

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Haunting Power of Sound in *Aswang*

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This paper examines the audibility of *Aswang* (2019), the first feature-length documentary that tackles Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs. I locate the documentary against the audibility of terror produced by the Duterte regime, accentuated by the primary metaphor of the aswang legend where the documentary initially draws its political charge. Inspired by theories of sound and haptic listening, I argue that *Aswang*, through its composition of key sound elements such as the voice-over, music, and urban noise, configures an overall audibility that amplifies, rather than reduces, the humanity of the documentary's subjects.

**Keywords:** aswang, Philippine documentary, haptic listening, haptic aurality, politics of listening, Duterte, war on drugs, Philippine films

When asked what sets *Aswang* (2019) apart from foreign-produced documentaries about the war on drugs in the Philippines, director Alyx Ayn Arumpac recounts the story of hearing a mother's voice through her earpiece, whilst her fellow journalists were taking photos and shooting videos of a crime scene. The mother was praying in the hope that the lifeless body in the crime scene was not her child. It was at that point, Arumpac said, that she realized the war on drugs had to be told from a local perspective through the *Aswang* documentary. "We do have the power to tell our own stories because there's a certain understanding, and a

certain feeling...when you understand the environment of the story you're trying to convey," Arumpac explains.<sup>1</sup>

This particularly local and empathetic voice of *Aswang* is, indeed, where the power of Arumpac's documentary comes from and what this paper aims to amplify. With footage collected over three years, *Aswang* is a documentary that is broadly about Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs, initiated shortly after he took power in 2016. The film features the experiences of selected figures—a young boy, a journalist-priest-activist, a mother seeking

justice for her slain son, a funeral director, a woman kidnapped by police, among other voices—to create a harrowing account of how Duterte’s “shoot to kill” directive against suspected drug users and unflinching anti-crime campaign cast fear and terror over Manila’s slums and its inhabitants. The film references key news events that exemplify the human toll of Duterte’s extrajudicial killings (EJKs), such as the death of seventeen-year-old student Kian Delos Santos, in a staged police shootout, and the discovery of a cramped “secret jail” behind a bookcase in a police station in Tondo, Manila.

Much has been said about the gripping images presented in *Aswang* and its undeniable skill and sincerity in capturing the horror of Duterte’s era of EJKs.<sup>2</sup> While initial reviews have focused on *Aswang*’s stark visualization of the disconcerting normalcy of death and impunity in Manila’s urban spaces under Duterte’s rule, and rightly so, this paper focuses specifically on the documentary’s aural potency. I argue that the strength of *Aswang*’s use of its aural elements lies not in the oft misguided impulse of the documentary form of “giving voice to the voiceless”; instead, it does the opposite: *Aswang*’s use of sound actively resists this fetishized humanitarian inclination of documentaries about the disenfranchised. As theorist Pooja Rangan has argued, documentaries about the disenfranchised, particularly in participatory documentaries where filmmakers literally or symbolically “give the camera to the other” (*Immediations* 1), might actually reinforce rather than redeem the dehumanization of its subjects. The metaphor of giving the camera to the other bears literal and ideological sense in certain participatory documentaries where, contrary to expository documentaries, the filmmakers interact with their subjects and are more visible on screen or the film’s subjects are involved in the film’s actual production. Rangan argues that in many cases, these types of documentaries mediate their subjects in ways that reinforce otherness “through the seemingly inclusive gesture of inviting them to perform their humanity” (*Immediations* 6). Such a claim requires careful analysis of how documentaries fashion their subjects through various filmic devices.

This article focuses on *Aswang*’s aural composition that resists a simplistic rendering of “giving voice to the voiceless.” Through the careful interplay of aural documentary elements—its narrative/directorial voice-over, its subjects’ testimonies, music and the urban

sounds the film records and assembles throughout in opposition to the state’s audibility of terror—I argue that *Aswang* does not claim to speak for its subjects or even presume it can, nor does it lay claim to merely capturing its subjects through an objective lens or pretend it is not without its own agenda. Instead, *Aswang* harnesses documentary sound to realize the genre’s potential to fashion a politics of listening that conveys compassionate and humane portrayals of its subjects.

In what follows, I examine how *Aswang*, through its composition of key elements of documentary sound, configures an overall “audibility” that amplifies, rather than reduces, the humanity of the documentary’s subjects. By audibility, I take after the notion of the voice in documentary as a “form of audibility” or “the product of sonic forms and auditory practices that render sound meaningful and call into being practices of listening that resonate with these meanings” (Rangan, “Audibilities” 282). To look at aural elements in the documentary form as audibility means to examine how they create sounds *as voice/s* that viewers are urged to listen to and to thus recognize these voices as human. Rangan warns against the documentary form’s capacity to define what it means to be human for its subjects, even without intending to. As Rangan posits, “...endangered, dehumanized life not only sustains documentary, but supplies its *raison d’être*” (*Immediations* 1).

The concept of humanity resounds heavily in the subject of *Aswang*; it is a documentary that wields the power of sound as undeniable proof of life of the victims and survivors of Duterte’s war on drugs, whose voices deserve to be heard. It is imperative to stress the humanity of the victims of EJKs especially given that the war on drugs casts them in dehumanizing terms. Among Duterte’s infamous remarks, he has been quoted as saying: “Do the lives of 10 of these criminals really matter? If I am the one facing all this grief, would 100 lives of these idiots mean anything to me?” During his campaign, he remarked: “Forget the laws on human rights... You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. Because I’d kill you.”<sup>3</sup> In defense of his shoot-to-kill directive, official government transcripts have documented Duterte reiterating: “I don’t care about human rights, believe me.”<sup>4</sup> I argue that *Aswang*, whose subject matter lends itself to the impulse of the documentary form to dehumanize, fashions an audibility that amplifies the humanity of its subjects.

The ethics of representing reality remain one of the central questions surrounding documentary filmmaking (Nichols, “Representing Reality”), given its “perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation...” (Bruzzi 9). This article suggests that the politics of sound is a productive route that can be explored in deciphering the ethics of documentary representation. On a broader scale, this article also converses with the ethics of representing marginalized subjects—a question that resounds not just with documentaries but media ethics in general.<sup>5</sup> The article approaches ethics in terms of how *Aswang* organizes its sonic elements to reinforce the humanity of its subjects—their right to be heard is representative of their right to life and justice.

From the documentary’s very inception, Arumpac and her team were alert to the ways the film’s sound design is crucial to meaning-making. Arumpac worked with established local and international sound designers and sound editors from pre- to postproduction. When asked why she chose not to score the film’s voice-overs, she explained:

The sound designers, scorer, and editors all agreed with me that we did not want music that forced emotions too much. There had to be a lot of restraint and subtlety because some scenes were already very intense. In many parts, the right sound design was more effective than music. I had different discussions with the sound designers and the editors on which sounds needed to be made more distinct (“Questions on *Aswang*’s Sound Elements”).

Precisely because music was used sparingly in *Aswang*, the scenes where music does appear in the film are able to draw heightened attention. For the film’s scoring, Arumpac tapped established composer Teresa Barrozo, known for composing music for a number of critically acclaimed Manila-based films directed by renowned filmmaker Brillante Mendoza, such as *Tirador* and *Kinatay*.<sup>6</sup> Music is used to accompany images in the film’s beginning and closing, the film’s voice-overs, and a critical montage roughly midway through the film (all of which I will discuss in detail in succeeding sections). In line with Arumpac and the whole team’s decision about *Aswang*’s sound design,

Barrozo said her key guiding principle in composing music for the film was “sensitivity” to the film’s subjects and subject matter (“Your Music in *Aswang*”).<sup>7</sup> She wanted to honor the truth of the images she was scoring. In an audio reply to my queries about how she composed *Aswang*’s music, Barrozo emphasized that all the decisions she made while composing *Aswang*’s music were guided by this principle of sensitivity—from choosing where the music was inserted/not inserted, the overall tone, the instruments she used (“Your Music in *Aswang*”).

In order to “sonify sensitivity,” Barrozo explained she chose instruments that conveyed an “atmospheric mood” that corresponded to and assisted the scene’s visuals (“Your Music in *Aswang*”). In terms of tempo, this meant slow and steady arrangements that gradually increased in volume, depending on the scene. She wanted the music to run “below” or “underneath” the voice and visuals and resisted what she called “sweeping” melodramatic music (“Your Music in *Aswang*”). To convey a sense of heaviness, she used drone sounds and built digital padding around wind instruments. This heaviness is heard, for instance, in the film’s opening, which Barrozo imagined as suggestive of the sound of howling or, perhaps, crying (“Your Music in *Aswang*”). The generally slow pace and the interplay between high- and low-pitched notes, and the modulation of digital padding in *Aswang*’s music also help convey what I deem to be the sense of haunting or mourning that envelopes *Aswang*—which I will refer to time and again throughout my discussion.

In the succeeding sections, I discuss *Aswang*’s audibility in more detail. First, I situate *Aswang* within the larger audibility of the Duterte regime’s war on drugs campaign and how the film uses the *aswang* metaphor in response to this audibility. In the sections that follow, I examine how *Aswang* organizes sound to challenge the state’s audibility of terror: through its deliberate exclusion of state voices, its reconfiguration of the documentary voice-over, and its careful selection and composition of its subjects’ voices alongside its layering of music and urban noise—creating a sonic order that powerfully amplifies the humanity of the documentary subjects’ voices through enabling what sound theorists have called “haptic listening” or “haptic aurality.”

## The War on Drugs and the Audibility of Terror

The audibility of *Aswang* resounds strongly when placed within the sonic milieu that characterizes Duterte's politics and his war on drugs. Media coverage of the early days of the war on drugs is rife with images of dead bodies, blood, and bullets, scored by sounds connoting tragedy and terror in the urban space: engines, sirens, cries, shouts, shutters. The opening lines of *The New York Times*' prize-winning photo-essay "They Are Slaughtering Us Like Animals," widely shared on social media, highlights the sinister aural facets of the war on drugs: "You hear a murder before you see it: The desperate cries of a new widow. The piercing sirens of approaching police cars..." (Berehulak). The audibility of terror under the Duterte administration also resounds in the president's anti-drug campaign, *Oplan Tokhang* (Operation Tokhang), which loosely means visiting houses of suspected drug users. *Tokhang*—a combination of Bisayan words *toktok* (to knock) and *hangyo* (plead)—quickly entered Philippine lexicon as the body count of *tokhang* victims piled up. The spate of *tokhang* operations under Duterte has effectively configured the sound of knocking as a sound of terror.

The Duterte administration's audibility of terror also derives from the president's biting speeches and rhetoric, audiovisual performances that proved absolutely crucial to his rise to power, played out on various screen platforms, from television to social media. Duterte's voice is distinct from his predecessors in the literal and symbolic sense. Literally, Duterte does not at all sound like previous presidents, not just because of his Bisayan accent, but more importantly, because of his crass rhetoric and even his tone. As sociologist Nicole Curato puts it, writing about Duterte's language and manner in presidential debates, "Discernible from Duterte's vulgar speech is a frustrated tone, an exasperated voice that is familiar to anyone who has endured the daily inhumanity of living in the city" (29). On a symbolic level, Duterte's campaign voice might be considered an "authentic characterization of citizens' deep-seated injuries" (29, emphasis in original). According to Curato and Jonathan Ong, the politics of listening figured largely in Duterte's populist campaign, successfully appearing to respond to the latent anxieties of the underclass (3–4). Duterte successfully projected himself as the voice of

the poor, whose anxieties have long been silenced by previous administrations (Curato and Ong). Of course, just months into assuming office, Duterte revealed that his voice only *seemed* different when the war against drugs turned out to be a war against the urban poor (Human Rights Watch).

Above and beyond the aural dimensions of Duterte's rhetoric and anti-drug campaign, the audibility of terror in Arumpac's documentary is bolstered by the film's use of the *aswang* folkloric figure as primary metaphor for Duterte's era of EJKs. In the Philippine imaginary, the *aswang* takes many shapes and forms, an all-encompassing term for vampires, witches, viscera-suckers, to name a few—a fantastic figure that has been identified in Philippine mythology as early as the Spanish colonial period (Pertierra; Ramos, "The *Aswang* Syncrasy in Philippine Folklore"). Perhaps the *aswang*'s most horrific permutation is the viscera-sucker who preys on pregnant women, paired closely with the ghoulish figure of the *tictic* or *tiktik*, named after the sound it makes to guide the *aswang* to its prey (Ramos, "Belief in Ghouls in Contemporary Philippine Society"). The viscera-sucker *aswang* version might also be associated with the Bisayan *wakwak* or the Tagalog *manananggal*, a creature that can fly by severing its torso from its lower half, whose presence is signified by the sound of flapping wings (Pertierra 320; Ramos, "Belief in Ghouls in Contemporary Philippine Society" 186).

The force of the *aswang* legend in the Philippines is not limited to literary and filmic imaginaries; it also haunts our political history. The *aswang* legend was infamously used by US Colonel Edward Lansdale for psychological warfare against the Hukbalahap communist insurgency during the Magsaysay presidency in the 1950s; corpses of captured insurgents were staged in a manner that resembled *aswang* attacks, sowing fear among the rebels (Lim 81). Felicidad "Bliss" Cua Lim, in her sharp analysis of *aswang* blockbuster films in the 1990s, examines the curious intersections between the timing of presidential elections, rumored *aswang* sightings in the impoverished districts of Tondo and Mandaluyong, and the release of *aswang* blockbuster films in relation to structures of power and the demonization of women and the urban poor. To borrow Lim's turn of phrase, "... historically, *aswang* beliefs have carried an undeniable political charge" (82).<sup>8</sup>

The *Aswang* documentary certainly draws from the political charge of the aswang belief that still resonates in both rural and urban spaces in the country today.<sup>9</sup> The aswang figure as symbolic of the horror of the *tokhang* age reverberates throughout Arumpac's documentary, developed initially through the film's voice-over and haunting music and strengthened gradually as the theme melds with other urban sounds captured in the film (e.g., vehicles, crowds, walking, barking, etc.). The aswang auralty of haunting and hunting is especially enhanced in transitional scenes where the camera momentarily leaves its chosen subjects, zooming out to wider shots of Manila at night as though showing us the aswang's view of the city it preys on.

On one level, the metaphor equates the monstrosity of the aswang to state-sanctioned killings and Duterte himself. But on another level, the urban noise and images used in combination with the film's voice-over that develop the film's aswang imaginary suggest the predatory nature of urbanization and modernity itself. This is apparent in an early montage where the voice-over is combined with urban sounds signifying progress and modernity (e.g., street traffic, a plane taking off). Soft tinkling music serves as undercurrent for this montage that cuts from scenes of vehicles and infrastructure into images of homeless bodies along highways or under bridges, as well as nighttime hawkers and commuters. These are the bodies of the lives that the state deems not human and dispensable—akin to urban waste, the “urban excess” that ironically also sustain the city through the flow of their informal labor (Tadiar 80–81). In this montage, *Aswang* juxtaposes the urban images and sounds of life and labor with the bodies of *tokhang* victims and the chilling sound of blood being swept off asphalts in Manila's slums. In the context of *Aswang* and the legend it invokes, Jacques Attali's characterization of noise bears literal meaning: “...noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder” (26).

### Mediated Silencing

This section underlines which voices *Aswang* chooses to exclude and how they are sonically excluded. The most obvious way that *Aswang* challenges Duterte's voice is through silencing the president and his proponents within the screen world. The absence

of clips of interviews of Duterte, policemen, or any other state figure is glaring in *Aswang*, especially when compared to other short documentaries on the drug war, such as PBS Frontline's *On the President's Orders* (2019) and National Geographic's *The Nightcrawlers* (2019), released roughly around the same year. Rather than voice-overs or voices from behind the camera, both documentaries use on-screen text transitions as narrative device. *On the President's Orders* largely follows selected policemen who are at the forefront of the anti-drug campaign. *The Nightcrawlers* follows local photojournalists who bear witness to the nightly killings in Manila's slums, juxtaposed with testimonies of vigilantes who confess to carrying out these executions covertly coordinated by the police. While both documentaries include interviews with families of victims of the drug war, they also feature interviews with figures that echo the state's reasoning behind the ruthless campaign. Both documentaries are stirring accounts of the war on drugs and are sympathetic to its victims. It is clear, however, that *Aswang* takes a different route from the approach of these early documentaries, through its obvious and deliberate omission of state voices, as well as its use of voice-over within its narrative structure.<sup>10</sup>

In the two instances that *Aswang* does include government voices, it does so through the inclusion of brief radio broadcast commentaries heard while the journalist is driving through the city. The first instance occurs earlier in the film, where we hear a reporter quoting the government's official line that it cannot be blamed for the spate of EJKS carried out by vigilantes. In the second instance, the broadcast features the voice of a police chief, who dodges a question about how the war on drugs has failed to apprehend rich drug lords by claiming that the poor are the ones often involved in drugs (Figure 1). In both instances, *Aswang* channels the state representatives' voices through radio technology, suggesting mediation, and thus the deception shrouding these claims. More importantly, through radio mediation, *Aswang* gives these voices an uncanny form, framing them as disembodied voices whose sources are nowhere to be seen in the frame.<sup>11</sup> These voices, unlike the privileged voices of *Aswang*, are detached from human, visible bodies. In effect, these are the voices that prey on the poor—these uncanny voices are the film's aswangs.

The rendering of these two radio broadcast scenes in *Aswang*, although used only twice, recalls Jonathan



Figure 1. State voices channeled through broadcast radio.

Beller's analysis of the use of the television medium in Lino Brocka's *Orapronobis*, set in the Corazon Aquino era that followed Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorial regime. For Beller, *Orapronobis*'s frequent insertion of the television (through news reports, talk shows, the editing room) within the film world enables viewers to see through and beyond the televised fabrications of the state. For instance, he cites a sequence where the film moves from a scene of state-sanctioned vigilante murders into television commentary about the spate of murders in the country, which then moves into the editing suite. For Beller, this kind of editing prompts "a re-evaluation of the televisual transmission of power" (148); it is a kind of seeing that exposes the hypocrisy of the state operating outside the screen.

The same can be said of *Aswang*'s use of audiovisual editing in the scenes that channel state voices through the radio. In the first instance, the radio broadcast is countered immediately by a mother's angry account of her son's death during a police shootout. In the second instance, the film moves from the police chief's voice into voices that detail killings executed by police forces inside their home. We hear two voices that counter the manipulation of media coverage and silencing of victims in the scenes that follow shortly, with the more audible voice recounting, "All I heard them say was...Don't let any members of the media into the crime scene. Don't answer their questions. Don't give them pictures. Nothing."<sup>12</sup> These voices poignantly accompany a close-up of the journalist's

face listening intently, which then cuts to a young boy framed from behind as he looks into the room where the murder took place, a crucifix and a candle caught in the frame. This boy reappears in later scenes of a funeral procession where his cries for his loved ones are heard. Through its editing choices, *Aswang* reinforces the plight of *tokhang* victims, their voices countering the state's accounts that the film chooses to mediate through broadcast radio.

### Against the Voice of God

Like many films, whether fiction or nonfiction, *Aswang* uses the voice-over to shape the film and direct our attention. I have already mentioned that the voice-over is used sparingly in *Aswang*, ensuring that it does not drown out the more important voices of the documentary's subjects. It is also worth noting that the voice-over is spoken in Tagalog, which I take as the documentary's conscious effort to speak in a local voice *as well as* not to speak on behalf of its subjects. Technically, *Aswang* uses the voice-over to give some coherence to the seemingly disconnected testimonials that we hear from the film's various subjects.

In the most basic sense, *Aswang*'s female voice-over departs from the conventional "Voice-of-God" documentary trope (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary"; Wolfe), the omniscient, male, white voice of the narrator that has been criticized as the filmmaker's "ultimate tool for telling people what to

think” (Bruzzi 50). In a larger sense, *Aswang*’s choice of a female narrator resonates beyond the film world when viewed as direct defiance and a cleverly executed tool against the brash misogyny that further characterizes the *tokhang* age. Who can forget Duterte’s sinister jokes about rape and sexual assault against women?<sup>13</sup>

That the first Filipino feature-length documentary critical of the war on drugs takes on a strong female voice—symbolized through its voice-over and through its female-led production team—is a remarkable feat. The classic understanding of film voice as point of view thus takes on more meaning in the context of the male-dominated Philippine film industry and indeed elsewhere in the world. Arumpac’s team forwards a welcome and necessary female voice that adds to the emergence of female Filipino documentarists in the last few years, along with the likes of Baby Ruth Villarama, whose documentary *Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016), which is about the struggles of Filipina migrant workers in Hong Kong, made history as the first documentary to have competed and won in the Best Picture category of the 2016 Metro Manila Film Festival. Another female-directed documentary that Arumpac’s film converses with is *A Thousand Cuts* (2020) by Ramona Diaz (who also directed the lauded *Imelda* documentary in 2003), a documentary about the journalist Maria Ressa, who has been convicted of libel under Duterte’s leadership given her new website’s coverage of the war on drugs. In September 2020, the *DaangDokyu* festival, which celebrates a hundred years of Philippine documentaries, was noticeably spearheaded by female figures in Philippine cinema: Villarama, Jewel Maranan, Villarama, Kara Magsanoc-Alikpala, and Monster Jimenez.<sup>14</sup> Without essentializing what it means to have a female voice in the film industry, it is worth highlighting how women filmmakers have been at the forefront of the documentary genre’s resurgence in the Philippines, with *Aswang* as a prime example.

The emerging voices of female filmmakers in the industry resound in the deliberate choice of female voice-over in *Aswang*. *Aswang* is consciously attuned to the capacity of the voice-over to add or subtract from other voices, which is evident in the ways it is deployed. It is striking that *Aswang* uses poetic storytelling rather than news reporting in its voice-overs—the lines are suggestive rather than prescriptive, which are built around the imagery of the aswang roaming the city. In contrast to the male voice-of-god trope, *Aswang*’s

female voice-over does not tell you what to think; instead, it encourages pause and reflection. One strong example is the lines laid over the scenes of flagellation (which also appear in the trailer): “*They say this is how to ask for forgiveness. But the aswang does not listen to prayers. Such a monster doesn’t forgive. What good are many eyes when they only look at a victim on the ground?*”

While the female voice-over in *Aswang* also bears with it the sense of the uncanny like the male voices of state figures mediated in the radio broadcast scenes, it is uncanny in ways that affirm, rather than prey on, the voices of the documentary’s subjects. This is especially evident in the editing of its voice-over scenes, where music and urban sounds come together to add depth to the spoken word and the film’s arresting images of life and death. In almost every instance the voice-over is used in the film, it is signaled by music that slowly gains volume and gathers pace, recalling soft bells, drones, and sirens blowing through the wind enveloping the city. The sound editing in these voice-over scenes conveys a sense of foreboding and haunting, the soundtrack to the horror inflicted over the city by the film’s composition of the aswang imaginary.

There is an overall sense of urgency and empathy in the tone of the voice-over scenes in *Aswang*. The voice-overs are often delivered at a fairly slow pace, literally and symbolically allowing pause for images to linger and diegetic and nondiegetic sounds to be heard, moments that serve as cue for audiences to consider what the words mean. According to Barrozo, she refrained from adding music to scenes that in themselves were already intense, such as images of dead bodies or people crying (“Your Music in *Aswang*”). Instead, she preferred to add music to the seemingly banal or ordinary scenes that precede or follow these intense images (“Your Music in *Aswang*”). Apart from allowing the strong images to speak for themselves, my view is that this strategy of restraint enables audiences to become more attuned to moments of reflection within the screen time, which is demonstrated in how music is laid over the voice-over scenes.

For example, in an early voice-over scene (roughly nine minutes into the film’s opening), the voice-over is laid over a series of images that begin with a chick on the casket of a *tokhang* victim, the voice mixing with the chick’s loud chirping. The voice-over states that placing a chick on a casket is a local custom that

signifies the search for justice if the perpetrator of the murder is unknown. The sound of vehicles is turned up just as the scene cuts from the close-up of the casket to a medium shot of a highway at night. Only after a brief pause does the voice-over return to say, “*But the aswang would never heed to the knocking of even a thousand chicks.*” Midway through this sentence, music gradually surfaces to meld with the sounds of the urban traffic, a melodic progression of soft single notes that build up in intensity as the film cuts to close-ups of dirty feet and bodies of the homeless who inhabit the urban space at night. These images of the city and its inhabitants then last for a few seconds, devoid of voice-over. Music and noise are used to allow the voice-over’s words to linger and, more importantly, bleed into the next scene where a journalist discusses the chilling statistics about the war on drugs. The above sequence is an example of how *Aswang* shapes our attention through sound editing, coaxing us to turn our listening from the voice-over to the journalist’s voice. Instead of using on-screen text or voice-over to present these statistics, *Aswang* uses sound to urge us to listen to the journalist who is the authoritative voice on this subject matter.

In another voice-over scene, *Aswang* combines the spoken word, music, and diegetic sound to appeal not just to our sense of hearing but to other senses as well. Consider these lines that tap into our sense of smell and taste: “*Decay fills the air around us. One can almost taste the metal. Not from the bullets, nor from the knives, but from the blood.*” Scenes of blood and bodies and the sound of vehicles and sirens precede this voice-over, then cut to a wide shot of the city at night. The city scene is scored with a poignant piano or keyboard note in a low register that plays on for a few seconds before changing into a slightly higher key that is also held for a while, until it combines with the steady sound of lashing in a scene already mentioned earlier: of men performing self-flagellation, their faces covered with masks as they walk through a narrow city street with blood running down their backs.

*Aswang*’s sound design can be approached through what some sound theorists have called “haptic aurality” (Coulthard) or “haptic listening” (Leimbacher)—which refers to the tactile experience of listening that enables us to sense how we as subjects resonate in the world. The haptic approach to listening draws from Laura Marks’s more popular theory of “haptic viscosity” or “the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were

touching a film with one’s eyes” (xi). Marks suggests the potential of an embodied, tactile experience of cinema when memory and the visual representation of spatial depth trigger all our other senses, particularly the sense of touch. Similarly, Irina Leimbacher suggests that haptic listening refers to our embodied and affective responses to the surface of sound, particularly the texture of voice in audiovisual works. Lisa Coulthard meanwhile (reading Jean Luc-Nancy) forwards the notion of haptic listening in terms of how sound can enable the “resonant subject”—or “the one who listens to oneself listening” (12).<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Barrozo actually raises the idea of haptic aurality in describing the melodic elements of her score for *Aswang*: she uses the word *haplos*, which means “to caress”: “If these melodies were a gesture, you could say that the music is caressing you (*hinahaplos ka lang ng melody*)” (“Your Music in *Aswang*”).

*Aswang*’s capacity to invoke the “resonant subject” is perhaps best rendered in a montage where the voice-over is *silent*. From the beginning of the documentary, the music alerts us to the voice-over via music, and so its *absence* becomes apparent in this series of images that take place in a cemetery. The montage I am referring to is placed roughly in the middle of the film’s running time and has been used as well in some of *Aswang*’s promotional material. The music that is used in this montage bears the familiar haunting tones, tempo, and textures of the score used in previous voice-overs, but the prolonged single low notes are tempered with higher notes that denote a softer mood, sounding almost like a lullaby. Instead of dread, there is something almost tender about the way the music and diegetic sounds play out in this montage. Along with the music, we hear the sound of fire flickering, its volume noticeably a notch higher than the score. A small mound of discarded caskets is burning, which a young boy piles on to as he is surrounded by towers of tombstones. This somewhat peaceful scene as day turns to night is a stark contrast to the scenes preceding, where we see the corpses of two unclaimed *tokhang* victims unceremoniously shoved into one of the lower tombs. The montage goes on to show images of cemetery residents: men sitting or walking on top of tombstones, an old woman walking through puddles, families sleeping in makeshift beds. The lullaby continues with the undercurrent of life: the noise of footsteps, people talking, and a rooster crowing at a distance.



Arumpac said that she wanted this sequence to be “a moment of reflection” (“Questions on *Aswang*’s Sound Elements”). She added, “We would never be able to fully control what meaning the audience can extract from these...[but] we could construct this moment of peace, silence (and sleep) in a cemetery that has seen so much pain” (“Questions on *Aswang*’s Sound Elements”). Comparably, I take the sound arrangement used in this scene as the film’s lament for the victims, not just for the victims of the war on drugs, but for all Filipinos who straddle the time-spaces of life and death on a daily basis. In the strong absence of the voice-over, the film allows the music of mourning to linger in these images that capture how the living and dead simultaneously occupy the country’s spaces of injustice, amplified, but certainly not just limited to, the age of Duterte’s EJKs (Figure 2).

With scenes that somewhat serve as respite from the harsher scenes in *Aswang*, this relatively tender montage might also be regarded as creating “noise” that interrupts our listening—further encouraging haptic aurality. This takes after the notion that noise encourages an “affective relation” that can induce change (Thompson). Marie Thompson suggests that noise (generally, sound that interrupts, which is neither positive nor negative) is an affective force “that can interrupt a system of relations” (18). More relevant to haptic listening is her suggestion that “Noise can also interrupt feeling; it can induce a modulation or modification in mood or temperament” (19). In the

obvious silence of the voice-over, the film allows the music and noise to take over, to resonate with, and ultimately to *touch* its listeners. To borrow Coulthard’s words when she explains the power of silence in moments that encourage haptic listening (in her reading of silence in French filmmaker Michael Haneke’s films), “...the film does not do the thinking for us, but rather creates a space for us to think” (27).

## Listening to Others

*Aswang*’s selected subjects resonate as the figures who experience and bear witness to the war on drugs. In their voices, we hear a cacophony of sorrow, grief, rage, and hope in a way that “touches” us through *how* the voices are shaped and presented to us by the camera.

One of the most piercing scenes in *Aswang* is that of a man who was suppressing his grief and anger at the death of his brother, conveyed in the words he spoke and the manner he delivered his words. The scene’s sonic power is visible in the man’s struggle to speak, his words punctured with brief pauses: “*I can’t (inaudible)...express my anger....*” He goes on to say, in between muffled sobbing, “*I am for Duterte but what they did to my brother was wrong.*” This is an example of how the film exercises deliberate ethical choices in terms of how it amplifies the voices of its victims. The film allows the scene to play on without cutting out its inaudible utterances, in the process also highlighting the other sounds (muffled crying) and,



Figure 2. The haunting of life and death in the city.

more importantly, the gestures (he crumples paper in his hands in rage) that make the man's testimony even more moving.

Just as *Aswang* encourages haptic listening through voice-over and music, the above scene is one among a number of instances where *Aswang* configures voices to enable haptic listening. As Leimbacher puts it, "We are touched by voice, and this voice, even when recorded, physically and ontologically matters" (298). This scene is "touching" in the affective sense that it is emotionally moving—it might even have the potential to trigger us to the point of eliciting our own tactile reactions to it (e.g., one might gasp, hold one's breath, perhaps even weep). More importantly, being "touched" by the texture of the man's voice can evoke a resonance between us and the person we are listening to. Leimbacher's turn of phrase illuminates how haptic listening opens up a dialogue between listeners and the voice: "It encourages us to engage ear to mouth and mouth to ear, as one human body listening to, resonating with, another" (299).

Another scene that lends itself to haptic listening is the conversation with the funeral director and the filmmaker, mostly shot using close-ups. His words are troubling, but what draws us to listen is his head movement and facial expression. His head is tilted slightly downwards as he speaks about how he takes care of unclaimed bodies. His voice is steady and direct; his eyes, in some instances, convey hints of concern. As he speaks, the film cuts to a medium shot

of a bloody hand, barely visible under a sheet. The film cuts back to a close-up of the funeral director's face then slowly zooms out to a tight medium shot as it pans down to show us his hand fiddling with the sheet covering the dead body we caught a glimpse of earlier. As the camera moves to the hand (Figure 3), we ourselves are potentially moved to think about how it must feel to take care of bodies slain in the drug war as the funeral director does.

In some other scenes, hands movements augment the texture of emotions of the voices we hear in *Aswang*. We see this in the testimonial of one of the women who survived the secret jail cell hidden behind a bookcase in a Tondo police station. We do not see her face, but we do see her hands fiddling with a pen as she recounts what happened. When prompted to draw what she remembers, her hand steadies, suggesting certainty in her memory as she illustrates the hellish room she was imprisoned in. If, in the earlier scene of the man weeping for the death of his brother, *Aswang* chose to let the scene play out unedited, in this scene, the film uses the power of the film cut to reinforce the female voice's account of police abduction. As she recounts her harrowing experience, the film cuts to footage of frantic scenes in the Tondo police station where the makeshift jail cell was discovered, shoring up the voices of the other abducted men and women who validate the female voice's testimonial.

Following the coverage of events at the police station, *Aswang* uses the sympathetic voice of the



Figure 3. A scene that encourages the potential of haptic aurality.

journalist in an attempt to make sense of the blatant disregard for human rights that just played out before our eyes. Throughout, the film makes a conscious choice not to use its voice-over to deliver facts; instead, it yields the camera to the voice of the journalist to do so. It is the same strategy that the film uses in the scene earlier mentioned, where the journalist presents statistics on the war on drugs. The film's ethical decision to *not speak* on behalf of its subjects is much more apparent in this scene where the film enables the journalist to explain the injustice that occurred. Again, hand gestures signify affect in this scene, even though the journalist's voice is steady and unwavering. Just before he speaks, the film frames him looking at the screen, reviewing his photos from the police station, tapping his fingers together in a way that might convey a sense of restlessness and frustration. His hand covers part of the screen just as his says, "*Napaka...ano...yung, walang dignidad...yung kinuwento sa'kin yung sitwasyon. Yung mararamdaman mo yung singaw, yung amoy, yung dilim nung sitwasyon nila...*" [It was dehumanizing. There was no dignity in there. It was how they described it to me. The humidity, the smell. All lined up inside in the dark...]. I cite the Tagalog lines first here to emphasize how the brief pause in the beginning of the journalist's speech—the "*ano*"—is significant in conveying how one struggles to put into words just how inhumane the situation was. Further, the words the journalist used to describe the jail once again appeal to our other sensorial capacities to encourage the potential of haptic listening.

*Aswang's* loudest voice, without a doubt, belongs to its youngest character, Jomari. Jomari is the slum child whose animated stories resound throughout the film almost as much as the film's voice-over. The film's approach to Jomari is, perhaps, where it treads on somewhat dangerous grounds when it comes to the enduring issue of documentary ethics and representation, particularly the all-too-familiar charge of poverty pornography.<sup>16</sup> However, I think the film is sensitive to this danger and even confronts it by including the filmmakers' voices in almost all its interactions with Jomari. *Aswang* includes, for instance, a scene where Jomari abruptly asks for money to buy slippers and clothes, which the filmmakers accede to. This particular scene calls attention to the complex issue of documentary ethics, raising questions about the relationship between the filmmaker and their subjects. In scenes where the filmmakers speak to

Jomari, the film exposes its own agenda of *representing* reality rather than merely recording it, despite its very real subjects and subject matter.

The film chooses to include scenes that show us how Jomari's childhood has been directly and indirectly affected and shaped by the war on drugs and the poverty he grows up in, from the first time we see him on screen where he is peering over *tokhang* victim Kian Delos Santos's casket. Jomari is a figure whom many of us have seen before on our screens, from news reports to fictional and nonfictional filmic representation—the slum child who thoroughly disavows "the enduring humanitarian myth of childhood innocence" (Rangan, *Immediations* 25). Rangan criticizes some documentaries for what she calls the aesthetic strategy of "feral innocence" that ultimately exploits and denies the reality of the lives of subaltern children by framing them "as the essence of ideal, unsullied humanity" (*Immediations* 39). In these documentaries, subaltern children are framed to perform the myth of enduring innocence—and therefore prove their humanity—in the midst of the violence around them. In contrast to the strategy of feral innocence, *Aswang* presents an unromanticized picture of Jomari as a self-sufficient child who has had to figure out how to fend for himself, with both parents in jail due to drug use.<sup>17</sup> *Aswang* highlights the normalcy of violence in Jomari's childhood as he fashions toy guns from things found amongst garbage, plays *tokhang* raids and talks about drugs with his pals, and raps about wanting to join the police when he grows up.

In line with the film's haptic aurality, *how* Jomari speaks is perhaps even more important than what he says. Jomari's rambling voice is amusing and moving but sometimes rather dubious—like when he talks about seeing a cobra in the waterways or "finding" wallets with money and not knowing who they belong to. Despite his self-assured words, there is a softness in his voice when he speaks about his mother, a marked change in facial expression when he talks about his plans to visit her in jail. When the filmmakers track him down after a suspenseful search, there is a slight difference in his tone of voice, arguably less playful, especially in comparison to scenes of play earlier in the film.

Jomari's voice, as we near the end of the film, resonates alongside the voice of his mother, whose voice betrays a combination of shame and pride at her son's ability to survive on his own. Her voice breaks



Figure 4. Jomari utters his parting words.

ever so slightly as she speaks about how Jomari slept beside her while she was in prison. A scene towards the end where the camera captures Jomari and his mother's hands, and his father's feet, while they share a humble meal invites haptic listening, encouraging us to feel for this family who are just one among many families living in an era of heightened poverty and fear.

I want to suggest a reading of the last scene where we hear Jomari's voice in *Aswang* as the film's appeal to a critical politics of listening, as well as its resistance to speak on behalf of its subjects. The camera follows mother and son as they scavenge for things to sell from a pile of garbage on a pavement. As they leave, Jomari turns to face the screen and says, "*Okay lang ba po, ma'am?* [Is that okay, ma'am?]" (Figure 4).<sup>18</sup> It's unclear what it is he was asking about, and the film chooses not to provide English subtitles for these last lines. This is the last we hear from Jomari; the camera remains fixed as Jomari walks away barefoot to follow his mother, disappearing into the city at night. While easy to miss, Jomari's last line, with its register of politeness, can also be read as underhandedly addressing the privilege of both the filmmakers and local viewers. If we listen closely, this is the question that the film leaves us with: Are we okay with the state of affairs in this city haunted by aswangs who prey on the living?

In this article, I argued that *Aswang* can productively be read in terms of how it configures an overall

audibility that challenges the Duterte regime's audibility of terror—a regime that has made its presence heard through the haunting sound of *tokhang* operations, gunshots, sirens, and cries of victims for justice. In response to this audibility of terror, the documentary initially draws from the political charge of the particularly local folkloric figure of the aswang to inspire its sonic landscape of urban sounds, music, and voices that are configured in ways that encourage haptic aurality and a politics of listening that sustain the voices of the victims of EJKs. It is a documentary that is moreover symbolic of the growing female voice in the Philippine documentary scene, a voice that finds its way in *Aswang*'s narrative voice-over that encourages reflection, as opposed to didactic storytelling. This voice-over ultimately serves to bolster the voices of the real subjects that the documentary chooses to showcase and, in doing so, amplifies the expressions of humanity, sorrow, rage, and hope of the Filipino urban poor that the Duterte regime continues to silence and deny.

*Aswang* is difficult to watch, and it is equally difficult to listen to. But, as *Aswang*'s final lines in its voice-over suggests, "*But some refuse to be afraid. They choose to stand up to look the monster in the eye.*" This is the lesson in audibility that *Aswang* leaves us with when the film cuts to black and its haunting music bleeds into the credits: In order for us to see, smell, taste, and feel the tragedy happening around us—we must *listen*.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> \*The author would like to thank the following for their generosity: filmmaker Alyx Arumpac for providing a copy of the film and responding to the author's queries, composer Teresa Barrozo for responding to the author's questions about the film's music, and musicologist Áine Mangaoang for her advice. An abridged version of Barrozo's interview is included as appendix in this article.

See "Director Alyx Ayn Arumpac Talks about Her Daang Dokyu Entry 'Aswang.'" *YouTube*. 19 Feb. 2020. Web. 4 Oct. 2020. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6So0k6L\\_xQ&ab\\_channel=OrangeMagazineTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6So0k6L_xQ&ab_channel=OrangeMagazineTV)>

<sup>2</sup> *Aswang* won the prestigious International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam Competition for First Appearance in 2019, among various international and local accolades. See reviews at <https://www.aswangmovie.com/reviews>.

<sup>3</sup> See "Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte in Quotes." *BBC News*. 30 Sept. 2016. Web. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36251094>>

<sup>4</sup> "Rodrigo Duterte: 'I Don't Care about Human Rights.'" *Aljazeera*. Web. 13 Oct. 2020. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/8/8/rodrigo-duterte-i-dont-care-about-human-rights>>

<sup>5</sup> See Ong, *The Poverty of Television: The Mediation of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines*, for an analysis of class-based reception of what he calls mediations of suffering and poverty in Philippine television.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of Barrozo's music for Mendoza films, see Pamintuan.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> Historian Vicente Rafael briefly mentions the aswang in relation to mourning rites in an essay that explores national mourning for the deaths of overseas Filipino workers. He likens the aswang belief to the function of gossip in mourning: "...both are conjured up as ways to organize and so give shape to the thoughts and behaviour of the living when confronted with the dead" (219).

<sup>9</sup> Arumpac also mentions in an interview that *Aswang* was a strategic title for the documentary while they were filming it—nobody would have guessed it was about the war on drugs ("Director Alyx Ayn Arumpac Talks about Her Daang Dokyu Entry 'Aswang.'").

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, a number of subjects who appear in *Aswang* are glimpsed in *The President's Orders* and *The Nightcrawlers*, such as the funeral director and some of the photojournalists. This is not surprising as Arumpac, herself a producer in a broadcast news media organization, followed the coverage of nightly killings with fellow reporters.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Chion (21) cites the radio "acousmètre" as an example of a disembodied voice in film whose aura derives from not being seen.

<sup>12</sup> All quotes mentioned in the article are from the film's official English subtitles.

<sup>13</sup> One of Duterte's infamous rape jokes was about an Australian missionary who was raped and murdered: "I was mad she was raped but she was so beautiful. I thought, the mayor should have been first" ("Philippines Presidential Candidate Attacked over Rape Remarks").

<sup>14</sup> See <https://daangdokyu.ph/> for more about the festival.

<sup>15</sup> While haptic criticism can yield productive ways of reading, I use them with caution. I think some texts lend themselves to haptic readings more than others. As Lúcia Nagib cautions in her work about the ethics of film realism, haptic criticism can potentially slide into "pure subjectivism through which the films themselves are almost entirely eclipsed" (25).

<sup>16</sup> I came across two international reviews that, while overwhelmingly favorable, zero in on Jomari's representation. A review from *Salon* says scenes of children playing on a garbage dump "steers the film into poverty porn" (Kramer), while a review in the *Hollywood Reporter* says the search for Jomari "crosses the line into the manipulative" (Young).

<sup>17</sup> The film's selection of the child figure as one of its characters converses as well with the Duterte administration's anti-crime crusade that does not exclude children from its targets, recalling the president's support for lowering the age of criminal liability from fifteen to nine years old in 2019, which was met with strong opposition from human rights groups (Ellis-Peterson).

<sup>18</sup> Author's translation.

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## Appendix

**Barrozo, Teresa. “Your Music in Aswang.” Abridged email interview. Received by Katrina Macapagal. 20 Jan. 2021. Email.**

*Note: This is an abridged and translated transcript of Barrozo’s 45-minute audio reply to the author’s questions about Aswang. It does not fully capture the nuances of the audio recording, especially in parts where Barrozo describes sounds through humming/singing.*

**Katrina Macapagal:** Alyx Arumpac has told me about how you both agreed that the music shouldn’t be too overly dramatic as the film itself was already so intense. Can you say a bit more about the overall mood/vision you wanted to achieve with the music you composed for the documentary, and how you tried to achieve this through particular sound elements (e.g., tempo, pitch, key, genre)?

**Barrozo:** Yes, Alyx and I agreed that the music shouldn’t be melodramatic. And I’d like to emphasize the reason: this is because we were dealing with real stories. This might seem quite obvious or basic. But all the decisions I made about music revolved around this idea of being sensitive to the material.

I want to emphasize what I mean by real. When I was scoring the film, I was watching raw, unedited footage. I know, of course, that “reality” is a basic documentary concept—but I needed to remind myself constantly that the material was real. The footage of blood on the streets—it’s blood from a real human being who was alive just moments before that footage was captured. So it was really important for me to be sensitive, and to be aware of the material I was working with. I wanted to respect the truth of these stories.

So the keyword for me is “sensitive.” Every decision I made in terms of tempo, pitch, key, genre—where to place music, where to remove music, where there would be no music, where to turn it up or down, and up to what point—all of these revolved around the idea of sensitivity. Because even the slightest change in music can dictate or alter meaning. For example, not putting music over shots of dead bodies was a huge decision. Sometimes, the absence of music is enough to convey the truth. *Aswang* had a lot of intense scenes, like images of bodies or scenes of crying. Instead of scoring those moments, often, I scored the scenes after. It’s something I also do for other films, but only if they work, of course. I’d look for the ordinary scenes that precede or follow intense moments, like maybe someone staring into space or someone walking. If there’s a scene where someone is crying, I’d score the undramatic scenes of, say, the sky or the street that might follow. So if there’s something I want the audience to feel, I won’t place music on the scene that’s already dramatic to begin with. I remember an instance when I inadvertently scored over a dead body in *Aswang*—Alyx called it out and said, “let’s take it out.” So my scoring for *Aswang*, it’s not just about style—it is anchored on sensitivity to the material.

So how did we try to sonify this idea of sensitivity? For example, with tempo, I was aware that the music I intended to produce should be very atmospheric, and that there should be a certain slowness. It shouldn’t sound like thumping or drumming, it should just float slowly, much like the feelings evoked by the camera work and editing in the film. Regarding pitch, I played with the idea that there should be high and low sounds. For low sounds, I used drones mostly to give a heavy feeling. The high notes, I preferred that they had a certain largeness to it, and adding pads helped to achieve this. With key, I’m not really the kind of scorer who thinks sad music has to be in minor, or happy music in major. Genre? Nothing specific, really. Mostly my composition was around the idea of atmospheric music that had some movement at the same time—like a calm sea. And that was my interpretation of being sensitive—not very imposing music, something that just flowed, in fact it shouldn’t even be that loud or it shouldn’t overpower, it should just support the visuals.

**Macapagal:** Can you describe what kind of instruments you used to compose *Aswang’s* music, and why you decided to use those instruments?



**Barrozo:** I was sure I wanted the music to be atmospheric, and I knew I'd be using a lot of pads. I also used wind instruments. For example, in the opening sequence where the title card of *Aswang* appears, I used a wind instrument and placed effects around it. I wanted to make it sound like a howling being (*demonstrates howling noise*). I think the sound of howling can have so much meaning: it could be the aswang based on our folklore, or it could mean the howling of a person dying, or someone crying, or someone asking for help, or a police siren. And it's not just about choosing an instrument, but also, especially for musicians or composers dealing with computer music, there's what we call modulation. For example, a flute could have a fast tempo, but for this flute howl, I wanted the sound to be gliding. So I had to program it to glide. For me, even that basic decision or minor detail matters, the decision to make it slide gradually from low to high or low again. So that's another example of sensitivity for me: the music slowly changing pitch and depth (*dahan-dahang lumalakas, dahan-dahang kumakapal, lumiliit*).

In a lot of films, I don't use musical pads, I actually use static wind, or static drones. So in some parts of the film, you'll notice that the score is just below the scenes, thanks to the sound design. It's not really intended to be heard loudly, but it should be felt. Again, these decisions are anchored on sensitivity. It's the same for time signature—it shouldn't really be heard or obvious—it was more of a free meter. We wanted the music to float freely. If I were to compare it to a ghost, or a soul, the music should just feel like a being floating freely above the scenes. But there are parts in the middle of the film that do have meters.

**Macapagal:** Can you describe the effect that you wanted to achieve in the music that accompanied a) the voice-over scenes in *Aswang* and b) the montage in the cemetery halfway through the film?

**Barrozo:** For the voice-overs—it was very simple. For me, if there were a hierarchy, the music should be below the voice. First, for the practical reason that we want the voice to be heard. Second, which is more important for me, the music shouldn't "move" too much (*hindi dapat magalaw*) or overpower the voice-over because this gets in the way of audience comprehension. It would be messy. These are both practical and creative reasons.

As for the montage in the cemetery, to be honest, I didn't have "grand" ideas for this scene. Visually, it might seem that there was nothing dramatic in those scenes—no hysterical crying, no dead bodies, no funerals—you just see people doing "normal" things. Instead of putting music in the previous scenes which were quite heavy, we thought it would be better to score these seemingly normal scenes to assist the viewers.

**Macapagal:** Would you like to share anything else about the music you made for *Aswang*?

**Barrozo:** I was very particular with how the music shouldn't be too highly melodic, I didn't want to compose sweeping melodies. Sweeping melodies are usually intended for drama, but in *Aswang*, I intended the melody to be slow and subtle (*patago*). The melodic phrases you might be able to grasp in *Aswang*, they're super slow. If these melodies were a gesture, you could say that the music is caressing you (*hinahaplos ka lang ng melody*). I wanted the music to touch the heart of the listeners. With the scenes with these melodic elements, I wanted audiences to feel and remember that the people they are watching are real human beings. We didn't want to force feelings of pity, but somehow, we wanted the music to provide something that viewers could hold on to (*kakapit yung emosyon nila, somehow, dun sa music*). I guess the word is empathy. I wanted the music to invoke empathy through the very slow and long and repetitive melodic phrases—and these were mostly in the moments of the film that are not outrightly dramatic.

One example is the music for *Aswang*'s ending. The music for the ending is still built around the idea of padding. There are light melodic elements, some soft bells, and then there's the howling sound. There's this very subtle, thin thudding sound underneath. The music is meant to complement the visuals here: someone is driving through a tunnel; the viewers only see the road. It's as if the visuals are telling you life goes on; it's about looking forward. What's next? Is there hope? So with this repetitive, rhythmic pattern that you hear at the end, for me, this signifies movement. It pushes the music forward, and it adds a sense of urgency.

It's a cliché, but I really believe in the power of music and sound as carrier of meaning—it's not just background for films; there's meaning in every detail. For music in a documentary like *Aswang*, I really cannot stress enough how important it is to be sensitive and present to the material and to respect the sources, because these are real stories. These are stories that are still happening now.