

Culture



Saskia KERSENBOOM, *Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text*, Oxford and Washington, D.C.: Berg Publishers, 1995, 259 pages, US \$45.95 (hardcover), \$19.95 (paper) both with CD-i

Cynthia Miller

Volume 16, Number 2, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083960ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083960ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Miller, C. (1996). Review of [Saskia KERSENBOOM, *Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text*, Oxford and Washington, D.C.: Berg Publishers, 1995, 259 pages, US \$45.95 (hardcover), \$19.95 (paper) both with CD-i]. *Culture*, 16(2), 99–100. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083960ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1996

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Book Reviews / *Comptes rendus*

Saskia KERSENBOOM, *Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text*, Oxford and Washington, D.C.: Berg Publishers, 1995, 259 pages, US \$45.95 (hardcover), \$19.95 (paper) both with CD-i.

By Cynthia Miller

McGill University

In the opening pages of *Word, Sound, Image*, Saskia Kersenboom guides the reader through an exploration of the intimate challenges of praxis: As a dancer learning to live the poetics of performance; a student attempting to mediate two frames of belonging; a scholar struggling to enact the relationship between the world and the word. A single, sobering question lies at the foundation of these undertakings: *Enta prayogam?* "What's the use?"

For Kersenboom, this question does not represent the threat of futility, but rather the necessity to demonstrate the lived relevance of a given body of knowledge. How may knowledge, once gained, be applied, accessed and revised? In what ways may the vacuum of epistemology be overcome? How may meaning, once derived from the world, be rejoined with the world? These concerns provide a catalyst for the heterodox trajectory of Kersenboom's approach to scholarship, as well as for its application, which takes form in *Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text*.

The volume's central focus turns on a confrontation of textual traditions between late Western scholarship and the South Indian Tamil oral tradition. As Kersenboom suggests, the two traditions have resulted in divergent textual configurations that represent and reveal culturally cherished forms of knowledge. Following the works of Bourdieu and Ricoeur, the Western "text"

is examined as a sign of knowledge which stands in particular relation to the world. Through two-dimensional, printed representation, knowledge is objectified, distanced, and decontextualized from its social and historical conditions – a sign turned from the experiential world – and meaningful action is reduced into text. Conversely, the Tamil sign is organic, manifesting itself as an event. In the Tamil tradition, texts are combinations of word, sound, and image that are sacred, contextual, and performed. Through performative interaction, the Tamil text is rendered into meaningful practice, while knowledge is exteriorized and rooted in the concrete particulars of the interpretive moment. By asking *enta prayogam?*, "What's the use?" the interrogator of the text is inquiring after a practice that is permeated by the world, implying that practice is the vehicle of sense-making.

Kersenboom uses the *Bhairavi Varnam*, an emergent rhythmic and tonal application of an early nineteenth century manuscript, to demonstrate the need for broadening Western notions of knowledge representation. Following Western criteria, a text is either literature (i.e. written and received as such), or it is art, and expressed through performance. Since the *varnam-as-text* is a manuscript that derives its meaning only from performance, it blurs the boundaries between literature and art, and creates its own logic as "literature as applied science" (p. 28), providing the perfect grounding for Kersenboom's dialogue between traditions.

The very structure of *Word, Sound, Image* emphasizes the interrelationship of knowledge, representation, and application. The "Introduction" illustrates ways of knowing, focusing on the tension between Western philology and hermeneutics and Tamil oral traditions, and reassesses the concept of the "text" in its relation-

ship with performance-generated meaning. The main body of the text examines the components and applications of flexible systems of knowledge representation. Part I, "Habitus," highlights the text of the *Bhairavi Varnam* as cultural action, exploring the synergy of text, world, and performer in the creation of generative flows of lived knowledge. Part II, "Praxis," locates the foundations of the Tamil knowledge system in the speech artefact, where grammar, semantics and application become united in the communicative effort. Finally, in Part III, "Representation," the embodiment, transmission, and performance of knowledge are contrasted with abstraction, custody, and enduring objectification. Of primary concern here is the development of strategies aimed toward expressive adequacy and interaction in the configuration of flexible systems of representation.

Kersenboom's application of the Tamil text, which emphasizes both practice and interaction as conditions for human knowledge, to her vision of a "radical hermeneutics" situates her work at the epicenter of current debates on the crisis of knowing – the tension between the word and the world, between textualized representation, and the production and organization of life-worlds. Her challenge to the dominant Western paradigm of static textual representation is one that builds on a strong foundation in sub-altern and post-colonial streams of thought. To these voices, *Word, Sound, Image* adds powerful illustrations of the full force of textual entropy in Western scholarship and opens up a vibrant space for dialogue among the traditions of Tamil and Western ways of knowing. In the process, however, spaces are also closed. Those Tamil texts which draw their force from the traditions of Western scholarship – translations, interpretations, and investigations of interior landscapes of devotion – are banished to the margins under Kersenboom's mandate for dialogue and contextuality. The most eloquent efforts of Western philological, hermeneutic, or structuralist analyses are held as presenting pale and lifeless representations of the Tamil textual event.

What is striking about Kersenboom's efforts is not so much a newness of concerns, but the depth and breadth to which they are extended. Not only does *Word, Sound, Image* present a mandate for human knowledge to be represented as an interactive event - it is the event itself. "Rendering the text into meaningful action" (p. 227), has meant posing fundamental questions about media of representa-

tion, and searching for ways to accommodate a paradigm rooted in practice. Extending beyond traditional Western conceptions of the text as a fixed, two-dimensional medium, Kersenboom's work may more aptly be described as a vehicle for meaning. It expands the parameters of textual representation through the use of a Compact Disc-interactive demo, which presents a five-minute excerpt of the Tamil text discussed in the monograph. Through the CD-i, the user may enter the world of the Tamil text either at the descriptive, analytical, or interpretive levels, investigating any combination of sound, word, and image, the grammars of music, prosody and dance, or the semantic networks that connect the text with the wider Tamil universe. The CD-i radically alters the relationship between reader and text, interweaving the user and the interpretive moment into the nexus of form and meaning of the text. While the text of *Word, Sound, Image* proffers an epistemology that returns to the world, the CD-i is its application, embodying an organic, simultaneous representation of the orality and performance of the Tamil text, and drawing the reader/audience into new relationships with knowledge, time and space.

Robert BOYD, *People of The Dalles. The Indians of Wascopam Mission*, Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, 396 pages.

Toby Morantz

McGill University

A secondary title to this volume describes it as "a historical ethnography based on the papers of the Methodist missionaries." Boyd's discovery of the papers of H.K.W. Perkins, dating back to the mid-1800s, led to this volume in which he reconstructs ethnographic details about the lives of the Chinookan and Sahaptin speaking peoples of The Dalles area, on the lower Columbia River, in Oregon Territory. It was a time, the author tells us, that was a crucial period in terms of change, much of it due to the devastating epidemics. This reconstruction makes up the first half of the book. Two other sections follow, one which reproduces the writings of Perkins and a smaller third section in which Boyd provides biographical sketches of the main individuals, Indian and white, who appear in Perkins' writings.