

Review

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Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, *The Auditory Setting: Environmental Sounds in Film and Media Arts* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2021), ISBN 9781474474382.

Given the spatial turn and rise of ecocriticism in film and sound studies over the past decade, it is rather surprising that it has taken so long for sustained scholarly explorations of the relationship between environmental sound and the moving image to emerge. Recent monographs such as Randolph Jordan's *Acoustic Profiles: An Acoustic Ecology of the Cinema*¹ and Chattopadhyay's *The Auditory Setting* serve as bellwethers for a greater awareness of our sonic environment and the implications that this has for the media arts. As figures associated with the Canadian World Soundscape Project such as R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, and Hildegard Westerkamp have indicated, natural soundscapes deteriorated throughout the twentieth century due to technological and human encroachment. *The Auditory Setting* draws on this research to interrogate the use of environmental sound in media practice and the ecological impact that industrial exploitation and mediation has on the natural landscapes (4).

Further to this, *The Auditory Setting* echoes trends in music and moving image scholarship, which understand the moving image soundtrack as an integrated and affective entity.² While this arguably existed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, technological developments in film sound recording, postproduction, and exhibition technology have accelerated the move towards this embodied approach since the transition from monoaural to multichannel sound in the 1970s. This has resulted in what composer and film sound theorist Michel Chion refers to as the superfield, a sense of diegetic space beyond the confines of the cinema screen facilitated by the use of ambient sound and noise.³ For film sound theorists such as Chion, Mark Kerins, and Mary Ann Doane, this results in a reversal of what was perceived to be the hegemonic hierarchy of cinema in which it had historically been the responsibility of the image to elucidate the soundtrack by visually confirming the sources

1 Randolph Jordan, *Acoustic Profiles: An Acoustic Ecology of the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

2 See Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Kulezic-Wilson, *Sound Design is the New Score: Theory, Aesthetics, and Erotics of the Integrated Soundtrack* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Danijela, Kulezic-Wilson and Liz Greene, *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media: Integrated Soundtracks* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).

3 Michel Chion, *Audiovision*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

of sounds.⁴ Now the soundtrack could provide the context of the image, offering access into areas the image is not willing or able to go.

The book takes a multifaceted approach to its exploration of ambient sound. The methodology is grounded in five interrelated tracks: historical overview, ethnographic research and fieldwork, personal input with interviews from other practitioners, artistic research, and self-reflective analysis (35). Outlining the spatial shift offered by advances in multichannel sound recording and exhibition technology, the book aims to question prevailing assumptions about sound in film and media arts, shifting the focus towards 'site and sonic environment, whose presence is often carefully constructed in a film or media artwork's diegetic world as a vital narrative strategy' (7). Building on this, the book is broken into four main sections: Part 1, Introduction; Part 2, Sonic Trajectories; Part 3, On Location and Other Stories; and Part 4, Critical Listening. Part 1 offers a definition of the terms of reference, a context for the research, and a delineation of the approach and the methodology. Part 2 provides a critical overview of developments in sound technologies and their impact on cinematic space and aesthetics. Part 3 is grounded in subject and site-specific soundscapes in locales categorized by labels such as 'Land, Field, Meadow' or 'Underwater, Outer Space'. Here the author recalls his personal experience of recording soundscapes within these settings. These recollections are underpinned by the analysis of case studies gleaned from global cinema history. This textual analysis makes overt the connection between sound art/soundscape recording practices, which involve the creative treatment of environmental recordings and comparable processes in film sound design. The final section is centred on Critical Listening, an important feature of both post-Second World War sound studies and film sound scholarship. This section deconstructs the aesthetic choices and practices inherent in sound production and postproduction both identifying and precipitating the creative use of ambient sound.

Although this book is interdisciplinary in nature, it can arguably be located within a film studies lineage given that it is both published in a book series that skews towards film studies and the arguments presented are predominantly underpinned with textual examples drawn from cinema. Although methodically fashioned, there are twenty chapters here, all containing multiple subchapters. This arrests the flow of the overall argument, making it somewhat disjointed and repetitive. However, this arrangement of sections could perhaps be useful for those undertaking online research or reading this book in smaller sittings as each chapter and, indeed, many of the subsections, almost function discretely. Practice as research scholars or practitioners interested in the relationship between acoustic ecology and the screen-based arts in particular should find the shorter case studies in Part 3 useful as they are underpinned with informed textual analysis of examples gleaned from myriad films spanning the globe. However, for film and sound studies scholars more generally, a further unpacking of the creative and ecological use of ambient sound, and its contribution to verisimilitude and the film

4 See Chion, *Audiovision*; Mark Kerins, *Beyond Dolby: Cinema in the Digital Age* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Mary Ann Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', in *Film Sound*, ed. Elisabeth Weiss and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

soundtrack would have been welcome. Some of the other terms of reference would also benefit from further clarification and elaboration.

For example, Chattopadhyay coins the neologism *mise en sonore* to represent the sonic equivalent of *mise en scène*. Referring to the profilmic arrangement and design of visual elements in a moving image text, *mise en scène* is a key touchstone for screen studies. The author's concept of *mise en sonore* imagines an aural equivalent to this in which ambient sound constructs the auditory setting. He describes *mise en sonore* as 'an auditory setting that in effect influences the verisimilitude or believability of a filmic work in the ears of its audience' (36). Chattopadhyay links this believability to ambient sound. *Mise en scène* is in itself a problematic and ill-defined concept, but the concept of *mise en sonore* presented here, although intriguing, requires a more robust unpacking which takes into account the construction and shaping of the moving image soundscape beyond that offered by ambient sound alone. This is made necessary by the capacity of multichannel and object-based surround sound systems to expand the audiovisual experience beyond that of the stable but potentially distancing superfield and its reliance on ambient sound, into what Kerins refers to as the ultrafield.⁵ This sonic field has the capacity to place the listener in the centre of the action, favouring spatial continuity over continuity within the film soundtrack and allows for a more fluid audioviewing experience.⁶

Of course, the book does not only seek to address cinema, but also takes into account the use of ambient sound in sound/media art. These do not necessarily follow the same conventions as film sound, but films are contingent on an audiovisual relationship, which includes sonic elements beyond that of environmental or ambient sound. This is something that the author acknowledges to a certain extent, suggesting that object-based multi-channel surround systems have affected the way that the film soundtrack is structured and rendered (23).

In addition, the book interrogates 'the capacity of ambient sound to help sculpt the site's presence and its sonic environment in film and media production, moving the complex relationship between sound, site and the environment beyond the predominantly image-centric studies in film and media art' (24). The author calls for new theoretical models and approaches, which move beyond screen-centric moving image tendencies. While this may prove useful for considering environmental sound in sound art, once a screen is utilised in moving image or media art context, an interrelationship between screen and sound is generated. From a screen studies perspective, it becomes problematic to ignore this. And, of course, there has been a notable sonic turn within screen studies over the past two decades, a turn which posits new ways of analysing sound without necessarily ignoring the presence of the screen.

The book also attempts to expand prevailing discourse as pertaining to the spatial aspects of sound production towards sound art, which involved field recording. Chattopadhyay considers ambient sound as a way in which to reinforce a sense of realism and believability in a mediated environment (26). The boundaries between acoustic ecology and film sound design have

⁵ Kerins, *Beyond Dolby*.

⁶ Kerins, *Beyond Dolby*, 97.

certainly been porous since the turn of the millennium. American filmmaker Gus Van Sant and sound designer Leslie Schatz have notably incorporated the soundscape recordings of Francis White and Hildegard Westerkamp into film such as *Elephant* (2003) and *Paranoid Park* (2007). However, in the case of films such as these, the use of soundscape recordings, which are not from the locales presented on screens, in fact bestow upon them an oneiric, otherworldly quality rather than one rooted in a more realist aesthetic. Further to this, French composer and sound designer Nicholas Becker has incorporated his field recordings of environmental soundscapes and onsite Foley sounds to help sculpt the sonic space in films such as *Wuthering Heights* (dir. Andrea Arnold, 2011) and *Sound of Metal* (dir. Darius Marder, 2019), lending them a tactile and sensual quality, drawing the audience into the subjective perspective of the protagonists.

Chattopadhyay's book is part of the Music & the Moving Image series published by Edinburgh University Press, yet it has resonance beyond moving image studies and practice. The book is eloquently written and interdisciplinary in nature, with an informed, critical voice and engaging turn of phrase. However, although scholarly in tone, it is not assuming specific disciplinary knowledge on the part of the reader and does attempt to define the key terms and concepts associated with film sound scholarship and practice, which buttress the line of argument woven through the book. Like theorists such as Bernie Krause, who have moved between the worlds of soundscape ecology, bioethics, and composing for film, the author has a wealth of interdisciplinary experience and knowledge, which has placed him in a unique position to write a book such as this.⁷ The author's expansive knowledge of film history and his ability to textually analyse and critically parse the contribution of film sound in specific film examples makes this book of particular value not only to film studies scholars, but also to sound practitioners or researchers who may not have formally studied film. The fluid transitions between the time periods effectively illustrate the effects that developments in audio technology have had on the aesthetics and spatialisation of sound design through its harnessing of ambient sound.

Overall, this book is part of a new wave of moving image sound scholarship grounded in concerns for sonic ecologies and the environment. It draws on disciplines beyond film and sound studies to negotiate a way of conceptualising the use of environmental sound. Perhaps rather than film and sound studies finding ways of incorporating practices gleaned from acoustic ecology, those concerned about the impact of ecological changes to the soundscapes which surround us on a daily basis could benefit from reimagining sonic environments influenced by creative practice.

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⁷ Bernie Krause contributed to the scores for New Hollywood films such as *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1968) and *The Graduate* (dir. Mike Nichols) with his musical partner Paul Beaver.