

Article

Filming Biblical Interpretations from the Ground: Anti-Empire Matthean Interpretations in *Huwag Kang Papatay* (2017) and the Philippine “Drug War”

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Abstract: Ditsi Carolino’s “Huwag Kang Papatay” (Thou Shall Not Kill, 2017) is an unconventional Jesus film. As a documentary, it presents the problems and the responses by members of the Roman Catholic Church in Metro Manila to the so-called “War on Drugs” (commonly known as *Tokhang*) of the Duterte government that resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killing (EJK) victims. From a biblical lens, this paper analyzes examples of grassroots recontextualizing interpretations of select Matthean passages like (1) Mt 6:9–13, the Lord’s Prayer, in the context of praying for an extrajudicial killing victim; (2) Mt 2:1–18, a street theater adaptation showing the massacre of the innocents, representing the beginning of the EJKs; and (3) Mt 27:27–50, a street theater adaptation of Jesus’ passion recontextualized in the plight of the victimized drug personalities. These episodes are examined using insights from biblical narrative criticism, performance criticism, empire studies, ritual studies and a liberationist approaches. The paper concludes that biblical interpretations from the ground in this documentary film demonstrate Matthew’s anti-empire message by recontextualizing Jesus’s story in the context of extrajudicial killings to advocate for political dialogue and action-response against human rights violations and development issues caused by the EJKs.

Keywords: Mt 2:1–18; Mt 6:9–13; Mt 27:27–50; Lord’s Prayer; passion narrative; Roman Empire; crucifixion; Philippine “Drug War”; extrajudicial killing (EJK); *Tokhang*



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1. Introduction

Ditsi Carolino’s nearly 13-minute documentary *Huwag Kang Papatay* (Thou Shall Not Kill, Carolino 2017) exemplifies a non-Jesus but ‘almost’ Jesus film. It is not a commercial film that features a conventional retelling of Jesus’ life story. Instead, it is a documentary film that tells of the challenge to the Roman Catholic Church in the early months of the so-called “War on Drugs” or “Drug War”, which has resulted in thousands of extrajudicially killed drug personalities during the administration of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (See Cornelio and Medina 2019; Maboloc 2022; Johnson and Fernquest 2018). The film’s primary purpose as a documentary is to document the extrajudicial killings (henceforth, EJK) linked to the “Drug War” and to serve as a teaching tool that sparks theological discussion of the Catholic Social Teachings on issues like this. It was a flagship program of the populist Duterte government that began in July 2016. The knock (*katok*) and plead (*hangyo*) operation, commonly referred to as *Tokhang*, where police officers knock on the doors of suspected drug users or pushers to make them surrender, resulted in the EJKs of thousands of alleged drug personalities, both drug users and pushers.

According to the Ateneo Policy Center, it is not easy to have an exact count of those who were killed from July 2016, when Duterte started his term until his presidency ended in June 2022. The following overview is gathered from the Ateneo Policy Center’s Drug Archive, which was able to gather about “5021 drug-related deaths from news reports between 10 May 2016 and September 29, 2017.” (See Ateneo Policy Center 2023). “The police say they have killed some 4300 in ‘legitimate’ police operations; in addition, there

are over 22,000 ‘homicides under investigation’ that may be linked to drugs.” (See [Ateneo Policy Center 2023](#)). In profiling the EJK victims, most were low-level drug suspects, urban poor men and family breadwinners working as “tricycle drivers, construction workers, vendors, farmers, jeepney barkers, garbage collectors or were unemployed.” (See [Ateneo Policy Center 2023](#)). Forty percent of the killings happened in Metro Manila, and the rest were from the provinces, especially in Bulacan (See [Ateneo Policy Center 2023](#)). Most of the victims were found dead on the streets (27%), in or around private residences such as their own homes (24%), and some were killed or found dead inside a vehicle (9%) (See [Ateneo Policy Center 2023](#)).

The Drug Archive data also indicates that the great majority of the EJK victims (2753 or 55%) were killed by police officers during their operations and were usually described as “*nanlaban*” or those who fought back the police and thus were killed. However, a large percentage was perpetrated by mostly unknown, masked or hooded assailants (1907 or 38%), while about 355 or 7% were found dead by gunshot or stab wounds and accompanied by handwritten cardboard signs that identify them as drug pushers who must not be emulated (See [Ateneo Policy Center 2023](#)). While the EJK victims were mostly poor, male and breadwinners of their families, some women and children were also victims (See [Conde 2019](#)). The drug-related killings continued during the whole term of Duterte. The killings even increased by 50% under the COVID-19 lockdown, according to a Human Rights Watch report in September 2020 (See [Conde 2020](#)).

The so-called “Drug War” killings posed a very contentious challenge to the Filipinos, including among the members of faith communities such as the Roman Catholic Church. Many openly or quietly endorsed *Tokhang*, following their strong support of Duterte and his framing of drug addiction through the lens of criminality and morality politics, while some openly and covertly resisted it, including the official stance of the Roman Catholic Church, on the grounds of compassion, understanding (See [Cornelio and Medina 2019](#); [Cornelio and Lasco 2020](#); [Mutiarin et al. 2020](#)), human dignity and human rights (See [Boehringer 2017](#); [Conde 2020](#); [Maboloc 2022](#)). *Huwag Kang Papatay* is a documentary that demonstrates and articulates the need to question and to stop the EJKs based on the human dignity and human rights of the victims and the families they left behind, whose lives were dramatically changed by the trauma of the killing, and the larger, longer-lasting negative impact that also endangered the basic survival of their families. Thus, *Huwag Kang Papatay* is a non-traditional Jesus movie from this context. However, in upholding compassion, understanding, human dignity and human rights, the film includes recontextualized interpretations of Jesus’ story found in Mt 2:1–18, Mt 6:9–13, and Mt 27:27–50, with anti-empire sentiments through a media flow that moves from prayers and street theater presentations against the EJKs to a documentary that hopefully expands the traditional understanding of a Jesus film.

2. A Non-Jesus Film: *Huwag Kang Papatay* as a Documentary Film

As stated above, *Huwag Kang Papatay* is a non-Jesus film. It does not conventionally include a sole protagonist taking the role of Jesus with his followers, nor does it follow the plot from his birth to his death and resurrection. The features below further demonstrate that it is more of a documentary film.

2.1. Basic Characteristics as a Documentary

According to Sherry B. Ortner, “If we accept that truth in documentary is always constructed, even while it remains in some sense true, then we must begin by looking at the strategies of that construction.” ([Ortner 2023](#), p. 33). She underlines that documentaries tend to have a “very unadorned style of representation.” ([Ortner 2023](#), p. 36). *Huwag Kang Papatay* uses camera footage from the events in their stark rawness from the perspective of the journalists covering the extrajudicial killings, the heart-breaking narrative of the surviving families within the context of their sharing in a parish gathering, and the unveiled threats of killing that Duterte repeatedly made amidst the full-blown “Drug War.” While

the street theater used some basic costumes for the stories in recontextualizing the infancy and the passion narratives, the film records them without additional adornment.

Ortner also explains that documentary films are “rigorously organized around a central theme, and they develop an argument through this rigorous organization.” (Ortner 2023, p. 37). Carolino’s and Llanes’ scriptwriting and redaction of the flow of the documentary was very tight, as the detailed description of the plot below will show. Carolino does not include any other words that narrate the unfolding of events. The careful curation of the combination of footage showing the cause (Duterte’s threat of killing the drug addicts, pushers and drug lords) and effects (the close-ups and long shots showing the EJK victims, the impact of the killing on their families and the people’s growing resistance to the murder of the alleged drug personalities) are arranged in ways that evoke the feelings of being in the midst of the action, confronting one on the need to respond and the impossibility of being a fence-sitter.

For Ortner, documentaries also use statistics to counterbalance personal narratives and provide objective support. She explains, “In every film, we see individuals recounting their personal experiences or expressing their expert opinions, or in other ways speaking from their own individual point of view.” (Ortner 2023, p. 37). Carolino’s compilation of the individual witness and communal response to the killings gives the statistics the faces behind the numbers. Nonetheless, she argues that “virtually every film shows statistics on the screen in relation to what is being said, so that we know these individuals are not random examples or unique cases but instead represent much larger patterns.” (Ortner 2023, p. 37). Carolino’s film does not provide this. Instead, the characters themselves provide the statistics, even if some are flawed. From the opening of the film, Carolino provides the audience with Duterte’s working assumption of the statistics of Filipino drug personalities and pegs the people with drug addiction at 3,000,000 in the opening scene to justify the need to have a “Drug War.” This number is contested by scholarly studies that report there are 1.3 million drug users in the Philippines according to the Dangerous Drugs Board, while the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that the country’s 1.69% estimated prevalence of drug-use rate is way below the overall global rate of 5.2% (See Pangilinan et al. 2021, especially n. 3). Carolino also provides the opening statistics by including a broadcast news report that cites a Human Rights Watch study that the police perpetrate 24 out of the 32 EJK cases. By situating these statistics at the beginning of the documentary film’s retelling of the start of the massive number of killings, the extrajudicial executions are situated in the larger context.

Ortner points out that “truth is the definitive goal and the moral imperative of documentary filmmaking.” (Ortner 2023, p. 33). As a documentary, *Huwag Kang Papatay* was aimed at truth-telling and provides an essential critique of how the whole operation against the Philippine problem of drug addiction was ideologically framed as a “War on Drugs” or a “Drug war” instead of being a multi-faceted public health issue. By calling it a “war,” it conditions the people to accept that the alleged drug personalities are “enemies” and automatically guilty. In contrast, the “soldiers” in the war, represented by the police, cannot be tried or prosecuted. This branding of the operation is problematic because, as shown above from the Drug Archive findings and as human rights advocates have pointed out, most of the perpetrators of EJKs are from the police force or linked to them. Moreover, the documentary has shown that the “war” was not mainly against the “drugs” but was against the human beings who were rightly or wrongly suspected of being drug users, drug pushers or drug lords and has also killed innocent people, including children. Thus, this article will refer to this deadly and divisive government program by qualifying the operation and using quotation marks, or the common reference to it as “*Tokhang*” or its result, the thousands of EJKs.

2.2. Available Formats

The documentary film uses the vernacular language and English with English subtitles. It is available in two formats. First, it is contained in Disc Two, the second of the three-disc

DVD package of the collection “*Mga Kwento ng Pagsamba at Pakikibaka* (Stories of Worship and Struggle): Films on the Catholic Social Teachings.” This format makes it portable for teachers to use in ecclesial communal discussions around the Philippines, even in places without internet access.

The documentary is also currently hosted on two YouTube channels of the St. Vincent School of Theology (SVST) in Quezon City, Philippines. Both have YouTube restriction notices from the perspective of age and the impact of vulgar language and violent images on the young. However, the restriction is easily bypassed when clicking on the “I understand and wish to proceed” button. An earlier, slightly shorter version (12:47 min) was uploaded by SVSTQC (<https://youtu.be/ML1wOiQApVg?feature=shared>, accessed on 23 December 2023) on 24 September 2017, and focuses only on the issue of the extrajudicial killings of drug personalities.

A slightly longer version of the film (13:53 min) is hosted on another but similar YouTube channel, SVSTQCPH, <https://youtu.be/XvOl0Ou6e1o?feature=shared> (accessed on 23 December 2023). The film was posted on 31 March 2021. This later version includes a rundown of the other documentary films within the collection, consisting of social issues like labor (*Kayod Kabayo/Work Like a Horse*), land reform (*Lupang Hinarang sa Sumilao/Blocked from their Land in Sumilao*), indigenous people’s ancestral domain (*Ang Tagapagtanggol ng Lupang Ninuno/Defender of the Ancestral Land*), ministry to tribal peoples (*Ang Misyon sa mga Lumad/The Mission with the Tribe*), and challenges of an urban poor church worker (*Ang Mabuting Samaritano ng Payatas/The Good Samaritan of Payatas*). They are followed by the topic at hand, the extrajudicial killings of alleged drug personalities (*Huwag Kang Papatay/Thou Shall Not Kill*). Finally, there is a quick teaser on the Philippine political situation under the Duterte presidency and in the shadow of Marcos’ martial law (*Ang Bagong Normal/The New Normal*). All these preliminary scenes before the documentary film proper provide a complete trailer of the full collection. Aside from this preliminary information and opening credits, which take about 1:24 min, the two versions are nearly the same. This paper will use the shorter version for references.

One may also include the earliest, slightly shorter version of the film, which lacks the scenes of the people’s recontextualized understanding of Jesus’ passion shown through street theater. This version is part of the recording of the international presentation of Fr. Danny Pilario, CM, a Vincentian missionary, theology teacher, and the Dean of the SVST at the time of the filming. He also ministers to the *Ina ng Lupang Pangako Parish* (Our Lady of the Promised Land). He presented it at a gathering of the Center for Women Studies Theology, at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Education, KU Leuven (Belgium), on 8 March 2017, and has been recorded and uploaded on the YouTube channel KULEuvenTheologie on 17 March 2017, which is available using this link: <https://youtu.be/9-EtAoWhVp4?feature=shared> (accessed on 23 December 2023).

2.3. Funding

According to the film credits, the documentary was made with financial support from the International Catholic Mission Society Missio Munich. Based on the funding agency’s website, it is one of the German branches of the Pontifical Mission Societies. One of its tasks is “to provide both financial and non-material support for the mission of local Churches in Africa, Asia, and Oceania.” (See [Missio München 2023](#)). It supports the mission of the Roman Catholic Church based on several principles enumerated on its website. For the film, the funding likely was to “work towards justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; and enable people to stand up for those who are powerless, oppressed, persecuted and without rights and those who seek to foster disadvantaged groups within both the Church and society as a whole.” (See [Missio München 2023](#)).

2.4. Film Production and Credits

The opening film credits of the slightly longer version of *Huwag Kang Papatay* give an overview of the identification of the documentary. As the trailer of the other documentary

films in the whole album rolls, the opening credits show that SVST is the executive producer of the documentary film. As the seminary's website describes, SVST is well-known for its clear stance of promoting a religious formation and public theologizing from the margins of society by means of exposure and immersion to marginalized groups (See [St. Vincent School of Theology 2023](#)).

The closing credits show that Ditsi Carolino is the producer and director of *Huwag Kang Papatay*. Carolino and Gladys Llanes managed the camera. Llanes was the editor, while Carolino joined her as a scriptwriter. Additional footage was credited to Alyx Arumpac, EJ Mijares, Matt Baguion, the Magiting Collective, Kyle Venturillo and RVTM. Special thanks were given to Bro. Karl Gaspar, Ciriaco Santiago III, Vincent Go, Raffy Lerma, Support for Orphans and Widows (SOW), and the Urban Poor Associates. The final credit is for Missio Munich.

Carolino is a multi-awarded independent documentary filmmaker from the Philippines and has been a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences since 2019. Among her documentary films is the multi-awarded *Riles* (Life on the Tracks, [Carolino 2002](#)), which deals with life in the slums of Manila, and *Bunso* (The Youngest), a story of three imprisoned boys from 11–13 years old. *Bunso* was used by child rights advocates to pass the juvenile justice law in the Philippines.

Considering the film production, a personal interview with Carolino reveals that she and Llanes joined the journalists covering the deadly “Tokhang” for about two weeks to acquire their footage for the film. These journalists, assigned to cover the drug-related killings, were called night crawlers since most of the killings happened in the evening (See [Almario-Gonzalez 2018](#)). Carolino and Llanes also accompanied Fr. Danny Pilario in his pastoral ministry of accompanying the surviving families of the victims in the *Ina ng Lupang Pangako* (Mother of the Promised Land Parish). He listened to the families' alternative narratives about their slain loved ones and helped to organize them into a group that would later be called Support for Orphans and Widows (See [Support for Orphans and Widows 2023](#)). In addition, Carolino and Llanes used officially available file footage of Rodrigo Duterte's speeches and his threats to kill drug personalities in 2016 and early 2017. They also followed the development of the resistance against the EJKs through the street theater performances for the *Panunuluyan* (a local rendition of the nativity journey based on Luke 2 and Mt 2:1–18) and Jesus' passion narrative in Mt 27:27–50 that they captured in their cameras.

2.5. Plot

Below is the plot of the short documentary *Huwag Kang Papatay*. It shows Carolino's compact scriptwriting and storytelling through a careful threading of the footage that she and her colleagues took with their own cameras and those that are available publicly, such as the pronouncements of Duterte.

- 00:00: The documentary begins with Duterte, speaking behind the podium with the seal of the presidency, exaggeratedly claiming that there were 3,000,000 drug addicts in the Philippines and that he would be happy to kill them.
- 00:16: The screen turns black, and the title appears in all capitals: “Huwag Kang Papatay.”
- 00:22: It is followed by footage from within a moving car with sirens blazing and running towards one of the extrajudicially killed alleged drug personalities lying on the street amidst the darkness of the night. Spectators are seen while the Scene of the Crime Operatives (SOCO) check the dead person and gathers evidence.
- 1:01: The first conflict is articulated by a middle-aged man who describes the EJK victim as someone who does not even engage in drinking, with the follow-up of a woman reporter's query regarding the slain man being on the drug watchlist. The hypothesis of the old man that the drug watch list was there to paint the EJK victim as a bad person, his refutation of the claim of the list and the apparent denial of the person using drugs will be the repeated scenario for many, if not most, of the EJK

victims. The covering of the man with a blanket and the simultaneous clicking of the cameras by journalists symbolically encapsulate the recurrent scenarios for most of the EJK victims in the country.

- 1:40: The next scene is again set in a car with a news report in the vernacular, giving the statistics of the early EJK days. Human Rights Watch already reported that 24 out of the 32 cases investigated found that the police were responsible for the executions. There is already a critique on the justification that the victims were killed because they tried to fight or resist (*nanlaban*) the police officers amidst the anti-drug operations. The news report underlines how this police declaration contrasts with the witnesses' claim that the victim was already surrendering when they were killed. The report continues with the information that Duterte and his cohorts might be held responsible for the crimes against humanity lodged at the International Criminal Court when the Philippines was still a member.
- 2:28: There is a change to daytime and a scene inside a car. It shows an oncoming garbage dump truck signaling the location of Payatas and the introduction of Fr. Pilario. He narrates how he has been ministering to the *Ina ng Lupang Pangako* Parish by presiding at masses since the 1990s. In between shots of Fr. Pilario inviting women to join the mass, he narrates the mother's fear amidst the many EJKs happening in their midst.
- 3:25: Fr. Pilario hugs and condoles the mother of a 35-year-old EJK victim, Constantino Y. De Juan (12 August 1981–6 December 2016), in their shanty. The mother narrates how her son was warned about the bounty on his head, how he tried to avoid the threat of death, his efforts to cook for the birthday of his daughter Joan and his happiness to see his children, and how his life was cut short with the gunshots, even if his children were asked to leave him and despite his pleadings to spare him given his many children. Fr. Pilario talks to Mr. De Juan's young daughter, who tried to hug and protect her father. Fr. Pilario asks her about her father's final words. She responds that her father asked her not to leave and neglect her siblings. The scene continues with Fr. Pilario blessing Mr. De Juan's coffin followed by his invitation to sing the Lord's Prayer in the vernacular amidst his crying mother and children and others. A funeral scene follows Fr. Pilario's narration of Mr. De Juan's supplication that he be spared for the sake of his seven children. This section ends with Fr. Pilario holding the old woman's hand while he checks on how she will take care of them, and she makes a tearful promise that she will strive to do so despite her old age.
- 6:49: The scene changes to nighttime, where other EJK victims are lying on the road surrounded by spectators. Duterte's voice is heard, and he is seen reiterating his campaign until the last pusher and the last drug lord are killed, without mentioning the word killing but demonstrating it with his finger slitting his throat.
- 7:10: Fr. Pilario condoles and listens to the widows and orphans of the EJKs in Payatas. Mothers and widows tearfully narrate how their loved ones were killed. They gather inside a parish hall along with young children, with one child wearing an oversized t-shirt with the words "Never give up." Mrs. De Juan speaks of the difficulty of caring for her seven grandchildren with their father gone and the mother not being around. The scene continues with Fr. Pilario leading a prayer for the victims of violence.
- 8:20: Footage is shown of men, women and children marching on a bridge with placards against EJKs, lamenting the loss of their loved ones, advocating for life and expressing what losing their loved ones means for them during the Christmas season, 2016. The people converge at Plaza Miranda in front of the well-known Quiapo Church, which is also the St. John the Baptist Parish and Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene in Manila. The footage shows the gathering of the urban poor and members of the cause-oriented group Urban Poor Associates staging their yearly *Panunuluyan*. It is a street theater staging of conflated Lukan and Matthean infancy narratives with a twist. It becomes a venue for them to publicly demonstrate their stance against

the EJKs. They are not against solving drug addiction, but they want justice and the people's rights to be respected.

- 9:34: The *Panunuluyan* continues but is succeeded by scenes from Mt 2:1–18 with the Herod actor declaring war against drugs, giving rights to the police to go after the drug personalities treated as criminals. The three wise men are shown agreeing with Herod but asking him to respect the rights of the poor. Herod is then shown knocking on an invisible door and killing the three wise men upon opening the door, followed by an evil laugh.
- 10:05: A post-demonstration press conference shows some of the Urban Poor Associates leaders, actors and other church leaders like Bishop Broderick Pabillo and Fr. Robert Reyes. Fr. Reyes, popularly known as the “running priest” and a staunch human rights and justice advocate, scolds those who pick on and kill low-level drug personalities. He flips the question regarding the addiction of human rights violators and politicians.
- 10:34: The scene shows *Kalbaryo* (Calvary), a street theater procession and demonstration of the urban poor resisting the EJKs. Timed during the Lenten season, the mise-en-scene represents the way of the cross, the way to Calvary, but with EJK victims prominently displayed and piled one on top of the other, with heads covered in plastic bags and masking tape, with the notorious cardboard signs identifying the victims as “I am a drug pusher” or “I am a drug addict”. Along with the urban poor men and women are the identifiable church workers (religious sisters, seminarians and priests) with placards demanding the cessation of drug-related human rights violations, killings and advocacies for approaches that solve the drug problem but save the victims. This is followed by a scene where the people and members of the (Roman Catholic) Church are shown marching and chanting the call to pray and to make a stand against the so-called “Drug War” and EJKs (culture of death) and to uphold the culture of life.
- 10:59: A dark, somber scene of a cross with lit candles and the pictures and names of EJK victims is shown, followed by a haunting sound depicting the lifeless bodies of the other EJK victims, men and women alike. Fr. Pilario's words about his worries, considering those killed and his fear for the plight of the left-behind families, like the one of Mr. De Juan, are interspersed with shots of the lamenting families. Fr. Pilario asks the crucial question: Who gave these people the right to kill anyone? The camera shows the *Kalbaryo* street theater procession mixed with the Lenten practice of the Way of the Cross. Street actors show a half-naked man with thorns on his head bearing a cross and being flogged by actors playing the Roman soldiers. Fr. Reyes is shown participating in the procession/demonstration clad in his soutane. Fr. Pilario's voice challenges the (Roman Catholic) Church to become more vocal, underlining that the silenced people need others who can voice their dissent. People carrying a huge placard are timely shown with the message: “Stop the killings. When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes a duty!”
- 12:01: The *Kalbaryo* procession continues. It shows men and women in white clothes smeared with red (signifying blood). They carry various crosses such as EJK, Death Penalty, low age of criminal liability, inadequate housing and others. Women representing the women accompanying Jesus in his ascent to Golgotha, followed by a vast throng of people with placards denouncing the EJKs and the “Drug War”, are seen being led by a masked person with a huge crown of thorns on his head. A tableau of *Pieta* is presented on the road along with a “*Nanlaban*” cardboard signage instead of INRI—the people bearing the social issues mentioned above as crosses are seen kneeling in the background. The sound of *Pasyon*, a sung version of Jesus' passion, a widespread religious practice since the Spanish colonial times, is heard while the masked man crowned with thorns is tied to a cross as a spectacle. The image fades to black, and the end credits run.
- 12:21–47: The end credits.

2.6. Notable Characters

- Rodrigo Duterte-Philippine, the president (2016–2022), who ordered the so-called “Drug War” and repeatedly emphasized his desire to kill drug personalities (drug lords, pushers and addicts).
- The countless EJK victims who were killed on the streets, bullet holes in their bodies, either soaked in their blood, covered with cloth, or with cardboard messages stating that they were “drug pushers” or “drug addicts” and who should not be emulated.
- The SOCO police who investigated the crime scenes.
- The journalists, consisting of reporters (narration) and photojournalists assigned to cover the EJKs.
- Fr. Danny Pilario, the Vincentian priest and SVST Dean at the time of the film production and volunteer priest working at the *Ina ng Lupang Pangako* Parish, Payatas, Quezon City. He is a supporter of the families left behind by the EJK victims, like Mrs. De Juan, as shown in the film. He helped organize them as members of Project “Support for Orphans and Widows” (SOW). He theologizes from their context.
- Mothers, Orphans and Widows of the EJK victims, especially Mrs. De Juan, who laments and shows her resilience amidst the need to care for her grandchildren after her son was extrajudicially killed.
- Unnamed actors of the *Panunuluyan* and *Kalbaryo* from the Urban Poor Associates, who channeled their performative interpretation of the infancy and passion narratives into street theater as the embodiment of their dissent against “*Tokhang*” and the EJKs as well as the recontextualization of anti-Roman Empire sentiments in Matthew’s texts.

2.7. Notable Visuals

- The opening visuals are arresting. Clad in a black t-shirt, with the backdrop of the Philippine flag and the seal of the presidency, Duterte looks at the camera, which zooms in and, devoid of any expression, declares that he will be happy to slaughter the alleged 3,000,000 addicts just like what Hitler did in killing the Jews.
- The title page of pure black with the all-capital writing of “HUWAG KANG PAPATAY” (Thou shall not kill, based on Exodus 20:13, most likely KJV: “Thou shalt not kill”) is displayed as a stark and immediate contrast to the opening scene. The use of the KJV citation in the English subtitle instead of the more recent “You shall not murder” (NRSV) gives it a more archaic ring of divine prohibition.
- The first scene within the car, where a news report runs in the background, sirens blazing, while the car moves towards the first scene of an extrajudicially killed man lying on the street, provides a vibe of the experiences of the night crawlers—the journalists assigned to cover the so-called “Drug War” and the EJKs.
- One scene shows the close-up shots of the EJK victims with bullet wounds while the statistics and report from Human Rights Watch are played, underlining the police’s responsibility for the killings, the counter-testimony of the witnesses against the *nanlaban* claim and the image of a young boy tending to the remains of an EJK victim in a coffin.
- The scene of the wake for Mr. Constantino De Juan, with Fr. Pilario speaking with his mother and daughter, followed by singing of the Lord’s Prayer in the vernacular amidst the crying and lamentations of his bereaved family and the few who consoled with them.
- The urban poor people’s *Panunuluyan* (an adaptation of Mary and Joseph looking for an inn based on Luke 2 and Herod’s command to kill the young children in Mt 2:16–18) is a notable visual. This event is street theater and a demonstration calling on Duterte to stop the killings and is held in front of the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila. The camera focuses on the massive signage on the church’s façade that says “HUWAG KANG PAPATAY” (Thou shalt not kill, Ex 20:13). The visuals and the narrated plea to stop the EJKs work in synergy to deliver the message. This event is a vital scene in the documentary because Duterte’s populist

and macho branding helped in his election as president (See [Curato and Yonaha 2021](#)). Yet, the message of the urban poor is now telling him to listen to them and to stop the bloody and divisive EJKs that result in a lot of orphans, widows and bereaved parents. The location is crucial, too, because the Basilica is less than 2 kilometers away or about 25 minutes on foot from the Malacanang Palace, the official residence of the Philippine president. The urban poor's call is followed by rap music about the fearful silence reigning in the land because of the killings, sung by a young person with a jester mask. The rap song accompanies the staging of Mary and Joseph going from house to house to find a safe space for the birth of Jesus. They knock at a bullet-ridden "Door of Violence."

- The urban poor people's staging of the street theater *Kalbaryo* to demonstrate against the continuing killing during the Lenten season in 2017 is also a notable visual. The enumeration of the issues that make them suffer, as described by the crosses and the placards, are effective ways of communicating their grievances and dissent. The presence of more distinguishable men and women from the Roman Catholic Church expressing their opposition to the human rights violations of the so-called "Drug War" heightens the visual effect of the need to discuss the Roman Catholic Church's response to the divisive and deadly anti-narcotic operation.

2.8. Notable Sounds

- In the opening scene, Duterte makes a parallel between a contested number of 3,000,000 drug addicts in the Philippines with an erroneous reference to the "3,000,000 Jews" killed by Hitler during the Shoah and says, "I'd be happy to slaughter them." This scene is followed by ominous music that gives way to the title of the documentary.
- Other notable sounds are that of the voice of the woman journalist broadcasting the Human Rights Watch report that 24/32 of the EJK cases were perpetrated by the police, the counter-witness against *nanlaban*, and the possibility of charging Duterte and his cohorts with crimes against humanity. A later development beyond the documentary film is Duterte's withdrawal of the Philippines from its membership in the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 17 March 2019. The continuing process of the ICC investigation and possible trial of the cases while the country was still a member of the ICC is one of the hopes of the surviving families to receive justice for their loved ones ([Duterte 2018](#); [The Office of the Prosecutor International Criminal Court 2020](#); See [Rakhmawati 2023](#)).
- In one scene, the use of the popular musical version of the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:9–13) in the vernacular is heard, sung by the lamenting family members at the wake of Mr. De Juan, an EJK victim.
- Other notable sounds are the words of the representative at the *Panunuluyan* street theater knocking at Duterte's heart to heed their call to stop the killings.
- Notable sounds include the chant during the *Kalbaryo* demonstration march and street theater: "Stop the killings! Justice for all!", "*Manalangin! Manindigan!*" (Pray! Make a Stand!) and "*Ang tao, ang bayan, kasama ng simbahan, ngayon ay lumalaban.*" (The people, the nation, along with the church, are now fighting back, are marching with the church, are not fighting back!).
- The haunting melody of the *Pasyon* in the background of the staging of the street theater and the demonstration of the people during the *Kalbaryo* event is a stark reminder of the passion of Jesus and how his passion also represents the hardships faced by the people. The use of the *pasyon* song and melody, especially during Lent, is an essential component and reminder of the Filipinos' revolt against the excesses of Spain and its colonial leaders (See [Ileto 1997](#), p. 254; [Chongson 2011](#); [Bautista 2019](#), pp. 31–45; [Ibita 2024](#), pp. 83–99). The message is recontextualized in the context of the "Drug War" and EJKs.

2.9. Documentary Film Reception and Beyond

Ortner notes that “artists working in restricted fields produce work that is both posed against commercial values and targeted to more narrowly defined aesthetically and/or politically defined audiences.” (Ortner 2023, p. 21). Even then, it is not very easy to measure the impact of the reception of *Huwag Kang Papatay*. There is no available report on how many DVDs have been sold at the time of this writing. Moreover, the YouTube access shows that the older and shorter version has 4.9 K views, while the longer and more recent posting has 1 K views and 26 thumbs-ups. Since the film is shown in ecclesial communities and various groups like students, the number of views on YouTube cannot be equated with individual views.

In the author’s interview with Carolino, she states that she does not recall having a particular premiere for *Huwag Kang Papatay*. On the SOW website, a YouTube link to Fr. Pilario’s presentation entitled “Of Mothers, Widows and Orphans: Stories of Resistance in the Philippine War on Drug” was found, which is one avenue for its international release. He presented a much earlier version (00:2–14:06, which does not include the *Kalbaryo* footage) to the audience of the Center for Women Studies Theology forum at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven on 8 March 2017. The recording was posted on 17 March 2017, garnering 909 views and 10 thumbs-ups to date. In this recording, Fr. Pilario presented the film to the international audience gathered in Leuven. He supplemented it with additional stories about the women’s responses to the killings and the lasting impact on the families. After the presentation of Fr. Pilario, the remaining 42 minutes were spent in discussion with the audience. Questions posed to him included the following topics: what can be done, especially on the ground amidst the very divisive issues, with a majority of Filipinos being pro-Duterte; affirmation of the courage of women and Fr. Pilario’s efforts; the role of the media; managing intense social media debates around the EJKs; trolling and attacks against the critics of EJKs; what Filipinos can do within and outside of the Philippines; the role of academic discussion in responding to the EJKs; and the women’s role in managing the challenges of EJKs among the survivors. While there are obvious limits in measuring the impact of *Huwag Kang Papatay*, Carolino’s efforts to communicate “its strategies for engaging people emotionally and moving them to action” (or “affective agency”) (Ortner 2023, p. 75) are effective as far as this available international audience response to the film is concerned.

A lone remark in the comment section can be found:

@borgytanto3563 6 years ago (as of 2023)

“If people are poor, do not kill them...” *Sinasabi nyo po ba na pinapatay ni President Duterte ang mga mahihirap? Mali po kayo Sir. “The problem is not drugs”?!?! Talaga po, di nyo nakikita na problema ang drugs sa bayan? Mag research pa po kayo....h’wag po sana kayong magbulagbulagan. Mahirap man ang buhay sa atin, at mahirap man ang marami sa atin, masaya pa din po ang mahirap na buhay. Pero dahil po sa drugs madaming buhay....buhay ng mahihirap, ang sirang sira na.*

(“If people are poor, do not kill them...” Are you saying that President Duterte is killing the poor? You are mistaken, Sir. “The problem is not drugs”?!?! Really, can you not see that drugs (drug addiction) are a problem in the country? Continue your research. . . do not pretend to be blind. Even if life is difficult in our country, and most people are poor, life is still a joy even if it is difficult. But because of drugs, many lives. . . the lives of the poor, are destroyed.)

This YouTube comment expresses dissent over the content of *Huwag Kang Papatay* and Fr. Pilario’s presentation. While it disagrees with him, the tone is still mild and respectful. This example is not the case on many other occasions for those who dared to go against Duterte’s so-called “Drug War” and EJKs. As mentioned in the discussion after Fr. Pilario’s presentation at the KU Leuven, intense social media debate and trolling usually occurred because of the topic of EJKs. Thus, it is understandable that both platforms supporting the film, the channels of SVST and SVSTQCPH, have turned off the comments

section. Most likely, this is to prevent the Duterte die-hard supporters and pro-government trolls from viciously attacking the film through their comments, a common scenario in the divisive term of Duterte, given the highly contested “Drug War” and EJKs (See [Cabañes and Cornelio 2017](#); [Hapal 2019](#)).

It is also worth noting that in a written exchange with Fr. Pilario, he underscored that the documentary film was never purposely shown to the mothers, widows and orphans from the *Ina ng Lupang Pangako* Parish, even until now. According to him, doing so will be traumatic for them, even at present, and will not be helpful in their process of healing. The project website of Support for Orphans and Widows (SOW) indicates that since 2017, the group has helped facilitate their healing and recovery, promoted capacity building, provided funeral assistance and accompanied them in their search to obtain justice and accountability (See [St. Vincent School of Theology 2019](#)).

3. Back to the Gospel Jesus and Beyond: Biblical Theologizing with *Huwag Kang Papatay*

While the preceding discussion has shown that *Huwag Kang Papatay* is a non-Jesus film with a primary focus on EJK and the question of response amidst the divisive issue, the atypical Jesus film presents scenes that expand the traditional presentation of Jesus in a film. These scenes are found in the recontextualized interpretations of Jesus’ teaching of the Lord’s Prayer, his infancy narrative and his passion story.

3.1. Extrajudicial Killing Wake and Mt 6:9–13

A very striking scene is shown in the first half of the documentary in the wake of Mr. De Juan. He was an extrajudicial killing (EJK) victim from Payatas, the largest garbage dumpsite in Metro Manila. The Congregation of the Mission, commonly known as Vincentians and who run SVST, is in charge of the *Ina ng Lupang Pangako* (Our Lady of the Promised Land) Parish. In Fr. Pilario’s retelling of the news that he gathered from the women, he learned that some members had been killed extrajudicially. Fr. Pilario visited Mr. De Juan’s family. Only a few people expressed their solidarity and condolences with the family for fear of reprisal or of being identified with him. Others did not come since they supported Duterte and *Tokhang*. In front of Mr. De Juan’s slain body in a coffin, along with his mother and the seven children he left behind, Fr. Pilario leads them in praying the Matthean Lord’s Prayer by singing it in the vernacular (See [Carolino 2017](#)).

The Matthean Lord’s Prayer is located within the Sermon on the Mount’s portion that focuses on prayer (6:5–14). The instruction includes praying in secret, in one’s room and using the words of 6:9–13. In the context of *Huwag Kang Papatay*, they pray and sing it in the cramped space of Mr. De Juan’s wake. However, with the event captured by the camera and included in the film, viewers are included in this virtually expanded space. While the sung prayer has been shortened in the film to include only Mt 6:9–10a, 13, one understands that the whole prayer was sung. The accompanying image of crying relatives renders the interpretation of the prayer as a lament, a sentiment not found in the original Matthean passage. In this way, even the documentary extends the lament through the film, and *Huwag Kang Papatay* also becomes a lament itself that viewers can participate in (See [Rindge 2016](#)).

From the perspective of empire studies, characterizing God as our Father contrasts with the claim of the Roman Emperor as *Pater patriae* (father of the nation), a title conferred on the Emperor from the time of Augustus to Theodosius. It emphasizes the Emperor’s power over the empire, which is maintained politically, socioeconomically, militarily and theologically ritually through imperial theology (See [Burton 1912](#), p. 81).

Since Mt 6:9–13 is Jesus’ teaching on how to pray, it is also important to note the resistance to the Roman Empire reflected on it from a ritual perspective. Rodney Werline’s study of biblical prayer underlines that “prayer is powerful . . . because it is a ritual enacted within a web of political relationships, whether local, national or international.” ([Werline 2014](#), p. 6). Werline considers prayer as an “embodied action” that manifests itself in

the quotidian (Werline 2014, pp. 6–7). While those who attended Mr. De Juan’s wake and the viewers of the film must have prayed the Lord’s Prayer as a foremost Catholic prayer multiple times before, this particular occasion of prayer and its recording and inclusion in the documentary makes it a more poignant dissent under the threat of the EJK repercussions.

Werline echoes Catherine Bell’s insight that “[R]ituals do not refer to politics . . . they are politics.” (Bell 2009, p. 195; Cited by Werline 2014, p. 7). In crying out to God by calling God as Father with the accompanying petitions, Jesus teaches his disciples that his Father is his disciples’ Father, too. More than the Emperor, God will provide for them amidst the hardship that they experienced under the Roman Empire. In the EJK context, the praying of the Lord’s Prayer counters and supplants the image of Duterte as the father (*Tatay Digong*) of his supporters (See Curato and Yonaha 2021, p. 387).

Joining these thoughts on biblical prayers with insights from biblical performance criticism amplifies the resistance. David Rhoads writes: “In the Gospels, Jesus announces, proclaims, names, heals, pardons, exorcizes, prophesies, blesses, curses, and warns, among other things—all with words that are understood as actions.” (Rhoads 2006, p. 169). The resistance is embodied in these words of Mt 6:9–13 when they are not just read but recited and performed in the Matthean community and all the other communities that received, performed and prayed these exact words. These words enhance the contrast of ritual, power and politics between the Roman Empire, which is characterized by the deplorable situation of the majority and the alternative reality articulated and prayed for in the petitions found in Mt 6:9–13.

Warren Carter’s study of the Roman Empire underlines how “political claims, visions of social organization, economic structures, and ideological commitments” (Carter 2001, p. 1) are tightly intertwined with those that relate to rituals like “temples and altars, liturgical practices such as prayers, vows, and sacrifices, and festivals commemorating the emperor’s birthday and accession, celebrated with different intensity and levels of significance in different parts of the empire, solicit submission and consent.” (Carter 2001, p. 29). By combining religious rituals with theological language, the Roman emperors and their officials, including their supporters, present in the whole empire “a picture of the relationship between the emperor and the gods” and “impose a definition of the world.” (Carter 2001, p. 10). The language of the Lord’s Prayer contrasts God the Father in heaven with the Emperor, and the petitions are meant to respond to their needs that are not fulfilled by the earthly Roman Empire. Building on literary, archaeological and transdisciplinary studies on the Roman Empire, Carter posits that the Matthean community in Syrian Antioch suffered from living in poverty and sickness, lack of food, defaulting on their debts, and other difficulties (Carter 2001, pp. 46–53; See also Stark 1997, pp. 147–62). The petitions of the Lord’s Prayer respond to these fundamental needs.

The biblical and ritual reception of Mt 6:9–13 in the film carries these anti-empire sentiments into the context of EJKs, like the scenes devoted to Mr. De Juan, starting from his wake and up to the dialogue between Fr. Pilario and Mrs. De Juan, who expresses that she will endeavor to take care of her seven grandchildren following her son’s killing, despite her advanced age and poverty. As mentioned earlier, for many supporters of the increasingly authoritarian government, the president is not only their leader, but he is also their father. However, considering the EJKs, he is an example of an abusive father. Against what Duterte and his cohorts have done, as the prayer is sung in the vernacular by Mrs. De Juan and the children, they also lift to the mightier God the Father in heaven and their slain son and father, respectively. In this context, the prayer is a lament by Mrs. De Juan and his children as they mourn their loss and cry for justice in front of his slain body. The resolute stance of Mrs. De Juan to take care of her grandchildren, given the combined economic, mental health and political justice needs of the left-behind family, is an expression of resistance, a resilient upholding of life.

The director tied the story of the slain Mr. de Juan to the scenes of more deaths as well as the naming and storytelling of the mothers and widows of their extrajudicially

killed loved ones in the context of faith sharing and praying. The prayer of resistance in Mt 6:9–13, sung at Juan’s wake and in their storytelling and praying, is magnified and also brought into the public and digital spheres by the film, increasing the possibility of synergy among those who pray, that it is a vital part of resisting the culture of death brought by the EJKs.

3.2. *Panunuluyan Street Theatre with Rap and the Conflation of Luke 2 and Matthew 2*

Huwag Kang Papatay, as a documentary film, continues an expanded cinema by including scenes of protests against the EJKs through the scenes of the combined procession-demonstration and street theater organized by the Urban Poor Associates. The Urban Poor Associates, a collaboration of various urban poor groups, works with a theater group and grassroots workers to dramatize and express their demands through street theater. Recorded in the film are their two activities at the beginning of the killings in late 2016 and early 2017. One event was held during the Advent season before Christmas 2016. The group’s annual *Panunuluyan* is a creative and liberating expression of their needs through the traditional presentation of Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem immediately before Jesus’ birth. It combines Luke’s and Matthew’s infancy narratives and uses a contextual, theatrical interpretation of the biblical texts. Likewise, the same group gathers during Lent. In the Lenten Season of 2017, they dramatized *Kalbaryo* (Calvary), the passion narrative in connection with the EJKs.

In both the *Panunuluyan* and *Kalbaryo* theatrical presentations, one can see how the grassroots contextual biblical interpretation connects the EJK stories with the Roman Empire. Their interpretation of the protagonists and antagonists highlights the life and death issues not only in the first century CE but also in contemporary times. The grassroots theatrical presentations combine contextual biblical interpretations that include insights from narrative and performance criticisms, empire studies and a liberationist approaches from the ground, as will be shown below.

The *Panunuluyan* is usually a paraliturgical pageant that reenacts the conflated infancy narratives. The twist that the Urban Poor Associates and its members have done in their open public presentation of the *Panunuluyan* is to link the EJKs to the killings found in Mt 2:16–18. The performance of the *Panunuluyan* was made more potent by being staged in front of the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila, during Advent. It is a big church that houses the Filipinos’ most beloved Christological image, the suffering Black Nazarene. This area is full of churchgoers, vendors and those taking public transport. As stated earlier, this church, located in Quiapo, Manila City, is spatially strategic since it is only about two kilometers away from the Malacanang Palace, the official residence of the Philippine president and where the order of the execution of the so-called “War on Drugs” originates.

Since the deadly program is known for its knock-and-plead (*Tokhang*) approach, many of the killings have been perpetrated by knocking on the door or forcibly entering the homes of unsuspecting victims. In staging the *Panunuluyan*, the group leader introduced the street theatrical presentation and ritual as their way of knocking at the president’s heart. They underline that they are not against solving the drug problem, but they want the violations of human rights, especially against the poor, to end so that the number of EJK orphans and widows will not increase. As the staging happens, the camera also shows many of the placards expressing the lamentable situation of the left-behind families longing for their killed loved ones, as well as their demands to respect and uphold life and to stop the violence.

The Lukan narrative of Joseph and Mary searching for a place for Jesus to be born during the census (Lk 2:1–7) embodies the meaning of *Panunuluyan*. Despite the scholarly disagreement regarding the historical details, it is worth noting that the Roman census that compelled Mary and Joseph to travel and be counted was “not a benign act,” and it meant being enlisted for Roman taxation (See Reid and Matthews 2021, 43A:64). The contrast with the *Panunuluyan* cannot be overstated, where illegally made drug lists enumerate

drug personalities and describe what must be done to them, just like what Mrs. De Juan described earlier in the film. The biblical narrative gap allows the Filipino actors' creativity to act out the couple's search by knocking from one inn to another. While Mary and Joseph's knocking for the safe delivery of Jesus, given the dire situation, is acted out, it runs contrary to those who knock in the *Tokhang* operations and who bring death instead of peace. This anti-life action is symbolized by the bullet-ridden and blood-smeared "Door of Death" and the storytelling through the accompanying rap song. The lyrics and the translation according to the film are as follows:

Katok tokhang katotohanan (4x) (Knock, knock, it's the Truth)
Tuloy po kayo sa aming tahanan (Welcome to our home)
Na puro katahimikan, walang kaguluhan (Here all is quiet, no chaos)
Dito sa amin walang umaalma (No one protests)
Lahat sumusunod, lahat may disiplina (Everyone follows, disciplined)
Kaliwa't kanan na mga patayan (There are killings left and right)
Ngunit di kilala ang may kasalanan (But no one knows who's behind them)
Katok tokhang katotohanan (4x) (Knock, knock, it's the Truth)

The film's recording of the *Panunuluyan* shows how it harmonizes the Lukan text with the Matthean infancy narrative. The theatrical presentation continues with the violent story in Mt 2:1–18. It depicts the character of Herod, the Roman Empire's vassal king, who commanded the killing of the innocents. In the dramatization, the biblical dialogue between Herod and the magi has been replaced by a conversation legitimizing the declaration of the so-called "Drug War". The actor playing Herod represents the president and the killers, while the three kings embody those who supported the bloody *Tokhang*. Although they asked for the protection of the poor, they were also shot. Thus, they also represent those who were killed—the children, women and mostly men living in urban poor areas, including those who supported Duterte's presidency.

In this dramatization, the popular understanding of the infancy narrative is used to communicate the message of critique and resistance. The oppressive Roman Empire and violent Herod are paralleled with the government's deadly *Tokhang*. Jesus is represented by those whose lives were put in danger because of the government's violent and lethal anti-narcotics drive. The massacred innocents represent the EJK victims. The placards show messages that hold the government accountable, criticize the lethal "Drug War," demand its end, express the need for decent urban poor housing and oppose the victimization of the poor. As the camera moves, Catholic leaders like Fr. Robert Reyes and then Manila Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo, who are both well-known defenders of human rights, especially of the urban poor, are also shown. The *Panunuluyan* ends with a press conference, where Fr. Reyes criticizes the perpetrators of *Tokhang* and EJKs.

3.3. *Kalbaryo Street Theater and Passion Narrative*

Huwag Kang Papatay also records and includes a multi-faceted event highlighting Jesus' passion and crucifixion in the film. It is another combination of demonstration-procession, prayer ritual and street theater rolled into one that was spearheaded by the Urban Poor Associates and held during the 2017 Lenten season. It is the *Kalbaryo* (Calvary) event. This event harmonizes the gospels' passion narratives and combines it with other traditions like the well-known Catholic Lenten devotion called the *Via Crucis* or Way of the Cross. It recontextualizes Jesus' passion in the Philippine setting and dramatizes the Filipino sufferings as individuals and as a community. This event is linked to the most prominent representation of Jesus in the documentary film, which makes *Huwag Kang Papatay* a Jesus film.

The film clips remind one of the following Matthean texts recontextualized with their anti-empire sentiments in the context of the EJKs. First, the Roman soldiers scourging the half-naked cross-bearer recalls Mt 27:26 when Pilate had Jesus scourged. This part is an adaptation of the well-known "*penitensya*", an extra-liturgical practice during Holy

Thursday and Good Friday, where people made promises/vows while being flogged as a partaking in Jesus' sufferings (See Bautista 2019, pp. 46–58).

Second, the image of cross-bearing women and men interprets Mt 27:31–32. There is a polyvalent identification of Jesus with the people and their suffering. Jesus' cross-bearing is linked to the people's dramatization of how they understand the crosses as the representation of the different forms of injustices they face under the Duterte government. However, it is notable how the extrajudicial killings are prominently displayed. The masked man representing the victims of EJK is paralleled with Jesus. The parallelism with Jesus is limited to their violent killing sanctioned by the ruling power. Jesus' innocence is not shown nor compared with the EJK victims' blamelessness or lack of it. The least common denominator was enough: they were all killed violently by the reigning political powers.

Third, the dramatization of Mt 27:37, "Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." underscores the way the EJK victims have been labeled with cardboard notices expressing their alleged crimes. These cardboard notices included handwritten labels such as "I am a drug pusher/user" or "Do Not Imitate Me". Playing faintly but hauntingly in the background is the familiar tune of *pasyon*, a poetic passion narrative chanted during the Lenten season, especially during Holy Week. The song lyrics caught in the documentary at this juncture are reflective of John 19:25–27: "*Ang anak nyang si Hesus, nakapako nang totoo*" (Her son Jesus is truly crucified). The street theater pictures a Pieta with the cardboard notice, evoking the scene of the *Pieta* with Mary, the mother of Jesus, cradling the lifeless body of her son. The presentation of the *Kalbaryo* and the whole film ends with the hanging of the masked man on the cross.

Just like in the *Panunuluyan*, the *Kalbaryo* is a procession-demonstration, a theatrical presentation, and even a prayer made of a series of biblical stories embodied, performed, ritualized, recorded and made part of the documentary. The contextualized biblical interpretation is supported by priests, religious men and women, and grassroots groups that hold the government accountable, criticize the EJKs against alleged drug personalities and demand its end. In including this multi-faceted event, the documentary reflects the early celluloid recordings as filmed passion plays (See Walsh and Staley 2021, p. 1).

4. Materials and Methods

The main materials in this study are Ditsi Carolino's documentary film *Huwag Kang Papatay* (Carolino 2017) and the Gospels, particularly the Gospel according to Matthew. The analysis of the film used a historical-critical method to learn about the historical context of the documentary, its main purpose, the funding agency, the institutions and the people behind it as a documentary film. The analysis of the documentary film and the interpretation of the biblical passages as citations and allusions in the film, especially the Matthean text, used narrative criticism, performance criticism, empire studies, ritual studies and a liberationist approach.

5. Conclusions

As a primarily documentary film meant to document the EJKs, *Huwag Kang Papatay* is a non-traditional Jesus film. The analysis of its characteristics as a documentary film, the film's accessibility based on its DVD and online formats, the production staff and its funding sources helped in situating it in the context of the early months of Duterte's very divisive and bloody "Drug War" that killed thousands. The analysis of the documentary film's plot, notable characters, visuals and sounds also established its non-traditional Jesus film characteristics. The discussion of the limits of the way the film's reception and impact can be evaluated and measured underlined the self-imposed regulation SVST needed to make by closing the comments section in the YouTube channels hosting the film. This decision helps mitigate the impact of organized trolling of any attempt to critique the contentious, violent, anti-narcotic program of the populist Duterte government. While online discussion is limited, the face-to-face setting of discussing its impact on the viewers

evokes affective agency and moves the audience to actions according to their ability and capacity.

Focusing on the biblical interpretations from the ground recordings included as part of the documentary *Huwag Kang Papatay*, they demonstrated Matthew's anti-empire message as a recontextualized Jesus's story in the context of extrajudicial killings to advocate for continued political dialogue and relevant action responses against human rights violations and development issues caused by the so-called "War on Drug" and the many EJK victims.

Since the documentary film *was* meant to illicit discussion about social issues and Catholic Social Teachings, this paper focused and theologized on the biblical interpretations found in the documentary. Overall, the Matthean Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:9–13), sung in the vernacular at Mr. De Juan's wake, the dramatization of Herod's violence of killing the innocents in Mt 2:1–18 in the *Panunuluyan*, and the Matthean passion narrative in Mt 27: 26, 32 and 37 in the *Kalbaryo* show different interpretations of the biblical texts from the ground as captured in the *footage* compiled in the documentary film. They demonstrate that the grassroots *communities'* biblical interpretations through the singing of the Lord's Prayer and the mixed procession-demonstration and street theater *presentations and ritualized* prayer-like interpretations of the infancy narratives and passion narratives from the Gospels, especially from Matthew's account, already include the general insights from narrative, performance, empire, ritual and liberationist studies and how these are reappropriated in the context of the so-called "War on Drugs" that resulted in so many extrajudicial killings, especially in Metro Manila at the start of Duterte's administration. The insights gathered invite the continued mutual learning from the perspectives of the world behind, the world of and the world before the Matthean text in dialogue with *subjugated* communities such as those of the mothers, widows and orphans of the EJKs.

More dynamic biblical training, documentary film analysis, immersion in marginalized communities and mutual enrichment through the sharing of interpretations can make the groups involved in this kind of endeavor learn with and from one another, particularly in view of the intersections of their insights. Using narrative and performance criticisms, ritual studies, empire studies, and a liberationist approaches in interpreting the biblical texts cited and alluded to in the film and their immediate and long-term impacts are beneficial, given that Duterte's populist administration continues to have strong support from its loyal base despite a change in Philippine government's leadership since July 2022 and the continuing EJKs under the new administration (See [Beltran 2023](#); [Human Rights Watch 2020](#)).

The use of film to showcase biblical interpretations from the ground magnifies the voice and visibility of ordinary readers and interpreters of the Bible. It makes the task and responsibility of biblical scholars more engaging and relevant for dialogue towards ethical and life-giving biblical interpretations in problematic contexts like the extrajudicial killings in the so-called "War on Drugs" in the Philippines. At the same time, there is also a need to include biblical trauma hermeneutics to deal with the traumatic aspect of the context. Moreover, a future-oriented hermeneutics that can contribute to further healing and meaning-making beyond the violence and trauma of EJK can be employed. The following questions in interpreting and analyzing biblical interpretations academically and from the ground can be helpful: What are the responsibilities of biblical interpreters in the contexts of violence such as those shown in the film? With whom do biblical scholars need to work with when considering the biblical interpretations in films and artistic expressions? To whom are the biblical scholars and their hermeneutical works accountable? Who are those who benefit and who are disadvantaged by their interpretations ([Bieringer and Elsbernd 2010](#), especially p. 21)? These suggestions on using combined biblical hermeneutics will help the continuing dialogues on this topic and other social issues to ensure that the recontextualization of Jesus' message in the biblical text and beyond it will remain relevant and life-giving.

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