Ferdinand Marcos was ousted from the presidency and exiled to Hawaii in late February 1986, during a four-day event called the “people power” revolution. The event was not, as the name might suggest, an armed uprising. It was, instead, a peaceful assembly of thousands of civilians who sought to protect the leaders of an aborted military coup from reprisal by the autocratic state. Many of those who gathered also sought to pressure Marcos into stepping down for stealing the presidential election held in December, not to mention other atrocities he had committed in the previous two decades.

Lino Brocka had every reason to be optimistic about the country’s future after the dictatorship. The filmmaker campaigned for the newly installed leader, Corazon “Cory” Aquino, the widow of slain opposition leader Ninoy Aquino. Despite Brocka’s reluctance to serve in government, President Aquino appointed him to the commission tasked with drafting a new constitution. Unfortunately, the experience left him disillusioned with realpolitik and the new government. He later recounted that his fellow delegates “really diluted” the policies relating to agrarian reform. He also spoke bitterly of colleagues “connected with multinationals” who backed provisions inimical to what he called “economic democracy.” Brocka quit the commission within four months. His most significant achievement was introducing the phrase “freedom of expression” into the constitution’s bill of rights and thereby extending free speech protections to the arts.

Three years after the revolution and halfway into Mrs. Aquino’s term, Brocka made an incendiary film about vigilante terrorism in the countryside. During a press conference for the Cannes screening of his film Les insoumis (also called Oрапronobis and Fight for Us), the director criticized the post-dictatorship government. He
said: “We are still facing the same problems today. There is poverty, hunger, corruption, repression and ongoing human rights violations, none of that has changed even though now we enjoy a democratic space.”

Brocka’s reference to a “democratic space” gave Mrs. Aquino some credit for reforming government. As the political scientist Gretchen Casper points out, the president “successfully restored democracy to the Philippines” with the reestablishment of civil liberties, the return of democratic elections, and the ratification of a new constitution. That said, the filmmaker was right about the chief executive’s shortcomings. Casper reports that the persistence of social inequality led to “a rising sense of dissatisfaction in the country” during Aquino’s six-year tenure. Moreover, problems from the Marcos era such as human rights violations and graft and corruption remained intractable under her watch. Much to the president’s dismay, landowners (including members of her own family) used their influence to undermine the land reform program that served as the centerpiece of her campaign. Its failure bolstered the communist insurgency that had flourished in the latter years of Marcos’s rule. To make things even worse, Aquino reneged on a pledge to broker peace with the communists, declaring a “total war” against them after her first year in office.

The Philippines’ rocky path to democratization—the transition from authoritarianism to a liberal democracy—was by no means exceptional. Indeed, political conflicts, weak institutions, and bad economies have plagued the successors of deposed autocracies all over the world. Moreover, the slow process of change within new democracies has frustrated persons and institutions habituated to the swiftness of autocratic measures. In many cases, the temptation to return to old ways has thus proven too strong to resist. Casper coined the phrase “fragile democracy” to describe the nation’s state during Aquino’s presidency, marred as it was by throwbacks to illiberal practices as well as political instability.

Brocka did his part to hold the country’s fragile democracy together by returning to filmmaking after his stint in the constitutional commission. He began reworking the political cinema he developed during the Marcos regime while making commercially appealing films to reach a wider audience and pay his debts from producing films in the 1970s. Several critics used the term “political melodrama” to describe his recent militant films, especially *My Own Country: Gripping the Knife’s Edge* (*Bayan ko: Kapit sa patalim*, 1984). The term was even more appropriate to the socially relevant pictures he made after the 1986 uprising. “Political melodrama” invokes three aspects of his post-dictatorship oeuvre. First, those films are explicitly about politics. They follow Brocka’s durable strategy of using local politics as a microcosm for national affairs, seen most notably in *Miguelito: The Rebellious Child* (*Miguelito: Batang rebelde*, 1985). Second, the films draw on conventions associated with melodrama in treating political matters. Their approach is sensational, moralistic, and charged with primal emotions. Third, the
films use melodrama as a political tool. To realize cinema’s democratic potential as a mass medium, the films treat political material in a manner that is both comprehensible and appealing to a broad audience. The works harness cinema’s utility for political pedagogy.

For some scholars, the notion of using melodrama for political ends is largely problematic. Their arguments are well-known and intuitive, and I have already rehearsed some of them in earlier sections of this book. For instance, certain scholars believe that melodrama is ill-suited to presenting sound political thinking. Melodrama, they suggest, is often unable to render the complexities and contradictions of sociopolitical realities. Other scholars observe that the tendency of some melodramas to rehearse Oedipal scenarios does not enhance one’s understanding of politics. Such films, they claim, tend “to personalize public and political conflicts” or merely revisit time-worn scripts for apprehending politics instead of devising new scenarios that might be more responsive to contemporary reality. Finally, scholars also regard melodrama’s traffic in powerful emotions as troublesome for political discourse. They argue that feelings usually escalate in melodrama well before the narratives thoroughly explain the issues at hand, before they work out the consequences of acting versus not acting, and before they chart alternative courses of action. Other scholars point to cases in which intense emotions cloud reason, taking the form of perplexed rage or melancholic inaction from the film’s viewers.

My discussion of Brocka’s political melodramas will take up the issues I have identified above. I am concerned with his exploration of a post-authoritarian cinema politics, including his attempts at performing the vital task of memorializing the nation’s authoritarian past and depicting the stakes of political involvement during the transition to democracy. The films in question here are Orapronobis/Les insoumis/Fight for Us (1989), A Dirty Affair (Gumapang ka sa lusak, 1990), and Above Everything Else (Sa kabila ng lahat, 1991). I shall discuss their stylistics, political rhetoric, and reception in light of historical events, Brocka’s career, and developments in Philippine film culture.

**ORAPRONOBIS**

Early in his stint as a delegate to the constitutional commission, Brocka witnessed an incident that served as the germ of his next political film. He recalled: “I went to Misamis Oriental with [screenwriter Jose F. a.k.a.] Pete Lacaba, and we happened to pass by a town where a massacre of eighteen men, women and children had just occurred.” The dead were members of a pro-Marcos religious cult known as the Tadtad, whose name meant “to cut into little pieces.” Brocka and Lacaba learned that some of the cultists also participated in anti-insurgent vigilante groups. They were known to summarily execute, mutilate, and even cannibalize
persons they suspected of being communists. Lacaba and Brocka developed a project out of this material, with some encouragement from a major Philippine movie studio called Viva Films. The director related: “At the time, I was really thinking in terms of an action movie for [famous leading man] Phillip Salvador because that’s what Viva wanted me to do.” The project fell through for unknown reasons.

In October 1987, Brocka once again witnessed the seriousness of the vigilante problem. More than two hundred people from Leyte province sought refuge in Manila from a paramilitary group that vowed to kill them for giving “water and food to rebels who knocked on their doors.” When a state university president agreed to house the refugees at his campus, the vigilantes and their military connections in the capital tried to assassinate him. Brocka offered his utility vehicle to move the refugees “to different convents and houses to hide them.” He also hosted two dozen refugees at his mother Pilar’s home, smuggling them in “in groups of five, at night.” Brocka also attended their court hearings to express his support. On one occasion, as he stood outside a courthouse with a refugee named Pacita Dellosa, police officers arrived to seize her. Brocka held on to her arm and engaged “in a tug-of-war with the police.” The director recalled feeling “very manly” and launching into a “flying kick” to fend off the abductors. The incident—minus the filmmaker and his daring stunt—would later be reenacted in his movie.

Brocka eventually found the opportunity to make his film about vigilantes in 1988 when, as he recalled, “Bernadette Films signed me to make a film for $300,000 on anything, as long as it was a ‘Lino Brocka’ film.” He volunteered that the producers turned to him because they “wanted a movie they could get into Cannes cheaply.” The outfit was a “Paris-based production company and a French affiliate of the Hollywood-based Cannon Group,” the latter known for churning out low-budget films. From September 1988 to January 1989, Lacaba reworked his proposal for a commercial action film into a political thriller aimed at a global audience. Brocka completed principal photography in just twenty-two days, filming in Manila and nearby Boso-Boso, Rizal Province, and Lubao, Pampanga. For safety reasons and to save money, the film is set near the Philippine capital instead of in the south, where vigilante bailiwicks were located. As in the case of Brocka’s fiery Marcos-era political film My Own Country, the motion picture elements of Orapronobis were sent to France for completion after preliminary editing in Manila. The film premiered as Les insoumis at Cannes on May 22 and, by the screenwriter’s account, “opened in eight Paris theaters on May 24.” The number of screens in the film’s engagement is telling of the director’s considerable popularity among French moviegoers. Orapronobis begins with a title card stating that the picture was “filmed clandestinely” and that “all that you will see in this film is authentic.” These claims—half-true at best—follow a tactic in exploitation filmmaking of hawking a sensational picture as forbidden fruit. Brocka claims he requested the European producers to delete the misleading title card, but they ignored him.
The narrative continues with a prologue set in the Marcos era. It is October 1985, and militia members sporting fatigues and red bandanas flag a Caucasian priest traveling on a motorcycle. Among them is Commander Kontra (Bembol Roco), their leader. They allow the traveler, Father Jeff (Gerard Bernschein), to pass through but remind him that he is venturing into unsafe territory. Checkpoints such as this one proliferated during the Marcos regime as part of its militarization of the countryside. Petty authoritarians like Kontra operated them, terrorizing denizens and travelers.

The prologue continues as the priest reaches the fictitious and allegorically named town of Dolores, where he ministers at the wake of a man hacked to death by vigilantes. Kontra interrupts the ceremony and berates the priest for tending to the corpse of a communist and “demon.” He then sets the priest’s motorcycle on fire before shooting him point-blank in the head. In the French theatrical version of the film, the scene continues with shots of Kontra scooping out the priest’s brain matter with his hand and preparing to feed on it. The tamer and more widely distributed US version ends the scene with Kontra’s bullet hitting the priest.
The cold-blooded killing and the horrified expressions of the victim and onlookers comprise what I have been calling in this book a “Marcosian moment.” As with many of Brocka’s martial law melodramas, the Philippine experience of authoritarianism registers in such passages of explosive violence and extra-judicial killings. Father Jeff’s murder slightly fictionalizes the horrific fate of the Italian missionary Tullio Favali in the hands of vigilantes led by Norberto Manero Jr. Like Kontra, they reportedly fed on the priest’s brains for superstitious reasons.30

In both versions of the film, the scene of the priest’s murder cuts to black, followed by the whirring of helicopters, and then a title sequence comprised of rephotographed television footage of the 1986 revolution. The uninterrupted flow of sound between the prologue and the title sequence provides an elegant overture to the film’s argument. It links the authoritarian and the postrevolutionary eras, subtextually prefiguring the changelessness of the national situation even after the autocrat’s ouster.

The scene following the title credits introduces the protagonist, Jimmy Cordero (Phillip Salvador), an ex-priest, former eight-year member of the communist underground, and political detainee. Jimmy and his cellmates have just received news that they will be among the more than five hundred political prisoners to be released by President Aquino at the beginning of her term.31 Both Jimmy’s character and the amnesty program for political prisoners derive inspiration from real life. Jimmy brings to mind several priests who became guerrillas, including Conrado Balweg.32 Following his release, Jimmy rejoins the political mainstream by signing up with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) called the Alliance for Human Rights. In the interest of narrative and thematic clarity, Lacaba makes the other characters in Jimmy’s story share his interest in human rights advocacy. Jimmy’s wife, Trixie (Dina Bonnevie), works as a media liaison for the same NGO. Her brother Rolan (William Lorenzo), a student activist, volunteers there as well. The allegorically named Sister Marie Dipasupil (Ginnie Sobrino) heads the organization. Dipasupil, whose name means “unconquerable,” is a fictionalized version of Sister Mariani Dimaranan, an activist-nun and head of the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, a human rights organization connected with the Catholic Church.33

Alongside developing Jimmy’s story, the narrative follows the ordeal of internal refugees from Santa Filomena, a town adjacent to Dolores and the place where Jimmy was assigned as a guerilla. The refugees include family members of persons murdered by Kontra and his men. In a coincidence typical of melodramas, one of the refugees happens to be Esper (Gina Alajar), who was once Jimmy’s former comrade and longtime flame. Esper ended up marrying Jimmy’s fellow guerilla and friend Roque. Kontra slew the latter in a massacre that Esper’s father (Ray Ventura), with whom he was traveling, narrowly survived. Jimmy returns to Santa Filomena with Rolan and their colleagues to investigate the massacre and see if
they could do anything for Esper and the villagers. To Jimmy’s surprise, one of Esper’s three children, a boy named Camilo (R. R. Herrera), bears his old nom de guerre. (The daughter is named after the leftist revolutionary heroine Lorena Barros.) Esper later states the obvious: the boy is Jimmy’s son, but the child does not know it yet. Jimmy’s discovery of his paternal ties to Santa Filomena only toughens his resolve to aid its people.

Meanwhile, the investigation at Santa Filomena exposes the Manila contingent to the vigilantes’ reign of terror. Jimmy’s group meets the highest-ranking military official in the area, an eccentric who uses a human skull as decoration on his office desk. Colonel Ricardo Mateo (Joel Lamangan) dismisses their concerns about human rights abuses while absentmindedly caressing the skull. Mateo also insists that the killing of Esper’s husband and the others was justified because they were either communist insurgents or sympathizers. He zealously defends the vigilantes, parroting the Aquino government’s claim that the fight against communism requires “the help of all our citizens,” and not just the authorities. The staging of the scene at Mateo’s office emulates key moments in Miguelito, Brocka’s last political work of the Marcos era. In both films, a poster of the Philippine president appears conspicuously near or behind one of the villainous characters, thus linking the two figures together. In Orapronobis, two pictures of President Aquino are seen in the background as Mateo spouts his defense of vigilantism. A poster of Sylvester Stallone portraying a rogue cop in Cobra (George P. Cosmatos, 1986) also hangs near one of the president’s pictures, adding a satirical note to the scene and implicating the United States in the rise of Philippines vigilantes. The Cobra poster and Mateo’s crazed demeanor both poke fun at a real-life figure named Lt. Col. Franco Calida, the top cop in a southern province who was a fierce supporter of the notorious vigilante group Alsa Masa (Rising Masses) and a fan of Stallone’s film. Calida, who trained with US Special Forces, was known to make such bombastic quips as “We will cook them [communists] in their own oil.”

Jimmy and his party proceed to Esper’s home after their meeting with Mateo. They find Kontra waiting for them across the street, armed with heavy weapons. They learn to their horror that the vigilante chief has just sprayed bullets at the shack, terrorizing the children inside it. Kontra threatens to kill Esper and others who speak against or resist the militia. The incident prompts a mass exodus to another town.

The evacuees turn for protection to their archbishop, who is named Romero after the martyred clergy from El Salvador but whose story draws inspiration from the experiences of the Filipino Cardinal Ricardo Vidal. Kontra follows the refugees to his church and holds a big rally outside. The scene is one of the film’s satirical highlights. It shows demonstrators carrying a human skeleton (supposedly a victim of the communists) and placards that read “Priests and nuns deserve to be barbecued” and “Communism = Satanism.” The scene is more provocative than it
appears because Kontra’s fanatical supporters include police officers and other members of the Philippine armed forces. The direct criticism of the military in this and other scenes in *Orapronobis* was unprecedented in Brocka’s films.

On the evening after the rally, two men in a jeep lob a grenade at the cardinal’s residence, missing him and Jimmy by a few meters. The incident sends the refugees fleeing all the way to the nation’s capital. Like many others in the film, the scene drew inspiration from recent history.

In the meantime, the country’s militia problem and the domestic issues from Jimmy’s past creep into Trixie’s life in Manila. First, her coworker Jun disappears after getting nabbed by armed men—likely also killed or “salvaged” (in the Marcos-era parlance). The coworker had been investigating a vigilante killing spree in another town when armed men abducted him. Trixie accompanies her coworker’s wife to a TV show as the latter appeals for President Aquino’s help. In a jab at the chief executive, the wife tells Aquino (whose husband was detained by Marcos for over seven years) that she must know what it was like to have a loved one disappeared by armed men. Secondly, Trixie’s brother Rolan and Jimmy are ambushed by goons after criticizing the government’s support of vigilantes in a TV talk show. Jimmy is wounded while Rolan is gunned down in another of the film’s Marcosian moments. Thirdly, Trixie gives birth to her and Jimmy’s child, only to find that she must compete with Esper and her children for Jimmy’s attention.

The refugees discover that Manila cannot offer respite from their troubles. Members of the military seize Esper’s father and other refugees seemingly picked at random by a hooded informant in a midnight raid at another university campus sheltering the displaced provincials. Shortly after the court hearing on their disappearance, armed men kidnap Esper and Camilo. Her abduction recalls the incident (described earlier) that Brocka witnessed in 1986. Esper is separated from her son and taken to a house in a secluded area. While her abductors are careful not to reveal themselves as military, their interrogation techniques and access to a safe house say as much. Reminiscent of torture practices during the Marcos-era, the abductors take turns abusing her. (The scene is truncated in the widely available version of the film.) They then take her back to Santa Filomena and hand her over to the vigilantes. At Kontra’s hideout, she is reunited with her son, father-in-law, and other refugees.

Kontra’s dimly lit shack recalls a serial killer’s den in American horror movies. As in the rest of *Orapronobis* and many of Brocka’s other films, the mise-en-scène speaks politics. A poster of Ferdinand Marcos hangs alongside one of Sylvester Stallone playing the mercenary Rambo. The posters invite comparison with the pictures of Stallone and President Aquino in Colonel Mateo’s office. They also snidely imply that the military officer and Kontra are virtually interchangeable. Elsewhere in the hut, a large American flag is pitched beside an altar, hanging over Christ images and human skulls. A tiny Philippine flag is stitched into the middle...
of the oversized banner’s red and white stripes. The nested flags once again implicate the Americans in the Filipino vigilantes’ atrocities. As with many in the Philippine Left, Brocka was openly critical of US interventionism. He believed that the US was exerting undue influence on Aquino to retain its military bases in the archipelago. American meddling directly exacerbated the vigilante problem as well. David Wurfel notes that in October 1986, a CIA veteran and chair of the World Anticommunist League may have assisted the Philippine military in “developing an anti-communist vigilante movement in the countryside.” He goes on to say that “the CIA had allocated $10 million to finance counterinsurgency efforts in the Philippines” in what was the United States’ “most massive intervention in Philippine affairs since the Magsaysay era [in the 1950s].”

Kontra preaches incoherently to Esper about the necessity of saving her soul and learning secret chants that would make her invincible to bullets. He then rapes her within earshot of the other refugees and in front of her son, before passing her on to his comrade Jango (Abbo Dela Cruz). Camilo, understandably outraged after his mother’s rape, attacks Kontra with a toy sword. Kontra shoots him dead. Esper grabs Jango’s gun and fires at Kontra (and, on Brocka’s instructions, actress Gina Alajar also imagines killing Marcos whose ubiquitous portrait had established in Philippine cinema a synecdoche between all bosses and the dictator).

Kontra responds with his high-powered—and American-made—M-16 rifle, killing her and then mowing down the rest of the captives. Jango notices Kontra’s wound, berates him for falsely claiming he was invincible to bullets, and fatally stabs him. In the French version of the movie, Jango uses his knife to cut Kontra’s chest and carve out a piece of his heart. He singes the organ meat and feeds it to a comrade.

In the meantime, Jimmy and Trixie make frantic attempts to rescue mother and child by using connections to society’s powerbrokers and elites. Their quest unravels the web of complicity that has kept the vigilantes in power. They begin their search by approaching two military officers. One denies commanding his men to abduct Esper and Camilo while the other disavows any knowledge of their whereabouts. Finally, the couple pleads with the highly influential archbishop of Manila, a man Jimmy knew well from his days as a priest. The former refuses even to see him, sending a monsignor in his stead. The latter rehearses the cardinal’s line that vigilantes were unarmed, God-fearing citizens who were doing the church a service by opposing “those who spread atheism.” The archbishop’s response reflects the position of his real-life counterpart, Jaime Cardinal Sin, who endorsed the militia. Sin was an immensely popular figure, but that did not deter the makers of Orapronobis from criticizing him.

In the film’s extended denouement, the spectacle of grisly violence is placed once more in the service of political agitation. Outside the ruins of the church at Santa Filomena, the narrative slows down to examine the aftermath of the militia’s
latest carnage. With almost pornographic attention, the camera studies the remains of Esper and the other victims. Shots linger on their pale and mangled bodies, and on faces made almost unrecognizable by caked blood and dirt. As the bereaved wail in the background, Colonel Mateo mugs for the TV and photojournalists’ cameras and makes the outrageous claim that the fallen were all communist guerrillas. Jimmy quietly tends to Esper’s corpse, not quite knowing what to do. Suddenly, the camera assumes his point of view and spots Camilo’s body in the same trailer that brought in her remains. Time dilates and everything—save for birds chirping in the distance—falls silent as Jimmy scoops up his child and carries him into the partially burned church.

The film ends with Jimmy making an unexpected political move. Back in Manila, he takes a final look at his sleeping wife and their newborn before delivering a cryptic message on the phone to an unknown party. The call indicates Jimmy’s decision to return to the underground movement.

Brocka called Orapronobis his “most political film” in an interview he gave to the French periodical Revue du Cinéma. “This time,” Brocka said, “the [political] events do not just serve as a backdrop but are front and center.” He added: “They take precedence over the personal drama. They affect everything.” Orapronobis was indeed his most overt and sustained representation of political issues. It was also his most confrontational statement about a sitting president and the military. A critic from Variety correctly surmised that the film is “perhaps even more violent and angrier than the films he [Brocka] made under the Marcos dictatorship.”
The philosopher Alain Badiou cautions that transparent and spirited depictions of politics—such as those featured in *Orapronobis*—can be problematic. It is often more difficult to appraise a film’s politics, he says, “the closer the film in question was to the political subject matter [it treated].”\(^{41}\) He goes on to say that “The more contemporary the politics, the more important the [film’s] nuances.”\(^{42}\) Equally pertinent, filmmakers, critics, and viewers have different assumptions—some contradictory and unexamined—about the proper form of political cinema. It thus behooves scholars and viewers to embrace a capacious notion of progressive filmmaking.

**Documentary Material**

Taking a page from the politically charged melodramas he made in the Marcos years, *Orapronobis* weaves documentary material and depictions of contemporary political events into a stirring fictional narrative. The film utilizes real-life incidents more extensively, however, than in his earlier political works, and Brocka was proud of it. While promoting the film, he emphasized that Lacaba’s screenplay drew extensively from published accounts of vigilante atrocities. And when some of the film’s critics charged that the film was replete with historical fabrications and distortions, Lacaba joined the director in defending the truthfulness of their work, enumerating the film’s documentary sources, such as pieces of investigative journalism and reports from Amnesty International, the US government, and the Philippine Senate.\(^{43}\)

The film’s incorporation of nonfiction material found reinforcement in the visuals, which emulated the stark and gritty style of documentary and news footage. Rody Lacap’s flat and often unvarnished cinematography markedly deviated from the moody and lushly composed images of Brocka’s longtime director of photography Conrado Baltazar. The banal appearance of Lacap’s TV news–like images suited the film’s proposition that the outrageous horrors of vigilantism reflected an actual state of affairs that Filipinos could no longer afford to ignore.

Brocka’s investment in nonfiction material also served to affirm his commitment to depicting sociopolitical conditions as truthfully as possible. Such vocation was just as important in an era marked by complacency in political matters as it was at the height of autocratic rule and its regime of falsehoods. The director’s new, post-Marcos iteration of political cinema thus attempted to take full advantage of the relative unfettering of the media to castigate the failures of democratization and the weaknesses of Aquino’s liberal-democratic regime.

Critics lauded the realism and documentary-like quality of Brocka’s first big post-Marcos salvo. The reviewer for *Variety* commended the film’s “wrenching documentary immediacy, enforced by the unflamboyant, committed acting.”\(^{44}\) Joel David referred to the film’s true-to-life depictions as “documentary events on-screen” and to the “narrative [as one] which has drawn voraciously from known
facts.” Sociology professor Randy David (no relation) praised the movie’s fidelity to the truth. He wrote: “Orapronobis is an objective report about the violence and continued harassment inflicted upon the masses. It contains no slogans. It makes no ham-fisted cries of revolt.” A host of public affairs programs, David characterized the film as an “equivalent to one million commentaries on newspapers and radio, and perhaps a whole year of television talk shows.”

The critics’ enthusiasm for a political cinema with the characteristics of documentary requires little explanation. The use of images resembling those of nonfiction movies signals the filmmaker’s desire to address real-life issues and convey their urgency to viewers. Additionally, political movies often benefit from adopting the episodic structure of documentaries, which allows for the representation of complex phenomena without the strictures of conventional dramatic development (such as having to use a limited set of characters and link scenes in a tight, cause-and-effect structure.) The narrative of Orapronobis constantly breaks free of tracking Jimmy’s story to follow other characters and engage in documentary-like explorations of the scourge of counterrevolutionary vigilantism. Implicitly framed as reportage or exposé, these digressions from the protagonist’s story depict numerous fact-based episodes and treat the sociopolitical factors behind the rise of paramilitary groups. That said, this advantage is neither unique to documentary-like narration nor entirely new to Brocka’s filmmaking. In some respects, the sprawling narrative of Orapronobis harkens back to the picaresque structure and multicharacter plots that Brocka utilized to draw panoramic social portraits in films like Manila in the Claws of Light.

A Political Slasher Film

As mentioned earlier, one of the most unusual features of Brocka’s political melodrama is its unforgiving depiction of state-sanctioned violence. The American critic Richard Corliss excoriated this aspect of Orapronobis, characterizing Brocka’s work a “political slasher film” and a piece of “wily exploitation.” His criticism suggests an underlying belief that sensationalism, a hallmark of genre films and melodrama, is inappropriate to sociopolitical discourse.

It must be said, however, that many of the European critics familiar with the Filipino director’s work approved of his film’s use of graphic violence. Writing for Revue du Cinéma, Raphaël Bassan observed that the gory film “is effective in its key goal: to make the viewer aware of the horror of the situation.” Similarly, the Dutch critic Anselm Jungeblodt remarked that the picture’s “spiral of violence” is “applied to cathartic effect.” Most liberal Filipino journalists and critics reacted like the Europeans. Sheila Coronel, who authored pioneering investigative reports on the vigilante groups, averred: “The problem lies in the critics’ refusal to accept that there exists in this seemingly gentle country a dark and brutal underside that manifests itself in the conduct of counterinsurgency warfare in hinterland villages.
Brocka’s film simply focused the klieg lights on this underside, and that is what makes ‘Les insoumis’ so shocking and so unpalatable.\(^{50}\)

It is worth unpacking Corliss’s apparent bias against political films that are replete with violence or packaged in sensational genres. Neither Brocka nor Lacaba mentioned having seen the films of Constantin Costa-Gavras, but *Orapronobis* resembles the kind of filmmaking popularized in the previous decade by the Greek-born director. Alternately described as “political thrillers,” “political fiction,” and “political melodrama,” the best of Costa-Gavras’s oeuvre explored the workings of politics through narratives supercharged with action sequences and primal emotions.\(^{51}\) Such Costa-Gavras films as *Z* (1969) and *State of Siege* (1972) wove fictionalized but realistic narratives out of a series of unrelated political events. *Orapronobis* treated its true-to-life material similarly, using dramatic license to connect events relating to counterrevolutionary vigilantism that occurred across the nation for over a decade. In its portrayal of human rights abuses, *Orapronobis* especially resonates with Costa-Gavras’s *Missing* (1982), a melodramatic political thriller that harrowingly details the search for a US photojournalist who disappeared in an unnamed Latin American country.

By the time *Orapronobis* was released, however, Costa-Gavras’s films—as well as the subgenre of the political thriller—had already fallen into disfavor. Among other things, critics had grown tired of his ostensibly heavy-handed approach, exemplified they say by his “manipulative use of staccato montages” to punch up scenes of political conflict and violence.\(^{52}\) Alain Badiou opined that Costa-Gavras’s films were “reactionary” and thus undeserving of their reputation for espousing progressive politics.\(^{53}\) Another reason for the backlash against political thrillers is the notion, which Corliss raises in his review of *Orapronobis*, that their depiction of violence could be gratuitous and mindless.

To be sure, violence had long been a staple of sociopolitical films and world cinema more generally when Brocka made his film. Karl Schoonover points out, for example, that Italian “neorealist classics pivot on scenarios of the violated body.”\(^{54}\) They use what he calls “corporealism”—a visual idiom of bodily display—as a transcultural strategy for making statements about sociopolitical conditions in a manner that appeals both to the emotions and the voyeuristic desires of moviegoers.\(^{55}\) Schoonover’s work reconsiders the cross-cultural politics of using images of “the suffering body to convene a global audience of moral onlookers.”\(^{56}\) This practice, he suggests, “authorizes the foreign gaze to adjudicate local politics.”\(^{57}\) The cross-cultural dynamics involved in this spectatorial position is quite tricky, however, as Schoonover acknowledges. For one, the foreign viewers of these films, some of whom were ill-equipped to weigh in on sociopolitical issues, might end up supporting interventionist policies detrimental to the real-life counterparts of the characters or the citizens of foreign countries depicted in a movie. The foreign spectators might alternatively end up doing nothing instead of trying to help fight
for worthy causes, satisfied that they had already done their part by vicariously bearing witness to the suffering of others, even if they only did so from the comfort of a movie theater. The term “proxied engagement”—merely “looking as a form of political engagement”—describes the latter scenario.58

*Orapronobis* utilized a less culturally prestigious version of “corporealism” than what Schoonover describes, but it shared the humanitarian and geopolitical purpose of summoning “a global audience of moral onlookers.”59 By setting up *Orapronobis* as a transcultural cinematic project, Brocka asserted the continuing value of foreign viewership to his practice of cinema politics. Following his Marcos-era strategy, Brocka aired his country’s dirty linen abroad to shame the Philippine government into changing its repressive policies. He raised the stakes in *Orapronobis* by staging an exponentially greater number of scenes of extrajudicial killing and torture (all of them Marcosian moments) than he did previously, using shock tactics to provoke outrage among domestic and international viewers who may have grown complacent about the fate of Philippine democracy after the fall of Marcos. Brocka counterintuitively posited the film’s over-the-top images of unhinged despots, bloody massacres, gang rape, and cannibalism as honest depictions of the current state of affairs in the country.

The recourse to extreme cinematic violence created problems for Brocka’s new political melodrama, but for reasons he did not anticipate. His goriest depictions fell victim to censorship at home and abroad. Lacaba relates that French producers demanded the shortening of the second cannibalism scene while the film was still in postproduction. The excised portion was an insert shot of the vigilante named Jango (Abbo De La Cruz) handling Kontra’s still-beating heart.60 Following the screening at Cannes and the theatrical run in France, the distributor made cuts to the film’s three most violent scenes, in addition to other less significant alterations. The Motion Picture Association of America reportedly asked for the excisions in return for issuing an “R” rating for the film.61 The deleted portions included shots of the Caucasian priest’s mangled head; Kontra scooping out brain matter and preparing to consume it; a scene of the vigilantes exhibiting the decapitated head of one of their victims to horrified onlookers; Jango cutting into Kontra’s chest; Jango looking at the chunk of Kontra’s heart on the tip of his knife; and Jango saying a prayer before offering the piece of human offal to another cult-member.

Despite their gory content, the deleted shots did not seem as though they belonged, as Corliss puts it, in the oft-maligned slasher film subgenre. The images had a realistic appearance, thanks to well-made prosthetics and clever editing. Unfortunately, the frankness of those depictions made them almost permanently inaccessible to viewers in the Philippines and other countries besides France. The print of the film that circulated in a handful of private screenings in the Philippines was of the bowdlerized MPAA version. The censored portions were never restored, not even when the film was released on home video in the United States.
and Italy. To my knowledge, only the French subtitled prints—held at archives in Paris and Brussels—contain all the material taken out of the MPAA cut.

Brocka’s detractors capitalized on the inaccessibility of the censored scenes in mounting a smear campaign against Orapronobis and its makers. They offered hysterical secondhand descriptions of the excised sections and their effects on viewers. Newspaper columnist Belinda Olivares-Cunanan blasted the film’s depiction of cannibalism and accused the filmmaker of casting “a slur on the entire Filipino race.” She went on to falsely report that “Filipinos who saw the film in the French capital came out crying and covering their face in shame.” To give credibility to her account, she added that television preacher Fr. Sonny Ramirez—one of the few Filipinos who saw the film’s integral version in France—told her “a foreign woman sitting beside him vomited at the film’s end.” In the most outrageously

**FIGURE 6.3.** This composite features images from the two censored depictions of cannibalism in the film. The top images show Commander Kontra (Bembol Roco) blasting the priest’s skull and preparing to eat his brain matter. The bottom images show Django (Abbo De la Cruz) ripping open Kontra’s chest and preparing to eat a piece of his heart. Orapronobis/Fight for Us. Courtesy of Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique.
spurious of her hit pieces, the columnist blamed Brocka for getting Filipina nannies sacked from their jobs in Paris, implying that employers feared they might be cannibals like the characters in his film.63

Other figures identified with Mrs. Aquino and her government joined the columnist in mudslinging. TV director Nick Lizaso suggested that the film’s engagement in France was “part of a leftist black propaganda [campaign] to downgrade [sic] President Aquino’s scheduled visit to Europe in July.”64 He subsequently floated the laughable theory that the film was secretly funded by the Marcoses (specifically former presidential daughter Imee) to get back at Aquino.65 Behaving much like—but also far worse—than Marcos’s cordon sanitaire Maria Kalaw Katigbak, Aquino’s chief censor Manuel Morato Jr. repeated Lizaso’s baseless claims. Additionally, Morato hurled more accusations against Brocka in his newspaper columns and interviews with the media. He even tried to make an issue of the director’s sexuality, boasting that he had salacious information about the director’s “nocturnal activities.”66 Worst of all, the chief censor sought to get the director and the scriptwriter in hot water by testifying to Congress about the alleged proliferation of communists in the film industry, obviously alluding to them.67 Brocka responded defiantly to the red-baiting, declaring that “If someone who fights for human rights is a communist, then I can be called a communist.”68

Apart from his demolition job against the filmmakers, Morato suppressed Orapronobis by leveraging the power of his office. After hearing of the film’s acceptance at Cannes, Morato sent a letter to festival director Gilles Jacob, accusing Brocka of falsely picturing himself “as a victim of censorship . . . [in a] publicity gimmick to generate sympathy and call attention to himself.”69

Viva, the Philippine distributor of films made by the Cannon Group, begged off from representing Orapronobis, likely out of fear of offending the censors and the government. Brocka was only able to obtain a print of the film by cutting a deal with Pathé, its international distributor. After a few private screenings, he submitted the print to the censors for review, hoping it would eventually find a local distributor. The censors slapped the film with an R-21 rating, limiting admission to persons aged twenty-one and over. The rating technically did not even exist. Morato initially assigned the same rating to Brocka’s gay-themed film Macho Dancer. The censors adjusted the latter’s rating to another previously nonexistent designation called “R-18” on appeal but then, according to Brocka, pressured the distributor (also Viva) to pull out of theaters after just “four days.”70

Emulating his Marcos-era predecessors, Morato likewise withheld the permit for the film’s commercial exhibition, citing deficient paperwork and accusing the director of bypassing export-import requirements.71 Morato’s rancor scared off distributors and, much to Brocka’s dismay, the film never enjoyed a commercial run in Philippine theaters. Ironically, the fate of Orapronobis in Aquino’s “democratic space” was worse than what My Own Country suffered under the Marcos
dictatorship. The new constitution's guarantee of free expression, which Brocka wrote into the document, did not save his film from the tyranny of Mrs. Aquino’s censors and her attack dogs in the press. She reportedly even joined the public bashing of the film. Referencing the cannibalism in *Orapronobis*, Mrs. Aquino was said to have quipped in a speech that the Philippines was “not a nation of brain-eaters.”

Despite the problems it caused in 1989, the gruesome violence of *Orapronobis* truly set it apart as a daring and unorthodox work of political filmmaking. Although screenwriter Lacaba felt pressure to downplay the film's graphic content at the height of the smear campaign, the integral cut of *Orapronobis* was true to his and Brocka's vision of using violence *in extremis* as a fiercely political cinematic statement. The boldness of this vision was already present in an early outline of the narrative, which was included by mistake in the film's press kit. The document laid out a climax of unbearable harshness, which reads: “In an abandoned house, an orgy of hideous cruelty occurs when Kontra rapes Esper and kills her son, eating his brains in front of her eyes.” Regrettably, the turn to “corporealism” that animated Brocka's political melodrama has found new relevance more than a quarter century later as a vital strategy of human rights advocacy and antiauthoritarian critique. Widespread vigilante killings returned with a vengeance in 2016 with the election of Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency. In keeping with his campaign promise to launch a ruthless “war against drugs,” Duterte encouraged the authorities to kill thousands of alleged drug users and traffickers. The chief executive's incitement to murder came with half-joking guarantees of impunity for the armed forces and even civilians heeding his call to action. Not surprisingly, the Philippines’s new strongman had also been a part of the checkered history of counter-revolutionary vigilantism and political violence in the late 1980s. The young Duterte, a former appointee of President Aquino and the newly elected mayor of Davao, figured in a piece of investigative journalism that Lacaba cited as one of the inspirations for *Orapronobis*. The article quotes Duterte as claiming that the widely reported human rights violations by vigilantes were just “isolated incidents.” Pointing to famously unreliable public records as proof, he challenged the reporter “to check the police station blotters to see if reports of criminal acts by vigilantes are true.”

In the Duterte era, outraged citizens have railed against state-sanctioned killings by circulating high-definition pictures of victims' corpses on social media. As in Brocka’s film, the mangled remains of the purported drug users and sellers function as shocking testaments to the malevolence of the new strongman regime. Although even the ghastliest pictures are incommensurable to the traumatic reality they index, the stomach-turning obscenity makes for powerful weapons of antiauthoritarian politics. When viewed anew amid the spectacular carnage of Duterte's rule, *Orapronobis* registers as a vivid and chilling history of the present.
written almost three decades previously. In the 1989 film’s uncannily prophetic account of the late 2010s, the unhinged Kontra is both Duterte’s precursor and equally fearsome stand-in.

*A Trenchant “Communist” Melodrama*

If some foreign and domestic critics had misgivings about the sensationalism and violence in *Orapronobis*, others—as I have mentioned—took issue instead with the melodramatic character of Brocka’s political film. These reservations about the film’s form are not surprising, however, since critics routinely denigrated melodramas and thrillers. Coco Fusco’s described the film in *The Village Voice* as an unsuccessful outing that “combines soap opera romance with social consciousness.” 75 Vincent Canby gave a backhanded compliment that similarly took aim at melodrama, citing the film’s more restrained aspects and moments as its redeeming qualities. “The story,” he argued, “is simply and effectively told without undue melodrama.” Luis Francia, a Filipino American critic, echoed Canby’s sentiments. He stated: “Though very much a melodrama, *Fight for Us* keeps theatricality to a minimum.”

Critics who disparaged the film’s use of melodrama while admiring its progressive politics misapprehended the former’s importance to the latter. Alongside its bombastic treatise on human rights, *Orapronobis* is also deeply melodramatic in its nostalgialaced celebration of the idealistic middle-class intellectuals who spent their youth fighting the Marcos regime and campaigning for social justice. The fictional Jimmy Cordero belonged to a generation of radicalized youth who read Marx and Mao and left the comfort of their urban middle-class homes to live and fight among the peasants. The battle of their lives was not the hasty uprising that toppled Marcos but rather the protracted “national-democratic revolution” that was reignited in the early 1970s and remained unfinished at the close of the following decade. 76

A fuller picture of Jimmy’s former life as a revolutionary reemerges at the start of *Orapronobis*, prompting him (and the film’s viewers) to reassess the validity of socialism as a political project. Initially, he opts to bury the past as he hastens to begin a new family after his release from prison. His approach espouses the rhetoric of a new beginning that came with President Aquino’s amnesty program for political prisoners and leftist revolutionaries. As the narrative progresses, the returning past collides with Jimmy’s forward push into the future. This collision generates one of the film’s emotional highlights. Revisiting Santa Filomena after many years, Jimmy sits outside his former lover’s hut and reminisces with her about their experiences as underground fighters. The nostalgic journey is interrupted by the revelation of young Camilo’s true paternity. Believing up to this point that fatherhood was the beginning of his new life in mainstream society, Jimmy realizes that it had also been a buried facet of his past. Although Esper begs Jimmy to withhold the information from Camilo just yet, the news of Jimmy’s newly discovered paternity visibly thrills him. Similarly, the traces of his former
life in the underground—the decaying former homes, the well-remembered songs of protest, the fading but primal connections with ex-comrades—fill him with joy once again. The melodrama of Jimmy's paternity thus becomes an objective-correlative for his abandoned youthful dream of socialist revolution.

One of the most heartfelt but understated episodes of Jimmy's paternal melodrama stages yet another collision of past and future. Sometime after Esper and her children seek refuge in Manila, Jimmy and a pregnant Trixie take them out shopping. The episode is rendered in montage, heightening the already strong emotions within the scene by replacing dialogue with the melodramatic spell of mute gesture and swelling music. Underneath the dramatically suspended escalators of Vira Mall—an upscale shopping center—Jimmy and Trixie ply Esper and her children with clothing and gifts. The montage sequence is quite moving. To make up for lost time, Jimmy buys Camilo a toy: a plastic sword, the same one the child would brandish before Kontra guns him down near the film's end. Trixie matches his generosity and tries to get over her jealousy toward Esper by buying her a dress. Jimmy looks on with pride at his wife's charity. The crisscrossing pattern of the escalators at the mall evokes the Janus-faced vision of Jimmy's past and future lives with his two families. This bittersweet episode passes all too quickly, however, as if to show the untenable coexistence of his two domestic lives and the political ideologies he had alternately embraced. Shortly after the idyll of the family outing, Jimmy and Trixie return Esper and children to the refugee center where the violence of the present catches up with them. Esper and Camilo are abducted and killed in the span of just a few scenes.

The matter of Jimmy's conflicting paternal obligations—and the related pattern of clashing elements within the film's narrative and mise-en-scène—is resolved in the final sequence. The film's fast-paced editing dramatically slows down in the scene when Jimmy recovers Esper and Camilo's bodies. Following the conventions of male melodramas, the film reaches an emotional flashpoint when Jimmy tries—and largely fails—to fulfill his paternal duties.77 Filled with remorse for not saving his child and missing the chance to disclose his paternity, Jimmy breaks down while cradling the child's body. Jimmy later realizes that he can still help create a better world for his new wife and their child, but to do so he must leave them and everything else behind, as he had already done in the past to Esper and Camilo. In another instance of melodramatic contrasts, Jimmy goes from living with two families to virtually losing both.

In the meantime, Jimmy's reversion to the underground grated at the centrists among the film's viewers, including those in academia. Randy David, a sociologist, admired the film but remarked that he "would have liked it more if [Jimmy] Phillip Salvador's decision to take up arms once more were left open rather than considered as a sure and inevitable course of action."78 David's response is understandable because the film's ending is bracingly abrupt and provocative. Jimmy's rapprochement with
socialism militated against the rightward drift in President Aquino’s politics. She had famously abandoned the leftist members of the diverse coalition that brought her to power after realizing that her political survival depended on embracing rightist military allies as well as the neoliberal economic policies of her country’s transnational financiers and investors.

The film’s attempt to portray socialism as the answer to Jimmy’s quest was especially brave because the communists, who served as the main exponents of socialism in the country, were especially unpopular at the time of the film’s release. They had lost their footing in opposition circles by sitting out the “people power” uprising. Their public image also took an enormous hit due to their much-publicized spate of political killings in urban areas as well as for murdering hundreds of their members in an internal purge. The film’s attempt to portray socialism as the answer to Jimmy’s quest was especially brave because the communists, who served as the main exponents of socialism in the country, were especially unpopular at the time of the film’s release. They had lost their footing in opposition circles by sitting out the “people power” uprising. Their public image also took an enormous hit due to their much-publicized spate of political killings in urban areas as well as for murdering hundreds of their members in an internal purge.80 *Orapronobis* illustrates the former in one scene. The episode shows how the party’s urban guerilla force (also called a “sparrow unit”) guns down a cop in broad daylight, with a brazenness reminiscent of the rightist vigilantes, one of their mortal enemies.81 The assassin is Jimmy’s friend, ex-comrade, and former prison cellmate Rene (Pen Medina), whom the film unflatteringly portrays as a hardened ideologue.

In *Orapronobis*, the characters use the term *kilusan* (movement) to refer to what in real life would have been the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the organization to which Lacaba once belonged and also the political entity that Brocka thought “should be legalized” in the Philippines if the country were to be a true democracy.82 The tarnished reputation of the Maoist CPP may well have been one of the reasons for the slight “ambiguity” behind the film’s references to the “movement.” At the same time, the “movement” is also a placeholder for the dream of society’s radical transformation, far beyond the reforms that the 1986 revolution yielded. An aspect of the Philippine experience dating back to the Spanish colonial times, taking to the hills or joining the “movement”—or, in the 1970s, the “revolution” and the “underground”—has never been coterminous with just one ideological position.83 In having Jimmy return to the movement, Lacaba affirms that for all their missteps, the work that he and his generation of revolutionaries did in their youth was ultimately not for naught. Rather than simply depicting the protagonist’s rapprochement with the CPP, *Orapronobis* closes with the notion that socialism continues to offer inspiration to those who wish to realize the unfulfilled promise of the “people power” revolution or the profound social transformation that should have followed the triumphant struggle against authoritarian rule.
going to be more than sleazy. It’s going to be tacky. It will have George Hamilton and his mother arriving dressed just like they were coming out of a Universal movie. It will have Van Cliburn playing the piano on the lawn.84 Sadly, “Cryselda R.” was not meant to be, but Brocka realized his desire to poke fun at his old enemy and recall the sordid history of her reign in the next iteration of his political melodramas.

Brocka delivered a string of box office hits in the late 1980s, and this encouraged Viva Films to give him considerable leeway in developing a new and substantial project.85 The completed work, A Dirty Affair (Gumapang ka sa lusak), utilized the elements of Brocka’s previous commercial successes. These include employing the adult melodrama subgenre, weaving a convoluted plot reminiscent of komiks or serialized graphic novels, casting stars in lead roles, and maintaining high production values. Brocka used these elements to deliver a narrative about Philippine political culture during and beyond the Marcos regime.

Without detracting from its achievements, I should mention at the outset that the film’s treatment of politics is not without compromise. The hellish backlash that Brocka endured after criticizing President Aquino’s policies in Orapronobis appeared to have set a limit-point for the political discourse of Dirty Affair. Unlike Orapronobis, Dirty Affair makes no explicit references to Mrs. Aquino’s government. Instead, the narrative anachronistically re-creates episodes from the Marcos era in a largely fictive present-day setting. This mixing of temporal perspectives works on multiple levels. It creates an engrossing narrative and history lesson by alternately invoking and dissimulating the familiar story of the Marcos regime. It also formulates a novel approach to political critique in Brocka’s cinema: namely, the coupling of a critical recollection of the failures of authoritarianism with a reflection on the enduring problems of Philippine democracy.

The film begins with a prologue that exemplifies the anachronism and temporal shifts that occur throughout the narrative. In the Japanese-occupied Philippines during World War II, a gang of soldiers from the Imperial Army corners a distressed young Filipina (Maureen Mauricio). They rip the back off her dress and are about to pounce on her when a disembodied voice suddenly yells “cut!” and a man who turns out to be the young woman’s boyfriend chastises her for agreeing to film yet another tacky nude scene. As it turns out, the prologue is a self-reflexive depiction of using historical trauma to make an exploitation film. This pre-title sequence sets up a critical attitude toward historical narratives and how the media constructs them. It also plants the seeds for what will turn out to be an unflattering statement about the country’s political culture.

The scenes following the title sequence identify the film’s principal characters. Jonathan (Allan Paule), a pal of the angry boyfriend in the prologue, encounters an older movie sexpot named Rachel Suarez (Dina Bonnevie) at a disco. He makes small talk with her, but she eventually walks away from him. Jonathan later finds out
that Rachel is the mistress of Eduardo Guatlo (Eddie Garcia), a corrupt mayor in one of Metro Manila’s cities. Guatlo’s physical appearance, mannerisms, and life story are uncannily reminiscent of Ferdinand Marcos. Also not coincidentally, his relationship to Rachel brings to mind the scandalous affair between Marcos and American starlet Dovie Beams. Beams starred in Maharlika (1970) a film based loosely on Marcos’s false claims of leading a guerilla outfit during World War II. Marcos’s supporters raised money for the film to help with his reelection campaign. After learning of his sexual interest in the actress, they also set up a love nest for the couple in the posh Greenhills neighborhood. Beams was already thirty-six at the start of the affair but claimed to be twenty-four. Like Beams, Rachel made her career in sleazy movies and was already past a starlet’s prime when she took up with a politico.

As was the case with Marcos, Guatlo’s oppressive treatment of women such as Rachel reflects his authoritarian character. He keeps her on a tight leash, having her tailed almost incessantly by his henchman, the allegorically named Falcon (Bembol Roco). Guatlo disallows her from making new movies, worried that her fame will fuel gossip about their affair. Rachel asserts her independence, however, by frequenting night spots and flirting with other men. In the course of several encounters, she develops a relationship—albeit a platonic one—with Jonathan, a man whose naivete she finds charming.

Election season rolls along and, in a subplot borrowed from Brocka’s Marcos-era film Miguelito, Guatlo sets his sights on the higher office of congressional representative. His wife Rowena (Charo Santos)—who looks and acts unmistakably like Imelda Marcos—reminds him that he must get rid of his mistress at once. When he hesitates, Rowena confronts Rachel, offering her a settlement to stay away from Guatlo and threatening to have her raped and doused with acid if she made trouble. The latter references the threat that Imelda Marcos allegedly made to Beams at the time of the dalliance.

Guatlo meets with Rachel separately and offers to continue her allowance and fulfill an earlier promise to pull strings for the release of her ex-boyfriend Levi (Christopher De Leon). Unknown to her, Guatlo has an ulterior motive for freeing the inmate. He intends to use Levi as a triggerman for the assassination of his political rival, a lawyer and gentleman farmer named Ricardo Tuazon (Ray Ventura). This subplot’s correspondence to recent history may have been obvious to viewers at that time: Tuazon functions as the stand-in for Aquino while Levi is the fictive counterpart of Rolando Galman, the “lone assassin” who supposedly killed Aquino before being gunned down by aviation security.

Unaware of Guatlo’s intentions, Rachel asks for Levi’s release and is also first to visit him. When she finally learns of the plan to use Levi as a hit man for his opponent, Rachel tries to dissuade the politician and, failing that, attempts to derail his plans.

The scheme to assassinate Tuazon exemplifies the film’s use of historical references to comment on both past and present political realities. Guatlo personally
briefs Levi on his mission but the overbearing Rowena listens in and constantly interrupts them. The scene is essentially a retelling of the plot to kill Aquino. It suggests the Marcos couple’s direct involvement in the assassination, something they denied but which the public nevertheless believed was true. In the days preceding the murder, Rowena and Guatlo separately accuse Tuazon of being a communist and, because of his lack of political experience, of being ignorant as well. The malicious and elitist accusations are not throwaway details but rather political jabs directed at both the Marcos and Aquino regimes. In the 1970s Marcos accused Ninoy Aquino of conspiring with communists to subvert his presidency. Marcos later tried to pin Ninoy’s assassination on the left, particularly Communist Party of the Philippines Chairman Rodolfo Salas. During the snap elections he called in the mid-1980s to legitimize his presidency, Marcos tried to discredit Cory Aquino by accusing her of having communist backers. Sadly, when Mrs. Aquino became president, her regime embraced the autocrat’s tactic of branding dissident labor organizers, activist farmworkers, and political opponents as communists. As Walden Bello and John Gershman note, the country’s civilian and military elite defined “all those advocating programs that seek substantial social and economic reform of the current social order as being outside the democratic pale, as being ‘communists.’”

Figure 6.4. Mayor Guatlo (Eddie Garcia, left) and wife Rowena (Charo Santos) mimic the appearance and mannerisms of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos in *A Dirty Affair*. Courtesy of MOWELFUND.
The “anti-elite candidates with radical political programs” were thus “driven from the electoral arena by the threat of force,” becoming “fair game for death squads and right-wing vigilantes.” Tuazon suffers a similar fate. The film emphasizes the injustice of red-baiting in a scene where Guatlo privately acknowledges that the character of the man he defamed and whose murder he ordered “was spotless.”

The parallelism to Aquino’s killing and the reference to contemporary politics continues in the sequence dramatizing Guatlo’s use of state-sponsored violence to silence Levi after his mission. The mayor orders his heavies to hunt him down. Rachel and Jonathan come to Levi’s aid, but the latter ends up saving them instead by drawing the goons to himself. The film stages the summary execution of Levi as a Marcosian moment, with the thugs encircling him and firing at close range. Rachel screams in silence as she watches the incident from a dark corner. Looking almost directly at the camera, she implicates the film’s spectator as a witness to her terrifying ordeal. When she and Jonathan later flee the murder scene, the film makes another intertextual reference to Brocka’s earlier crime melodramas, specifically Jaguar (1979) and Angela, the Marked One (Angela markado, 1980). The ensuing nighttime chase, which leads Rachel, Jonathan and Guatlo’s heavies through the slums and into a junkyard littered with gigantic concrete piping, invokes the climactic moments of the director’s earlier films. As in the case of Orapronobis, the director’s recycling of some of the set pieces of his Marcos-era work is itself a cinematic statement. This intertextuality suggests, among other things, that the scenarios of political violence remained virtually unchanged since the reign of authoritarianism. Guatlo’s politically motivated killing spree then continues as his goons pursue Rachel and Jonathan. In a series of additional Marcosian summary executions, Falcon and his fellow goons brutally dispatch Rachel’s parents and Jonathan’s friend RJ (Francis Magalona).

As the Guatlos’ henchmen continue the hunt for Rachel and Jonathan, the mayor and his wife begin to suffer the fallout from Tuazon’s assassination and other murders. At one of Rowena’s public appearances, a middle-aged woman attacks her with a machete-like bolo knife. Bodyguards promptly subdue and kill the assailant, who turns out to be Levi’s mother. The scene pokes fun at the attempted assassination of Imelda Marcos by an engineer named Carlito Dimaali. The attack occurred during a televised awards ceremony in December 1972, less than three months after the imposition of martial law. Imelda’s wounds required seventy-five stitches but, as biographer Katherine Ellison recalls, just the next day “she was preening for television cameras in a silky, frilly gown unlike any her attending doctors have ever seen.” Like Imelda in 1972, Rowena capitalizes on the incident to generate public sympathy. The mayor’s wife hams it up in an interview with the press, tearfully recounting her pleas to God following her attack. Guatlo interrupts Rowena and declares, “Everything is getting out of hand. Chaos and anarchy have set in!” The mayor’s alarmist discourse makes fun of Marcos’s rheto-
ric for justifying the imposition of martial law. Marcos falsely claimed that a conspiracy of radical leftists and nefarious oligarchs was using violent “dissident agitation and activity” to set the stage for a “bloody social revolution.” No such conspiracy existed and, as many had suspected, the president’s allies staged many of the violent disturbances they attributed to the opposition.

The film’s unlikely combination of history lesson, soap opera, and contemporary political satire continues in the grand finale. Rachel crashes Guatlo’s biggest political sortie, telling the audience of their adulterous liaison and the politically motivated killings he masterminded. With the help of Jonathan and his friends—who have taken over the audio control booth and hogtied the technicians there—Rachel plays a taped conversation between her and the mayor. The recording incriminates Guatlo for the abduction and killing of her parents.

Rachel’s political bombshell is a historical reference to Beams’s secret tape recordings of her sexual encounters with Marcos. Student activists aired the tapes on campus radio to humiliate the dictator. The American starlet played additional excerpts to a crowd of journalists before finally departing the Philippines. Marcos reportedly tried to have Beams killed during her stopover in Hong Kong, even putting the would-be assassin on the same plane as the starlet. When the murder plot failed, the president allegedly leaked nude photos he took of Beams to the press. She fired back by releasing more tapes of the raunchy pillow talk.

The film alters the outcome of the Beams affair as well as the means by which the tyrannical Guatlo is ousted from politics. The deviation from history is alternately more tragic and hopeful than real events. Rachel’s incriminating tape agitates the crowd at the campaign event. Falcon retaliates by shooting at Rachel. Jonathan cradles his mortally wounded idol, who thanks him for assisting her in their mission. Before she breathes her last, and through her tears, Rachel flashes what film scholar Joel David aptly describes as “the most blissful smile ever seen in local cinema.” The heroine’s beautiful death, a classic trope of sentimental literature and melodrama, is made more poignant by the triumph of justice. The tape continues to play after Rachel expires, giving details of her relationship with Guatlo. “He was spending the people’s money to keep me,” she relates, before rattling off the mayor’s other crimes. The tape concludes with a plea, addressed to the people, “to end his [Guatlo’s] evil doings” once and for all. The tape, and indeed the entire incident, play over live radio and TV broadcasts. The Guatlos—realizing that their careers are finished—dejectedly leave the stage.

The Politics of Time and Intertextuality

Temporal shifts and intertextuality play crucial roles in the cinema politics of Dirty Affair. As mentioned earlier, the film engages in an anachronistic retelling of the history of Marcosian rule. Although set in the present, the narrative comprises historical episodes from the Marcos dictatorship, some of them already
over a decade old when the film reached theaters. By unhinging recognizable events and figures from their proper historical moment, the film creates an altered picture not only of the past but the present as well. This anachronism engages the viewers’ historical memory and tests their knowledge of contemporary issues. More specifically, the aberrant temporality allows for a postmortem on the authoritarian state and, more subtly, a critique of stumbling democratization in the present.

Dirty Affair’s postmortem on the dictatorship recounts the features of Marcosian authoritarianism in sensational and often humorous episodes. Apart from what I have cited earlier, the film depicts the authoritarian leader’s cabal (through his wife and cronies), his exercise of state violence (through Falcon’s surveillance and salvaging operations), and his regime’s pay-offs to the masses (Rowena’s reference to BLISS, Imelda’s low-income housing program). The film also invokes Marcos’s overpriced infrastructure projects (the Light Rail Transit or LRT trains that appear in the background of some of Levi’s scenes) and his blatant rigging of elections. The function of the film’s postmortem of the Marcos regime is educational and cathartic. Satire both thrives on and inspires a sense of mastery. To denounce and laugh off the follies of authoritarian rule, the viewer must first become wise to them. The
film’s easily recognizable historical references facilitate insightful remembrance and scathing criticism.

The pleasurable recollection and catharsis that the serio-comic reenactment of history prompted may have been helpful in not only in providing civic education but also in renewing public support for democratic reform. One of the film’s reviewers notes that audiences burst into applause during screenings. He said: “It was not possible to make films like this during the previous regime.” (“Talaga namang hindi puwedeng gawin ang ganitong pelikula noong nakaraang rehi-men.”) The French philosopher Alain Badiou has written about the progressive potential of humorous movies with a political slant. “Farce and comedy,” he says are “potent political, social, and esthetic weapon[s].” The cathartic laughter generated by Dirty Affair points to a collective desire to banish the traumatic vestiges of authoritarianism and prevent its recurrence.

There is a second, decidedly more obscure level of intertextuality and temporal shift in Dirty Affair that is particularly legible to audiences familiar with Brocka’s 1979 film Jaguar. Dirty Affair revisits the main protagonists, basic narrative features, and some highlights of that film. The critic Mario Bautista correctly pointed out that Dirty Affair is “basically a continuation of ‘Jaguar’ and shows what happens to these two characters eleven years later.” His use of the word “basically” is an apt qualification because Dirty Affair renames Jaguar’s protagonists and makes other substantial changes.

Those familiar with the 1979 film might recognize Levi as a renamed version of its hero Poldo. The latter is a security guard who accidentally kills his boss’s romantic rival. The boss abandons him, and he languishes in prison. Poldo’s only champion is a former go-go dancer and rising movie starlet named Cristy, who was also a former girlfriend of his boss. Cristy is the counterpart of Dirty Affair’s Rachel. At the end of Jaguar, Cristy distances herself from Poldo, fearing his notoriety would hurt her career. In Dirty Affair’s updating of the Jaguar narrative, the hero’s incarceration only lasts seven years, and the heroine never abandons him. Although the passing of time demonstrates the lovers’ fidelity, it hardly engenders progress in their personal lives and the larger sociopolitical realm. Indeed, Rachel/Cristy and Levi/Poldo find themselves stuck in a temporal limbo in the same way that Philippine society and politics remained mired in some of the problems that existed under authoritarian rule.

Before Guatlo’s intervention, Levi/Poldo languished in prison, obsessed with the fear that his jailing will “drain away my humanity.” He was in such deep despair that he was “willing to do anything” in exchange for freedom. He seemed to be aware that the temporary freedom Guatlo was offering would cost him his life. As for Rachel/Cristy, her economic situation may have improved over the years, but the decline in her reputation and professional career had canceled out her gains. Already washed up in her thirties and tainted by her affair with Guatlo, the only
roles offered to her are in “semi-bold dramas,” the tamer but still disreputable versions of the sexploitation films that once catapulted her from the slums to the silver screen. She cannot even take those parts, however, due to the mayor’s insistence that she “perform” only in his bedroom.

As in the past, Levi/Poldo and Rachel/Cristy continue to be pawns of the rich, although now it is the political and not just the economic elite that controls them. Their plight is symptomatic of the fundamental stagnation lying beneath the surface of the ostensibly radical political transformations of 1986. The uprising that toppled the Marcos regime may have restored the trappings of democracy, but it was failing to serve the precariat to which Levi and Rachel belonged. Walden Bello characterized the aftermath of the “people power” revolution as a “narrow process of democratization” in which free elections were restored “but social and economic structures remain[ed] as frozen as ever.” He argued that what the Philippines actually regained in 1986 was an elite democracy that “generates the illusion of democracy at the formal political level to defuse the reality of social and economic inequality.” The Filipino masses’ obsession with free elections (and their use of it as a fetish for a participatory, mass-based democracy) was evident in the staggering 90 percent turnout during the congressional and senatorial elections of
Ironically, roughly the same percentage of newly elected congressional representatives were members of the landed elites, who proceeded to legislate according to their ruling-class interests. Bello’s notion of an elite democracy is useful in reading Dirty Affair’s transposition of Poldo/Levi and Rachel/Cristy’s standstill lives into a post-authoritarian Philippines gripped by election fever. If the protagonists’ fates suggest the consequences of an elite democracy for the lower classes, then the film makes a statement about Philippine political culture that is at turns deeply cynical and hopeful. Jaguar’s Poldo killed a man because of his misplaced loyalty to his boss, the womanizing and trouble-making son of a millionaire. Dirty Affair’s Levi rehearses Poldo’s fate: he kills Tuazon for Guatlo’s benefit. His loyalty to the corrupt politico costs him his life. Rachel fares a little better than Levi, redeeming herself in a heroic act before her demise. But compared to her alter ego in Jaguar, Rachel is obviously far worse off at the conclusion of Dirty Affair. Whereas Cristy managed to buck the patriarchy and the class system by doggedly pursuing stardom, her contemporary incarnation perishes in a quicksand of political corruption and violence.

The demise of Jaguar’s two protagonists, both of whom implicitly survived the tumult of the Marcos dictatorship, paints an unfavorable picture of the present under Mrs. Aquino’s leadership. Similar to the deplorable state of affairs in Orapronobis, the elite democracy of Dirty Affair testifies to the failures of democratization after 1986. But, as I intimated earlier, a flicker of hope separates Dirty Affair from Orapronobis. Jaguar’s Poldo splits off into the two male protagonists of Dirty Affair: namely, Levi, the broken-down prison inmate, and Jonathan, the doe-eyed lad from the slums who clings to the dream of social mobility and a better world. Jonathan is the counterpart to Poldo’s innocent and optimistic self at the beginning of Jaguar while Levi represents the cynical Poldo.

Something of a relay between Poldo and Jonathan occurs during Dirty Affair’s reprise of a memorable scene from Jaguar. In the epilogue to Dirty Affair, we see Jonathan reminiscing at the breakwater of Manila Bay, where he and Rachel talked a couple of times. A sound flashback replays the advice Rachel gave him early in their friendship: “Your life is just beginning. Start it right. Start it clean.” The scene recalls a similar conversation in Jaguar. Set in the same location, the scene shows Cristy speaking ruefully about her sordid path to a career in cheap movies. She offers her story to encourage Poldo to be more critical of her ex-lover, the boss whom he idolizes. Poldo unwisely ignores the advice Cristy gives him in Jaguar, but his counterpart Jonathan gets it right in Dirty Affair. Heeding Rachel’s counsel, he comes out unscathed in the end. The sound flashback of Rachel admonishing the young man to “start right” and “start clean” doubles as a plea to the film’s viewers to reaffirm their promise to better society—to fulfill the promise of democratization—against all odds.
For a majority of the Filipino entertainment journalists and critics, *Dirty Affair* represented a breakthrough in Brocka’s political filmmaking. Many of them pointed to the mass patronage of the film as a rare achievement. The film reportedly grossed 2 million pesos—the entire budget of an exploitation film at that time—on just its first day.102 “We had a difficult time entering and leaving the theater because of the thick crowds,” remarked film reviewer Mario Bautista. Entertainment reporter Bibsy Carballo noted that “after two weeks” the film was “still bringing in the crowds.”103 Nestor Torre declared that the film’s “popularity refutes the hoary notion that local moviegoers will reject any production that asks them to think.”104

Apart from marveling at the film’s strong following, the critics noted the viewers’ hearty response. Bautista reported that during the film’s climax, “the audience in the theater where we saw it applauded several times.” Torre’s *Inquirer* review cited the same episode for having “a stunning and pure effect on the viewer.” Along similar lines, Joel David lauded the film’s “careful working out of viewership psychology, particularly when placed in the context of its director’s body of work.” David found that Brocka was able to establish a rare compact with his wide audience, one in which the film’s political statements were transmitted between them but remained opaque to the subjects of the film’s critique. He said: “It is an indication of the gap between our officials and the masses they aim to represent when no one among the former thus far has raised a peep about the wholesale (and well-deserved) defamation being visited upon them by our moviemakers... and something must also urgently be said about the way the mass audience laps it all up.”105 *Dirty Affair’s* success demonstrated the potential of film melodrama—a plebian art form—for invigorating democracy.

The warm response of some critics suggested that the success of *Dirty Affair* may have raised melodrama’s standing as a vehicle for political discourse. Luis H. Francia, who once criticized the melodramatic underpinnings of Brocka’s *Weighed but Found Wanting* (1974), found the “noirish melodrama” of *Dirty Affair* useful in staging a “chilling allegory of the terror that gushed through the open sewer of the Marcos regime.”106 David found the melodramatic base perfectly suitable to a movie about Philippine political culture. He opined that the director “advanced a proposition audacious even for himself: Philippine politics, per Brocka’s latest, is more than just a matter of intrigues and chases and shoot-outs; it is actually one big noisy and unending melodrama.” David’s take on the correspondence between form and content was right on the mark. Indeed, from the “film-within-a-film” opening to the series of histrionic episodes that depict Rachel’s political misadventures, *Dirty Affair* self-consciously exposes that country’s politics as a cynical spectacle of violence and histrionic playacting—a shrill and pointless melodrama—that is inimical to the people’s interests.

As in the case of *Orapronobis*, the success of *Dirty Affair* did not impress some critics, who declared the film’s melodramatic form—or rather their idea of what
the term meant—to be incompatible with political critique. For example, Torre, an influential critic, noted in his largely sanguine piece that "Dirty Affair's "melodramatic devices deflect the production's more purposive intentions."107 Melodrama, in other words, was the very aspect that prevented Dirty Affair from realizing its full potential as a political film. Isah Red expressed a similar idea in his scathing assessment, tellingly headlined as "Sudsy Politics." Red complained that the director merely uses "politics as the jumping board for an obvious [sic] soap operatic movie."108

ABOVE EVERYTHING ELSE

The box office triumph and warm critical reception of A Dirty Affair earned Brocka the opportunity to make another political melodrama for the same movie studio. Above Everything Else (Sa kabila ng lahat, 1991) retained characters, plot devices and other elements from the previous film. The familiar characters include a Marcosian couple, a mistress who works in the entertainment industry (another faint echo of Dovie Beams), and a small crew of political henchmen. As in Dirty Affair, Above Everything's narrative is set during election season. These similarities notwithstanding, the film is not a remake of Dirty Affair, and its political critique is markedly different. Apart from the Marcosian couple and the mistress, the characters of Above Everything seldom reference specific historical figures. Similarly, instead of Dirty Affair's liberal restaging of events from the Marcos era, the narrative of Above Everything centers on fictional situations.

In a novel turn for Brocka's political melodramas, Above Everything largely dispenses with a critique of authoritarianism. Instead, the film’s assessment of both Philippine political culture and political economy treats other, less conspicuous issues that might account for the country’s weak recovery from autocratic rule. More specifically, Above Everything generates an expansive vision of the Philippines as a predatory state. Political scientist John T. Sidel characterizes the latter as a government that exploits “the archipelago's human, natural and monetary resources” to enrich the “main predators . . . elected government officials and their allies.”109 Within predatory states, politicians behave as gangsters and criminal bosses rather than as public servants. This feature of Philippine politics as a ruthless enterprise of dispossessing people and plundering the nation for personal gain preceded, accompanied, and outlived the Marcos dictatorship. Sidel writes: “The Philippine state, even under the authoritarian Marcos regime, remained essentially a multitiered racket. Though never wholly nor solely a racket, the Philippine state's racket-like dimensions decisively shaped electoral competition, capital accumulation, and social relations in the archipelago over the course of the twentieth century.”110 Unfortunately, this feature of Philippine political culture persisted during the Aquino regime. In spite of her benevolence and sincerity, Aquino
unwittingly engaged in political bossism due to what Walden Bello and John Gershman describe as the “tolerance of corruption in her family and the upper rungs of government.”

As in the case of *A Dirty Affair*, one of the pivotal characters of *Above Everything* is the mayor of a city in Metro Manila. Ventura Velasco (Ronaldo Valdez) is a former movie actor who owes his political career to the affluent family of his wife, Cresencia (Celeste Legaspi). His in-laws have bankrolled his career in exchange for political influence and kickbacks from government contracts. Actor-politicians became a fixture of Philippine politics after the Marcos regime, helped considerably by their participation in Marcos’s reelection campaign and “people power.”

*Above Everything* details Velasco’s methods of accumulating wealth by leveraging the power of his elected office. As with the gangster-politicians described by Sidel, Velasco takes bribes and illegally parcels city contracts and franchises. He also sanctions all manner of illegal activities, such as gun running, foreign cur-

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**Figure 6.7.** Mayor Velasco (Ronaldo Valdez, center) and his wife Cresencia (Celeste Legaspi, left) console the bereaved family of a victim of their misdeeds, *Above Everything Else*. Courtesy of Juan Martin Magsanoc and Archivo 1984 Gallery.
currency trading, and drug trafficking. The mayor works closely with two rival gangster figures. One is a government employee who simultaneously acts as his enforcer. Boy Boga (Mark Gil) runs a “death squad” to support the mayor’s illegal activities and pursue schemes of his own. The other gangster, named Daniel Fu (William Lorenzo), is a Chinese Filipino who runs drug trafficking and protection rackets. Fu is both a racialized stereotype and an allegorical figure of transnational capital. As Sidel notes, “many of the entrenched politicians and magnates in the country derive[d] their power and wealth . . . from state resources and foreign (mostly overseas Chinese) commercial capital.”

The film’s depiction of the pervasive threat that greed and corruption posed to a struggling democracy was especially relevant to the post-1986 situation. While public discourse on crony capitalism ebbed with the ouster of Marcos, opportunists in the underworld, politics, and the business sector were as ruthless as ever in fleecing the nation. Additionally, Brocka’s habit of using local politics as a micro-cosm of national politics took on greater significance during the Aquino presidency. Early in her term, President Aquino rechanneled development efforts to the countryside, creating jobs and stimulating local economies in the hope of weakening the communist movement. These programs, as well as development projects from the private sector, greatly benefitted local leaders, including gangster-politicians. In a bid to undo Marcos’s concentration of power in the central government and to foster a more inclusive democracy, Aquino pushed to toughen the hand of local governments even further. Her pursuit of decentralization culminated in the Local Government Code of 1991, which devolved certain functions of the national government to local government units. It became law less than half a year after Above Everything screened in theaters. Regrettably, even as the law promoted greater participation in governance, it also expanded the influence of gangster-politicians and increased the spoils available to them.

Democracy, Documentary, and the Fourth Estate
Alongside its depiction of gangster-politicians, Above Everything self-reflexively thematizes the media’s role in enabling and resisting the enemies of democratization. The film’s protagonist Maia Robles (also played by Dina Bonnevie) is Mayor Velasco’s mistress and a broadcast journalist. Thoroughly corrupt, Maia uses her shows to improve her lover’s public image and to disparage his enemies. She grants sexual favors with the expectation of landing government contracts, often sealing deals while engaging in pillow talk with the mayor.

Mike (Tonton Gutierrez), an idealistic junior producer and colleague of Maia’s, embodies the media’s conscience. They collaborate in producing documentary segments for public affairs programs. Their pieces on corruption, social problems, and political issues are hard-hitting, much like the print and broadcast journalism during the Aquino era. Maia underhandedly waters down or blocks Mike’s legiti-
mate exposés, however, reserving for herself the privilege of dropping political bombshells on her lover’s enemies. Her unmatched bluntness cultivates the illusion of probity, which she then uses to cover up her unethical and illegal doings. Her career ends abruptly after the mayor suffers a heart attack during one of their trysts. (The incident is inspired by a rumor about the bout of lovemaking between a movie actress and a Manila mayor that killed the latter in the early 1960s.) The network dismisses her to distance itself from the scandal. Even worse, the mayor’s wife orders their henchmen to kill her. Maia decides to use the mass media one last time, to tell a lie that might save her life while also taking down some of the city’s most notorious criminals. She convinces Mike to broadcast fake news stories aimed at turning the mayor’s criminal associates and henchmen against each other. The plan works, but the feuding criminals kill Mike for exposing them.

Echoing Marcos’s death in Hawaii in 1989, Velasco perishes while seeking medical treatment in the United States. Moreover, the authorities arrest the mayor’s wife on corruption charges, calling to mind the trial of Imelda Marcos, which had recently occurred in the United States. The film ends with Maia accepting a posthumous award on behalf of Mike. While praising fearless journalists like him, she also chastises those (such as herself, although she does not say so) who fail their noble profession.

Reusing a device from Brocka’s landmark political film *My Own Country: Gripping the Knife’s Edge (Bayan ko: Kapit sa patalim, 1984)*, Above Everything incorporates various types of documentary material into its narrative. The film contains footage of real political demonstrations as well as documentary-like passages that combine footage of real events with audio from simulated radio broadcasts. Additionally, the film features snippets of the TV programs created by Maia and Mike. These documentary elements comprise an almanac of sociopolitical issues during the penultimate year of Aquino’s tenure. They traffic in stories of pollution, homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, crime, runaway inflation, and skyrocketing gas prices, among others. Through these actual and simulated documentaries, the film acknowledges the important muckraking role that the fourth estate performed during the Aquino presidency. That said, the film uses Maia’s underhanded practices and the excerpts from her programs to illustrate how popular forms of documentary can be used to distort reality and betray the public trust. The film warns that the free press—whose return after the dictatorship Filipinos roundly celebrated—continued to be fettered by the influence of rotten politicians and the threat of violence from other powerbrokers. More subtly, the grandiloquence of Maia’s voiceover commentary brings into relief her tendentious rhetoric. Her habit of representing social ills with already hackneyed images of teeming slums and half-naked street urchins emphasizes the lazy reporting of some broadcast journalists. The film thus occasionally undermines the viewer’s faith in nonfiction programs to foster a critical attitude toward the mass media and its relationship to democracy.
Above Everything premiered on May 15, 1991. Six days later, Brocka died in a car accident, on the eve of starting a new picture. Actor William Lorenzo, reportedly inebriated, was at the wheel. The Good Samaritan who came to their aid had recently seen Above Everything and recognized Lorenzo after pulling him and the director out of the wreckage. Hernando noted that while Above Everything opened successfully, Brocka’s death “boosted the box-office success of the movie.”

Reviewers warmly received Brocka’s final political melodrama. Mario Hernando characterized Above Everything as “a bleak and disturbing mirror of a vital segment of Philippine society—those in media, local government and the underworld.” Along similar lines, the Young Critics Circle described the work as a “filmic treatise on the conjugal dictatorship,” one that coherently represents “Philippine democracy’s state of disrepair in such a darkly pessimistic style and from a thoroughly cynical point of view.” The group named it the best film of 1991 for “realizing Brocka’s negative vision of elite power and its destruction.”

Grace Alfonso praised “Brocka’s consistency in managing to comment on existing conditions” but still had trouble with the film’s adherence to “traditional film norms.” Her definition of a traditional film—one with “untiring twists and turns in the storyline; a convoluted plot; two-dimensional characters; unidentifiable timeframes; a ray of hope in the end”—recalls belittling characterizations of melodrama. Presumably a fan of social realism and oblivious to the film’s self-reflexivity, the critic faulted Above Everything for its “lack of radical questioning on [sic] the medium’s form.” As I have pointed out in responses to Brocka’s other political melodramas, implicit in this line of critique is an unexamined notion of a proper, ostensibly uncompromising form of political filmmaking. If we were to believe most of the critics and commentators that appraised Above Everything Else, A Dirty Affair, and Orapronobis, the ideal kind of political film—in whatever way they did or did not happen to have defined it—eluded Brocka despite his worthwhile efforts and demonstrable successes.

**CONCLUSION**

After the fall of Marcos, the “socially relevant” filmmaking for which Brocka was acclaimed noticeably gravitated toward more topical and expansive analyses of politics than seen in his earlier work. The achievement of the director’s latter political melodramas rests on several factors. First, the films contributed to the process of democratization by offering a robust critique of systemic and particular sociopolitical issues. They explored what Rancière might describe as “a politico-cinematic approach now turned less towards the exposure of mechanisms of domination than the study of the aporiae of emancipation.” Specifically, they traced the residual but still powerful influence of authoritarianism and called out the failings of Aquino’s liberal democracy. They also shifted from focusing on antiauthoritarian politics to
offering a broader view of political culture, especially in the Philippines. Secondly, Brocka and his collaborators continued to devise new ways to widen the popular appeal of his films, mainly by more aggressively appropriating genre structures and other elements from commercial cinema. More successfully than in the past, his final two political works drew a large audience and boosted his commercial prospects as a filmmaker. His successful bid to engage a wider viewership arguably did not force him to turn his back on intelligent political discourse. Indeed, the filmmaker used his considerable influence to continue hiring progressive artists with whom he had made prestige films. They include writers Jose F. Lacaba and Ricardo Lee, both political activists who had internalized the intellectual rigor and plebian loyalties of socialist politics during their time in the revolutionary underground.

I have also attempted to show in my discussion that the director and his collaborators renewed their attempts to explore the affordances of both melodrama and documentary forms in crafting engaging political films. As in the past, most critics favored Brocka’s emulation of nonfiction imagery and narratives over his continued exploration of melodrama’s discursive and aesthetic possibilities. Many of those critics were beholden to unexamined notions of Marxist cultural critique and Third Cinema aesthetics. They sneered at Brocka’s twinning of politics and populism and faulted his narratives for not delivering the kind of comprehensive structural analyses of sociopolitical conditions they expected. That said, Brocka’s newfound success prompted other critics to reconsider their views about the proper form of political movies. To cite an example, the captivating political diatribe of Orapronobis revived interest in the ostensibly moribund subgenre of the political thriller. The film also demonstrated the value of appropriating for political discourse such unlikely cinematic forms as exploitation cinema. To be sure, even the disagreements among critics and viewers were productive in sustaining the progressive film culture that emerged during the post-dictatorship campaigns to fortify democracy in the Philippines.

The glowing reviews and box office performance of A Dirty Affair and Above Everything Else showed that the glossy aesthetic of high-end melodramas was not incompatible with political discourse or with the elements of documentary and nonfiction. Moreover, in both of those works, Brocka and his collaborators successfully wagered that comedy would not be out of place in political filmmaking nor trivialize its purpose. As Mike Wayne points out, the cause of political cinema is best served by a “non-prescriptive openness as to the forms, strategies and subgenres” that filmmakers might use to fight the battles of their era. To his mind, “a cinema of social and cultural emancipation” would benefit from drawing on dominant commercial cinemas “as a potential resource” to reach a substantial audience. Brocka’s post-Marcos political melodramas demonstrated the potential rewards of such aesthetic openness and argued for the necessity of expanding the resources of political filmmaking.
Reflecting on Brocka’s post-Marcos work, Joel David characterized the relation between the filmmaker’s political commitments and his artistry as follows: “When Lino Brocka walked out on the 1986 Constitutional Commission, it seemed like an act of futility, a typical if oversized artist’s tantrum. . . . What we mostly failed to realize then was that Brocka intended to continue conducting his side of the political debate in the venue where his expertise lay—the mass medium of film—and more alarmingly, that his decision to do so would be accompanied by a quantum leap in his creative faculties.” As David saw it, the pursuit of relevant political filmmaking did service to the director’s craft, and vice-versa. Indeed, by constantly renewing his sociopolitical vision and recalibrating the style and rhetoric of his melodramas, Brocka won new followers and further strengthened popular cinema’s power to articulate and illumine politics.