Urban Media and the Politics of Sound Space

Jonathan Sterne

Essay – November 1, 2005

Muzak, also known as a 'nonaggressive music deterrent', is used more and more often as a strategic weapon in the effort to make public space 'safe' and controllable. But according to Jonathan Sterne, its use is primarily aimed at excluding non-consumers – whereas he believes it should be seen as a vital component of urban design. In Sterne's opinion, besides an aesthetical dimension, sound also has a political and ethical dimension.

I had a nightmare that the man who invented Muzak invented something else.
Lily Tomlin

In the early 1990s, a curious phenomenon appeared on the US press's radar screen. Convenience stores and even whole shopping districts began to blast programmed music – best known by its brand name Muzak – outdoors in parking lots, walkways, doorways and parks. For decades, the characteristic easy-listening 'background' sounds of Mantovani and a legion of imitators were an easily-recognized interior feature of elevators, supermarkets, convenience stores, and telephone-hold systems. Now, as a new population management strategy, they flowed outdoors as well. The earliest reports depict a group of retail managers and owners who turn to music in an attempt to chase away youth who loiter near their shops: according to one account, the store owners originally intended to use classical music to drive away the kids, but they couldn't find any canned Beethoven. So they turned to easy listening as what one of them called a 'nonaggressive music deterrent' and blasted them with stringed versions of Rolling Stones hits and other rock songs. Elevator music. Background music. The teen-age hangers-about found the sounds so offen sive they fled to another part of town. [1]

Soon after the success of a 7-Eleven convenience store in Edmonton, other downtown businesses joined together to blast Muzak in a city park to drive away 'drug dealers and their clients. Police say drug activity has dropped dramatically.' [2] By the end of the year, the *New York Times* hailed this new use of programmed music as one of the major events of 1990. [3] Following trial runs in western Canada, the Pacific Northwest and Los Angeles suburbs, in 1990 and 1991 Southland Corporation installed Muzak speakers in the parking lots of its 7-Eleven stores all over Canada and the United States. Soon after, the New York Port Authority Bus Terminal began using programmed music to deter loitering. By 1992, it had become a familiar tactic: A group of Cincinnati merchants is among the newest clients piping Muzak into the streets to repel teenagers and vagrants. 'We're trying to cut the crowds of young kids', says Robert Howard, president of the Corryville Community Council. High-school students, skateboarders, and vagrants flock to the urban college neighbourhood in droves, he says. Summertime crowds are so thick that cars sometimes can't get through. So Corryville merchants installed stereo speakers along the three block shopping area, filling the streets with Muzak as well as Mozart. The music seems to be an effective deterrent so far, though cold weather may be helping the re-recorded Barry Manilow drive the loiterers elsewhere. At the same time, the music appears to be

encouraging prospective customers. Scott Snow, owner of Bearcat Bob's sports bar, says 'there's a 97% to 98% positive acceptance rate among shoppers'. [4]

Each case is somewhat different but the stories all have similar features. Some store, street corner, or open section of a town attracts a large group of people. Businesses in the area find these groups undesirable because they are thought to chase away customers. They install a programmed music service of either easy-listening selections or light classical music, and the group dissipates – ostensibly because the Muzak renders the space inhospitable to them.

For the full run of their histories, programmed music services like Muzak have been part of second-order media economies. They use already-familiar music – music that has circulated through other sound media as a commodity – to engineer the acoustic dimensions of spaces and experiences for listeners. In order to work, programmed music requires an earlier, 'first' moment of circulation, prior to its own. Whether we talk about the cliché d example of a 101 strings cover of the Beatles on an elevator speaker, or a more common and up-to-date example like Natalie Imbruglia in Starbuck's coffee (or Nat King Cole near Christmas), programmed music operates on the assumption that people are already familiar with the song. This essay examines the use of programmed music to chase people away. I will call this new use 'the nonaggressive music deterrent' (following the unnamed executive in a quote above), and use this remarkable case to recast some key questions about the control and design of public spaces, especially as acoustic spaces.

History

These questions have a long history, and it would be worth considering the invention of 'private' sound space, since it is a foil against which the notion public sound spaces would be defined. The idea that persons can have their 'own' sonic space goes back to the development of middle class professions like medicine and electrical telegraphy in nineteenth century Europe and North America. As early as the 1810s, manuals on mediate auscultation – the technique of using a stethoscope – urged doctors to listen as if they were in their own private sound space. Though the first stethoscopes were monaural instruments, binaural stethoscopes were developed so that the physician could put a tube in both ears and thereby better block out the noises of the room. This was important not only for diagnostic reasons, but also because doctors of this period sought to distinguish themselves from their generally lower-class patients. Blocking out the noise of the room to focus on the interior sounds of the patient's body was one more way of desubjectifying the patient, of making him or her less a person and more a set of symptoms to be analysed. Another set of aspiring middle-class professionals, electrical telegraph operators, quickly learned to block out the noise of the room to focus on the sounds made by their printing telegraphs, and were thereby able to transcribe their messages without 'reading' the telegraph's printout. Early incarnations of sound reproduction technologies built on these models: hearing tubes for cylinder phonographs followed a form similar to binaural stethoscopes, and the first telephone booths were marketed for use *inside* offices and other noisy environments to isolate the user from the surrounding acoustic space. [5]

One might also look at the long history of complaints and concerns about noise as a nuisance. Though recorded noise complaints go back through most of written history, the nature of noise – especially urban noise – began to change in the nineteenth century and even more so in the twentieth. Victorian writers like Thomas Carlyle railed against street music because it interfered with his work. He hired masons to build a special soundproof study to isolate him from the urban street noise that surrounded him (though in the end they did not do a very good job). Other writers, like Charles Babbage, openly campaigned against street noise, especially in the form of organ grinders and other street performers. As with the physicians who wished to distance themselves from their patients, John Picker argues that Victorian writers did not rail against all forms of noise, but rather focused their

ire upon the noise of the lower classes. [6]

Emily Thompson and Karin Bijster veld both note that the nature of urban noise was changing in the early twentieth century. Thompson writes that, for instance, New York City was widely noted for its cacophony and that by 1929 most of the complaints concerning urban noise had to do with 'machine age inventions'. One response to complaints was to engineer buildings that isolated their inhabitants from the noisy street outside. Bijsterveld, meanwhile, has shown that the nature of noise itself began to be understood differently with the advent of sound reproduction technologies and new avant-garde ideas about the form and content of music. [7]

Since its first wide commercial adoption as an alternative to jukeboxes in the 1930s, programmed music operated within these contradictory cultural logics. On the one hand, it is an attempt to give a sonic space the private signature of its owner. Politically, it is the equivalent of birdsongs or cats marking their territories. When programmed music fills up a space it creates a sonic version of an inside and an outside, and the company who pays for the music service is marking and giving consistency to its territory. On the other hand, Muzak (in particular) is also famous for its behaviourist attempts to regulate the minutiae of movement within its space. Following a British War Plants study that showed people built bombs faster if they were listening to music, the US government awarded Muzak a contract to provide a soundtrack for its war manufacturing effort. Programmed music has also been used as a salve to relieve listeners of other noises. It screens the din of conversation in restaurants and it quiets the whir of the dentist's drill.

Defensible Space

The nonaggressive music deterrent rearranges these historical functions of programmed music. As a form of urban white noise, it instrumentalizes musical taste to chase people away, and in so doing creates an inside and outside. Whereas the parking lot has been 'outside' the convenience store, the nonaggressive music deterrent now signals that it is 'inside' the space owned by the store. It takes a space that lies ambiguously between public and private and renders it as a private space. In the minds of the store owners, programmed music used in this fashion will help blanket over the din of social difference by limiting interactions between their desired clientele and publics who make them uncomfortable, whether they be teenagers, homeless people, or others. In some ways, the nonaggressive music deterrent might seem like an ultimately benign response to populations that shops or municipal authorities don't want hanging around – essentially, they chase people away by making the space they occupy less pleasing. This is a simple enough tactic, and it is actually part of a much longer tradition of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. CPTED (pronounced 'sep-ted' and also known as 'defensible space') is a movement in urban design. According to CPTED, one can make an outdoor environment less hospitable to crimes of opportunity by controlling aspects of an environment such as lighting, signage, landscaping, and other measures. CPTED also aims to make people (that an institution *wants*) in an environment feel safer and make others feel unwelcome. Textbook examples of CPTED include the removal of shrubbery around parking lots and the addition of bright lighting so people feel more safe going to their cars at night; increased signage in and around a university to increase the sense that one is in a powerful institution; or even the bars one sees across the middle of benches on bus-stops, so that it is impossible to lay down (and sleep) on them. [8] The nonaggressive music deterrent extends the premises of CPTED into the acoustic realm. It manages urban space to promote a sense of safety and control for its preferred occupants.

If we are to believe the existing literature on programmed music, the nonaggressive music deterrent accomplishes its goal because it assumes that some people will find Mantovani-in-the-convenience-store-parking-lot a pleasing and welcoming gesture, while others will find it offensive and hostile. Obviously, the assumption is that the people disposed to shop

in the store will be welcomed, and loitering teens or other unwanted persons will be deterred. Obviously, this is not always going to be the case. As with the lighting of parking lots, the construction of outdoor benches and the placement of foliage, the nonaggressive music deterrent plays against a law of averages. All these strategies require the assumption that they will work well enough for most people most of the time to be worth the trouble.

The very name 'Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design' begs a crucial question: are people who loiter in convenience store parking lots, skateboarders at public fountains, or homeless people in front of a fast food store best thought of as criminals or potential criminals? They aren't doing anything illegal by being there. Yet the articles which describe the nonaggressive music deterrent don't really distinguish between teenagers with lots of time (but not much money) on their hands and other forms of activity that are actually criminal. Rather, teens, drug dealers, the homeless, sex workers, and low-income nonwhite populations are all lumped together as targets of the new Muzak.

Apparently, retailers who use the nonaggressive music deterrent don't consider teens to be sufficiently valuable potential customers to keep them around. An article that compares Corryville's use of programmed music to an Indianapolis ordinance banning skateboarding in a hip retail section of town, describes the target groups as 'teen-agers with orange hair and pierced noses, many on skateboards and few spending any money'.[9] Similarly, city authorities described large groups of youth in the 'E' Block of Minneapolis as creating 'some uncomfortable meetings' with adult consumers on their way to downtown events: 'they don't feel safe if they have to pass through a crowd of 50 to 60 loitering kids.'[10] Race is also an unspoken context here. One wonders whether the crowds of loitering adults a block or two over would get the same treatment. At least in the Minneapolis E Block example, the kids were often African American, and the adults were often white.

Class and RaceIn contrast, only a few news stories directly mention crime as a problem. The use of Muzak in Toronto followed a wave of subway violence. In Dallas, a McDonald's that began piping in classics had previously been the site of over 115 arrests a year (which, strictly speaking, is not evidence of crime but of police activity). In Minneapolis, a local mall serenaded a parking lot across the street that had been the site of some car vandalism. One Houston store reported being the site of gang graffiti until it installed aCD player and some speakers outside its front door. Even there, the legality of the loiterers' presence is far from a clear-cut case. One report on Dallas referred vaguely to 'street toughs' and 'troublemakers'.[11] Another account of the same event does explicitly mention crack dealing, incitement to riot, and the shooting of a police officer; it is also clear about the blame for the problem. While the author describes the McDonald's as 'Exhibit A in the average person's case against ever setting foot in downtown again', he is careful about placing blame: 'Not that McDonald's was to blame for any of this chaotic, even deadly, street life, what with dozens of bus lines converging within blocks of its glass doors, and a nearby Greyhound serving as a pipeline for trouble.'[12] Class and race are slippery slopes toward crime here: 'average' people in Dallas apparently own cars and can avoid downtown bus hubs. Fast food is innocent while public transit is to blame for middle class fears about the area.

Behind these discussions is a latent theory of neighbourhoods, most famously put forward by Wesley Skogan: signs of 'decay' or 'blight' in a neighbourhood help contribute to its further decline.[13] Skogan had in mind things like graffiti and broken windows. If the graffiti is allowed to stand or the broken windows don't get fixed, he argued, then it is likely that more serious forms of criminal activity will soon manifest themselves in a neighbourhood. While Skogan's argument isn't directly aimed at loitering youth or homeless people, the same logic is at work in retailers' use of the nonaggressive music deterrent: 'respectable' people are less likely to move through a space filled with pink-haired teens and street people. Or to put it even more bluntly, the nonaggressive music

deterrent is built on the belief that people – especially upper-middle class people – should not have to encounter people of lower social classes in their daily or leisure travels. The nonaggressive music deterrent is designed to discourage people from perceiving outdoor environments in terms of shared, multiple meanings and uses. In this way, programmed music used outdoors is an attempt to code space, and specifically to code it in terms of social class, race and age. Urban ExperienceMany writers, ranging from theorists of 'the public' to critical geographers have criticized this class-polarization of public space. All of these writers make a similar set of points. The standard story of US public space is that it more or less disappeared with the increasing importance of suburbanization, first in the 1920s and then in earnest in the 1950s (this is not to say that US suburbanization began in the 1920s – it is a much older process). However, in recent years the American middle class has sought to reclaim some lost dimensions of the urban experience. One approach has been to create facsimiles of urban experience in suburban downtowns, shopping malls, and other non-urban middle class landscapes. A second approach has been to reconstruct urban space through gentrification, which essentially recreates some dimensions of the urban experience while importing the class and race segregation of suburban living back into city space. A third approach has been the new urbanism, which seeks to create vital, mixed-use neighbourhoods and offers a softer-seeming version of gentrification. As a spatial strategy, the nonaggressive music deterrent fits within both the second and third camps: outdoors, the nonaggressive music deterrent is about organizing urban space in a way that, as best as possible, reduces the chances of cross-class encounters – especially those encounters where people out shopping might interact with people who can't afford to be out shopping. While CPTED is directly about law enforcement and the perception of safety, the nonaggressive music deterrent is more about a comfort zone for a certain set of middle class visitors to a space. Ultimately, shops and cities use the nonaggressive music deterrent to help reduce cross-class encounters in parking lots, on sidewalks, and in downtowns. It is about turning mixed-use spaces into single-use spaces.

One could even go so far as to read the nonaggressive music deterrent as a kind of low-intensity psychological warfare against urban populations that shops or cities wish to disperse. In addition to the remarkably inflammatory Dallas story quoted above, the rhetoric of warfare and the subtext of class warfare lay just beneath the surface of several reports of the nonaggressive music deterrent. Retailers' use of Muzak drew repeated comparisons to the US's use of loud rock music in its siege against Manuel Noriega, and later the use of the same tactic against David Koresh. Noise warfare has become one of a set of psychological strategies used by the US military. Alongside the more famous Noriega and Koresh examples, the US also blasted loud rock music at Iraqi troops prior to attacks in both Gulf Wars. The parallel is hard to miss.

As a new use for one of the oldest forms of Muzak, the nonaggressive music deterrent marks a particular moment in the history of urban design. This moment is characterized by a deep ambivalence. On the one side, there is a strongly felt longing for varieties of urban experience, especially a nostalgia for walking in the city, for flaneurship, for all those metaphors of movement through urban space that have populated writings about the city for the last thirty years. On the other side lies a deep anxiety about the widening barriers between affluent and poor, between young and old, between consumerist leisure and other public forms of leisure. The nonaggressive music deterrent helps facilitate a form of urban experience decorated with the nostalgic trappings of an earlier period. But like all nostalgias, it corrects the past to fit a fantasy, in this case a fantasy where the only meaningful social distinctions are those of consumer taste. It is, above all else, an attempt to mask the very real social differences that currently rock our cities, our suburbs, and suffuse our social spaces. Behind the nonaggressive music deterrent is a real aggressiveness toward the poor, the young, and all other 'nonconsumers.' It is about moving these people out of the 'front' spaces of consumerism.

Weapon

Whatever its political meaning, programmed music doesn't always work and even if it did, it would be very hard to know for sure without devising a novel strategy for isolating music from other environmental variables. In some cases, reports of Muzak's success have been somewhat exaggerated. In Dallas, for instance, police were quick to credit a rerouting of bus lines, along with other environmental factors, such as a fence erected around the parking lot facing the McDonald's and landscaping that prevented people from crossing the street mid-block. [14] The Muzak in the Toronto subway accompanied other more conventional security measures such as video cameras and a regular subway patrol. But the point is not whether Muzak ultimately 'works' but rather why it's there at all. This essay has argued that the nonaggressive music deterrent is a form of second-order consumption, an attempt to manage outdoor, urban, and other public spaces to make them hospitable to the kinds of consumers that shops and cities hope to attract. In the process, the nonaggressive music deterrent has also become a weapon in an ongoing, low-intensity form of social warfare that aims to reproduce some semblance of a cosmopolitan urban experience while limiting social interactions among strangers of different social strata – at least outdoors. Muzak is a form of sonic architecture or design, and like all forms of design, it is created and used with a specific aesthetic and social purpose in mind.

It would be easy to end by decrying the invasion of programmed music into public spaces, and to argue for more authentic forms of social interaction. Yet there is something disingenuous about that move. We would never expect a critique of urban design that helps maintain social inequality to conclude with an attack on urban design or architecture *as such*. Rather, we would expect such a critique to call for better and more egalitarian design. As it is in architecture and urban planning, so it should be in media: technology and design are defining aspects of the human landscape. We need better, more egalitarian forms of urban media design. As Emily Thompson has written, acoustic design is one of the forgotten dimensions of architectural history, yet architectural acoustics have proven essential not only to the experience of twentieth century music, but also to the experience of middle class work and leisure. [15] Indeed, there is a long line of scholars, most notably R. Murray Schafer and Barry Truax, who call for more attention to the acoustic design of our lived environments. [16] If this article has demonstrated anything, it is that such calls for better acoustic design are not simply aesthetic calls; they also have an irreducible political and ethical dimension. The design of sound space, like the design of urban space, is at once a question of sensuous experience *and* a question of justice.

Jonathan Sterne (Canada) teaches at the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He was the author of *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), and also helps to produce *Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life* (badsubjects.org), one of the longest continuously running publications on the Internet. His next book is about MP3 as a sonic format.

Footnotes

1. Diane White, 'Mantovani Clears the Mall', *Boston Globe*, 1 September 1990.
2. Ned and Lucy Howard Zemen, 'Let's Split', *Newsweek*, 20 August 1990.
3. Jan and Alessandra Stanley Benzel, '1990: The Agony and the Ecstasy', *New York Times*, 30 December 1990.
4. Valerie Reitman, 'Muzak Once Again Call the Tine in Retailers' War on the Unwanted', *Wall Street Journal* 1992.
5. For further discussions of these and other examples of the development of private sound space, see chapters 2 and 3 of my *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
6. For a wonderful account of Victorian writers' response to urban noise, see John Picker, *The Victorian Soundscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
7. Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900 1933* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 115–117, 144–47; Karin Bijsterveld, 'A Servile Imitation: Disputes about Machines in Music, 1910–1930', in: Hans Joachim Braun (ed.), *Music and Technology in the 20th Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 121–134; '"The City of Din": Decibels, Noise and Neighbors in the Netherlands, 1910–1980', *Osiris* 18, 173-193.
8. Carrie Rentschler, 'Designing Fear: Environmental Security and Violence against Women', *Cultural Studies: A Research Annual* 5 (2000).
9. Will Higgins, 'Ohio Merchants Aim Muzak at Skateboarders', *Indianapolis News*, 19 July 1995.
10. Doug Grow, 'City Turns to Classical Tunes to Keep Tunes Off Block E', *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 3 March 1995
11. Janine Zuniga, 'McDonald's in Dallas Gives Thugs the Bach', *Austin American Statesman*, 25 April 1996.
12. Thomas Korosec, 'Mcfugue, No Cheese: Beethoven and the Dead European Males Clean up a Notorious Street Corner', *Dallas Observer*, 24 April 1997, B1.
13. Wesley Skogan, *Disorder and Decline: Crime and the Spiral of Decay in American Neighborhoods* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).
14. Korosec, 'Mcfugue, No Cheese', op. cit.
15. Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity,* op. cit.
16. While I diverge from these authors on the nature of good design (they are naturalist in orientation, I am not), we are in agreement about its importance. See R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1993) ; Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication* (Norwood: Ablex, 1984).

Tags

Control, Public Space, Urban Space, Sound

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