



Images That Sweat

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Manuel Ramos

All images in this article are
from Lino Brocka, *Macho
Dancer*, 1988

1 Naficy Hamid and Lino Brocka, 'The Americanization and Indigenization of Lino Brocka Through Cinema', *Framework* 38/39, January 1992, p 153. Expressions such as 'new Filipino cinema' or 'the cinema of the Second Golden Age' are often used by critics and historians to refer to the work of filmmakers who began work in the 1970s or early 1980s, opening up new avenues of expression for the cinema in the Philippines, and who included Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mike de Leon and Peque Gallaga among others. See, for instance, Bienvenido Lumbera, *Re-Viving Filipino Cinema*, Anvil Publishing, Manila, 2011.

To watch a film by Lino Brocka is an extraordinarily physical experience. About the new cinema he proposed and practised from the mid 1970s onwards, Brocka affirmed: 'I want to be able to touch the spectators so that I make them think with their hearts and see with their minds.'¹ I take this playful statement seriously, not as an empty pun undoing the conventional equation between thought and mind, heart and feeling. To think with our hearts, to see with our minds: these words imagine a spectatorial encounter that reorganises habitual modes of perception and their attendant distinction between thinking, seeing and feeling. Brocka's films generate a sensorial and intellectual experience that allows for the possibility of change, for the individual and the collective, via the melodramatic stories he tells and the electrifying images he makes. His films seek to contribute to a transformation of the order of the senses that calls for a transformation in the order of things. In his preoccupation with the emergence of new audiences, Brocka does not have in mind an ideal spectator, one who would see, think, feel in a certain way, for instance politicised in a predetermined manner, but a spectator who watches his films, who takes his films, as opportunities to see, feel and think both more and differently. The cinema of Brocka thus belongs to the precious history of cinematic inventions, of non-programmatic images, that seek to warm up spectators to the powers of the moving image without telling them what to feel and think. To write about his films is therefore not only a matter of decoding meanings or political references but rather a matter of accepting the challenge at play in these images to do things differently. In order to explore the transformative physicality of Brocka's cinema this article will focus on *Macho*



2 See, for instance, José B Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama: Lino Brocka's Cinema Politics*, University of California Press, Oakland, California, 2020

3 For insights into the problematic but also contradictory and changing views of Brocka on sex work, homophobia and politics during his career and life, see Joel David, 'Thinking Straight: Queer Imaging in Lino Brocka's *Maynila* (1975)', *Plaridel*, vol 9, issue 2, August 2012, pp 21–40 and Jo-Ann Q Maglipon, 'The Brocka Battles' in Mario A Hernando, ed, *Lino Brocka: The Artist and His Times*, Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas, Manila, 1993, pp 118–154.

Dancer (1988), a film that is most concerned with the body and the bodily. I first consider the spectacular realism at work in Brocka's cinema as a whole, and then concentrate on one particular visual motif in *Macho Dancer*: sweat. I regard sweat in Brocka's films, and liquidity in general, as a useful motif through which to feel something of the transformative passion of these images.

Spectacular Realism

Macho Dancer is a late work in a prolific career cut short by accidental death, a low-budget film less discussed and circulated than those regarded as Brocka's masterpieces, such as *Manila in the Claws of Light* (1975). *Macho Dancer* is nevertheless often connected to Brocka's other work by those few critics and commentators who have paid attention to it as a reworking of the early narrative ideas and visual inventions of his filmography.² Indeed *Macho Dancer* shares similarities with the storyline of *Manila in the Claws of Light*: a provincial migrant helps a friend find a loved one who is being forced to perform sex work. There are also differences in tone as *Macho Dancer* offers a more complex and less judgemental view on sex work.³ The film focuses on the (mis)adventures of Pol, a

particularly fluid character who moves with ease and without much of an explanation within the sexual spectrum, and a group of young people who work as erotic dancers and sex workers in Manila in the 1980s. Through the vicissitudes of their lives the film touches upon various social and political issues that Brocka considered urgent in the Philippine context of the time, from questions of sexual exploitation to police corruption, from neocolonialism to solidarity among the oppressed.⁴ In the film it is through the body in sex, in dance, in violence, in tears, and in gestures of friendship that Brocka approaches all these sociopolitical questions (body as sufferer, body as emblem). This is not to say that the comings and goings of the characters do not matter, but rather that this is a particularly exhibitionist film driven by the spectacle of the body and of the interaction between bodies. Here, the variety of bodily spectacles, about which I will make more specific comments in the next section, do not interrupt the plot but rather constitute the narrative, they move the story forward, shaping it and shaking it for the whole duration of the film. This spectacular inflection is especially true of the international version of *Macho Dancer*, as Brocka prepared a Philippine version that saw ‘the racy scenes drastically shortened or omitted’.⁵ In its radical exhibitionism, *Macho Dancer* is a valuable film within Brocka’s filmography, and one that may serve as an example of a quality I consider to be fundamental in his work, what I here call spectacular realism.

Within Brocka’s output it is his so-called social dramas rather than his more directly commercial films and television work that have been habitually discussed and appreciated, essentially in terms of their realism. The literature on Brocka’s films emphasises the exceptionality of their realist aesthetics within the context of mainstream Philippine cinema, which is considered to be dominated most often by entertainment values and modes that are closer to Hollywood cinema.⁶ This realism is also given political significance in the context of the martial regime of Ferdinand Marcos, the period in which Brocka made most of his work. Read as realist works, Brocka’s films have been seen as more or less capable of countering the sterile images of that regime, and of allowing spectators to gain a better understanding of a variety of social issues that the regime would have preferred to keep out of sight. In the essay ‘The Realist Cinema of Lino Brocka’, José Gutierrez has usefully summed up the discussion around the realist politics of Brocka’s cinema and identified its key characteristics: his interest in stories based on true events; the depiction of specific social milieus; a focus on characters marginalised by the political system (the working class, the poor, sex workers, women and non-normative sexualities); shooting on real locations; and Brocka’s work with actors in search of the authenticity of emotion, among other aspects.⁷ His films thus share the usual components of realist aesthetics employed by filmmakers in order ‘to transform into spectacle the human world that surrounds us and that we nevertheless ignore’, as André Bazin put it in reference to Italian neorealism, a key episode within the history of cinema for Brocka.⁸ All of these characteristics can be more or less observed in *Macho Dancer*. And yet, in this film, Brocka not only uses the tools of realism to make visible that to which little attention has been paid; he also deploys, as in all his other films to different degrees, various other spectacular grammars. From the

4 Hamid and Brocka, ‘The Americanization and Indigenization of Lino Brocka Through Cinema’, op cit

5 Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama*, op cit, p 239

6 See for example José Gutierrez III, ‘The Realist Cinema of Lino Brocka’, *Plaridel*, vol 14, issue 2, November 2017, pp 169–178

7 Ibid

8 Bert Cardullo, ed, *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, Continuum, London, 2011, p 187

vocabularies of melodrama to those of film noir or erotic cinema, *Macho Dancer* eminently functions, as I shall go on to argue, as a formidably sweaty spectacle, realist and otherwise.

To appreciate the powers of Brocka's cinema it is necessary to let oneself feel the agitated articulation of realism and other spectacles at play. In his remarkable monograph dedicated to Brocka, José B Capino describes this articulation as 'a combination of either gritty realism or observational naturalism and expressive stylization' or as the juxtaposition of 'neorealist aesthetic with conspicuous stylization'.⁹ I would stress that this combination or alternation of cinematic languages is not a smooth one, but rather a friction, an energetic tension, a sort of short-circuit that generates many a spark in Brocka's cinema. In his films realism is only one of the multiple languages employed to give form to the spectacle of human emotions and actions. In his determination to touch spectators and make them sweat, Brocka has no qualms in using all the instruments at his disposal in the toolbox of genre cinema, and to use them in promiscuous and combinatory ways. *Macho Dancer* moves abruptly from one scene to another, from one tone to another, from one style to another – giving the film an episodic quality capable of keeping spectators at the edge of their seats. But slip-pages between the different spectacles and tones also occur, realism is melodramatised, melodrama becomes film noir, and they often take place unexpectedly, without transition, unsettling the rhythm of the story and intensifying the spectatorial experience. We move from observational sequences to voyeuristic close-ups of semi-naked or naked bodies, and to film noir aesthetics used in scenes such as the one in which Pol avenges his murdered friend (Noel) and shoots the corrupt policeman (Kid). In *Macho Dancer* Brocka gives himself permission to



⁹ Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama*, op cit, p xxi, p 30

move without ceremony between the codes of realism, documentary, eroticism, melodrama and film noir. The film, shot and edited quickly due to limited funds, progresses with a kind of accelerated or feverish freedom. To watch *Macho Dancer* is a dizzying and overwhelming experience – because of the story it tells, the gradual accumulation of spectacles it organises, and because of the audiovisual attractions that Brocka piles up, one on top of the other.

Such spectacular orientation challenges any simplistic equation between the idea of ‘political cinema’ and realism, and its opposition to the spectacular capacities of the cinema – a recurrent configuration that has greatly contributed to impoverishing our perception. The spectacular accumulation that constitutes *Macho Dancer* indeed challenges conventional ways in which the significance of film has been limited to its capacity to make visible, to gain understanding, to act as a tool for consciousness-raising. When I speak of the spectacular realism at play in Brocka’s films I put pressure on the assumed opposition between realism and spectacle that is the basis of a recurrent tendency towards partial, or limited, interpretation of what the cinema is and does. I seek to do so not only while insisting that realism is a spectacle among other spectacles, but also by looking at how Brocka’s films erode, in various ways, the binary logic that separates realism and escapism. Commentators on the director’s work most often understand that his deployment of a realist aesthetic seeks to address the prevailing escapism in mainstream cinema and to design a spectatorial experience that provides insight into the individual’s place in society. Gutierrez, for instance, quoting Agustin Sotto, affirms that Brocka’s films go ‘against the grain of the escapist cinema in which “dreams are shown on the screen rather than the analyses of the human condition”’.¹⁰ Brocka himself often employs similar terms to describe his intentions, for instance when he affirms:

In the administration of Marcos, cinema was used to make people forget ... cinema was used to deflect the attention of the people from injustices, violation and oppression. I, on the other hand, hold that cinema can be used to make people think, to make people remember and remind themselves that all is not rosy, that all is not just, to open the eyes of the people to issues in the same way that writers use the pen to wake people up.¹¹

Brocka distinguishes the fantasyland of escapist cinema from his intentions, that of making films that ‘confront you with certain realities’.¹² And yet, in the same interview, he also defines himself as a ‘Hollywood boy ... a movie fan’, a spectatorial identity he refuses to relinquish.¹³ I would argue that this self-definition as a ‘Hollywood boy’, his obsession, of which I will say more in the last section of this article, with the cinema of Hollywood, is indicative of a fundamental aspect of his social cinema that gets easily neglected, perhaps because it is difficult to incorporate into an argument when it comes to clarifying the politics of his complex films. In my view, the power of his work resides precisely in the restless amalgamation of an impulse to confront reality and an impulse to dream and escape. Not to attend to this amalgamation, to this work bringing together what is often kept, or rather thought,

10 Gutierrez III, ‘The Realist Cinema of Lino Brocka’, *op cit*, p 171

11 Hamid and Brocka, ‘The Americanization and Indigenization of Lino Brocka Through Cinema’, *op cit*, pp 146–147

12 *Ibid*, p 146

13 *Ibid*, p 153



apart, is to miss out on the capacities of his cinema (and the cinema at large) to move us and to make us move.

With its extraordinary accumulation of attractions and its social and political concerns, *Macho Dancer* confirms the very limited usefulness of the distinction between realism and spectacle, as well as the deficiencies of the charge of escapism that is frequently made, still today, against films that do not easily conform to the realist protocols of *good political cinema*. To look back at the films of Brocka after watching *Macho Dancer* helps one realise that this is a general stance within his work. His cinema is both realist and escapist. It makes spectators think, but also feel, dream, imagine – and this at the same time, a turbulent at-the-same-time, which attests to the inexhaustible connection between cinema and the political. His work, and in particular *Macho Dancer*, makes possible the coexistence in a film of realist and escapist impulses, without resolving these into a happy agreement, without making them compatible in some neat formulaic way. A film such as *Macho Dancer* eludes the norms and expectations of both Hollywood cinema and political cinema by way of an inconclusive amalgamation of modes of expression. Perhaps it is in this sense that Gilles Deleuze considered Brocka's work a key example of 'modern political cinema'.¹⁴ For him, Brocka's films are made of, to deploy Deleuze's usual nomenclature, deterritorialisations and minorisations of dominant cinematic languages; he sees Brocka's films as representatives of a break with the more programmatic modes of classical cinema. In the director's own words, he refuses to imitate Hollywood just as he refuses to turn his back on first-cinema (that is, commercial cinema) languages.¹⁵ He is excited by the solutions of Hollywood cinema, seduced by Italian neorealist cinema, or inspired by the inventions developed by Filipino literature to give form to social and political concerns (most famously in the work of José Rizal). His cinema can be seen as an exercise in freedom with regards to established, dominant, colonialist film languages and their distribution of cinematic value. This freedom makes his work comparable to the cinema of other filmmakers who have worked with Hollywood *and*

14 D N Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1997, p 152

15 See for example Hamid and Brocka, 'The Americanization and Indigenization of Lino Brocka Through Cinema', op cit

anti-colonial aesthetics in different ways, for instance Youssef Chahine or Djibril Diop Mambéty. The restless play with spectacular codes derived from many kinds of cinema (and other arts) heats up the perceptual and emotional capacities of these cinemas. In the case of Brocka, I would argue, such heat makes of the act of watching his films a particularly sweaty experience.

Sweating

In order to further discuss the spectacular passion at work in the cinema of Brocka, but also to follow my own understanding of his films as invitations to do things differently, I would like to look now at a specific visual motif recurrent in *Macho Dancer* and that is the sticky motif of sweat. I propose to see sweat as a central trope in the film and as a key one through which to think and feel something of its queer capacities. Bodies that sweat are visible in *Macho Dancer* from the very first image.

The film opens with a close-up of a naked torso whose skin is noticeably glistening with sweat. One immediately understands that this torso belongs to a body engaged in passionate sex, something flagged too by the sexy music that accompanies the scene. It is the body of Pol, the young protagonist, who is having sex in a semi-dark room with Larry, a middle-aged military man from the United States who, we soon learn, is his friend, as well as being, in the contemporary vernacular, his ‘sugar daddy’. This opening scene can perhaps be read as some kind of commentary on the North American military presence in the Philippines – although, as is often the case with Brocka, such commentary seems highly ambiguous. The US military presence in the Philippines was a





deeply contentious issue at the time of the film's making, a sign of the continuing tutelage of the country by its ex-colonisers, but one well beyond economic and cultural forms of neocolonialism. But apart from noting the reality of the military presence and its everyday effects, this scene seems most concerned with showing the warmth of the friendship that exists between Pol and Larry.¹⁶ The scene shows not only an exchange of money between the two, but an exchange of affection, and this too through their visibly shared perspiration. Both Pol and Larry sweat. After sex, Pol wipes the sweat from his face; Larry prefers to take a shower. It will not be the last time we see Pol sweating or wiping sweat from his body (after sex, after dancing). But the point I am trying to make – this matter of sweat as a central motif – is not about listing every time that sweat makes an appearance. Rather, I would like to argue that Brocka works in *Macho Dancer* with a poetics of sweat, and of many other liquids (rain, tears, soapy water), which allow him to guide our attention towards the materiality of the bodies on the screen as well as highlight their dreamlike qualities. I invite the reader to watch the film and pay attention to the various ways in which the skin of the characters shines in these images – such attention might offer an opportunity to enjoy the film at its most defiant and otherworldly.

I am of course not the first spectator of Brocka's films to notice and be affected by the presence of sweat in his cinema. Agustin Sotto, for instance, uses the happy formula of 'sweating physicality' to describe the appearance of Brocka's characters in numerous films, such as in the already mentioned *Manila in the Claws of Light* or in *This Is My Country* (1984).¹⁷ The presence of sweaty bodies in Brocka's films has commonly been interpreted as an essential characteristic or proof of his commitment to a realist aesthetics. The reality is that bodies tend to sweat in the tropical climate of Manila and the bodies of workers sweat due to their physical activities (they dance, in the case of *Macho Dancer*). Brocka's attention to the realities of perspiration has been read as having a political inflection: sweaty bodies are dirty bodies for bourgeois sensibilities, in the Philippines and elsewhere. Brocka's

16 It is worth noting that *Macho Dancer* contains multiple endearing scenes of homosexual and homoerotic friendship – scenes that contrast with the representation of homosexuality in previous films by Brocka and which have been read as inherently homophobic or as expressing problems of internalised homophobia on the director's part. For instance, in Joel David's book *Manila By Night: A Queer Film Classic* (Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 2018), David presents *Manila by Night* by Ishmael Bernal as offering a kind of corrective to the problematic representations of queerness in the cinema of Brocka.

17 Sotto, 'Lino Brocka – The International Director', in Hernando, ed, *Lino Brocka: The Artist and His Times*, op cit, p 102



images, in showing his characters' skin to be sweaty, or rather emphasising it, clash with the clean and cleansing image projected by the Marcos regime in its call for a New Society and a New Citizen. One could argue that in the Marcosian vision sweat is a marker of impropriety and even, potentially, of subversion. I would suggest that it is not just Brocka's stories but the sweaty physicality of his films that lead to his constant problems with the censors in the Philippines. The sweat-drenched skins of workers, the poor, sex practitioners – the bodies that Brocka wants to make count in his social dramas – make visible, odorous and palpable the fact of inequality and injustice. Furthermore, without wishing to contradict this realist interpretation of physical reality in the director's work, I would like to add another layer of interpretation, one particularly obvious in *Macho Dancer*: Brocka is not only an observer of the reality of perspiration, he is also a poet of sweat. In *Macho Dancer*, and this observation could hold true for some of his other films too, sweat gives a shiny spectacular patina to bodies. Sweat is both a marker of a physical and social reality and, at the same time, part of a particular sight, a show: the body. In *Macho Dancer* sweat operates indistinguishably as a realist device and as a spectacular one. In this indistinction it is possible to sense something of the queer passions at play in the spectacular realism of Brocka's work and of the challenge it poses to formulaic understandings of the relation between cinema and politics.

Sweat is one of many liquid motifs that Brocka employs in *Macho Dancer*: the soapy water used in the erotic dances performed throughout the film, the frequent tears visible on the faces of the main characters, and the use of rain in one key scene accumulate to create an overarching watery feel to the images. All these liquid motifs act as intensifiers of the film's melodramatic tendencies. Visual intensifiers are habitual elements of the melodramatic toolbox. But also, I would add, such motifs make the surface of these images sparkle, as if hinting at an elsewhere, at another possible world – it is in this sense that I understand Brocka's cinema not simply as a spectacle but as an escapist spectacle. The liquid poetics used here are at their most exhibitionist, making bodies continuously glisten, in, for example, the rain scene mentioned above.

One night Pol and Noel rescue Pining, Noel's sister, from a brothel where she has been forced into sex work. Leaving the brothel behind, they run away from the villains through the deserted streets of Manila. A sudden outburst of torrential rain heightens the tension and suspense – will they manage to get away from Kid, the corrupt policeman and crime lord, and his men? It is more or less obviously a studio rain, made of curtains of water, that immediately has the characters drenched, with their clothes and hair clinging to their bodies as if they were wearing silk. The rain might be justified, in realist terms, by the climate of Manila, since such downpours are a genuine phenomenon in tropical regions. It also functions to make a spectacle out of an action-packed sequence that includes a perilous escape, and the pursuit and death of Noel at the hands of Kid. Certainly, rain is a well-known and oft-used dramatic device to enhance the emotional power of certain climatic moments within a film, something that has been done from the early days of cinema. In this scene, *this* rain, with its wild, irregular and low-budget quality, is not only another obstacle for the heroes to overcome, but is also, in my view, another excuse to make the bodies of the main characters glisten in the dark. *Macho Dancer* uses as many liquid tricks as possible to make bodily surfaces, and therefore the surface of the image, sparkle. I would say that what to make of the glistening quality of Brocka's images is up to the spectators' realist-and-escapist imagination. Looking at them might enhance a viewer's emotional involvement with the characters. But it might also distract from the comings and goings of the narrative and allow viewers to eroticise these bodies in unexpected and disturbing moments, such as at the death of Noel; conversely, it might – why not – help spectators glimpse a better world for them. These glistening images constitute a rich field of expression (narrative, formal, abstract), with signifying – and asignifying – qualities open to a multiplicity of spectatorial engagements and responses.

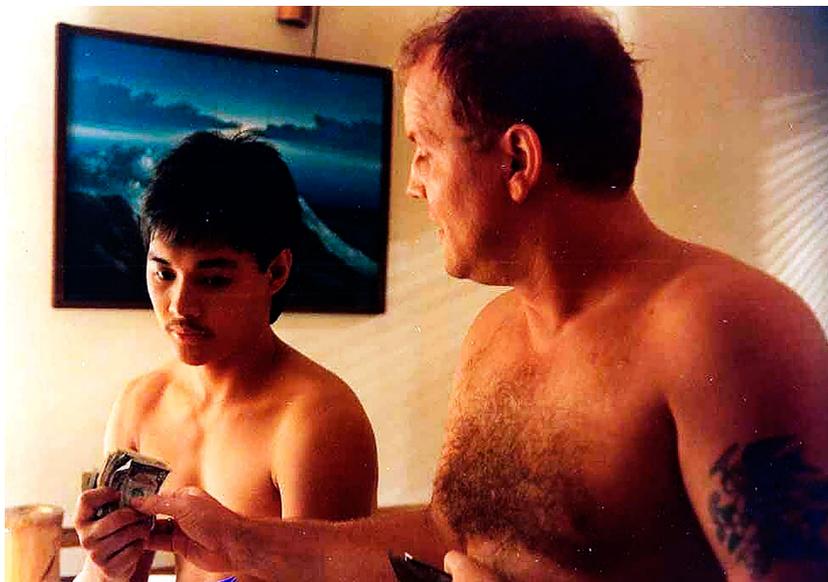
The expressive agitation of these images is at its most dazzling in the scenes in which the characters perform, in Mama Charlie's club, the erotic dance known in the film as 'The Shower'. This consists of two young men dancing on stage while washing each other with soap and water, surrounded by shiny bubbles. These shower scenes happen three times in the film in different pairings (Noel and Dennis, Noel and Pol, Pol and Dennis), and are always of similar duration, and with similar dance moves and music. Each scene has different narrative

connotations: the second makes visible the caring friendship between Pol and Noel, while the last lets us read on Pol's face his sadness after Noel's death. They are also lengthy and somewhat oneiric spectacles, which slow down the progression of the plot. Brocka deploys erotic codes in their filming, in terms of music, rhythm and the use of frequent close-ups of faces and different body parts. It is useful to contrast the erotic energy of the scenes at Mama Charlie's with Brocka's approach to similar ones at D'Pogi, the first club Pol visits in Manila when he is looking for work. Brocka films the erotic numbers at D'Pogi (dancing, collective masturbation) in a detached, observational manner. In my view, this de-eroticises the sexual numbers and emphasises the exploitative side of the business, including the fact that the Philippines operates as a tourist destination for Western homosexual travellers. D'Pogi is presented as a 'bad club', with numerous Western patrons, and run by a 'Mother' who is a comic stereotype of the *bakla*, a 'loud, sharp-tongued and decidedly effeminate character'.¹⁸ *Bakla* is a Tagalog term untranslatable into English with a single word; it is used to name gendered identities that are 'a hybrid of the ideas of male homosexuality, transgenderism, cross-dressing, and effeminacy'.¹⁹ The character of the Mother at D'Pogi follows the comedic conventions developed by Philippine cinema to (mis)represent such identity.²⁰ In contrast, Mama Charlie offers another version of the *bakla*, a boss who is not particularly caring towards the dancers and sex workers but who is certainly fair and serious. In the 'good club' of Mama Charlie, Brocka films the shower scenes not to denounce or ridicule them but rather, and quite clearly, with exhibitionist panache. He invites the viewers to enjoy without reserve these long dancing sequences made up of glistening images with undulating bodies and floating bubbles, to enjoy them erotically and otherwise.

18 Mikee N Inton-Campbell, 'Exploring the Dolphy Bakla: Queerness in Philippine Cinema', in Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park, Gina Marchetti and See Kam Tan, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018, p 585

19 Inton-Campbell, 'Bodies in Transition: The Bakla as Transgender in Philippine Cinema', in Zowie Davy et al, eds, *The Sage Handbook of Global Sexualities*, 2020, p 918

20 On this question see, for example, the work of Mikee N Inton-Campbell, *op cit.*



Apart from the collection of watery tricks that Brocka uses to make surfaces shine, the film resorts to a variety of expressive lighting modalities, all of which contribute to the glistening impact of these images. *Macho Dancer*, in its concatenation of radically different light aesthetics, differs greatly from many contemporary films, with their inclination towards the monochromatic: naturalistic light; film noir shadows; fascination with the electric and neon lights of the city, and with the blinding and otherworldly glow of the disco clubs; and the romantic attention paid to the golden light of the afternoon in the scene in which Bambi and Pol say goodbye, to name just a few. Together with the poetics of sweat and liquidity, the luminous oscillations of the film add up to a strangely affective experience. Watching *Macho Dancer* is, for all the reasons already evoked, an extraordinary, shimmering visual experience. Using the term ‘shimmering’ brings to mind the thought-provoking work of Eliza Steinbock, in which they think in suggestive ways about the affinities between the operations of the moving image and trans embodiment. Steinbock engages with a poetics of shimmering in order to break away from binary thinking, to affirm the capacity of film to visualise change, and to highlight the multilayered and endlessly impure quality of the spectator’s gaze. Steinbock writes:

The shifting scintillations of the shimmering boundary refuse to settle embodied or cinematic images into the diction of true or false, fantasy or actuality. The radical antistatic status of shimmering suggests a suspension of being either really there or not there, of being fully graspable. To become situated, or to situate oneself, in the shimmering of these boundaries opens up another way of knowing that does not rely on visual certainty.²¹

In the context of this article I would argue that to be open to, and affected by, the shimmering experience organised by *Macho Dancer* implies a refusal of the habitual distinction between realism and escapism, and its attendant implications. The scintillating quality of the bodily surfaces and the range of light aesthetics in the film confounds distinctions, among other things, between analysing and feeling, between learning and dreaming, between seeing in order to know and seeing in order to change. *Macho Dancer* is thus a film that offers spectators in its own distinctive ways the possibility of feeling the pleasure of the not fully graspable.

If, in this text, I am privileging sweat over the other liquids made visible in the film, it is because I wish to insist on the impurity of these shimmering images and their shameless use of any possible means by which to warm up spectators to the story they tell. *Macho Dancer* is not a sanitised visual experience, but a raunchy, messy, excessive one. *Macho Dancer* is not simply a film that shows bodies sweating but a film made of images that sweat. Brocka makes these images sweat by paying attention to the glistening capacity of bodily surfaces, by freely blending different cinematic codes and by moving between different light aesthetics – this I have tried to argue. Brocka’s is a cinema that seeks to make spectators sweat, literally and metaphorically. I agree

21 Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2019, p 17



with José Gutierrez when he affirms that the purpose of Brocka's work is 'to cinematically engage the spectators to contemplate the everyday, not ideologically, but physically'.²² I would contend that this physical engagement does not involve simply crying with the characters, as in most melodramas, but in sweating with them – this speaks of the singular physical and intellectual experience that is a film such as *Macho Dancer*. This is a cinema concerned not only with generating empathy for the characters and their plight, but with searching for ways to make spectators feel more and differently. Brocka always speaks with admiration in his interviews of the very rowdy Filipino audiences and the spectacle of those in the movie theatres screaming and crying with the film on screen. Certainly Brocka has learned many lessons from these unruly audiences and seeks, with his films, to contribute to this unruliness – a question he has asked himself is how to make audiences, in the Philippines and elsewhere, rowdier. The cinema of Brocka confounds political formulas of the image and invites spectators to give themselves permission to sweat and to change, in the dark room of a movie palace. It is up to us, as spectators, to accept Brocka's invitation to sweat off oppressive conventions and to continue the transformation of ourselves and the cruel world we live in.

²² Gutierrez III, 'The Realist Cinema of Lino Brocka', *op cit*, p 175

A Hollywood Boy

To finish, I would like to emphasise, once more, how Brocka's cinema never goes against the grain of escapist cinema but rather organises a sweaty amalgamation, a sweaty spectacle, of both realism and escapism. And to do so I would like to say a few more words about Brocka's self-definition as a 'Hollywood boy' and to add a sort of biographical layer to my argument. To that end, I would like to include two anecdotes about his childhood obsession with the cinema and its powers. These anecdotes, narrated by Brocka himself in an interview published posthumously, are not simple trips down memory lane.²³ In what they contain and in the fact that he tells them with such detail late in his life, these stories seem to speak of a life-long commitment both to understanding the pressing realities that surrounded him and to the fireworks of the cinematic spectacle. In Brocka's account, being committed to both spectacle and reality is greatly stimulating in terms of making work, a frame of mind that perhaps explains something of the scintillating impurity at the core of his cinematic adventures. In this interview, Brocka at first describes how he spent his childhood inside the only movie theatre that then existed in the town of San José. There he watched mainly Hollywood action and adventure films. About these days he gives the following account:

I remember my mother used to come to look for me in the movie-house because it was already evening and I had not returned home yet. Sometimes, parents would ask the projectionist to page us and he would flash written announcements on the screen in the middle of the movie, which said: so and so please come home, your mother is waiting. My mother once had him flash a note for me. I think the projectionist got tired of doing this, so my mother would come into the theatre with a flashlight and like an usherette scan the rows, repeatedly calling me by my nickname: No Noy, No Noy, No Noy! I'd hear my name, but I would slink down in my seat so as not to be seen. And the moment she saw me, there would be a big scene: she would cry and shout at me, hitting me with her slippers, and sometimes bodily dragging me out of the theatre. The spectators would shout at her to stop. All the way home, she would spank me and shout at me in the streets. Of course, that did not change anything. I probably would not go to the movies for a couple of days, but then after I'd be back to the theatre.²⁴

From being captivated by the films to the written announcements interrupting the flow of images on the screen, from spending the whole day inside the movie theatre to the spanking from his mother all the way home, this anecdote depicts a kaleidoscopic existence. In Brocka's memories the experience of the cinematic spectacle and of reality do not cease to clash and mingle.

The second anecdote that I would like to relate in these concluding remarks has to do with Brocka's early preference for the classic Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer musical films from the forties and fifties. These are the films that according to him most affected his imagination as a child. He was particularly fascinated by the films of Esther Williams and the magical ways in which she appeared to be immune to the human

23 Hamid and Brocka, 'The Americanization and Indigenization of Lino Brocka Through Cinema', *op cit*

24 *Ibid*, pp 136–137

necessity for oxygen in her synchronised swimming numbers. As he remembers it,

I never thought there was such a thing as editing. So all you could see was Esther Williams and other dancers dancing under water and smiling. I would go swimming in the irrigation canals and trying to copy Esther Williams, I would smile and dance under water. I would open my eyes under water but end up swallowing a lot of dirty water. The irrigation water was very dirty because that's where they threw everything: dead pigs, people would pee in the water, houses were built on them and, of course, all kinds of waste and manure was in the water. But I didn't care, there was this particular spot we would go swimming, and all around was this floating debris. You can imagine all the waste that I swallowed almost daily!²⁵

This is an anecdote bursting with multiple meanings, from questions of his cross-identification or trans-identification with Esther Williams to issues of neocolonialism that Brocka describes as 'his Americanization' in the interview. His failure to imitate in the irrigation canal the underwater routines of Esther Williams led him to believe, he explains later on, that only Americans could do without oxygen. In the context of this article I offer this anecdote not so much to reinforce what I have already said about the realist-escapist ethos of Brocka's cinema and his poetics of liquidity, his prolific attention to the glistening qualities of liquid substances, be these dirty or clean. Rather, I bring it forward in order to shift slightly how I look at *Macho Dancer*, and to consider it as a singularly subversive musical film in which Brocka gives composite form to life-long excitements. Now *Macho Dancer* appears to me as a string of erotic and crime-centred episodes and dance numbers, with a more or less insignificant plot. The realist-escapist sparks of *Macho Dancer* will not easily exhaust our attempts at interpretation, which will continue to shift and change, and Brocka's impure cinema will not cease to defy the policing of the political image any time soon.

25 Ibid, p 141

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