

Aswang *contra* aswang: Interrogating the drug war chaos through Alyx Arumpac's *Aswang* (2019)

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Abstract

In this research, I seek to interrogate Rodrigo Duterte's "war-on-drugs" through the documentary film *Aswang* (Arumpac, 2019). In the first part of this paper, I revisit the *aswang* phenomenon against the backdrop of the Philippine folkloric tradition and some evolving issues in the Philippine society. Before I narrate and dissect the indispensable aspects of the film, I explain first Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of chaosmosis against the backdrop of the neoliberal capitalist chaos. Subsequently, I theorize the *aswang* as an aesthetic principle capable of traversing other worlds, disciplines, and scholarship. I use the film's revolutionary potentials as an impetus to explore other artistic productions and community—rehabilitation initiatives critical of Duterte's drug war. In the third part of the paper, I use the film in diagnosing the drug war's secularized *aswang*—an authoritarian flattening and superimposition of chaos. In this vein, *Aswang* metamorphoses into a political principle that can antagonize the repressive configurations of Duterte's *anti-chaos chaos*. Ultimately, the fusion of the aesthetic and the political seeks to transform the *Aswang* into a vector of transformation, resistance, and hope, which I call *post-Aswang*.

Keywords: *Aswang*, Duterte's war-on-drugs, chaos, authoritarian populism, post-*Aswang*

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Introduction

As a device of social criticism and catalyst of change, art plays an indispensable role in the Philippine society. Despite censorship, manipulation, and commodification, it remains a cultural force in articulating alternative interpretations of life, analyzing various forms of injustice, and diagramming pathways of freedom. State-sponsored censorship and harassment perpetually hunt anti-establishment/-authoritarian artistic productions. In this dangerous time, several artists practice the “art” of political camouflage to make their productions accessible to a larger audience (Lumbera, 2010) and further cultivate revolutionary consciousness among the people.

The Philippine cultural community today remains a fertile ground for reflection, education, and critique. Against the backdrop of Duterte’s reign of terror, artists and cultural workers remained steadfast in antagonizing the government’s iron fist. Some of these works include Maynard Manansala’s monologue *Tao Po* (2017), Jessie Villabriles’ musical *Bitan* (2017), and Derick Cabrido’s film *Purgatoryo* (2016). These “revolutionaries” valiantly employ cultural devices to combat tyranny and guarantee the existence of a historical accounting of their present. According to Yu and Muslim (2021), “the Filipino cultural community persisted in producing work that transcends the static limits of art...work that holds the state accountable for its actions, works that serve as indelible documentation of our time...” (p. 335).

Duterte’s drug war spawned one of the cruelest forms of chaos in Philippine society. From May 10, 2016, to May 20, 2022, drug-related fatalities reached 7,009 (Manahan, 2022). However, according to the United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, the killings reached to 8,663 (Lopez, 2023).

During his last six months (January 1, 2022, to June 30, 2022) of presidential stint, 149 people were killed (UP Third World Studies Center, 2022). The drug war is not only about the use of drugs and statistics. More importantly, it is about people—their family, life, and future. The orphaned, widowed, and displaced families affected by the extra-judicial killings (EJK) are left perplexed, impoverished, and hopeless. Among those severely affected by the drug war’s violence are children left behind by the victims. They are “often driven deeper into poverty, suffer deep psychological distress, often drop out of school for financial and other reasons, and suffer bullying in their schools or communities” (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In the same vein, their capacity to conceive meaning from their surroundings vanish. Since their lives are disjointed by the unlawful imprisonment and/or death of one or more family members, even their ability to imagine a life-affirming future turns nebulous. In *Drugs and Philippine Society*

(Lasco 2021), Gideon Lasco underscores that interrogating the drug war “should consider the people involved in its logics and mechanics; and the people affected most, as well as their range of responses, from victimhood to resistance” (p. 9). Aside from the comprehensive accounts and multi-disciplinary perspectives found in this book, there are already numerous literatures that investigate and problematize the historical, political, and socio-economic configurations and dimensions of the drug war (see Chua & Labiste, 2020; Lanuza, 2022; Reyes, 2016). Furthermore, there are already an inventory of philosophical research that analyzes and problematizes Duterte’s authoritarian rule or political governance (see Festin, 2020, Gaspar, 2018; Imbong, 2019; Maboloc, 2019). Despite the profundity and critical imports of these works, there remain insufficient philosophical explorations focusing on the drug war’s detrimental effects to Philippine society, through the fusion of aesthetic and political analysis.

More specifically, I seek to engage with a contemporary manifestation of chaos by interrogating and nuancing Duterte’s “war-on-drugs” through Alyx Arumpac’s *Aswang* (2019). After reconstructing the *aswang*, a mythical and shape-shifting monster in the context of the Philippine folkloric tradition, I nuance the significant aspects of the film. Arumpac critically contemporize the *aswang*’s monstrous, liminal, and allegorical characteristics in relation to the Duterte-orchestrated killings (secular) situated in the city’s periphery (geographic), which engender enormous terror and trauma to the people that further necessitate interventions (aesthetic and cultural). However, to enhance the *Aswang*’s fight against the drug war’s enormous monstrosity, I also include in the discussion Kiri Dalena’s *Alunsina* (2020) along with the other initiatives of some cultural and community workers. Their initiatives springboard my formulation of *Aswang* as an aesthetic principle—a beacon of solidarity and hope in the despondent communities. Moreover, the *aswang*’s monstrosity amplified as the face of the Philippine state under Duterte’s regime. These mutations galvanize my theorization of the film as a political instrument that can diagnose the drug war’s authoritarian flattening and superimposition of chaos successfully embellished by Duterte’s populist rhetoric.

To theoretically deepen my discussions, I seek the help of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994) principle of *chaosmosis*. However, instead of assuming the role of an overarching theoretical framework or methodology, I utilize this principle as a vector that radicalizes the potentialities of the film *Aswang* as an aesthetic principle. Concurrently, I examine the conceptual breadth and relevance of *chaosmosis* through the film. While navigating the drug war’s ramifications, I likewise realize the necessity of pursuing a political interrogation of Duterte’s secularized chaos with the help of other

theoretical perspectives and contexts. This unorthodox research style grounds my conceptualization of a decolonized theory of chaosmosis (post-*Aswang*) capable of articulating one of the most appalling chapters in the contemporary Philippine society.

The aswang phenomenon:

Some appropriations and societal contextualization

The utilization of mythology is an indispensable fabric of artistic imagination, creation, and rendition in the Filipino imagination: “Philippine myths explain the creation of the universe,...the creation of the first man and woman and the origin of social classes.... What is unique about Philippine myths...is their interesting variety” (Eugenio, 2007, pp. xxvi-xxvii). Instead of merely looking back with a linear eye, these beginnings that Eugenio refers to can also be interpreted as the commencement of new sense of ethical relation within the community, against the backdrop of future atrocities. Myths are therefore subjected to constant reinterpretations in relation to dynamic historical contingencies and social circumstances.

People use mythology in understanding things they cannot comprehend. Philippine folkloric tradition attests to Mircea Eliade’s (1963) argument that myths can be reinvented to assume new meaning and relevance and to re-imagine our world. For example, the concurrence of sunlight and rain is construed as a manifestation of a *tikbalang*’s [half-man half-horse mythical creature] wedding; the *tyanak* [demon babies] serves as an allegory of a society’s high infant mortality; and the aswang is utilized to proliferate a spectacle of fear and violence among Filipinos, especially, among the urban poor.

As a Philippine folklore figure, aswang is an evil and terrifying creature devoid of consistent descriptions because its appearance varies per region and context. In its primitive form, the aswang is described as an inhuman and monstrous entity. The belief on the existence of this demonic creature backdates to the conquest and accounts of Spanish missionaries assigned to the Visayan and Central Luzon regions of the Philippines as per Miguel de Loarca’s (2005/1898) historical accounts in 1582-1583. The Spanish Augustinian priest, Tomas Ortiz (as cited in Lim, 2011), ardently urged the other missionaries to exterminate the natives’ superstitious beliefs. Specifically, Ortiz defines the Aswang as a flying witch which stays on the roof of a pregnant woman’s house “and from there extends its tongue in the form of a thread that passes into the body of the child.... With it he draws out the bowels of the child and kills it” (p. 97.)

Furthermore, according to Maximo Ramos (1969), the aswang or Philippine vampire is a “corpse-eating mythical being” (p. 238) whose

existence and attributes are hybridized from one region or locale to another. Aswang is a “blood-sucking creature disguised as a beautiful maiden” and “attractive woman by day, with buxom, long-haired, and light-complexioned” who, in hunting for human victims, “discards its lower body from the waist down and flies” (Ramos, 1969, pp. 238-240). Based on another interpretation, the aswang appears “as an adult male when he does not choose to change himself into...some animal. He effects the change...during his nocturnal prowling when he is out looking for a victim who is always a pregnant woman” (Eugenio, 2007, p. 244). In the Atimonan folklore, meanwhile, the aswang is portrayed as a creature “endowed with superpowers of locomotion and inhuman appetite for the voided phlegm and blood of the sick, especially the tubercular ones, the fetus in the womb, as well as flesh and blood of the dying and the dead” (de Gracia, 2011, p. 68). Frank Lynch (1998) shares de Gracia’s sexual identification of the aswang and further describes the corpse-eating *manananggal* as the most recognized kind of aswang in the Philippines.

The contemporary taxonomy of the aswang challenges conventional and definitive determinations as it veers away from the typical western theorization of vampires, ghouls, and werewolves. Additionally, its audience expands from the rural and ordinary Filipino natives to the urban and downtrodden masses, as well as independent viewers and scholars. The aswang’s liminality or the aptitude of becoming-other (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) prevents itself from becoming fully monster, human, animal, or insect. Through this ability, Valentina (Darna’s nemesis) and Dino (Zuma’s son), for instance, can be classified as aswang (Samar, 2021).

In addition, the aswang’s social and ethical significance are also explored and nuanced by different contemporary authors, such as Tony Perez’s *Cubao Pagkagat ng Dilim: Mga Kuwentong Kababalaghan* (1993), Segundo Matias’ *Moymoy Lulumboy: Ang Batang Aswang* (2014), and Allan Derain’s anthology, *May Tiktik sa Bubong, May Sigbin sa Silong* (2017). The aswang represents the material temporalities of the world and the social exclusion of the stranger (outsider). However, since the self and the other inevitably comprise an immanent whole, the aswang always betrays the possibility of achieving a definite and singular illustration. Allan Derain (2017) contends that this failure paradoxically crafts a space of creative possibilities, wherein the aswang assumes different forms, such as Captain Gimo of Iloilo, the OFW Maria Labo of Capiz, the visceral-sucker used by Major General Edward Landsdale against the Huk, and the power-greedy politicians, to name a few. In one of the chapters of Derain’s book anthology, Rogelio Braga (2021) presents a magic realist theorization of the aswang in *Aling Lilay ng Luzon Avenue*. In the story, he describes not only the malevolence of Aling

Lilay (a suspected aswang), but also her distorted historical consciousness. Like many Filipinos, Aling Lilay is an Erap Estrada fanatic and a Ferdinand Marcos Sr. apologist, despite the documented corruptions and widespread injustices associated with their presidencies.

The contemporary re-inventions of aswang in various visual and literary genres contribute to the growth of the aswang's existing configuration and relevance. This is augmented by the aswang's depiction in popular media, such as film and television. For instance, the accounts of the Manananggal phenomenon in Tondo in 1992 disturbed the grain of the incoming presidential election. It was during this decisive moment where two radical and intertwined interpretations of the Aswang emerged: first, a brand of "secularized disparagement...strongly temporalized and class-infected; second, a deciphering of their supposedly superstitious-delusional structure as a kind of social allegory" (Lim, 2011, p. 100). During this period, films revolving around the aswang portrayed the permeability of different worlds, such as the rural, urban, and the middle-class (Lim, 2011). Writers and journalists appropriated the 1992 manananggal fever in two intersecting ways: firstly, they interpreted the aswang as secularized and class-infected; and, secondly, they see it as a socio-political allegory (see Lim, 1997; Tolentino, 2016).

The feverish manananggal news that dominated tabloid and broadsheet headlines in 1992 likewise overwhelmed TV shows and films. Concurrently, some media institutions were even accused of figurative vampirism and tabloid sensationalism for the sake of profit (Tejero, as cited in Lim, 2011, p. 279). In the same year, Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes (1992) directed *Shake, Rattle, and Roll 4* episode, "Ang Madre." It features the story of a Catholic nun and a physician who supervise a charity clinic in a depressed neighborhood. At night, they turn into corpse-eating monsters who victimize the informal settlers. At a deeper level, the episode illustrates the impoverishment of Metro Manila's urban poor both from supernatural and human monstrosities. The dilapidated and cobbled-together houses of slum inhabitants offer feeble defense from the aswang's onslaught. This is the reason why middle-class writers construed the "Ang Madre" episode as an allegory of the poor's marginalization and destitution.

From the world of the urban poor, the portrayal of the middle-class hypocrisy symbolizes the power-greedy Filipino elites and politicians who prey on the disadvantaged. All in all, these differential developments in artistic genres and popular culture open the doors for clarification, deepening, and the crafting of new interpretations and possibilities. Another example is Arumpac's documentary, *Aswang*.

From myth to allegory: Aswang as an aesthetic principle

Chaosmosis as a Minoritarian Framework

The contemporary world is replete with different faces of chaos. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari contend in *What is Philosophy?* (1994): “Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly-off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness...” (p. 201). More specifically, chaos is characterized by a vortex of accelerated rhythm of information technology and experience, depleted resources, impoverished human relations, and psychopathologized individuals. These quandaries authored by no less than neoliberal capitalism accentuate the impossibility of overcoming chaos, including its ensuing consequences. In the G20 Summit in July 2017, for example, an enormous number of protesters and artists marched under the banner “Welcome 2 Hell” (Berardi, 2018). With a pessimistic tone, Franco Berardi laments:

In the past twenty years, the global movement, from Seattle to Genova to Occupy, has tried to stop the hellification of the world. We have marched, we have chanted, we have... expressed concepts and proclaimed predictions that have been confirmed by every deployment of the global crisis. In return, many of us have been beaten, repressed, imprisoned, and killed. In the end, everybody is now in hell (pp. 128-129).

In other words, launching an explicitly belligerent war against it is futile and self-destructive because war is its fuel. Contemporary individuals should therefore moderate their relationship with chaos by acclimatizing themselves with the rhythm of the cosmos and maintain a critical alliance with it—chaosmosis. Echoing Deleuze and Guattari (1994): “It is as if the struggle against chaos does not take place without an affinity with the enemy, because another struggle develops and takes on more importance—the struggle against opinion, which claims to protect us from chaos itself” (p. 203). This incommoding realization necessitates humility and prudence or, as Deleuze describes in *The Logic of Sense* (1990), becoming a “little alcoholic, a little crazy, a little suicidal, a little guerilla” (p. 157).

One of the timeliest initiatives to do is to labor for the fashioning of an apocalyptic or paradoxical ethics to rhythmically survive in this chaotic world. The search for new rhythms or the struggle for the promotion of ethical values, is exceptionally a difficult task, especially in a world tormented by violence, apathy, and psychopathologies. Affirmatively, this complexity is inspired by what the French calls orgasm *petite mort* (little

death): “an intense momentary ... weakening of consciousness that enables a vision of nothingness and simultaneously opens the possibility of listening to the sound of chaosmosis” (Berardi, 2018, p. 140). This revolutionary goal poses a great challenge to philosophy, i.e., in creating concepts that engender *chaosistency* (chaos and consistency), as well as to arts, i.e., in producing percepts and affects to make chaos sensible. Chaosmosis, in this manner, assumes the function of the *refrain* that engenders “the emergence of incorporeal Universes” and crystallizes “the most deterritorialized existential Territories” (Guattari, 2006, p. 16).

In this research, I attempt to theorize the film *Aswang* as a form of chaosmosis (refrain) to radically empower the families left behind, as well as maintain a critical relation with the drug war chaos and Duterte’s anti-chaos chaos.

Looking at the monster in the eye

Alyx Arumpac’s (2019) debut feature documentary *Aswang* illustrates a depressing and captivating portrayal of contemporary life under a regime that encourages a culture of impunity. Through an intricate combination of social realist and journalistic styles, animated by mythical and sonic interventions, Arumpac’s documentary film reconstructs the aswang’s conventional, horrifying, and shape-shifting characteristics against the backdrop of the gruesome drug war. Initially, the aswang depicts the different mutations of chaos in the Duterte regime. The film starts with a blurry shot of a flickering police siren that prefaces a documentation of a real-life crime scene where another drug-related victim is unlawfully killed. In the background, an adjacent port area can be perceived—a common dwelling to most of Manila’s urban poor. The nocturnal and luminous urban panoramas are adulterated by throbbing red and blue siren lights. It is succeeded by a man sailing at the Manila Bay coast while frantically staring at the polluted and obscure cityscape. The man’s voyage on the shadow blue and metallic textured coast is backdropped by a disconcerting soundscape. Subsequently, an elegiac and poetic voice begins narrating:

Noong umuusbong pa lang itong lungsod, nananahan na sa lupaing ito ang halimaw. Tinawag na Aswang, nagbabalatkayo’t pumapatay ng tao. Namamatay ang tumititig sa kanyang mata kaya huwag titingin. Ngunit ang mga kuwentong lang, mga dating panakot lang ng mga matatanda, nagkatotoo na yata. Gabi-gabi, naglalantad ang dilim ng mga katawan, bulagta’t nakataob sa lansangan. Palutang-lutang ang kamatayan sa ilog at dagat. [For as long as the city has existed, a creature has roamed this land.

They call it aswang. A shapeshift that preys on humans. It kills anyone that dares to look back and one must never look. These days, the myths and old tales seem to have come to life. Night after night unravels bodies sprawled face down the streets. Death floats down the rivers and the sea. (All translations of narration and interview are based on the Film's sub-titles.). (Arumpac, 2019, 00:57-02:27)

The horror of the aswang traumatizes not only the marginalized, but also the city of Manila itself. Its monstrosity, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari (1994), does not only involve human, but also the nonhuman “landscapes of nature” (p. 169). Speaking of the nonhuman, Nerissa Balce et. al (2020) in the essay “Fighting the Aswang,” cogently observe that in the documentary, the city of Manila is not merely portrayed as an inert place as it assumes the role of the primary narrator in the film. This novel narration style diverges from the normative configuration of traditional Philippine folklore, where a grandmother typically recounts mythical and scary stories to her grandchildren. As the initial narrator, Manila is portrayed as a living organism “who” experiences and chronicles the enduring decay and malevolence embedded in the Philippine soil: “*Itong lungsod, na nanatiling tambakan ng katawan ay lalamunin ka*” [This city is its killing field, and it can devour you.] (Arumpac, 2019, 1:18:49-1:18:54).

In the film, the “nightcrawlers,” a group of journalists closely following the accounts of unremitting murders, are escorted by the Eusebio funeral parlor’s morticians. The funeral parlor’s staff plays an important role in providing the recording (both official and unofficial) of the killings. Most of the victims comprise people from the slum areas. Most of their corpses endure inhuman punishments, such as bruised body parts and heads wrapped with duct tape. Every time the police are interviewed, they will resoundingly say that these people fought back that is why they are shot dead. Sadly, even the pandemic did not quell these brutal extra-judicial killings which can be only roughly executed by a callous monster—the aswang.

Sequentially, the film shows the remains of Kian Delos Santos surrounded by bereaved loved ones, outraged residents, and placards clamoring for justice. Jomari, one of Kian’s closest friends, is then interviewed. This young slum-dweller turns out as the succeeding narrator of Manila’s underworld. For him, he is in extreme sorrow due to Kian’s death. A helpless 17-year-old teenager, Kian was slain by policemen due to false accusation of being a drug-runner (Elemia, 2017). The policemen in-charge of the operation told the senators during a hearing that they merely “checked ‘social media’” to

determine the supposed involvement of the teenager in illegal drugs, but only after the anti-drug operation (Elemia, 2017). Despite the imprisonment of the three policemen or “enemy” as Jomari calls them, an atmosphere of despair and trauma continue to torment his family, friends, and community.

In the film, Jomari claims that his parents were arrested due to drug-use involvement (Arumpac, 2019, 08:09-08:36). As a result, he is left alone wandering and scavenging in the violence-afflicted neighborhood. His story miserably acts as a microcosm of thousands of urban poor children left behind due to the drug war. In most cases, their vulnerability is taken for granted by police authorities as they are easily treated as the war-on-drug’s collateral damage. Many of these young individuals become vagabonds, petty-criminals, and drug couriers (Conde, 2020).

Aside from Jomari’s story, the film presents the dangerous journey of Ciriaco Santiago, a religious brother, photojournalist, and member of the nightcrawlers. Through up-close stories and interrogations, he follows the pervasive shadows of the aswang—the trails of murder and the plight of the urban poor families. During his interview of Kian’s mother, the wailing orphan laments:

Ni kurot hindi ko makurot ang anak ko, ni palo hindi ko mapalo yan. Hindi ko kinukurot yan. Tapos isang araw ganyan mong makikita ang anak mo. Sobra pong sakit. Sana po, hustisya po para sa anak ko bilang galang na lang po sa pagkamatay ng anak ko. Anak, makakamit mo yung hustisya anak. Tandan mo iyan anak. Ipaglalaban ka ni mama kahit ikabaril ko na iyong paglaban ko sa iyo.... Ngayon nagtrabaho po ako para makalimutan kon konti yung ano niya kasi sobrang sakit talaga. [I never even pinched not slap my son. And then one day this happens to him. It’s so painful. I want justice for my son. I want to honor his death.... Mama will fight for you even if they kill me.... I work everyday so I can try to forget the pain.]. (Arumpac, 2019, 18:00-19:05)

The camera’s focus on different victim’s blood being washed away with water functions as the transitional device from one scene to another. This frightening image attests that rampant killings and the aswang’s brutality are already embedded organically in the city. As Jun interviews another family, similar sentiments are conveyed. One of the victim’s brothers bemoans: “*Hindi ko maipaliwanag iyong galit ko.... Walang kasalanan ang kapatid ko.... Kay Duterte ako pero pangit ang ginawa nila sa kapatid ko.... Lima po iyong iniwan niya na anak.*” [I can’t express my anger.... My

brother was innocent. I am for Duterte but what they did to my brother was wrong.... He left behind five children] (Arumpac, 2019, 19:33-21:38). Franco Berardi (2015) uses the word *spasm*—an agonizing vibration that compels individuals “to an extreme mobilization of nervous energies,” (p. 219) to describe this breathlessness and agony. However, spasm is chaotic because it opens the opportunity for the individual to reconfigure its vibration and cultivate *syntony* via resingularization (Guattari, 2006). In a chaotic world, Berardi (2018) supposes that music bears the power to search for “possible conspiracy beyond the limits of the noise of the environment and the recomposition of fragments of noise and sound that embodies a conscious vibrational intention” (p. 24). This dissonant capacity is certainly a universal attribute of art in general and not limited to music. In *Aswang*, noise is substituted by the deafening silence and mourning of the orphaned families. This is attested by real-life accounts where some bereaved family members are forced to say that their kins died out of natural causes, such as heart disease, hypertension, and pneumonia (Talabong, 2022). As a radical art, the documentary artistically utilizes mythical symbols and alternative images of life to process the families’ traumas and possibly transform their docility into empowerment and sustainable development.

Furthermore, one of the most disquieting scenes in the film is the documentation of roughly 30 individuals illegally detained in MPD Station 1—Presinto Uno. The conditions of these people are undeniably inhuman. Through drawing and narration, one former prisoner vividly recounts her experience:

Basta kinuha lang nila ako. Dinala nila ako sa likod ng Presinto Uno. Para siyang aparador.... Tapos, sabi [noong pulis], pumasok ka doon, pumasok ka doon.... ‘Pag tanggal ng maliit na bakal sa gilid, iyon na, naamoy ko kaagad ang panghi, ang baho. Tapos ang daming tao, halo-halo.... Huwag ka na diyan iyak ng iyak, ka pag may pera ka makakalabas ka na dito. Kasi yung mga tao na pala na iyon na nilalagay sa likod ng aparador na iyon, parang nangayari, kidnap for ransom. [They brought me to the back of Precinct One. It was like a cabinet. Then they told me to go inside. I wondered because I am standing between a wall and a cabinet. When he [referring to the police officer] removed that small piece of metal, I smelled it immediately, like pee and shit. There were so many people inside.... They told me to stop crying. That I had money I would get out. Because

the people they put behind this cabinet, were kidnapped for ransom.]. (Arumpac, 2019, 58:47-1:00:48)

Members of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and the press learn from the detainees that they are occasionally electrocuted inside the stowage cell and requested to pay an amount ranging from 40,000 to 100,000 pesos in exchange of their freedom (Arumpac, 2019, 1:04:02-1:04:10; 1:04:33-1:04:40). Shockingly, some prisoners cry for their protection and not even for their freedom. CHR representatives likewise learn that they are undocumented or “ghost” detainees, which makes their lives more dispensable—bare life according to Giorgio Agamben (2005).

Furthermore, the monster in *Aswang* still preserves its monstrous, shape-shifting, and ambulant configurations. However, it does not dwell anymore in a remote milieu and exists in a purely mythical time. The aswang already resides in the fissures and peripheries of the city degraded by socio-economic, geographical, and mobility predicaments. In its plural, these sinister and nocturnal creatures’ fluidity allow them to mutate like ordinary humans and “co-exist in the spaces we inhabit in different times of the day, and we are unaware of their true nature” (Balce et. al., 2020). In other words, the aswang traverses different milieus and temporalities, and it constantly hunts the people in the streets and interstices of contemporary Manila or Philippine society. As such, death assumes different, albeit interrelated faces—the murder of the victims, the demise of the orphaned families’ ability to live well, the death of the city, as well as the people’s capacity to fight the aswang.

The *Aswang*’s appropriation of monstrosity likewise stays in the middle of the porous worlds of the secular and the mythical. Secular, because monstrosity is authored and proliferated by Duterte’s governmental mechanisms; and mythical, because the terror and trauma engendered by the drug war necessitates mythological and sonic references in conjunction with cultural productions just to make its consequences comprehensible to the victims. The aswang’s aberration of striated time compellingly depicts the permeability of different realms, i.e., it fuses the horizons of the past and the present and opens to a future. As a cultural text, Derain (2021) compares the aswang to a chimera—a creature consisting of numerous heads indistinctly or rhizomically attached to its various heads, which further makes it difficult to locate its end tail.

Aswang, the cultural community, and Chaosmosis

The terror of the war-on-drugs relatively resonates with the socio-anthropological works of Frank Lynch and F. Landa Jocano. To be more specific, the aswang belief in Bicol (Lynch, 2004) and Panay (Jocano, 1969),

promotes the social control of the children and adults (Lynch, 2004; Jocano, 1969). Through painstaking orientation and policing, they are taught that any forms of deviation or disobedience to their place's "rules of conduct" would translate into illness and misfortune from supernatural beings (Jocano, 1969).

In the drug war era, the threat of disease and catastrophe translates into the threat of fear and violence, i.e., of being unlawfully detained and killed by police authorities or civilian men. More appallingly, it redounds into orphaned families, helpless children, and widows, as well as hopeless communities. Accompanied by a gloomy background sound, the documentary's narrator says, "*Kapag sinasabi nilang may aswang, ang gusto talaga nilang sabihin ay...matakot ka. Itong lungsod na walang patawad, lalo na sa mga bata. Huwag lalabas sa gabi, huwag aalis sa kama. Ipikit ang mga mata kahit gising. May aswang sa labas, naghihintay, paikut-ikot. Nakaabang ang mga pulang matang naghahanap ng makukuha.*" ["Whenever they say an aswang is around, what they really want to say is... be afraid. In this unforgiving city, not even children are spared. They are warned not to go out at night, not to leave the bed. Keep their eyes shut even when wide awake. A monster lies in wait, circling outside. Its red eyes waiting for the next kill."] (Arumpac, 2019, 30:54-31:26). However, despite the reconfiguration of the aswang belief in conjunction with the status social control at present, there is a divergence between Lynch's-Jocano's and Arumpac's. Whereas the former is attributed to a supernatural cause, the latter is state-authored. Albeit secularized, the drug war's unthinkable horrors transcendentalize the state as aswang.

As the misery of the urban poor aggravates, the marginalized does not only refer to the residents of the socio-economic bottom. They also refer to the drug war's collaterals. Kiri Dalena's *Alunsina* (2020) continued exploring the fissures crafted by Arumpac's *Aswang*. It is another documentary film that critically diagnoses and narrates the traumas spawned by the drug war, especially to families and children in one depressed community.

Dalena (2020) reconstructs the Visayan myth of *Alunsina* through a creative assemblage of real-life images and animations. She formulates a novel documentary about a community whose families and children are traumatized by the drug war. More specifically, she engages with a family whose children resorted to drawing pictures as existential mechanisms to confront and communicate their tragic experiences. In the film, the death of the children's father spawns a massive black hole in their individual and communal existence. The inverted camera technique employed in one segment symbolically illustrates how this misfortune turns their lives upside down. As a cradle of comfort, their grandmother-turned-

parent, necessitates godly resiliency in taking care of these children as she simultaneously grieves for the death of his son (the children's father), whose killing occurred in front of her very eyes.

Thousands of poor Filipinos have been killed in the Duterte's drug war. In most cases, the victims are the breadwinners or heads of the family (Fernandez et. al., 2021). These fatalities exacerbate these families' pre-existing hardships. Through *Alunsina*, Dalena (2020) empowers and inspires these children to remember and articulate fragments of their traumatic experiences. Through art, not only an existential bridge was crafted between the orphaned children and Dalena's group, but also, an ethical sense of solidarity and hope. Both Dalena and Arumpac are kindred spirits along with other artists-activists in the Philippines who fight for the advancement of social awareness among Filipinos and the empowerment of the marginalized sectors through different art expressions, projects, and platforms. Their documentaries both utilize mythological figures in their productions. The figures of the aswang and Alunsina serve as wellspring of understanding, empowerment, and hope, or as a vector of biorhythmic conjunction where a "common rhythm, a common emotional ground of understanding...that results in a possible...syntony" (Berardi, 2018, p. 112) between the individuals and the world is cultivated.

Regardless of Arumpac's or Dalena's transformative works, the fact remains that struggling with the aswang or chaos through mere artistic productions is insufficient. The drug war-afflicted Philippine society will remain contaminated by corpses, blood, and historical amnesia, when cultural workers simply constrain themselves with these works. Fortunately, several researchers and artists like Arumpac and Dalena are also community workers as their feet are also immersed in the filthy and disheveled Philippine soil. The latter, for instance, is one of the pioneers of Respond and Break Silence Against the Killings (RESBAK).

When a fire ravaged the houses of the residents of Market 3, Navotas City in 2019, Alex Baluyut (photojournalist), Precious Leaño (art curator), RESBAK, members of *Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Pamilya ng Pantawid* (SNPP), and *Sandata* launched an Art Relief Mobile Kitchen for the victims (Fernandez et. al., 2021). At least 57% drug war-related casualties occurred in Market 3. While drug war-related deaths descend in the first half of 2019, the said "allegedly planned" catastrophe happened (Fernandez et. al., 2021).

Furthermore, Albert Saldajeno and Fr. Flavie Villanueva of the Arnold Jansen Kalinga Center developed a theater therapy—a play that articulates a commentary to the current socio-political issues plaguing the Philippines (Yu & Muslim, 2016). The play, performed by orphans, parents, siblings, and the widows of the EJK victims, likewise "culminates with narrations

and reenactments of the performers' real-life experiences in the drug war" (p. 258). Some of their more immersed community-based programs involve Alternative Learning System (ALS) classes to homeless children, skills training, livelihood and employment in conjunction with psycho-spiritual formation and intervention."

Another community-based rehabilitation program is Project SOW (Support for Women and Widows)—an initiative spearheaded by the Inang Lupa parish, Vincentian priests, pastoral workers, and other volunteers. One of the project's most notable initiatives is the employment of grandmothers, mothers, orphans, and widows in a sewing facility in Barangay Lupang Pangako, Payatas. Teaching them to cut fabrics, thread sewing machines, and pile rugs are some of the ways that provide rehabilitation and livelihood programs for the abandoned families in Payatas.

All these noble and emancipatory attempts to make the chaos spawned by Duterte's drug war more sensible to the affected families and inspiring to the traumatized communities, lucidly depict Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) theorization of chaosmosis—"a composition of chaos that yields the vision or sensation, so that it constitutes...a chaosmos, a composed chaos—neither foreseen nor preconceived.... Art struggles with chaos but it does so...to render it sensory..." (pp. 204-205). Artists, workers, and volunteers are exceptionally laudable in struggling for the creation of spaces of happy survival or normal breathing despite drug war-related threats and problems.

On a more critical plane, befriending chaos through mere attempts to make its sensible can even exonerate and proliferate chaos. Similarly, Filipinos, most especially the human collaterals of the drug war, may even assert that all these efforts launched at the aesthetic front are not enough.

Territorializing the ticklish monster: Duterte's anti-chaos chaos

The Philippine society is an unfortunate witness to the brand of chaos authored by neoliberal capitalism. The acceleration, hyperproduction, and noise that prevent people from educing meaning from their experiences, are factors that debase contemporary Filipinos' existence. However, there is another terrain that is peculiarly novel in relation to the prevalent Western appropriation of chaos popularized by Deleuze and Guattari (1994).

In the global landscape, neoliberal capitalist political and economic transformations caused democratic entropy and governance to be exclusively managed by some privileged elites, the "sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests" (Ranciere, 1999, p. 102). Through what I call authoritarian or violent populism, Duterte creatively infiltrated the static interstice between elitist politics

and state mechanisms (Thompson, 2021). It is a kind of populism which promises to protect the people betrayed by liberal/elitist democracy. But what complicates his version of populism is that he did not only formulate himself as an alternative to liberal/elite democracy, but also as a political equivalent of the state itself—the state as *aswang*. (cf. Bello, 2017; Bugaric, 2019; Quimpo, 2017; Reyes, 2016).

Jomari, Jun, and the grieving voices they represent are artistically fused by Arumpac as a valiant critique against the evil Philippine state under Duterte's regime. The *Aswang* documentary personifies as an allegory to Duterte-orchestrated state violence. The state as *aswang* is symbolically epitomized by characters whose identities are masked, hence, maintaining the mythic element of terror. The state regards the lives of these human collaterals as disposable in relation to the "state's gentrification projects for economic regeneration, securitization, and foreign investments" (Balce et. al., 2020). At least in the perspective of Thomas Hobbes (2008), authorizing the state (Leviathan) to exercise political rule over the people is justified because it is the price they pay in exchange for collective protection and welfare. In the Philippine state, on the contrary, political power was abused by the Duterte government where dissent among people, organizations, and civil society groups is vehemently discouraged and opposed. It resembles a state manipulated by an alternative, yet a homogenizing and monstrous one.

Instead of promoting general welfare and safety, Duterte viciously disentangled criminals or victims outside state protection and heaved them into what Agamben (2005) refers as the *state of exception*—the "no-man's land between public right and political fact, as well as between the juridical order and life" (p. 10). The state of exception does not equate to dictatorship, "but a space emptied of the law, a zone of anomy in which all juridical determinations...are disactivated" (p. 66). By excluding the suspected criminals from state protection, he "authorizes their killings, similar to the language that the German jurist Karl Binding's used to justify the extermination of the 'incurably ill'" (Reyes, 2016, p. 118). In a state of exception, furthermore, "the judicial status of an individual" is eradicated "thereby producing a being that is judicially unnamable and unclassifiable" (Agamben, 2005, p. 12). Whereas the state of exception for Agamben refers to a zone of indeterminacy, it is equivalent to authoritarianism for Duterte.

The Western-theorized chaos conspicuously spawned by neoliberal capitalism has undoubtedly oppressed and is continuously oppressing the entire global community, including the Philippine society. However, its dehumanizing consequences are aggravated and adulterated by this Duterte-engineered chaos that causes deafening silence, especially among

the urban poor families and communities. The severity of cruelty and trauma caused by the drug war necessitates the use of metaphors, myths, and psycho-spiritual interventions. This is what the *Aswang* documentary, as an aesthetic principle, attempts to articulate and confront.

The latter part of the documentary also demonstrates the radical viability of mass protests as an indicator that activism remains alive despite the aswang's ubiquitous malevolence (Arumpac, 2019, 55:38-55:24). While collective protest remains an essential bedfellow of artistic productions and communal rehabilitation efforts, it must still be coupled with political criticism and mapping, since it is in this realm that Duterte's aswang or anti-chaos chaos works potently and cunningly. Paradoxically, it is in this realm where extra-judicial killing is deemed as a justified solution to eradicate chaos.

At the realm of political theory and practice, populism can help us undermine the deceitful camouflage concealing the aswang's ferocious nature. This camouflage serves as a formidable bulwark that prevents many Filipinos from perceiving the drug war as a flattening and superimposition of chaos. Populism (authoritarian) sanctifies Duterte's drug war as an anti-chaos machinery and a symbol of redemption.

One of the most distinctive attributes of populism, given its complexity, is its moralistic appropriation of identity politics. Populism is a discursive strategy of constructing a political frontier separating society into two binaries and summoning for the mobilization of the "marginalized" against "those" in power (Laclau, 2005). According to Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser (2017), populism is a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (pp. 5-6). In other words, it defines a political world as a battleground between the morally pure and the underdogs, as well as the immorally corrupt and privileged elite. In this polarized perspective, the former is privileged while the latter is considered as an enemy (*other*). Populism, therefore, is not only anti-elitist, but also anti-pluralist. Populists ingeniously claim, "that they, and only they represent the people" (Müller, 2016, p. 3).

In addition, populism's exclusionary configuration is hostile to heterogeneity of voices and conventional forms of political deliberation, hence, posing a grave danger to democracy. In grassroot governance, democracy territorializes and embeds power in institutions. In populism, on the other hand, power is frequently lodged in a strongman who claims to embody the people (Abao, 2016). Whereas agonism or dissent finds a

reasonable place in democracy (Mouffe, 1993), it is considered as the enemy's negative attribute in populism.

The strongman, as the embodiment of the people's general will, is ambiguously interpreted by populist adherents as tantamount to giving the power to the people. This is a variant of populism foremost among Latin American and non-Western societies for it "implies the emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct connection with the masses" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4). This is how the populist rhetoric works and infiltrates democratic processes. Prior to becoming the president, Duterte's campaign is embellished by the political slogan, "change is coming." From being a notable politician in Davao, he symbolized as the progressive voice of the people of Mindanao who are oftentimes marginalized in the national and liberal democratic, and Manila-centric scenes (Maboloc, 2019). More importantly, he offered an alternative politics from the brand of politics represented by Benigno Aquino Jr., whose six years of presidency authored numerous political blunders and inadequate responses to major issues, such as the Haiyan disaster, the Mamasapano encounter, the implementation of the Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP), etc. (Abao, 2017, p. 305). These problems, in conjunction with other predicaments besetting the Philippines, magnify the 38th parallel separating the poor (people) and the rich (elite). These tortuously interlaced conditions provide a fecund climate for a monster-in-disguise leader. But what distinguishes the 90's socio-political portrayal of the aswang from the contemporary is that the elite is no longer deemed merely as an economic class. Duterte's *other* is a fictional reality imagined by a powerful minority perceived to have been marginalized or cheated throughout the years. He galvanized his fortress by superimposing another layer of othering, where the other assumes a new meaning. Ironically, the new other is referred to as the drug users and pushers and defined as the State's enemy.

Despite being called as Duterte Harry (Dirty Harry), a mass murderer, or a fascist, Duterte remained revered by many Filipinos. His popularity ballooned because of his unconventional political strategy that effectively synonymizes entertainment and politics. More specifically, he declared, in a populist fashion, that ending the lives of the criminals or victims is informed by the noble goal of protecting and caring the law-abiding and God-fearing citizens and families (Alindogan, & Hay, 2016). Again, through Duterte's authoritarian populism, his supporters simply focused on the unorthodox veneer of his ways, instead of the political and ethical implications of the drug war. They regard it as a justified consequence of Duterte's radical leadership expressed through the so-called anti-chaos drug war. Aside from the people-elite polarity earlier presented, Duterte's populism likewise

dichotomizes the “good people” from the “criminalized others” (Thompson, 2021). It is in this respect that the drug war can be perceived as a monster in disguise and a covert genocide of the poor.

Duterte’s enormous mass-based support is not the only neutralizing barricade against all forms of criticism from different political fronts. Let us not forget that the drug war’s marginalization of identities and monstrosity is grounded on his administration’s utilization of the drug problem as the “central axis of state policy, a key focus of policing and law enforcement, and priority of various levels of government” (Coronel, 2021, p. x). In addition, Duterte’s *aswang* ingeniously dispersed itself in institutional and public spaces. It is fortified by a political media machinery serving as a 24/7 vindication mechanism in relation to its human rights violation, repugnance to critical media, sexist commentaries, among others.

Another layer that precludes Duterte’s *aswang* from critical challenge is its legal territorialization powered by fraternal alliances with the legislative and judiciary authorities. Aside from the relentless drug war, the Philippine Congress passed a law, signed by the former President Duterte: Republic Act No. 11479 or what is known as the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (The Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2020). Based on the essay, “The Spectre of Terror: Philippine Democracy and the Threat of the New (Ab)normal” (Jove Jim Aguas et al., 2020), the most threatening provisions of the law are: “the very broad definition of terrorism, the threat against freedom of expression, warrantless arrest, expanded surveillance, arbitrary detention and the president’s arrogation of quasi-judicial power via the proposed Anti-Terrorism Council whose composition also depends on presidential appointment” (Aguas et. al., 2020). The integrity of the law is undeniably tainted and dubious, since this law is a brainchild of an administration notorious for human rights violation, ineptitude, and predilection to authoritarianism. In the new administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) through the conduit of the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino (KWF) red-tagged so-called subversive books, including renowned scholars merely because they cited references written by the Communist Party of the Philippines - New People’s Army (CPP-NPA) (Limpot, 2022). As such, the threat to our lives, freedom of speech, and other constitutional rights, remains in jeopardy in the Marcos Jr.’s government.

Aswang (Arumpac, 2019) articulates Duterte’s monstrosity in heterogeneous terms as it ambiguously identifies the monsters behind the widespread killings and its territorial immensity. The blood-stained neighborhood, haunting darkness, and appalling soundscapes, imply that chaos, mythical and secular, is already entrenched organically in the

Philippine soil. Similarly, the non-identification of the murderers maintains the mythical configuration of the aswang. The documentary critically maintains its reverence to the role of myth in undermining impermeable territories and promoting self-reflexivity. Duterte's aswang bizarrely ushered Filipinos into an incessant state of skepticism, i.e., on whether they are already mutating into monsters. Comparably, indifference to community participation and political deliberation may anytime translate as a subtle contribution in levelling chaos. The tragedy of the Philippine society, aside from the monstrous killings is also depicted by the widespread coldness and indifference of many Filipinos to the nocturnal murder of tens of thousands happening in trickles daily in the slums and poor communities of Manila and its neighboring cities" (Festin, 2018, p. 89).

In a way, Duterte was correct to say that the drug problem is the most perilous problem plaguing the Philippine society. However, in some places inside and outside Metro Manila, for instance, the concerns of the ordinary primarily revolve around unemployment, food security, and literacy (Coronel, 2021, p. xi). Filipinos' problems are so complex to be categorized under a single overarching cause. Drug use, crimes, and the status of being poor, were interpreted in the Duterte administration, as if they are synonymous with each other. The complexity of the Philippines's societal problems cannot be resolved through the exclusionary identity politics or Duterte's anti-chaos chaos project.

Given the homogenizing yet cunning aptitude of Duterte's anti-chaos chaos, a comprehensive dissent from a united opposition unfortunately did not become politically feasible. To begin with, populism is a shadow of liberal/elite democracy—markedly represented by the Liberal Party's standard bearer Noynoy Aquino. When Leni Robredo assumed as the Vice President in 2016, she became the figurehead of a "united opposition." Although "pink" symbolized her 2022 presidential campaign against Marcos Jr., the latter's political machinery still managed to successfully equate "pink" with "yellow" (the traditional color representation for liberal democracy or the Aquino administration), complemented by numerous political assassination projects in social media. Hitherto, much of the efficacy of Marcos Jr.'s strategy was guided and enhanced by Duterte-configured political infrastructures.

As a political principle, aswang serves as a political intervention that subjects Duterte's authoritarian populism into constant interrogation. Significantly, it is hoped that the agonistic spaces deactivated by Duterte's chaos can be reactivated and expanded. These ameliorations can promote and shelter various social practices, such as safer and empowered communities,

increased gender inclusivity, more humane healthcare system, participatory local governance, as well as culturally-rooted and accessible education.

Conclusion: Towards a post-Aswang theory

What is preserved in arts are “bloc of sensations ... a compound of percepts and affects” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 164) that exceed the anthropological and the lived. Like arts, myths exist in different cultures and temporalities. They are perpetually narrated and reinvented against the backdrop of evolving events and problems in the world. In the aswang myth, its monstrosity is both differentially retained and hybridized. As an art, the film *Aswang* (Arumpac, 2019). memorializes the violence and trauma spawned by Duterte’s drug war for the future generation.

Monumentalizing the past alone is insufficient, especially if it is done in the service of a particular ideology or class interest, and without projecting a future community. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) remind us that art as monument should not only commemorate, but should also create affects and conditions fecund in fabulating a community of minoritarian becomings. Paradoxically, the man behind the drug war—Duterte, is a product of this problem, specifically, the problems or failures of the post-EDSA government. Duterte’s drug war, “is focused on the changing modes of practices in remembering the EDSA People Power... Mnemonic actors... attempt to instrumentalize memories, creating narratives that they think will result in the most potent legitimization for their rule (Arguelles, 2016, pp. 122-131). This is what the documentary seeks to confront and address. The aswang’s porousness and secular character undergird this radical war *contra* the drug war (aswang *contra* aswang) and Duterte’s war against memory.

In this research, I theorize the film *Aswang* as a provisional territorialization to creatively survive in this chaotic world (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Although I mentioned earlier that Arumpac’s and the other cultural workers’ initiatives are insufficient catalyst of antagonism, from a deeper perspective, their efforts are not only aesthetic, but also political. Their valiant projects exemplify the dynamics of grassroot governance that aims to rehabilitate people’s lives and empower local institutions. But of course, despite their capacity to spawn political aberrations to Duterte’s aswang, other modes of political interventions should still be explored—practices that would make Duterte “accountable—not just onscreen, onstage, or on the page, but in the nation’s collective memory—for the thousands of lives its phony war on drugs has claimed and wrecked” (Yu & Muslim, 2021, p. 371).

Whereas Duterte's drug war flattened chaos, Arumpac territorialized the aswang's indeterminacy by labeling it as Duterte's drug war. But while the former flattens chaos to generate further chaos, the latter, materializes the aswang to help radicalize the human collaterals' lethargic bodies and to subject Duterte's aswang into comprehensive interrogation. Critically speaking, *Aswang contra Aswang*, as the title of this article suggests, can likewise metamorphose as a critique of Arumpac's *Aswang*. Against the backdrop of chaos as pure indeterminacy, she likewise navigates the complex path pursued by Duterte—the neutralization of chaos. Therefore, despite the film's critical objectives, it remains an endeavor perpetually hunted by chaos' detrimental elements, that is why vigilance should always be in place.

Positively, Arumpac's secularization or de-mythologization of aswang navigates different geographies and assumes numerous identities—from the city of Manila, Jomari, Ciriaco Santiago, the families left behind, the undocumented prisoners etc. In my view, territorializing Duterte's anti-chaos chaos through a critique of its authoritarian populism (which the documentary does not extensively discuss), is an equally important venue for political critique and intervention, as well as further research.

Despite riskily trying to put a human face to chaos, Arumpac attempts to recuperate its indeterminacy in the last part where she left open the *who's* and the *how's* of resistance against Duterte's aswang. This rupture, both revolutionary and perilous, serves as a challenge to the *Aswang* documentary and to arts in general. Moreover, this space serves as a battleground between those who seek to mitigate or antagonize Duterte's aswang and those who knowingly or unknowingly contribute to perpetuating violence or proliferating chaos in the Philippine society.

Whereas Dalena's *Alunsina* (2020) ends with a moderate tone and affirmative image of hope for the seven children's future, Arumpac's *Aswang* (2019) ends with a radical message that heartens us to fight chaos, although with no determinate blueprint:

Kapag sinasabi nilang may aswang, ang gusto talaga nilang sabihin ay 'matakot ka.' Itong lungsod, na napiling tambakan ng mga katawan, ay lalamunin ka. Tulad kung paano nilalalmon ng takot ang tatag. Pero mayroon pa ring hindi natatakot at nagagawang harapin ang halimaw. Dito nagsisimula. [Whenever they say an aswang is around, what they really want to say is—be afraid. The city is its killing field, and it can devour you. Like how fear might sometimes drown our courage. But some refuse to be afraid. They

choose to stand up and look the monster in the eye. Here is where it begins.]. (Arumpac, 2019, 1:18:40-1:19:11)

These revolutionary narrations backdrop Bro. Santiago as he traverses the stretch of Ortigas. The ubiquity of the government's infrastructures, skyscraping buildings, and colossal advertisements in Ortigas, albeit superficially illustrating progress, conveys the neoliberal chaos elucidated by Deleuze and Guattari. However, the chaos illustrated by the drug war menace, as earlier discussed, pursues an analogous pathway.

Although the drug war cripples the ethical, aesthetic, and political underpinnings of Philippine communities, it merely assumes a subsidiary role in comparison to Duterte's flattening and superimposition of chaos. This constellation of chaos indispensably informs what I refer to as post-*Aswang*. As an aesthetic and political theory, post-*Aswang* seeks to confront Duterte's aswang by sustainably enlightening and empowering the communities scourged by the drug war and critically diagnosing the anti-chaos chaos emanating from his authoritarian populism.

Looking the aswang in the eye is a battle against the drug war's chaos and Duterte's anti-chaos chaos aesthetically and politically. Moreover, it is a war against all the evils in this world. Post-*Aswang*, as an aesthetico-political principle, assumes the role of a decolonized chaosmosis—a precarious ethics of life and critique in the contemporary Philippine society. More importantly, post-*Aswang* is not merely a critical intervention to Filipinos' aesthetic and political imagination, especially in the face of homogenizing and oppressive forces, but a cornerstone for a reconfigured Filipino subjectivity, radical action, and hope.

After Duterte's presidency, the drug war's monstrosity remains and continuously transforms. The cultural community and different concerned organizations are still clamoring for accountability and justice, especially for the families left behind (see Gavillan, 2023a; Gavillan, 2023b; Gavillan, 2023c). Unfortunately, last March 28, 2023, the Marcos Jr.'s administration released a statement that it will already cut its ties with the International Criminal Court (Galvez, 2023). This pronouncement is difficult to reconcile with its previous promise in confronting the drug war chaos more wholistically (Galvez, 2023). However, based on various reports and interviews from the slum populace, the killings continue, but this time, the gruesome operation has become more underground and paradoxically elusive from state control (Simons, 2023). The drug war chaos is currently subservient to an underground system bolstered by money, contract killing, and corruption—something that analogously resembles the principle *Splatterkapitalismus* (Berardi, 2009). Indeed, these interwoven predicaments alchemize the

fight against the aswang in general and the drug war chaos in particular as an eternal war *contra* its liminal, polysemic, and brutal mutations. In this dystopian society, Filipinos must incessantly explore and create novel modes of grassroot governance, solidarity, and resistance, capable of radicalizing their impoverished bodies *contra* different mutations of chaos in the present and the future.

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Notes

¹ For more information on the various programs of the *Paghilom* project, see <https://ajkalingafoundation.org/program-paghilom/>.

² For more information on the different initiatives of PROJECT SOW (Support for Orphans and Widows), see <https://projectsow.weebly.com/general-objective.html>.

³ Of course, this is not to say that poverty is only a socio-economic and geographical term applicable only to imperial Manila. The poor or the marginalized may also refer to the underpaid and contractual working class in the industrial centers of Southern Tagalog and even Lumads of Mindanao.

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