

# Reconstructing atmospheres: Ambient sound in film and media production

**Budhaditya Chattopadhyay**

Leiden University, The Netherlands

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## Abstract

In film and media production, ambient sound is a standard term that denotes the site-specific background sound component providing locational atmospheres and spatial information of public places. In this article, the specific role of ambient sound to create the context for the spatial experience in film and media production has been thoroughly examined in the light of Sound Studies. The article investigates the capacity of ambient sounds to sculpt the presence of a site by producing an embodied experience of the site. The article brings in a much-needed focus on the complex relationship between sound and site by examining the spatial environments recorded, mediated, and reconstructed by sound practice. Guided by the production studies of sound, the article draws on the theories of diegesis, mimesis, and presence to reformulate the notion of the soundscape while keeping a conceptual base in phenomenology of sound in analyzing the spatial and atmospheric listening experience. The article cites examples from representative Indian films and few of my own sound artworks as case studies to make critical listening and analysis of the processes through which ambient sound practice enhances the spatial and atmospheric sensations. The article draws insights from prominent sound practitioners in the form of long interviews conducted by me over several years and self-reflective insights on my own work. The practice-led inputs make the empirical basis of the article shedding light on the production processes providing links between certain techniques available to specific phases of sound production and aesthetic principles shaped by the respective phases of practice with ambient sounds. The article locates a distinct shift occurring through these trajectories of sound practice and relates this shift to the recent “spatial turn” in Sound Studies, making valuable contributions to the field interested to inquire about the emerging spatiality and public-ness in sound artworks.

## Keywords

Ambience, ambient sound, atmosphere, presence, public place, site, Sound Studies

## Introduction

The world within the film and media art production appears by means of the place or the *site*<sup>1</sup> depicted on the screen and created within the environment of sound. We involve ourselves with mediated environment of the production by recognizing the relative presence of the site within this constructed world. The embodied experience<sup>2</sup> of presence<sup>3</sup> may vary in

degree and intensity, depending on the art and craft of the sound practitioners and their intention to

### Corresponding author:

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA), Leiden University, Rapenburg 38, Leiden 2311 EX, The Netherlands.

Email: [mail@budhaditya.org](mailto:mail@budhaditya.org)

attend to the visual and sonic details of the site recorded and represented during the process of the making. We believe in the constructed world when resonance of the site reverberates in our ears and to our sonic sensibilities even long after the medial experience. It is no surprise then that creating the presence of the site in the sound production is of foremost importance when it comes to convincingly convey the narrative development to the individual audience.

How is the site in the film and sound-based media artworks recorded and produced through the practice of sound? Certainly, there are specific methods and creative strategies involved in constructing or evoking presence of the site within the media environment by recording and organizing sounds that intend to create a relatively convincing universe through the mediation process. How much degree of presence is achieved in sound practice? Or the site still remains mostly absent when we listen to these works?

In the case of the film as a mediated environment constructing a convincing universe, the cinematic experience is essentially crafted by recorded materials put together by the practitioner with a narrative structure in mind (Bordwell & Thompson, 1997). These audiovisual materials may or may not be directly or synchronously recorded from the public site<sup>4</sup> or environmental setting we see and hear in cinema. However, the strategic combination of these disparate materials suggests the presence of a fictional site where the actors move and within which the story takes place. It is a question of degree how much association and engagement the spectators develop with the sites narratively portrayed in the reproduced sonic environment on and around the screen, and how resoundingly *present* they appear following various stages of production processes involving recording and spatial organization of sound. Hence, answers to these questions may be found in the hands of sound practitioners and artists working with ambient sound. In my own artistic practice, the primary medium is sound—more specifically field recording of ambient sounds from specific sites. I produce works for installation and live performance often dealing with contemporary issues such as climate change, human intervention in the environment and ecology, migration, and exile.

Conceptually, my work questions the materiality and objecthood of sound and addresses the aspects of contingency, contemplation, mindfulness, and transcendence inherent in listening. Generally, my work intends to shift the emphasis from object to situation, and from immersion to discourse in the realm of sound and media art. In this process, public-ness of ambient sound is a specific issue while making field recording on site and composing with these field recordings while developing a sound artwork. Through this work method, I address how site-specificity is often transformed by artistic intervention of field recording in a public site and how this transformation helps to put a nuanced account of the site. I will discuss how in most commercially driven Indian cinema, in comparison to sound art, this nuanced and sensitive reflection on the public site is often absent to conform to the film industry.

My interest in this article lies in understanding trajectories of sound practice, that is, the way the specific layers of ambient sound are recorded and spatially incorporated so as to produce the association of site since the advent of sound in film and media arts developing toward contemporary digital realm.<sup>5</sup> This trajectory perhaps poses a large historical canvas, but the singular focus of this article remains on the study of the practice of ambient sounds to construct and produce the presence of the site in film and sound-based media artworks. A qualitative evaluation of the production practices and various methods used by sound practitioners working within the film industry and practice-led description of the production, critical listening, as well as self-reflective analysis of a number of my recent sound artworks will inform this inquiry.

What is the specific role of these ambient sounds in film and media art? Every public site depicted in the story has distinct and subtle sounds emanating from its specific environment. These sound sources can include wind, rain, running water, rustling leaves, distant traffic, aircraft and machinery noise, the sound of distant human movement and speech, creaks from thermal contraction, air conditioners, fan and motor noises, hum of electrical machines, and room tones. Although film sound has received extensive academic interest, much of that attention has been invested explaining the role of the voice

and music in relation to the visual image. The public, atmospheric, and ambient sounds remained underexplored in the traditional scholarship of film sound<sup>6</sup> as well as in studies in film and media art production, albeit these specific layers of sound carry the primary spatial information for constructing what is termed in the realm of Sound Studies, particularly in the field of production studies of sound, and studies in digital media as the “presence” (Doane, 1985a; Grimshaw, 2011; Lombard & Ditton, 2006; Reiter, 2011; Skalski & Whitbred, 2010). In the contemporary scholarship of Sound Studies and digital media, “presence” is an emerging area of research. According to the current research, the presence of a site in media is constructed through the interplay between “diegesis”<sup>7</sup> (Burch, 1982; Percheron, 1980) and “mimesis”<sup>8</sup> (Kassabian, 2013; Weiss, 2011) in the narrative strategy that is undertaken within the production processes facilitated by the sound practitioners. Therefore, the term “ambient sound” and its specific mode of practice need careful attention and analysis in the light of Sound Studies and research in sound production. The discussion will help to enrich a specific area of sound scholarship that is the spatial dimension of sound, its relationship to public place and the idea of presence.

### Defining ambient sound

The central topic of this article is *ambience* or, more precisely, *ambient sounds*.<sup>9</sup> I intend to examine how *ambient sound* is used in the process of sound production, both in fiction films and in media arts—for instance, the emerging field recording–based sound artworks, especially produced in my home country India. The focus of the comparative investigation is on the processes of (re)constructing the presence of a site by means of ambient sounds recorded from the site: in film it is the fictional site, while in sound art it is the site for making field recordings with the purpose of developing production of a sound work through artistic intervention and transformation of the site.

How can the terms “*ambience*” and “*ambient sound*” be adequately defined? There are many intersecting definitions and explanations available on the public domain. A quick (and dirty) online search on

Google may lead to some of the term’s many interpretations, but it is quite doubtful whether they correspond to each other and help conceptualize the term comprehensively. According to the online resources Wikipedia and Media College,<sup>10</sup> in the context of filmmaking, “*ambience*” consists of the sounds of a given location or space. This definition correlates *ambience* with other associated terms, such as *atmosphere*, *atmos*, and *background sound*. The resource-rich website FilmSound.org suggests that “*ambience* pertains to the pervading atmosphere of a place.” The website further claims that “*ambience* is widely used as a synonym for *ambient sound*, which consists of noises present in the environment.” Drawing on these sources, I argue that these two terms belong to the same “family” of concepts in sound practice and sound theory and can be used interchangeably. However, etymologically, “*ambient sound*” underscores the material and functional aspects of the term, while “*ambience*” emphasizes the term’s social and cultural connotations.

Terminology aside, for the sound artists and practitioners,<sup>11</sup> *ambience* and *ambient sound* generally denote the surrounding sounds that are present in a scene or location, such as wind, water, birds, forest murmurs, electrical hum, room tone, office clatters, traffic, and neighborhood mutterings. *Ambient sound* can provide a specific atmosphere of a public site in the construction of the diegetic space—or the interior world of a film or sound-based media artwork. To the sound artist and practitioners, *ambient sound* injects life and substance not only to what we see on the cinematic screen but also to the off-screen story-world. The practitioners use the material layers of *ambient sound* to construct the experience of presence.<sup>12</sup> *Ambient sound* helps to mount atmospheres of the public or social aspect of a site in mediated environments. These practical considerations underscore its site-specific, public, and spatial nature.

*Ambient music* pioneer Brian Eno has defined *ambience* in the liner notes of *Music for Airports* “as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint” (Eno, 1978). This sense of subdued coloring indeed permeates the field of *ambient music*. However, Eno’s definition shows a tendency to make an easy association between *ambient music* and *ambience*. In opposition, I will argue that correlating *ambient music*

readily to ambient sounds or ambience is debatable. As Joanna Demers has shown, ambient music “uses a slew of methods to make it sound as if it lacks a foreground and thus easily melts into its surroundings” (Demers, 2010: 117) and thus, as David Toop (1995) suggests, hints at an imaginary environment rather than imposing one. However, ambient sounds emerge from specific public sites, and their site-specificity cannot be easily disassociated in artistic transformation in field recording pieces.

Contributing to the discussion of ambience, Sound Studies scholar Ulrik Schmidt (2012, 2013) has proposed the term “sonic environmentality” as a general context for the ways ambient sound can affect us as environment. The concept of sonic environmentality further opens up the discourse by making distinction between three major forms or dimensions: the ambient, the ecological, and the atmospheric. This three-fold dissection of ambience helps create a deeper engagement with the term in a comprehensive understanding. My work (Chattopadhyay, 2012, 2014b, 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b) tried to intervene into the discourse by considering ambient sound as a material in the hand of practitioners and artists for developing site-driven sound artworks.

Ambient sound as a concept gains currency in contemporary studies of sound in film and field recording-based sound art practice ever since digital technology made it possible to record sound more precisely from the actual location and reconstructing it in a multichannel spatial organization of sound in the contemporary media toward what is being termed the “spatial turn” (Eisenberg, 2015) to describe an intellectual movement that puts emphasis on place, space, and site in social science and the humanities. The present time is conducive for these considerations since Sound Studies has emerged and rapidly established itself as a vibrant academic discipline. A critical listening, informed inquiry, and in-depth analysis of the generally ignored field of ambient sounds will do justice to the pertinent discourses in Sound Studies.

### **Roles of ambient sound**

For the past few years, a major part of my research revolves around the notion of “ambient sound” or

“ambience.”<sup>13</sup> The broader interest is to examine how ambient sound is practiced in the methodology of filmmaking and media production. The specific focus, however, lies in conceptualizing the processes of (re)constructing the presence of a site by means of ambient sounds, recorded from the site. As explained above, ambient sounds used in the narration directly relate to the sites depicted on the screen to project a diegetic space,<sup>14</sup> but the relationship between the site and sound is (re)constructed according to the craft of the sound practitioners in terms of what they intend to suggest in order to enhance the auditory setting of the narrative. It is therefore necessary to understand the specific roles of ambient sounds in film and media (art) production as the primary question driving the research in this article.

Let us first consider the role of ambient sound in the films. Since a substantial amount of sound production scholarship is based on the historical development and analysis of film sound, a clearer picture of the context of the article can be drawn by beginning with an exploration of ambient sound in film. It is my primary assumption that film sound practitioners choose to use the layers of ambient sound among a multitude of other recorded sound components, incorporating them in the strategy of narration in such a way that they produce a spatial realization of a presence of the site in the diegetic world. The absence or relative inclusion of ambient sound in the sound organization determines qualitative degrees and intensities of the site’s presence.

Scholars of sound production point toward the spatial, enveloping properties of ambient sound. Take, for example, David Sonnenschein, who suggests that ambient sound can “create a space within which the audience can be enveloped” (Sonnenschein, 2001: 47). No wonder, emphasizing the atmospheric properties, Béla Balázs proclaimed that it is ambient sound’s business to reveal the acoustic environment—the landscape that we experience every day. He called the acoustic environment the “intimate whispering of the nature” (Balázs, 1985: 116). Theories of spatial cognition also suggest that site-specific environmental and ambient sounds can reinforce spatial aspects of perception “focusing primarily on perception of sound-source direction” (Waller & Nadel, 2013: 83). These varied perspectives inform us how ambient sounds

provide depth and a spatial dimension to a particular filmic sequence by establishing conducive environments to elicit the cognitive association between the auditor and the site in the diegesis, reinforcing “the impression of reality” (Percheron, 1980: 17) in the narration. In film sound production, the organization and design of ambient sound complete the perception of reality in terms of direction and localization, enabling the audience members to relate to the specifics of a site’s sonic environment in the interior world of a film. Sound production scholar Tomlinson Holman (1997) states that “ambience most typically consists of more or less continuous sound, often with a low-frequency emphasis we associate with background noise of spaces” (p. 177). Holman further informs us that there are various kinds of ambient sounds used in film sound production: they can vary from the characteristic natural environmental sounds of a given outdoor site to the indoor “room tone.” Room tone is the low-frequency ambient sound of an indoor space in which all the actors are silent; it is the sonic layer that is significantly capable of carrying the characteristic details of a particular indoor location. In this connection, Holman (1997) suggests that “ambience most typically consists of more or less continuous sound, often with a low-frequency emphasis we associate with background noise of spaces” (p. 177). The advent of digital recording makes it possible to record and re-present a deep layer of low-frequency sounds (Kerins, 2011). Earlier recording media, analogue optical film, and analogue magnetic tapes, with their limited dynamic range, were less capable of capturing the full spectrum of locative ambient sounds, such as the elusive layer of a room tone. This low-frequency content such as room tone and rumbles in digitally recorded ambient sound layers arguably contributes to the sense of embodiment. An embodied experience of sound in the cinema is provided by site-specific bodily perceptible location recording of ambient sounds in their spatial organization proliferated by full-frequency multitrack digital audio recording and multichannel surround sound design. As rightly argued by sound production scholar Mark Kerins (2006, 2011), this sense of embodiment through bodily perceptible low-frequency sounds finds prominence in the digital realm of sound production—an important aspect for sound design practices where this capacity is termed

“adding body to the sound.”<sup>15</sup> The concept of embodiment draws from phenomenology of sonic perception. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2005) has argued that perception is the product of a multisensory relationship between the individual’s “body” and its surroundings as a whole. Don Ihde resonated with similar claims: “I do not merely hear with my *ears*, I hear with my whole body” (Ihde, 2007: 44), substantiating embodiment as a useful concept in discussing ambient sound.

The notions of presence and embodiment as drawn from Sound Studies may be quite relevant while discussing ambient sounds in the context of sound art. Contrary to film sound, in sound art, the functional aspects of ambient sound are often dissolved to embrace the artistic imagination and transformation. The “ambient” in “ambient sound” often relates to a loosely environmental and a rather vague understanding of atmosphere (Böhme, 1993). Similarly, sound artist and theorist Seth Kim-Cohen (2013) in his book *Against Ambience* would diagnose the art world’s recent fascination with ambience. Here, “ambience” is understood as the soothing atmospheric or environmental sounds prevailing in contemporary sound art exhibition contexts lacking critical and conceptual rigor as Kim-Cohen argues. These later perspectives, however, do not consider the site-specific evidence provided by ambient sound in any work of film and media production to stimulate a sense of presence and embodiment.

From a positioning of a sound artist and practitioner myself, I make a counter-argument here, that in field recording-based sound art the mimetic<sup>16</sup> representation of a site in the form of ambient, environmental, and natural sounds tends to develop more into unrestrained, idiosyncratic, playful, and often subjective constructs. These constructs, as I reflect while critically listening to my own artworks, are typically a result of intricate interplays between recognition of the site and its abstraction in the compositional stages, utilizing the ambient sounds extensively recorded on the field as compositional ingredients or raw materials. Field recording-based sound artworks often transcend the Schaferean notion of the soundscape. These works neither give substantial importance to underscoring stereotypical “soundmarks” of the site, nor do they intend to enhance the “ecological” discourse of

differentiating between “lo-fi” and “hi-fi” environments. These works, in my assumption, encourage a rather subjective interaction with the site. As artist and sound scholar Brandon LaBelle articulates, “artistic production is but a mirror of the artist’s own image: mimesis depicting interior states, psychological anxieties, euphoric hopes, and ecstatic dreams. Art represents life at its most poignant, its most dramatic, and its most memorable” (LaBelle, 2006: 212). The artist’s own image of the site as derived from the interaction with the site while doing field recording frames the selfhood to be inscribed in these sound artworks. The artist’s subjectivity also reflects in the way these works are “composed.” The interviews with field recording artists in the book *In the Field: The Art of Field Recording* (2013) reveal the current discourse on field recording as an artistic practice. The discourse reveals and contributes to a larger debate between a “realistic presentation” and an artistic intervention, transformation, mediation, and manipulation of sound. This tension often challenges and dictates the artistic decision as to whether field recording in its presentation as a composition should be processed or presented in its raw form, that is, with as little post-production editing as possible. This decision largely depends on the artist’s intentions in approaching a specific site as a subject of artistic intervention and aesthetic transformation. Many listeners and artists alike tend to appreciate works that are unprocessed. Similarly, the deliberate choice of medium and methodology for particular recordings may contribute to a perceived compositional structure without the need for artistic transformation. Needless to say, this choice of preserving the rawness of sound materials for the potential listener’s interpretation essentially arises from a preference for “purity” in the artist’s sonic sensibility.<sup>17</sup> Taking part in this debate, I argue that the choice of method largely depends on the desired intervention of the artist to produce a certain narrative of the site. In most cases, the site-specificity of the recorded sounds is deliberately altered by further compositional mediations, be they entirely based on recording or involving studio processing. However, I show that sound artworks that go through artistic transformation via compositional mediation via recording and spatialization techniques might appeal to a wider range of engaged listeners than a purely

documentary approach of field recording would do. Through artistic interventions and transformations, public sites are rendered in intimate and thoroughly nuanced ways.

I would like to point out here how the discourse of “acoustic ecology” becomes reconfigured in the shift from ambient sounds recorded at the site to the production of what is termed “soundscape composition,” taking a point of departure from a Schaferean terminology of the soundscape (Kelman, 2010) and underscoring artistic freedom and aesthetic sensibilities. Using this particular term to denote compositions developed from field recordings, Sound Studies scholar Joanna Demers (2010) argues that field recordings as “audio footage ties a soundscape composition to the ecological, social, historical, or cultural dynamics of a specific location, which both personalizes and politicizes the act of listening” p. 120). What she means is that the material layers of ambient sound collected through field recording from a particular site always carry documentary evidence of their publicness. The composition also allows the listener to co-create the imaginary atmospheres of the public site that is perceived in a private mode of engagement. To give the listener a fertile space or open-ended situation in which to listen in an embodied and subjective manner, the artist may choose to intervene in and artistically transform the field recordings in such a way that they would be considered universal artworks rather than pure documentary.

This capacity of ambient sounds to provide site-specific evidence in sound art does not differ from that of ambient sounds in film production, but what is unique is a distancing from an ontologically driven approach to a public site, weaving it, rather, into an ambivalent reproduction that is open to multiple contingent interpretations “by bringing place out of place and toward another” (LaBelle, 2006: 213). It is no surprise that Demers (2010) finds sound in an artistic context “a tantalizing phenomenon that simultaneously discloses and hides a great deal about its origin” (p. 115). To substantiate my explanation of why I believe artists prefer to avoid presenting field recordings as purely documentary works, I refer here to Sound Studies scholar John Drever’s (2002) essay “Soundscape Composition: The Convergence of Ethnography and Acousmatic Music.” In this essay,

Drever describes “soundscape composition” as a juxtaposition of site-specific ethnography and musical composition, incorporating ambient sound as its key ingredient. This articulation takes into account the aspects of convergence between the site-based evidence embedded in the field recording and the sonic abstraction brought about in the artistic practice of recording and/or composing. Both Demers and Drever’s formulations depart from the Schaferean notion of the “soundscape,” embedded within environmental, public, and ecological perspectives of rural and urban sites, in order to embrace the artistic possibilities of field recording.

### Case studies: film sound production and sound artworks

Most of the public places in India are deeply layered with multiple sources of atmospheric sounds coming from the historical past and mixing with the present as I have shown in my work “Sonic drifting” (Chattopadhyay, 2014). However, Indian cinema is notorious for producing typical sound experiences that are based on an overwhelming use of “song and dance” sequences whereby careful incorporation and attentive organization of ambient sound are generally ignored in the narrative strategy (Gopalan, 2002; Rajadhyaksha, 2007). There are indeed many examples from popular Indian films that have kept mindful sound design at bay, mostly creating a loud and high-pitch auditory setting to provide a remote and imaginary cinematic landscape. Challenging this popular preconception about Indian cinema, in this article I intend to show that this generalized perception of Indian cinema could be erroneous if we consider the historical trajectories of sound production as opposed to exporting an essentialist typecast. The advent of digital technology indeed makes it possible to incorporate rich layers of prominent sound components, namely, ambience, in the production scheme of sound organization in the current breeds of Indian films made in the digital realm. There is a new breed of Indian films that methodologically distance itself away from the popular mainstream Indian cinema known for its typical narrative tropes of the spectacular but escapist song-and-dance extravaganza. This new breed of Indian films captures an immersive immediate reality of contemporary India (Chattopadhyay, 2017).

In my previous research (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016), I have indicated a major spatial shift within Indian cinema, marked by the proliferation of a new trend, with audiences increasingly feeling a need to relate to the convincingly real and believable sites within the constructed film space as a diegetic universe (Chattopadhyay, 2013d). A number of recent films such as *Asha Jaoar Majhe* (Labour of Love, Aditya Vikram Sengupta, 2014), *Court* (Chaitanya Tamhane, 2014), *Masaan* (Fly Away Solo, Neeraj Ghaywan, 2015), and *Killa* (The Fort, Avinash Arun, 2015) do not rely on the music, or practically do away with it, using instead a reduced amount of dialogue (or no dialogue, as with films like *Asha Jaoar Majhe*) in the narration. These films are packed with rich layers of ambient sounds: street noises, car horns, tram bells, voices of street hawkers, cats meowing and crows cawing, background radio’s news announcement, and other recognizable mundane ambiances that are present in the everyday public life of India. Due to this careful inclusion and elaborate spatial organization of ambient sounds, these films have a “gritty documentary feel” to them, marked by an immersive immediate realism that stands strongly in contrast to the typical song-and-dance films from the conventional *Bollywood*.<sup>18</sup> These independent films represent a renewed sense of situated-ness in everyday public life, meticulously portraying ordinary sites known through a lived experience in contemporary India with its emerging public urban spaces and transforming rural hinterlands. Due to their narrative strategies, these sites become another character within the diegetic narrative, contributing a resounding presence of the site in the film space. Take for example a typically commercial film, *Highway* (Imtiaz Ali, 2014). Even such a commercial film incorporates a deep layer of ambient sounds from various sites of northern India through which the two characters travel. These sites become significantly audible throughout the first half of the film. As informed by the sound designer of the film Resul Pookutty, these layers were all collected through the technique of digital multitrack sync sound recording and multichannel surround sound design, now becoming standards in Indian film production. The emerging spatial sensibility in the digital realm’s sound production becomes apparent in the way contemporary Indian cinema incorporates the proliferation of ambient sounds that play out in the mind of the

audience a believable topography relatively closer to the lived experience of place. The use of ambient sound via the intricate digital surround spatialization<sup>19</sup> of these sonic layers produces an enhanced sited experience of sound. It is no surprise that the current breed of Indian films, made with digital technologies, compels the audience to utilize their sensorial and ambient or environmental faculties of listening. This new realm of sound production supports the emergence of an embodied experience of everyday life. However, there are industry norms and regulations firmly in place now allowing the practitioner's individual artistry to flourish seamlessly. In *Highway*, the two protagonists (the abducted girl and her fugitive captor) travel through many cities and small towns and rural hinterlands of north India in a truck, staying in hidden places for a few days before running away. Every public place is established with a certain "soundmark" specific to the site. A place in the state of Rajasthan, in north India, for example, is narrated through the distant and proximate calls of the peacock, since Rajasthan is a well-known home for a wide variety of peacocks. This tendency to underline a particular sound, often at the expense of many other ambient sounds emanating from the specific sites and their vibrant environments, serves as a kind of sonic "compensation" for the noise reduction and editing of sync sounds in the post-production. These "industrial" norms, rules, and regulations embedded in the film industry's sound production practices hinder the practitioner in applying a more "artistic" approach that might further enrich the sound experience offered by the film.

On the other hand, sound works produced from similar sites in India use ambient sound with playful and transformative intervention of the artist. Insofar as the use of sound as an artistic medium in the Indian context has been relatively new and nascent, sound art is gradually moving toward being part of the "auditory culture," an ever-widening category in which musicians, composers, new media artists, scholars, and listeners are becoming attentive to a variety of sonic experiences, the act of listening and creative possibilities of sound recording, dissemination, transmission, and playback. Recognition and appreciation for sound art have come to prominence only recently when media scholars active in the arts and cultural studies began to look at sound as a

marker of cultural difference and convergence. Because of this relatively brief history of sound and field recording-based artistic practice in India, the number of works is yet gradually evolving. I make reference to two of my sound artworks:

*Elegy for Bangalore* (2013) is a soundscape composition for stereo and multichannel format, premiered at Klangkunst, Deutschlandradio, Berlin and released by Gruenrekorder on CD. Stemming from the sound/video installation-project *Eye Contact with the City* (2010–2013), the result of an artists' residency in Bangalore, the primary materials used in the installation are extensive field recordings made at various construction sites of Bangalore and retrieved sounds from archival reel-to-reel tapes found at the city's flea markets. The repository of field recordings and other audio materials eventually took the form of this elegiac composition during a subsequent artist residency at the School of Music, Bangor University, in 2011.

*Decomposing Landscape* (2015) is an award-winning sound work that offers in-depth listening to the transfiguration of rural landscapes in India, undergoing environmental decay and destruction. Using field recordings made on the site, and diffusing sound in a third-order Ambisonics B-format, the work is an exclusively multichannel sound composition. The work has been developed through a meticulous collection of ambient sounds from an SEZ (Special Economic Zone) in India during extensive fieldworks over several years. The collection has been forming a digital archive that was instrumental in realizing the work, which was composed, mixed, and produced at ICST, Zurich University of the Arts, during an artist residency in 2014. The work has been released in 2015 by Touch (UK) as both Binaural and Ambisonics mixes.

### **Reflective analysis and further commentary**

In the two of my sound artworks cited, the tension between site-specific evidence of everyday life and compositional abstraction engages the attention of audience in inclusive and often playful ways. Take, for example, my work *Elegy for Bangalore* (2013), which has been based on field recordings made at



various metro construction sites in Bangalore. Materials of the piece also included retrieved audio from old reel-to-reel tapes found at a city's flea market. This extensive repository of field recordings and other audio materials eventually took the form of an elegiac composition, infused with random recordings gathered through sonic drifting and reflecting the perceived longing of the past prevalent in the rapidly modernizing urbanization of India. The work creates a conceptual, practical, and methodological premise for in-depth listening to the passage of time and offers a psychogeographic reflection on emergent urban public sites in India, with their chaotic, noisy, and hybridized sonic environments, many of which are often absent in Indian films. The artistic methodology involving psychogeographic drifting helped me to shape the general outer appearances of the city that had become registered in my mind as a personified construct. Emphasizing a subjective and adaptive auditory perception, *Elegy for Bangalore* suggests a kind of apt ethnographic methodology for listening to a noisy Indian city by engaging with the multilayered ambience and for composing a "truthful" and nuanced sonic portrayal of the city as opposed to a functional and controlled use of ambient sound in Indian films.

Take, for comparison, the example of an Indian film, shot also in Bangalore during the same period when recordings for *Elegy for Bangalore* were made, *Gori Tere Pyaar Mein* (In Your Love O Lady, Punit Malhotra, 2013). The locations—such as street corners, restaurants, and airports depicted in the story-world—are depicted with fewer sonic details than necessary for an inclusive and thorough understanding of these urban sites and their auditory characters. Although shot with sync sound technique, the sonic quality of Bangalore as a site has been practically erased within the film space.

These examples show that both film sound and field recording-based sound art utilize recordings of sound from particular public sites and use similar technological tools and equipment. There are, however, fundamental differences in their approaches to the utilization of ambient sounds. This difference of approach stems from the structures of functionality and storytelling within which sound is deployed in cinema as a narrative component. In many

occasions, the dense and noisy parts of the ambient sound recordings are controlled and sanitized through editing and advanced noise reduction to provide "cleaner" sonic textures, whereby more "aestheticized" and rather sterilized accounts of the sites are heard. The processing of sound with predetermined effects (i.e. echo or reverb) used in sound production has been a result of consciously manipulating sounds to control and compensate for the lack of realistic sonic representations. This film industry-driven technological approach of sound production can be understood as cinema's asynchronous tendencies: separating sound from its real site-specific sources may add to enhance its clarity and legibility, as well as dramatic and spectacular qualities. This perspective on deliberately processing sounds seems comparable to what sound scholar Emily Thompson (2004) has articulated in the context of American cinema as "a fundamental compulsion to control the behavior of sound" (p. 2). This compulsion for achieving clarity in the cinematic soundscape has led the practitioner to often employ easy and obvious "soundmarks" instead of accurately capturing and rendering the complete and authentic atmosphere of a public site. This tendency to highlight a stereotypical sound, often at the expense of the many other ambient sounds emanating from a public site, is meant to balance out the noise reduction and editing of digital sync sounds during post-production processes. These "industrial" norms, practical rules, and regulations embedded in the essentially "functional" aspects of film sound production tend to hinder the artistic potential of the sound practitioner and often fails to further enrich the film's spatial features. As a result, the multilayered public-ness of Indian sites remains mostly absent in the films.

In the light of (more or less recent) historical developments in sound production and looking toward a future scenario, this article instigates a reconsideration of the concept of "presence" precipitated by the practice of ambient sound in film and sound art as the mediated construction of atmospheres from public places. Reading these trajectories of conceptualizing presence, one primary theme emerges, namely, a contribution to the sense of embodied experience via a perceived notion of realism. This sense of embodiment elicited by this

perceived realism is a literal translation of stepping into a site “present” through its acoustic elements. Through the use of sync sound recording and surround design in the digital realm of cinema, similar to any other augmented digital media environment, “spatial presence” is produced to the degree to which an audience “feels that the mediated environment and the objects within the environment that surrounds him or her is real to the extent that the environment responds realistically” (Ahn, 2011: 25). Looking through the lenses of sound art, the presence of a site in Indian cinema emerges in terms of a functional approach in mimetically (re)presenting sound’s inherent site-specificity and public-ness. Presence is, therefore, often “manufactured,” technically crafted, and/or constructed, rather than being an immediate, sensitive, and direct exploration of the many layers of the “real” India and its nebulous but wonderful sites. In sound art, conversely, the artist has the likelihood to intervene more intimately and render a rather nuanced account of the site. The possibility of multiple interpretations of these works in an open-ended way leads to the condition of a “poetic presence.” Similarly, in my field recording–based sound artworks, akin to many other emerging sound artists and their upcoming works, capturing and constructing the presence of the real is not the primary aim, but, as Sound Studies scholar Christoph Cox notes in general on post-Cagian sound art, the field recording–based sound work “offers [...] an aural opening onto a region of this sound” (Cox, 2009: 23). The works foreground the “background” by framing, accentuating (LaBelle, 2006), or amplifying (Cox, 2009) the “real” to trigger fertile imagination and private space for the listener to participate.

## Conclusion

Ambient sound can be defined as the site-specific background sound component that provides locational atmosphere and spatial information in both film and sound art production; generally, it is the primary material in the hand of the sound artist and practitioners to sculpt the sense of presence and embodied experience of a site within the interior world of a sound work. Going through the trajectories of films and sound artworks that use ambient

sounds recorded from certain public sites in India and making a comparative analysis, it is observed that in the Indian films, there is a formidable absence of the subtler actualities of the everyday life of the public places by way of a functional but controlled use of ambient sounds. As a result, the multilayered public-ness of Indian sites remains mostly absent in the popular mainstream Indian films. The apparent intensification of presence in the contemporary films of the digital realm is largely artificial and constructed by industrial norms and market consideration for making cleaner and artificially sanitized sounds. This strategy in Indian films often fails to engage the audience to the publicly vibrant and noisy reality of Indian cities and rural areas. In sound art, conversely, the artist has the likelihood to intervene more creatively and render a rather nuanced and private account of a public site by the artistic practice of field recording with ambient sounds. This comparative study intends to suggest that filmmakers and media producers should have some responsibility while projecting site-specific reality and need to be more connected to the everyday public life they portray and narrate in their works to make their film and media productions more credible and engaging for the audiences. The discussion helps to enrich a specific area of sound scholarship that is the spatial dimension of sound examining its relationship to public place and the idea of presence.

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## Notes

1. *Place* is a generic term, while *site* as a term is more specific. *Site* denotes a point of an occurrence or event, where something important happens; *site* suggests a particular place that is used for a certain public activity. Hence, I will be using the term *site* more often than *place* to specify the narrative depiction of the particular location or public place in film and media production.
2. “Embodied experience” is defined by scholars of digital media as a state of “being surrounded by simulated sensorimotor information in mediated environments that create the sensation of personally undergoing the experience at that moment” (Ahn, 2011: iv).

3. The conceptualization of “presence” concerns the degree to which a medium can generate seemingly accurate reproduction of objects, events, and space—representations that look, sound, and/or feel like the “real.”
4. A public site is a social place that is generally open and accessible to people. Roads (including the pavement), courtyards, public squares, parks, and beaches are typical examples of public site. In film, a public site may appear as a setting for a narrative.
5. Since the 1990s, a large-scale conversion from analogue recording, analogue production practices, and optical film exhibition to digital technologies has taken place. Digital technology has been integrated into the production and post-production stages of filmmaking. The ramifications of these developments have been far-reaching; it is particularly evident in the way cinematic experience has changed through the use of sound, such as multitrack synchronized sound recording and surround sound design. In very recent times, digital multichannel surround sound systems like Dolby Atmos or Auro 3D have altered the way in which the film “soundtrack” is rendered and organized. These newer environments have reconfigured the audience’s experience of the film space, diverging considerably from earlier predominantly screen-centric mono- and stereophonic settings, integrating and augmenting the desired aesthetics into the surround environment through a reordering of the spatial organization of film sound.
6. Most of the scholarly works in film sound do not read ambient sound as a potential source of site-specific evidence to be considered for in-depth analysis and further investigation. There is indeed no comparable work on ambient sound to date.
7. In film and media art, the term “diegetic” typically refers to the internal world created by the story that the characters themselves experience and encounter, the “diegetic space” that includes narrative components of the story-world, both those that are and those that are not actually depicted on the screen by the process of diegesis.
8. Opposed to the basic tenets of diegesis, that is narration and depiction, “mimesis” as a concept suggests imitation or representation (Dumouchel 2015; Weiss, 2011). While diegesis *narrates* the action, mimesis *shows* the action (Kassabian, 2013).
9. Ambient sound broadly denotes the background sounds that are present in a location: wind, water, birds, room tone, office rumbles, traffic, forest murmurs, waves from seashore, neighborhood mutters, and so on. Detailed explanation follows later in this article.
10. See: <http://www.mediacollege.com/audio/ambient/>
11. “Sound practice” is a broad term used throughout the article; it encompasses sound recording, production mixing, dubbing, studio mixing, Foley, re-recording, and so forth. Similarly, the term “Sound practitioner” accommodates all the sound professionals, for example, location sound recordists, field recording experts, directors of audiography, Foley artists, sound designers, production mixers and mixing engineers, and re-recording specialists working within film and media production.
12. See ongoing project *Audible Absence* (Chattopadhyay, 2017), <http://budhaditya.org/projects/audible-absence/>
13. See ongoing project *Audible Absence* (Chattopadhyay, 2017).
14. Already explained in Note 5.
15. Referring to interviews I conducted with the many renowned sound designers, production mixing specialists, mixing engineers, re-recordists, sound editors, and location sound recordists in the context of the project *Audible Absence* (2012–2017). To name a few, sound re-recordist Alope Dey, veteran sound and music mixing engineer Anup Deb, sound mixing engineer and sound designer Anup Mukherjee, Hitendra Ghosh, Jyoti Chatterjee, one of the pioneers of independent Indian cinema Shyam Benegal, Oscar-winning sound designer Resul Pookutty, the younger generation of sound designers, such as Biswadeep Chatterjee, Dileep Subramanian, Dipankar Chaki, Manas Choudhury, Bobby John, P. M. Satheesh, Promod Thomas, Vinod Subramanian, Vikram Joglekar, Amala Popuri, Kunal Sharma, Baylon Fonseca, Anish John, Pritam Das, Sukanta Majumdar, Hitesh Chaurasia, and Jayadevan Chakkadath. Some of these interviews can be accessed online at <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/47914>.
16. Already explained in Note 6.
17. In a recent article “Talking Field: Listening to the Troubled Site” (Chattopadhyay, 2017) published in *Journal for Artistic Research* 13, I have elaborated on this debate between maintaining the “rawness” of the field recording versus manipulation.
18. *Bollywood* is a casual and loose nickname given to the Bombay-based Hindi-language film industry. Bollywood proper is only a part of the larger Indian cinema, which includes other industries producing films in many other regional languages. This article discusses a few films and sound works as case studies based on the site-specific ambient sound recordings

made during the making of these works at certain Indian public places while portraying these sites in their narrative developments. The article, however, does not encourage using this awkward coinage “Bollywood,” nor does it focus on an investigation of the national cinema of India in its limited scope.

19. In multichannel experimental soundscape composition and electro-acoustic music creation, production, and performance, the term “spatialization” is increasingly used to denote diffusion of sound in space. The origin of the term can be found in the English translation of the French term “l’espace,” introduced by Henri Lefebvre (1974) with reference to sociocultural perception and cognition of geographical space.

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### Author biography

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay is an Indian-born media artist, researcher, and writer, with a PhD in Sound Studies from Leiden University, The Netherlands. Prior to his PhD, he has graduated from the national film school of India specializing in sound and received a Master of Arts degree in new media/sound art from Aarhus University, Denmark. His work questions the materiality, site-specificity, and objecthood of sound and addresses the aspects of contingency, contemplation, mindfulness, and transcendence inherent in listening. His artistic practice intends to shift the emphasis from object to situation and from immersion to discourse in the realm of sound and media art. He has received numerous fellowships, residencies, and international awards, and his works have been widely exhibited, performed, or presented. He has an extensive list of scholarly publications in the areas of contemporary media, cinema, and sound studies in leading peer-reviewed journals. Website: <http://budhaditya.org/>