

The Acoustics of the Archipelagic Imagination in Southeast Asian Artists' Film

How do we conceptualize films in relation? As we seek to trace the connections and affinities we see, hear, and feel across a regional cinema, what kinds of alternative cartographies (affective, aesthetic, cultural, or industrial) emerge? How do we think through and with the aesthetic practices of artists and filmmakers in a way that enables us to avoid both reinscribing arbitrary lines across territories and disavowing the specific historic and lived conditions of the nation?¹

Recent scholarship by Gayatri Gopinath and Brian Bernardts has proposed a reconceptualization of region as a spatial imaginary that is not “territorial” but rather shaped by questions of relationality and flow.² As a scholar of film sound, what strikes me about these associations is how powerfully they resonate with the political and material qualities of sound.³ In this essay, I build on my previous writing on sound, history, and memory in Asian cinema, and the important work of scholars such as Hsu Fang-Tze,

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the support of the AHRC through the network grant Southeast Asian Cinemas Research Network: Promoting Dialogue across Critical and Creative Practice (2016-2018) out of which this research emerged.
- 2 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); and Brian Bernardts, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).
- 3 See François J. Bonnet, *The Order of Sounds: A Sonorous Archipelago* (Falmouth, Urbanomic, 2016) and Jessica Swanston Baker, “Small Islands, Large Radio: Archipelagic Listening in the Caribbean,” in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking*, ed. Michelle Stephens and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 383-402.

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meLê yamomo, and Tao Leigh Goffe⁴, on “transcolonial” soundscapes and the affective resonances of audio technologies, both within and outside of the region, to suggest listening as a useful theory and method for tracing the vicissitudes of the regional, “archipelagic imagination.”⁵ In what follows, I suggest that attending to the auditory reveals how under-the-radar frequencies disrupt regimes of listening associated with empire and the nation-state. I assert that the depiction of and engagement with auditory experience thus invites a consideration of acoustic spatiality that is informed by historical studies of colonial media technologies and practices as well as writing on the acoustic experience of diaspora.⁶ Several film and media works from or about Southeast Asia exemplify these dynamics in different ways, such as *Droga!* (*Drug!*, Miko Revereza, 2014), *No Gods, No Masters* (Sung Tieu, 2017), *Nhà Cây* (*The Tree House*, Truong Minh Quỳ, 2019), and *Expedition Content* (Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati, 2020).

Focusing on two artists’ films from Southeast Asia, Nguyễn Trinh Thi’s *Everyday’s the Seventies* (2018) and Shireen Seno’s *Nervous Translation* (2017), I conceptualize regionality through the acoustic, affective, and emotional cartographies depicted in these works, both of which explore experiences of migration in and out of the region during the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ During this era, across many parts of Asia, vinyl and particularly the cassette tape could travel across borders with relative ease by both legitimate and illegitimate means. The motility of these formats enabled the formation of listening communities that flourished across and above the official borders of the state.⁸ In Nguyễn’s and Seno’s works, lo-fi analogue practices of sound production and reception work to evoke small-scale haptic and sonic intimacies that seem to lessen the protagonists’ perceived distance from home.

I propose that due to the itinerant and diffuse nature of sound, the acoustics of the archipelagic imagination allow for a consideration of Southeast Asia not as a fixed category or static entity but as a spatial imaginary shaped

4 See for example, Philippa Lovatt, “Cinema’s Spectral Sounds: Memory, History, Politics” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2011); Hsu Fang-Tze, “Cold War Acoustmètre: Artists’ Film and the First Island Chain” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Singapore, 2018); meLê yamomo, “Sonic Entanglements: Listening to Modernities in Sound Recordings of Southeast Asia, 1890–1950,” accessed June 30, 2020, <https://sonic-entanglements.com>; Tao Leigh Goffe, “Unmapping the Caribbean: Toward a Digital Praxis of Archipelagic Sounding,” *archipelagos*, Issue 5, December 2020, pp. 6–23; See especially Hsu (2018) who similarly maps out an auditory geography through her analysis of acoustmètre in artists’ film from the First Island Chain.

5 Bernards, *Writing the South Seas*, 13.

6 See Peter J. Bloom, “The Language of Counterinsurgency in Malaya: Dialectical Soundscapes of Salvage and Warfare,” in *The Colonial Documentary Film in South and South-East Asia*, ed. Ian Aitken and Camille Deprez (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 63–78; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and Trinh T. Minh-ha, “An Acoustic Journey,” in *Rethinking Borders*, ed. John C. Welchman (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 1–17.

7 For a detailed discussion of Nguyễn’s and Seno’s earlier works in relation to region, see Jasmine Nadua Trice, “Gendering National Histories and Regional Imaginaries: Three Southeast Asian Women Filmmakers,” *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 1 (2019): 11–38.

8 See Alex Sayf Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

affectively through relationality. Listening out for “transcolonial” resonances across the region, I draw from the work of Édouard Glissant and the scholars mentioned above in order to attend to the processes of contact, heterogeneity, and lateral exchange that operate at sub- and supranational levels.⁹ Against the background of larger-scale aural histories of the region, the sound design in both Nguyễn’s and Seno’s works attunes the listener to a vernacular experience of sound that is juxtaposed against larger-scale dominant and colonial modes of broadcasting.¹⁰ These dynamics are mapped out in both *Everyday’s the Seventies* and *Nervous Translation* as they foreground economic and affective labor, including the transnational flows of people and capital, alongside the networks enabled through the circulation of audio media and sonic artifacts.

Everyday’s the Seventies is an installation composed of three video and four audio channels each depicting a different form of regionalized, acoustic affect through the layering of colonial, cinematic, and personal narratives.¹¹ Through this sometimes dissonant layering of audio channels through which we encounter a multitude of voices, diegetic sound effects, music, and ambient noise, the work emphasizes the processes of contact and heterogeneity inherent in the acoustics of the archipelagic imagination. Nguyễn repurposes found footage in order to draw connections between audiovisual accounts of the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and earlier moments in the colonial histories of Vietnam and Hong Kong. One channel shows archival wire service footage of Saigon in the 1960s and 1970s and television news broadcasts of Hong Kong during the refugee crisis that followed in the 1980s and 1990s. Another plays short fragmentary bursts of footage from genre films featuring the Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Ka-fai that use exoticism or stereotyping as they mediate Vietnam’s recent history of colonialism (e.g., *L’amant*, *The Lover*, Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1992) and diaspora, with the latter category of films reflecting anti-Vietnamese and anti-refugee sentiment (e.g., *Huang jia nu jiang*, *She Shoots Straight*, Corey Yuen, 1990).

The third channel shows video recorded by Nguyễn in Hong Kong of Paul, a Chinese-Vietnamese record store owner who narrates his memories of growing up in Saigon’s Chinatown during the war and how he fled to Hong Kong at seventeen to avoid conscription just before the war ended. The record store where the recording takes place is itself an archive, housing thousands of imported and locally produced LPs, many of which bear traces of their former owners in the handwritten notes and track listings kept inside the sleeve.¹² Over these sounds and images we also hear *gangtai*, Vietnamese, and American pop music from this period. Like the archival footage that Nguyễn draws from, these sounds are also documents of cultural history that circulate across borders and extend beyond individual, personal memories of particular places and times.¹³

9 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997).

10 Regarding aural histories of Southeast Asia, see Yamomo (2020) and Hsu (2018).

11 *Everyday’s the Seventies* was first shown in this configuration at the Glasgow Short Film Festival in March 2018 with audio mixed by Ernst Karel.

12 Andrew S. Guthrie, *Paul’s Records: How a Refugee from the Vietnam War Found Success Selling Vinyl on the Streets of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2015), 110.

13 John Davis, “Going Analog: Vinylphiles and the Consumption of the ‘Obsolete’ Vinyl

As Glissant asserts, fluidity of language—and in particular what he terms its “creolization”—plays a crucial role in the postcolonial archipelagic imagination.¹⁴ In *Everyday's the Seventies*, we hear this fluidity as each of the audio channels foregrounds the politics of voice through the presence of multilingualism: plurality, accent, translation, and subtitling are all part of the work's sonic and visual texture that connects the postcolonial present of Hong Kong and Vietnam with their past. As Peter Bloom has described, English, spoken with the accent of “received pronunciation” (RP), was a key instrument of British governmentality deployed through broadcasting in the colonial era.¹⁵ In *Everyday's the Seventies*, the echoes of that colonial past still reverberate through the sounds of the RP English spoken in the archival wire service footage and in Paul's monologue, which is also spoken in English. Meanwhile, the sounds of the many languages and accents voiced in the movies in the second channel—Cantonese, Vietnamese, English, French, and Mandarin—similarly echo and historicize the movements of capital and labor through the former colonial spaces of Hong Kong and Vietnam.¹⁶ While some dialogue is subtitled, no particular language is privileged within the overall mix. Nguyễn's practice thus destabilizes hierarchies of sounding, voicing, and listening associated with dominant histories and colonial media technologies in favor of lateral connections that emphasize relationality, heterogeneity, and flow across the region.

The acoustics of relationality and postcolonial fragmentation, described above with regard to *Everyday's the Seventies*, can also be heard in Mikko Quizon's sound design for *Nervous Translation*. *Nervous Translation* is a semiautobiographical feature about Yael, an eight-year-old girl who lives alone with her mother in Manila. Her father, like thousands of other “Overseas Filipino Workers” (OFW), is employed abroad in the construction industry in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Yael's only contact with her father is through listening to his voice on the cassette tapes he sends to her mother, a practice of oral letter writing that was common among OFWs and their loved ones in the 1980s.¹⁷ The story takes place in 1987, a year after the People Power Revolution that led to the fall of the Marcos dictatorship, and the film ends with the arrival of Typhoon Unsang in 1988. As with *Everyday's the Seventies*, the sound design of *Nervous Translation* juxtaposes personal accounts of memory, acousticity, and migration with audio from dominant media forms. For instance, we learn of the wider historical and environmental events mentioned above through brief snatches of television.

Record,” in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 229.

14 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

15 Peter J. Bloom, “Elocution, Englishness, and Empire: Film and Radio in Late Colonial Ghana,” in *Modernization as Spectacle in Africa*, ed. Peter J. Bloom, Stephan F. Miescher, and Takiyawa Manuh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 137.

16 See Rey Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); and Pooja Rangan, “The Skin of the Voice: Acoustic Illusions, Ventriloquial Listening,” in *Sound Objects*, ed. James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 130–148.

17 Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, “Crafting Love: Letters and Cassette Tapes in Transnational Filipino Communication,” in “Mediated Diasporas: Material Translations of the Philippines in a Globalized World,” ed. Mark Johnson and Deirdre McKay, special issue, *Southeast Asia Research* 19, no. 2 (2011): 249–272.

Short bursts of audio—of news reports, Yael’s father’s voice, television shows, and indie music—all evoke a soundscape of fragmentation and dispersal as if replicating the lived experience of OFW families of this time. Like the fragments of dialogue and music in *Everyday’s the Seventies*, this soundscape speaks broadly to the archipelagic imagination and the wider experience of migration and diaspora across the region.

While most of *Nervous Translation*’s dialogue is in Tagalog, Yael’s mother prioritizes her learning English, which is the language associated with elevated social and economic status in the film—and is another auditory reference to Southeast Asia’s colonial past that connects Seno’s and Nguyễn’s works. As Seno explains, “This mind-set is a direct result of our colonial past. After all, how can you unite an archipelago of some 7,000 islands, where there are 12 major languages?”¹⁸ As its title denotes, the act of translation is a central motif in the film. However, although the dialogue switches between Tagalog and English at certain points, rather than focusing on the act of translation itself, Seno uses the term metaphorically to address connections she sees between the experience of the Filipino diaspora and commodity culture under capitalism. “Nervous Translation” refers to a magic pen that Yael sees advertised on Japanese television that promises to bring her a “beautiful human life.”¹⁹ Here translation is not literal, but the pen is a commodity that is marketed through its ability to “translate nervous thoughts.” A reference to Seno’s own autobiographical experiences of being a child growing up in the diaspora, through the logic of capitalism, the pen promises to “translate” the anxiety of “not belonging” that manifests itself in different ways throughout the film as objects take the place of absent people.

Similarly, in rendering the phenomenology of the home, as Hannah Paveck has observed, the sound design places emphasis on the sonic textures of isolated objects and surfaces that resonate within in it, such as the monotonous tick-tock of the clock in the living room, Yael’s echoing footsteps across the tiled floor, or the latch on the door of her miniature toy stove.²⁰ The sonic metaphor of surface plays out in the film when Yael verbally lists the sounds that she can hear: the ring of the telephone, the ceiling fan, the air conditioner. Through the layering and looping of each vocalization in the aural mix, her voice resonates and harmonizes with itself as she transcribes each sonic detail in her notebook. In this way, the sound design of *Nervous Translation* similarly plays with spatial, affective, and emotional constructs of proximity and distance as it amplifies a sense of fragmentation—depicting the acoustic space of the home as one of isolation rather than community and comfort.

In their emphasis on the oral and acoustic—categories at the heart of Glissant’s poetics of relation—both *Everyday’s the Seventies* and *Nervous*

18 Andrew Northrop, “The Spaces That Inhabit Us: Shireen Seno on *Nervous Translation*,” Kinoscope, December 7, 2018, <https://read.kinoscope.org/2018/12/07/the-spaces-that-inhabit-us-shireen-seno-on-nervous-translation/>.

19 Japan occupied the Philippines between 1942 and 1945.

20 Hannah Paveck, “Wonder in Miniature: Shireen Seno’s *Nervous Translation*,” *Another Gaze*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.anothergaze.com/wonder-miniature-shireen-senos-nervous-translation-feminist-review/>.

Translation share some characteristics with what Hamid Naficy describes as “epistolary films,” about which he writes, “Electronic epistolary media, such as the telephone, answering machine . . . audiocassette, and video cassette, are widely employed, resulting in fragmented, multifocal, multivocal, and emotional narratives.”²¹ Like the films Naficy writes about, both Nguyễn’s and Seno’s works address the physical and haptic nature of the audio technology: the grooves on the vinyl, the magnetic tape of the cassette, and the satisfying “clunk” of the play button that Yael repeatedly presses on the boom box in order to access her father’s voice on the cassette tape love letters he has recorded for her mother. These devices suggest a lessening of physical distance—an imagined proximity to that which the protagonists long for, a sense of home that is as much sensory and emotional as literal.²²

Listening enables a way of conceptualizing region not as a static entity but as a spatial imaginary shaped by affect, relationality, flow—and even perhaps an imagined proximity—as the expansiveness of the sonic allows for a perception of embodied space that works outside of frameworks of territories and borders. As Nguyễn and Seno’s works show, attending to the acoustics of the archipelagic imagination allows us to trace processes of contact, heterogeneity, and lateral exchange that are informed by transcolonial histories and by shared experiences of diaspora and migration, across and beyond Southeast Asia.

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21 Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 104.

22 See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 12.