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A Flimsy Image:

A Case Study for Learning to Listen

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During the World War II Japanese occupation of Singapore, several Shinto shrines were built to honour those who died in warfare and in the process of serving Emperor Showa. The Battle of Singapore saw the fall of one empire and its replacement with another—three years of Asian-focused rule as opposed to that of distant Europe. Many men fought in a war for an empire that only abstractedly recognised them—their indigenous histories were always second to the nationalism of the British Empire. The same can be said of the Japanese Empire.

There is not much left of Syonan Jinja, the Shinto shrine in the depths of MacRitchie Reservoir; it was destroyed just as the Japanese had to admit their defeat, just as the old empire reclaimed its colony. It has not been memorialised into the sanctioned narratives of this war, that is, while the spirits of the dead Japanese and the sweat of the allied labour that built the shrine are present, they are not officially visible. This leads to the question: in the context of memorialising, both unofficial and official, how are we to listen; to give image, feeling and presence to that—memories, materials, feelings, experiences and narratives of the Asia-Pacific Theatre—which is not literally visible?

Fiona Amundsen and Tim Corballis.
Machine Wind. HD Video, 10 minutes,
47 seconds, 2015. Installed at Te Tuhi
Gallery, Auckland. Photograph: Sam
Harnett

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Throughout the Asia-Pacific region there are various forms of official memorials positioned at or near key battle sites, which aim to pay homage to the numerous deaths and battles associated with World War II (WWII) (Asia-Pacific Theatre).¹ Memorials give an important physical presence to the suffering connected to this conflict; however, they do not necessarily allow or speak to the complexities inherent within the remembering, narrating or imaging of such experiences. In effect, the visual and written discourses that memorials produce inadvertently reinforce mainstream, established narrative accounts—the official version—of the events they commemorate.² Without simply dismissing what government memorial does, the focus here concerns how to memorialise in other modalities—embodied, imagined and non-visual. Accordingly, this case study has a twofold preoccupation with both the act of memorialising itself and the role that specifically lens-based artworks may take within such acts.

Drawing on my recent video work titled *Machine Wind* (2015), made in collaboration with Tim Corballis and looking at the remains of a former Shinto shrine located in the depths of Singapore's MacRitchie Reservoir jungle, this case study explores how lens-based methods that respond to remnant sites of trauma, complex imperial histories, materials and archival propaganda footage may in turn extend acts of memorialising beyond the physical sites of memorials per se. Key to this is a questioning of how a lens and, specifically, the artwork in question, may be able to punctuate paradigmatic socio-cultural histories and narratives which have an associative function of defining how WWII Asia-Pacific events are memorialised and narrated across parts of Asia and the Pacific. Such methods are correspondingly approached through postcolonial and post-structural methodologies that position ideas concerning historical archives, trauma, memorialisation, embodied knowing and lens-based practice. Within the artwork under discussion, this position is characterised via the stuttering of established forms of memorial representation of WWII experiences; this occurs through the employment of present-day images that are edited together with archival material. Also, such methodological framing in turn informs this discussion's questioning of how to enable a camera to perform a kind of visual listening and thereby *witnessing* of this specific past as it informs the present.³

Machine Wind focuses on Syonan Jinja, the Shinto shrine built by Australian and British POWs in 1942 during the Japanese Imperial Army's occupation of Singapore and destroyed in 1945 at the end of the occupation. Although Singapore's National Heritage Board in 2002 acknowledged Syonan Jinja as a historical site of significance, it remains inaccessible for public viewing or memorialising—architectural remnants of the shrine, the steps leading up to

it, along with the concrete *chōzubachi* are overgrown and relatively difficult to access.⁴ Although not the primary focus of this case study, it is important to consider the role that war commemoration has had within Singapore as this not only elucidates what official WWII narratives get perpetuated, but also the strangeness of Syonan Jinja's obfuscation.⁵ Much of this emerges from the colonial contexts of Britain's failure to protect Singapore as its colony, which led to its surrender to the Japanese military in February 1942, resulting in the nation being passed from western to eastern military powers and then back again, once liberated from Japanese control following their surrender in September 1945. The latter was proudly stamped on the front page of *The Straits Times* under the headline "Singapore is British Again! Our Day of Liberation; Reoccupation Proceeds in City Ablaze with Allied Flags".⁶ In spite of what would have been an obvious sense of relief to be released from the cruelties of Japanese rule, the British reoccupation of Singapore was "also tinged with the sense that Singapore was being yet again recolonised", which denied people the right to govern themselves and be independent of the British, or any other, empire.⁷ In other words, eventually WWII Japanese military control directly influenced Singapore's—along with other Southeast Asian nations'—passage to self-governance. This raises complex questions concerning not only how, but *what* to remember in relationship to this conflict, thereby producing narratives concerning both Singapore's liberation from Japanese military dictatorship as well as a newly charged sense of nationalism. For example, in contrast to what was a minimal governmental response to the immediate commemoration of WWII experiences, the Singapore Chinese Victims Massacred by Japanese Committee (SCMAC) was established in 1946, leading eventually to the building of the Civilian War Memorial (1967), which aimed to acknowledge the suffering of Singapore civilians during the occupation.⁸ This memorial, initiated by SCMAC, was both privately and state funded. However, upon its official opening, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yee used the occasion to state that the memorial "commemorates an experience which, in spite of its horrors, served as a catalyst in building a nation out of the young and unestablished community of diverse immigrants", thereby reinforcing a narrative of nation-building and independence that was directly linked to WWII memorialisation.⁹

Relationships between nation-building and war commemoration further developed in the 1980s and 1990s in a twofold manner, namely via foreign former prisoners of war who were interested in revisiting their sites of defeat and subsequent imprisonment, as well as the development of state-sponsored organisations such as the Historic Sites Unit (1992) and the National Heritage Board (1993).¹⁰ The former saw the establishment of the Changi Prison Chapel

and Museum, Kranji War Memorial and Fort Siloso, while the latter led to the marking, with identical plaques, of WWII-related sites across Singapore in preparation for the 50th anniversary of the end of the war.¹¹ Aside from the economic imperative for Singapore to commemorate its war histories so as to capture tourist dollars, this 1990s' surge of memorialisation is also linked to the country's own sense of national identity via the creation of endorsed narratives. In addition to the role this conflict played in the eventual freeing of Singapore from any colonial rule, war commemoration also reinforced narratives of the value of *being* Singaporean. These "centred on the 'strength of character' and heroism of locals ... and how the different races put aside all differences in coming together to face a common enemy", which is echoed by state commemoration of "small" acts of dissidence.¹² Such self-sacrificing values are strategically made accessible via the inclusion of multiple languages on the commemorating plaques (including Japanese) to accommodate Singapore's different ethnic groups. In other words, Singapore's belated public recognition of its WWII history worked to establish what it *meant* to be Singaporean, as locals became united in spite of their racial differences.¹³

Such a nuanced context of WWII commemoration formed the initial motivation for *Machine Wind's* point of focus.¹⁴ Specifically, by comprehending the differing contextual layers of Singaporean war commemoration, the omission of Syonan Jinja's remains as a location for memorialisation becomes even stranger. Narratives of self-governance and strength of unifying character are partly reinforced by Syonan Jinja, as ultimately the site of the destroyed shrine can be viewed as a kind of symbol for Singapore's defiance to western and eastern forms of colonial imperialism. However, this becomes somewhat challenged by the shrine's construction, which contradicts established rhetoric of the Japanese occupation of Singapore concerning suffering and cultural unity. For example, the everyday experience of the British and Australian POWs who built the shrine was one where they were initially fed and housed appropriately, and provided with proper sanitation, at the former British colonial Adam Park Estate; this is in contrast to the violent brutality and resultant defining Allied narrative that would later unfold over the three-year wartime occupation.¹⁵ Also, the Allied POWs banded together with their Japanese guards to claim a kind of cultural superiority over local Singaporean Chinese, which was perpetuated via black-market trading and the distribution of labour within the camp.¹⁶ This equally layered context has also motivated some of the foundational questioning adopted by *Machine Wind* in terms of how lens-based practice may enable a closer present-day connection to how an unresolved past manifests in the present, albeit visible or not.

Adopting filmic methods of montage, *Machine Wind* combines contemporary and archive newsreel footage with voiceover in a meditation on machinery and war, their presiding spirits and the traces they leave, be they officially memorialised or not. The film shows the present-day remains of Syonan Jinja with archival imagery drawn from footage taken by the Japanese forces during their WWII Southeast Asian campaign. This is edited with a voiceover about “The Fate of Japanism”, an essay written in 1935 by the Japanese philosopher Tosaka Jun.¹⁷ Tosaka was critical of the Japanese regime and died in prison in 1945. “The Fate of Japanism” functions as a critique of the Japanese ideology that would ultimately drive the Japanese campaigns of WWII. It was, according to Tosaka, an ideology of primitivism and spiritualism at odds with the mechanisation of the military and the industrialisation of society. Tosaka is a useful reference here because he is a Japanese critic of Japan who argued that the machineries of capitalism and militarism required a spirit, an ideology, to animate them. *Machine Wind* puts this distinction between the machine and the spirit into play, emphasising the machine-like nature of the recording device through editing strategies stressing repetition and the camera’s slow, laborious panning motion.¹⁸

Machine Wind begins with a voiceover introducing Tosaka as a Japanese Marxist philosopher who was arrested for his criticism of Japan’s war regimes; this is followed by the same voice stating that a list of words removed from Tosaka’s “The Fate of Japanism” will be read. As the voice starts, archival footage of a Japanese warship emerges, making its way across the screen from right to left—*militarism, militaristic, militarist* ... However, every time the word “militarist” is uttered, the footage cuts back to the beginning with the ship re-emerging again from the right-hand side of the screen.¹⁹ It is only after eight repetitions that the ship fully crosses the screen. This repeated image works with the accompanying stuttering text to perform a sort of rupturing to any sense of coherent narrative, be it from Tosaka’s theorising or the archival footage itself. This is further perpetuated by the cut to present-day footage of one of the remaining platform walls of Syonan Jinja, as well as the surrounding jungle foliage blowing in the breeze. Here, it is the voice—with its contextualising statement that Syonan Jinja was an “effort to reconstruct a piece of historic Japan” during its occupation of Singapore—that allows the imagery to present a historical past while simultaneously moving from any fixed image or narrative association of that past.

Machine Wind’s merging of archival footage with present-day filming of Syonan Jinja as well as the voiceover provides an obvious historical connection to Japanese imperialism: the voiceover performs a type of listening to both

these different imaging modalities. Here the voice and image combinations function as a complication to established representations of war histories by employing Tosaka's critique to highlight the "deep relationships between capitalism, nationalism, liberalism, fascism and everyday life" that infiltrate wartime imperial regimes.²⁰ The last scenes of *Machine Wind* move from grainy black-and-white images of soldiers collecting parachuted supplies to present-day, slowing panning footage of the granite *chōzubachi* and surrounding remains. Similarly, the voiceover moves from a reflection of the mobilising of industrial capitalism for military means to asking what kind of spirit animates such forces—what allows the shift from abstract ideology to that of something with real effects? This question is answered via a description of the lengths taken to build the shrine, its *chōzubachi* and corresponding water flow. The voice continues to state that "these efforts—the moving and shaping of matter—had no obvious value in terms of Japanese war aims" and imperialism. The image accompanying this is a close-up of the *chōzubachi* with its dank water and a single bottle of sake, recently left as an offering to the spirits of the long dead.²¹ Again, the voice continues its inquiry, this time asking "what eternal wind blows that puts the machine to work, that allows an economy to function, that sets the still into motion?" These reflections ask viewers of this artwork to consider how the site of Syonan Jinja acts as a warning, calling for not only memorial remembrance per se but also a type of active investigation into the seemingly invisible ideologies and images that propel cultural life, which, broadly speaking, is akin to what Tosaka questioned.

Throughout *Machine Wind* there is a continual slippage between hearing and seeing, between images and their meanings, between images and culturally embedded events, which destabilises what can be seen and what can be said of a site like Syonan Jinja, and war commemoration too. *Machine Wind* brokers this through not only its montaging of different forms of imaging, but also its editing methods which take Tosaka's ideological positioning as prompts. The voiceover—with its direct referencing to Tosaka's critique of fascist wartime ideology—cues audiences to *see* beyond what is literally imaged, regardless of its present-day or archival form. This reveals a contradiction between discourse and document inherent in lens-based practice. Such thinking around lens-based images' faithful rendering of the world is obviously a well-established field of critical inquiry. This thinking is echoed in theorist Georges Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (2008), where he navigates the only existing photographs that depict the mass killings by and of Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz. As these images were produced in secret and in haste, they are literally compromised in the specificity of which they aim to speak. Although what they literally

show is limited, Didi-Huberman argues that their existence alone must be acknowledged thereby creating an actual form, via the photograph, to the unimaginable hell of Auschwitz.²² For Didi-Huberman, imagination gives a sense of visibility to what cannot literally be seen in these images—“*To imagine in spite of all*—which calls for a difficult ethics of the image: neither the invisible par excellence (the laziness of the aesthete) nor the icon of horror (the laziness of the believer) nor the mere document (the laziness of the learned). A simple image: inadequate but necessary, inexact but true. True of a paradoxical truth, of course. I would say that here the image is the *eye of history*: its tenacious function of making visible”.²³ In *Machine Wind*, this idea of imagining is taken further by the montaging of Tosaka’s dissenting voice with present-day and archival footages. The former ends up mobilising the latter beyond its intended use: this mixing of different modalities creates a space from which to imagine the implications of that which actually has no image—the logic of Japanese (and British) imperialism.²⁴

Machine Wind utilises Tosaka as a censored contemporary critic of that time to rethink how the legacies of this conflict have become shaped as collective memory and memorial. His ideology is animated by the literal splicing of two time frames into an extended duration that displaces any sense of this specific past as fixed (or over).²⁵ Accordingly, it is this merging of voice and image across historical and cultural time that produces other potential modalities for memorialising. However, there is a gap between the aural and the visual modalities of *Machine Wind*—although these faculties function together, they resist forming a coherent completed image. This gap is at the core of *Machine Wind* and is also what motivates this work; it remains central to an encounter with a site as complex as Syonan Jinja. The words of Tosaka provide a kind of resistant representational platform from which to reimagine and re-remember the specifics of this conflict in ways that challenge the certainty of officially sanctioned narratives. The animating force of Tosaka’s words, something essentially invisible but grounded in the material remnants of the shrine itself, are akin to the distinctions this artwork makes between seeing and hearing: *Machine Wind* enlists a type of visual listening, a type of listening as memorialising.

Fiona Amundsen and Tim Corballis. Still from *Machine Wind*. HD Video, 10 minutes, 47 seconds.

BIOGRAPHY

Fiona Amundsen is a New Zealand-based artist who utilises photography and moving images to question relationships between historical sites of trauma, socio-political narratives, memorial and lens-based representation. She is Senior Lecturer in the School of Art and Design (AUT University) and is also completing a PhD from Monash University titled “Registers of Seeing: Imaging Memorial within the Asia Pacific Theatre of World War II”. Her research interests include questioning how photography and film can be utilised to stammer sanctioned official narratives that are linked to both memorials and archival imagery connected to and representative of the Asia-Pacific Theatre of World War II. Her work has been exhibited widely throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

NOTES

- ¹ Official memorials are understood as those that sanctioned are State or municipal.
- ² Mainstream (dominant) refers to generalised paradigmatic historiographies, the metanarratives or big stories, of the Asia-Pacific Theatre, which are perpetuated via memorials, museums, school textbooks and popular media.
- ³ This sentiment of the “listening camera” originates from Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay: “I believe we might do well to further explore how to make the camera a listener. As a Māori, you are taught how to listen, you sit at the feet and open your ears. You have ‘no right to know’. The knowledge is gifted to you at appropriate times and appropriate places.” Barclay explored this and other related material in his text *Our Own Image: A Story of a Māori Filmmaker* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1990), where he contemplated how Māori ways of being could effectively become strategies for camera methods within documentary filmmaking (p. 17).
- ⁴ A *chōzubachi* is a concrete bowl or bath containing water positioned at the entrance to Shinto shrines; guests use this water to wash their hands and the inside of their mouths to cleanse themselves before entering the sanctity of the shrine itself.
- ⁵ For an in-depth discussion (which this case study makes repeated reference to) regarding Singapore’s WWII memorials, see Hamzah Muzaini and Brenda Yeoh, *Contested Memoryscapes: The Politics of Second World War Commemoration in Singapore* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).
- ⁶ “Singapore is British Again!”, *The Straits Times*, 7 Sept. 1945, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Page/straitstimes19450907-1.1.1> [accessed 26 Feb. 2017].
- ⁷ Muzaini and Yeoh, *Contested Memoryscapes*, p. 27.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 34.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 35.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Australian historian Lachland Grant’s edited collection *The Changi Book* (Sydney: NewSouth Books 2015) and co-edited collection *Beyond Surrender: Australian Prisoners of War in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 2015) for a discussion of Australian POW experiences in Singapore during the Japanese occupation and their subsequent memorialisation.
- ¹¹ Identical plaques were erected to link the following to WWII: Alexandra Hospital, City Hall Singapore, Civilian War Memorial (War Memorial Park), Ford Motor Works, Fort Siloso, Fort Tanjong Katong, Kranji State Cemetery, Lim Bo Seng Memorial, St Andrew’s Cathedral, Cenotaph Memorial, Changi Prison Chapel and Museum, Labrador Battery, Former Indian National Army Monument (Connaught Drive) and Bukit Batok. While these plaques point to the layered narratives

of Singapore's war history, it is the Former Indian National Army Monument that perhaps best encapsulates the complexities of these histories. This was a monument that was initially built by Japanese occupiers in the middle of 1945 and symbolised the alignment of the Japanese and Indian military forces against the British. It was destroyed by the British when they reclaimed Singapore after the defeat of Japan. The site was officially recognised by the National Heritage Board in 1995, but it was donations from Singapore's local Indian community that enabled the building of a memorial plaque. For further details, see <https://roots.sg/Roots/Content/Places/historic-sites/indian-national-army-memorial> [accessed 23 June 2017].

- ¹² Muzaini, and Yeoh, *Contested Memoryscapes: The Politics of Second World War Commemoration in Singapore*, p. 42.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 45.
- ¹⁴ In a related albeit visually different manner, Japanese artist Motoyuki Shitamichi's project *Tori* (2006–12) provides an interesting study of the location of *tori* gates (used as markers leading to shinto shrines to distinguish the everyday secular from the sacred) in former occupied territories of Japan, such as China, Russia, Taiwan and South Korea. Remaining *tori* within these locations have largely been either destroyed or repurposed for other uses such as posts for gates and signage. These artworks raise important questions about how past imperial war histories remain physically present within a landscape, in spite of the lack of formal recognition of the narratives they signify.
- ¹⁵ Battlefield archaeologist Jon Cooper recently published *Tigers in the Park: The Wartime Heritage of Adam Park* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016), the culmination of a seven-year research project focusing on Adam Park Estate and other WWII-related sites in Singapore. When I first travelled to Singapore to begin filming for *Machine Wind*, Cooper showed me how to find Syonan Jinja within the depths of MacRitchie Reservoir. As we walked through the overgrown jungle, carrying camera equipment, he told me many stories from his research relating to the building of the shrine, treatment of prisoners and where they lived. We also visited Adam Park Estate, now upmarket real estate for colonial expatriates, and he showed me the layout of the POW camp while explaining what buildings had been used for. Cooper's research can also be accessed via his project's website: <http://www.adamparkproject.com/project-history/> [accessed 16 June 2017].
- ¹⁶ For further discussion, see Cooper, "Park Life: Revealing a Hidden Battlefield from the Fall of Singapore", in *A History of Conflict: Britain at War* 43 (Nov. 2010): 75–7.
- ¹⁷ For further reading, see Ken C. Kawashima (ed.), *Tosaka Jun: A Critical Reader* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Study Program, Cornell University, 2014).

- ¹⁸ This paragraph was co-written with Tim Corballis and is taken from our contextualising statement for *Machine Wind*.
- ¹⁹ The full list of words is as follows: “*militarism, militaristic, militarist, aggressive militarist, military authorities, privileged, militarist, militaristic xenophobia, military, military authorities, authority of the commander-in-chief, military, soldiers, soldiers, soldiers, officers, military, commander-in-chief, military, military, militarist, military, military, militarist, military, military, militarist, military, military, soldiers, military, military, force, soldiers, military, military, military, militarist, military, militarist, militarist, military, militarism, military, military*”.
- ²⁰ Kawashima (ed.), *Tosaka Jun*, p. vii.
- ²¹ The filming for *Machine Wind* was conducted over a series of separate visits to Syonan Jinja. On my last visit, this bottle of sake had been left as an offering; I could smell the sweetish alcohol fumes emanating from the bottle in the humidity.
- ²² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 3.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 39 (Didi-Huberman’s emphasis).
- ²⁴ There is also a potential link here to the thinking of American theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, specifically her ideas of embodied listening and thereby embodied knowing as discussed in her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You”, from *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003). Sedgwick offers nuanced theoretical framing from which to position, to “*reparatively* read”, Asia-Pacific Theatre memorialisation by moving from the rigidity of: “Is a particular piece of knowledge true and how can we know?” to further questioning: “What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows?” (p. 124, Sedgwick’s emphasis).
- ²⁵ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. xvii.

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