Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

Part III: Conclusion

1. Summary

In this project I set out to consolidate a number of pertinent questions into one: the question of *how* ambient sound is used as a site-specific element to create spatial awareness in Indian films and field recording-based sound artworks. Taking a critical attitude towards the notions of diegetic sound, mimesis, presence, artistic transformations of soundscapes, and technological innovations, the project highlights the inherent similarities and differences between the ways ambient sounds are used in film and sound art; the aim was to know how the latter practice can inform the former.

Part 1 of the dissertation, the introductory chapter, outlines the premise for understanding the basic concerns of my research. Part 2 includes six articles of which the first three deal with three primary phases of sound production in Indian cinema and the last three discuss my own field recording-based sound artworks.

The first article, "The World Within the Home: Tracing the Sound in Satyajit Ray's Films," examines the use of sound in the early films of Indian cinema and considers the work of Satyajit Ray as exemplary of the monaural and synchronized framework of sound production. "The Auditory Spectacle: Designing Sound for the 'Dubbing Era' of Indian Cinema," the second article, conceptualizes the specific practices of designing ambient sounds (or a lack thereof) in the dubbing era of Indian cinema, roughly between 1960 and 1990. The third article, entitled "Being There: Evocation of the Site in Contemporary Indian Cinema," examines contemporary cinematic works in the digital realm that incorporate techniques such as multi-track sync recording and multichannel surround sound mixing, reordering and substantially expanding the spatial organization of ambient sound. "Sonic Menageries: Composing the Sound of Place," article four, shifts the discussion to sound art and investigates the connection between site and sound, mediated and (re)presented by field recordings, and the creation of an artwork entitled *Landscape in Metamorphoses* (2008). Continuing the discussion of sound art practice vis-à-vis film sound production in India, the fifth article, "Sonic Drifting: Sound, City and Psychogeography" investigates one of my more recent sound artworks, *Elegy for Bangalore* (2013), examining its artistic processes. The sixth article, a shorter essay called "Decomposing Landscape: Hearing the Troubled Site," examines another of my recent field recording-based multi-channel sound

compositions, *Decomposing Landscape* (2015), through which I inquire into the complex and evolving relationship between sound and site.

2. Findings

2.1 "The World Within the Home: Tracing the Sound in Satyajit Ray's Films"

In this article I disclose how early Indian cinema was primarily *vococentric* in nature, whereby ambient sound received little attention in the scheme of sound production. However, there were authors like Satyajit Ray whose treatment of sound reveals the recognition of a situated listening by means of attending to the details of the sites. This specific realistic sensibility tended to overcome the limitations of, and expand beyond the creative possibilities of direct or synchronized sound recording and monaural mixing practiced in Indian cinema at the time. Ray explored the synchronized or "direct sound" practiced by his predecessors following the introduction of sound in Indian cinema during the 1930s and 1940s. Investigating Ray's use of a relatively rich layer of ambient sounds to carry out a convincing portrayal of the sites in the narration, I suggest that Ray initiated a tradition of audiographic realism, which was later resurrected by independent Indian filmmakers in the digital era.

2.2 "The Auditory Spectacle: Designing Sound for the 'Dubbing Era' of Indian Cinema"

The basic finding in "The Auditory Spectacle" is that the methodology of designing sound in Indian films in the period between 1960 and 1990 involved a technologically-informed approach through the use of dubbing and studio-centric analogue processing. The expressionistic and melodramatic overtones of these processes led to a remote imagining of the site within the auditory setting. I show that magnetic recording, dubbing, and re-recording rendered this imagining as something spectacular, with extravagant songs and dances in foreign locations and actions imbued with studio-manipulated and synthetic sound effects. This practice produced a cinematic experience charged with emotive tension and affective stimulation by excluding ambient sounds in production schemes, stimulating a sense of escape from the site.

2.3 "Being There: Evocation of the Site in Contemporary Indian Cinema"

In this article I show that production practices involving digitally recorded and organized sounds are employed in novel modes of cinematic expression, thereby evolving in contrast with earlier practices by reconfiguring the linear construct of a soundtrack towards a

spatially-evocative surround sound environment. Using significant examples from post-1990 Indian films, this article explains how previous practices are replaced by "sync" sound recordings, actors' live performances, and surround sound arrangements of location-specific ambient sounds. I demonstrate how these layers of location-recorded sounds lead viewers to renegotiate their association with the site through perceptual processes involving spatial cognition, mimesis, presence, and immersion. I briefly discuss how portable and easy-to-handle digital recording devices have triggered the emergence of field recording-based sound art. The article sets the premise for drawing attention to the inherent limitations in an industrial sound practice lacking artistic sensibilities.

2.4 "Sonic Menageries: Composing the Sound of Place"

"Sonic Menageries" shows that making site-specific field recordings is basically an exercise in the dislocation of sound from the environment. Often, the purpose of recording is reconstructive; here, however, the site-specificity of the recorded sound is displaced by further artistic mediation. By developing the argument from an experiential perspective, that is, in relation to one of my own sound artworks entitled *Landscape in Metamorphoses* (2008), the article shows how the notion of acoustic ecology needs reformulation when relating it to the way environmental sound content recorded at a site is put to use in the production of soundscape composition as sound art. The discussion is expanded to the application of digital technology in artistic practice, arguing that this shift generates a transformation of the discourse on the sound–site relationship.

2.5 "Sonic Drifting: Sound, City and Psychogeography"

The article shows that perceiving a noisy Indian city by listening to its location-recorded sounds might be phenomenologically reductive. However, a psychogeographic approach as artistic practice of playful drifting and random, location-based field recording can lead to a more relevant understanding of the fabric of contemporary urban sites. By examining the artistic processes undertaken in my recent sound artwork *Elegy for Bangalore* (2013), I suggest an apropos method for recording urban sites through listening to the multi-layered sounds and, subsequently, evoking their character.

2.6 "Decomposing Landscape: Hearing the Troubled Site"

This final article traces the coming into existence of my recent field recording-based sound artwork *Decomposing Landscape* (2015), demonstrating that the compositional strategy in this kind of works relies on artistic interventions through intricate digital recording and

compositional transformation. The composing process employed techniques of post-digital processing and multi-channel spatialization of recognizable ambient sounds. The article further shows that artistic mediation generates works that might be considered to fall into a blurry area between musical abstraction and sonic recognition. The article assesses how much spatial information is retained and how much abstraction is generated in the artistic transformation, shedding light on the methodology of handling sonic material collected at a particular site as it is practiced within sound art production as compared to digital film sound production, the latter being more bound to creating a certain mimetic representation of site than the former.

3. Critical observations

3.1 Historical mapping of film sound production leading up to the contemporary digital

Critically looking at the trajectories of sound production within Indian cinema, it can be concluded that sites have been inconstantly rendered and produced through various phases of sound production. I have divided these trajectories into three primary historical markers that seemed useful when locating and mapping the foremost technological shifts. I have studied how these shifts have become manifest in the emerging aesthetic choices available to and embraced by sound practitioners and how these choices are reflected in the production of a site's sonic presence. In other words, the various forms and formats of technological innovations and transformation have informed the degree of site-specific presence produced by ambient sound components. Therefore, my central concern has been to study the specific nature of ambient sound's usage in these corresponding and intercepting phases of recording and sound production in Indian cinema: the analogue monaural synchronized sound recording (direct optical on location) and monaural mixing; dubbing, studio processed, and stereophonic mixing; digital multi-track synchronized recording and surround sound design. Critical observation, reflection, and analysis of the passages of sound from representative Indian films, specifically from these three different phases of sound production, qualify the evidential account of the research as following a top-down approach. In light of the above, this research set out to challenge the traditional reading of Indian cinema as producing mostly song and dance sequences.

Questions might be raised as to whether this broad historical overview suffers from not being able to delve adequately into a specifically focused and detailed discussion of a particular era. In defense, I refer to the argument of certain film and media historians who

maintain that writing history demands a broader perspective in order to accommodate historiographical accounts (Tybjerg 2013). Emerging from a void of serious and sustained research on sound in Indian films, this current research, with its inherent constraints, can be acknowledged as creating a context for future research that might present more detailed studies of particular periods of sound production. Moreover, the project has been inspired by my own professional background as a sound artist and my academic experience in the historical developments of sound in Indian cinema, opening up the research to a new range of knowledge production. As film historian Casper Tybjerg argues: "In order to connect the dots of the historical record into some sort of coherent pattern, historians must inevitably draw on their own experience and understanding of human life and behavior […] [W]e must inevitably rely on our background knowledge of the world when we discuss the past" (Tybjerg 2013: n.p.).

Indian cinema – with its diverse fields of practices, productions, and experiences – is the world's largest producer of films. It was the intention of this project to locate the dominant tendencies and predilections from this diversity with a practice-led approach. This approach was driven by the methodologies of critical and self-reflective observation, pursued through a number of complex and intercepting threads of production trajectories in a vastly heterogeneous national cinema, loosely unified by technological and aesthetic developments. This observational approach helped to locate the major historical developments with a particular focus on the use of ambient sound, which is in itself an underexplored subject of film sound research, and within the wider field of Sound Studies.

My aim was also to facilitate a study of film sound that questioned the classical assumption of the sound-image relationship and shift the focus toward the site's presence as a vital narrative component in film sound production. To that purpose I have devised a taxonomical model on the basis of critical observations of the historical and technological shifts and emergent aesthetic strategies. This model's point of departure is found in specific phases of technological innovations and transitions in sound production, but is not limited to a discussion of the history of sound technology. On the contrary, the model highlights characteristics delineating the sonic aesthetics emerging from these most prominent technological phases, thereby linking studies in sound art to film sound. The use of ambient sound in each of these phases can be broadly categorized as:

1. Ambient sounds used as direct evidence of a location
2. A lack of ambient sounds to facilitate site-unspecific spectacles

3. Ambient sounds used to create spatially evocative environments

This model helps to map the various technological shifts within film sound production practices and makes it easier to categorize the types of experiences these practices have been facilitating. As an outcome, the project provides a novel approach in studies of cinematic sound: shifting the scholarly attention from "sound in relation to image" to "sound in relation to site."

The corresponding model for the production of presence of site in cinema by means of ambient sound (for the three phases demonstrated above) can be loosely categorized as:

1. Locating the Site
2. Escaping the Site
3. Being Sited

What this tripartition shows is that ambient sounds were used in phase 1, the phase of analogue monaural synchronized sound recording (e.g. direct optical on location) and monaural mixing (to varying degrees, and more by Satyajit Ray than by his predecessors). This should primarily be regarded as the direct observational evidence of a location, producing a sense of "locating the site." Ambient sounds were mostly ignored in the phase of dubbing, studio processing, and stereophonic mixing, to facilitate unsitely fantastic spectacles. They were incorporated again, in the present era, but this time with greater richness and wider spatialization in order to create spatially evocative environments; this is what I mean by "being sited." In the digital era, many of the production aesthetics of the "direct era" find revival (albeit within a spatialized environment) with particular inspiration from Ray and his followers, who strived after a realistic (re)presentation of sites.

I have used the nomenclature of these three corresponding categories for the simple purpose of order and punctuation, as well as taxonomy. From the outset, these categories can be questioned concerning their historical accuracy. In defense, I present the argument that the three-part division can be considered as a heuristic, pragmatic, and useful way to read the fragmentary and uneven trajectories of Indian cinema sound production processes in a historical context. There are other shifts that occur in parallel or intersect to a certain degree, but the choice to use these three prominent markers facilitates an understanding of the use of ambient sound within highly diverse Indian cinema in a more or less coherent and comprehensive manner. The division reflects the discourse and vocabularies of the sound

practitioners as well. Moreover, the categorization is not arbitrary; the proposed model takes its inspiration from existing research in Sound Studies and new media theories. Frances Dyson, in her book *Sounding New Media* (2009), observes some key "rhetorical maneuvers" that accompany the transition of sound media from the analogue phase to the digital realm, stating that, "[T]he shift from 'looking at' to 'being in' […] is reflected by the artful dropping of analogical markers: the 'it's as if you are there' of screen-based media is truncated to a 'you are there' […] By 'being in,' rather than 'looking at' […] the viewer is said to occupy the space and time, the here and now, the virtual present of a separate but ontologically real space" (Dyson 2009: 2).

The transformation of the diegetic space from a screen-centric, monaural soundtrack to the ultra-screen expanded stereophonic space and further to today's spatially enveloping surround sound environment can be understood as paradigmatic shifts from "looking at" to "being in" – a clear indication of a spatial shift characterized by the changing relationship between site and sound as created through evolving production practices. Much of this shift is made audible through the use and spatial ordering of ambient sounds to create an immersive environment facilitating an embodied experience of a site's presence. I have shown how the screen-centric, monaural recording and mixing of synchronized ambient sound as direct evidence helped to "trace the site." Dubbing and ultra-screen stereophonic mixing created an auditory setting of an unsitely spectacle by a deliberate lack of ambient sound to "escape the site." I have also demonstrated that the contemporary digital era is more generous in including ambiences in the sound organization than former eras had been. Consequently, the site becomes more bodily "present." I have analyzed significant passages from Indian movies after 2001, showing that many embraced digital multi-track sync sound recording before it gradually became standard practice around 2009. The novel experience of listening to the film space in the digital era is marked by low frequency room tones, atmospheric contents recorded from the location in synchronization with the onsite live setting. The mise-en-sonore is rendered by elaborate spatialization of these ambient sound recordings that provide ample evidence of the site in a spatially enveloping environment of surround sound. These new methods and approaches produce a sense of "being sited" as an embodied experience of the site's realistic and convincing presence. In this dissertation I have discussed these transitions within sound production in Indian cinema from the analogue eras towards the contemporary digitalization of sound to study the latter's implications in triggering novel cinematic experiences of immersion and site-oriented engagement. It is widely acknowledged that film is possibly "the first medium to efficiently accommodate sound" (d'Escriván 2009: 65). My interest here has been to study how

creativity with cinematic sound developed historically and where this creativity intersects with sound art.

3.2 Comparative analysis: film sound/sound art

In his book *Film, a Sound Art* (2009) Michel Chion argues that watching movies is more than just a visual exercise; it also enacts a process of "audio-viewing." The audiovisual makes use of a wealth of tropes, devices, techniques, and effects that convert multiple sensations into image and sound, therefore rendering, instead of reproducing, the world through cinema as a "truly audiovisual language." Chion's formulation adheres to the image-centric reading of sound in cinema and, therefore, fails to make a clear distinction between the approaches toward auditory and visual setting as two distinct processes within production practices. My project has aspired to make this distinction clear by not just using the coinage "sound art" as a metaphor, but, unlike Chion, to cite real works of sound art to show how the creative possibilities and potentials of sound in cinema are delimited, often suppressed, in order to cater to the industrial needs of storytelling, diegesis, and narration as well as an overwhelming desire to juxtapose sound events with the visual cues (Chion 1994). The discussion on sound art offered here intends to enable a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between the use of ambient sound to construct and narrate the site within the interior world of the film production and the use of field recordings in certain site-driven sound artworks and compositions.

In the last three articles in Part 2 I have shown that field recording practices emerged as a response to the advent of digital technology in sound recording. However, I do not claim that digital technology *alone* triggered this flux of field recording practices. My suggestion is that digital media provided a unique condition for these practices to flourish within a more innovative and creative realm, namely through a proliferation of production technologies, such as multi-track recording, multi-channel spatialization and diffusion of sound, transmission of works through a globally dispersed digital network, enabling previously unimaginable level of access, and, most importantly, the development of digital communities promoting and fostering sound art and field recording. There were some instances of pre-digital or analogue field recording in India; in my artwork *Elegy for Bangalore*, I have acknowledged these practices from the magnetic tape era. But what was lacking then was an aesthetic grounding. Many film sound professionals made field recording for their own creative pleasure, but their works remained "amateurish" due to the lack of publication and dissemination, which has become so much easier in the digital realm.

So, while location recording with heavy analogue recorders was, firstly, cumbersome and, secondly, almost always financially unfeasible, easy-to-handle digital equipment made recording more democratic and widespread. Therefore, now is the appropriate time to make a critical commentary on the differences and similarities between film sound and sound art that are informed, influenced, and enhanced by digital technology. In this context, I have demonstrated that ambient sounds are used in field recording-based sound art productions, not as means to construct immersive environments for the audience by creating a feeling of "being sited," but as materials to develop a more nuanced impression of the site as ingrained with many complex social, cultural, political, and ethical issues.

In the works cited, the tension between site-specific evidence and compositional abstraction engages the attention of audience in inclusive and often playful ways. My sound work *Elegy for Bangalore* (2013), based on field recordings made at various metro construction sites in Bangalore, is an example of this. Materials of the piece also include 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 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 (a) for listening to a noisy Indian city by engaging with the multilayered urban context and (b) for composing a "truthful" and nuanced sonic portrayal of the city.

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 during the digital sync era of sound production, the sonic quality of Bangalore as site has been practically erased within the filmic space.

I have shown that both film sound and field recording-based sound art utilize recordings of sound from particular 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. This compulsion for achieving clarity in the cinematic soundscape leads the sound practitioner to often employ easy and obvious "soundmarks" instead of accurately capturing and rendering the complete ambience of the sites. This tendency toward highlighting a stereotypical sound, often at the expense of the many other ambient sounds emanating from a specific site, is meant to balance out the noise reduction and editing of digital sync sounds during post-production. These "industrial" norms, practical rules, and creative regulations embedded in the essentially "functional" aspects of film sound production often tend to hinder the artistic potential of the sound practitioner and fails to further enrich the film's spatial features. Here, knowledge concerning the ways sound artworks can be conceived and developed may influence and inspire, if not radically alter, film sound practices.

3.3 Best practice in film sound production

It is my belief that learning about these similarities and differences can generate novel and relevant insights for producing a specific set of new knowledge that can contribute to the notion of "best practice"[173] in film sound production.

There is no official document or manual related to best practice in sound production for Indian film industry yet. However, examining my interviews and in-depth conversations with several sound practitioners may shed light on the perception of a best practice, critically gauging the industry standards in this context. This is often reflected in the national awards given to the "best" works in the categories of "Location Sound Recordist," "Sound Designer"

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[173] As explained earlier, best practice is a method, technique or approach that is generally considered as better than its alternatives, either because it produces results that are deemed superior to those achieved by other means of production or because it has become a standard way of doing things in compliance with certain aesthetic references. As a result, a best practice becomes widely accepted as better than any alternatives that have been traditionally embraced in the production process.

and "Re-recordist of the Final Mixed Track."[174] Many of the interviewees of my project received this type of awards from national (as well as international) bodies based on the film industry's evaluation of a highest level of craftsmanship in sound production. How do these "best" works sound? Do they indeed represent and exemplify exceptional works of film sound production, those that demonstrate a sensitive application of artistry? In my opinion, sound-based creative endeavors are often characterized by a refusal to be standardized, destabilizing existing systems of industrial norms and protocols. To articulate how the idea of producing "better" sounds occupies the minds of practitioners and how they aspire to achieve certain (personal) standards of quality and efficacy within the immense constraints of the film industry, I refer to the interviews that discuss how the creative utilization of ambient sound expanded in the digital era (e.g. Chaki, Dev, Dey, Chatterjee, Pookutty). It is ambient sound that is categorically singled out by these established practitioners as the primary element of artistic exploration in film sound production. However, sound production in mainstream Indian cinema is still dominated by the pervasive norms and rules of the film industry, even though the digital realm opens up possibilities for creative intervention by the practitioner, shaking up the hierarchical and feudal chains of industrial and studio-centric production. One example of this is how sync sound requires the glorified actor's committed participation on the film set on a par with the location sound technician, who has long held a lower status in film crew hierarchy. In this project I have argued that the lenses provided by sound art can be useful in the attempt to find out how film sound can be more inclusive towards the site, more playful, more aware as well as more nuanced in its application. Here I intend to distance myself from industrial norms and regulations in search for more freedom, hacking the technology and subverting industrial standards. I am, therefore, critical of the standardizing idea of a best practice when it comes to individual artistry and send out a call for greater inclusiveness and sensitivity to the site-specificity of sound. Best practice, as I apply the concept here, envisions a future of film sound where these creative sensibilities will be explored artistically, using industry-dependent ideas of a "best sound" in film only as a point of departure to reinterpret and recontextualize the conventional notion of "best practice."

It is in the independent, so-called "art house" cinema rather than the cinema for the masses where the possibilities for artistic exploration and developing exceptional examples of creativity in sound are most present. Take for example a review from Amersfoort, The Netherlands, paraphrasing the director of the independent Indian film *Anhey Ghorhey Da*

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[174] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Film_Award_for_Best_Audiography

Daan (Alms for a Blind Horse, Gurvinder Singh 2011): "Even a still scene can create its own sound and tell [you] what's going on."[175] The director was present when the film was shown at the Rotterdam International Film Festival 2012 and talked about his ideas of sound in Indian cinema. The statement suggests a clear emphasis on the potential of ambience and its deeply evocative effectiveness in establishing the poetic presence of the landscape shown on a static frame. Sound, in this handful, but growing number, of Indian "indie" films, takes its own course by creating layers of multiple impressions within, around, and beyond the visual narrative and the overarching story. Here the authors' (both the director of the film and the sound practitioner) subjective interpretations of a place are paramount and crucial when developing an auditory setting.

In similar ways, subjectivity is central in sound artworks developed from field recordings. I have shown how the artist's personality, idiosyncratic state of being, playfulness, and a sense of abundant freedom allow the artwork to be more engaging and evocative than it would be if a merely functional approach were taken. While many film sound works tend to be inflexibly culture-specific and controlled, sound artworks seem to strive for a subtler sense of subjective truth and contingent universality. As Brandon LaBelle argues, sound art "attempts to tell the truth, to locate origin, capturing, harnessing, finding, and researching the environment, its inhabitants, and delivering up its […] reality" (LaBelle 2006: 220). Hence, film sound can learn from how sound art is developed. Throughout the history of motion pictures we have witnessed a complex discourse concerning the reciprocal relationship film establishes with other arts, mostly defined by creative efforts and experimental gestures in mutual domains, permeated by dialogic inquiries into how those other arts express themselves in film and the latter transmutes into the former. On this note, my project aligns with a fertile discourse and opens up a space for a stimulating dialogue. In his article *Sound Art (?) on/in Film* (2009), film music scholar Julio d'Escriván notes that "a fair evaluation of the work of sound artists in film is still largely virgin territory" while "film has gradually brought into focus the practice of sound art as something distinct from music yet existing at the end of a unified continuum between abstraction and representation" (d'Escriván 2009: 65 and 72).[176] From d'Escriván's statements it is fairly easy to speculate about possible dialogues and how such dialogues can contribute to the

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[175] See the film review by JvH48 (28 October 2012)

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2085746/reviews?ref_=tt_urv

[176] What d'Escriván broadly refers to as "sound artists in film," I call "sound practitioners," with a specific focus on the creativity they have introduced in film sound.

enrichment of film sound and also inform sound art in its many modes of expression. My PhD-project makes a conscious and deliberate effort to step into this "virgin territory" with the intention to intervene and develop relevant new knowledge in both fields.

3.4 Rethinking the concept of presence

In the light of (more or less recent) historical developments in sound production and looking towards a future scenario, this project instigates a reconsideration of the concept of "presence" precipitated by the (re)presentation of sound in film and sound art. I have discussed in this dissertation how presence was conceptualized within an analogue sound recording context (Doane 1985) and how it gains currency in the ways contemporary media negotiate and establish place in mediated experience in the digital era. Reading these trajectories of understanding presence, one primary theme emerges, namely a contribution to the sense of embodied experience through a perceived notion of realism. This sense of embodiment elicited by the perceived realism is a literal translation of stepping into a site "present" through its acoustic elements; "thus, presence may be the key to understanding the processes of embodied experiences" (Ahn 2011: 25). If the goal of media is to reproduce the illusion of nonmediated communication, the degree of vividness or realism that users experience during their perception of the media environment is crucial to the production of presence. In this context presence is "the psychological state of feeling that the mediated experience reproduced by virtual environments is 'real'" (Ahn 2011: 22). Likewise, in film sound, presence is produced by creating an illusion of "being there" for the audience, which intensifies as filmmakers employ digital technology that is inherently able to provide the means to simulate reality in a more perceptually lifelike fashion. 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, see also Lombard and Ditton 1997; Skalski and Whitbred 2010; Grimshaw 2011).

The mobility and portability of contemporary media contribute to the so-called "spatial turn"[177] in media and communication studies as well as in the social sciences and

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[177] I have explained the term "spatial turn" in the subchapter "Sound Studies" of the Introduction as "the increasing recognition of the intimate links between sound and space" (Eisenberg 2015: 195).

humanities. On the issue of "spatial presence" within a broader context, philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has stated that "the (spatial) tangibility effect coming from the communication media is subjected, in space, to movements of greater or lesser proximity" (Gumbrecht 2004: 17), indicating the importance of contemporary media to include increasingly spatial features. This development may explain the intensified sense of a site's presence in the digital realm. Such views are shared not only by digital media scholars (whose works I have referred to extensively in other parts of this dissertation) but also by sound scholars. For the latter, sound strengthens the condition of the "preconceptual sensory experience, for immediacy, bodily presence, or states of immersion" (Gess 2015: n.p.). In her recent article "Ideologies of Sound: Longing for presence from the eighteenth century until today," sound scholar Nicola Gess notes how in the contemporary discourse on sound

> the key concepts of the aesthetics of presence promise an experience beyond symbolic orders, that is, an experience of immediate contact with "materiality," "phenomenal being," or the "real." (Gess 2015: n.p.)

However, she further explains that this promise often establishes an "ideology of presence" rather than an actual, "historically informed, critical and concrete examination of sound" in contemporary theories. Through an engaged literature review, she shows how this promise is often "accompanied by an appeal to a past era when these essences are thought to have been central, or at least when the experience of sensory presence is thought to have been more central" (Gess 2015: n.p.). To her, the essence and appeal of this promise are marked by a romanticized view of the past, longing for its lost glory of immediacy, sensory, and corporeal presence of the genuine and the original.

While my principal findings may resonate with this promise of an unmediated merging with reality in the digital era, this research project also demands a closer and critical look at the concept of presence. 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. 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. The truthfulness of the site withdraws or slips away under the pressure of the cinematic storytelling. In my opinion this habitually elusive veracity of the site in Indian films is first of all an outcome of the pervasive control of the market and the film industry at the expense of a greater artistic

freedom of the practitioner, who is often not allowed to indulge his or her creative self. The practitioner's sincere artistic efforts have historically met with resistance[178] arising from an adherence to, or the demand to adhere to, the norms of the film industry. This has led to inaccurate and untruthful (re)presentations of reality in favor of a manufactured presence, what film scholar Stephen Prince has called "perceptual realism," meaning that unreal images (and sounds) appear "referentially fictional but perceptually realistic" (Prince 1996: 32). In Part 1 and 2 of the dissertation I have mapped out and reflected on this formidable absence of the subtler actualities of sites in Indian cinema, hence, the title of this project: *Audible Absence*. Here I would like to point out once again that the apparent intensification of presence in Indian cinema in the digital era is largely artificial and constructed – with the help of market-driven digital technology with its readily available tools, presets, formats and systems – rather than tapping (or hacking) into the contemporary post-digital[179] realm's open-source playing field with its immensely creative applications.

In sound art, conversely, the artist has the likelihood to intervene more intimately and render a rather subjective account of the site. While writing on the works of Hildegard Westerkamp, Brandon LaBelle speaks of the artists' own "interference" that helps to embrace "a counternarrative […] against mimesis and toward alterity […] while accentuating the real […] and chart[ing] the dynamism of acoustic spaces inhabited by both real and mythological beings" (LaBelle 2006: 213). However, despite this openly interventionist and performative process, sound artists may remain "sensitive to the acoustic environment" (LaBelle 2006: 215) by becoming mindful of the deeper intricacies of a site and its complex sound world. The performativity (Gallagher 2015) involved in field recording-based sound artworks is embedded in the fact that field recordings are presented primarily as independent sounds, often sans juxtaposition with a dominant visual cue, unlike cinema. Therefore, the possibility of multiple interpretations of these works in a more open-ended way leads to a condition of a "poetic presence," as mentioned before. With this poetic presence, sound operates beyond the confines of immediate meaning-making and readily-

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[178] In some of the interviews (see Appendix), sound practitioners have expressed their frustration with not being able to contribute their creative best by responding with sarcasm, irritation, withdrawal, or hostility to the suggestion of instigating change or voicing their opinion. While their defence of their profession and their own position in the system is understandable, it is also imperative to pay attention to what they truly aspire to, revealed through the intermittent flashes of inspiration with which they describe their work.

[179] I will elaborate on the term "post-digital" in the next subchapter "Future Directions."

available signification. This is a condition where the "realness" of a site may intermingle with imaginary "mythological beings," as LaBelle points out, thereby transcending a state of mere spatial presence towards eliciting an "associative" or poetic-contemplative state in the mind of the listener. In an article[180] for the *Journal of Sonic Studies*, and subsequently in other writings, I have articulated this state in terms of the "auditory situation" (Chattopadhyay 2013, 2014, 2015), suggesting "a listening that wanders across thresholds of presence and absence, the immediate and the remembered to create all sorts of associations" (LaBelle 2015: 319). LaBelle cites the article in the new edition of *Background Noise* (2015) and interprets it this way:

> The artist and writer Budhaditya Chattopadhyay investigates the question of presence, and how sound suggests another understanding of perceptual experience. For him, sound and listening are intensely "associative," never singular but always already superimposed across multiple levels of presence and that easily stitch together present and past, now and then. As he suggests, 'Knowledge about the locative source of sound becomes blurry in its juxtaposition with memory, contemplation, imagination and mood,' which creates a rather 'disorienting experience.'" (LaBelle 2015: 319)

Likewise, in my sound artworks, similar to many other field recording artists, capturing the real or constructing the presence of the real is not the primary aim, but, as Christoph Cox notes in general on post-Cagian sound art, my field recording "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 a ground for the listener to participate. By coalescing presence and the imaginary, the real and the virtual, these works tend to obscure site-derived information "through a superimposition of sound that interpenetrates preexisting spaces, effecting a layering or doubling, which can produce hybrid spaces" (Gallagher 2015: 574).

Coming back to LaBelle's analysis of Westerkamp's *Kits Beach Soundwalk* (1989), the apparent problem for him is that she *seems* to present an unmediated account of the site – while the recording makes clear how much manipulation she has employed on the recorded

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[180] Chattopadhyay, Budhaditya (2013). "Auditory Situations: Notes from Nowhere." *Journal of Sonic Studies* 4.

sound – hence, that the reality of Kits Beach[181] is constructed by the recordist, the recording device, the post-production, the playback, and so forth. However, in my opinion, this critique does not hold much ground. Field recording-based sound artists do not record reality as it is, nor do they intend to compose presence; they aspire to open up the multiple layers of reality by creating an interplay between presence and poetic imagination. As Cox (2009) suggests, field recording does not so much capture as transduce, amplify, and reiterate site. LaBelle also recognizes this, as he points out that in field recording-based sound art, "place paradoxically comes to life by being somewhat alien, other, and separate, removed and dislocated, rather than being thoroughly mimetically real […]. [A]s a listener I hear just as much displacement as placement, just as much placelessness as place, for the extraction of sound from its environment partially wields its power by being boundless, uprooted and distinct" (LaBelle 2006: 211). These sensitive readings suggest that listeners are asked to engage more creatively with these works; they are encouraged to participate in unfolding the many potential interpretations and imaginings inherent to such a work.

Questions can be raised as to whether it is possible at all to present reality as "thoroughly mimetically real" because reality always needs some sort of representation to appear. Philosophers would argue that presence or reality is always already mediated and endlessly deferred in any form of representation. As music philosopher and Sound Studies scholar Marcel Cobussen writes: "The real is always already permeated with a deficit, a shortage. However, if the real cannot exist without its representation, if the latter is established as the precondition for the presence of the real, then representation should become the point of departure. On the other hand, representation also prevents the real from appearing; it defers the real" (Cobussen 2002: n.p.). My PhD project, with its inherent academic delimitations, has humbly redrawn attention to this triangular relationship between reality, its representation, and presence within the context of sound production, arguing that there are differences in approaches when enacting this relationship in various forms of media production, e.g. film and sound art. My final comment on this topic would be that reality is perceived and constructed in the mind of the listener with ardent and helpful contributions from sound practitioners and artists, depending on the extent to which expressiveness and creative freedom as well as care and sensitivity is used in building the delicate bridge between listener and creator of sound-works.

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[181] See my previous remarks on *Kits Beach Soundwalk* in footnote 34 of the Introduction.

4.   Future directions

At the outset, this PhD project appeared to be limited in scope by only focusing on Indian cinema and a few sound art productions originating from India. However, the findings of my research can be considered, more broadly, to inform the (potential) futurity of a sound production both in and outside India in which varied forms and formats of expression coalesce. Film sound and sound art practices may intersect through intensive technological convergence, aesthetic inclusivity, a sense of democratization, and artistic freedom. This sense of inclusivity and creative freedom will trigger the production of new, hybrid artistic forms, enriched with experimentations that subvert former and current industrial norms and limitations. Here I am able to only briefly speculate on these future conditions.

However, my speculations are more than mere flights of fancy; they resonate well with the so-called "post-digital aesthetics"[182] of contemporary film and media practices (Cramer 2014; Cox 2014; Bosma 2014; Chattopadhyay 2014). When the digitalization of sound production has reached a state of saturation, contemporary media theories suggest that a critical juncture will occur, which will include the shifts this project has discussed, analyzed, and hypothesized. Such a "post-digital" context directs to potentially new fields of inquiry for future researchers.

In terms of considering post-digital aesthetics as a potential future direction, pivotal is the question of the a-temporal convergences, as performed through the emergence of a so-called precarious aesthetics, exemplified by hybrid film and media productions, from GIF[183] artworks based on archival materials to silent films like *The Artist* (Hazanavicius 2011). In the context of sound production following the demise of the digital revolution, Kim Cascone has argued that, "the medium of digital technology holds less fascination for composers in and of itself" (Cascone 2002: n.p.). In articulating the "post-digital" in relation to sound art and new music, Cascone advocates an attention to the alleged failures of digital technology and the way in which it triggers subversive and alternative events through glitches,

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[182] The "post-digital" is a condition in contemporary creative media practice where applications of digital technologies do not remain an end in themselves (Cramer 2014). This tendency is exemplified by the way older mono- and stereophonic practices are converged with, and absorbed within, the three-dimensional surround sound universe. Also, certain retro-aesthetics from the analogue sound eras have been applied in contemporary sound production, leading to an intense flexibility and hybridization of various practices.

[183] The Graphics Interchange Format. See: http://giphy.com/artists

clippings, aliasing, distortion, and so forth. His formulation of the "post-digital" thus accommodates the breaking down of "digital essentialism" into fragments of digital sonic artifacts that can be reused and repurposed as artistic materials in a new spatial ordering of soundworks in fluid, malleable, flexible, and inclusive manners. Riding on these waves, artists may push the technical limits of sound recording, exploring the lo-fi recording possibilities of smartphones in addition to demanding extended frequency response in portable, easy-to-use recording formats, ranging from high-resolution multi-track recording gadgets to the self-made technologies of DIY contact microphones. My project has shown that the emergence of field recording as a means of assembling the novel materials to artistically (re)engage with the site and develop a more nuanced reproductive impression has been indebted to these developments.[184]

Such use of sound is also accentuated in the post-digital context of cinematic experience, especially in the spatially fluid environments of digital systems such as Dolby Atmos or Auro 3D. In *A Theory of Digital Objects*, Jannis Kallinikos, Aleksi Aaltonen, and Attila Marton claim that "digital objects are marked by a limited set of variable yet generic attributes such as editability, interactivity, openness and distributedness that confer them a distinct functional profile" (Kallinikos et al. 2010: n.p.). This leads to a profound sense of "object instability," with digital material being experienced as evasive and fleeting artifacts in contrast to the more solid and self-evident nature of traditional film sound media, such as the optical strip, the magnetic tape, or a soundtrack released on a CD or DVD, etc. The dispersed and mutating nature of the universe of digital sound objects and their diffusion across the itinerant and mobile three-dimensional space makes them difficult to authenticate from the

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[184] As I have shown earlier, digital technology merely creates the conditions in which the artistic practice of field recording can flourish and be widely acknowledged. I do not glorify here a modernist "progressive" role of digital technology, nor is it my intention to downplay or undermine older techniques. As mentioned before, early digital recording and reproduction systems had several drawbacks, e.g. a lack of warmth, an absence of natural roughness, and no grains of sounds, all of which are typical characteristics of analogue recordings, as Jonathan Sterne has argued (2003, 2006). Digital technology can, however, facilitate postproduction by replacing cumbersome and noisy analogue processes. The two technologies, in fact, can complement each other in fruitful ways. That is why I speculate about a "post-digital" condition, where all the techniques, old or new, analogue and digital, coalesce and consolidate freely and uninhibitedly, forging new forms of sonic expressions, from sonification to Ambisonics compositions and interactive installations.

perspective of the fixed screen and its two-dimensional visual narrative. Sounds that are disembodied from the screen space cause multiple layers of mediation, leading to, potentially, many interpretations beyond the screen – most importantly in the mind of the listener.

The post-digital discourse essentially relates to the perpetual transience of these amorphous but fertile "auditory situations" (Chattopadhyay 2013, 2014, 2015) that need to be navigated spatially, just as in real life. It is evident that, in this milieu, the access of sound in cinema to greater spatiality, mobility, interaction, and sensorial presence, leads to an extension of the presence of sounds beyond their visual image-based object-hood, a structure that was necessary to understand and appropriate Michel Chion's terminology of "illusion of redundancy," "added value," "audiovisiogenic effects," and "syncresis" in the earlier organization of sound, i.e. monaural and stereophonic eras of sound production. In the reorganized space of digital sound, these notions tend to lose their validity. Contemporary sound practices and their emergences contribute to the formulation of the speculative concepts of the "post-digital," not only by regarding sound recordings as relocated and transformed sonic artifacts in the spatial reordering of systems, such as Dolby Atmos and Auro 3D, but also by facilitating multi-level spatiotemporal reinterpretations of older sonic experiences in an era of rapidly converging and intensely hybridizing fluid environments marked by an expiry of the digital. I hope that my dissertation also opens up such issues for discussion and creates a fertile framework in which to address them. I hope that the findings and suggestions of this research can be considered as a point of departure for future researchers venturing into a study of sound in cinema, sound art, and other media art.

These free-floating sonic states in contemporary film and media art are less attached to the cinematic screen and visual image, thereby acquiring independent identities. Such states are articulated in Steven Shaviro's recent book *Post Cinematic Affect* (2010), where he claims that "digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience […] Recent film and video works are expressive: that is to say, in the ways that they give voice (or better, give sounds and images) to a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today" (Shaviro 2010: 2). This ambient, free-floating sensibility loosens up the cinematic structures into new forms of artistic expressions, inviting and incorporating new media art practices and giving birth to forms akin to the previously ignored *Expanded Cinema* (Youngblood 1970). In the late 1960s, Expanded Cinema was considered an unfixed mode of

film presentation encompassing multiple projections, live sound performances, and spatial film environments. Similar to new media art installations, each individual projection in Expanded Cinema was a unique and finite durational experience where audiovisual works were structured to incorporate temporal drifts and spatial variations, with performances often depending on the active participation of the artists. Expanded Cinema deconstructed standard conditions of traditional screen-centric cinema formats and broke down the relationship between film and viewer as well as the inherent dependence between film and 2D visual images, thus liberating the mechanics of cinema from the hidden confines of the single projection booth and dispersing them amongst the audience, a condition that has also become possible through the development of digital technology in cinematic sound. The resulting freedom may lead to further experiments with spatialization in cinema, bringing it closer to sound art, interactive inter-media, and video installations.

In view of this, my project has speculated as to whether there will be a future condition in which these two approaches can enjoy a fruitful dialogue and bridge the creative divide. Let me end on a hopeful note. As concluding remark, I would like to underscore the prevailing practices that employ creative and artistically inventive means to produce new sonic experiences that are relatively more dedicated in their attention to the nature of the site and its ambient particularities. The primary relevance of this project is to substantially contribute to this evolving vision and associated discourses on sonic spatial practices and the site-inherent potentialities of ambient sounds in future cinematic and sound art contexts.