

Insiang (1976)

Thomas Morsch

dir. Lino Brocka; prod. Ruby Tiong Tan; screenplay Mario O'Hara, Lamberto E. Antonio; photography Conrado Baltazar; music Minda D. Azarcon. 35mm, color, 95 mins. Cinemanila, distrib. Film Development Council of the Philippines.

Lino Brocka's films are rooted in the Philippines' commercial genre cinema of the 1970s and 80s, a popular film culture dominated by melodrama, comedy, horror, and action. However, a number of this controversial director's films not only moved beyond the conventions of genre cinema, but also opposed many implicit and explicit rules of film production in his country and tested the limits of censorship during the Marcos era (1965-86), a time of economic decline for many Filipinos following the prosperous 1950s.

Like his contemporary Ishmael Bernal, another prominent director of the »New Filipino Cinema« (Lumbera), he was able to survive, and even thrive, within a restrictive system while opposing it at the same time (Lent 14): a balancing act made possible in part by the international recognition both directors gained early in their careers. At the same time, their somewhat controversial status is emblematically illuminated by the paradox that the fertile »Second Golden Age of Philippine Cinema« (Vasudev 18; David) coincided with a twenty-two-year period of oppressive dictatorship.

Following the commercial and critical success of Brocka's 1975 film *Maynila, sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Light*), a gritty drama depicting crime and sex work in the Philippines' capital, *Insiang* rather turned to a more intimate setting. The film tells the tragic story of the eponymous protagonist (played by Hilda Koronel), a young woman living with her mother and her mother's younger boyfriend in Tondo, a district in the vicinity of Manila's harbor and home to some of the city's largest and poorest slums. The film combines elements of a rape revenge plot with a grim realism in the depiction of urban poverty on the one hand, and a melodramatic structure orchestrating the story's elements, in effect merging popular genre, neorealism, and melodrama, on the other. Like the career and oeuvre of its director (which includes ambitious art films as well as trivial genre movies), *Insiang* embodies the generic and cultural hybridity that is, in more than one sense, a prominent characteristic of Philippine cinema (Capino 33-39).



Courtesy of the Film Development Council of the Philippines

Already the choice of protagonists renders *Insiang* a film that joins realism and melodrama in an unexpected manner. The protagonist, Insiang, is a hardworking, demure, and obedient young woman who is exploited by her resentful and abusive mother, Tonya (played by Mona Lisa). For Tonya, her daughter is a living reminder of her deadbeat husband who left her without any support for his child. While the trope of the abandoned mother is a stereotype of global sentimental culture, it is very much the dire reality of many Filipinas' lives, born out of a culture-specific mix of the Catholic Church's rejection of birth control, machismo culture, and the deeply rooted notion that children are obliged to care for their parents and are therefore a necessary investment into one's future well-being (Thomson; Aguilar; Bautista).

Brocka, however, moves beyond this stereotype by assigning this narrative trope to the older generation, the mother, and by focusing instead on Insiang, the obedient daughter, who is at risk of experiencing a similar fate. Aggrieved by her circumstances of living as a single mother, Tonya seeks comfort in the relation with a younger man, Dado (played by Ruel Vernal), who also sexually pursues her daughter. The dutiful and self-sacrificing daughter is another stock character in Asian cinema and television, providing a masochistic point of identification for the audience. She is doubly victimized as Dado not only rapes her while she is unconscious, but her mother furthermore takes his side and blames her daughter for the sexual transgression. Tonya needs to believe her lover's claim that it was Insiang who seduced him in order to sustain her own fragile happiness. With the failure of Insiang's subsequent plan to sleep with her repressed suitor, Bebot (played by Rez Cortez), and to entice him to take her away from Manila, her ensuing strategy takes the narrative to the next melodramatic level. She now sexually seduces Dado, whom she hates, manipulating him to fall madly in love with her, stirring his desire to make him more and more careless, until the mother finally discovers the betrayal, as she catches her lover and daughter in the act and kills Dado in a fit of rage.

Leslie Fiedler argued that in the melodramatic fantasy of the sentimental American novel, the Manichean opposition of good and evil is articulated through the opposition between the woman as the embodiment of the Divine, morality, and chastity, and the man as the embodiment of temptation, phallic destruction, and sexual aggression (50-53). *Insiang's* narrative takes this ubiquitous trope of sentimentality into a new direction by letting the female victim lose her moral standards in an act of revenge on her male tormentor—to her own harm as much as to her family's detriment, which becomes evident in the affective abyss of the film's final scene. Insiang visits her hardened mother in prison, who refuses her daughter's tearful plea for forgiveness, yet who bursts into tears herself when she watches her daughter leave. The desolate ending leaves both characters unreconciled, guilt-ridden, and unredeemed, with only the spectator experiencing emotional catharsis through witnessing their shared suffering.

What separates *Insiang* from the tradition of melodrama is its social realism, a more general tendency of Philippine cinema and art during the Marcos era as well as of many of Brocka's films (Beller 117-62; Guillermo). The film's claim to realism is already evident in Brocka's decision not to sacrifice the naturalistic depiction of the Tondo slum for the kind of »parabolic image space« that Hermann Kappelhoff (25; 35-38; 234-36) has singled out as a characteristic of cinematic melodrama: that is, an image space, overcharged with meaning, that effaces any trace of the real in favor of a stylized canvas that reflects the characters' inner states and emotions. Rather, Brocka retains the

material qualities of the locale and lets the spectator experience the heat, the tightness, the overcrowding, the makeshift housing, the impending violence of the slum.

Beyond its realist representation, it is also the film's engagement with the country's political and social realities that sets it apart from the dominant tradition of melodrama. *Insiang* serves, including its bleak ending, as an »affective map« (Shaviro 6) of the country's political landscape. The drama of a »broken family« (another consistent trope of Philippine cinema and social life) as well as the personal power relations that are at the film's core have even been interpreted as symbolizing the political circumstances of the mid-1970s. In this reading, the submissive and vulnerable Insiang is an allegory of the true Philippines, while the malicious Dado symbolizes the Marcos regime that put the Philippines under martial law in order to extend its reign and exploitation of the suffering masses, with Tonya standing in for those who supported the Marcos regime for opportunistic reasons and personal gain. And finally, »Insiang's ineffectual boyfriend Bebot is a reminder of the Philippines' former colonial masters, such as the United States, who supported the strongman in power instead of intervening« (Clark 5). It is this interweaving of the personal and the political, of the melodramatic with the social fabric, that makes *Insiang* an outstanding example not only of the so-called third cinema (Pines and Willemen), but of global melodrama in general. In a uniquely interesting way, *Insiang* attests to the fact that melodrama is, contrary to long-standing belief, »not the opposite of realism but in ongoing engagement with it« (Gledhill and Williams 10).

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