

A Review of Rolando B. Tolentino's *Contestable Nation-Space: Cinema, Cultural Politics and Transnationalism in the Marcos- Brocka Philippines*

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Rolando B. Tolentino's *Contestable Nation-Space: Cinema, Cultural Politics and Transnationalism in the Marcos-Brocka Philippines* offers a very complex narrative of how cinema becomes a technology that both reproduces and contests national fantasies of development. Tolentino locates it in the body of works of Lino Brocka, examining the socio-economic and historical conditions for many of the dominant themes in the political cinema of the filmmaker, while also juxtaposing it against Martial Law's image-machines of nation-building.

The book title's use of "Marcos-Brocka" to name a particular historico-cultural conjuncture of Philippine politics and cinema may at first glance appear to be a provocative strategy borne out of auteurism that is still dominant in contemporary film scholarship. However, the deployment of these names to discuss and explore failed modernity and development projects and the role of national cinema in the Third World are much more complicated than what auteur theory or criticism provide. In fact, in the early chapters of the book, the author rejects the author-centric methods to analyze Brocka's works, and instead looks at the filmmaker and his corpus as both "incidental and integral" in understanding the often fraught relationship of Brocka's films and the Martial Law regime (Tolentino, 2014).

For Joel David (2017), this has dire consequences in examining "manifold quirks and contradictions" that the director and his films present in Tolentino's seemingly neat narrative that "effectively positions Brocka as

David against Marcos' Goliath-like monstrosity" (p. 113). David points out how such strategy also dismisses Brocka's conservatism in his youth, the director's own influence in the local film industry, and his films' problematic portrayal of queer and Chinese-Filipinos. He is certainly correct that these anecdotes and filmic close readings are necessary and could have provided a much more nuanced reading into the director. After all, Brocka's and his corpus' flip-flopping of queer and activist ideologies reflect the very transformations happening on the ground only confirm Tolentino's complex examination of various shifts in the cultural politics at work in Philippine cinema before, during, and after Martial Law.

But Tolentino's admirable film scholarship has constantly veered away from dominant auteurist methods, and *Contestable Nation-State* only shows the trademark analytics of Tolentino's "wild semiotics" (as labelled by U Eliserio in his review of another book of the author) — the brief anecdotes and short snippets of textual analysis become palimpsests of outside texts of social, historical, and economic notes of film production and national politics at play in the global movements of capital and goods (Eliserio, 2017).

The first chapter summarizes the book's main arguments by talking about how visual imaginaries of the city, family, body, and sexuality in Brocka's films become counter-narratives or counter-desiring machines against the Philippine nation-space articulated and imagined by Marcos' regime. In this chapter, Tolentino shows how the filmmaker's corpus can become the nexus of analyzing the contradictory representations and fantasies of development and globalization during Martial Law. By briefly talking about *Jaguar* (Brocka, 1979), Tolentino argues how the discursive space of city slums becomes the antithesis of Marcos' strong and vital republic, and how the bodies and spaces of slum dwellers become unwieldy figures and presences of uneven development in the Third World. This provides a good launching point to demonstrate how "city, family, body and sexuality have become geospaces that allow for nodal points to engage in discussion of cinema, cultural politics and transnationalism" (Tolentino, 2014 p. 42).

The second chapter lays the foundation for working concepts that binds Tolentino's (2014) exploration of Brocka-Marcos cultural studies: insularity and worlding (through Jamesonian national allegory and cognitive mapping). The author first acknowledges that Philippine cinema is "insular," not just in terms of filmic production and market, but also as a way of describing the "libidinal economy" that relies on "the notion of the familiar and parochial... to sustain cinema in the Philippines" (p. 53). Because of this, Tolentino argues for the need to incorporate this insularity to explore "the familiar in the local as situated in the global," providing an approach that "works out issues of the

transitional and multinational, colonial and imperial, and postmodern and postcolonial” (p. 59). By reframing insularity this way, Tolentino does not just expand the critique of nativism and parochialism inherent in Philippine cultural production in general, but also dovetails into his own theoretical retrofitting of Fredric Jameson’s national allegory and cognitive mapping: where the examination of “certain film style, content, and form symptomatic of national character” is sustained by “foregrounding the Philippines and the contours of modernity as experienced outside the center” (pp. 72). This discursive strategy allows the author to be able to push the boundaries of his filmic analyses and immediately project them as critical intervention and interrogation of national and transnational economic, social and cultural policies. It forces interesting intertextual and intersectional connections where they have not previously been imagined to exist.

Chapters 3 to 5 are the crux of the book, providing succinct analyses of the books’ major three critical themes: the city space, the family, and sexuality. The third chapter zooms in on *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (Brocka, 1979) to talk about the colonial and postcolonial structuring and restructuring of Manila. In this chapter, Tolentino skillfully examines how Manila’s slum colonies and characters like Julio Madiaga become abject spaces and subjects of global capital restructuring and developmental strategies.

In the fourth chapter, the author exposes the underlying problems and progressive possibilities of family and the familiar in small-town films *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (Brocka, 1974) and *Miguelito: Batang Rebelde* (Brocka, 1986), and melodramas *Bona* (Brocka, 1976) and *Insiang* (Brocka, 1980). Tolentino (2014) demonstrates the incestuous in “late capital operations of family, community and nation” (p. 209) and how it consolidates and wield power during Martial Law regime. In his analysis of the two small-town films, he reveals how transcripts (jokes, gossips, etc.) become tactics of resistance against master narratives of authoritarianism, nationalism, and modernization. Towards the end of the chapter, Tolentino centers on the figure of women and the power of melodrama in contesting national narratives. He contrasts political subjects Imelda Marcos and Cory Aquino against subaltern entities like Bona and Insiang as counterpoints of highly-gendered *Inang-bayan* [motherland] discourse, highlighting the problematic appropriations of women and their bodies into political and national melodramas.

The fifth chapter focuses on discourses and counter-discourses of sexuality under the Marcos regime, by looking into transgressive figures of sex workers and transvestites in the films *Macho Dancer* (Brocka, 1989), *White Slavery* (Brocka, 1985), and *Ang Tatay kong Nanay* (Brocka, 1978).

These foregrounded the body politics of Marcos' fascist rule by studying the master narratives of the Marcoses' disciplining of bodies, desires, and sexuality through the power couples' projection, militarism, and surveillance. He argues that prostitution reveals the peripheralization of bodies, becoming subjects of further rule and control even as they fall away from, and become excess, of modernity and development, as evinced by Brocka's sex worker films. Tolentino closes this chapter by studying the transgressions of transvestites, how they perform and negotiate the lines of gender and class. He claims that the figure of the transvestite in Brocka's *Ang Tatay Kong Nanay* (1978) is an ambivalent mark that is both constrained by nation-building spectacles' strategies of containment, while also trespassing lines of gender, sexuality, and class through his transgressive desires and practices.

The last chapter moves away from Brocka's films and instead shifts to documentaries about Brocka to discuss the filmmaker himself. Here, Tolentino (2014) rehearses the various critical conversations and debates on Third World and Third World cinema to position Brocka as an international auteur. The chapter problematizes both the resistance of Brocka as "antithetical artist of Third World" (p. 209) against Marcos and his apparent complicity in the "Third Worlding of Philippines": projecting images of poverty to both contradict the nation-building imaginary of Martial Law and repackage his work as Third World film commodities in international festivals.

From here, *Contestable Nation-Space* (Tolentino, 2014) concludes by shoring up the difficulty of properly representing the Philippine cinema. Tolentino made such an attempt by looking at both the insular and Third World politics of Brocka's films, putting into high relief the salience of the cityscape, family, and sexuality as geopolitical nodes of the national and transnational in Philippine films. The whole book is an ambitious project, conjuring Brocka and rupturing his figure and corpus into various texts where the manifold issues of cultural politics of Third World, uneven globalization, film production, and festivals productively intersect.

The book closes where the original manuscript ended. It should then be noted that *Contestable Nation-Space* originates from Tolentino's doctoral dissertation more than twenty years ago, and it almost follows the content and 7-chapter structure of the original manuscript, with the exception of an addendum which is the book's Introduction: "Lino Brocka and the Legacy of Political Cinema." In this thought provoking supplement, Tolentino gives out preliminary reflections on the emergence of two of the most prominent local film "movements": the OCW (overseas contractual work) film genre, and independent digital films. This small addendum could have easily been

expanded into new sections on Marcos and Brocka's specters on OCW films and indie cinema, examining the legacies of Brocka's films and Martial Law in ushering both the Third Golden Age of Philippine Cinema, via the proliferation and mainstreaming of independent digital films; and the phenomenon of OCW in Philippine contemporary cultural politics.

In small doses, the book briefly discusses digital filmmaking (especially the work of Kidlat Tahimik and some new directors) and OFW films (in particular, Joel Lamangan's *The Flor Contemplacion Story* and a host of other mainstream Filipino migrant movies). Tolentino himself has also written articles and book chapters about independent cinema and labor migration published in various journal articles and anthologies. That is why two full-blown chapters highlighting the enduring effects of Marcos and Brocka's works in shaping current indie and OCW films may have been Tolentino and *Contestable Nation-Space's* biggest missed opportunity.

References

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