

The Sonic Sovereignty of the Voiceless: Silence, Inequality, and Recognition in Southeast Asian Cinema¹

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Abstract

This paper examines silence as a mode of communication within contemporary Southeast Asian cinema, investigating how marginalized subjects articulate existence beyond speech and how such expressions are recognized. Focusing on *At the Horizon* (Laos, 2011), *Manta Ray* (Thailand, 2018), and *Taste* (Vietnam, 2021), the study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological approach. It synthesizes textual analysis with an interdisciplinary framework integrating film sound theory, phenomenology, and postcolonial discourse to examine how meaning emerges through embodiment, soundscape, and affect. The analysis reveals that silence operates as a context-dependent, shifting communicative condition. The study uncovers a contingent recognition in *At the Horizon*, where silence underscores a fragile interpersonal connection collapsing under unequal power structures; an ethical recognition in *Manta Ray*, where the absence of a refugee's voice forces an encounter through a shared sensory atmosphere; and a relational recognition in *Taste*, rooted in the somatic synchronicity of bodies on society's

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fringes. Consequently, silence's political potential depends heavily on the socio-political conditions of its mediation. Contributing to discussions on communication inequalities, this paper proposes the concept of "Sonic Sovereignty" as a framework for understanding how agency is asserted through auditory presence beyond formal language, calling for an ethically grounded, phenomenologically aware approach to listening amid systemic inequality.

Keywords: silence; sonic sovereignty; recognition; marginalized voices; communication inequalities; Southeast Asian cinema.

"Beyond the pivotal question of whether the subaltern can speak, we must fundamentally ask how we ought to listen."

When Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) famously concluded that "the subaltern cannot speak," her target was the epistemic violence that filters, co-opts, or erases marginalized voices within dominant geopolitical discourses. For decades, postcolonial and film scholarship has treated this declaration as an absolute ontological ceiling, operating under the logocentric assumption that political agency exists only within formal speech and articulate resistance. Yet, contemporary Southeast Asian cinema demands a radical reassessment of Spivak's premise. By collapsing spoken dialogue and leaning into dense, atmospheric quietude, regional directors demonstrate that the subaltern articulates presence not through the master's tongue, but through the sovereign deployment of silence. This paper argues that the historical erasure of marginalized subjects is not a failure of their capacity to speak, but a failure of the dominant framework's capacity to listen. Shifting from a paradigm of mere "hearing" (*entendre*), which seeks immediate linguistic signification, to a radical state of "listening" (*écouter*), as conceptualized by Jean-Luc Nancy (2007), cinema becomes a space of profound acoustic

immersion. Here, silence is reconfigured as an active site of resonance, where environmental vibrations and the somatic presence of the marginalized enter a shared sensory space with the spectator. In environments fractured by systemic inequality, authoritarian governance, and historical amnesia, the refusal to speak becomes a potent, contingent mode of communication. Through this lens, I propose the concept of "Sonic Sovereignty" to examine how subaltern subjects assert agency and register ontological presence beyond formal language.

Scholarly inquiry into Southeast Asian cinema has historically interrogated the intersections of postcolonial nation-building, spatial politics, and localized cultural anxieties (Chee & Lim, 2015; Dissanayake, 1994; Lim & Yamamoto, 2012). With the digital turn, this critical gaze shifted heavily toward the political economy and aesthetic resistance of independent 'New Waves,' widely documenting how regional filmmakers capture the precarities, displacements, and lingering traumas of marginalized subjects at the peripheries of state power (Baumgärtel, 2012; Ingawanij & McKay, 2012; Liew, 2018). While existing literature comprehensively maps these socio-political realities through visual representation and the aesthetics of slowness, Gerald Sim (2020) marks a pivotal intervention by destabilizing this visual bias. Driving on the deeply rooted oral and aural traditions of Malay culture, Sim re-centers postcolonial discourse by intertwining the poetics of space with the multilingual cacophony embedded within regional soundscapes. Through his analysis of Yasmin Ahmad's cinema, Sim illustrates how overlapping languages and imperfect subtitling intentionally decenter strict linguistic meaning, shifting the spectator's attention toward purely acoustic pleasures and vocal fragmentations. However, while Sim illuminates how historical tensions are negotiated through the acoustic textures of formal speech and polyphonic dialogue, current

scholarship still confines the sonic dimension to atmospheric analysis, largely overlooking how sound and silence function in relation to communicative exclusion and social invisibility.

Admittedly, a burgeoning critical shift in Southeast Asian sound studies has begun to challenge this limitation, expanding into fluid "archipelagic" regional mappings of film soundscapes (Lovatt, 2021), the deployment of sonic materiality for embodied memory and spiritual attunement (Lin & Chermanchonlamark, 2026), and the investigation of acoustic aesthetics in relation to both non-conscious cultural expression (Jiang & Suboh, 2025a) and traumatic memory work against historical amnesia (Jiang & Suboh, 2025b). Concurrently, media reception research has increasingly reframed film viewing through an auditory-centric lens—ranging from Freedman's (2025) "Listening Cinema" and Barker's (2021) focus on audience interpretative agency, to Li's (2025) exploration of meditative, silence-driven psychological environments. Yet, while these interventions successfully establish the acoustic sphere as a dynamic site of embodied, psychophysically mediated reception, they rarely cross-examine how these soundscapes operate under systemic conditions of statelessness and marginalization.

This critical intervention seeks to reconfigure the political economy of film sound by introducing a holistic, three-dimensional theoretical framework that synthesizes Film Sound Theory, Phenomenology, and Postcolonial Thought. By adapting and extending Liz Przybylski's (2023) formulation of sound as cultural agency into the realm of cinema studies, this perspective positions the acoustic sphere as a primary force that shapes embodiment and relational experience (Chion, 1994; Nancy, 2007). Within this framework, we redefine "Sonic Sovereignty" not as geopolitical authority, but as the capacity of marginalized and socially unheard subjects to resonate affectively and assert an ontological presence within structural systems that render them socially and politically invisible. To map this dense acoustic

topography, this study draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Vivian Sobchack (1992) to approach cinematic silence as an embodied, visceral register through which spectators encounter marginalized lives sensorially, integrated with Michel Chion's (1994) audiovisual framework and scholarship on slow cinema (Flanagan, 2012; de Luca & Jorge, 2016). Furthermore, Gerald Sim's (2020) critique of "postcolonial hangups" provides the necessary socio-political grounding, allowing us to examine how regional cinema navigates cultural tensions and systemic exclusions through sonic fragmentation and somatic quietude rather than explicit narrative exposition.

Consequently, this study bridges the existing epistemological gap by examining a purposive corpus of contemporary Southeast Asian slow cinema: *At the Horizon* (dir. Anysay Keola, Laos, 2011), *Manta Ray* (dir. Phutti Phong Aroonpheng, Thailand, 2018), and *Taste* (dir. Lê Bảo, Vietnam/Singapore, 2021). Although exploring distinct axes of exclusion—communicative deprivation in *At the Horizon*, statelessness in *Manta Ray*, and racialized migrant labor in *Taste*—all three texts eschew narrative exposition in favor of ambient noise, bodily rhythm, and silence to construct a visceral "sonic experience of marginality." Ultimately, this paper articulates how subaltern subjects exercise a distinct form of "Sonic Sovereignty"—a concept that outlines a precise phenomenological and political boundary. It departs from traditional frameworks by shifting the analytical focus from voice and visibility toward listening and audibility. Rather than defining agency through the subaltern's capacity to speak or assimilate into logocentric structures, Sonic Sovereignty locates power within the deliberate cultivation of silence, quietude, and textured environmental soundscapes. It operates not merely as a reactive tool of resistance against systemic marginalization, but as an autonomous

sensory domain where marginalized subjects reclaim and enact their own modes of somatic presence and existential recognition, independent of dominant political validation.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine how contemporary Southeast Asian films reconfigure cinematic silence from a symptom of oppression into a radical site of subaltern agency and lived experience.
2. Analyze the shifting spectrum of recognition articulated through the somatic and profound spaces of sound and silence within contemporary Southeast Asian films.
3. Formulate a holistic theoretical framework that bridges human bodies, sonic matter, and postcolonial politics to conceptualize the phenomenon of "Sonic Sovereignty."

By pursuing these objectives, the study seeks to move beyond a reductive understanding of silence as merely the absence of speech, instead theorizing it as an active, embodied, and politically charged mode of resistance, presence, and recognition.

Theoretical Framework

To construct a theoretical framework for the voiceless is not to find them a language within the system that erased them, but to cultivate a critique that listens to the weight of their refusal to speak. This study deploys an interdisciplinary framework blending phenomenology, film sound theory, and postcolonial thought to conceptualize silence not as an acoustic void, but as a communicative and political force through which subaltern presence is sensorially negotiated.

Embodied Perception and Relational Listening

Phenomenology frames cinematic silence not as a cognitive abstraction, but as a lived, bodily experience. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), human perception is rooted in

active physical engagement where meaning emerges through sensory friction with our environment. Vivian Sobchack (1992) applies this framework directly to film theory, arguing that cinema is a shared sensory encounter; rather than intellectually analyzing a movie from a distance, spectators participate in the filmic world through a physical alignment with its sights, movements, and sounds. This bodily engagement complements Jean-Luc Nancy's (2007) philosophy of listening, which distinguishes the mere extraction of literal meaning from deep, relational listening. For Nancy, the body acts as a resonant chamber vibrated by the presence of the Other. Synthesizing these perspectives redefines silence: it ceases to be a passive vacuum of victimization and becomes a dense, relational space where marginalized bodies encounter one another beyond words. This synthesis is crucial for investigating how subaltern subjects in Southeast Asian cinema become affectively perceptible—not through dialogue or narrative exposition, but through bodily noises, ambient textures, and soundscapes.

Audiovisual Materiality and Slow Cinema Poetics

To decode the mechanics of this sensory immersion, this study deploys Michel Chion's (1994) film sound theory. Chion's concept of 'audio-vision' argues that sound and image mutually transform one another, challenging visual-centric film analysis. Central to this framework is 'reduced listening,' an approach that strips away the urge to identify a sound's external source, focusing instead on its raw sonic materiality—its texture, rhythm, and duration. Crucially, as Chion notes, cinema does not possess an absolute acoustic vacuum; rather, cinematic silence is inherently relative, functioning as a constructed aesthetic threshold. By suppressing dominant narrative dialogue, this relative silence amplifies what would otherwise remain imperceptible. Under reduced listening, micro-sounds like labored breathing or environmental hums become urgent registers of subaltern vulnerability. This is further

intensified by 'acousmatic sound'—sounds whose sources remain unseen off-screen—destabilizes spatial certainty, expanding cinematic space into realms of historical ambiguity and psychological tension. This acoustic immersion operates in tandem with slow cinema poetics, where silence and extended duration serve as active structural strategies rather than passive backgrounds (Flanagan, 2012; de Luca & Jorge, 2016). By rejecting rapid narrative exposition, slow cinema forces spectators to dwell within extended sonic atmospheres, cultivating an ethics of listening that reorients cinematic engagement toward somatic presence.

Postcolonial Hangups and Sonic Sovereignty

While film sound theory maps the aesthetic mechanics, postcolonial theory uncovers the political stakes of these quiet landscapes. This study deploys Gerald Sim's (2020) concept of 'postcolonial hangups,' which posits that contemporary Southeast Asian cinema articulates historical traumas and systemic inequalities not through didactic political narration, but through sensory disorientation and sonic fragmentation. Synthesizing Sim's critique with phenomenology, this research proposes that the subaltern's crisis within unequal structures is fundamentally a crisis of audibility. By extending Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) foundational inquiry, 'Can the subaltern speak?', we shift the critical focus from the subaltern's capacity for speech to the dominant framework's systemic incapacity to listen. To describe how marginalized subjects navigate this erasure, this study advances the concept of "Sonic Sovereignty." When synthesized with Nancy's relational ontology, this shift reveals that under systemic inequality, the body's capacity to act as a resonant chamber is constantly policed and restricted. Sonic Sovereignty, therefore, serves as a subversive sensory rupture that forces the marginalized body to vibrate across socio-political fractures, bypassing logocentric censorship to demand an immediate ethical encounter. Adapted from Liz Przybylski's (2023) formulation,

sonic sovereignty is redefined here not as state authority, but as the subaltern's capacity to register an ontological presence through the strategic deployment of silence, bodily rhythms, and environmental resonance—asserting a radical agency that demands to be ethically felt even when it is socially unheard.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in textual and audiovisual analysis to investigate how sound and silence function as registers of marginality, recognition, and sonic sovereignty. Moving beyond narrative-centric approaches, this research treats cinema as a co-constituted sensory experience where meaning emerges through the friction between soundscapes, temporal duration, and spectator embodiment.

Case Selection and Purposive Sampling

The study examines three contemporary Southeast Asian films selected through purposive sampling based on their aesthetic, thematic, and socio-political relevance to the research inquiry: *At the Horizon* (dir. Anysay Keola, Laos, 2011), *Manta Ray* (dir. Phutti Phong Aroonpheng, Thailand, 2018), and *Taste* (dir. Lê Bảo, Vietnam/Singapore, 2021). These films are representative critical cases for investigating communication inequalities in the Mekong sub-region, a geopolitical space shaped by shared histories of border crossings, systemic exclusion, and socio-political trauma. Despite their distinct contexts, the three films converge around a common corporeal and communicative axis: their protagonists are systematically denied a formal voice, whether through muteness, statelessness as Rohingya refugees, or the precarity of migrant labor. Formally, they share contemplative aesthetics characterized by sparse dialogue, extended moments of silence, and a sustained reliance on acoustic materiality,

making them particularly well suited for examining how sound and silence mediate subaltern presence, vulnerability, and recognition.

While *Manta Ray* and *Taste* operate within the global aesthetic paradigms of slow cinema, emphasizing extended duration and textured sonic environments, *At the Horizon* provides an important comparative counterpoint. Although it adopts a more conventional narrative tempo, it remains conceptually vital because of its rigorous deployment of silence and sound design to articulate muteness not merely as a narrative device but as an embodied expression of socio-political marginalization. Together, these three films constitute a comparative cross-border framework through which the study examines how contemporary Southeast Asian cinema mobilizes sound and silence to challenge dominant regimes of recognition.

Analytical Protocol

The textual analysis was executed through a systematic three-stage protocol that transitions from structural formalist observation to critical synthesis. The process began with acoustic mapping, which involved repeated close viewings of the selected films to log recurring sonic motifs, register shifts in soundscapes, and trace the structural distribution of silence. This was followed by audiovisual isolation, a stage dedicated to extracting pivotal sequences based on three strict criteria: (1) the complete or near-complete absence of spoken dialogue, (2) the prominent narrative and affective use of silence, and (3) a thematic focus on subaltern figures. Finally, these isolated sequences were subjected to a critical-phenomenological synthesis. Here, the formal mechanics of the soundscape were interrogated through phenomenological bracketing (*epoché*), a process wherein conventional narrative interpretations and linguistic significations were temporarily suspended to allow the researcher to focus strictly on the

immediate, visceral construction of meaning through embodiment, soundscapes, and affect. This multi-layered approach ensures that the analysis transcends a reductive reading of the filmic plot, instead revealing how regional cinema transforms the purely acoustic frame into a politically charged site of sonic sovereignty.

To ensure interpretive validity and analytical trustworthiness, this study acknowledges the researcher's positionality as an academic researcher who does not share the immediate lived experiences of the specific subaltern communities represented in the selected films. Recognizing this epistemic distance, a rigorous process of interpretive reflexivity was maintained throughout the textual analysis to critically examine potential assumptions and biases informing the interpretation. Interpretive validity was further strengthened through thick description of the audiovisual data and by triangulating interpretations across an interdisciplinary framework integrating film sound theory, phenomenology, and postcolonial discourse. This process ensures that all analytical claims remain firmly grounded in the formal and sensory structures of the cinematic texts rather than in the researcher's personal projections.

Results

The analysis of *At the Horizon*, *Manta Ray*, and *Taste* reveals that silence in contemporary Southeast Asian cinema does not function as a singular or static aesthetic condition. Instead, it emerges as a contingent communicative and political form whose ontological meanings shift according to distinct socio-political matrices, power relations, and modes of spectatorship. Across these three films, silence operates not merely as a passive absence of dialogue, but as an embodied, affective space through which marginality, vulnerability, and structural recognition are negotiated.

Contingent Recognition in “*At the Horizon*”

Anysay Keola’s *At the Horizon* (2011) leverages sound and silence as markers of class stratification, communicative exclusion, and fragile human recognition within contemporary Lao society. The film structures a stark acoustic opposition between its two central characters: Sin (Khounkham Sidthiyom), a reckless youth from a hyper-privileged urban elite, and Lud (Khamhou Phanludeth), a mute motorcycle mechanic navigating poverty and grief. Through this sonic duality, Keola constructs silence not merely as a symptom of subaltern deprivation, but as a potential site for ethical empathy.

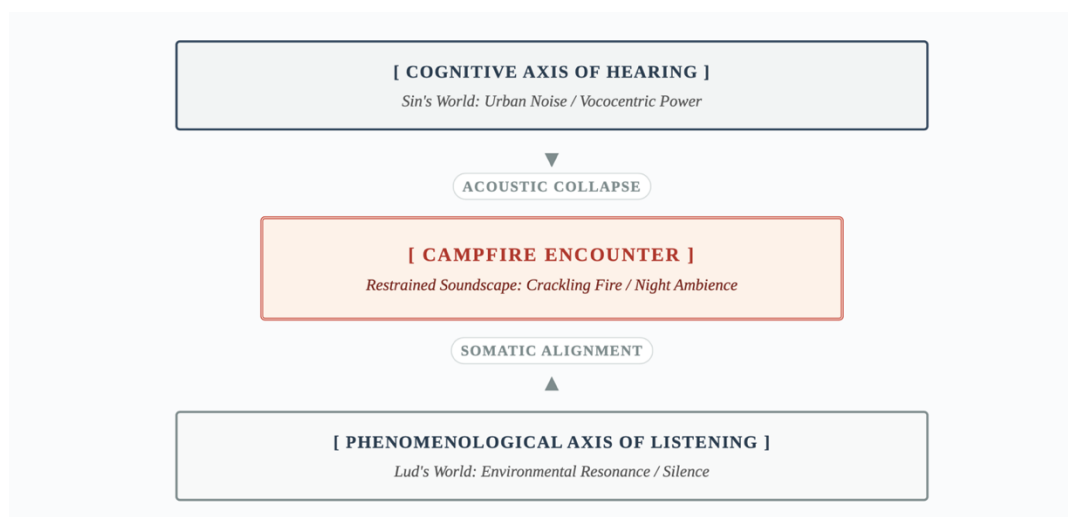
Sin’s socio-cultural power is registered through a soundscape of aggressive acoustic congestion, saturated with loud sports cars, booming hip-hop, urban traffic, and verbal confrontation. In this vococentric realm, speech is weaponized to assert masculine bravado and social dominance. Yet, despite Sin’s absolute access to language, his communication remains fractured and emotionally hollow. Conversely, Lud’s sonic space is enveloped in a serene atmospheric quietude, framing his existence within a deeply somatic and muted acoustic landscape. Framed as a representation of the “voiceless poor” within an unequal capitalist system, Lud’s muteness does not signify passivity; rather, he communicates through bodily gestures, domestic labor, and non-verbal intimacy. Keola reinforces this through environmental textures—domestic scenes involving Lud’s family are stripped of dialogue, allowing quiet ambient noises, insects, wind, and room tones to cultivate an atmosphere of emotional sincerity that exposes the alienating noise of Sin’s elite urban reality.

The acoustic collision culminates in the pivotal campfire sequence, where Sin discovers that Lud is the victim of his previous hit-and-run accident. Sitting in front of the fire, the two men attempt to communicate across structural divides. When Sin asks, “Are mute people

usually deaf too?”), the narrative shifts from verbal performance to what Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) conceptualizes as *écouter* (deep listening). The soundtrack collapses into profound restraint, foregrounding only the soft crackling of fire and night insects. Removed from the acoustic markers of urban privilege and class hierarchy, the two men temporarily inhabit a shared sonic environment in which social distinction is momentarily suspended. For Lud, this space of environmental resonance is familiar; for Sin, it forces a transition into a radical state of listening, entering Lud’s sonic world by abandoning the aggressive auditory armor of urban wealth. Here, silence transforms into a somatic contact zone—an affective language that bypasses verbal communication, facilitating a fragile recognition of Lud’s humanity through embodied listening rather than speech.

Figure 1

The Dialectical Sonic Encounter of the two main characters in “At the Horizon.”



Yet, *At the Horizon* ultimately rejects a utopian, reconciliatory resolution, illustrating the tragic precarity of sonic sovereignty when confronted by institutional power. In the climax, the figure of Sin’s authoritarian father, representing the dominant socio-political order, misinterprets Lud’s non-verbal presence as an imminent threat and executes him, exposing how

structures of power fail to recognize forms of communication beyond speech. Crucially, this tragedy arises not from Lud's biological inability to speak, but from the dominant social matrix's total incapacity for empathetic listening beyond linguistic codes. Silence in *At the Horizon* is therefore deeply contingent: it opens temporary clearings for visceral human connection yet remains fatally vulnerable to erasure within broader structures of class prejudice and communicative exclusion.

Ethical Recognition in “*Manta Ray*”

In Phuttiaphong Aroonpheng's *Manta Ray* (2018), silence operates as a critical site of ethical recognition, configured through sensory ambiguity, atmospheric density, and embodied spectatorship. The film traces the relationship between Nobi (Wanlop Rungkumjad), a local fisherman, and a wounded, mute stranger he rescues and names Thongchai (Aphisit Hama)—after an iconic Thai pop star, a naming that ironicizes the stranger's radical social invisibility as a suspected Rohingya refugee along the Thai-Myanmar border. By rendering Thongchai entirely mute and refusing him an explanatory backstory, Aroonpheng engages directly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. The film rejects the problematic act of speaking on behalf of the refugee through dominant nation-state frameworks. Instead, it anchors Thongchai's presence in raw acoustic materiality, environmental textures, and tactical silence, shifting the ethical burden of representation onto the limits of the cinematic medium itself.

This lack of verbal data compels what Michel Chion (1994) terms “reduced listening,” forcing the spectator to bracket semantic interpretation in favor of the visceral, sonic proximity of the traumatized body. Through this acoustic intimacy, viewers are forced into an ethical confrontation with the characters' social invisibility, demanding that we recognize their shared

humanity not through labels or citizenship, but through the raw reality of their physical presence. This sensory path toward ethical recognition reaches its aesthetic climax during the film's celebrated shack-turned-disco scene. When the local Thai fisherman fits his modest coastal shack with pulsating, multicolored string lights, the space transforms into a dreamlike oasis. Rather than relying on traditional dialogue, the scene is driven by deep, electronic hums and rhythmic musical textures that vibrate through the characters' bodies as they engage in a silent, shared dance. Under the flashing neon glow, the trauma of borders, state identity, and language evaporates into a purely sensory moment of human intimacy. By stripping away the social constructs that divide them, the film creates an egalitarian space where the audience witnesses a pure form of ethical recognition: two human beings acknowledging each other's existence and worth through the shared rhythm of survival and joy.

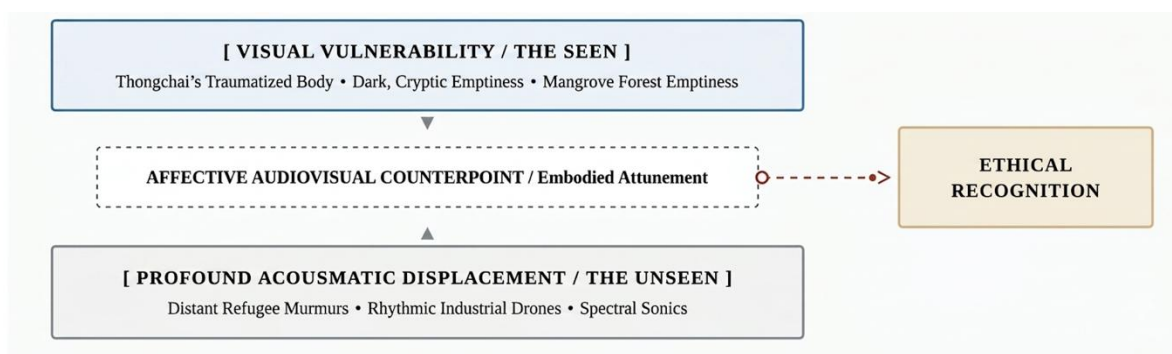
The film's sonic landscape further deepens this ethical engagement by using environment-filtered audio to simulate being submerged underwater, mirroring the silent, fluid world of the manta ray. This hypnotic natural ambience of waves and coastal wind is regularly shattered by aggressive sounds—like the rattling of fishing boat engines or military patrol equipment—which symbolize the constant threat of state violence. The French musical duo Snowdrops anchors this tension with their original score featuring the Ondes Martenot, whose eerie, glass-like waves of electronic sound bridge the gap between reality and memory. This complex audio design transforms the beautiful landscape into a haunting requiem for those buried beneath the mangroves, forcing the audience to recognize the hidden violence embedded in the terrain and to confront our own moral responsibility as witnesses to these historical atrocities.

The final sequence masterfully weaves these thematic threads together, converting cinematic aesthetics into a lasting political and ethical impact. The soundtrack culminates in a

frenetic sonic peak, where chaotic frequencies swell and interweave with the collective field recordings of Rohingya voices. In this haunting climax, the film operates through a deeply affective audiovisual counterpoint; as the camera captures Thongchai’s traumatized body stranded inside the dark, cryptic emptiness of the mangrove forest, this visual vulnerability is layered with a profound acousmatic displacement. The audience is suddenly confronted with what Chion defines as "acousmatic sound"—audio whose source remains invisible on screen—as the overlapping voices, prayers, and ambient field recordings of actual Rohingya refugees flood the theater. By stripping these voices of their visual source, the film emphasizes the stateless, displaced, and spectral condition of the refugees who haunt the borders of the nation-state. This sudden, jarring acoustic intrusion forces the viewer out of the comfort of an abstract artistic fable and into direct contact with the living human crisis. It is a powerful demand for ultimate ethical recognition, returning a collective voice to a people whom history has tried to make invisible, and leaving the audience with the haunting question of how we respond to the cries of the displaced.

Figure 2

The affective audiovisual counterpoint in “Manta Ray.”



Ultimately, unlike the contingent recognition in *At the Horizon*, recognition in *Manta Ray* demands that the spectator remain with opacity, preserving the sensory sovereignty of the stateless “Other” within the folds of acoustic echo. By demanding sensory accountability rather than enabling voyeuristic consumption, *Manta Ray* enacts an ethics of listening where perception becomes deeply implicated in the political and affective weight of the unheard.

Relational Recognition in “*Taste*”

Lê Bảo’s *Taste* (2021) configures silence as a form of relational recognition grounded in bodily rhythm, sensory coexistence, and shared socio-economic precarity. This film follows Bassley (Ogunleko Ezekiel Gbenga), a displaced Nigerian footballer stranded in Ho Chi Minh City, who seeks refuge in a cramped, subterranean apartment with four middle-aged Vietnamese women. Isolated by language, race, and poverty, this quintet retreats into a derelict concrete building, constructing an intimate, sensory utopia defined entirely by basic, stoic human routines. Rather than forging alliances through conventional dialogue, the filmmaker constructs an alternative community strictly through somatic proximity and domestic duration. Rejecting conventional musical accompaniment, Lê Bảo meticulously treats corporeal movements—walking, breathing, and resting—as the film’s actual musical score, elevating corporeal rhythm into the primary structural composition of the text.

The film’s primary sonic strategy relies on the radical reduction of spoken language in favor of localized environmental and corporeal textures. Dialogue is sparse, detached, and entirely untranslatable between Bassley and the women; hence, speech is reduced to mere atmospheric residue. When monologues do emerge—such as a woman recalling her lost family or her labor sewing hot-air balloons—they function not as narrative exposition, but as ambient sound layers drifting through the frame. In lieu of a traditional score, sound designer Vincent

Villa constructs a "symphony of room tone," (Kiang, 2021) amplifying micro-sounds: slow exhalations, fingers massaging soap into hair, peeling corn husks, and skin-on-skin friction. This generates what can be termed a dense, tactile sensory ecology of survival. Through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's framework of intercorporeality—the phenomenological understanding that our bodies are inherently relational and intertwined with the bodies of others—these "sounds of the flesh" operate as somatic vibrations traveling between characters. Communication manifests not through linguistic clarity, but through a shared temporal vulnerability born "in-between" the subjects, proving that under conditions of extreme postcolonial precarity, the subaltern does not rely on state recognition, but on relational vulnerability to validate their own material existence.

This tactile attunement is pushed to its ontological limit in the sequences where the characters live and eat together entirely naked inside the abandoned building. Their radical nudity functions not as a voyeuristic spectacle, but as a total rejection of the performative vestments of social identity, class, and citizenship. Stripped of clothing and linguistic mastery, they coexist within a hyper-localized matrix of routine and domestic labor. Because these subjects exist entirely outside dominant structures of global capitalism, the film avoids hierarchical modes of listening, transforming silence into a collective condition. As the title *Taste* implies, the tongue is dualistic: it is the organ of both speech and taste. Lê Bảo demonstrates that when speech is structurally or biologically severed, interior desires and empathetic recognition continue to resonate through somatic proximity; the flesh must speak instead.

Figure 3

The tripartite phenomenological structure in “Taste.”



During prolonged scenes of shared meals and silent rest, the amplified sounds of chewing, shifting flesh, and heavy, humid room tones cultivate a humid, tactile world of bodies and spaces. Through this extreme, durational listening—which induces a mode of tactile listening or haptic audition—the spectator's psychological distance from the "Otherness" imposed by the state is completely collapsed, pulling the viewer into an embodied mode of spectatorship. Ultimately, *Taste* concludes that marginalized subjects can achieve profound mutual perceptibility through the syncopation of breath and movement. By retreating into an intercorporeal, pre-linguistic state, these characters reclaim an autonomous, sovereign sanctuary of absolute human dignity and relational equality, proving that human connection can be fiercely articulated even when dominant political structures render them systematically unheard.

To systematically synthesize these analytical findings, Table 1 provides a comparative overview of how *At the Horizon*, *Manta Ray*, and *Taste* employ silence and acoustic design to construct distinct modes of "Sonic Sovereignty" through differentiated registers of recognition.

Table 1

Comparative Analysis of Silence and Sonic Sovereignty in Selected Southeast Asian Films

Film	Form of Marginality	Sonic Characteristics	Type of Recognition	Function of Silence	Socio-Political Implication
<i>At the Horizon</i>	Rural poor, lower-class subject, socially voiceless individual	Contrast between noisy, vococentric urban spaces and quiet, restorative rural ambience; environmental sounds (crickets, fire, birds); minimal dialogue in intimate scenes	Contingent Recognition	Silence creates temporary empathy and interpersonal understanding but remains fragile under unequal class structures	Marginalized subjects remain unheard within systems privileging verbal authority and social power
<i>Manta Ray</i>	Stateless refugee, displaced Rohingya subject	Ambient forest sounds, insects, waves, off-screen voices, bodily sounds, sparse dialogue, drone-like sonic atmosphere	Ethical Recognition	Silence creates an ethical encounter with alterity and resists reductive representation	Refugee existence is rendered perceptible affectively rather than politically recognized
<i>Taste</i>	Migrant laborer, economically marginalized urban subjects	Bodily sounds, breathing, eating, domestic ambience, tactile sonic environment, restrained dialogue	Relational Recognition	Silence produces intimacy through through intercorporeal rhythm and shared precarity	Marginalized individuals construct alternative modes of coexistence outside dominant social structures

Discussion

This study demonstrates that sound and silence in this selected corpus of contemporary Southeast Asian cinema are deeply intertwined with the lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and quiet agencies of subaltern subjects. Rather than treating silence merely as an acoustic void, the findings suggest that the sonic dimension functions as a primary site where marginality and human recognition are continually negotiated.

This study establishes a productive dialogue with slow cinema scholarship and postcolonial film studies. While slow cinema studies traditionally illuminate how silence and extended duration cultivate spaces for aesthetic minimalism and contemplation (de Luca & Jorge, 2016; Flanagan, 2012), this study seeks to extend and enrich this framework. By looking through the lens of regional contexts, we suggest that these contemplative aesthetics are fundamentally grounded in the material precarities of postcolonial modernity—such as class exclusion, statelessness, and labor migration. Silence and cinematic slowness are thus understood not in isolation from society, but as aesthetic registers deeply responsive to historical and socio-political realities.

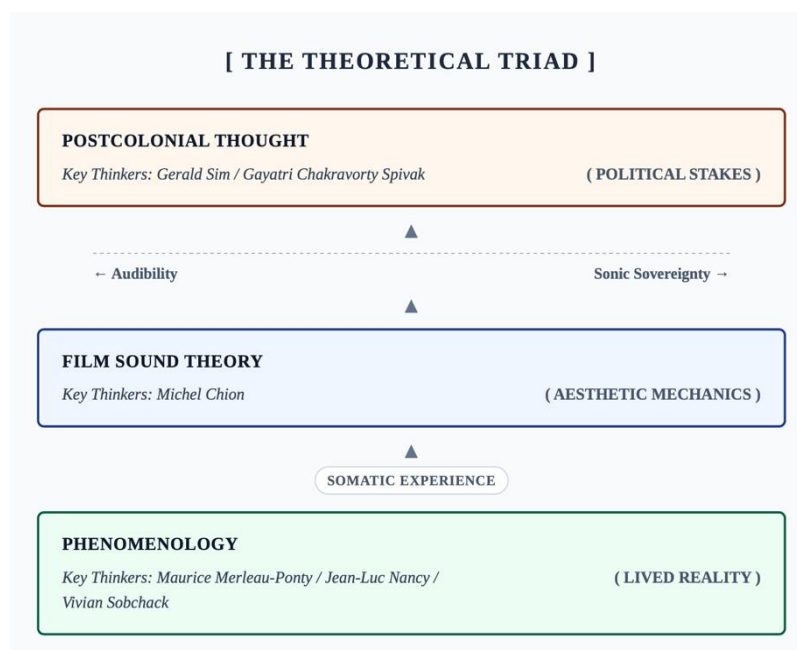
By integrating Phenomenology, Film Sound Theory, and Postcolonial Thought, this study offers a holistic framework that reveals the reality of the subaltern through a three-dimensional approach:

- Film Sound Theory provides the precise formal tools to decode how the cinematic text de-centers the visual and elevates the acoustic.
- Phenomenology bridges these formal mechanics with lived reality, shifting the spectator's engagement from a detached intellectual observation to an embodied, visceral encounter.

- Postcolonial Thought uncovers the political stakes of this sensory experience, ensuring that the spectator's phenomenological attunement directly encounters the structural inequalities and crises of audibility facing the subaltern.

Figure 4

The formalized Inductive Theoretical Triad framework.



Synthesizing these three pillars allows us to advance the concept of "Sonic Sovereignty." Adapted from Liz Przybylski's (2023) formulation, sonic sovereignty as conceptualized in this study, does not imply the attainment of formal institutional power or mastery over dominant political discourses. Instead, it represents the subaltern's capacity to register an ontological presence through the somatic textures of their bodies, variations in room tone, and environmental resonance. Even when the dominant socio-political structures render certain individuals socially unheard, their embodied existence continues to resonate affectively within the cinematic space.

This phenomenological reappraisal of cinema provides a vital counterpoint to the geopolitical textures outlined in Gerald Sim's (2020) critique of Southeast Asian postcoloniality. Sim perceptively argues that the region's historical realities—characterized by authoritarian structures and a unique tolerance for colonial institutions—often produce a civic sphere where political critique cannot be articulated through conventional, overt anti-colonial discourse. While Sim tracks these 'postcolonial hangups' by demonstrating how the multilingual cacophony and acoustic textures of formal speech in Yasmin Ahmad's cinema disrupt dominant linguistic meanings, this study suggests that the subaltern response to structural erasure frequently retreats into, and operates from, the sensory field of silence. In films like *At the Horizon*, *Manta Ray*, and *Taste*, silence is not a passive submission to authoritarian amnesia, but can instead be understood as a peripheral tactic. By shifting the spectatorial experience from intellectualized discourse to an embodied, intercorporeal encounter, these directors use silence to construct a protective opacity for the marginalized. When dominant political systems police who is allowed to speak and be heard, the somatic textures of breathing, environment, and room tone become alternative sites of historical inscription. Silence, therefore, extends Sim's cartographic project; it is the ultimate peripheral space where the subaltern retains their ontological presence and exercises Sonic Sovereignty precisely by withholding formal speech within a system that refuses to listen.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that silence does not produce a singular mode of recognition but rather gives rise to multiple, context-dependent modalities of encounter. In *At the Horizon*, silence enables only a contingent recognition, where fleeting moments of interpersonal understanding remain fragile and ultimately collapse under unequal communicative structures. In *Manta Ray*, silence cultivates an ethical recognition, compelling

spectators to encounter the refugee's humanity through shared sensory exposure rather than verbal testimony. By contrast, *Taste* foregrounds a relational recognition grounded in bodily co-presence and somatic reciprocity, where marginalized lives become perceptible through shared rhythms of labor, intimacy, and everyday survival. Taken together, these differing modalities reveal that silence is neither inherently emancipatory nor universally resistant. Rather, its political and communicative force remains contingent upon the socio-political conditions through which it is mediated, recognized, and experienced. This comparative framework therefore reinforces the central proposition of Sonic Sovereignty: that subaltern agency is enacted not through the recovery of voice alone, but through diverse modes of embodied audibility that emerge across unequal structures of recognition. Ultimately, this theoretical triad establishes an ethics of listening that moves beyond visual representation. By transforming silence from a sign of passive victimization into a dense palimpsest of memory, labor, and quiet persistence, Southeast Asian cinema invites audiences into a more patient, attentive, and ethically grounded relationship with marginalized lives. Listening, in this context, becomes an ethical act of recognition—an openness to encountering human presence beyond the limits of language, visibility, and power.

Conclusion

Beyond interpreting the selected films, this study contributes to film and communication scholarship by conceptualizing Sonic Sovereignty as a framework for understanding how communication inequalities are negotiated through embodied listening, acoustic presence, and modes of recognition that exceed formal speech. This study repositions cinematic listening by arguing that sound and silence are not merely aesthetic ornaments but

primary modes through which subaltern presence, recognition, and historical memory become perceptible. By synthesizing film sound theory, postcolonial thought, and phenomenology, this research demonstrates how the integration of bodily textures and structural quietude can render marginalized experience perceptually tangible, circumventing the reduction of marginalized lives to visual representation alone. The concept of Sonic Sovereignty advanced in this paper provides a transferable theoretical framework for future cinema studies, inviting researchers to explore how non-verbal resistance and acoustic agency operate in other contemporary Global South contexts. Future scholarly inquiries might productively extend this sonic framework to communication environments beyond cinema , such as digital streaming architectures, independent documentary practices, or regional soundscapes, to investigate how they interact with marginalized identities across shifting geopolitical landscapes.

Despite these theoretical contributions, several empirical limitations within this study must be acknowledged. First, the scope is limited to a purposive sampling of three specific films: *At the Horizon*, *Manta Ray*, and *Taste*. While these texts are pivotal for examining displacement and statelessness, they cannot represent the vast, heterogeneous landscape of Southeast Asian cinema, which encompasses diverse commercial industries, genres, and national contexts. Second, by prioritizing a close phenomenological reading from the perspective of an academic researcher who does not share the immediate lived experiences of the communities represented, this study does not account for empirical variations in spectatorship across different cultural or demographic backgrounds. Consequently, the conclusions regarding sonic sovereignty should be understood as interpretive possibilities unlocked by the audiovisual textures themselves, rather than absolute sociological realities shared by all regional audiences.

Recognizing that the ethics of listening and spectator recognition advanced in this study remain predominantly text-bound, a vital direction for future communication research lies in empirical audience reception studies. Future research should integrate textual analysis with qualitative audience reception methods. This would allow researchers to investigate whether and how actual, historically situated audiences experience the somatic attunement and visceral recognition identified in this text-based analysis. Examining how diverse spectators cross-negotiate cinematic silence could bridge the current gap between textual film philosophy and empirical audience studies within Global South communication landscapes. In an interconnected yet fragmented cultural field, these Southeast Asian films ultimately remind us that human recognition is not solely a matter of political visibility, but a profound commitment to an ethics of listening—an openness to hear and validate human existence within the subtle resonances of the world. In this sense, Sonic Sovereignty is not simply a cinematic phenomenon or an analytical concept but an ethical invitation to rethink how communication, recognition, and humanity might be reimagined beyond the limits of speech through an ethics of listening.

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