in last year's *Lagi na Lamang Ba Akong Babae?*). *Aliw, Sir!*, the originally proposed title, would have been a better come-on; but then again, it makes unnecessary reference to the pre-martial law era's *Crush Ko si Sir*. Whatever the reason for title change, the board of censors, contrary to its reputed character, allowed too-true-to-be-good glimpses into the lives of society's alleged low-lives, engaged in the oldest profession. The three characters round whom the narrative revolves are Ayet, Lingling, and Esper, who earn their keep at Valiente Super (so-spelled) Club.

Ayet (Amy Austria) is the worldly-wisest of the three. She studies Nippongo, enrolls in a typing class, and sells goods to customers and fellow bar girls. Her shrewdness is manifested in her way with figures, quitting a ₱200 modeling job after a spat with nasty choreographers, demanding the exact peso-equivalent of \$100 (plus service tax) from a tightwad Japanese customer, and risking cohabitation with a sadist for a ₱1,500 monthly “allowance.” In the end, her preoccupation with figures brings about her emotional undoing. When goody-boy Nilo courts her, she first spurns him, then returns to him, then flees upon discovering he earns ₱500 a month and is only a sophomore commerce student, irregularly enrolled at that. Nevertheless, because of numerous live-in proposals, she is considered the most level-headed of the Valiente lot. “Ang hostess nabubuhay pag nagagarahe” [A prostitute succeeds when her sugar daddy provides full support], declares her cousin's aunt, a has-been spendthrift ex-streetwalker who has been reduced to selling small (non-sexual) goods.

The novice the aunt keeps admonishing is 16-year-old Linda Pudoy, nicknamed Lingling (Lorna Tolentino). Baptized “Pandora” by another co-worker, Lingling personifies innocence corrupted in the course of the story. To emulate her cousin, she enrolls in a keypunching class, but refuses to consider an ₱850 bank job. She moves in successively with three different men who embody her increasing awareness of the need to gentrify: Atab, a band guitarist, who steals her money while whistling “Honesty”; a mestizo looker, who holes her up with his good-for-nothing gang and money-squabbling parents; and an elderly entrepreneur who insists on virtual nunhood as a condition for her stay. In each instance she winds up walking out of the relationship. Yet in the end she turns out wiser than before – that is, she learns to walk out earlier.

For Esper (Suzette Ranillo), no amount of wising up could vanquish an error from the past. She and her baby were neglected by Greg (George Estregan), who is married, but not to her. Greg's spouse spots them in public, and a scene ensues; by its end Esper realizes she has lost him forever. Mercifully enough, as it turns out, domestic problems vie for her attention. Her lazy, idle-talking, improvident mother marries overweight gambler Polistico after a two-week courtship. Her adolescent brother would better not be relied upon to look after her baby and their house. Her persistent boyfriend, after waiting for her too long, marries a silly giggly replacement. What to do then? For someone in her



station, nothing else beyond confiding in another bar girl, getting drunk with a customer, and collapsing on her way to take a leak. Some of the more memorable moments in the film occur when the camera lingers on the mixed emotions transpiring on the newcomer performer's face, as when in the midst of conscious restraint her eyes convey distinct hurt and bewilderment.

Unlike most apologetically ambivalent efforts at realism by major Filipino directors (including a few past Bernal films), Aliw's boldness goes beyond skin exposure, proceeding from its frank contemporaneity, indicated by markers such as the disco hits covered by Atab's band and the gaggle of Japanese tourists ogling the contents of the club's "aquarium," where the girls play poker and discuss the futility of applying for government housing loans while making sure they can still manage to capture the interest of prospective johns. Best of all, Aliw espouses a relentless materialist outlook. In one sharply observed exchange, the characters collect loan payments from one another – ₱800 for board and lodging, ₱50 for perfume, tuition money for a gay hairdresser's boyfriend. Even when the painted ladies go to church, they pray for more affluent (foreign) customers. Refreshingly anti-social for a change, they matter-of-factly undergo health check-ups for venereal disease and detest "Family Night" at Valiente, since unlike the church or government, the family is the one social institution that they thrive on countering in the short term (by distracting husbands from their wives), even as they contribute to its long-term stabilization (by allowing these same husbands a means of containing their impulse to stray).

As may be expected of Bernal, Aliw is rich in peripheral details and unobtrusive symbols. As in his *Lumapit*, *Lumayo* ang *Umaga*, newspaper headlines ground the narrative in contemporary history; and when Lingling finally bags an upscale patron, the several gates she has to pass through in order to flee from her love nest betokens an insider's familiarity with how success never comes easy for the people that society has turned its back on. As bonus, the movie's dialogue is laced with wit throughout. The technique is at best Shavian, comicalizing exchanges in order to temper otherwise painful situations. One may opt to take exception with the portrayal of the police as upholders of law and order. Twice in interacting with the Wengweng character – in church, where she feels compelled to hide her cleavage from them, and in the nightclub, where they arrest her for possession of illegal drugs – local cops, contrary to common knowledge, are treated as omnipresent agents of retribution, ever ready to pounce on whoever oversteps the limits of decency and discipline.

And as for surface technique, the most one can say is that the low-end production values complements the nature of the material; in short, this is a far cry from, say, *Ikaw Ay Akin*, the closest a Pinoy artist has ever come to a European art film without inciting smirks among intellectual viewers. Aliw's sound engineering, though crude, not only bears favorable comparison with the current norm, but also pioneers in the conveyance of simultaneous delivery of dialogue by two or more characters – although the film could certainly benefit from more restraint in the use of the stating-the-obvious theme song during what should have been meaningful pauses in the plot. These irritants aside, one may already confidently declare that no other local film has succeeded in depicting the lives and loves of sex professionals in such a credible, accurate, and sympathetic manner – and profited extensively from the project. What Bernal could be capable of accomplishing after this can only be regarded as worth awaiting.

[Submitted November 1979 to Who; unpublished]

### Note

[1] (<https://amauteurish.com/2014/06/07/the-national-pastime-directors-3/#2>) When the Filipino film critics circle included Aliw's screenplay in its list of nominees for its annual awards, the credited scriptwriter released a statement claiming that her original material had, in effect, been bowdlerized, and rejected the nomination. The list of nominees was revised to acknowledge instead the director and Franklin Cabaluna as scriptwriters.

[Back to top](#)

[Return to The National Pastime contents \(https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents\)](https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents)

### Renewal of Appreciation

Manila by Night

Directed and written by Ishmael Bernal

A series of films by Ishmael Bernal serves to remind us all too vividly how far we've fallen behind, in terms of the apices of achievements in local film art and artisanship. The tribute (by the Cultural Center of the Philippines) has been long overdue as well, and inadequate considering the transitory nature of a retrospective. Most of the proper superlatives will have been out by now, but I don't see anything wrong in helping to propagate the truth: for all our inroads in international cinema, the world is still far from an accurate appraisal of our maximum capabilities – and only because it still has to be introduced to Ishmael Bernal.



I must have seen *Manila by Night* more often than any other Filipino, or probably even foreign, film in my life so far, and I'm talking about a fanaticism about movies that sometimes gets me to watching one title after another during my waking hours. Apart from my subjective fascination with its material, however, *Manila by Night* has me convinced, with each re-viewing, of its considerable and near-unique accomplishments in the medium, whether in a Filipino or even in a Third-World context. To begin with, the movie can be situated in the theoretical mainstream of progressive filmmaking – not according to the academic balderdash of social-scientific constructs that film scholars love to bandy about without half understanding the implications, but rather the more practical approaches that originated in European literature and developed in Hollywood products; as an aside, probably the very fact of this adaptation by the bastion of American commercialism-cum-conservatism has led to its underemphasis in film studies.

I refer here to the undertaking of several major lines of action from among as many characters, interwoven to provide a larger, usually abstractified, impression of a social milieu. The achievement isn't as easy as it sounds, even when you've gotten the operational framework down pat. Robert Altman, the gringo who placed American cinema at the forefront of contemporary film innovation with *Nashville*, resorts to the same formula once in a while but still has to come anywhere near the significance of his politically and morally acute dissection of country music.

A personal epiphany of sorts came about during my latest appreciation of *Manila by Night*, which pertains to how it falls within even a strictly technical schematization of this trend in thinking. The parenthetically mentionable *Citizen Kane*, the late Orson Welles's first film, has been credited with releasing cinema from the confines of Soviet montage, in which film narrative is developed through the juxtaposition of several images. The introduction of relatively "faster" film for deep-focus purposes, wherein details could now be arranged within the same frame instead of requiring a successive presentation, allowed Welles the opportunity to initiate his long-standing reputation as film innovator, notwithstanding a few structural problems with his debut. In a sense Altman merely synthesized this visual deep-focus technique with an aural complement, through his patented Lion's Gate system, and, for good measure, provided himself with the potential for multi-levelled storytelling through an astute choice of subject matter in *Nashville*. The problem, however, as evidenced in Altman's failed attempts afterward, is that such a highly advanced use of technique requires a concomitant plan for execution – which simply means the project is always in danger of getting carried away by its own conceits, if not bogged down by the sheer weight of its ponderousness.

Where does all this place *Manila by Night*? It might be too early to create a case for exclusivity, but I still have to come across a work, regardless of origin, that provides such a successful depiction of milieu with all the energy of personal filmmaking. Inevitably a few particulars amount to sheer indulgence – the extended lovemaking scenes, for example, or the overexposed and overextended bayside frolic of dope fiends and Halloween revelers. But other former objections seem to acquire more defensible rationales in hindsight. The open-ended resolution doesn't only parallel a realistic indeterminacy over social and sexual contradictions (as the movie's more enthusiastic proponents used to answer those who attributed the ending to the filmmaker's own confusion), it also suggests a method of dealing with the too-neat packaging of similar other works, as well as, if we're fortunate enough, the rich opportunities for a sequel, if not a series.

The plastic shortcomings, especially in lighting, have also been rendered moot with careful laboratory processing. The latest *Manila by Night* print seems to be the version intended for its aborted participation in the Berlin International Film Festival competition, what with English subtitles and the New Society disclaimers obviously intended for the former First Lady. Its cinematographic strengths have been impressively enhanced, specifically in terms of camera placements and movements, revealing in effect how the film had been originally victimized by industrial as well as political limitations. Other titles in the Bernal retrospective reveal how this notoriously evasive artist has outlined his concerns in the medium. After seeking the requisite mastery of plastic and commercial elements in local cinema, he abandoned either one or the other in preparation for the masterwork that became *Manila by Night*: there was minimum commercial appeal in the subject and treatment of *Nunal sa Tubig*, and similarly few plastic merits in *Aliw*, yet these two exercises, rather than his better-received domestic dramas during the same period, stand squarely in the direction of internal theoretical discourse that eventually resulted in *Manila by Night*.

Thereafter only *Ito Ba ang Ating mga Anak?* and *Working Girls*, out of a series of milieu attempts, provided indications of the director's full potentials. Bernal did better with more conventional material in *Relasyon*, and with more conventional storytelling in *Himala*. Meanwhile at least one other team-up, Marilou Diaz-Abaya directing a script by erstwhile Bernal collaborator Ricardo Lee, has provided our cultural heritage with the only other title that belongs clear within the same league as *Manila by Night* – i.e., *Moral*. And while these dynamically gifted thinkers figure out where next to take film as a medium of universal and not just parochial properties, an entire community of evaluators, national and foreign, still has a lot of catching up to do. Would that Bernal et al. were as patient with backward opinion leaders as they are with film craft itself; then again, film understandably proves a lot more flexible, intelligent, and rewarding in the long run.

[First published March 16, 1988, in *National Midweek*]



## An Awakening

Pahiram ng Isang Umaga

Directed by Ishmael Bernal

Written by Danny Lopez and Jose Javier Reyes

The newest Ishmael Bernal release, *Pahiram ng Isang Umaga*, comes as the latest, and best, output in what has turned out to be a trilogy of melodramas, all spaced by roughly a year each and produced by the same outfit, Regal Films. The cycle actually initiates a phase in Bernal's consistent abandonment of his successful decade-old milieu-movie attempts. At first I was very much tempted to regard *Pahiram* as part of a new Bernal concern: the multi-installment body of work. The director may be the only one capable of such a concept in these parts, and his earlier triumphs in milieu delineations seem to have met an industrial dead-end, what with the later impositions on his work (young-star smorgasbords in *Ito Ba ang Ating mga Anak?* and *The Graduates*, and gender-specific mash-ups in *Bilibid Boys* and *Working Girls*) that only serve to limit what should really be an expansive perspective.

*Pahiram ng Isang Umaga* can be viewed alongside *Pinulot Ka Lang sa Lupa* of two years back and last year's *Nagbabagang Luha*, but that would probably be underestimating an intellectual stature as singular as Bernal's. Sure, the most significant French New Wave survivor – Eric Rohmer, after François Truffaut's demise – operates entirely according to this strategy; so does commercial television. The title "major" belongs to individual works in literature and film, with concessions made to the output of the likes of Honoré de Balzac, Marcel Proust, Satyajit Ray, Ingmar Bergman, and why not, Eric Rohmer. For it sure takes a lot out of the artist's energy to arrive at a respectable level of consistency, but truly productive creativity will cause the completion of work or works inconsistent with the rest, even the artist's own. On a vastly minor but still important scale, this is what happens to *Pahiram* in relation to Bernal's Regal melodrama cycle. Not that the komiks origin of the others are forgone this time: the lead character complains that she'd find her remaining time to live too long for comfort, and the movie's several simplistic developments verify it; moreover, the leading man gets to bed her at a point too close to necrophilia. Neither is the work far from melodramatic – most everyone gets to cry a river and emote by the sea – although in certain instances, particularly in the working out of the main character's conflict with her elder sister, the genre demonstrates its tragicomic potentials in the finest manner possible.

Even Bernal's political polemics are tempered, and for the better, if I may say so. What turned *Hinugot sa Langit* into so much ado about almost nothing, and the second *Working Girls* movie into an absolute mess, surfaces only twice in *Pahiram*, and in a sense makes the latter title a more filmically honest product, since its horizontal storytelling mode allows for the compartmentalizing of plot-based developments. In other words, the plight of fisherfolk plagued by Japanese trawlers, or of old-money restaurateurs threatened by American fast-food multinationals, doesn't really have anything essential to do with a dying advertising executive's interactions with her gentleman farmer of an ex-lover and her current neurotic-artist flame, but it's a whole lot easier to discard these passages in *Pahiram* like so much excess baggage, in contrast with the wholesale presentations in the other "politicized" works. Where *Pahiram* takes off, literally and figuratively, from its predecessors, and in fact from the rest of Ishmael Bernal's major works, is in the final scene. The last shot's a helicopter long-take, though of course Bernal has done better with simpler crane shots (cf. *Himala*) in the past. What I refer to as the suggestion of a possible shift in the director's regard for the medium of film is in the execution of this exact same seaside scene. Here the about-to-expire female lead proclaims her defiance against death in a whisper made louder than it actually sounds by her remoteness from the audience. The whole business is done in mostly long shots, with the helicopter view merely serving as confirmation of the entire foregoing attempt at distancing.

No previous Bernal melodrama, not even the ones made prior to and during his development of milieux in film, exhibits this tendency toward epic filmmaking. The closest the director has come to this sort of stance would be in his big-budget projects – *Nunal sa Tubig*, *Manila by Night*, even *Himala* – but the procedure he used then remains completely counter to that of *Pahiram*. For instead of expanding the feel of the movie through crowds and movements, as would characterize past Bernal films, *Pahiram* gets by with a deliberate paring down of dramatic essentials and an expansion of onscreen space. This could never have been managed by the Bernal we used to know, someone who was all-too-prepared to forsake surface gloss for the sake of multi-levelled dramatization. All his significant films since *Manila by Night* indicate an obsession with plastic polish, and *Pahiram* may very well be the culmination of them all (so far, at least).





Ishmael Bernal (1938-96), a director-writer, film critic, stage performer, and café proprietor, known for *Manila by Night* (1980) and several other films.

There is of course the very real danger of having appreciated too much in what could have been the producer's whim or the writers' specification. Be that as it may, the time has been long overdue for a responsible producer to risk once more the 1979 carte blanche that resulted in Bernal's, and by clear analogy Philippine cinema's, greatest movie ever, *Manila by Night* (released in 1980, after having been banned for a year). What he'll come up with this time may be difficult to ascertain at this point, but certain qualities based on his recent development can be ventured with confidence: spatially prolific, visually agreeable, commercially accessible, medium-conscious, and political, possibly to a fault.

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[Back to top](#)

[Return to The National Pastime contents \(https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents\)](https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents)

### Just another Exercise

Angela Markado  
Directed by Lino Brocka  
Written by Jose F. Lacaba

Angela Markado has the markings of a memorable movie. Unfortunately these do not obliterate its obvious and basic blemishes. The title name is the alias used by Angela del Mar, a rape victim who sets out to kill her five assailants and, with typical komiks consistency, slashes through all her obstacles more literally than figuratively. For Lino Brocka, working with komiks material is no new endeavor. His first movie, as well as some well-received ones among his other early efforts, are based on such sources. Predictably then in his latest film he has been able to surmount some of the limitations inherent in adaptations of like material, particularly in his handling of the sequences depicting Angela's agony in the hands of her captors and the discovery of her brutalization by her first victim's brother. Both are executed with discernment where overplaying or underplaying the attendant emotions would only have been too convenient for commercial or critical compromise.



Lino Brocka (1939-91), a theater and film director who led the resistance of popular-culture artists against the Marcos dictatorship.



two aforementioned examples, however, are effective enough because they bear upon the story of the avenging Angela. Several other scenes, including an inevitably comic one involving the fainting of two feuding widows during their rapist-husband's burial, are striking in themselves, but the absence of connecting threads to Angela's story reduces them to the status of dispensable frills. Now if improbabilities are worse than deviations, then Angela Markado could have been better. Instead it follows up logical developments with improbabilities and follows up the latter with further improbabilities. After Angela escapes from the whorehouse her captors sell her to, she is discovered by Rona, a prostitute with the proverbial (and overused) heart of gold, who takes Angela to her apartment where she gives the latter a light meal and some transportation money. Not long after the burial of Angela's mother, who had died of neglect and overwork, her waitress-friend Sally is raped by the same gang responsible for Angela's fall. The next morning Angela finds her dead, her wrist slashed. That Sally should break down and commit suicide while Angela vows vengeance is inconsistent with everything that forewent between them. In the first place it was the suicidal waitress who advised Angela to maintain good relations with the gang members because of their influence over the management of the restaurant they were working in, and in fact this same character had precipitated her own fall by dating one of the members who had molested Angela in her presence.

On the other hand it was Angela who, though forced to support her consumptive mother, confided in Sally her reluctance in waiting on shady personalities. Anyway – an appropriate adverb for the narrative – Angela offers her services as domestic helper to Rona, who dismisses the offer and even counters with her own: board and schooling for the victim. Then it turns out that Rona is also sugar mommy to another of Angela's rapists, whom the neighborhood suitor attacks in a fit of jealousy, thus providing Angela with an opportunity for revenge. In spite of the circumstances Rona suspects nothing; but when interrogated by the rest of the gang, she refuses to disclose Angela's whereabouts. Considering the anti-social nature of her profession, Rona's generosity during her first encounter with Angela is a little forced, but not entirely implausible. Her eventual taking in of someone whose sympathy she has no third-party confirmation of, however, strains her golden-heart bit a little too much. At least Celia Rodriguez, hardy survivor of Joey Gosiengfiao camp, interprets her role with self-parody sufficient for comic relief, raising the possibility that the other characters might have been approached with the wrong sensibility.

The romantic male lead, for one. Although he figures dramatically in the movie's climax, he is developed with the hastiness and insufficiency of an afterthought. He is first introduced in the funeral scene as a lawyer concerned with the murder of his brother. To sustain his suspicions he asks from a survivor of Angela's assault a description of the attacker, who therewith describes her as having sported an Afro regardless of the fact that she did not. Anyway again, the lawyer persists in tracking down Angela – who this time persists in wearing Rona's Afro wig despite the availability of other styles in her hostess's wardrobe collection – conferring with an incapacitated (and therefore unnecessary) lieutenant-detective and convincing the surviving gang members to act as decoys. After his development as his brother's avenger, a male counterpart of Angela who does not hesitate resorting to extra-legal means for her capture, it is surprising to find him sympathizing with her, even offering legal protection in the face of the survivors' insistence on dealing with her themselves. Of course it is also surprising to find these survivors around in the first place, but there apparently was no easier device for facilitating a chase and their subsequent killing. As it turns out, one survivor accidentally shoots the other when, in keeping with his heartlessness, he could have ordered the figure below him to halt for further torment. Angela, for her part, suddenly emerges atop the woodpile she has been hiding under and, out of self-defense, shoots the last gang-rapist dead.

In spite of the circumstances obtaining in the final showdown, Angela is reported to have been convicted on five counts of murder. More interesting is the faulty logic presented in the ruling, ending with the quote "'Vengeance is mine,' says the Lord." The irony here, whether deliberate or not, is either lost or wasted in a movie which makes no provisions for any form of subtlety. Apparently the creative forces behind the project considered the sympathetic depiction of police, village militia, and intelligence personnel insufficient for censors' approval. But if in the first place the lawyer character were left out, there would have been no need to present the viewpoints of the other parties involved in Angela's case. As a consequence the main character loses out, and not just to the legal system either. Hilda Koronel works hard for a role which does not work for her in return. She screams, writhes, and grimaces for her plight as Angela although like the rest of the cast, she suffers from apparently komiks-derived self-consciously poetic lines that abandon the use of colorful colloquial prose for stiff sentence constructions and an insistence on repetition when silence alone would have sufficed.

About the only aspect of the movie which surpasses critical commentary is Conrado Baltazar's cinematography. Not since Jaguar, for which he also took charge, has a local movie possessed such distinct visual character. What stands out in that of Angela Markado is Baltazar's use of light, or more properly his disuse of it. Defying the local preference to illuminate every detail, he employs one or two oblique sources for his nocturnal shots and directs the rays at some inanimate structure or at the camera itself. The result is not only (pardon the pun) arresting in approach, it also lends itself to levels of interpretation moviegoers would delight in discovering in such displays of expertise. Would that the same could be said for the movie as a whole. As it is, Angela Markado might best be taken as just another exercise by Brocka in his quest to depict the Filipina's struggle for survival and dignity.



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[Back to top](#)

[Return to The National Pastime contents \(https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents\)](https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents)

### Text vs. Texture

Macho Dancer

Directed by Lino Brocka

Written by Amado Lacuesta Jr. and Ricardo Lee

For all its kinks, *Macho Dancer* ought to occasion the intense seminal discussions that major films during the 1970s, particular *Nunal sa Tubig* and Lino Brocka's own *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, engendered. Unfortunately a complex of extraneous factors seems to be working against this possibility: once-extensive local critical activity has dissipated, the subject matter itself is too delicate for casual, much less objective, consideration, and the director's international reputation seems to have raised expectations beyond what the movie is capable of sustaining. On the other hand, a new lease on national life was provided by the February 1986 revolution, and Philippine film observers will eventually realize (which means they still have to) that the original art-criticism signpost – the declaration of martial law in 1972 – has been superseded, for better or worse, by the three-year-old upheaval. Not only was there in 1986, as in 1972, a worrisome hiatus in film attendance preceded by moral permissiveness and followed by a return to basic commercial imperatives; critical reaction also, in both cases, suffered a decline owing to the momentary failure to acknowledge the implications of the shift in the sociopolitical structure on artistic production.

As far as the new, uncertain era has bidden so far, *Macho Dancer* is its first major serious output, and by a coincidence everyone has overlooked, Lino Brocka, who almost singlehandedly revived artistic consciousness in film with *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* in the seventies, has done it again. This process of pioneering, though, once proved too enervating even for someone like Brocka, who after the more impressive triumph of *Maynila*, left the field to the likes of Eddie Romero (*Ganito Kami Noon... Paano Kayo Ngayon?*), Ishmael Bernal (*Manila by Night*), and Marilou Diaz-Abaya (*Moral*), before bouncing back with a belated major-status entry, *Miguelito: Ang Batang Rebelde*, right before the close of the previous era. *Macho Dancer* calls to mind a number of Brocka films that deal with the similar subject of homosexuality, all of them integral albeit minor achievements: the komiks-derived *Tubog sa Ginto*, the star (Dolphy and Niño Muhlach) vehicle *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay*, and the romantic-comedy *Palipat-Lipat, Papalit-Palit*. *Macho Dancer*, however, has evoked parallelisms with the redoubtable *Maynila*, and for good reason: what seemed like an indulgent deviation in the latter has this time been expanded to a full-blown treatise in the current release, with the searcher-cum-victim split into two major characters.



The cover review in *Kultura*, the Cultural Center of the Philippines journal, of Lino Brocka's *Macho Dancer* (1988).

The innocent at odds with social evil has been a recurrent – as a matter of fact, the only – theme in the noteworthy titles in Brocka's oeuvre, and *Macho Dancer* is no exception. The only complication, which to my mind has become *Macho Dancer*'s gravest flaw, is that this concept of social innocence is necessarily a bourgeois contribution to the literature of fiction, whether film or literature or, as in the case of Mahatma Gandhi (and Corazon Aquino), politics. Where a dramatic setup like that of *Miguelito* is favorably disposed to accommodate this sort of character orientation, that of *Macho Dancer* is woefully inappropriate, as will become evident later. *Maynila* is a special case in point, that actually upholds rather than challenges this thesis. Here the – how else to put it? – sensitivity of the provinciano lead is nullified



a twist in the end, where a social rather than a psychological resolution takes place: it is the members of Julio Madiaga's class who take the initiative in, well, exterminating the guy, rather than the unspecified upper stratum that had been oppressing him for the entire length of the narrative.

Macho Dancer suffers in comparison with both Maynila, which at the very least had allegorical strength, and Miguelito, which had integral characterizations going for it; but then again, even Tinimbang Ka would have aged fast enough to crumble beside Maynila and Miguelito. What places Brocka's latest a cut above his 1970s watershed work is the amazing consistency of filmic texture – the clearest indication that Macho Dancer could only have been an eighties, and an old-time director's, effort. Moreover, it features a choice of material that's not so much daring politically as it is morally, and by doing so it indicates for post-EDSA filmmakers where the next area for thematic debate lies: politics, dear Watson, won't be necessarily passé. It will just assume the incidental role that it actually plays in subjective reality, prior to providing a higher plane of involvement, where the issues graduate from personalized relationships to more intellectual and medium-conscious concerns – in short, from the public sphere into the dualistic politics of identities that continually collide in the private sphere.

In more media-specific terms this can be deduced from the transmutation of the French New Wave into the so-called milieu movies of latter-era Europe and even Hollywood. How this might be manifested in Philippine cinema can be glimpsed through the triple-M treat of Manila by Night, Moral, and Miguelito (and we note with some reticence that it's Brocka who contributed last to this formal discursive trend). Macho Dancer, were it not for its basic textual problems, could have served as a reviewer of this sort of function, considering that the distinctiveness of its setting recalls Manila by Night, the first and still the best of the lot. As it turns out, Macho Dancer flounders precisely when it attempts to move from delineation to development of milieu. As in Miguelito, the strategy is to employ the generic strength of the thriller, which by definition should suffice to maintain audience interest in lines of action, if not anything else. This is indicated in the film by a transition in physical location, when the lead character Pol moves from an American military-base locale to the metropolitan capital.

Pol's story then follows his separate interactions with two characters – Bambi, a hardened streetwalker, and Noel, a fellow dancer and, but of course, another prostitute. Pol falls in love with Bambi and almost becomes Noel's lover; Noel in turn traces his long-lost sister to a seedy brothel and perishes in the attempt to rescue her. The issue of credibility at this point centers on how Pol could have retained his heterosexual orientation all this time. Having had sufficiently profitable and trauma-free career upgrades, plus the casual consent of his family and hometown friends, there would have been the least chance of falling for a woman who never bothered to hide her brutalization from him in the first place; on the other hand, there would also have been every opportunity to develop an emotional dependence on Noel, with whom Pol had shared not just the melodrama of the latter's search but also, and more saliently, a bedroom, a (skimpy) wardrobe, and a live erotic act.

Nowhere is this reluctance to pursue obvious logic displayed than in the excuses summoned for sexual encounters between Pol and Noel: first they were forced by their gay bar's mama-san, then were caught up in the depression of discovering the plight of Noel's sister, and finally, in a completely dispensable development, agreed to a pornographic video performance to raise funds for the sister's deliverance. Not only does the last overlook the many other financial sources that Noel resorts to in the course of his presentation as character; it also leads to some possibly incidental semiotic irony, when the movie camera assumes the point of view of the video camera, in effect admitting (but only to the incorrigibly academic, I hope) the voyeuristic nature of this particular plot-based problematic. In the end Pol consummates his relationship with Noel vicariously, by offering his last live act to his late friend. The trouble is that he needs a partner for this number, and it turns out to be one of the least sympathetic characters in the film, a virtual extension of the corrupt policeman who killed Noel. The irony in this situation is glossed over by the lyricism of the execution of this particular scene; moreover, the Platonic (in the Calvinistic rather than the original Greek sense) nature of Pol's regard for Noel in effect defines Noel's desire for Pol as a weakness, contrasted as it was with Bambi's resistance and eventual triumph for both herself and Pol.

Noel's story is therefore the embodiment of whatever modern sensibility Macho Dancer has had the good fortune to retain. As performed by Daniel Fernando, it also constitutes an achievement in post-1986 film acting – multi-levelled, conflicted even, but heartfelt, and without a single hint of the inhibitions that would naturally attend this kind of role-playing. The Noel in Macho Dancer is such a rarity (in the film as in Philippine cinema in general) that when the character is bumped off, our realization that this sort of presentation – of a moral outlaw who operates without guilt yet prospers by sheer charm – might be on its way to finding a larger share of audience patronage is enough assurance, for now. The Bambi character also scores, notwithstanding the falsehood she incites in Pol, largely because Jaclyn Jose has developed into such a fail-safe performer. For post-1986 acting hers, regardless of film title, is the definitive model: stylish style-lessness, if ever there was one. Fernando's in Macho Dancer may be the present era's best male performance so far, but Jose's body of work threatens to challenge any comparable accumulation in available local film history.



no disturbing peripheral personae in *Macho Dancer* point to the larger potential passed up by the undertaking. Johnny Vicar as the corrupt policeman effectively essays the evil counterpart of Noel, but his role requires him to venture forth nothing more than utter villainy for his exceptional nature as powerful brute, moral degenerate, and heartless killer. On the other hand lies Noel's sister, who as executed by Princess Punzalan is everything that the aforementioned police officer isn't: straight, female, wholesome, and capable of suffering – Ligaya Paraiso of *Maynila* down to the fixed frown and moving monologue. That the policeman dies, as avenged by Pol, and the sister lives to return to what may be presumed a provincial idyll, is at the very least a reversal, at worst a betrayal of all the foregoing businesses. The viewer gets deprived of appreciating the extent and depth of big-city corruption, a realization reinforced by the reward granted the only character who opted to remain a weakling. Vicar and Punzalan, for all their displayed capabilities, square off against each other only on a symbolic plane, and the twists in their respective stories merely serve to confuse their meanings rather than reveal genuine characters.

All the other elements, whether plastic or histrionic, combine admirably enough so long as they remain out of the track of the narrative. (For the first time, for one thing, star filters have been correctly used to convey the tawdriness of certain interior settings.) But when text leads to one thing and texture to another, the result could be self-defeating, or at least puzzling: after the policeman makes a display of his tender mercies, the better to cow his public to submission, he chooses to execute Noel sans his usual audience. A sudden (and analytically embarrassing) rain effect helps to drown out, as it were, the contradiction in this situation, but the filmmaker could get away with only so much – and only up to the point where his theatrical control ends. One last detail in the movie's resolution constitutes a throwback to the basic political moralizing also pioneered by Brocka during the Marcos era. The policeman's death is mistakenly attributed to the Communist underground hit squad, conjuring up an entire offscreen scenario of Pol's American acquaintances as well as the policeman's cohort constantly under threat of annihilation, no matter how justifiable. The trouble isn't so much historical (Brocka once went on record to condemn such practices) or political (the notoriously heteronormative underground is queered by association); a simple process of logic raises the question of how a guy who could be repeatedly duped by his big-city friends, seduced by a cynical sex worker, humiliated in public and even made to witness the murder of his best friend by the very object of his vendetta could still muster the distance and cunning necessary to carry out his vigilante-style execution.

The only plausible reason is that the story, crammed as it was with depressing developments, needed an uplift at this point – just as Pol's subsequent dance fit perfectly in the movie's rhythmic schema (a beatific calm after a grief-stricken storm), without necessarily taking into account the hard, scientific possibilities involved. A casual acquaintance with recent critical thinking will suffice to explain why filmmakers exposed to First-World aesthetic systems tend to overvalue non-dramatic elements. Since the basics of cinema were finalized decades ago, there was no other way for speculative processes to venture except into the heartland of film craft: the dramatics of film storytelling. But since the standards in this territory were set as far back as ancient history, and the commercial nature of filmmaking demanded (or so it seemed) greater justification for the simple act of dabbling in it, critics have been outdoing one another in attempting to turn this reliable and productive premise inside out. Narrative, yes; but rather the poesy of narrative first, its musicality even – rhythm and texture and harmony, rather than the rigors of plot and logic and character, lest we be mistaken for being old-fashioned and possibly capitalistic.

Modern apices in filmmaking craft have managed to accommodate both sides of this essentially irreconcilable opposition by proceeding from the basis of solid drama and working toward the so-called refinements of non-dramatic art. Texture as text becomes the operative formula in this case, although the actual procedure begins with text and builds up toward a text-based type of texture, which in the end can be taken as the final statement – the ultimate text – of the filmic work. Rather than being replaced, the dramatic nature of film is in fact upheld by this approach. The evidence of local capabilities in this area is commendable enough, with filmmakers coming up with output as impressive as the aforementioned *Manila by Night* and *Moral* even without the aid of theoretical articulation by our film critics. Even Brocka's *Miguelito* begins with the same foundation, although the depiction of milieu does not come about as successfully as in the instance of the other two films, primarily because the movie's discourse remained resolute on its level of origin.

Of course the other tendency, the literal application of "texture as text," has also found its way in our midst, and has gifted us with at least one supreme accomplishment in naturalism, *Oro, Plata, Mata*. The primacy of basic dramatic values, however, has proved sturdy enough to demonstrate that, while *Oro, Plata, Mata* may have delivered the strongest initial impact among all the major Filipino films produced thus far, the absence of a sturdy dramatic framework has made it incapable of sustaining its first impressions. On the other hand, other types of films – even formalistically and ideologically conventional ones like *Ganito Kami Noon* – have proved to be worthier of long-term appreciation. *Macho Dancer* evinces an awareness of this debate, but happens to be indeterminate about the proper nature of the relationship between contradictory elements. The presence of a distinct but non-filmic milieu has been mistakenly regarded as sufficient unto itself, and the development of plot and character, at certain points at least, may



...ve been considered as obstacles, rather than materials, in rendering social complexion. Such then becomes the tension evident in *Macho Dancer*: the voices of a young nation, simple in essence actually, crying to break out in final clarity, trapped for the moment in the conceits and convolutions of awe-inspiring world-class stylistic panache.

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[Back to top](#)

[Return to The National Pastime contents \(https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents\)](https://amauteurish.com/2014/04/23/national-pastime/#contents)

### After the Revolution

Orapronobis

Directed by Lino Brocka

Written by Jose F. Lacaba

The inveterate optimist's reward for enduring an inordinately long dry spell in Philippine cinema, after a commendable inundation that should never have ended (but did anyway), has arrived in the form of, well, a Filipino film that's alien-produced, concerning a local subject that's universally topical, and with short-term consequences that should be urgently overridden in the light of significant long-term implications. *Orapronobis*, Lino Brocka's latest cause célèbre, stands to be the most significant closing film of an impressive decade in the history of Philippine cinema – and although a handful of other films (Brocka's own included) may have equal if not greater artistic value, *Orapronobis* holds the additional distinction of being the first arguably superlative Filipino movie since the February 1986 revolution.



Gina Alajar as an abducted activist who avenges the death of her son in Lino Brocka's *Orapronobis* (1989).

It also arrives, like those twin big-city masterpieces – Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* and Brocka's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* – in a swirl of controversies complicated no end by the project's internationality this time around. No doubt discourses on the director's differences with his foreign financiers and own government, plus the movie's inherent capability of provoking debates on ideological and public-relations policy issues, contain the potential to continue beyond the resolutions of whatever problems can be formulated, for whatever motives possible. This is the main reason why *Orapronobis* is being discussed by practically every major opinionist who happens to have an outlet for publication or broadcast. And the determination of the movie's ultimate worth being buried in the avalanche of articulate, well-meaning, but conflicting points set loose by political perturbations remains, as lawyers love to put it, a clear and present danger.

*Orapronobis* would probably be a fitting marker for the end of its director's second decade in his profession – or, for that matter, the beginning of his third. Like any other Filipino filmmaker gifted with vision and intelligence, Brocka would be the last to admit that his career has been a tranquil and restful one. To make matters worse (for himself, that is), he happened to assume the extra burden of pioneering for Philippine cinema in foreign shores. It would be only logical to conclude three things, one proceeding from the other: that Brocka's artistry, intersected as it had been at about the midpoint of his career so far by international attention, would exhibit permutations unique to his case; that these would be more difficult to analyze than similar case studies of local directors, since internationalized interactions presumably induce a system of dialectics which may be occasionally complementary with, but which may also at other times be tangential or opposed to, that of local dynamics; and finally, it would take even the most sincere and driven director (and Brocka is nothing if not one) quite a time, given these constraints, before he can come up with a definitive body of work.



*Orapronobis* is proof positive of the last conclusion. Prior to this, the only truly major movies Brocka ever made were *Maynila* and *Miguelito*; *Ang Batang Rebelde*; naturally, the course of his international impactation did not always conform to the pattern formed by these three titles. If anything, Brocka became better – and unfairly, if I may say so – known for efforts that were minor to a fault, minimalist in style, and badly balanced by what could only be explained as an overeager willingness to please an ill-advised combination of foreign admirers and the local masses, neglecting the crucial element of local observers (including the community of artists Brocka belongs to). Ultimately the director will be known as more than just another Third-World filmmaker. With the three aforementioned titles, a case can be made for his versatility in three disparate and difficult film approaches: documentary realism in *Maynila*, milieu formation in *Miguelito*, and advocacy moviemaking in *Orapronobis*. Each milestone holds its own significance with respect to Brocka's career development. *Maynila* was a stunning coup d'essai, coming as it did without any antecedent among any of the major talents (apart from Brocka, scriptwriter Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., cinematographer Mike de Leon, and lead performer Rafael Roco Jr.) associated with it; *Miguelito* displayed the range and extent of Brocka's discipline in being able to pick up from what he had left off more than a decade earlier, improving on a better-forgotten first attempt in *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang*; *Orapronobis*, for its part, has drawn directly from a number of impassioned works but responded to the need to depart from a scantiness of details and devices on the one hand and a surfeit of bathos on the other.

Of particular interest in this last instance is *Bayan Ko* (*Kapit sa Patalim*), the previous collaboration between Brocka and *Orapronobis*'s writer Jose F. Lacaba. Released locally the same year as *Miguelito*, *Bayan Ko* managed to ride a crest of sentiment swollen by the anti-dictatorship movement (which had resulted in the temporary interdiction of the movie and incarceration of its director), sufficient to surpass in critical attention not just its superior contemporary but also a number of other better works. Ironically the 1986 revolution, in negating *Bayan Ko*'s source of suffering, did the same to its artistic *raison d'être*, in effect allowing its basic thematic weakness of justifying both proletarian nobility and lumpenist imperatives in the same character to now become a commanding concern. Such historical reversals may soon similarly obtain in the case of *Orapronobis*, but in the opposite direction. Reviled, at least in certain quarters, where *Bayan Ko* was admired, the current opus will definitely be capable of prevailing on its own merits as film – that is, if it manages to survive what is turning out to be typical establishment resistance to its divulgence of disillusionment and dissent.

The achievement is all the more noteworthy when one considers that *Bayan Ko* essentially constituted a throwback to *Maynila*, in the sense that the intention was for the viewer's perception of reality to be transformed after the viewing experience; no plastic manipulations were imposed on reality as raw material, and at one point the action was in fact transposed to an ongoing protest march, rather than, as in *Maynila*, the march being staged for more effective filmic exploitation. Comparatively, *Orapronobis* consigns documentary events onscreen to the onslaught of a narrative which has drawn voraciously from known facts – hence sandwiching the presentation between history, on the one hand, and realistic imagery, on the other. The method would be daring for those who happen to share the movie's conclusions, but even those who don't will have to admit that cleverness of a high order is involved herein: the post-experiential transformation of reality may or may not take place, depending upon one's ideological position, but in the meantime an alteration has already been accomplished, facilitated by the act of viewing itself, and the return to a stance of disagreement would require a strong (and possibly disturbing) triumph of the will.

The matter becomes clearer when one reduces *Orapronobis* to its most basic level of argumentation. All possible worst-scenario charges against the existing political dispensation are stacked up front, crowding out in the end any possible apology (as represented by the lead character's initial frame of mind) for even the minutest offense. There is nothing really dramatic about this sort of attitude: in fact the only motivation, if we may extend our definition, allowed the main antagonist is that he suffers from a psychosis stemming from a lethal combination of colonialism, religiosity, and machismo. Yet in a schematic way the movie manages to convey a cautionary world-view that surpasses even the commonplace businesses that it purports to treat. If domestic relationships are regarded, as well they may be in Philippine culture, as basis for an ideal, then the movie's protagonists can be seen to function in a context not far removed from the potential for abusiveness and callousness that their enemies have gone over into. The lead's underground contact turns out to be a hit man who targets a policeman shown as having a family of his own (cf. the more exploitative treatment of this recent urban-guerrilla strategy in the previous Brocka international release, *Macho Dancer*); more saliently, the lead himself ultimately abandons his wife and newborn child to rejoin the underground movement, more in retaliation for the death of his illegitimate family than from any need for personal security.

The performances constitute a vital aspect in delineating this state of affairs. The legal wife's predicament works only in retrospect mainly because Dina Bonnevie, despite a strong presence, loses out to the skills of Gina Alajar, who may originally have been intended as a foil, an impetus to the male lead's change of heart, but actually succeeds in becoming a dominating figure in the movie through the sheer resplendency of her portrayal. Phillip Salvador is for once given again the opportunity to work with a fully rounded character, this time smoothing out the rough edges



servable in *Jaguar* (his first film and the first Brocka-Lacaba collaboration, with co-writer Ricardo Lee). *Jaguar* though would be more instructive than coincidental this time around: here the antagonist, unlike that of Bembol Roco in *Orapronobis*, is treated with enough sympathy to create an involving conflict between him and the title character.

Hence the means by which *Orapronobis* elicits audience alertness is not so much representational as technical. It would be valid, though somewhat pedantic, to say that montage is actually the main actor in the movie – the engrossing alternation between romanticism and paranoia, the intricate correlation between imagery and anxiety, and finally the successful transmutation of symbols of personal comfort (religion, politics, even escapist cinema) into objects of social menace. When an editor – actually three of them in the opening credits – doesn't hesitate to use jump cuts to compress time, then she or he knows and appreciates her or his film language; but when she or he uses them to facilitate transitions and make narrative commentaries in the process (as in the use of the religious-icon insert in the final rape scene), then she or he has progressed beyond film language to imaginative storytelling. Mature editorial judgments resist the usual confinements of style and genre; although essentially a political thriller, with several shots timed at split-seconds, *Orapronobis*'s climax comprises a series of prolonged takes, the longest of which consists of an excruciating yet exhilarating slow zoom into the lead character rocking his dead son in church.

It may be said, on the basis of *Orapronobis*, that an aspect of Brocka's artistic persona may have died along with his long-time cinematographer Conrado Baltazar. Gone are the cavernous compositions and light-and-shadow interplay that used to suggest more than what the script was capable of conveying. This is not to say, however, that Brocka has merely returned to the functionalism of his early, pre-Tinimbang Ka movies. What the latest work suggests is that the director has become more confident with the tools of his medium and may now pay more attention to how these can be made to serve the purposes of straightforward storytelling – not in the manner of recreating history in terms of imagery or narratory momentum, but through the realization of a vision whose relationship with actualities becomes secondary to its awareness of and approach to film. All told, *Orapronobis* bodes both ways for Philippine cinema in the next decade – or what we should all hope to be another Golden Age, if not a continuation of the previous one. It confirms the increasing technical sophistication of Filipino filmmakers even as it dares to challenge and reverse popular notions of existing reality. What ought to be anticipated is the reflexive backlash against such an appropriation of what has long been the jurisdiction of social institutions, rather than entertainment industries: the privilege to uphold or change values or attitudes. No doubt experience has proved that artists do it better, and less painfully besides, but then it's the other types who maintain positions of influence in the end.

As for the particular artist behind *Orapronobis*, the time may well be near when a Brocka film could be appreciated fully on its own, rather than as part of an indispensable body of work, no matter how impressively sustained the individual entries may be. In this regard a long-time lesson from that part of the world where he has been introduced to the global film community could serve as appropriate starting point. Not long before Lino Brocka began making films, the French managed to prove, first in theory and then in New-Wave practice, that several styles may be successfully combined in singular works, which in turn would be limited only by their filmmakers' command of the styles being used. When the next major Brocka movie would be putting to use in one summarist masterpiece his accumulation of skills through the years, instead of the pursuit of too-distinctive modes of expression and content, might just be one of the more welcome developments in the near future of Philippine cinema.

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[Back to top](#)

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Teacher, scholar, & gadfly of film, media, & culture. [Photo of Kiehl courtesy of Danny Y. & Vanny P.]  
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