

Looking into the Eyes of Aswang: Alyx Arumpac's *Aswang* (2019) as a “Gothumentary” of the Philippine War on Drugs

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Abstract

Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang* (2019) navigates an intimate terrain of the Philippine “war on drugs” during Rodrigo Duterte's administration by documenting first-hand narratives from its various affected victims. The film challenges documentary norms as it entangles the reality of extrajudicial killings with the folkloric spectre of the “aswang.” *Aswang's* (2019) narratives seek to temporarily disrupt perceptions of reality and expose the underbelly of Duterte's anti-drug campaign, as spearheaded by the program “Oplan Tokhang,” within the dark urban spaces of Manila. By employing horror as an allegorical medium, *Aswang* (2019) blurs the boundaries between reality and folklore, which urges its viewers to engage in a more interpretive cinematic encounter. It also augments the depiction of its victims' actual harrowing experiences impacted by state-sanctioned violence through the cinematic instillation of fear and radical hope through visual, thematic, and symbolic elements.

Keywords

Gothumentary – documentary – aswang – Duterte – gothic – Philippines – Oplan Tokhang – war on drugs

1 Introduction

Alyx Ayn Arumpac's documentary *Aswang* (2019) received extensive praise for its comprehensive examination of the Philippine "war on drugs" during the post-2016 period when Rodrigo Roa Duterte assumed the presidency. Duterte secured his position as the 16th president of the Philippine Republic with the backing of more than 16 million voters, or 39.01% of the total votes (Cerdeña 2016). Duterte attributed drug dealing and drug addiction as the "major obstacles" to the Philippines' socio-economic problems. Addressing these "problems" through the eradication of illegal drugs was one of Duterte's central campaign platforms, which "[...] he'd implemented earlier in his political career as the mayor of the city of Davao" (Gershman 2016; Human Rights Watch 2010). This solution appealed to voters who felt frustrated by the inability of the previous administrations to address crime and drugs (Simangan 1).

In 2019, the backdrop for subsequent legislative development that supported his anti-drug campaign platform was set. The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2019 was signed under his administration. On the one hand, this act granted a council of Philippine government officials the authority to apprehend individuals suspected of being "terrorists." On the other, it introduced concerns about potential abuse and intimidation due to the vagueness surrounding what defines "terrorism." One report considered Duterte's initial year as a Philippine president as a "violent period" where a "war" against drugs was waged and suspected drug sellers were prosecuted. It claimed over 30,000 lives, including women and children (Coronel et al. 2019), with one description comparing it to a "genocide of the poor" (Balce et al.) since most of its "casualties" were found to have been living in depressed urban areas. This contentious war was conducted through an operation called Tokhang, and Oplan Tokhang, loosely explained as visiting the residences of suspected drug users. Both terms became an integral part of the Philippine lexicon under Duterte's administration. Tokhang is a combination of the Bisayan words "toktok" (to knock) and "hangyo" (to plead) (Macapagal 2021, 39). This operation involved operatives "knocking" at the doors of suspects and "pleading" with them to stop engaging in illegal drug activities (Dela Rosa 2016). The national drug policy adopted a dual-pronged approach in enacting this operation, addressing both drug supply and demand through a strategy termed "Double Barrel" (Dela Rosa, 2016). The plan to eliminate drug supply, named "Project HVT" (High-Value Targets), was concentrated on targeting drug trafficking and supply across various levels, including local cities, provinces, and international locations. Concurrently, this "punitive drug policy" as an effort to curb drug demand was

carried out through Project “Tokhang,” to purge local communities (referred to as *barangay*) from the illicit activities of drug use and sale (Hunt 11).

Another review detailed a recurrent pattern that surfaced in eerily identical police reports across these cases: individuals met their demise in a “neutralization” because they fought back (*nanlaban*) with a gun. The gun was consistently the same rusty .38 caliber pistol and was discovered alongside packets of methamphetamine (*shabu*) near their lifeless bodies. In instances where children and innocent people perished during operations, the Philippine National Police (PNP) deemed them “collateral damage.” Furthermore, under Duterte’s “encouragement,” countless vigilante killings occurred, with some falling prey to unidentified riding-in-tandem assailants. In contrast, others ended up as lifeless figures wrapped in duct tape, mutilated or adorned with a piece of cardboard inscribed with the words, “Pusher ako, huwag tularan” (I am a drug pusher, do not emulate) (Mendizabal 2020). As a result, this Philippine “war on drugs,” through “Oplan Tokhang,” caught the attention of international audiences through local and international news due to the circulation of brutal images of its aftermath (e.g., Berehulak 2016; Lerma 2016), which mostly captured the extremely inhuman ways that befell its victims who “allegedly fought back” the enforcers. Beyond pictures, Jude Sabio, a Filipino lawyer, filed a 77-page complaint at the International Criminal Court (Smeallie 2019) against Duterte and 11 Philippine officials for mass murder and crimes against humanity (Holmes 2017). These harrowing events – Oplan Tokhang, “Double Barrel,” “Project HVT,” “collateral damage,” and Anti-terror Law – have directly influenced a cinematic resurfacing of a dark Philippine folkloric creature called “*aswang*” as an embodiment of evil that shadows the Philippine “war on drugs.” Titled after the creature it explores, the documentary *Aswang* (2019) debuted at esteemed international documentary film festivals (IMDb 2023). Before its 2021 premiere in the Philippines, it garnered acclaim, securing fourteen prestigious awards and earning nominations for eight grand prizes. With a title evocatively drawn from the vampiric shapeshifter of traditional Filipino folklore, *Aswang* (2019) harnesses the symbolic potency of this folkloric creature as a recurring metaphor (Torralla 1) in creatively portraying Duterte and his police “accomplices” as evil *aswang* which have shapeshifted into human form.

The documentary provides a compelling rumination on urban life in the Philippines under the Duterte administration from the perspectives of two individuals: Jomari, a friend of a deceased 17-year-old victim of the “war on drugs” named Kian Delos Santos (BBC News 2018; Lecaros 2020), and Br. Jun, a priest and photojournalist actively involved in assisting families impacted by the government’s aggressive “war on drugs” within the urban poor communities. Br. Jun gathers stories “[...] not inside the church’s confessional but beyond

church walls, in the homes of his parishioners, in the streets of the city, in the funeral parlors, in whispers in the dead of night” (Balce et al. 2020). He patiently awaits calls or messages notifying him of Tokhang incidents scattered across the various corners of Manila. Distinguished by his commitment as a Redemptorist Brother, he goes beyond the conventional approach, engaging in conversations with the families of the deceased not merely to gather information but also to provide solace. He was notably reserved in his speech throughout the documentary. Br. Jun assumes the role of listener. His countenance reflects a genuine display of concern and empathy, manifested through furrowed brows, attesting to the emotional weight he carries in the face of the grim circumstances surrounding the Tokhang killings.

One analysis mentioned that this documentary utilizes horror as “[...] an allegorical language to narrate state violence” (Balce et al. 2020), while another situates the documentary in the tradition of depicting “[...] drug war among the urban poor” by bringing Arumpac’s “[...] camera directly to the scenes of actual crimes to tell the grim aftermath among the families left behind” (Hawson 2020). Instead of focusing on the war on drugs itself, critiques of the documentary *Aswang* (2019) tend to overlook its innovative use of horror. The film transcends a simple portrayal of the conflict and employs allegorical elements of horror to explore the human experience within this brutal reality. Hence, this paper seeks to examine how the documentary *Aswang* (2019) managed to capture this authentic criminal event called the war on drugs within a mode that invites a darker yet more subjective approach to its storytelling which is not typically associated with a traditional locus of documentary (p. iii). It reconfigures *Aswang* (2019) as a kind of “gothumentary,” a term coined by Kristopher Karl Woofter in his 2016 doctoral thesis since it articulates a “[...] critical turn in the documentary” (97) that daringly challenges the conventional demarcations between documentary, avant-garde, and horror cinema (5–6).

2 *Aswang* (2019) as a Gothumentary

Aswang (2019) utilizes a distinctive Filipino aswang mythology and incorporates a “dark, magical realism,” according to Zinampan (2020). Blending fictional horror tropes and techniques that highlight actual events emphasizes the limitations of documentary representations of its subjects and disrupts the expected boundaries of each genre. Kristopher Karl Woofter (2016) sees this rupture as the birth of an experimental narrative form that could broaden discussions on the explicit focus of documentary traditions. This expansion occurs through “[...] their often-straightforward introduction of fictional Gothic-horror conventions

and themes as a way of approaching the historical world” (Woofter 2016, 97). In this context, *Aswang* (2019) could be located and analyzed using “gothumentary” as a mode that surpasses traditional documentary genre expectations to examine its portrayal of the subjects of the “war on drugs” further.

This strategy of using the folkloric creature aswang to strike fear in the hearts of Filipinos is not new. Sixteenth-century Spanish missionaries in the Philippines utilized this move to eliminate barriers to converting the population still practicing various rituals of the old animistic religion by eradicating female shamans in a concerted effort (Llana 301). Maximo Ramos (1969) explores the “aswang concept” within Philippine folklore while emphasizing its prevalence among Tagalog, Bikol, and Visayan groups. The term encapsulates characteristics associated with five mythical beings aligned with specific creatures from European traditions: a blood-sucking vampire, a self-segmenting viscera sucker, a man-eating weredog, a vindictive witch, and a carrion-eating ghoul (Ramos 1969, 238). The aswang is described as indiscriminate in its choice of victims, often targeting members of its own family, thereby deviating from the substantial kin obligations typical in Filipino culture (Llana 2009, 302). As Llana elucidated, these creatures symbolize the “repudiation of God’s power” (2009, 302), signifying a complete reversal of the role of the “balyana,” traditionally a priestess from Bikol who employs her powers for healing and blessing. Using a hollow tubular tongue, elongated to thread-like thinness, when necessary, the aswang extracts fetuses from the womb or incises a pregnant woman’s belly with long fingernails to remove the infant. This macabre image is a striking inversion of the balyana’s role as a healer and midwife (Llana 2009, 302). Just like how the concept of aswang was utilized by the Spanish missionaries during the sixteenth-century colonial period in the Philippines, *Aswang* (2019) used the imaginary of the aswang to accomplish one of its objectives: to strike fear in the hearts of its viewers.

Significantly, in the late 1940s (Lecaros 2020), during the Magsaysay presidency, U.S. Colonel Edward Lansdale gained notoriety for exploiting the aswang legend as a tool for psychological warfare against the “Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon” (Hukbalahap), a predominantly peasant army opposing U.S. intervention after the Japanese defeat in World War II. Under this strategy, the corpses of captured insurgents were strategically arranged to simulate aswang attacks, instilling fear among the “rebels” (Lim 1997, 81). Essentially, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) strategically employed folklore against the Huk and the Philippines. These lifeless bodies were then strategically positioned along roadsides for public viewing, orchestrating a dreadful display that rapidly eroded sympathy and support for the Huks, as people became apprehensive about the perceived threat of the aswang reaching them.

Aside from utilizing these evil creatures and grotesque imagery of dead bodies in *Aswang* (2019), several criteria describe “gothumentary” as a “[...] critical turn in the documentary” (Woofter 2016, 97) against the configurations set in the conventional documentary. First, gothumentary is a conceptual space where gothic-realist strategies are used in documentary representation (97) to challenge the conventional demarcations between avant-garde, horror cinema, and documentary (5–6). These conventions of documentary allude to how the documentary subjects are portrayed straightforwardly. As John Grierson envisioned in the 1930s, documentaries aim to depict actual events and situations, or a “creative treatment of actuality” (Nichols 2010, 6) since they emphasize factual accuracy and rationality, or a “higher degree of realism” (Robbins and Woofter 2012, 8). However, fiction films also touch upon real-world issues. Nichols, to build on Grierson’s idea, further qualified that documentaries are “[...] about something that happened” (Nichols 2010, 7), presenting known facts directly without introducing new, unverifiable elements, unlike the treatment of fictional narratives that often function as allegories. They directly reference the historical world, focusing on real people “[...] who do not play or perform roles” (Nichols 2010, 8) but “draw on prior experience and habits to be themselves in the face of the camera” (8). The folkloric creature aswang is not the straightforward, realist subject of *Aswang* (2019). This diverges from the approach of documentaries like the *Aswang Phenomenon* (2016) of Jordan Clark and Cheryl Anne Del Rosario, which aimed at “... discovering where manifestations of the creature came from and how they evolved and embedded themselves in Filipino society” (Aswang Project 2011) in a more sociological and anthropological sense.

Second, it brings Gothic strategies (e.g., tropes and elements) toward the conventionally oriented documentary framework to push the limits of “what we can know about the historical world” (Woofter 2016, 97). For Nichols, Grierson’s “creative treatment of actuality,” which situates storytelling within the term “treatment,” shall only qualify as a documentary by meeting a specific criterion “[...] akin to the criteria of factual accuracy and interpretative coherence that governs history writing” (12). He clarifies that the binary oppositions in treating documentary as distinct from fiction are “[...] not a black-and-white division” (12) since the distinction of documentary from fiction essentially rests on the degree to which the story corresponds to the actual events and people (12). However, the abovementioned qualifications are deferred without an actual marker that could be utilized in separating a documentary from fiction since “[...] documentaries adopt no fixed inventory of techniques, address no one sets of issues, display no single set of forms or styles” (15). Gothumentary addresses these challenges by providing a mode where the “objective” realist and direct portrayal of documentary subjects become intricately interwoven

with more fictional elements that are particularly related to gothic elements. This approach challenges established representations and compels spectators to reflect on the boundaries of knowledge (Woofter 2016, 112).

Third, these Gothic strategies include Gothic's "unsettling attributes, with its eerie, uncanny, and macabre qualities" (Woofter 2016, 82) in generating an undercurrent of tension and unease by broadening the horizons of documentary storytelling. Similar to numerous Gothic-horror narratives in fiction, the perspective of the gothumentary often revolves around acts of witnessing and subsequent efforts to document traumatic events or situations that defy logic or deviate from the norm, which in particular, centers on the potentially disturbing subject matters of "murder, suicide, physical and mental disintegration, social collapse, extreme violence and abuse, cryptic texts, diseases of the collective psyche, enigmatic or absent persons" (Woofter 2016, 99), which are present in *Aswang* (2019). The entanglement of pleasure and dread in gothumentary does not need to stem from narrative coherence and believability since it can emerge from the reader's contemplation of the authenticity and objectivity inherent in recounting events (Woofter 2016, 102).

In addition, gothumentaries significantly emphasize parallels between documentary and horror epistemologies (Woofter 2016, 97). They explore the convergence of these approaches into an investigative mode that recognizes the documentary spectator's desire for sensation and spectacle as a means of accessing reality, "[...] where knowledge comes through both interpretation and feeling and is both desired and dreaded" (Woofter 2016, 97). The creature aswang transcends its folkloric origins, becoming more than a tool to evoke negative emotions such as "[...] hilakbot (sudden fear), gulantang (panicked state), gimbal (disturbed state), takot (fearful state), balisa (anxious state), pangamba (apprehensive state), sindak (dreadful state), bagabag (restless state), gulat (shocked state), and pagkabahala (worried state)" (Balce et al. 2020). It serves as a cautionary tale meant to frighten and enforce social mores and as a reconfigured concept within the documentary.

Aswang (2019) meets the criteria of being considered a "gothumentary" since it incorporates dark, gothic, fictional elements converging with a specific focus on the disturbing objective events that happened in a highly modernized, urban environment serving as a canvas for documenting the "war on drugs." It also attempts to blur the reality of aswang as malevolent shapeshifters now residing in various areas influenced by "[...] uneven economic development, gentrification, migration, technological shifts, and globalization" (Balce et al. 2020). This combination of the straightforward depiction of the subjects of the documentary through a Gothic mode is also evident in *Aswang's* (2019) use of montage, which "[...] 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" (Macapagal 2021, 40).

Arumpac portrays aswang not merely as a folkloric evil creature confined to fictional tales, mythical times, and rural settings but as a dynamic entity that transcends these limitations through its shapeshifting capabilities. The presence of the creature aswang, akin to a spectral trace, defies categorization and becomes seamlessly woven into the fabric of the film, despite the absence of a tangible, corporeal form. *Aswang* (2019) shows a series of images where aswang, the folkloric creature, has been used as a framing device to set the mood and place the traces of aswang within the entire documentary through a poetic narrative:

For as long as the city has existed a creature has roamed the land. They call it aswang. A shapeshifter that preys on humans. It kills anyone who dares to look back. And one must never look. These days, the myths and old tales seem to have come to life.

Through this narrative, the documentary provides a space for viewers to reflect on the disruption within the folk stories of the aswang as an evil shapeshifter, surpassing fiction's boundaries toward the realm of urban Manila, which leads to the gothumentary's primary objective that moves beyond the goal of simply clarifying meaning (disambiguation) and instead emphasizes the importance of ongoing moments of uncertainty (hesitation). By highlighting this hesitation, the author emphasizes the existence of multiple interpretations (polysemy) and the possibility of various perspectives being expressed (plurality of enunciation). This hesitation manifests throughout the transgressions portrayed through the creature "aswang," taking on a role articulating its shapeshifting nature and not having its actual material body. The creature materializes through the accentuation of its absence, becoming present despite its physical void in the documentary. Far from emptiness, this physical void projects a substantial presence, an entity looming over the narrative with conspicuous invisibility. The elusive nature of the aswang is a metaphorical cornerstone in the *Aswang* (2019), drawing parallels to the intangible and elusive essence of concealed truths that the documentary aims to uncover.

3 Gothumentary Strategies in *Aswang* (2019)

3.1 *The Unlawful Imprisonment*

In *Aswang* (2019), themes such as unlawful imprisonment are indicative of a broader systemic pattern of violence and abuse perpetrated by those

authorized by the state to inflict “punishment.” The documentary portrays how a traumatic experience is being recounted by one of the victims with the help of an incomplete, ambiguous visual illustration. It features an interview with an anonymous woman who had information about over twelve unlawfully detained individuals (Kine 2017; Madarang 2020) apprehended during Oplan Tokhang. The illumination from the camera lights exposes the concealed cell, no broader than a corridor, devoid of windows, light sources, or ventilation, and occupied by about thirty individuals (Gangca 2020). Subsequent media interviews disclose that these people were forcibly taken and held captive for an entire week without any formal charges or police documentation. Their harrowing ordeal involved sleeping amidst their waste and enduring torture and electrocution at the hands of law enforcement officers. Additionally, they were coerced into paying sums to the Philippine National Police (PNP) with the promise of release. In one of her accounts, an unnamed imprisoned woman provides specific details about the incidents that happened when undercover policemen took her away:

There was a lot of them. The guys were in civilian clothing. There were around five motorcycles. They didn't say anything. They just took me. They brought me to the back of Precinct One. It was like a cabinet. It had plates at the bottom. On top it had books. Then they told me to go inside. I wondered where because I was standing between a wall and a cabinet. When he removed the small piece of metal, I smelled it immediately.

This unlawful imprisonment was foregrounded by a disembodied female voice that functions as a narrator who shows the disinterest of people in listening to those who reappeared. She mentions: “Disappearances have become common. However, still, no one listens to the ones that manage to return.” According to Balce, Devilles, and Lopez (2020), this disembodied female voice belongs to a “*diwata*,” a guardian spirit in Filipino folklore. Arumpac’s *diwata*, rooted in a long-standing tradition, unveils the truth about a monstrous force oppressing the Filipino people. She forewarns of challenging days ahead, emphasizing that the ongoing battle against these “monsters” is just the beginning, a warning of the people’s struggle in the future. However, this voice might not be a *diwata* but a different entity or a collective voice that makes more sense in providing a spectral guidance that is rooted with Earthly understanding – the soul, or souls, of our virtuous ancestors who remain caring for the people they left behind. This connection arises from the incorporation of a significant artifact in the Philippines called the “*Manunggul Jar*.” This burial jar, from a Neolithic burial site in Palawan, Philippines, features two prominent figures atop it,

symbolizing the soul's passage to the afterlife. The foremost figure represents the departed man, while the figure behind holds a steering paddle, guiding the boat and the man's soul toward the realm beyond, just like how the opening scene of *Aswang* (2019) reveals a man rowing a boat while being accompanied with a disembodied voice who narrates the rise of aswang in urban spaces. A history of this jar illustrates that epics across the Philippines depict the passage of souls to the afterlife, navigating bodies of water. According to ancestral beliefs, an individual comprises the physical body, the life force, referred to as "ginhawa," and the soul, known as "kaluluwa" (Chua 2012). Following death, the kaluluwa can return to Earth, residing in nature to guide their descendants. The conception of the soul and its association with benevolent and merciful individuals emphasized the belief that the soul imparts life, intellect, and volition (Chua 2012). In contrast, in the case of *Aswang* (2019), it imparts a truthful impression and attention to events that must be changed. *Aswang's* (2019) depiction invites the viewers to understand this gothumentary's attempt to render and navigate a silenced significant human experience within the drug war with an ancestral disembodied voice who cannot do anything but observe the crimes committed by their descendants.

The combination of folkloric elements (e.g., disembodied virtuous and central voice) and distressing elements (e.g., entrapment of over twelve individuals within a dimly lit and confined area) forms a narrative that heightens the themes of injustice, despair, and the enduring consequences of power imbalances associated with the police's misuse of authority against vulnerable and urban poor communities. The use of incarceration as a means of unlawful control echoes the oppressive environments of the drug war, emphasizing the victim's stark confinement in foreboding spaces. It mirrors the bleakness and the sense of entrapment emblematic of the gothic genre. This visual and thematic parallel enhances the emotional impact of the "gothumentary," immersing viewers in a harrowing and hauntingly familiar (e.g., a bookcase, a prison, a cramped hidden space). By emphasizing the lives affected by these incarcerations, the "gothumentary" combines its dark aesthetic with a commitment to revealing these truths obscured from the eyes of the public. These cases are depicted as stark contrasts to the narratives presented in national news, which often depict the victims as drug-related casualties, as mere statistics. The addition of a testimony from a person ensnared in a harrowing incident of police abduction introduces another layer of complexity to the intricately woven narratives of incarceration and extrajudicial punishments. It embraces subjectivity as a crucial element in their narratives (74), emphasizing a move towards a more compassionate portrayal instead of guiding viewers towards the voyeuristic tendencies often

associated with the Gothic-horror genre and its tendency to reduce victims to mere statistics.

3.2 *Burning the Aswang President*

Aswang (2019) also utilizes the folkloric creature aswang as a metaphor for the systemic violence caused by President Duterte's anti-drug campaign. A significant embodiment of this representation transpires during a protest against the war on drugs. Br. Jun participates in a demonstration against the extrajudicial killings carried out under Oplan Tokhang in the context of the "war on drugs." The camera zooms in and captures the march of the protesters with a fluidity that mirrors the undulating motion of a continuous, unstoppable wave.

Protesters hold various illustrations to condemn the extrajudicial killings. One group holds a sign that mimics a crosshair from a sniper telescope, aiming at the pictures of faces of deceased victims on the left half while also featuring their faces on the open portion on the right. Another group holds placards that denounce Duterte as a "mamamatay tao" (murderer) and a "dictator" (dictator). Families of the deceased present various testimonies on stage, questioning the absence of justice for impoverished individuals exclusively targeted in the "war on drugs." They specifically mention that the police officers responsible for their sons' deaths faced no consequences and were merely "[...] removed from office." Some attendees believed that Duterte's actions escalated following a visit from former U.S. President Donald Trump. Notably, a priest, holding a photograph of a tokhang victim, takes a prominent position onstage, expressing fearlessness towards Duterte, "Digong, hindi kami takot sa iyo!" (Duterte, we are not afraid of you), and directly accusing him of orchestrating these killings, "We accuse you of these killings." Subsequently, the camera transitions to a specific group of protesters, distinguished by their collective appearance. Each member dons a makeshift mask crafted from white handkerchiefs adorned with hand-drawn faces and multiple teardrops, crying out for "hustisya" (justice).

Following the initial phase of the protest, the narrative turns to the evening preparations and the subsequent burning of an effigy depicting Duterte as an "aswang," reminiscent of a scene where a condemned witch is bound and set ablaze on a stake in public condemnation. The effigy initially depicts a large caricature face of Duterte in human form. Then, a second layer of the effigy showcases a dramatic effect of Duterte metamorphosing into an "aswang." His eyes are illuminated by light bulbs that intensify the portrayal of his aswang form during the evening protest. This effigy serves as a conduit for collective apprehension by casting Duterte as an aswang. The aswang's shapeshifting

ability and predatory nature align with the manipulation and abuse of political power, transforming the effigy into a shared symbol of collective unease. It echoes Woofter's concept of the "monstrous" since the film depicts aswang as a "monster" capable of assuming the guise of a Philippine president and vice versa. This representation emphasizes the term "monstrous" as a figurative depiction and a conceptual phenomenon akin to a specter or an uncanny double. It challenges conventional understanding, persisting beyond definable and rational boundaries, thereby resisting the "positivist drive" by evoking terror and deploying gothic tropes (Robbins and Woofter 2012, 9). This resistance serves as a mechanism for fostering a "critical distance" between the viewers and the documentary as an emerging basis for "documentary realism" (10). *Aswang* (2019) navigates factual constraints, managing to evoke "emotional exorcism" without succumbing to sentimentality or overlooking the inherent raw brutality in the narrative, which crafts a vital, unadulterated documentation for these challenging times (De Mesa 2020).

Radically confronting the perceived monstrous nature of political authority through appropriating the imaginary of "aswang," to use Felicidad "Bliss" Cua Lim's (1977) phrase, "[...] [has] carried an undeniable political charge" (82). In *Aswang* (2019), burning the aswang effigy carries an inherently political and cinematic essence. It generates a visual spectacle, juxtaposing the darkness of the night with the intense flames of the burning effigy, effectively evoking fear on emotional and political planes. Both actions signify society's endeavor to symbolically confront and eradicate perceived malevolence through a dramatic and public show of force, as opposed to adhering to the Catholic practice of dispelling such creatures through the use of holy water, a crucifix, and prayer. In this context, the act of burning emerges as a radical symbol of resistance, serving as a "fiery" metaphor in contrast to the preceding series of events, characterized by the "peaceful" act of praying and bowing down to an invisible force.

4 Conclusion

Aswang (2019) serves as a nightmarish reflection of urban life, presenting a stark portrayal of the war on drugs that diverges from conventional documentary approaches to documenting victims' experiences. The individuals and families impacted by the recurrent assaults of this elusive yet identifiable folkloric creature confront the unsettling reality of living in Manila, where "[...] the darkness unravels bodies / sprawled face down on the streets." The film transcends a simple representation of the president as an aswang within an

effigy, bridging folklore and socio-political commentary. This bridging of two realms of representation aligns with the essence of a gothumentary in blurring epistemic boundaries and portraying Duterte as both a symbolic and tangible manifestation of the “aswang.”

By reinterpreting a familiar folk creature within the context of a contemporary criminal event that is set in the liminal space provided by a gothumentary, *Aswang* (2019) encourages viewers to actively engage in inquiry and critically examine the representation of the historical world, blending “interpretation and feeling” (Woofter 2016, 98). *Aswang* (2019), as a gothumentary, aims to expose disruptions in rational conversations, posing alternative inquiries about reality and knowledge. It emphasizes the significance of gaps and negations over the disclosures and truths emphasized by positivism (Robbins and Woofter 2012, 10). It goes beyond exploring traditional Gothic themes in documentaries concerned with portraying knowledge as monstrous, particularly when it proves elusive. In addition to *Aswang’s* (2019) focus on inherently monstrous subjects like serial killers, traumatic events, or the paranormal, it also directs attention to the inherent monstrosity in subject matters not conventionally seen as monstrous, which includes a trusted institution like the police force.

Gothumentary conveys a new approach to thinking about documentary filmmaking, aiming to rekindle elements like desire, dread, pleasure, and active viewership. It actively engages viewers in the construction of the documentary text and revitalizes avant-garde possibilities within the genre. Gothumentary reintegrates the pleasures of textual exploration not merely as a form of “erotics” but as an essential component of the meaning-making process that encourages a critical understanding of the historical world by immersing viewers in it emotionally (Robbins and Woofter 2012, 9). Amid the ongoing slaughter of the poor and psychological warfare by the Duterte regime, the film verbalizes its call to action before the credits roll:

When they say there’s a monster, what they really want to say is “be afraid.” This city, chosen to be the dumpsite of the dead, will devour you as fear devours courage. But there are still those who are not afraid and are able to look the monster in the eye. This is where it begins.

In Filipino folklore, looking into the eyes of an aswang holds cultural significance as a means of detecting its true nature. The belief is that the eyes of an aswang reveal its malevolent identity and supernatural essence since the reflection of its beholder is vertically reversed. This cultural motif reinforces the idea that appearances can be deceiving, and the eyes serve as a gateway to discern the true identity of this folkloric creature. The film urges a

rumination and reassessment of the war on drugs by immersing the audience in a space of disconcerting proximity to both the deceased and the living by looking back directly at the eyes of these evil creatures, both folkloric and real. Gothumentary enables a critical mode that articulates these experimental attempts to fuse the folkloric and the reality of the victims' diverse positions as subjects of *Aswang* (2019) while reminding us of "[...] what we really want to know about the past and about how the past persists in the present" (Robbins and Woofter 2012, 7).

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