

## Images of the Mother in Lino Brocka Films: 1970-1991 by Jose C. Gutierrez III

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*The images of the mothers in the films of Lino Brocka – a veritable auteur who used film as his medium in expressing his insights through his works from 1970 to 1991 – gravitate towards two clusters of images: 1) the mothers who struggle within the confines of their role; and 2) the mothers who question their role and affirm themselves as persons.*

*Brocka's films from 1970 to 1982 generally belong to the first cluster where the following images are identified: 1) the "ideal" mother; 2) mother as victim; and 3) the controlling matriarch. Brocka's films from 1984 to 1991 generally belong to the second cluster where the following images are fleshed out: 1) mother as transgressor of patriarchy; and 2) mother as aggressor of patriarchy.*

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### Introduction

The seminal book on the auteur, *Lino Brocka: The Artist and His Times* (1993), features various facets of Brocka – as a passionate thespian, television director, auteur filmmaker, outspoken celebrity, and political activist – and his films as the following: popular, socially relevant, critically acclaimed, within the realist aesthetic, politically daring, and of international caliber. The current study attempts to analyze Lino Brocka's films through a specific character: the mother.

Brocka, through his films, still contributes to the discourse on motherhood in Philippine culture. This study endeavors to map the transition from the primarily virginal and venerable discourse on motherhood before Brocka's era to the significantly more liberated and existential discourse on motherhood in the 1990s and the 2000s. Brocka exhibits a strong affinity for the images of the mother character. He contributes to the running discourse on motherhood in Philippine culture by integrating his artistic preference for the realist aesthetic with his work on melodrama movies — the mastery of which catapulted him to mass appeal. His films situate the mother character within the familiar grounds of melodrama but end with counter-hegemonic, counter-patriarchal statements about what a Filipino mother really is, and later, as he achieved political consciousness, what a Filipino mother should be.

While it would have been very interesting to map out the changing representations of the mother from the nascent years of cinema in the Philippines to the present, the study limits itself from 1970 to 1991 which covers the imposition of Martial Law and the whole period of Marcos' martial rule, the EDSA revolt, and the term of Cory Aquino. This period is marked by dramatic transitions in the Filipino's political and social character and behavior. The period from 1970 to 1991 also happens to coincide with the years when Lino Brocka made all of his films.

As a second filter for the study, the Brocka films that are included are those that have the mother characters as protagonists or important characters in the narrative, namely: *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (1970); *Stardoom* (1971); *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* [Weighed but Found Wanting] (1974); *Hellow Soldier* (1974); *Bukas, Madilim, Bukas* [Tomorrow the Darkness] (1974); *Maynila: Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [Manila in the Claws of Light] (1975); *Insiang* (1976); *Inay* [Mother] (1977); *Ina, Kapatid, Anak* [Mother, Sister, Daughter] (1979); *Mother Dear* (1982); *Cain at Abel* [Cain and Abel] (1982); *Adultery (Aida Macaraeg Case No. 7892)* (1984); *Miguelito: Ang Batang Rebelde*

[Miguelito: The Rebel Boy] (1985); *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* [My Country: On Knife's Edge] (1985); *Pasan Ko ang Daigdig* [I Carry the World] (1987); *Kailan Mabubugasan ang Kasalanan?* [When Will the Sin Be Washed Away?] (1989); *Orapronobis* [Fight for Us] (1989); *Sa Kabila ng Labat* [No Matter What] (1991); and *Makiusap sa Diyos* [Plead with God] (1991).

This study employs content analysis in investigating the images of the mother in Lino Brocka films. Through a cross-sectional analysis of the narratives of the said films, the study identifies and fleshes out the emergent discourses on mothers and mothering, evaluates the characterizations of the mothers, and then categorizes the resulting images thematically. The subjectivities and sociocultural positioning of the mothers from each film are then compared and contrasted with the other mother characters inside and outside their respective categories.

## The First Cluster

Brocka's films from 1970 to 1982 generally belong to the first cluster of images. Here, Brocka's familiarity and affinity with the types of mothers as portrayed in studio films, popular literature, and comic books are seen. Within this cluster, the following images are identified and fleshed out: 1) the "ideal" mother; 2) mother as victim; and 3) the controlling matriarch. Among these, the "ideal" mother is the most oppressed.

### *The "Ideal" Mother*

By accepting and internalizing the patriarchal construct of the mother as the *ilaw ng tabanan* (light of the home), the woman enters into a role that imposes strict characteristics for her not just to display but internalize. Her self-definition and self-regard are tied up to her role and identity as a mother. She even judges herself and other women from the patriarchal point of view that she has

internalized. She, the psychologically oppressed, becomes her own oppressor.

In *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (1970), Edna (Lisa Lorena) leads her children in bringing pleasure to their father. She looks and feels good all the time so that the home would be a haven for the family members. She upholds the value of love and tenderness in child-rearing, an activity that she “commonsensically” accepts as hers. She teaches her children the patriarchal values such as gender roles that she has unquestioningly accepted as true. For her, it is “common sense” to make the father feel comfortable all the time at home, for it is the man’s right to rest after a day’s work. When she suffers, she does it silently, away from the eyes and ears of her husband and children because she cannot afford to make them feel bad. She is, after all, the *ilaw ng tahanan*; a house with a less-than-bright light is not a home. For her, the thought of being tagged as a “bad mother” is unimaginable for it would shatter her identity and self-respect.

### *Mother as Victim*

The mother as victim comes next to the “ideal” mother with regard to oppression. While for the “ideal” mother the source of oppression is internal, for the victimized mother it is external in the form of: 1) the violence and cunning of men, as illustrated by Cesar’s (Eddie Garcia) forceful abortion of his baby with Kuala (Lolita Rodriguez) in *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (1974); and 2) the patriarchal demands of the society that men dominate, as exemplified by Lucia (Anita Linda), in *Hellow Soldier* (1974), who is bound to the patriarchal expectation that a mother cannot demand too much from the father of her child should he decide to leave her (see Figure 1). From the patriarchal point of view, it is deemed just for the man to leave his woman. Given that the man is rational (as opposed to the irrational woman), there is always reason in the man’s decision and society does not even require him to defend his position. Indeed, staying with the mother of his



Figure 1. Kuala (Lolita Rodriguez) regresses into madness after the traumatic death of her child.

child is the prerogative of the man who, according to patriarchal ideology, is naturally free. Thus, when the American father of Lucia's child leaves, the mother is left with no other option but to wait for him, hoping that he will have mercy on her plight as a single mother. While waiting for this to happen, however, patriarchy also expects her to devote her life to raising her child and enduring all the sufferings that come along with it.

### *The Controlling Matriarch*

The controlling matriarch also struggles within the confines of her role as mother. Superficially, the matriarch has power over people, objects, and objectified people, but this is never stable. The matriarch merely took over the properties left by the father. She therefore strains to maintain the volatile stability of her "realm". She masks her insecurity amidst the patriarchal society that negatively frames her as a borrower of power by controlling her children either through overt meddling or emotional manipulation. As women, these mothers are made helpless by patriarchy all their lives. After their own husbands pass away, their helplessness is intensified as the mothers take on the role of the father. To come

to terms with this, the mother therefore tries to gain control of her son or daughter so that using the younger person – essentially the mother’s extension – she can survive with a sense of power, no matter how illusory or volatile it really is.

The matriarch strives to gain efficacy by living her dreams through her child, objectifying her child through emotional manipulation, meddling in her adult children’s personal lives, and constantly guarding her house and the people in it.

Toyang (Lolita Rodriguez) in *Stardoom* (1971) obsessively pursues her lifelong effort in mothering her favored son Joey. In this film, the patriarchal image of the mother who uses her child to grapple with her personal frustration comes into play. The mother uses her son to live her own dreams. Toyang’s “unconditional love” involves an element of control. The mother thinks that her actions are out of love, but her underlying personal motivation is actually her personal need to control. Her behavior is a non-verbalized expression of her psyche’s underlying fears and anxieties of being a helpless woman. She has internalized her own subordination in a patriarchal society that leaves a woman with limited choices in grappling with her personal frustration.

Aside from being overtly intrusive, the mother can also control the child, even as an adult, by using emotional manipulation. In *Bukas, Madilim, Bukas* (1974) the spectator empathizes with the daughter who is manipulated by her mother by feigning sickness to keep her daughter from leaving her. Atang (Mary Walter) further echoes the patriarchal image of the mother who uses emotion (pity and guilt) and culture (filial piety and religiosity) to prolong as much as possible her motherhood. In the process, she deprives her daughter of her own chances at motherhood. This old widow conveniently monopolizes the power in the entire house. She has properties (e.g., Virgin Mary icons, land, house, and furniture) and objects (e.g., her own daughter) that she uses to fulfill her own need for security and desire for domination. Indeed, the “common sense” notion that it is the daughter – usually the youngest – who is assigned to take care of the old parent reveals itself to be a

patriarchal value. This patriarchal value of the daughter's "sacrifice" for the sake of filial piety is so "common sense" that questioning it sounds wrong. The dominant, patriarchal point of view which every element in society has already internalized is what Atang "naturally" uses to maintain the status quo. Ironically, Atang is completely a subject of patriarchy. When her husband dies, she does not have control and eventually takes on his role as the only way to deal with her "lack" of power. As with all the mothers under patriarchy, Atang does not know how to earn a living; thus, her child should take care of her when she is old. Atang has completely internalized and personified the values of patriarchy.

In *Inay* (1977), the character of Inay (Alicia Vergel) shows one of the features of the traditional mother who is meddling (*pakialamera*). As described by Lapuz (1981), the mother zealously watches over her adult children's affairs. She perceives the world outside the home as full of moral dangers for her offspring, especially the girls. She even wants to know what goes on in her adult children's minds in order to prevent mistakes. Indeed, Inay's attempts at meddling in her daughter's life exemplify her propensity to gain access to the private lives of her adult children.

The mother, as a matriarch who maintains her self-esteem and sense of power, feels safe in objects within her turf. These objects primarily include her child and her house. The matriarch feels insecure when the control of her house is compromised, as in the case of Emilia in *Ina, Kapatid, Anak* (1979). When her sister Pura makes plans of selling it, the matriarch feels doubly angry when she feels that her child is being taken away from her. Emilia's daughter Erlinda becomes a prize – the crucial object – in the war between the sisters (see Figure 2).

## The Second Cluster

After Brocka's incarceration for 16 days in 1984, his works became braver and more daring. This marks the point that sets off the



Figure 2. Emilia (Charito Solis) tells her daughter Erlinda (Rio Locsin) to return the makeup kit to Pura (Lolita Rodriguez).

second cluster of images of the mothers in Brocka's later films. This time, Brocka wields the power of his artistry in the genre of melodrama and his masterful characterizations of the mother to reflect this political insight into images that communicate not just to the hearts but also to the minds – not just emotions but consciousness as well – of the Filipino viewing public. Brocka does more than describe the Filipino mother; he proceeds to analyze and prescribe more progressive images of the mother and the concrete actions that she can take in a male-dominated society where she struggles to assert herself as her own, free person.

Brocka's films from 1984 to 1991 generally belong to the second cluster of images. Two images – the mother as transgressor and aggressor of patriarchy – are identified and fleshed out from the cluster of images of the mothers who question their role and affirm themselves as persons in Brocka's later films.



*Transgressor of Patriarchy*

The transgressive mothers question patriarchy by challenging the “common sense” patriarchal demand that the mother’s desire is confined to her husband and children. These mothers challenge the notion that when they express their personal desires – in essence, affirming themselves as persons – they break the acceptable code of behavior for women and should therefore be punished. These mothers therefore attempt to break away from the confines of their role as mother. The expression of their desire as individuals becomes natural for them. They use their desire – whether in sex, career, or decision-making – to develop and complete themselves as independent individuals. By expressing their desires, the transgressive mothers question the confines that patriarchal expectation imposes on them as mothers and women. By testing and cross-examining the arbitrary limits that patriarchy, through culture, sets for the mother, the woman transgresses social expectation and eludes judgment based on black-and-white morality. This image of the mother marks the start of the woman’s rebellion against patriarchy.

These mothers challenge patriarchy by openly expressing her sexual desire and refusing to judge themselves from the patriarchal point of view that categorizes women as either “pure” or “loose” and mothers as either “good” or “bad.” The transgressive mother also declines to take it upon herself to protect her daughter’s innocence at the expense of the truth. She also refuses martyrdom and struggles for power with men both in the domestic and the larger social spheres.

By deciding to employ the services of a younger man whose erect penis she uses to serve her sexual needs as a woman, Beatrice (Pilar Pilapil), in *Kailan Mabuhugasan ang Kasalanan?* (1989), symbolically castrates her impotent husband. She overturns the patriarchal ideology that places the burden of fertility on the woman and blames her tremendously if she cannot conceive a child. In an argument with her husband, Beatrice blurts out, “*Ako*



Figure 3. Beatrice (Pilar Pilapil) with her lover Douglas (Gino Antonio).

*rin, gusto ko rin ng pamilya! Magsisimba ako, lulubod ako, dadapa ako, at tutuwad ako, para magkapamilya lamang.”* (I also want to have a family. I will go to church, kneel, get down, even bend on all fours, just to have a family.) The wife derides her husband for his impotence. She takes it against her husband who essentially deprives her of the motherhood that she personally desires. This subverts the patriarchal idea of the all-powerful phallus. She uses her words to castrate her husband even more. Through her words and the unfortunate circumstance of her husband’s impotence, she asserts her power over him (see Figure 3).

When Aida (Vilma Santos), in *Adultery (Aida Macaraeg Case No. 7892)* (1984), offends the pride of her husband, he invokes the law to punish her. This mother, however, does not just accept the status quo. She actively fights for her rights – up to the extent possible for a woman judged by men – within the four walls of the courtroom which is ruled by patriarchal ideology. The mother finally reunites with her son in the end, notably, not because

her husband pities her, but because her husband understands her as a person who fights for her rights.

In *Sa Kabila ng Lahat* (1991), Maia (Dina Bonnevie) transgresses the patriarchal imposition that a woman should never compromise her purity and the moral boundaries of her culture in order for her to get what she wants. In the patriarchal point of view, the woman should just wait for the support of either her husband or her father. She cannot use her body and her capacity to give pleasure to a man to serve her own end. As a transgressor, she is judged harshly as an unclean woman, a bitch, a prostitute. In this film, Maia's actions are determined by the value system that patriarchy endorses for the woman to internalize. She is a bitchy *femme fatale* who uses her body in order for her and her daughter to survive within the corrupt system of local politics in Manila. To do this, she plays with the games that men play. She is not naïve. She is not just manipulated by men; she also manipulates them. To uphold her pragmatic and utilitarian orientation, she refuses to judge herself based on the point of view of men and the institutions – religion, law, and “common sense” ethics – that they have infiltrated ideologically. She builds trust with men. She also destroys this so that she can have a fair share of power with them. Otherwise, she will merely be an object to men. She refuses to be objectified in a “loving” relationship between a man and his mistress.

#### *Aggressor of Patriarchy*

As the aggressor of patriarchy, the mother directly confronts not just her husband or father but the dominant patriarchal system itself. The mother, as a person, demands justice that is due to her. She also proceeds to search for social justice in the collective of which she, her husband, and children are part. She does not limit her energy to the family; for her, the family and the collective are not distinct spheres. Indeed, the personal is also the political.

In the film *Miguelito: Ang Batang Rebelde* (1985), after Auring's (Nida Blanca) release from prison, she returns to the small town primarily to demand retribution from Mayor Ven and his cohorts, not just to look for her son and continue her thwarted motherhood. She asserts herself as her own person to whom justice is due. She exacts justice even if it may mean that her son will be implicated in battle. For Auring, blind forgiveness is out of the question. What she wants is retribution for the injustice that she suffered. She is not a self-sacrificing mother for her son. As her own person who deserves dignity, she declares war so that her son will know the history of her oppression. She was a victim of the small town's fear of the mayor and the connivance of his men. Unlike Kuala whose violent abortion results in regression to unconsciousness, Auring's incarceration results in an understanding of the structure and dynamics of power in society. When Auring returns to the small town, she refuses to be a victim by her disavowal of fear that gripped her in the past and now still grips the whole town. The mother is proactive in her personal crusade (see Figure 4).

Auring confronts each of the mayor's men who all conspired against her in the past. She first confronts the judge who betrayed her 15 years ago because he was paid by her former lover Ven. He asks her, "*Ano ba ang kailangan mo sa akin?*" (What do you want from me?) She tells him with conviction, "*Ang karapatan ko. Ang karapatan kong ipinagkait niyo sa akin!*" (My right. The right that you deprived from me.) She tells him that she is resolved to have the case reopened. He tells her that the case is already moot and academic because she has already served her sentence. She vehemently asserts that what she wants is "*Tbangon ang karangalan sa harap ng diyos at sa harap ng tao! Hindi ako kriminal!*" (Redeem the the honor in front of god and the people! I am not a criminal!) She refuses the judge's offer to help her find a job in Manila. She also pronounces that the reason that she returned is that she wants to see her son Miguelito. He tells her that Miguelito's life will be disturbed. She retorts, "*Nagulo rin ang bubay ko!*" (My life was also ruined!)



Figure 4. Auring (Nida Blanca) demands personal justice.

Luz (Gina Alajar), in *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (1985), as a mother-to-be, upholds her sense of self as an activist. She does not use her pregnancy as an excuse to participate in collective action. She openly expresses her will to join the struggle of workers who arrive at their home. Ka Ador, the eldest of the workers, explains the purpose of their visit. The old man tells Luz and her husband Turing that it is now time to act as one so that they can collectively demand for their rights as workers. He invites Turing to join them. Ka Ador tells Luz that they are not inviting her right now because she is currently not in the printing press. Luz tells Ka Ador, “*Sayang nga ho eh, kung pwede lang sana.*” (It’s really unfortunate, if only I can.) The woman’s advocacy for activism is tenacious. Luz listens attentively as the conversation continues. Ka Ador asks Turing, “*Maaasaban ka ba namin?*” (Can we count on you?) Turing tells Ka Ador, “*Kilala n’yo naman ako eh, kaisa sa damdamin. [. . .] Unawain ho nyo sana ako, buntis si Luz.*” (You know me, I sympathize... But please understand me, Luz is

pregnant.) Luz quickly responds, “*Turing kung ako lang ang inaalala mo.*” (Turing, if I’m the only one you’re worried about.) Turing then reveals that he has already signed a waiver that proves that he is not a member of any workers union. Luz is silent as she is her husband’s wife and friend, but the spectators can clearly see the disappointment in her eyes. Later, at the hospital room Luz clutches her newborn baby. Turing relates to her that he chanced upon a former co-worker on his way to the hospital. Luz expresses her progressive concern about her co-workers: “*Eh yung kaso nila? Akala ko ba magdedemanda?*” (What about their case? I thought they will file charges?) Her being a mother does not automatically transform her worldview; she maintains her sense of self, her identity, and her convictions. She continues that it may take a while but they can still win their case. Turing tells his wife, who is now a mother, “*Wag mo nang problemahin ‘yun. Tayo nga ‘tong mabigat ang problema.*” (Don’t think about their problem. We have a big problem.) For this woman, who now happens to be a mother too, the problems of others also concern her; their fight is also her fight. Being a mother does not make her mind and heart exclusive to her child (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Luz (Gina Alajar) has just become a mother.

For Esper (Gina Alajar), in *Orapronobis* (1989), her identity as a person is not merely defined by her motherhood, her being an activist, or by any aspect of her personhood for that matter. The said two aspects of her personhood co-exist with each other both in terms of body and discourse. The Orapronobis attacks the small town. Jimmy, Esper, Sister Marie, and some press people arrive near Esper's house. Kumander (Commander) Kontra confronts the group. Esper hears the cries of her children. She very discretely looks to the direction of the sound. The mother does not let go of reason; she does not hysterically run toward her children. Esper masks her anxiety as a mother because she knows that she should maintain her composure, for the safety of her children, the group that she is with, and herself. Esper is brought to the lair of the Orapronobis. The mother sees her child and says, "Camilo. *Anak ko...*" (My child.) Esper's father, who is among the captives, sees her daughter. Esper is brought to Kumander Kontra in a room that has a very conspicuous altar. Kumander Kontra drinks from a glass on a table. On the wall are mounted a picture of Ferdinand Marcos, a picture of Rambo, and an American flag. Kumander Kontra speaks of light and darkness. Esper is tenacious. Kumander Kontra yells, "*Putangina ka!*" (You whore!) He contemptuously tells her that he will not give her the *mahiwagang kaalaman* (mysterious knowledge). He continues, "*Bibigyan kita ng kaligayaban. Higit pa sa binigay ng asawa mo.*" (I will give you pleasure. Even more than what your husband gave you.) Kumander Kontra rapes the mother in front of an image of Jesus. After Kumander Kontra is satisfied, he says, "*Dyango ikaw naman.*" (Your turn, Dyango.) Camilo strikes Kumander Kontra with his plastic sword. Kontra shoots Camilo. Esper seizes Dyango's gun and shoots Kumander Kontra, the very embodiment of oppression. The mother's act asserts that the personal is also the political. Indeed, the mother's fight begins from the domestic sphere and naturally culminates to the larger power dynamics and struggle in society. A couple of bullets hit the picture of Ferdinand Marcos mounted on

the wall. The injured Kumander Kontra picks up a machine gun and shoots Esper.

### One of Brocka's Greatest Legacies to the Filipino People

On May 21, 1991, Lino Brocka died in a car accident. In Filipino films before Brocka's era, the images of the mothers are patterned after and judged against the image of "Mama Mary"; the mothers in *Tunay na Ina* (Silos, 1939) and *Biyaya ng Lupa* (1959) are pure, virginal, all-suffering, and venerable. On the other hand, in Filipino films in the 1990s onward, such as *Batang PX* (Reyes, 1997), *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* (Roño, 1998), *Anak* (Quintos, 2000), *Mudraks* (Badayos & Guzman, 2006), and *Inang Yaya* (Biglangawa & Velasco, 2006), the mothers become real, specific, and considerably more liberated women who are judged by their merits as persons coping with the new challenges that they and their children face. Now, they openly recognize that they have needs beyond the admiration and adoration of their children. They even "dare" question the very naturalness of the sociocultural confines that the discourse on motherhood imposes on their personhood. In *Anak* (2000), Josie (Vilma Santos) voices out:

*Bakit gano'n? Ang lalaki kapag binigyan niya ang pamilya niya ng pagkain, damit, bahay, tapos napag-aral niya ang mga anak niya, ang sasabihin ng mga tao, aba, mabusay siyang ama. Pero kapag babae ka, kabit ibinigay mo na ang labat ng iyo sa mga anak mo, kasama pa pati puso, pati kaluluwa mo, parang hindi pa rin sapat na tawagin ka na mabuting ina. Sana pwede natin sabihing, oops, tama na. Hanggang d'yan na lang ang pagiging nanay ko. Kasi kabit nanay ka, nakakapagod din, 'di ba?*

(Why is it like that? When a man gives his family food, clothing, a house, and sends his children to school, people describe him as a good father. But if you're a woman,



even if you've given everything to your children, including your heart and your soul, it seems that these are not enough for you to be called a good mother. I wish we could say, oops, that's enough. My being a mother ceases at this point. Because, even as a mom, you also get tired, right?)

Lino Brocka opened doors for Filipino mothers in cinema. Brocka's films from 1970 to 1991 project the image of the mother as a person with her own history and social context that resist the judgment of black-and-white morality. Progressively, the mother possesses the personal will to express her desires, to demand her own justice, and to determine her own identity and future that are not entirely determined by her father, husband, or even children. Brocka's films significantly challenge the traditional characterization of the mother as weak-willed, self-sacrificing, and long-suffering. The films of Lino Brocka situate her in narratives that make her struggle with and ultimately question the confines that her role as a mother imposes on her personhood. The resulting images of the mothers pave the way to more liberated characterizations, visualizations, narratives, and representations of the mothers in Philippine Cinema. Certainly, this is one of Brocka's greatest legacies to the Filipino people.

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