

## Sonic Chronicle, Post Sound

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In this audiovisual essay I suggest that film soundtracks might be best considered a ‘soundscape’ as defined by R. Murray Schafer in his book *The Soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world* (1993). Schafer established The World Soundscape Project in the late 1960s out of a growing concern for the rapidly changing sonic environment. His book (first published in 1977) suggests that we should seek to analyse and record our sonic landscapes, capturing sound events before they are lost. Using some of the terminology defined by Schafer I have chosen to explore the soundscape of three films, in particular three newsrooms from the late 1960s and early 1970s which can be situated quite specifically in time and place as a result of the events that they were witness to. David Fincher’s *Zodiac* (2007) is partly set in

the *San Francisco Chronicle* newsroom of 1969. Steven Spielberg's *The Post* (2017) and Alan Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976) are both set at the *Washington Post* but in very different newsrooms, set in 1971 and 1972 respectively, either side of the relocation of the newsroom to a new building.

The newsrooms depicted in these 3 films follow the open plan principles of Bürolandschaft (office landscape), a design concept attributed to the German consultants Ebehard and Wolfgang Schnelle in the early 1960s.[1] Whilst founded on ambitions of a democratised working space devoid of hierarchy and focused on productivity[2] the 'office landscape' also helped with the soaring costs of city centre real estate – more workers in less space. By 1972 Brookes notes the open plan office concept had been implemented in at least a dozen large US corporations including Eastman Kodak, DuPont de Nemours, and IBM. Our view of the cinematic office is inextricably tied to Bürolandschaft, whether in the forced perspective set where C.C. Baxter toils in *The Apartment* (Wilder, 1960) or the suffocating cubicles of *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999) and *The Incredibles* (Bird, 2004). The open plan office brings scale and depth to the visuals, and in *All the President's Men* Gordon Willis explores this using split diopter lenses to bring more of the office into focus. Similarly, the open plan office is defined by its complex soundscape which travels freely within the space and is only partially ameliorated by privacy partitions, modular furniture, and strategically placed plants. These are the soundscapes that I am seeking to explore here.

I have taken a number of steps in the creation of this audiovisual essay to not only access the soundscape of the newsrooms within the film soundtracks but also to draw attention to these soundscapes. Michel Chion uses the term 'synchresis'[3] to describe the melding of sound and vision in a synchronised event, one which carries considerable perceptual power which I suggest might prove a distraction to any analysis of the soundscape. Through the stilling of the image (choosing a 'decisive moment'[4] to represent the scenes under discussion) I have mitigated the viewer's natural quest for synchronising events within the moving picture. Where possible within the multi-channel soundtrack I have also removed the center channel from the sound mix, as this is largely responsible for carrying the dialogue, location sound, and Foley effects. And to further disentangle the soundscape from the film image, the particular scenes chosen for analysis are viewed through a visual mask created using the waveform of the soundtrack itself (tangentially reminiscent of the process of printing optical soundtracks on film). This approach draws directly on Chion's suggestion that we might engage in 'reduced listening'

when seeking to analyse a film soundtrack, making the sound ‘the object to be observed instead of as a vehicle for something else’[5]. The visual masking also acknowledges (to a certain extent) Chion’s argument that removing the film image breaks the audiovisual structure and brings those sounds that were previously perceived as offscreen onto the same plane of listening as the rest of the soundtrack.

To allow for the best possible translation of the soundscape through the audiovisual form I have created a headphone optimised binaural mix for this video essay using Sennheiser’s AMBEO Orbit plugin[6]. I have mixed and remixed the soundtrack of this essay to represent as closely as possible the intended spatial positioning of the original multi-channel soundtracks. In the case of *All the President’s Men* the original monaural soundtrack is presented here with no additional mixing.

In this audiovisual essay I suggest that Schafer’s lexicon of soundscape terminology facilitates a discussion of film sound which is sympathetic (and perhaps symbiotic) with Chion’s reduced listening. The vocabulary of the soundscape bypasses the technical aspects of the soundtrack creation, shifting the analytical focus from individual sound effects to ‘sound events’[7] and from the practical concerns of sound production to the evocation of time, space, and place. In remixing and manipulating the soundtrack of this video I hope to encourage an engagement with these places, and specifically with the unique components of their soundscapes. Thus, the film image is mitigated, not just to remove any potential for distraction, but rather to provide a visual conduit to the soundscape through the waveform masks.

Schafer’s soundscape concept encourages appreciation as well as analysis and is fundamentally concerned with preservation in the face of change. In our current, rapidly shifting global circumstances, where the workplace is now a fluid concept, these cinematic office soundscapes exists as fixed points, and yet are also evocative of a much more recent past.

## Author

Cormac Donnelly is a PhD student in Cinematics and Photography at Liverpool John Moore’s University. His research focuses on film sound and the still image and includes a number of audiovisual essay investigations. His video essay ‘Pan Scan Venkman’ was published in the journal *[in]Transistion* in 2019 and featured in the *Sight & Sound* ‘Best Video Essays of 2019’ poll.

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## Notes

- [1] Brookes 1972.
- [2] Rumpfhuber 2011.
- [3] Chion 1994, p. 63.
- [4] Murch 2001, p. 32.
- [5] Chion 1994, p. 29.
- [6] Sennheiser 2020.
- [7] Schafer 1993, p. 131.