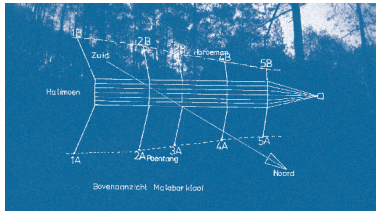
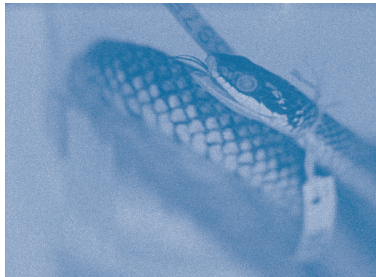


LISTENING TO UNHEARD VOICES

What we perceive as “sound” is merely a series of vibrations, arranged in such a way that gives them meaning to our brains. Some vibrations are informative, others disturbing. Some are pleasing to our ears. Our sense of hearing is a versatile instrument on its own, but we don’t rely on it as much as our sight. Why is that?

Before there was writing, humanity relied on oral records to pass on our stories. Sound used to be our primary means of storytelling. Now, not so much. You’re probably as aware as I am that we live in an increasingly visual-centric culture. But even amidst this hypervisual world, some artists still try to remind us of the importance of sound, such as the following four.

MERCURY CINEMA, ADELAIDE
THURSDAY, 8 AUGUST 2024, 6.30PM



DOCUMENTARY FILM SOCIETY
& SAMSTAG SCREENING

In his work NAMA, F.X. Harsono highlights the Indonesian saying, “A name is a prayer.” This film reflects on the Suharto administration (1967-1998), during which Chinese Indonesians were coerced to abandon their culture and change their names. The repetition of names, sung aloud in a choir, creates a powerful auditory experience that underscores the weight of history and memory, reminding us of the erasure and silencing of marginalised communities.

Reflecting on her own history, Vietnamese artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi’s How to Improve the World advocates for a culture of the “ear” rather than the “eye,” challenging viewers to consider whether they trust sounds or images more. Nguyễn seeks a more sensitive approach to perceiving the world, resisting the narrative power of visual imagery and focusing more on aural landscapes. Using traditional music and natural sounds, the film’s structure mimics the non-linear, cyclical nature of oral traditions.

Meanwhile, Sriwhana Spong’s having-seen-snake explores Balinese spiritual practices and their connection to contemporary life. Juxtaposing the artist’s personal encounter with a garter snake and an interview about the discovery of a new species of snake in the Amazon, the film discusses how designating a name to something brings it from the unspoken into the spoken realm. Blending ritual sounds, traditional music, and abstract visuals; its fragmented narrative and experimental editing evoke the fluid nature of spiritual experiences.

Lastly, Riar Rizaldi’s Tellurian Drama explores the interaction between humans and nature, focusing on Radio Malabar at Mount Puntang. Built on Indigenous Indonesian land by the colonial Dutch government, this radio station – equipped with the most powerful arc transmitter in the world at the time – was made to transmit audio waves from Indonesia to the Netherlands. This story underscores the complex interplay between colonial geoeengineering technology, Indigenous sovereignty and the natural environment.

These four films use sound in creative ways to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge. Reflecting on them, we see the power of art to bridge cultural and historical gaps, creating spaces for dialogue and understanding. Harsono, Nguyễn, Spong, and Rizaldi each offer unique views on identity, history, spirituality, and the environment; reminding us of the importance of listening to and honouring the voices of the marginalised.

Most films are made to be watched. These four require us to listen.

HAVING-SEEN-SNAKE
SRIWHANA SPONG

TELLURIAN DRAMA
RIAR RIZALDI

HOW TO IMPROVE THE WORLD
NGUYEN TRINH THI

AUSHAF WIDISTO

This essay has been commissioned for
the Kudlila Season / FX Harsono



SAMSTAG

