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Abstract

Ambient sound is a standard term used by sound practitioners to denote the site-specific background sound component that provides a characteristic atmosphere and spatial information for a sound work. Here I set out to examine *how* ambient sound is used as a site-specific element to create spatial awareness in the production of 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 has been to investigate how the latter practice informs the former and vice versa. The dissertation cites examples from a substantial number of representative Indian films and focuses on three of my recent sound artworks. These case studies are examined via critical listening, historical mapping, and thorough analyses of the sound production processes. The project also draws inputs from prominent sound practitioners in the form of semi-structured interviews, which, alongside my own experiential accounts on the development of the sound artworks, constitute the empirical basis of the project. These interviews and my personal insights shed light on the production process, providing links between certain techniques available to specific phases of production and aesthetic principles shaped by the respective phases of sound practice. The project makes an effort to posit my own artistic practice within a historical trajectory, showing that presence of the site in cinema is constructed according to the narrative strategy and technological context of sound recording and design, while in sound art there exists a tension between documentation and abstraction of the site in the composition of ambient sounds via practices of field recording and subsequent artistic transformation via digital manipulation. I question the classical assumptions about sound in film (e.g. image-based relationships) and shift the focus toward a careful constructing of a site's presence in the diegetic world as a vital narrative strategy. The emphasis on "site" enables the study of the similarities and differences between location recording of ambient sounds made for the purpose of constructing the site within the interior world of the film and field recordings used in certain site-driven sound artworks. Finding inherent similarities and differences between the ways ambient sounds are used in film and sound art generates new knowledge that contributes to the notion of a "best practice."