



Research Notes

## A Thousand Several Tongues: Notes on Sound and Noise in *RD3RD* Augusto Xavier Ledesma

### I. Introduction

This presentation collects and expands upon a series of production notes from my involvement in *RD3RD* as the sound designer and composer. *RD3RD* is a 2018 adaptation of *Richard III* directed by Anton Juan and the late, great Ricardo Abad with dramaturgy by Judy Ick. The title of this presentation is drawn directly from Richard's soliloquy as he is confronted by the ghosts of those he had assassinated:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain.<sup>1</sup>

In *RD3RD*, this is delivered as Richard stirs in his sleep the night before he assumes the throne. The way this is staged involves the entrance of actors playing Clarence, Anne, Hastings, and the Princes veiled in sheets of translucent white gauze. They leave a trail of

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<sup>1</sup> *Richard III*. Act V, Scene III.

slippers in their wake, an allusion to a protest against the War on Drugs staged before Duterte's State of the Nation Address in 2017. The ghosts deliver their lines in harsh whispers as they torment Richard, standing before his prone body. The ghosts materialise multiple presences, signifying the spectres of assassinated characters, while also functioning as surfaces upon which the names of the victims of Duterte's War on Drugs were projected and scrolled. The 'thousand several tongues' of Richard's conscience are not only the fallen characters in the play but the actual people who were slain during Duterte's bloody campaign.

What I find particularly noteworthy here is the articulation of plurality in the text as well as explicit acknowledgement of multiplicities simultaneously embodied and disembodied by the presences on stage. The spectral characters appear in order to haunt, to perturb Richard, but the audience is made aware of multiple forms of this haunting through the projected names of the deceased. The interplay between the historical and the fictive in *Richard III* is modulated and intensified by its recontextualisation. Richard is both Richard and Duterte at once; the dead are personages, actors, and signifiers of the actual death toll of Duterte's War on Drugs all at once. This drive toward plurality manifests in the play several times.

The opening scene ends with a dummy lowered from above the stage, its head crudely wrapped in tape as the ensemble looks on in

horror at this terrible ritual. This rendering of the body is not seen until the end of the play in which scores of smaller dummies drop from the ceiling of the performance space. The one body becomes many bodies, and the presence of these bodies all gesture toward the gravity of systematised violence.

What I intend to do here is to sort of retrospectively confront the magnitude of the play and also think alongside the technical considerations I made in relation to composing music and generating the soundscape for *RD3RD*, which are processes framed as responsive to parallel political and aesthetic currents of the play. The discussion takes on a practitioner's perspective and draws heavily from conceptions of sound and noise frequently referred to in the field of sound studies.

## II. Gun Noises Made With Mouth, or Duterte's Noise Machine

In 2016, foul-mouthed authoritarian Rodrigo Duterte was elected and sworn in as the 16th president of the Republic of the Philippines, amassing around 16 million votes, running on a populist platform, emphasising the country's need for discipline via repressive force and retributive justice, manufacturing consent for a brutal campaign against drug pushers and drug users. The human toll of Duterte's War on Drugs is estimated by human rights organisations to be around 27,000 lives, murdered by cops or armed vigilantes. The corpses of the slain were often exhibited as

grotesque spectacles, faces obscured by duct tape, hands holding pieces of cardboard with hastily written warnings, bodies exposed to the public as a threat. [6] Cries for mercy, pleas of innocence, and helpless wails featured prominently on the news. The implicit noises of struggle, of gunfire, of the peeling of tape away from the roll found their way into the auditory imaginary of the Philippines during Duterte's violent regime.

While conceptions of noise have largely been associated with transgressive posturing due to its disruptive qualities, it would seem that Rodrigo Duterte's government has co-opted this disruptive force and folded it into their arsenal of tactical operations. Noise is often understood as sound's *other* or that which operates outside or beyond a set range of frequencies, but noisy, distorted aspects of sound can also be found within the acceptable threshold. Noise can be controlled and domesticated, instrumentalised toward achieving a particular end. Jacques Attali understands the presence of noise itself as violence, writing that 'it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder.'<sup>2</sup> Duterte's antics similarly preempt and replicate acts of violence, normalising state terror through brutal repetition. According to Vicente Rafael, Duterte's usage of violent language cultivates 'a proximity to death', which renders his measures of

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), 26.

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biopolitical control 'subsumed and structured by the necropolitical'.<sup>3</sup> Duterte's ability to openly discuss his desire to murder his enemies establishes a symbolic power his regime has over life and death. His remarks can be perceived as noise in the sense that they move between form and formlessness,<sup>4</sup> and they unsettle cultural norms as they conflate conflicting signals and strategically traffic in the distribution of nonsense.<sup>5</sup>

Even prior to his election, Rodrigo Duterte's rhetoric was characterised by a 'coarsening of political discourse' that normalised the language of crisis and rendered visible his purported outsider status and his supposedly visceral responses to crises.<sup>6</sup> This brash and vulgar posturing is by no means unique to Duterte, but the frequency of his usage of gutter language and the frequency of his violent threats became causes for alarm. Duterte's outrageous remarks are often passed off as dark humour despite their severity

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<sup>3</sup> Vicente L. Rafael, *The Sovereign Trickster* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History*. (New York and London: Continuum Books, 2007), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Duterte himself admits that he traffics in nonsense. See: VJ Bacungan, 'Duterte: '3 in 5 of my statements are just nonsense', *CNN Philippines*. 9 February 2017. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/02/09/duterte-statement-nonsense.html>

<sup>6</sup> Nicole Curato, 'Flirting with Authoritarian Fantasies? Rodrigo Duterte and the New Terms of Philippine Populism.' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 1, (2016): 142-153, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2016.1239751>

and the traumatic reactions they inflict upon the public,<sup>7</sup> but they govern and structure both subtle and overt measures of violence.

What transpires in Duterte's tactical deployment of noise is similar to what Jacques Attali describes: 'the monopolisation of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalisation of the silence of others assure the durability of power'.<sup>8</sup> Duterte's persistent utilisation of that which lies outside the boundaries of "acceptable" public speech normalises this method of communication by consistently reproducing it in the public sphere and delimits the boundaries of dissent by pre-empting it and framing outrage as a natural part of the status quo. Moreover, Duterte's method of communication downplays state violence by signalling its inevitability and its necessity and by manufacturing controversy to obfuscate concrete acts of slow violence resulting from neoliberal policy and immediate, spectacular violence resulting from the brutal operations of a repressive state. In Duterte's discursive practice, 'noise is the source of power'<sup>9</sup>, which produces 'a resonance chamber well on the way to forming a black hole'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See: Hannah Ellis-Petersen, 'Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte orders soldiers to shoot female rebels 'in the vagina'', *The Guardian*. 13 February 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-orders-soldiers-to-shoot-female-rebels-in-the-vagina>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 333.

Duterte's noise-machine consists of mechanisms that interrupt sociality, displacing established sets of relations. This operates on multiple registers, including Duterte's public addresses laden with profanity and wanton threats of violence as well as the actual noises produced by the implementation of the War on Drugs. These noises produced other sounds and silenced others. The voice of the president spoke over others, its voluminous presence produced a kind of censorship via repletion. The constant repetition of his threats to kill supposed criminals cast a veil of the structural conditions that led people to drug use. The gunshots prefigured screams, cries, and silences. After the murder, the subject becomes an object, no longer capable of producing its own signals of communication. The distorted soundscape of the Philippines under Duterte was saturated with noise not merely as a signifier of violence but as violence itself.

### III. On the Production of Sound

A tendency toward excess, contradiction, and subversion expands into the production sound expressed in multiple registers. The cadence of Shakespearean verse is frequently disrupted (or profaned) by infrequent shifts into percussive expletives in Filipino, the narrative lyrics of the *Pasyón* recited in one scene by Richard's fanatical followers are replaced by the rhythmic chanting of the words *putang ina*. The *Pasyón* is considered a Philippine epic that

*Longhand* details the narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, focused on the Passion, Death, and Resurrection. The Pasyón is regularly performed during the Lenten season as an expression of devotion. The performance of the Pasyón takes on the form of an uninterrupted chant or what's called the *pabasa*, which translates to the 'reading' of the text. *Putang ina* is derived from the Spanish *puta madre* and is perhaps the most commonly used but also the most offensive curse in the Philippines. This expression would heavily feature in Duterte's public addresses and was a key element of his populist rhetoric. The established sonority of a form was consistently undermined by the introduction of incongruent elements.

Sound bridges or transitions from scene to scene were marked and motivated by acousmatic sounds, or sounds with an imperceptible, non-diegetic source, such as vehicular traffic, typing on keyboards and the tones of social media notifications, and the tearing sound of duct tape being peeled away from the roll, all echoing of components of an imagined Philippine soundscape under the Duterte administration and its concurrent media environment.

The accompanying music is similarly fragmented and multivalent. The curated set of musical pieces for the production includes original compositions incorporating found sounds and repurposed segments of classical music, movements from Mozart's *Requiem*, a found recording of a brass band playing during a funeral procession, and *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, the anthem of the Nazi party from 1930 to

1945. Original compositions for the play were informed by strategies developed by early electronic composers Halim El-Dabh and Pierre Schaeffer in the early 1940s, who both appropriated and modified fragments of pre-existing recorded material to produce sound collages in a musical idiom that would be later identified as *musique concrète*. One thing that working within this idiom enables is the subversion of established forms, rhythms, and tones as well as the production of sonic assemblages that displace musical motifs from their initial domain and reintegrate them into a new set of relations.

The samples for original compositions were selected for their immediate proximity or reference to tragedy and loss as well as their similarities to the aesthetic and political currents folded into *RD3RD*. One such example is an ambient musical bed lifted from Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* — a 1961 avant-garde composition for 52 string instruments, playing sustained clusters of dissonant tones through several extended techniques, or productively misusing their instruments.

Other key elements in the score were drawn from William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops*. *The Disintegration Loops* is series of four albums by experimental musician William Basinski, which is comprised of decaying magnetic tape recordings of shortwave radio systems and other found sounds treated with various reverb and delay effects. While Basinski was attempting to convert a collection

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of analog recordings to digital format, he discovered that the tapes had deteriorated, producing several noise effects as they were played back. He allowed the loops to play over extended periods of time as the material deteriorated further, treating the cracks and gaps in the music with modulation and time-based digital effects. The completion of this project coincidentally happened on the morning of the 9/11 attacks in New York City as the World Trade Centre collapsed, which Basinski witnessed from the rooftop of his apartment complex. Basinski would later dedicate the project to the victims of the attacks.

Samples, motifs, structures, and thematic developments from existing recordings were slowed down, drawn out, reversed, cut up, and remixed. These were juxtaposed alongside digitally manipulated recordings of box-sealing tape, the revving engines of motorcycles, ambulance and police sirens, and gunshots, all refracted through digital manipulation. While these processes defamiliarised recognisable sounds, the compositional goals of the sound design imitated how the production approached its multiple objects of reference, extracting and reconfiguring a slew of partial objects, making use of the alienating effects of multiple modes of mediation to unsettle the established relations of these objects to one another to allow different directions to emerge. The hyper-referentiality of the selection of recordings, as well as the abrupt shifts in dynamic and register, are consistently repeated until

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these disjunctions appear to resolve into what resembles a harmonious but odious whole.

All sound needed allude to the material properties and conditions of any act of producing sound under the Duterte regime as a totalising experience that structured and organised all forms of sound or noise-making. The only appropriate response was to exert a degree of control over noise in an effort to reclaim to, to reorient it, and to utilise the language of the oppressor to express critique.

