

Chapter 8

Intimacy in Ethnographic Film

Listening to *How to Improve the World* by Nguyễn Trinh Thi

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Introduction

Towards the end of John Baily's film *Amir* (1985) there is a 'moment of truth', which serves as an affective denouement. This takes place when Amir, an Afghan musician living in exile in Peshawar who is the main protagonist of the film, visits a shrine dedicated to the Sufi saint Rahman Baba. At the shrine, he expresses the distress at having to live far from his homeland and reflects on the tragic death of his young daughter, who he says, 'is buried here, a refugee, a foreigner'. Amir briefly breaks down into tears. Claspings his hands over his eyes to wipe away the tears, he says, 'I can't bear it. I am far from my kinsmen. Far from my home. I am a stranger here. No-one knows us here. I want Afghanistan to be free so I can go home. I want nothing more'. Explaining the significance of this shot, John Baily suggests it is a 'powerful statement about the universal predicament of the refugee' (Baily 1990, 14). In the filmmaker's reading, Amir's anguish broadens out to the collective; personal tragedy and longing become an expression of the refugee experience writ large. Shortly after his visit to the shrine, we see Amir playing the *rubab*, the Afghan national instrument, for a small group of fellow musicians and friends in a domestic setting. Baily interprets this performance, which closes the film, as 'a cathartic expression of Amir's state of mind, perhaps another "moment of truth"' (Baily 1990, 14). The framing of the performance encourages the listener to connect the music to Amir's innermost thoughts and feelings. Framed by Amir's pain and longing, the final long shot of his playing becomes imbued with the plight of exile.

Amir has long been celebrated as a classic portrait film in an observational style (Loizos 1995, 85-87), and the 'moments of truth' are powerful examples of filmic intimacy. Immediacy and closeness are conjured through the camera movement and close ups during the 'moment of truth' scenes. At key moments Amir's head fills the entire frame and the intimate setting of his performance is conveyed with close-up

pans that move along the length of the *rubab* and between Amir and the small group of listeners who are relaxing in the room.

Intimacy in nonfiction films might be understood as operating along three intersecting planes: first, in the relationships between the filmmakers and the people and places filmed; second, in the forms of audiovisual intimacy that are integrated into the film's narrative; third, in the impact films have on audiences by generating 'a sense of virtual intimacy' (Biella 2009, 145). In *Amir* there is a relaxed rapport and a degree of reflexivity in the relationship between filmmakers and filmed, which enables the musicians to share their music, emotions and conditions of exile. Intimacy in the film's narrative is rooted in a sensitive portrait of Amir. Long shots of musical and social situations bring the viewer into intimate contact with Afghan musicians. The sense of virtual intimacy gained through watching *Amir* is likely to have contributed to its success, although, to my knowledge, its impact on audiences has not been studied extensively.

Films by ethnomusicologists that evoke intimacy have tended to focus more on the documentation of public rituals, rather than private moments like those we see in *Amir*. Steven Feld's *A Por Por Funeral for Ashirifie* (2009), for instance, documents the funeral of a prominent member of a union transport worker in Accra, Ghana. Featuring the 'por por' sounds of antique squeeze-bulb car horns, the funeral is shot in a 'fly on the wall' style and shows the public expression of grief, rather than the individual stories of participants. In the quite different context of the Peruvian Andes, Holly Wissler's film *From Grief to Joy We Sing* (2007) also includes arresting shots of mourning, focusing on a brother and sister, Victor and Juana Flores Salas, grief-singing in their home. In a discussion of the ethics of representation in her film, Wissler notes that she was initially unsure about including shots of personal grief-singing, but her nervousness was assuaged by Victor and Juana's ease while she was filming and by the fact that grief-singing for Q'eros communities is part of a ritual framework that supports the public expression of loss through singing (Wissler 2009, 46).

To provide some theoretical contextualisation, the next section briefly discusses some of the scholarship on intimacy and ethnographic film. I then explore how intimacies are manifested in *How to Improve the World/Cải tiến Thế giới* (2021) by the Vietnamese filmmaker Nguyễn Trinh Thi. As well as producing a linear 47-

minute film, Thi created a multiscreen ‘sound and video installation’ version of *How to Improve the World*, which was displayed at Manzi Exhibition Space in Hanoi (December 2020-January 2021). Due to space constraints only the film will be discussed in this chapter, although an image from the installation is included as Figure 8.2. In keeping with Benjamin Harbert’s aim of developing ‘a critical cinema of music’, I discuss Thi’s film as a cultural expression rooted in ‘a type of visual and aural theorizing’ (Harbert 2018, 21 and 245). My analysis incorporates insights about the filmmaking process gained from an interview I conducted with Thi on 15 August 2022.¹ Nguyễn Trinh Thi’s moving-image work often straddles the artistic and the ethnographic, and my reflections on *How to Improve the World* concentrate on the intimate ways the film engages with the ethics of ethnographic filmmaking and indigenous experiences of sound, place, music and listening.

Exploring filmic intimacy

To intimate is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared (Berlant 1998, 281).

Lauren Berlant’s influential characterisation of intimacy suggests an inherent tension when applied to film. Intimacy may be communicated with ‘the sparsest of signs and gestures’, yet when it becomes ‘something shared’ through the medium of film it is amplified and gains semiotic complexity. Intimate stories are necessarily conveyed in film narratives through a surfeit of signs, even when the way they are shot and edited gives the impression of being sparse and authentically attached to the inner lives of others. Many of the most intimate moments in film, from Hollywood to documentary, gain their power through giving the illusion of unfettered access to the intimate sphere of another (Roche and Schmitt-Pitiot 2014).

¹ My interview with Nguyễn Trinh Thi took place remotely online. Thi and I have known each other since the 1990s and I have watched her filmmaking career blossom since the 2000s. Of the many exchanges over the years, Thi presented three of her films and led a research seminar on ‘Experimentation in nonfiction filmmaking’ at Goldsmiths in March 2016. My thanks to Thi for agreeing to be interviewed ‘on the record’ and for your inspiring friendship over many years.

Berlant is concerned with the publicness of intimacy, with how intimacy ‘links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective’ (1998, 284), and is interested in the challenges intimate relationships pose to the configuration of the public/private taxonomy. Serving as a bridge between the private and public, non-fiction screen media frequently connect intimate portrayals of individual lives to the collective. As in *Amir*, an everyday moment of intimacy can become particularly striking and affecting due to it being captured and publicly shared in film.

Observational and essayistic approaches offer numerous possibilities for conveying a sense of intimacy in film. Techniques like close ups, long shots, video diaries and personal voice-over narrations are commonly used by filmmakers to give the impression of closeness and interiority. Writing on intimacy in ethnographic film has mainly focused on personal narratives conveyed through video diaries and private screen recordings (Bates 2014) and on feminist and queer methodologies and approaches (Merryman 2020). Peter Biella makes the case that film intimacies enhance awareness and compassion amongst audiences, which can lead to political action against racist, sexist and militarist ideologies (Biella 2009). He explores the little researched area of the social impact of visual ethnography on audiences and the applied uses of ethnographic film in political struggles. Warning of the potential dangers of audiences misreading intimacy, Biella argues that media-based analysis is necessary to ensure that film intimacies are not misunderstood through stereotypical readings and are a spur for action rather than complacency (Biella 2009, 158).

The mediated nature of intimate stories in film often becomes more noticeable when image-sound relations are creatively handled and when sounds are heightened in ways that enhance or disrupt profilmic ‘reality’. This can be seen in Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki’s film *El Mar La Mar* (2017), which uses various forms of formal experimentation, combining images of the Sonoran Desert near the US/Mexico border with haptic soundscapes and voice-overs from migrants and others who live on the border (Wright 2020, 53-55; Kasic 2020, 180-181). Discussing the reasons why the faces of the people speaking are not shown, Sniadecki suggests that, ‘listening to a voice in a darkened space, leads to a different intimacy. A lot of audience members have said they feel more attuned to these voices because they’re not standard talking heads over images acting as B-roll’ (Erickson 2018, n.p.). A focus on sound stripped from indexical images is also apparent in the sensorial

approach of the film *disorient* (2010) by Laurent Van Lancker and Florence Aigner. Radically experimenting with materiality, decontextualisation and asynchronicity, *disorient* weaves together voices of migrants who are never shown physically on screen, as ‘a way of creating a corporeal link between the spectator and the protagonists without the need of visualization’ (Van Lancker 2013, 145).²

Anthropological and critical theory work on intimacy (e.g. Herzfeld 1997, Berlant 1998) has fed into ethnomusicology in large part due to Martin Stokes’ book on cultural intimacy in Turkish popular music (Stokes 2010). Following Stokes, other ethnomusicologists who have written books linking musical intimacy with broad socio-political formations include Byron Dueck (2013) and Anna Stirr (2017).³ Despite such ethnomusicological interest in intimacy, attention to the audiovisual as a springboard for understanding social, cultural and political struggles involving music and sound is less common. An indication of the potential of analysing audiovisual material, however, is suggested in recent research by Martin Stokes and Benjamin Harbert. Martin Stokes’ article on the postcolonial politics of gesture in filmed performances of the Egyptian singer Abd al-Halim Hafiz considers the place of sentimental gesture in discourses about modernity (Stokes 2020).⁴ Hafiz’s sentimental gestures, in Stokes’ reading, speak to struggles over two distinct Arab modernisms,

² Laurent Van Lancker suggests his sensorial approach is like ‘filmmaking as a painter’, which ‘requires considering sound and image in all their sensory and synaesthetic possibilities - different materials become the pallet at my disposal, to use to convey sensations, impressions, and intentions’ (Van Lancker 2013, 146). In *disorient*, the pallet includes: radical asynchronicity between sound and image; engaging with materiality through using different formats like super 8, photography and DV video, which are manipulated (scratched, chemically treated etc) for ‘haptic effect’ (Van Lancker 2013, 147); and decontextualisation in which migrants are ‘not named or signposted’ so ‘they are more human, closer to us, than if they are signaled as examples’ (Van Lancker 2013, 148-149).

³ Dueck highlights how intimate relationships shared through expressive practices in the aboriginal music scene in the Canadian province of Manitoba are dialectically linked to social imaginaries, which enable Manitoban aboriginal people to develop and contest various forms of publicness (Dueck 2013). Anna Stirr's book on the ‘intimate politics’ of *dohori* song performance in Nepal links the media circulation and performance of *dohori* song to everyday political struggles (Stirr 2017). The political dimensions of sonic intimacy are also central to a book about alternative cultural politics and black diasporic sound cultures in the UK by Malcolm James (2021). Writing from a cultural studies perspective, James argues that a relational analysis of sonic intimacy contributes to understanding the ways in which ‘sound cultures sustain alternative registers of human life to that re-scripted in dominant racial capitalism’ (James 2021, 25).

⁴ Expanding upon his notion of ‘sentimental gesture’, Martin Stokes equates the sentimental with performativity in two senses: ‘Firstly, performativity in which emotion is self-conscious, reflexive, staged’; ‘Secondly, performativity that is ‘modern’, entangled with the modern world’s anxieties about emotion, their mediation and their authenticity’ (2020, 187). In contrast to hi-tech investigations of gesture in much analytically inclined music research, Stokes interprets the intimate details of ‘emphatic mimeticism’ and ‘mechanical repetition’ of Abd al-Halim Hafiz’s gestures - for example, repetitive eye, hand and body movements that mimic words of the lyrics - as pointing to cultural and political tensions and unsettling questions about modernity in Egypt and across the Arab world.

one ‘transgressive and sexualized’ and the other ‘urbane and sentimental’ (Stokes 2020, 195). Stokes’ ideas about sentimental gesture point to the value of thinking about musical performativity when considering intimacy in audiovisual media.

Without explicitly referring to intimacy, Benjamin Harbert touches on related areas in his discussion of ‘musical vicarities’ in documentary films that enable ‘the experience of occupying the perspective of another’ (Harbert 2018, 76). Exploring the different subject-positions that influence the audience’s emotional connections to musicians and music, Harbert states that vicarity takes two forms: inner and outer vicarity, one focused more on the ‘interior life of another’ and the other spanning out to ‘social positioning’ and ‘relations within a system of power’ (Harbert 2018, 76). In his analysis of Jill Godmilow’s film, *Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman* (1974) about the female conductor Antonia Brico, Harbert suggests that ‘vicarity is an important part of feeling the fractured ways of being a woman conductor, of sensing a relation to Brico and Brico’s relation to her world and her history’ (Harbert 2018, 79). The way Brico’s narrative is shot and edited, Harbert argues, encourages the audience to enter different subject positions and reassess the gendered power dynamics and meanings of orchestral music. Relatedly, the following discussion of *How to Improve the World* reflects on the ways in which intimate relationships and filming/editing choices encourage audiences to think about asymmetrical power relations and entrenched hierarchies between aural and visual cultures.

Intimacy and listening in *How to Improve the World* by Nguyễn Trinh Thi

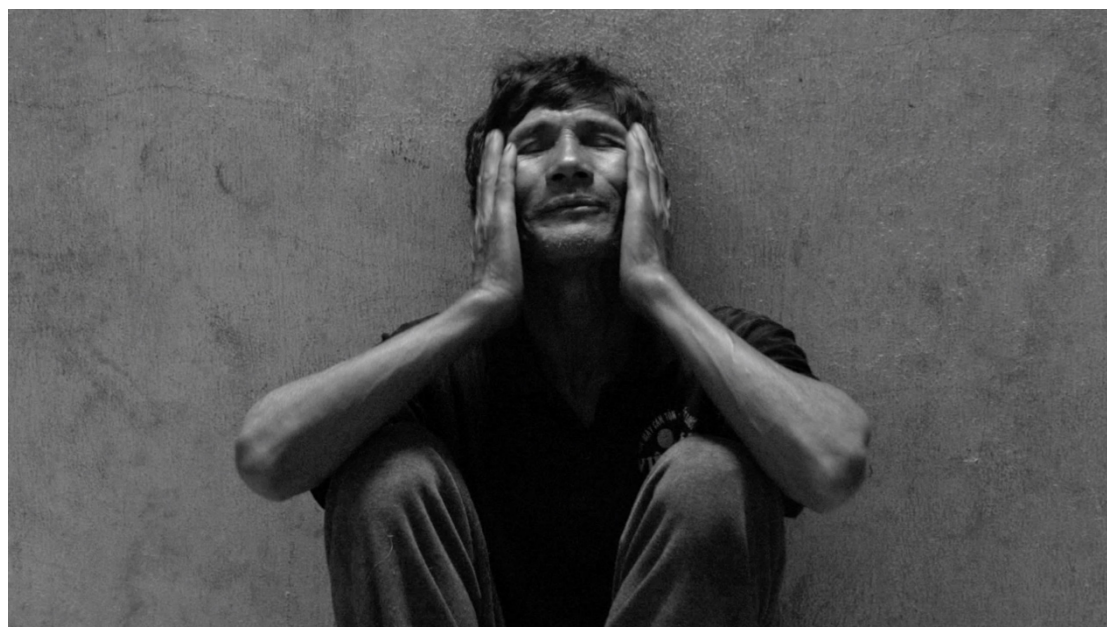
Nguyễn Trinh Thi is a Hanoi-based artist whose critically acclaimed films have received attention from a number of scholars (e.g. Taylor 2015, Rascaroli 2017, Ingawanij 2019, Lovatt 2021). This research usefully positions Thi’s essay films and her other sound/image-making practices in the context of the instrumentalisation, marketisation and globalisation of artistic production in Vietnam since the economic reforms of the ‘Renovation Policy’ in 1986. May Adadol Ingawanij suggests that, ‘Nguyen’s essay films experiment with creating an aesthetics of potentiality that shift the actualized past of cinematic and visual production and the formation of the modern artist in Vietnam into the realm of contingency’ (2019, 162). One of Thi’s essay film’s, *Letters from Panduranga* (2015), which features a voice-over based on

an exchange of letters between a man and a woman, is also analysed in Laura Rascaroli's book *How the Essay Film Thinks* (2017). Rascaroli argues that the film's essayistic qualities as an interstitial audiovisual text are grounded in a 'narrative strategy of profound disjunction, barely concealed by the stratagem of the intimate epistolary exchange' (Rascaroli 2017, 154).

In *Letters from Panduranga*, Thi struggled with the ethics of making a film about Cham people and culture in the province of Ninh Thuận, which was formerly part of the Panduranga kingdom of the historic Champa civilisation. Eventually she settled on a reflexive, personal exchange between two correspondents, which allowed for ethical and political issues to be raised and problematised. When filming amongst Jarai communities for *How to Improve the World*, Thi was faced with similar representational and ethical problems, but her creative response is quite different. Rather than using an epistolary device, the narrative of *How to Improve the World* is inspired by the aesthetics of listening in Jarai culture, and an attentiveness to sound and listening is embedded in the film's approach.

How to Improve the World was shot in several Jarai villages in the province of Gia Lai in the Vietnamese Central Highlands in 2020. A central narrative thread in the film is provided by a Jarai elder and musician called Ksor Sep, or Sep for short. The shots of Sep talking and performing that are interweaved throughout the film are rendered in black and white (see Figure 8.1). This was done for technical reasons as there were problems with light in the room, but the use of black and white also serves to visually distinguish Sep's narrative from the colour images of the rest of the film.

Figure 8.1: A still of Ksor Sep from *How to Improve the World* (courtesy of Nguyễn Trinh Thi).



The theme of listening is set up early in the film when we hear Sep speaking in the Jarai language about an ‘ear blowing ritual’ (called *ponan*) traditionally carried out for new-born babies. No subtitles are provided when Sep speaks so audiences who do not know Jarai are required to listen to the sound of the words without knowing their meaning. After Sep stops speaking, another Jarai musician sitting next to him, Ro Cham Tih, or Tih for short, is asked by Thi (who speaks off-screen) to help with translation, and he provides a summary in Vietnamese that is subtitled in English. Tih tells us that the ritual, which includes blowing through a bamboo pipe into the ears of newborns, used to be carried out so that babies would ‘know how to listen’.

Thi faced numerous ethical issues when making the film, in part due to her position as a member of the Viet or Kinh majority. Reflecting on these issues during our interview, Thi said she felt the need to change herself, to change her habitual ways of ‘perceiving things’. As she learnt more about the value placed on listening in Jarai culture, she endeavoured to ‘pay attention to things through listening’ and to make a film that integrated Jarai ways of perceiving human and more-than-human sound. During the filming, Thi recorded the sound, not the images, which were shot

by her partner Jamie Maxtone-Graham and another young filmmaker Tạ Minh Đức. This helped her to concentrate on gaining cultural understanding through listening.

The importance of the ear and listening in Jarai culture, in comparison to the predominance of the eye and on viewing in many cultures, is returned to throughout the film. In contrast to comments from Thi's teenage daughter, An, about how she trusts images more than sounds, Sep says he prefers sounds to images. He describes remembering through listening, rather than looking. Recalling one of his aural memories as a young boy, Sep reminisces about planting crops with his parents and taking care of cows on land, which has since been taken by people belonging to the Viet or Kinh majority. Remarking on the environmental degradation and land dispossession that had occurred during his lifetime, he says: 'There was so much land! Now we don't have land anymore! There was every kind of birds and animals. The *Kinhs* have taken it all! The land, the fields, all have been gone. There was a lot before! There were rabbits. There were tigers. In the old days. They have all gone!'.

These comments point to the marginalisation and dispossession of the Jarai and other indigenous minorities, which have taken place in the context of increasing migration of Kinh people to the Central Highlands over the last few decades. The title of the film, which references John Cage's *Diary: How to Improve the World (You will only make matters worse)* (2019 [1992]), obliquely refers to the long history of destructive interventions by 'outsiders' on indigenous minority cultures. In relation to the film's title, Thi commented that cultural loss was often the result of the actions of arrogant outsiders, who intervened under the guise of trying to improve the lives of indigenous communities. Acutely aware of her positionality, Thi wanted to avoid following the same path as previous interventions that had 'made matters worse'.

During our interview, Thi said that Sep and Tih initially seemed to respond to her like she was a 'client'. Influenced by previous interactions with other Kinh people, Sep and Tih would ask Thi whether she wanted them to wear traditional dress and how they should perform in front of the camera. In an effort to overcome such expectations, Thi strove to establish a more equitable relationship based on 'returning agency'. Rather than telling them what to do, she asked them what they would like her to do. Thi said Sep and Tih initially found this 'strange', but over time more trust and understanding developed which enabled them to move beyond long established precedents and to collaborate more freely.

Intimacy was a crucial part of Thi's efforts to overcome a transactional, client-like dynamic during the filming process. When I asked Thi about intimacy, she responded, 'When I was making films, I never really thought in a conscious way about intimacy, but if you ask me about that [...] I think that [intimacy] is maybe the most important thing that I need to have to be able to make a film [...] I have to find an intimate connection, either to a character or an issue or some feeling, that I have to feel really intimately connected to, it has to affect me'. Elaborating on how trust and intimacy had shaped *How to Improve the World*, she added: 'My first edit was different, and I was using more found footage, but I keep going back [to the Central Highlands] and getting more material [...] At some point, I realised I wanted to focus more on Sep and I think that is partly or mainly because of this intimate feeling. I felt [...] through him, through his life and his story, his voice, you could feel this story in a more personal way'.

Sep's comments about land dispossession and radical ecological change during his lifetime speak to a long history of subordination and extractivism in the Central Highlands.⁵ Although the film is not directly polemical about environmental exploitation and change, it subtly brings ecological issues to the fore through its attention to the ecology of human and nonhuman sound and the sonic evocation of place. The narrative is punctuated with shots of the surrounding landscape, like hills, waterways, forests, as well as everyday ritual activities taking place in Jarai villages. Many of these shots are creatively edited using split screens and/or asynchronous sound. For example, audio is entirely removed from some landscape shots, and, conversely, ambient sounds are sometimes heard over a black screen. Such editing challenges the viewer/listener to question what is being shown and why. Through prioritising more-than-human environmental sounds, like the sounds of insects, buffalos, wind and rain, the soundtrack takes an ecological approach that immerses listeners in the sonic environment. Ambient sounds – such as dense sounds of everyday village life, of murmuring crowds, of gongs and other instruments being moved and tuned in preparation for the grave-abandoning ceremony – are given as much prominence as music performances and speech. Most of the music performances are presented with in-sync sound, and background sounds are usually

⁵ For more on official policies and 'environmental rule' in Vietnam see McElwee (2016).

co-present in the recording context. But the sound design at some points creates ambiguity about whether ambient sound is co-present in the direct sound or whether multiple sonic layers are used for cinematic effect.

At times, sonic layering blurs the boundaries between music and environmental sound, veering towards what Holly Rogers has termed ‘sonic elongation’ (Rogers 2020). This refers to when ‘film sound is treated creatively to such an extent that it dissolves into musical timbres and structures yet retains a strong and quasi-synchronous hold over its image’ (Rogers 2020, 90). In *How to Improve the World*, ‘the creative transfiguration of sound into music’ (Rogers 2020, 89) arises in a long shot (11’19”-12’25”) of local people building a large church. In-sync sounds of chatter and construction mingle with an audio track of gong sounds, which is extended from the preceding shot. The construction sounds are kept in-sync with the images, but the percussive sounds of the building work become quasi-musical as they dissolve into the pitched musical texture of the gongs. In another sequence, ambient sound is replaced entirely with gong sounds, which take on an environmental quality through the way they are combined with images. The sequence consists of several shots of bushes moving in the wind and rain (41’14”-41’54”) combined with a soundtrack of gongs being tuned and a performance of a fast, interlocking gong pattern. As the pace of the music increases and the bushes shake in the wind and rain more vigorously (intensified by camera shots that judder and move in-and-out of focus), the gong sounds mimic the flora and weather, as if they have morphed into environmental sounds. Earlier in the film, the close links between Jarai music and the weather are mentioned by the musician Ro Cham Tih. Over a split screen of the hills of an old volcano and the muffled sound of wind and other sounds of nature (4’19”-4’56”), Tih explains in a voice-over that a raspy sustained sound, created by a special bowing technique on a chordophone, was said to be ‘like the wind, the storm’.

The performances of music in the film are in stark contrast to predominant representations of Jarai culture in the state-controlled Vietnamese media. Oscar Salemink’s research on indigenous cultures in the Central Highlands notes that most gong ensembles have been severed from their traditional contexts and replaced by staged performances that are authorised and controlled by the Vietnamese state (Salemink 2016). Following the proclamation of ‘The Space of Gong Culture’ as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2005, the Vietnamese government has

enthusiastically promoted mass-mediated parades and festivals in which different gong troupes wearing colourful ‘ethnic’ dress compete against each other. Salemink argues that such festivals in the Central Highlands have transformed ‘the “culture bearers” into spectacles, while dispossessing them of their ownership over their cultural objects and lives’ (2016, 338). The gong processions and circle dancing of the grave-abandoning ceremony shown in *How to Improve the World* take place outside, in village settings, without elaborate festival staging. A particularly intimate performance of a song connected to preparations for the grave-abandoning ceremony is sung by Sep in his home to an accompaniment played by Tih on the *ting ning* tube zither (15’19”-18’38”). This duet, like an earlier one they performed on the *ting ning* and *k’ni* (7’06”-8’28”), is filmed using close camerawork with a haptic quality: the camera almost brushes against the bodies of the performers and musical instruments.

The film offers glimpses of traditional music as it currently exists in people’s lives and ritual practices, but it also refers to other cultural forces that are having a strong impact on Jarai traditions. These include an influx of popular culture, which is signalled in passing when we hear a Vietnamese pop song playing in the background to a village scene, and the strong influence of Christianity. A long shot of congregational singing in a church (see Figure 8.2), which includes an accompaniment on a set of gongs suspended in a rack, reveals how gong music has gained new spiritual resonances in Christian services.

Figure 8.2: Image by Nguyễn Thế Sơn of the ‘sound and video installation’ version of *How to Improve the World* at Manzi Exhibition Space in Hanoi (December 2020-January 2021). The two screens display images that also appear in the film: a landscape shot of a hill, and a row of Jarai women singing in a Christian church service.



Most indigenous minorities in the Central Highlands converted to various denominations of evangelical Christianity after 1975. In the context of disruptive collectivist reforms in the late 1970s, followed by capitalist market reforms since the 1980s, Oscar Salemink suggests that Christianity became an ‘existential safe haven’ (2016, 330) for indigenous minorities. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese government has sought to clamp down on Christian communities in the Central Highlands, and some groups do not wish to, or are prevented from, connecting their gong heritage to their Christian services (Salemink 2016, 332-334). As can be seen in *How to Improve the World*, however, gongs have been integrated into the liturgy of some churches in the Central Highlands.

In many areas, Christianity has swept away indigenous traditions connected to animist spirits like grave-abandoning ceremonies and epic storytelling. In the film, Sep says that, due to the influence of Christianity, he had forgotten traditional epic stories because he had stopped singing them at evening gatherings. These storytelling

evenings involved communal drinking of locally brewed rice wine, using pipes from an earthenware jar, but they no longer take place due to Christian prohibitions against alcohol. When Sep was younger, he had been drawn to becoming a shaman through visits from *yang* animist spirits and, although he never became a shaman due to a bad omen received in a dream, he was one of the last people in his family to convert to Christianity. In the film, Sep discusses why *yang* spirits no longer visit him: ‘before I joined the church, *yangs* used to come in the house. Since I’ve gone to church, the spirits have stopped coming in. *Yangs* don’t dare to come in anymore! I’m with the church now!’. The long shot of congregational singing in the film suggests, perhaps, that Sep retains some ambivalence about the impact of Christianity. After showing a row of women singing in the church (see Figure 8.2), the focus of the shot shifts to some men at the end a row, and there we see Sep standing near an open doorway, gazing outside. He looks disengaged and, unlike the rest of the congregation, he does not sing.

One of the most arresting sequences of the film appears towards the end (41’58”-44’12”) when we see Sep making gestures that imitate the carving of a ‘crying monkey’ wooden statue.⁶ This statue is prominent in the grave-abandoning ceremony and is usually made for the deceased by close family members. Sep’s arm and hand gestures are rendered in slow motion black-and-white, with a blurring effect like that produced when filming with a slow shutter speed. As Sep moves – for instance, when he dangles his arms from side to side in a crouching position like a sad monkey, or when he covers his eyes and ears with his hands (see Figure 8.1) – the slow-motion blurring effects draw attention to the trajectory and temporality of the movements. The asynchronous soundtrack to these gestures uses audio of Sep singing laments, recorded on a separate occasion when he demonstrated the different ways that women and men cry when mourning. The soundtrack’s flow of laments is creatively edited. Song is interwoven with some abrupt moments of silence, with snippets of verbal exchange between Sep and the filmmakers, and with ambient human and environmental sounds, particularly the sound of cicadas, which at some points increase in volume to become as prominent as Sep’s voice. The sequence is open to different interpretations; it does not attempt to determine the meaning of the

⁶ Personal communication Nguyễn Trinh Thi, 15 August 2022.

gestures, and their connection to the ‘sad monkey’ statue is not made explicit. But the soundtrack encourages the audience to see Sep’s gestures as an expression of sadness and grief. The images bring the viewer close to Sep’s body and his emotionally charged, stylised movements, while the audio immerses the listener in the gendered melodies of mourning. The images and sounds of Sep are rooted in tradition but their experimental treatment in the film seem to entangle them with ‘modern’ forms of performativity (Stokes 2020), which are fraught with anxieties about cultural authenticity and loss. The verbal and musical interactions included in the soundtrack create distance and reflexively position Sep’s performativity; what is being seen and heard is mediated through audiovisual experimentation but has arisen from intimate encounters between Sep and the filmmakers.

Conclusion

Building collaborative relationships based on respect, trust and integrity has been cited as one of the distinctive aspects of ethnographic filmmaking (Vannini 2020, 8; Merryman 2020, 128) and the ways that intimacies are embedded in audiovisual ethnography deserves further exploration. Film intimacies can take many forms and can be generated through different audiovisual strategies, from the observational to the experimental, as we have seen in John Baily’s *Amir* and Nguyễn Trinh Thi’s *How to Improve the World*. These two films are separated by nearly 40 years and, in this time, ethnographic filmmaking has expanded to encompass a diverse range of approaches, including the observational, essayistic, artistic, sensory, collaborative, experimental and multimodal (see Vannini 2020). In the context of the climate crisis, the growth of sound art and sound studies over the last few decades have also led to increased historical, ethnographic and artistic exploration of the human and more-than-human sounds of the natural world (e.g. Browning 2021; Collins 2012; Peterson and Brennan 2020; Robinson 2020).

Although *Amir* and *How to Improve the World* were produced in different historical, scholarly and aesthetic contexts and are very different in style and approach, both films are rooted in intimate relationships and connect individual narratives to the collective. A focus on sound and music is also central to the mediation of intimacy. Audiences are encouraged to listen closely to *Amir* and *Sep*,

and to the places where they live, as a means of gaining cultural understanding and awareness of ethical and political issues, like the plight of Afghan refugees and the sustainability of the environment and indigenous cultures in Vietnam. An attunement to Jarai aural culture was part of Thi's approach to filmmaking in the context of stark power asymmetries in Vietnam between majority and minority cultures. In contrast to outside interventions that haven ridden roughshod over the aural culture of the Jarai, *How to Improve the World* urges us to listen to indigenous, ecologically oriented ways of knowing and remembering through sound. Through formal and aesthetic experimentation, the film questions how we listen and who we listen to. Inspired by a collaborative ethos, the film's audiovisual experimentation challenges conventional sound-image hierarchies and rigid distinctions between human and more-than-human sounds. Ethical tensions are not entirely resolved through such collaborations, rather they become a productive source of personal, creative and aesthetic exchange. Such openness to collaboration based on intimate relationships affords numerous possibilities for co-creating audiovisual work which explores the ecological, cultural and emotional significance of music and sound. Engagement with such work, I would suggest, assists us in the task of listening intimately and ethically to musical cultures and the sonic ecologies of the natural world.

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