

AVA LIVERSIDGE

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PSA: WHITE NOISES IN THE BACKGROUND

Sonic Ideology

At the level of the semiotic, ideology informs—rather demands—how the subject digests visual symbols. Sonic ideology functions much more discreetly. We know what we see, or at least an attempt at interpretation is already a component of visual sensory engagement. Often, we don't know what we hear. More often than that, we don't listen to what we hear. Listening is active engagement with sonic material. Hearing is the passive state of an ever-open ear.

Ideology functions like a undetachable filter. Armed with a sort of cognitive dissonance, subjects impose a narrative upon the external world that makes comprehensible what would otherwise be situations of serious inconsistency. Essentially, our worldviews are postured in a way that evades disillusionment. For example, we are totally comfortable with the pervasiveness of clickbait, the empty promise of the digital age par excellence, preying on the frailties that come with an attention economy while rewarding our endurance with the prize of nothingness. In short, we are comfortable being tricked. As both a coping mechanism with and a function of the dominating cultural matrix that exists at every level of personal and public life, ideology is the series of thought-complexes that systematize subjective reactions.

The increasing noisiness of our lives results in us degrading sonic value. We make more and more inconsequential our mechanisms of auditory reception, our very means of communication. And that is the natural dream of a mechanical world, is it not?: To alienate the subject which is to render intersubjective communication obsolete. It is a world in which the isolated, inner dialogue

reigns and our organic soundscapes—the calls of nature, the human voice—can be thought gratuitous blabber, can be called noise. The more noise we introduce, the cheaper all sound becomes; the musical masterpiece becomes the hum of the radiator, goes unnoticed, becomes silence. This may be the project of sonic ideology.

One note regarding “popular” music: those who reserve their listening for music that might be deemed “high art” or “serious music” are not spared from the filter of sonic ideology. The very possibility that one might feel a sense of moral superiority because of their music preference proves that a sociocultural framework ungirds listening practices. Those who consider themselves to engage with “high culture” are perhaps the greatest victims of a tactfully constructed edifice of individualism. This is because of the ostensible moral attachment to “high art.” Those satisfied with popular art consumption don’t ascribe a fallacious moral affiliation with their taste in culture. The ills of a fallacious morality result in “high art” consumers being more zealously attached to an evidently hollow pillar of individuation.

Not a matter of taste; a matter of reaction:

We grieve the following deaths in contemporary music listening processes: the judicious listener, the tasteful listener, and the autonomous listener. The judicious listener is one who listens, not just hears. The tasteful listener is one who has a cultivated, and perhaps conscientious, preference for certain music over others. The autonomous listener is one who can attune their listening when they please and hear when they please. To clarify, listening is an active mode of auditory internalization; hearing is a disengaged, happenstance consequence of having ears. In the public imagination, music is endowed with modes of individualization—a distinguishing element. Musical taste purports to be a pillar of your uniqueness clause. However, the medium

we have chosen to precede ourselves in fact presupposes ourselves. Any suggestion of divergent taste evaluation operates at the very surface layer in human interactive complexes. Social impulse is to individuate at critical bands of meaning. “My music.” We purport to *possess*, in some capacity, the music we enjoy—as though we freely chose it—but this is sorely misled. Supposed taste propagates subjectivity, yet we find ourselves numb to the very sounds we’re ostensibly seeking out, not even listening.

“Your music” owns you.

To be clear, you—we— are parts, necessary cogs, in the functioning culture industry¹. The music we listen to, or the movies we enjoy, pretend to be chosen by us, by our developed tastes and listener-specific preferences when, in fact, we have been chosen by the cultural hegemony we are collaborators in as a prime subject for de-subjectification. How do supposedly liberated individuals become victim to the media they consume, they love? By weaving mimetic impulses into the fabric of their expected consumer reception.

Though we are presented with the notion of cultivating a uniqueness through music taste, music taste fails its “choice” clause. Personal reaction to music takes the place of personal music taste. That is, music operates in an economy of familiarity wherein listener satisfaction, which hinges on the listener’s ability to recognize and be comfortable with what they’re hearing, takes a precedence over sonic intrigue and discerning listenership. Popular music aims at, and succeeds at, institutionalizing standard reactions to standardized sounds built upon decades of sonic

molding. Emotional impulse is codified with streaming analytics and personalized interfaces (e.g., 15-second TikTok songs generate physical correlates via standard dance routines from their audience). Paul Allen Anderson describes neo-Muzak in the age of streaming as a “totalitarian project of massified mood control.” Music operates within a cause-and-effect mechanism: structural standardizations apparent in popular songs aim at standard reactions from their audience. Beyond compositionally banality, however, there lies a super-sonic structure reinforcing sonic ideology—the sound beyond the song. Adorno tells us that the culture industry functions such that workers, free American citizens, seek solace from their labor in entertainment that functions within the very same hegemonic system that their work does. Instead of being met with stimulating, extra-laboral content that might insight enlightenment towards dissatisfaction, the entertainment reflects the kind of standardization and (managerial, fiscal) subordination integral to the working sector. Mechanical relaxation facilitates mechanized labor. Your leisure and labor function in tandem. More so, your leisure and labor are one. This amalgam functions slightly differently, if not more insidiously, amongst younger populations. Non-working adolescents invariably seek to cultivate their individuality in the very popular cultural modes motivated by goals of mass conformity. Multiple psychological studies reveal the indelible mark the music of one’s youth makes on an individual’s taste in music in their later lives. The music of your youth is that which you will esteem most highly. At the microcosm, your music taste reflects your general mood and worldly disposition. Beyond this, and the social benefits one might reap from a well-cultivated music “taste,” by virtue of the subject cultivating their taste through streaming platforms that rely upon standard reaction patterns, the subject has willingly genuflected to an industry of sedation and alienation. Your music—its harmonic fabric—your reaction to it, and the way you share it all function in a grander cultural economy that relies upon

your predictability and conformity: “The composition hears for the listener.” If you don’t know why you don’t like a certain artist or song, someone—something—else does.

The question then arises: why is music a particular danger in the cultural-hegemony matrix? My supposed taste in art or film holds just as much cultural capital. Music’s menace has much to do with the regression of the listener in contemporary life. Again, we can call upon distinctions between listening and hearing to interrogate modern sound-engagement rituals. Sound takes its stage in the background. Much like the ever-turned-on televisions central to the Orwellian narrative, music, now more than ever, functions in a virtually infinite capacity. That is to say, the dimensions of music-listening spaces (concert halls, recitals) and non-listening spaces have transformed unrecognizably. Notably, the alternative is not the transformation of all spaces into listening spaces. The alternative is the mortification of the listening space.

Music was first introduced into the workplace as a commodity with Muzak, an American brand of background music that essentially serves as a sonic mood-manager. Later, Muzak became the colloquial term for all narcotic background music (also known as elevator music or workplace jazz). Muzak’s background music was grounded by psychological metrics to determine the sonic landscape that generates the optimal balance of a pacified and productive working body. Mood-manager transforms into the semblance of “mood playlists” popular on music streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music. A distinctly dystopian shade can be cast upon the familiar act of turning on playlists labelled “calm,” “melancholy,” or “focus” to score any proceeding life-scene with the desired temperament. Uniquely amongst the arts, music abstracts itself in its lack of spatio-temporal coordinates; this abstractness creates the occasion for stealth.

You can consume music without paying attention to it; you can consume music without listening to it; we do, we are encouraged to consume music without listening to it. By means of instantaneous streaming processes, an infinite number of speakers and audio devices that litter public spaces, and music's newfound role as accepted mood simulacrum, sound has become integrated into nearly every facet of our public and private lives.

Dynamics—the materiality of sound—can be understood as the space between silence, but sound collapses upon itself in the face of limitless consumption. I intuitively conceive of silence as the lack, the emptiness to which substance is contributed. But maybe noise has transformed into the lack, a ground-zero from which to diverge. Of course, there is no such thing as silence: our world hums. This is how we know it's alive. Complete silence leaves us with an eerie reminder of the world beyond ourselves which we cannot and will never know; silence startles us with the gaping empty space we occupy just a sliver of. Silence is a secretly held ideal in a world that hates it. There is no instance of silence on earth though many, particularly religious disciples, strive towards it. Regardless, silence has no material function in any of our lived experiences.

Post-industrial soundscapes create the occasion for noise as lack: “Noises are the sounds we choose to ignore”². When we hear, the lack is filled. Annoyingly loud sounds divert attention due to possible alert-signification (e.g., sirens, alarms) or chaos. Background noise is comfortable, mindless. Can you hear the danger? Ambient noise and background noise become one. Noise is no longer a destination but a starting point. Consuming cultural product endowed with capital goals (and means) of mood manipulation and ideological formation has become our ground-zero.

² R. Murray Schafer. “Introduction,” *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environments and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, Vt: Destiny Books, 1994).

We do not opt into the cultural economy. We do not choose our music. We are the chosen subjects—we sit on the conveyer belt in culture’s factory. So, then, sound is the new silence.

Reaction quantification and capitalization as the primary function of music in the culture industry produces an interesting duality between an age of both hyper-individualization and hyper-conformity. At once, our music purports to represent our unique selves—or, at least, music production is aimed at eliciting individual emotional response from its audience—and advocates a complete dissolution of the individual through standardization. We can attribute this possible contradiction to the reversal of Kant’s adage: “Music is the quickening art.”³ Music is, in fact, a sedative: an omnipresent stultifying media-form pouring out from every speaker hidden in a plant pot, embedded into office ceiling, and, importantly, shoved into our willful ears. The subject only holds importance, or requires attention, as far as they are appropriately pacified. If sonic ideology functions as a filter, then the ubiquity of headphones is the perfect prop. I choose to put headphones on every day when I walk across campus. Again, listening spaces have collapsed upon themselves. The listening space is any place I wish to occupy; simultaneously, the listening space is confined to my ears and nothing beyond. I want to listen to the music that incites enjoyable reactions in me. I want to listen to the music that affirms my individuality. Through my very means of liberation—my thoughtfully curated tastes and preferences—I make myself victim to mass conformity. It is not that you prefer some music over other music. You prefer your reactions to certain music over others. You also prefer others’ reactions to certain music.

³ Emmanuel Kant. *The Gerontologist*, Volume 53, Issue 1, February 2013, Pages 175-177, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gns151>.

This is a systematized emotional response mechanism. Familiarity reactions are informed by personal habitus. Habituated conditioning precludes genuine listening. And, these reaction modes reach far beyond the boundaries of the individual subject. Matrices of intersubjective and environmental factors fabricate the sonic realm in which you, maybe unknowingly, reside. The subject is relegated to their sonic ideological orientation and alienated from themselves. This alienation democratizes, or neutralizes, the individual. Personal habitus, the unique sounds of our physical environments, require sharp processes of dissimulation and “tuning-out” from its particular citizens. Dominating ideology informs the noises each subject must be keen on ignoring. In busier cities, these noises of note include human voices. The subject becomes object with a constant sonic inundation in the background. “I can’t hear myself think.” Musical sound is inextricable from (lacks the means to stimulate) our daily lives. The white noise rages on.

Silence in a noisy age: The fallacy of silence and soundscapes

Silence infringes upon the background noise that you are ignoring. It is tempting to understand music as having some significance in the macrocosm, as representative of some higher metaphysical truth. For example, it is easy, even today, to swallow the Dionysian myth⁴ of music’s capacity to harness all of man’s rawest primordial energy. Music offers a twofold (and contradictory) comfort: Its listeners are both inculcated with a sense of individuality through taste development and experience a profound metaphysical comfort when confronted with the unifying effects of masterful musicianship. People feel a true sense of togetherness at a

⁴ In Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the thinker outlines his nascent metaphysics through analyzing various artistic expressions. Nietzsche identifies two artistic energies, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, that operate in a dialectic with one another and serve as inherent characteristics and signifiers of various creative expressions. As opposed to the Apollonian, the Dionysian (from Dionysus, God of Wine and Law) artistic energy is how Nietzsche characterizes artforms grounded in raw human emotion and romanticism. Essentially, the Apollonian arts are calculated and controlled while the Dionysian arts are impulsive, emotional, and raw—they communicate more directly with the human spirit. Music is a Dionysian artform.

particularly raucous concert. The feeling becomes more moving when the collective witnesses a performance of a song that chronicles a particularly moving life event (I believe this is why so much popular music fixates on love and heartache). This unification evokes a mass feeling of comfort amongst audiences. To be moved by the sonic appears utterly natural. And so, musical sound ought to spring forth from mother earth's bosom. Musical sound should score the organic, the right and natural, world. The argument could certainly be made that, in its earliest forms, music mimicked the noise of the natural world which, in turn, endows music with its sublime properties. But it seems we live with somewhat dazed understandings of what our natural world sounds like. We hold tightly to this ideal of nature but sounds of the organic world no longer compose our ambient background. We have lost that privilege. Our soundscape is one crafted by a world of machinery.

Even that which is "natural" is highly curated and achieved through pseudo-bucolic aesthetic means. I think it is noteworthy that popular contemporary youth culture fixates on ideals of retroism and vintage—in short, an idea of authenticity. The authentic and the old often appear in tandem. That which has aged has proverbially "stood the test of time." It has outgrown fad-hood. Engaging in retroism is an act of repurposing, grasping at what was once real. Vintage aesthetic concerns, however, do not drive young people to the preservation of organic soundscapes or, even, silence. Instead, the urge is to reproduce facsimiles with technical precision. This phenomenon is evinced by the exponential rise of vinyl sales over the last decade, the commonly held correlation between preference for old music and highly cultivated taste, and the emergence of record remastering. In essence, an emerging nostalgia economy teaches consumers to recreate,

not preserve, an idyllic sonic past. In this, that which is deemed natural is attained through nullifying means.

Silence and the natural, the organic, have a tumultuous yet necessary relationship in the human imagination. As mentioned, silence looms. It is not, as some righteous reports of the natural state of things might suggest, our accustomed point of reference. Our world hums. This is how we know it is alive—just as silence, the presence or absence of it, signifies human life or the lack thereof. Because it is inorganic matter, silence, when a close approximation occurs, looms threateningly over cosmopolitan life. We are silent only when truly horrified, in great anticipation, or under strict direction to be so. The possibility of silence, and its occasional approximation, reminds us of the world beyond the self, the special comfort that comes with acknowledging the potential for ego-death amidst the vastness of the universe.

But, there is no silence. All we have are cheap approximations of the void. So then, we need to interrogate our soundscapes—the collections of sounds that coalesce to form the unified sound of our surrounding environments—and our predilections that inform how we conceive of them.

That is, we need to interrogate how we discern what sounds are worthy of inclusion in our soundscapes and which sounds can be dismissed.

As mentioned, our world does not go silent on us. That would be a marker of some grave threat.

But, most of us do not navigate our daily lives with a consistent feeling of inundation with and aggravation from a perpetual background noise. It seems, then, that we are accustomed to, allow for, a sort of background music that goes totally unnoticed in its presence but would conjure a

mood of apocalyptic doom if absent. Our baseline soundscape—which delivers us from silence—can be composed of key sounds (Schafer’s term for sonic landmarks) like passing cars, loud breathers, shuffling footsteps, and, more alarmingly, actual music. Regardless of whether you are aware of the exact sounds that coalesce into this soundtrack of your life, these sounds are always collected from your personal habitus and, as we will later discuss, learned existence: background music is “quoted from the unconscious memory of the listeners, not introduced to them.”⁵ As Adorno exhorted, background music cannot introduce something new to its listenership. You are meant to ignore it; if you happen to tune in, you are not meant to be intrigued by it; if you are intrigued by it, you were meant to be—consume it accordingly.

Noise pollution exists as a symptom of this stratified attention deficit. We pretend to be victims of this noisiness, but we are its most prolific composers. Industrial sound has entered the comprehensive dominion of music. Deconstruct the composition and consider the landscape onto which the sounds of an age have been grafted upon. What counts and what precedes judgement? Silence requires a willing receptor—does the will of the listener impress itself upon the lack, coloring it as such? To recognize silence as such, one must be cognizant of its presence whereas hearing the noises that encompass much of your daily life proceeds without any active consideration, not even detached contemplation. We confront noise passively and silence (its approximation) actively.

⁵ Theodor Adorno. “Music in the Background,” *Essays on Music*, (California: University of California Press, 2002).

Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier defines silence as “the deployment of the limit.”⁶ Silence is always thought of as the negation, the lack. As we’ve determined, this is grounded in an ideal—a promise of a world that once was but will never be. When faced with the backwardness with which we discriminate which sounds belong to our soundscapes, still rooted and rotting in the anachronistic ideal of an organic, silent, past, it will be helpful to reshape our understanding of silence.

Consider: what if silence was the additive feature—that which is in possession of acoustic materiality? Let silence not be the lack. Since sound is the basis for all human proceedings, then silence should be our additive case. In any composition, silence gapes. But let’s place the onus on the sound which is, of course, a physical disturbance—a material wave—moving through a medium. We hold such a strong ideal of nothingness as the natural state (see: the creation story), but our lives are so adamantly additive.

So, ambient sound is the new silence, the new lack. We see a positivistic interpretation of silence in John Cage’s 4’ 33’’. The piece orients itself with the only thing sound and silence have in common: duration—that both mediums occupy a temporal space or lapse. Cage composes within sound-filled shapes analogous only to a series of time durations. As the emphasis in Cage’s compositional method is on duration and not pitch, Cage essentially emancipates noise from the strictures of functional harmony and, in turn, embraces silence as a principle dynamic function. Silence amidst sound functions as dynamic high point in otherwise static compositions. Finally, silence takes up space; silence materializes amidst droning sound.

⁶ Ana María Ochoa Gautier. "Silence", *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak, Matt Sakakeeny (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015).

Alienation: atomic music and atomic ears:

“Terror is the normal state of any oral society for in it everything affects everything all the time.”⁷

Nietzsche called the ear the “organ of fear.”⁸ It seems Nietzsche would have existed in a perpetual state of terror had he been alive today. His writings on the ear mainly concerned themselves with the idea that the ear is undiscerning: He could not be spared from music that he did not like if it was playing at the opera he was attending or being sung in some parlor. Through and beyond industrialization, the noise with which we are inundated goes far beyond distasteful music we mistakenly stumble upon. This is the basis for noise pollution.

Adorno simply coined the ear as “passive.”⁹ Unlike with our eyes, we cannot shut our ears. They do not stop listening when we sleep. As audial creatures, we exist at the constant beck-and-call of the sounds of our surrounding world. We are forced to, at least, hear. And so, a progression to a world where sound is used as a tool for domination and subordination is a natural one. Music is neither the process nor the product. Music, instead, grafts itself upon its listener. Illusory and intangible, music evades coordinates, definitions, and subjectivity at all turns. There is always the hermeneutical debate of definition. We produce new words (“musicking”) to mask our unwillingness to wallow in metaphysical unknowns. We are Socratic men in a machine age.

⁷ Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Part IV, number 250 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁹ Theodor Adorno. “Fetish Character in Music and Regression of Listening,” *Essays on Music*, (California: University of California Press, 2002).

Kant, and then Cage, posit that the ideal artist must act as if the only true artistic purpose is transcending purpose itself. Of course, affect-driven playlists, mood-enhancement via Spotify recommendations, TikTok songs crafted to boost a creator's brand conflict head-on with the Kantian ideal. But considering the adage in this antithetical age may still help us define what exactly, then, music is beyond its phenomenological role. The musical artifact's transcendence is facilitated by its detached contemplation. Understanding that this contemplation is impossible within the strictures of sonic ideology, autonomous music too exists only as an ideal.

Today, music is most accurately evaluated phenomenologically, in relation to its experienced impact on the listenership. The culture industry prizes individual reaction as a mechanism for maintaining power and dominion over the masses. Music exists as one part in a complex web of reaction and interaction with media stimuli. Music, it seems, does not exist beyond this reaction complex. We are motivated to consume musical sounds, not experience them.

Forfeiting aesthetics for praxis, we begin to fetishize the machine. Sonic structures squelched of any artistic value by an imposing standardization allows for songs to act as interchangeable, pragmatic tools. Machine-age music renounces our will for pleasure. This is to say, music operates as a nonaesthetic force, fulfilling a purely practical role within the grander cultural complex. To this end, it is not even the music that has been commodified; it is us—our reaction to it. This is the commodity.

No sound can be atomized. The act of listening must always be filtered through the lens of personal experience that inform omnipresent biases and understanding. Through auto-affection, even the act of speaking incorporates your own consciousness in the feedback loop of conscious understanding. Your own voice is heard by yourself through an internal resonance, implicating (again) your personal experience in the listening mechanism. You are never free from yourself, so sound is never free from the self.

The omnipresent you imposes itself on the architectonics of the soundscape. The sounds we ignore, “the noises,” are such through discerning acts of self-preservation. The incessant city-sounds of taxi horns and revving engines fade to the background of our consciousnesses; now, common jingles and songs that have soared to ubiquity on social media also fail to catch our sonic attention. We learn to ignore the sounds we make common which is to say that we practice a form of active self-denial and willful ignorance towards the very fabric of our modern world, the products of every contemporary ill and success. We seek numbness towards our every mark.

To have clean ears means to accept every little seemingly pithy murmur and tap and thud. Because to accept the thud is to be prepared for the voice, the voice of someone you might disagree with or the one singing the most beautiful melody you’ve ever heard. In listening with clean ears, one becomes sober. One becomes ready to live in the world, not just be a product of it. To continue on as we are in this world, with IV drips of sonic saccharine willfully jammed in our ears, is to walk confidently into isolation chambers. We might need to embrace silence, at least as a first step back.

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