

## Lukács, Kracauer, and Lino Brocka's *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1975)

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This essay will first present a description of the realist film based on notions of cinematic realism by Georg Lukács and Siegfried Kracauer. It will then affirm the cinema of Lino Brocka as being realist. Lastly, it will discuss *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [*Manila in the Claws of Light*] (Brocka, 1975) in terms of cinematic realism shaped by ideas proposed by Lukács and Kracauer, and Brocka's own statements as artist and activist.

Drawing on the ideas of Kracauer and Lukács, a realist film can be characterized as seeking redemption from the damaged modern condition by cinematically foregrounding the humanity of the ordinary man, who is organically grounded in physical reality.

### Damaged Modern Condition

Both Kracauer and Lukács were influenced by the conception of modernity—fostered by thinkers such as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Edmund Husserl, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel and the neo-Kantian revival (Aitken, 2012)—coupled with the tradition of “romantic anti-capitalist” thought (Löwy, 1989, p. 189). This conception of modernity entails that dominant players in the modern world forward the demands of, as Weber called it, “instrumental rationality” (Aitken, 2012, p. 4), resulting in human alienation and subjugation to manipulative ideologies (Aitken, 2001). According to Kracauer, symptomatic of this condition is a pervasive state of abstraction, in which the immediate experience of the physical environment as an object of

contemplation for the modern subject, is sharply abridged (Kracauer, 1960; Aitken, 2006). In modern capitalist society, the inculcation of the dominant ideology is fostered by a form of culture Kracauer referred to as the “mass ornament,” (Aitken, 2001, p. 170) which includes the cinema. Kracauer asserted that this “aesthetic reflex” (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 70) of the dominant social rationality results in the modern subject’s “distracted” relationship with the world (Kracauer, 1960). This complements the previously discussed abstraction—state characterized as a sterile encounter between the self and the world (Rodowick, 1991)—indicating the “damaged condition of modernity” (Kracauer, 1987, p. 94).

The dominant cinema of distraction and manipulative ideology opposes the ideal notion of cinema described by Lukács, who adapted Georg Simmel’s concept of “objectification” as the process whereby man fashions objects for the purpose of personal “self-cultivation” (Arato, 1971, p. 130). This ideal notion of cinema as an act of “objectification” means that, as a created object, it embodies the totality of man’s vision and needs (Arato, 1971). Lukács proposed that cinema redeems the ordinary person from the “damaged condition,” whereas Kracauer contended that engagement with physical reality redeems cinema and the spectatorial experience.

## **The Ordinary Man**

Lukács argued that historical change “must be seen through the eyes of ordinary, or ‘typical’ characters, rather than ‘world-historical figures’” (Aitken, 2006, p. 99). This orientation is consistent with the two central Lukácsian thematic paradigms, “(1) films which focus on instances of resistance to ideological positioning and oppression and (2) films which are concerned with totality and/or moments of elemental historical transformation” (Aitken, 2006, p. 99). In particular, the Lukácsian film must work to present a ‘new world’ to the spectator, and show both the “whole man of everyday life” and the “sense of man’s wholeness” (Aitken, 2006, p. 100). The Lukácsian film therefore must be rooted in social orientation and must possess an unremittingly social critical attitude, an imperative driven by the fundamental Lukácsian principle of “the need to connect the particular to the general, in order to express the totality” (Aitken, 2006, p. 100).

## **Physical Reality**

For Kracauer (1960), film transcends the abstraction that is inherent in modern society and reinforced by forms and aesthetics of an escapist—“mass ornament”—cinema by disclosing the sensuous and ephemeral surface of reality. He asserted that the true value of film is manifested in its potential to

redirect the spectator's attention to the texture of life, which is lost beneath the abstract discourses that regulate experience (Kracauer, 1960). Kracauer's notion of redemption begins with the medium's specificity (Hansen, 1997, p. viii). Kracauer believed that an aesthetic medium must build from its basic "properties," "affinities," and "appeals" (Aitken, 2001, p. 175). The basic property of film is its capacity for "recording" and "revealing" physical reality; its basic affinity is representing aspects of reality (Kracauer, 1960); and it is closely identified with "urban crowds, the street, things normally unseen, the small and the big, the quotidian and the marginal, the fortuitous and the ephemeral" (Hansen, 1997, p. ix), affirming "Kracauer's plea for a cinematic realism of everyday life" (p. ix). Lastly, for Kracauer (1960), the basic appeals of film are "notions of truth and authenticity congruent with the transient effects of things, and. . . notions of aesthetic beauty compatible with the perception and generation of a multiplicity of meanings" (p. 21).

### **The Realist Cinema of Lino Brocka**

Before the essay proceeds with a reading of Lino Brocka's *Manila in the Claws of Light* using the ideas stated in the previous section, it first introduces the cinema of Lino Brocka in relation to realism. In this section, the idea of cinematic realism backtracks to a more general notion, "Let us call realist a certain sensibility which feels most at home living among familiar things in their familiar places, or among persons with recognizable characters acting or suffering in comprehensible ways" (Earle, 2011, p. 25) to accommodate Brocka's more specific ideas on social reality, his film practice, and the continuing discourse of Filipino film scholars and critics on his body of work.

#### **Lino Brocka: Citizen Artist**

Filipino director Lino Brocka made over 60 films from 1970 to 1991. On 21 September 1972, then President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law, which established his dictatorship. His wife, Philippine First Lady Imelda Marcos, enacted "The True, the Good, and the Beautiful" policy for artistic expression in the country.

In 1974, along with other stockholders, Lino Brocka started his own independent film company, Cine Manila, and produced *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* [*Weighed but Found Wanting*]. The film was a box-office hit, and it debunked the prevailing notion that commerce and art do not mix (Sotto, 2010). Although Cine Manila made three films, none achieved the success of the first. This independent film outfit shortly declared bankruptcy. Brocka continued making films for mainstream film outfits. In fact, most of his films were made under the commercial mode of film production.

Brocka relentlessly tried to entertain his audience and, whenever possible, incorporated his vision of a society in turmoil and the effects of social and political environment on the individual (Hernando, 1993). He rode the commercial tide and weathered the ups and downs of the film industry (Hernando, 1993), however, even working on commercial projects, Brocka “could not escape his need as an artist to possess integrity, project his vision clearly, and make his work more interesting” (p. 41).

Following the assassination of one of the most articulate opponents of Ferdinand Marcos, senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino on 21 August 1983, Brocka began speaking at rallies in Manila and in the provinces. He became more vocal about government censorship of movies, which he considered a serious hindrance to artistic development (Hernando, 1993). In the same year, Brocka formed the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP), an organization he chaired for two years. He believed that artists were citizens first and foremost and must address issues confronting the country (Hernando, 1993). *Jeepney* (local public transportation) drivers supported CAP and Brocka in an anti-censorship rally; in return, they supported the Jeepney Drivers’ Association strike. Brocka was then arrested and jailed for 16 days (Hernando, 1993).

### Cinema as Mirror that Confronts Reality

As soon as Brocka was released, he resumed making movies. In an early interview, Brocka related that he used to think of cinema as a mirror reflecting reality; however, after his incarceration, the activist-filmmaker’s views changed. He declared that cinema is a “mirror that confronts the people with the reality of their human condition, and this reality is my responsibility as director to show on screen” (Del Carmen, 1983, p. 29). He talked about the responsibilities of the artist during his acceptance speech for the 1985 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts:

The filmmaker, like his peers in the other media, now realizes that the artist is also a public person. He no longer isolates himself from society. Instead of working in his ivory tower he is a citizen of the slums, of the streets, of the battlefields if need be. The artist is becoming a participant. He tries to be true, not only to his craft but also to himself. . . . To the best of our abilities, and even if we often times fail, we must produce films that will hurt, films that will disturb, films that will not let you rest. For the times are bad and, given times like these, it is a crime to rest. . . . Although it is the duty of

the artist to work for what is true, good and beautiful, first we must expose and fight what is wrong (Hernando, 1993, p. 205).

The “Second Golden Age” (David, 1990, p. 3) of Philippine cinema—from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, which marked “a return to realism and social commentary not seen since the late 1950s” (Vick, 2007, p. 230)—was spearheaded by Brocka, who “created works that powerfully and sensitively showed the lives of the Philippines’ rural and urban poor” (p. 230). Brocka’s death by car accident in 1991 “left a void in Philippine cinema in what was once a clarity of vision, representation, and narrative and realist film styles so recognizable in national and international film festivals” (Tolentino, 2014, p. 8). This realist approach found expression in Brocka’s “social drama films” set in particular locales such as the slum area (e.g., *Insiang*, 1976), the small town (e.g., *Weighed but Found Wanting*, 1974), and the factory (e.g., *My Own Country*, 1985), and “reflect the national political turmoil during the Marcos dictatorship and the succeeding Aquino administration era” (Tolentino, 2001, p. 31). The characters in Brocka films, Francia (1987) notes, are:

The ragtag proletariat, struggling to stay afloat. Not consciously aware of the larger issues beyond survival and getting out of the ghetto—at the very least, Brocka’s works aren’t facile propaganda efforts for a better life—they live their lives in such a manner as to lead the viewer to draw certain disturbing conclusions about the society in general... Through Brocka’s camera we witness the day-to-day realities of the slums: the lack of water; dark, perpetually muddy alleyways; unemployed men hanging out and drinking while their women pray; and the hordes of ill-clothed children—always children milling about with no playgrounds to seek refuge in (p. 213).

Focusing on the authentic correspondences between the social milieu and the setting of the film diegesis has been noted as a prominent characteristic of the “Brocka film,” which is closely associated with the social realist genre during the 1970s to mid-1980s when Filipino film directors and scriptwriters began using the term “milieu movie” (David, 2011, p. 88). Brocka always made it a point to shoot on location. In an interview in Christian Blackwood’s *Signed: Lino Brocka* (1987), the Filipino director relayed his experience while making his first slum film in the early 1970s:

“I did my first slum picture and it got in trouble with the censors—they were banning it because it was too realistic. They would say: “You know your movies disturb. We feel uncomfortable.’ I said: ‘It’s meant to be” (Blackwood, 1987). Campos (2011) asserts that Lino Brocka’s “realist effect” was first realized in the milieu movie *Manila in the Claws of Light*, “the pioneer urban realist film” (p. 5). The film was founded on Brocka’s realist film aesthetics, one of the major characteristics being, “his inclination to choose subjects (i.e., main characters) and subject matter that resonate with the ‘real’ or ‘everyday’ way of life of slum-dwellers” (p. 5).

### **Cinematic Realism in *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1975)**

The titular film of this section is about a *provinciano* [person from the province] Julio Madiaga who comes to Manila to look for his girlfriend, Ligaya Paraiso. While pursuing his quest, Julio works several jobs in order to survive in the urban jungle.

This final section of the essay reads *Manila in the Claws of Light* using the concepts and statements discussed in previous sections.

#### **The City as Grand Illusion**

A Kracauerean cinematic realism of everyday life can be observed in the opening sequence of *Manila in the Claws of Light*. The sound of horse hooves and a visually poetic string of black-and-white images of the streets, “city symphony” style, open the film with a portrait of Manila waking up to a new day: shop owners setting up their stores, street vendors preparing their goods, bums still sleeping on the street, etc. The revving of engines,



**Figure 1.** Opening sequence of *Manila in the Claws of Light*. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).





**Figure 2.** Construction site; the “machine world.” Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).

honking of the vehicles, blaring of music from radios, and chattering of people gradually add in the audio mix as viewers watch *Manileños* go about their business: commuting to work, having breakfast in an eatery, smoking, gossiping, sitting on a gutter, etc. (figure 1, panels 1-3; note that the panels are counted from left to right, top to bottom). After a panning aerial shot of a busy street in Sta. Cruz—at the heart of Manila—(panels 4 and 5) we hear various sounds altogether in the mix, including, at this point, whistling from law enforcers. The acoustic cocktail feels violently jarring and suddenly unfamiliar to the spectator. From an extreme long aerial shot, the camera zooms in to a medium shot of a man, Julio Madiaga, breaking the documentary-like rendition of the previous sequence (panel 6). The steady shot of Julio then gradually infuses the frame with color; the film remains in color throughout its running length of 125 minutes.

The concept of instrumental rationality is illustrated in the following sequence: the camera zooms out to a high-angle long shot (figure 2, panel 1); the forceful sound of the cement-mixing machine fuses with the soundtrack; viewers enter a construction site. The purpose of the lingering, documentary-style visualization of the machines (panels 2-4; see also figure 5, panels 1-3) interspersed with scenes of humans at work is not only to establish the new milieu, but also to establish a visual metaphor for human beings as cogs in the machine manufacturing the image of the modern city. We then see Julio from a high-angle medium shot from the subjective point-of-view of the foreman, Mr. Balajadia, who tells him that his daily rate will be 2 pesos and 50 centavos. Julio reasons that his previous pay as a laborer in a construction site was 3 pesos per day. The foreman rebuffs Julio so the latter

takes the job. We see Julio as a worker (panel 5). The harsh sounds produced by the mechanical processes in the construction site are overwhelming. The only source of comfort here is Julio's co-worker who sings as he shovels gravel. Julio operates the wheelbarrow. He faints (panel 6).

### The Tragedy of the Ordinary Man

After Julio faints, his co-worker, Atong, helps him to his feet. Julio has not eaten yet. Other concerned workers gather around him. Anxious that the foreman might notice the commotion, an elder co-worker, Omeng, tells the others to get back to work. Atong offers his packed lunch to Julio. A friendship is formed. That night, we see the workers in their overcrowded quarters. For the first time in the film, the harsh sounds of the machine world are significantly diminished. A co-worker sings "Dreaming" by the Cascades in the background. We witness Julio, his new friend Atong, and the elder worker Omeng in conversation. We gather some bits of Julio's story: that he was a fisherman in the province, that he has been in Manila for 7 months now, and that he has no family in the city. Atong brings up the issue of "taywan." Emong explains the practice to Julio (figure 3, panels 1 and 2): come payday, the contractor's representative will say that the owner does not have enough money to pay the workers. He will offer to shoulder the workers' wages in exchange for a 10% cut. The workers, on a hand-to-mouth existence, have no choice but to comply. Omeng comments that it is like being fried in his own oil. Julio just listens. When Omeng stops talking and lies down, Julio's remembers Ligaya (figure 3, panels 3 and 4). Julio and Ligaya were lovers until Mrs. Cruz arrived in town and offered Ligaya a job in Manila. At this early point in the film, talk about the contractor's oppressive practice does not seem to bother the protagonist, who is only



**Figure 3.** Emong explains the oppressive practice of "taywan" to Julio. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).



interested in finding Ligaya. Later in the story, Julio becomes more inclined to, as Brocka would say, expose and fight what is wrong.

### The Personal, the Physical, the Political

The film, as an artistic medium, reveals the physical reality and texture of life in the slums where people fight for survival on a daily basis. Atong is injured at work and Julio brings him home (figure 4, panels 1-3) to the slums. The photographic nature of film—this in-your-face characteristic of the art form—visually confronts viewers with the physical reality of this milieu, and undermines both abstraction and manipulative ideology of the modern society's brand of progress that is assumed to be universally beneficial. It is ironic that these two men's bodies are exhausted due to their work constructing modern buildings, but there is no place for decent homes for them in the city. As they walk through the neighborhood, the film picks up overlapping conversations among residents of the slums. Some of them interact with the men. They ask Atong what happened to him; he tells them that he was injured at work. They tell him to be more careful. We see children running around, playing in what they consider, in their innocence, as paradise. This cinematic larger-than-life portrayal presents the immediate experience of the physical environment of the city as an object of contemplation by the modern subject. The film recreates the world through the eyes of filmmaker-artist, Brocka, an active participant-observer of the slums and of the street. Atong invites Julio for lunch in the shanty he shares with his sister, Perla, and their paralyzed father (panel 4).



**Figure 4.** The slum area where Atong lives. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).

The sight of the children playing outside (panel 5) triggers a flashback of Julio and Ligaya as childhood friends (panel 6).

Later in the film, the oppressive conditions take their toll on the protagonist, whose personal plans are impeded not necessarily by people but by societal problems such as corruption, crime, and poverty. Christmas is around the corner. Julio decides to give Perla some money. He takes Paul along with him. The two men are confronted with a tragic scene: the slum area is completely burned down (figure 5, panel 1).



**Figure 5.** Julio is a ticking time bomb. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).

They ask a female bystander about the fire and Perla (panel 2). According to the woman, the big fire broke out last night after Perla went out for work. Perla's paralyzed father was among those who perished. The woman saw Perla in an ambulance, but she does not know where Perla was taken. One afternoon, while Julio waits at his usual spot, Mrs. Cruz arrives. He follows her when she leaves and confronts her about Ligaya. Mrs. Cruz shouts for the police, claiming that Julio is trying to steal her bag (panel 3). A policeman apprehends Julio (panel 4) as Mrs. Cruz gets away. The so-called policeman turns out to be a fake. He steals Julio's money. That night, Julio and Paul drink gin at a local store. Julio is angry. A man almost trips Julio by accident;

Julio tries to pick a fight with him (panels 5-7). Paul disperses the tension, asking the two men to shake hands (panels 8 and 9). At this point, Julio has a lot of pent-up emotions. The spectators know that is ready to fight (panel



**Figure 6.** Julio and Ligaya finally meet. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).

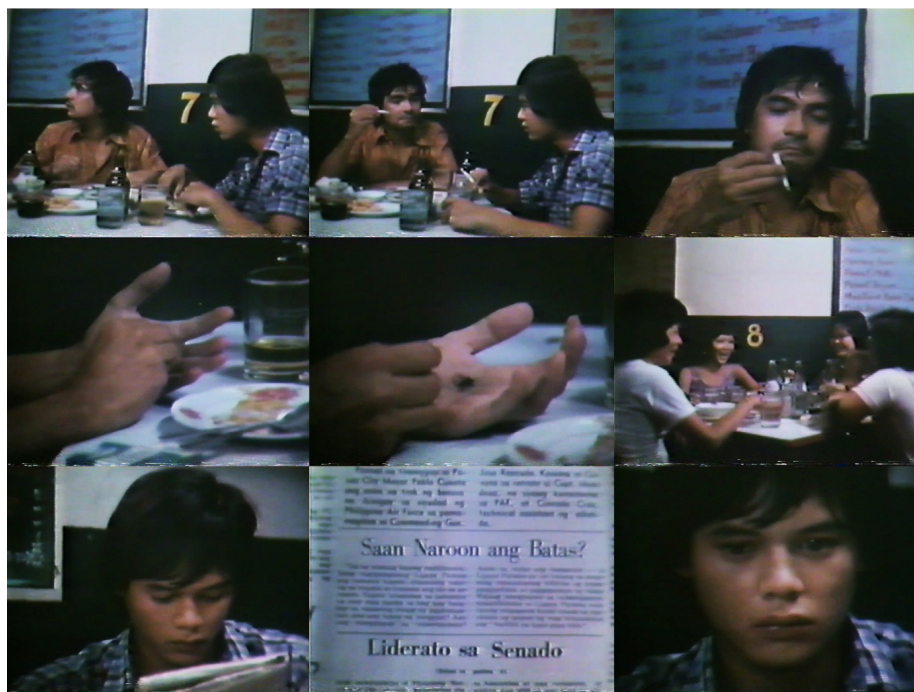
6).

In a fortuitous—Kracauerean—moment when Julio is not standing in his usual spot, he chances upon Ligaya (figure 6, panels 1 and 2). He follows her inside a church (panel 3). They talk in secret, and end up in a cheap hotel (panel 4) where Ligaya tells Julio her story. She recounts the trauma of being forced by Mrs. Cruz into prostitution. She confirms that she lives in “the house,” reveals that she is Ah Tek’s common law wife after he saved her from the horrors of the prostitution den. Mrs. Cruz regularly visits to receive Ah Tek’s payment for Ligaya. Julio asks her to come home—this is her chance. She tells him that she cannot leave her four-year-old child behind. Ligaya cries and asks for Julio’s help. He persuades her to escape; he will take care of everything, he says. She recalls that after one failed attempt, Ah Tek threatened to kill her if she tried to escape again. Escape is difficult because the maid watches the child even in his sleep. Julio persuades Ligaya to try again that night. To calm Ligaya’s doubts, Julio says, “*Kung gusto mo*



*talagang maka-alis doon, susubukan mo nang susubukan, kahit ano ang mangyari sa'yo*" [If you really want to get out of there, you will constantly try to escape, regardless of what happens to you.] Julio plans to wait for her in a nearby market from midnight to 3:00 AM. Still afraid, Ligaya agrees. Julio is happy and gives her a tight hug (panel 9).

Ligaya does not show up. Julio goes to Paul's home dejected, and sleeps. Paul wakes him up at 5:00 PM. He invites Julio to have dinner with him in a restaurant, the setting of a scene that cinematically renders—in a Kracauerean manner—the quotidian and the ephemeral. Someone plays "It's Not Unusual" (Tom Jones) on the jukebox. Paul complains to the waitress about the music volume, but the waitress's hands are tied; she does not want the other customers to be angry with her (figure 7, panel 1). The song ends; in the background, we hear the laughter of the other customers having a good time at the restaurant. Paul asks Julio (panel 2) if he could put out the cigarette using his palm. Julio thinks that Paul is joking then Paul does it himself (panels 4 and 5). He tells Julio that Ligaya is dead; the laughter of the other customers becomes louder and harsher (panel 6). Paul gives Julio a newspaper. The title of the news story is "*Saan Naroon ang Batas?*" [Where Has Justice Gone?]. According to the article, Ligaya fell



**Figure 7.** Julio finds out that Ligaya is dead. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).

off a flight of stairs, but her autopsy reveals suspicious marks on her neck. The scene marks a turning point for the protagonist. His personal mission has been thwarted. In a Lukácsian sense, this moment is the beginning of a resistance to oppression as Julio connects the particular to the general and intuitively grasps the totality of it all. The physical reality of the violent milieu and the social reality of the corrupt system come together in the film that, Brocka would put it, acts as a mirror confronting the people with the reality of their human condition.

Julio and Paul attend Ligaya's wake (figure 8, panels 1 and 2) and—in secret—her funeral (panels 3 and 4). After this, Julio and Paul are on the sidewalk where a mass protest is being held (panel 5). Remarkably, the film concretizes a potential life for Julio as an activist; it sublimates his pursuit for personal justice in the form of a fight for social justice, a possible Lukácsian moment for elemental historical transformation. Julio, however, chooses a different path. In panel 6, Julio tells Paul that he wants to walk around the city by himself. Julio returns the money Paul lent him; Paul refuses, but Julio



**Figure 8.** Julio chooses his path. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).

insists.

That night, Julio chooses to obtain justice for Ligaya. He does not trust the police. He is not inclined to leave it up to the journalists or the activists to pursue justice. He kills Ah Tek (figure 9, panels 1, and 2). Julio's decision to take the law into his own hands signifies a deep-seated mistrust of government and bureaucracy. Men pursue Julio after hearing Ah Tek's housemaid's cry for help (panels 3 and 4). Cornered, Julio (panels 5 and 6) and the men pick up weapons and attack each other. Dazed and still clutching the ice pick, Julio is lit from behind by a powerful street lamp





**Figure 9.** In Julio's final moment, he is reunited with Ligaya. Screenshots from *Manila in the Claws of Light* (Brocka, 1975).

to unveiling the “claws of light” metaphor (panel 7). Julio lets out a final, silent scream captured in a freeze frame poignantly superimposed with the beautiful silhouette of his love, Ligaya Paraiso. In spite of or, perhaps, because of their transient existence in the city, Julio and Ligaya reveal and invoke, in a Kracauerean sense, notions of aesthetic beauty compatible with the perception and generation of multiple meanings.

Julio's decision to pursue his own justice by means of murder, despite the option to join a social movement, leads to a tragic end. This is distinctive of Brocka films where possible escapes from oppressive conditions can be painful: death or mass action. Brocka's final film call for artists to make films that hurt, disturb, and disquiet.

*Manila in the Claws of Light*, his seminal film, together with most of his social realist milieu movies—though largely made via mainstream film outfits—certainly cannot be dismissed as mass ornament. The film does not escape reality; instead, as Brocka articulated, it confronts reality. His works, though considered “serious” films by scholars and critics, were widely viewed. His audience afforded Brocka the luxury of working with mainstream film producers who gave him leeway as an artist. His films address the prevailing distraction and abstraction promoted by other entertainment media.

Brocka's films served as springboards for discourse across different levels of society. More importantly, Brocka's films entertained the masses by featuring major stars, and invited viewers to expand their outlook from the personal and familiar to the political, where networks and hierarchies of oppression were prevalent. *Manila In the Claws of Light* destroys the illusion of the modern city to reveal its disintegration. When the film ends, the audience questions the status quo.

Brocka's realist film unpacks issues within the specific milieu of its story, and foregrounds the humanity of the ordinary man who is grounded in physical reality. The film thereby demonstrates the ordinary man's quest for redemption from his damaged modern condition. This film's social orientation and critical attitude link it to the Lukácsian idea that film can be used in the process of "objectification," fostered by Brocka's artistry as director, realizing the medium's ability to represent and reveal the ordinary man's vision and needs. Finally, discourse generated by the film—grounded in physical reality as espoused in Kracauerian cinematic realism—is never didactic, but rather open to a multiplicity of meanings.

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