One of the most accomplished works of the new cinema that emerged in the Philippines in the early 1970s revolves around a scene of waiting, one in which little appears to be happening even though everything is actually at stake. The film, called *Maynila: Sa mga kuko ng liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Light*, 1975), returns intermittently to the image of a young man standing on a dingy corner of Chinatown. He has his eye on the window above an always-closed storefront. He waits for any signs of his lost sweetheart, a country lass who may have fallen prey to white slavery. Somewhere behind him, a fortune teller’s sign reads: “Do you have a problem?” In an inconspicuous but visible corner of the movie screen, we might find the answer to that question. A snip of graffiti scrawled in blood-red paint on newsprint screams “Long Live the Workers!” Another handmade poster contains an image of a raised fist and the initials of a radical youth organization called Kabataang Makabayan (Nationalist Youth). A third poster, partially torn, alternately suggests the words *Junk* (*Ibasura*) and *Take Down* (*Ibagsak*), depending on which letters the man’s body obscures and reveals as he moves around.

The political graffiti in Brocka’s mise-en-scène are imprints of history. They are the traces of a political ferment that began in the West—in the antiestablishment and antiwar uprisings of the late 1960s—and spread, albeit not unchanged, to the third world country where the young man dwells. The First Quarter Storm was the name of the biggest salvo of the Philippine rebellion against “imperialism, feudalism, fascism” in the year 1970. From January to April, thousands of angry college students, laborers, and political activists took to the streets to express displeasure at the reelection of President Ferdinand Marcos and to demand change in the country. They turned out in droves for the first state-of-the-nation address of his second
term and hurled rocks at the first couple as they exited the Congressional building.  

The first lady bumped her head as she scurried into a car. Four days later, activists rammed a fire truck into one of the gates of Malacañang, the chief executive’s residence. Authorities went after protesters with batons, tear gas, and truncheons. Often, the youthful activists evaded capture with the help of Manila’s sympathetic denizens, who popped open a door and pulled them in just seconds before the police turned a corner. Some of those events happened on the same streets where the film takes place. Yet in Brocka’s movie, the images of this tumultuous period appear only in flashes, like the antiestablishment slogans glimpsed fleetingly behind the protagonist in the opening sequence.

In this and other chapters of the book, I venture a practice of closely reading such provocative inscriptions of politics and history in Brocka’s martial law melodramas. The strict and inconsistent censorship of films during the Marcos regime demands that scholars pay attention to seemingly insignificant details. Such careful scrutiny is also necessary because of the abundance of both thinly veiled and subconsciously inscribed allegories in the director’s work. As I hope to illustrate in this chapter, martial law melodramas follow a tradition of sociopolitical critique initiated in nineteenth-century Philippine letters. That tradition inscribes sociopolitical discourse overtly (through historical and political references) as well as indirectly (through allusions and metaphors). Central to it is the novel *Noli me tangere* (1887) by Philippine national hero José Rizal. Rizal’s roman à clef inspired a nineteenth-century anti-colonial revolution against Spain.
Before I interpret Brocka’s Marcos-era films through the prism of a critique inspired by Rizal, I wish to discuss the context in which his oeuvre emerged. The director articulated his desire to create a new kind of Filipino film in 1974, two years into martial law and the same number of years after he returned from a self-imposed hiatus from the film industry. Brocka’s star was still on the rise when he took leave from filmmaking. He had directed nine genre pictures, six of them for an independent production outfit called LEA Productions. Several of his movies were box office successes, including his debut, *Wanted: Perfect Mother* (1970). His work also collected trophies for Best Picture and Best Director at awards ceremonies. Perhaps most notably, critics lauded *Tubog sa ginto* (Gold Plated, 1971) for its candid portrayal of homosexuality. Even the mediocre *Cadena de amor* (Chain of Love, 1971)—a romance that shows the leading man walking away from a small plane crash with only a reversible case of amnesia—took home seven prizes from the Manila Film Festival.4 His career hit a low point with two commercial efforts that opened to scathing reviews: *Now* (1971), a youth-oriented musical with a subplot about political activism, and *Cherry Blossoms* (1972), a romance filmed partly in Japan and featuring American actor Nicholas Hammond.5 Brocka shared the critics’ poor opinion of his pictures and even told journalists to skip them.6

Brocka declined to explain his respite from the movies, claiming that his reasons were “personal.”7 One journalist speculated that a spat with LEA Productions prompted the hiatus. Rumors circulated that one of the outfit’s proprietors bore a personal grudge against a star in *Gold Plated* and thus barred its exhibition at the Venice Film Festival.8 Whatever the reason, Brocka diverted his energies to making quality television drama with members of the progressive-leaning theater group Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), which he joined in the late 1960s. He also planned his eventual return to filmmaking by trying to secure financing for a movie that would take Philippine cinema in a new direction. But, as the director would later recall, he came up empty-handed. “I wanted to work, but producers could not understand my desire to make films that can truly be considered meaningful [may kahulugan],” he told a reporter.9 “Most of the producers that came to me wanted only action or fantasy movies.” One of the board members of PETA created a scheme to fund the filmmaker’s dream project. With the help of investors from the corporate world, the public sector, as well as film actors and creative personnel, Brocka scraped together enough money to found an outfit called CineManila. According to press releases, the company aimed to produce films “with a good story, good cast, that depicts Filipino values so that audiences can identify with them.”10 Brocka also expressed his desire to make “a complete breakaway from the trend for fantasies and slapstick comedy” that ruled popular cinema.11 CineManila envisioned a transnational audience for its alternative pictures, identifying “Guam, Hawaii, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan and California” as prospective markets because of their large overseas Filipino population.12
A project initially called *Buhay* (Life) served as the test case for Brocka’s new cinema. Mario O’Hara wrote the screenplay, based in part upon stories from Brocka’s youth. The filmmakers changed the title to *Tinimbang ka ngunit kulang* (*Weighed but Found Wanting*), based upon a line from the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament. To obtain lush, bucolic scenery, Brocka filmed on location. As an article notes, he and cinematographer Joe Batac captured the rustic charm of the “hillsides of Tanay (Rizal), the heart of Sta. Rita (Pampanga), the pace and pulse of San Jose (Nueva Ecija) and the beautiful beaches of Nasugbu (Batangas).” Brocka made his “dream project” with a shooting ratio of 4:1, considerably exceeding his usually slim allocation of film stock.

The director remarked to a journalist that the film “is quite timely” (“*medyo ayon sa takbo ng panahon natin sa kasalukuyan*.”) Quite tellingly, however, Brocka added in Filipino: “But it has nothing to do with Martial Law” (“*Pero walang kinalaman dito ang Martial Law.*”) Fear of drawing the censors’ attention seems to underpin Brocka’s equivocation. This attempt to downplay the film’s political relevance was a calculated gambit. There would have been no means for Brocka’s cinema politics to do its proper work if the censors blocked the film. Indeed, he took pains to avoid shaping the movie around resolute political statements. Only brief instances occur in the film that signal any link to martial law or Ferdinand Marcos. Set alongside these politically charged fragments, Brocka’s insistence on de-politicizing his work generates a curious irony. The conscious erasure of the political all the more registers the moments when, however briefly, it becomes perceptible. The method I propose for reading the films in this chapter, hence, is that of seizing these moments as the distinct allegorical shards of sociopolitical critique.

Beginning with *Weighed*, Brocka devised a model for an alternative kind of sociopolitical representation on film. Focusing on Brocka’s newly developed filmmaking, this chapter analyzes two landmark works in this vein. *Weighed* and *Manila* fall under the rubric of “social melodrama.” John G. Cawleti characterizes the social melodrama as “an evolving complex of formulas” that tell intricate narratives of heightened feeling and moral dilemmas “with something that passes for a realistic social or historical setting.” Its purpose, he argues, is to give viewers a “detailed, intimate, and realistic analysis of major social or historical phenomena.” Cawleti’s term is especially useful in describing the two Brocka films, both of which combine realism with the sensibility and features of melodrama but also differ from each other in several respects. Equally important, as I have mentioned earlier, the films draw from strategies of representation and critique that Rizal popularized. As in the latter’s novel, the director’s new social melodramas feature sprawling multicharacter narratives with a young male protagonist at their center. Whereas Rizal’s *Noli* represented the conditions of Spain’s decaying empire, Brocka’s movies registered the state of affairs in the country and the city during the
early years of martial law. In the balance of this section, I shall elucidate the workings of Brocka's social melodramas, trace their connections to Rizal's example, and map the relationship of his two most pioneering films to the politics of the Marcos regime.

**WEIGHED BUT FOUND WANTING**

After the cultural and political upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, it might seem odd that Brocka looked back to Rizal's canonical nineteenth-century fiction in his attempt at devising a novel approach to Philippine cinema. That said, the national hero never lost his appeal to Filipino artists and intellectuals in search of social relevance. To cite just a few examples from the same decades, characters and subplots from Rizal's fiction inspired such landmark works of Philippine literature as Rogelio Sicat's short story “Old Selo” (“Tata Selo,” 1962) and Paul Dumol's play *Barrio Captain Tales* (*Kabesang Tales*, 1975). Rizal's influence on critical literature and the arts solidified many decades earlier. As Soledad Reyes notes, the pioneers of the twentieth-century Tagalog novel used his work as “the main sources not only of the realistic tradition but even as sources of realist techniques.” They emulated as well Rizal's project of using literature to engender social reform or, as he put it eloquently, “to expose the cancer of the body politic on the steps of the temple so that a cure may be offered.”

The influence of Rizal's vision of art and politics continued to spread with the help of legislation. Starting in the 1950s, the law mandated all Philippine schools to teach Rizal's writings, thereby informing the vision of artists of diverse political persuasions and various media. Philippine cinema from the start has celebrated Rizal's works and the hero himself. Its pioneers chose him as the subject of the first Philippine-produced movies. In the 1950s and '60s, the justly renowned Gerardo De Leon made film adaptations of Rizal's novels. De Leon was Brocka's idol, and it seems possible that his work inspired the latter's fascination with the national hero's legacy.

The influence of Rizal's *Noli* on Brocka's *Weighed* is evident not only in the latter's approach to social criticism but also its narrative. Both stories begin with the young upper-class male protagonist trying to find his bearings in his provincial domicile. In *Noli*, Crisostomo Ibarra returns to the fictive town of San Diego (in Rizal's home province of Laguna) after seven years of studying and living in Europe. His homecoming is an unhappy occasion. He discovers that his father Don Rafael, one of the wealthiest men in town, died in prison after falling out with a Spanish priest named Damaso. In the Spanish-colonized Philippines, peninsular clergy such as Damaso were virtual sovereigns, more powerful and despotic than colonial administrators. Crisostomo eventually learns that Damaso not only put Rafael in jail but ordered the desecration of his corpse. Damaso's crusade against
the Ibarras continues with his attempts to break up Crisostomo’s engagement to his childhood sweetheart Maria Clara. The young woman is very dear to the friar. As it turns out, Damaso is Maria Clara’s biological father.

Damaso makes snide remarks about Crisostomo’s father on several occasions. Rather than minding such provocations, Crisostomo takes the high road and busies himself with charitable work. He finances the building of a modern public schoolhouse in his father’s memory. Damaso and his fellow clerics ensure, however, that those plans never materialize. They attempt to kill Crisostomo through a staged accident at the school’s construction site. When the scheme fails, one of the Spanish priests, driven by lust for Maria Clara, successfully frames Crisostomo as the leader and financier of a fictitious uprising against the Spaniards in town.

Damaso, who epitomizes the malevolence of theocracy and the colonial system, is but one of many broadly sketched characters that represent society’s ills. He and other clerics prey on citizens from various social classes. The victims of this theocracy include the peasant Sisa and her two young sons. Sisa’s boys earn a pittance as bell ringers at the church. Their supervisor, an ill-tempered sexton, frequently docks their pay and beats them up. In a series of tragic events, Sisa’s children disappear (the younger likely killed by the sexton), and she loses her sanity as a result. Crisostomo, who learns about the family’s troubles from a mysterious boatman named Elias, comes to their aid on several occasions.

Elias, witnessing Crisostomo’s empathy for Sisa’s family, reveals himself as an outlaw and dissident. Although Elias’s family has a history of conflicts with the Ibarras, he recognizes Crisostomo’s virtue and rescues him twice from the schemes of Damaso and his conspirators. On the second of those rescues, Elias heroically sacrifices his life to save Ibarra. He does so in the belief that a reformer from the upper crust would be better equipped to change society than a poor worker like himself. Rizal’s novel concludes with many of the other virtuous characters—including Crisostomo, Maria Clara, Sisa and her older son Basilio—devastated, injured or dead. The faint glimmer of hope from Elias’s sacrifice and Crisostomo’s political awakening reappears in the novel’s sequel, El filibusterismo (1891). In that work, Crisostomo returns under the guise of a Cuban jeweler named Simoun and uses his influence and wealth to gather the forces of dissent in a violent rebellion against the colonial order.

Like Crisostomo, the protagonist of Weighed belongs to a landed family. Junior (played by first-time actor Christopher De Leon) is the child of a couple with a rice plantation and business interests in rice milling and operating gas stations. As with Noli, the narrative of his development also proceeds along two lines of action that frequently converge. The first is a coming-of-age story. In the months between summer and Christmastime, Junior falls in and out of love with his first girlfriend, Evangeline (Hilda Koronel). Their relationship deteriorates, and she ends up getting impregnated by and marrying their mutual friend Nitoy (Joseph Siytangco), the
mayor's son. All is not lost for Junior, however, as he experiences sex for the first time with an older woman named Milagros (Laurice Guillen). The latter, a college student from Manila, happens to be Nitoy's illegitimate half-sister. Amid these bittersweet events, Junior discovers a terrible family secret. The revelation changes his life.

The second line of action focuses on Junior's relationship to the provincial society in which he grew up. As a corollary to his sexual coming of age, the teenager matures as a social being in the span of a few months. Venturing away from his family and fellow teenagers, Junior gains an awareness of society's inequities, its prejudices, and even its violence. His development hastens in the course of an unlikely friendship with a mentally impaired homeless woman named Kuala (played by Lolita Rodriguez) and a leper named Berto (played by O'Hara). As Noel Vera correctly points out, Brocka's Kuala is the counterpart of Rizal's madwoman Sisa, while Junior is the substitute for Crisostomo. Brocka claims in an interview that he patterned the character of Berto after a resident of the leper colony at Molokai, the Hawaiian island where the director once lived as a Mormon missionary. That said, Noli also features a minor but haunting character afflicted with leprosy. Epifanio San Juan describes the latter as an allegorical figure “of the degrading and dehumanizing essence of the [colonial] system.”

While Rizal's novel made for good entertainment, both its content and the reputation of its author cued readers to interpret the work's sociopolitical significance. To be sure, the sociopolitical valences of Brocka's film were more opaque than those of Rizal's fiction, and the director did not yet have the reputation of being politically minded like the nineteenth-century writer and intellectual. As I mentioned earlier, Brocka was even careful not to call attention to the film's politics during an interview. Apart from emphasizing that Weighed “has nothing to do with Martial Law,” he characterized it as a simple film about a young man's rites of passage. He stated: “My main purpose is to show how and what the boy learns about life and love, about values from his town; the people in his town, and more important, the town's outcasts—mainly Berto and Kuala.” That said, the allusions to Rizal's novel and the positioning of Weighed as a “meaningful” picture encouraged viewers to expect valences similar to those found in Noli.

While Weighed uses the narrative of Junior's development to revisit some of Rizal's concerns about class relations and secularism, I venture that Weighed also yields a powerful but rarely elucidated allegory of the Philippines under Marcos. As I shall explain later, one of the keys to this allegory is the film's rendition of patriarchal figures, some of whom are linked implicitly to the authoritarian state.

A Panorama of Social Maladies

As in Noli, Weighed introduces social issues in the course of a picaresque movement about town by the hero and other pivotal characters. In both works, the narrative's examination of social geography reveals both the dilemmas that individuals face
and the systemic issues affecting the community. *Noli* portrays the machinations of imperialism, the opportunism of native compradors, and the plight of subalterns in a decaying colonial society. In contrast, Brocka’s film depicts the rural Philippines under martial law. As in *Noli*, the regressive forces in Junior’s backwater society include religious zealots, heartless capitalists, and a docile and self-serving citizenry.

Among the different social maladies that the film critiques, two stand out as the most common. The first is sexual perversity. The narrative portrays several of the young adults in town as “fornicators.” Their parents, no better at controlling their urges, take part in adulterous liaisons. The teachers—typically figures of respectability—likewise commit sexual transgressions. One of them, a gay man (played by Orlando Nadres), openly flirts with his underage male students. The other perverse educator is a young woman who consorts with married men. Apart from these teachers, many of the film’s significant characters engage in acts considered depraved by the town’s morally conservative inhabitants. As I shall discuss later, the perverse tendencies of these characters point to a deep-seated flaw that ultimately has little to do with sexual morality. Not merely a form of concupiscence or state of moral fallenness, such perversities represent a culpable weakness and malign predilections among the populace.

The other social ill depicted in the film is a pervasive antipathy toward others, especially those at the margins of society. The narrative demonstrates the consequences of such widespread social antagonism through the journeys of Junior, Kuala, and Berto. Only the last two, however, suffer their neighbors’ hostility due to their lowly station in life.

Early in the film, the owner of a kitchenette tries to drive Kuala away when he notices her feeding on leftovers at a vacated table. The man also callously upbraids her for smelling bad. Too famished to mind his harsh words, Kuala even scoops up the scraps that have fallen to the ground. Sadly, the other townsfolk are no less cruel to her than the petty capitalist. For instance, children invite her to play, only to mock and pelt her with stones. Similarly, the adults ply her with drinks to the point of inebriation, the better to make her dance saucily so they can make fun of her.

Berto’s encounters with the townsfolk are often worse than Kuala’s. Because of his illness, they do not even regard him as human. The woman who runs the *kabaret* refuses him admission, telling him to relieve his sexual urges by “rubbing [himself] against an electric post” instead of visiting with her hospitality girls. The men are harsher: without reason or provocation, they slaughter Berto’s dog and laugh in his face as he unknowingly consumes a dish made of its flesh.

The church women make a show of being charitable, but the effect of their actions is no more benign. As in Rizal’s fiction, the Catholic women act like harpies toward their neighbors. One pious woman, for instance, a member of the lay sorority La Asociacion de las Obreras Cristianas, belittles the leper Berto’s act of kind-
ness. When a boy trips on a rough road, just as soon as Berto rushes to help him, the lay sister yanks the kid away, leaving Berto abashed. The scene recalls the title of Rizal’s novel: “touch me not!” Several months later, when the church women discover that Kuala is with child, they detain her to prevent further sexual contact with the leper. Their cruelty toward the two outcasts extends to other indigents. For example, the sorority members propose to demolish shanties by the railroad tracks, simply because one of its residents is known to engage in sex work occasionally. The irony of such antipathy toward prostitutes and lepers—precisely the social types Jesus Christ urged his followers to treat kindly—is lost on the unthinking bullies.

Junior bears witness to some of the indignities heaped upon the two outcasts. The experience of seeing the abjection of others alters the way he sees his community, makes him aware of his class privilege and pushes him to discover how else to be in society. Through the use of camera distance and editing, the film dramatizes the formation of a critical subjectivity in the young man. In a series of eyeline matches and switchbacks, the camera lingers on close-ups of Junior’s face as it registers his response to the privations of his townsfolk. This pattern of shots occurs numerous times, as when Junior shows disappointment at his friends after they dunk Kuala in a canal or when they belittle Milagros behind her back for

![Figure 1.2. Berto (Mario O’Hara) watches helplessly as a woman pulls a child away from him.](image)

*Weighed but Found Wanting.* Courtesy of Danilo Brocka/CCP Library.
being born out of wedlock (and, Nitoy adds, “to a whore at that”). The same visual devices likewise recur when Junior observes Evangeline (then still his girlfriend) flirting with Nitoy or when Junior witnesses his parents trading insults and criticizing other people. By isolating Junior from other characters, this visual pattern represents, with bold simplicity, his growing disaffection with family and the town.

As Junior distances himself from his kin and friends, the film’s social geography moves to the edge of town. There he and the misfits form an alternative community. Berto and Kuala were already a couple when Junior befriended them. The couple’s relationship began after Berto lured her to his ramshackle dwelling, a hut symbolically placed at the margins of town and its cemetery (that is, in a liminal area between virtual exile and death). The leper bathed, fed, and then romanced the mentally impaired woman. Kuala latched on to him despite his appearance. Berto, afraid of scandalizing the town, tried to hide the affair from the townsfolk by putting her out in the street during the day, only taking her back into his hut at dusk or when no one else was around. Junior accidentally discovered their arrangement while trailing Kuala one day. The leper panicked when he noticed Junior spying on them. Berto pled for discretion, which Junior granted, and they became pals.
To escape the prying eyes of the townsfolk, Junior and the couple retreat to the hills during the day and play like children. In one memorable shot, we see Junior perched high up on the limbs of a tree, blissfully relaxing as Kuala and Berto frolic in the grass below him. This pastoral idyll conjures a vision of a free and harmonious society so different from the one that exists in their small town.

In his study of *Noli*, Epifanio San Juan Jr. describes the goal of Rizal’s novel as one of enabling the “attainment of ethico-political awareness among his readers.”25 Through realist fiction replete with allegories, Rizal “conveys the ideological as well as economic structures underlying or subsuming the relations among individuals,” thus opening the viewer’s eyes to social injustice and the repressiveness of the colonial order.26 To accomplish his goal, Rizal appeals to the intellect as well as to the emotions. *Noli* features lucid conversations about social issues between the protagonist and the other characters. Some of those discussions are couched in allegory, while less sensitive issues are treated plainly. The topics include public education, the separation of church and state, freedom of speech, and the future of the Spanish empire. Alongside these cerebral moments are episodes of stirring melodrama, including the persecution of Sisa’s family, Elias’s final sacrifice for Crisostomo and their country, and Maria Clara’s compassion for the unnamed leper. Recognizing that the colonial system benefits from fostering social inequality and infighting among the natives, Rizal uses emotionally charged episodes of social injustice to “exorcise the specter of putschist individualism which he knows as the endemic malady of his class.”27 Rizal thus writes Crisostomo, his alter-ego, as a bourgeois obsessed with redeeming himself through civic engagement.

Brocka’s film appropriates *Noli*’s penchant for didacticism and melodrama, as well as Rizal’s message about the urgency of reforming society. However, *Weighed* resists overt criticism of authority figures and institutions. The film’s nod to Rizal’s veiled critiques explains why, at first glance, *Weighed* appears to limit its concerns to humanitarian issues and common civic problems. As I mentioned earlier, Brocka himself even stated that *Weighed* had “nothing to do with Martial Law” and thus with politics. But even if one were to take him at his word, it still would be a mistake to disregard the sociopolitical valences of the film. As Fredric Jameson points out, film artists unwittingly inscribe ideas, signs, and meanings from their historical moment into the movies they make.28 I have been proposing here that one finds evocative figurations of authoritarianism in some of *Weighed*’s surface details as well as in its subtextual layers.

**The Specters of Martial Law**

There are three passing but arguably significant references in the film to either Marcos or martial law. As Brocka noted, the allusions serve the practical purpose of indicating that the film unfolds in the contemporary moment. At the same time, the allusions to the national leader and political matters invite viewers to think of
Junior’s dysfunctional community as a microcosm of the Philippines under authoritarian rule. It is important to note that the film’s production script makes no mention of Marcos or martial law, suggesting that the references were introduced into the film during preproduction or in principal photography. I do not wish to speculate on the reasons behind their addition to the film but shall venture an interpretation of their significance.

The first of the political references occurs near the beginning of the film, at the wake of a man named Clemente. We learn from an earlier scene that he was involved in politics and that he had reneged on a promise to campaign for Junior’s father Cesar during an unsuccessful bid for the mayor’s seat. Clemente was apparently a fan of Ferdinand Marcos, as indicated by the poster of the strongman that hangs prominently in his home. The portrait shows Marcos dressed in Philippine finery, while behind him loom the Philippine flag and the presidential seal.

The visitors at Clemente’s wake resemble the town’s population in miniature. The wake is, not insignificantly, one of four scenes in which virtually all the major and minor characters appear together. (The other scenes include his burial ceremony, a religious procession, and a public killing.) Junior and his parents arrive at the wake later than the other townsfolk, including the mayor and his wife. His parents, rancorous as ever, proceed to backbite the politico and his spouse just moments after exchanging pleasantries with them. We learn that Cesar is still sore at the mayor for defeating him at the polls while Cesar’s wife Carolina (Lilia Dizon) complains about the uppity behavior of the town’s first lady. Later, in front of the Marcos portrait, Cesar holds court. He shows Junior off to the men, taking credit for his son’s good looks and virility. When the effeminate school teacher Mr. Del Mundo (Orlando Nadres) acknowledges—with matching googly eyes—that Junior is indeed “all grown up and handsome,” Cesar makes another reference to his own manliness, boasting of his quickness with women and advising Junior to emulate him.

Elsewhere at the wake, the church ladies scold the teenage girls—including Evangeline and the daughter of Clemente—for spying on Junior while he was urinating in the bushes. Outside the house, the young men behave inappropriately as well, getting Kuala drunk and goading her to dance for them. They proceed to mock her, and she retaliates by wetting her shorts and splashing urine on the hecklers.

The second reference to something associated with the nation occurs just moments after the Marcos portrait appears onscreen. Evangeline’s mother Amor Ortega (Anita Linda) excuses herself from the wake, saying she could no longer wait for her husband to arrive because she needs to beat “the [impending] curfew.” She is referencing the same curfew that Marcos initiated when he imposed martial law. It prohibited residents of the country from leaving their homes between midnight and four o’clock in the morning.
At face value, these allusions to Marcos or his autocratic policies seem like throwaway references. However, embedded as these details are in a sequence critiquing social malady, they cannot but form part of a political interpretation of the film. Brocka’s gambit here is to rely on the fact that Rizal’s novels have long established the practice of allegorical reading among Philippine audiences, and that some viewers would use the same approach to interpret his film.

I read the scene of Clemente’s wake as a metaphor for Philippine society under martial law. The visual reference to Marcos and the dialogue about the curfew place the film’s characters within the time and space of authoritarian rule. I say this despite—and especially because—of the fact that most of the characters seem oblivious to the implications of autocratic rule. For instance, even as the severe threat of breaking curfew looms for all the persons at the wake, only one of them (Mrs. Ortega) appears to be concerned. Some church women depart at the same time but the rest pick at each other, drink irresponsibly and distract themselves with cheap amusements. Like the visitors at Clemente’s wake, citizens who actively or passively support dictatorships forget the pernicious consequences of living in a police state.

Marcos used the term “New Society” to characterize the docile citizenry he envisioned cultivating through authoritarian rule. His slogan—“to achieve national development, discipline is required”—justified the cost of social repression by making a slew of lofty promises to the people. The autocrat sowed fear and dispensed violence in his ambitious remaking of the nation. He also relied on fascistic rituals to distract the public from the brutality of his regime.

Apart from drawing attention to the complacency of the townsfolk, Brocka’s film also slyly makes fun of their intellect and political choices. As mentioned earlier, the poster of Marcos at Clemente’s home suggests that the deceased was a supporter of the president. While viewing Clemente’s coffined remains, his widow tells a fellow churchwoman that he died from “eating too many ripe mangoes.” The purported manner of his demise thus characterizes the autocrat’s follower as a glutton and idiot. The widow who accepts the ridiculous account of her husband’s misadventure is no wiser than him.

Significant Father Issues

The presence of three fathers in the scene of the wake—Cesar, the deceased Clemente, and the national paterfamilias Marcos—links the patriarchy to authoritarianism. What should we make of this connection? Critics have rarely examined the film’s Oedipal plot, perhaps because it seems unremarkable. Although Father-son rivalries are generic to melodramas, they may be imbued with metaphorical significance. Both Weighed and Rizal’s novel trace their youthful protagonists’ disenchantment with paternal figures. In Noli, Crisostomo uncovers the history of his grandfather’s misdeeds. He learns that his ancestor built the family fortune through
land grabbing and Elias’s grandfather was one of the victims. The bourgeois hero’s
encounters with Elias thus open his eyes to the role of his family and class in per-
petuating oppression. The novel features other malevolent or failed patriarchs,
including Damaso and Maria Clara’s (legal) parent, Capitan Tiago, both of whom
also represent corruption in the colonial regime. In Weighed, Junior’s coming into
manhood overlaps with the discovery of his father’s role in Kuala’s troubles. Cesar
becomes the figure of an unseemly form of masculinity that Junior will struggle to
disavow.

Near the start of the film, Junior overhears from one of his parents’ frequent
quarrels that Cesar recently bedded their housemaid, causing her dismissal. On
another occasion, Junior’s mother catches her spouse escorting one of their son’s
teachers in public. That evening, she berates Cesar for the incident within earshot
of Junior. Things take a turn for the worse when the teen discovers that his father
is not just an adulterer and rabid sexist but also a hebephile. One day after mass,
Junior overhears his father speaking to pals about the thirteen-year old hostess he
regularly hires at the kabaret. Cesar brags about satisfying her and other lovers
with his “long-playing” and “long-eating” sexual techniques. Much to Junior’s
embarrassment, he and his friends spot his father inside the drinking joint one
night where, as the other teenagers point out, Cesar is carousing with “an awfully
young companion.”

Junior tries to grapple with his father’s depravity while dealing with his own
sexual urges. In another of the film’s key moments, the young man strays into a
bowling alley late at night and loses his virginity to a woman he barely knows. He
had just walked out of a religious parade called Santacruzan after seeing his ex-
girlfriend being escorted by a movie actor at the procession. Junior tries to deal
with his jealousy by ordering a beer from the concession stand. Milagros, who
works the closing shift, declines to serve alcohol because he is underage. She also
reminds him to start for home to beat the curfew. He stays put, and they make
small talk about their mutual disdain for the self-righteous townsfolk. Junior pro-
fesses, to Milagros’s delight, that: “Everyone in this town is a member of La Aso-
ciacion de Obreras Cristianas, all of them gossipmongers, and nosy wretches!”
Milagros then shuts the bowling alley and, without saying a word, offers herself
to Junior. Brocka described the love scene as “a case of two lonely souls communi-
cating with each other,” but the reference to authoritarianism in the dialogue
charges the episode with political significance. As with the teenage women’s
voyeurism at Clemente’s wake, Junior and Milagros commit a perverse act in the
same scene where a character invokes the strictures of martial law. Because Junior
and Milagros have sex while passing the curfew, their intimacy is defined in part
by the fear of transgressing the edict of the nation’s authoritarian patriarch.

The furtive sexual encounter is similar to Kuala and Junior’s trysts. In both
cases, the woman is a social outcast and the assignation is both morally transgres-
sive (because it occurs out of wedlock) and mutually affirming. Additionally, both couples engage in sexual relations amid the threat of constant surveillance by the self-righteous townsfolk and, in Milagros and Junior’s case, by the police state (the curfew’s enforcer). These couplings—both ill-fated—cast the authoritarian regime as an entity so oppressive as to place intimacy under duress. Indeed, how benevolent could the autocracy be when even the most private moments of its citizens are tainted with the fear of heavy-handed social control?

Due to his sexual awakening, Junior regains some empathy for his libidinous father. He even turns to Cesar for advice on being with women. The bond frays quickly, however, and the contours of an Oedipal conflict sharpen as Junior learns of Cesar’s culpability for Kuala’s trauma. The last quarter of the film stages the public unmasking of Cesar as the killer of her unborn child and the person most deeply responsible for her miseries. Junior’s response to this discovery is crucial to my reading of the film’s antiauthoritarian politics.

Disappointment follows Junior’s sexual initiation. He loses Milagros after their tryst. She refuses to see him again without explanation and leaves town for good. (Unfilmed scenes from the script have her dying of an unspecified cause, but this is not the case in the assembled film.) In the meantime, Berto and Kuala also