

noise begin to alias: An Experiment in Using Ambient Sound in Film

by [Elle Jung](#)

A few weeks ago, I was asked by a colleague to be the sound mixer for the final day of a film shoot. I enlisted a friend as the boom operator, and we headed over to Tribeca. After a day of shooting, we arrived at the seven-month-long production's final scene: an insert shot of bed sheets. The director called cut and was getting ready to shout the three magic words when I stopped him, somewhat gleefully, and reminded him that we had to get room tone. I waited for everyone to settle down, pressed record on my mixer, and sat there, listening to the room for sixty seconds – my favorite minute on any set – then stopped the recording. “That’s a wrap!” he said.

Room tone, also called ambience, ambient sound, or presence, is the recording of a location's natural sound. Its main purpose is to provide consistent and natural background noise for dialogue and sound effects, resulting in a realistic sound mix. Without ambient sound, a scene can often feel ‘dead’ or uncanny, and the dialogue can sound unrealistic or out of place, as if the air has been sucked out of a room. As a sound recordist and editor, I've always had an affinity for ambient sound. It's the sound of silence – the sound of closing your eyes and slowing your breathing, grounding yourself in the present by listening to your surroundings. It's useful in editing sounds because it acts as the foundation and glue for all the other elements to blend, anchoring the soundscape in a believable space, even as it's designed not to capture the audience's attention. In film, ambient sound is the opposite of what is usually spot-lit, namely characters speaking and taking actions. Yet there was something compelling about those sixty seconds. This made me wonder: could I make a film that uses ambient sound as the primary storytelling element?

Two films that explicitly incorporate ambient sound into their stories came to mind: *Death of the Sound Man* (2017) and *One Fine Spring Day* (2001). In *Death of the Sound Man*, directed by Sorayos Prapapan, two sound recordists in Thailand search for the perfect sounds for their upcoming film. We see them recording sounds like the hum of an A/C unit, the clink of fluorescent lights turning on, the roar of bubbles in water, various animals at the zoo. After they record the noises of a camel, the camera cuts away from the characters to a wide shot of the zoo, including trees, a Thai flag waving

high, a lake being crossed by a paddle boat and people walking along its edge. We hear the sounds of the zoo – the birds, the animals, the fountains. Then we return to a wide shot of the characters setting up microphones. One of the sound recordists leans into a mic and says, “This is zoo ambient take one.” He steps back quietly, avoiding the cables on the ground, and the two stand still, monitoring the recording. Then we cut just behind the mics so that they’re centered in the frame, pointing outwards to both sides, facing the animals in the pen. We listen (00:05:54–00:08:06). Later in the film, this shot from the perspective of the mics happens again, to the same effect. By placing the camera behind microphones listening to the ambience, the filmmakers prompt the audience to follow suit. By telling a story about listening and recording, the film leads the audience to listen as well.

A similar effect is found in *One Fine Spring Day*, directed by Heo Jin-Ho. In this love story between a sound recordist and a radio host, the two characters meet for the first time to record ambience for a radio program. They go to a bamboo forest and walk around, shaking the trees and listening to the rustle of the leaves above them (00:05:58–00:07:46). As we watch them sit and record the ambience, our attention is drawn to the ambient sound because the characters pay attention to it. In *One Fine Spring Day*, we learn that ambient sound can be personal and emotional, as the characters are not only recording the sound of the bamboo trees but also the sound of their first meeting. Emotional stakes and lingering memories can imbue such apparently neutral artifacts with subjective weight.

Initially, I conceived my film as a narrative short about a musician in search of the perfect recording with which to open their album, centered around the main character recording and listening to sounds on a portable cassette recorder. That is, until I accidentally dropped the recorder and broke the spring system in the buttons. I had to rethink my film, and I took this moment as an opportunity to completely start over – square one with an attitude. Like the recordist in *One Fine Spring Day*, I’ve found myself returning to a certain take not because of any identifiable technical reason or a specific memory, but because of a gut feeling. I thus scrapped my previous narrative structure for my film, entirely discarding story and character, and decided to start with the sounds instead, opting for a more emotional and instinctual approach. I grabbed my digital audio recorder and embarked on my search for sound, with no plans other than to follow my ears and guts.

I took the first recording on the 14th Street F subway platform, planning to head uptown to Bryant Park and go from there. As I stood waiting, I listened: the reverb of the cavernous tunnels, the moisture of the concrete and the drops of rusty water from the ceiling, a family down the platform and their echoing laughter. I stood still, recording, and then the train came into the station – the announcer’s voice drowned by the roaring screech of the metal beast and the blast of displaced air as the train chugged

to a stop. Once the doors opened, I stopped the recording and got on. Arriving at Bryant Park, I saw that the beautiful weather had brought the city to life. There was a decent crowd, some gathered to watch the bagpipes and drum bands perform while most sat on flimsy metal chairs talking over iced coffee. I sat motionless and silent, engulfed in the sonic bath of bagpipes and snares and wrens and humankind, recording, listening, letting the sun glow through my eyelids.

After a bit of wandering, I headed to the main branch of the New York Public Library. Basking in the marble echoes of the crowd's footsteps, I made my way to the reading room and grabbed a seat. The shift in atmosphere was instant and striking, despite the lack of a door separating the halls and this official quiet area. The silence was heard not as a lack of sound, but in the creaks of the wooden chairs, pens tapping on paper, understated coughs, and pages turning. The quietest sounds could travel across the room here, bouncing off the marble floors and the painted ceiling. I was able to record the sound of silence here. Later, I was sitting outside the main entrance on Fifth Avenue, facing downtown, when an abortion rights protest began to gather. The chanting mixed with the waves of cars driving past to my left, the fountains and the birds to my right, and later, a distant wail of sirens. I was stunned by the dichotomy of unrest and stillness, machinery and nature, intricately placed in the stereo field by an incomprehensible combination of forces dating back centuries. After a few more stops in Koreatown and Washington Square Park, I returned home with a collection of ambient sounds.

Now, what to do with them? Speaking theoretically, ambient sound creates characteristic atmosphere and spatial information, creating a sense of three-dimensional space that extends past the limits of the frame (Chattopadhyay 22). In other words, unlike the camera, which can only capture a portion of a location at a time, ambient sound is able to capture the sounds from all directions at once, expanding the film's believable world. This idea of ambient sound as a locator or a portal was a useful framework for me. The foundational film theory of Béla Balázs argues that sound blends together in ways images cannot; multiple sounds played together form a new composite sound (213). Sound thus has a spatial character, each recorded sound having a specific timbre local to its site, and when sounds are combined and blended, those spatial characteristics become harder to distinguish from one another. Additionally, conveying silence with sound does not require a lack of sound, but rather a sense of space where sound is free to travel in the silence: "when the buzzing of a fly on the window-pane fills the whole room with sound and the ticking of a clock smashes time into fragments with sledge-hammer blows" (Balázs 206).

Considering these insights, I was struck with an idea. If ambient sound can recreate a sense of location and act as a portal, and if sounds can be blended into a seamless composite, then what would happen if multiple ambiances from different locations

were mixed? Could I create impossible sonic spaces, both here and there, near and far, loud and quiet at once? Could I create a sense of movement by fading one ambience into the next as if to phase in and out of locations?

I began to imagine a cubist sonic portrayal of New York, flattened and truncated days where the moments between places evaporate and the places deviate from a clear chronology. I drafted an edit of the ambiences, beginning in the subway station. The train rolls in, and the rhythm of the tracks slowly blends with a drum line in Bryant Park. Bagpipes enter the soundscape, and as the park sounds fill the space, sounds of the protest and sirens join in, building into a crescendo until the sounds calm down again. We find ourselves in Washington Square, hearing the bustle of the sunlit park, and the spray and splash of the fountain grow and grow until they are inescapable. Then the water mixes with the sounds of a party – something I recorded one night when the downstairs neighbors threw a big house party, and I couldn't fall asleep. As in a swarm of locusts, each water droplet mingles with each voice in a crowd, and the cacophony buzzes into a climax until everything slowly disappears, and all that is left are wind chimes, a flag waving in the wind, and occasional cars on the narrow street in front of my apartment: sounds of silence from an open window in the kitchen.

When I was collecting ambiences I had brought along a camcorder: now I gathered this footage, as well as videos from my phone library, and began creating a visual collage to accompany the sound film. I began exploring digital grain and pixelization, and experimented with unorthodox techniques to find textures and visuals that best suited the sounds. I wanted to avoid representative images that show what is heard and rather use more abstract and impressionist methods.

The end result, *noise began to alias*, was screened as my final project for my filmmaking class. During the round of feedback, the most repeated and agreed-upon responses were that the film felt meditative and immersive, that, as audience members, viewers found themselves sitting back and simply experiencing the film, and that the film successfully conveyed a sense of journey and movement. One viewer described the film as an expression of the urban transience felt as an immigrant or transplant; another viewer related the film to their experience of being overwhelmed by the city. Overall, the audience seemed to get the film and what I had tried to do with it: portray an unsettled, enveloping whirl through the city. I had left open what that whirl might mean to the audience. Their responses to the film were exciting to hear because the interpretations were all so different, yet anchored in the same emotions of unrest, displacement, transience, melancholia, and solace in silence.

It's difficult for me to write about ambient sound without sounding deliriously romantic. How could anyone care this much about background noise? For me, ambient sound is a transcendental thing – the sound of somewhere and somewhere, the sound of

being and living and breathing in the air around you. I couldn't help but get a little emotional when I was listening to the audience's thoughts after the screening because it felt like I finally got people to care, to get them to listen the way I do, and it was validating as an artist to have created something this experimental and have the experiment succeed. I didn't need a story or a character to get people to listen: I just needed to listen myself.

Works Cited

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