

Soundscapes of Productivity

The Coffee-Office and the Sonic Gentrification of Work

ABSTRACT Using the urban portmanteau terms “coffice” and “coffitivity” as a starting point, this paper examines ideas around sound and productivity with a focus on coffee shop ambiances. The project considers café soundscapes “soundscapes of productivity” reflective of changing attention spans, work process, and stress management that invoke cultural histories of Muzak, personalized sonic spaces, and the sonic management of everyday life. A result of over six years of ethnographic observations, recordings, and decibel measurements, *Soundscapes of Productivity* has also been compiled into a Story Map as a kind of soundwork collage of different coffee shop ambiances in Vancouver, Canada. Vancouver is used here for its local specificity, including a rapidly gentrifying urban infrastructure and a creative freelance haven with aspirations to be the Canadian Silicon Valley. The project presents an opportunity to link scientific discourses of the stimulus response model of sonic productivity historically and politically with the modern practice of productivity playlists, and bridge them together with acoustic environments seemingly replicating former factory production—environments such as the urban coffee shop. **KEYWORDS** soundscapes, sound studies, urban studies, coffee, productivity, gentrification

“Hey Shane, I need to finish up this design comp by 5, so I’m going to head down to the coffice with the laptop and put the touches on there.”

#coffee#office#work#web#mobile by kevinwo, December 9, 2008

The trendy hipster portmanteau ‘coffice’ dates back to the mid- to late-2000s and is defined by Urban Dictionary as a labor practice that transforms the coffee shop into a temporary office where “non coffee-shop work is performed.” I encountered this term on Twitter in connection with the notion of ‘coffitivity’—a kind of productivity that comes from drinking coffee, but also presumably a motivational communal experience that comes from the café’s social status as a third place.¹ Coffitivity implicates the accountability of working alongside others as an antidote to the creative block that might come with solitary freelance work. Coffitivity entails work with benefits: a familiar social experience in a comfortable place. Coffitivity is also an app:² a looped coffee shop ambience of your choosing (paid options for premium world locations) meant to elicit productivity anywhere. Listening to a real or virtual coffee shop is one of a multitude of recent trends in what Kassabian terms “ubiquitous listening”³ and Hagood refers to as sonic self-control.⁴ Somewhere within the vast matrix of themed playlists on Spotify, SoundCloud, and YouTube, wellness apps such as Noise.li and Moodify, and the long tradition of new age nature soundscapes, we can locate a persistent evolving genre of ubiquitous listening to *soundscapes of productivity*.

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Founded on popular science of the day, sonic productivity interventions date back to the days of factory work and the transition to retail branding and sonic architecture.⁵ These logics are reincarnated in contemporary practices of functional ubiquitous listening organized around genres of experience: work, study, exercise, travel, etc.⁶ Such practices are reflective of changing attention spans, workflows, and urban life management, scaffolded by technological platforms of mobility and personalization.⁷ Coffitivity, the app, has a similarly scientific basis: To convince the user of its merits the producers cite a study conducted by Mehta, Zhu, and Cheema (published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*), which claims that ambient sound levels above certain decibels—levels that are typically considered too loud for intellectual work or concentration—are actually conducive to “creative cognition.”⁸ Taking Hilmes’s notion of “soundwork” almost literally as sound for work,⁹ this project offers a genealogy of the relationship between sound and work in a Western context, tracing continuities and ruptures in what is an increasingly technologized cultural practice of sonic self-management. Within this genealogy sonic relations engendered by the urban “coffice” are symptomatic of broader patterns in the evolution of neoliberal concepts of work, urban gentrification, and received models of productivity.

In order to anchor this genealogy in a specific genre of sound for work, I focus on historical relationships between mood media and the urban café and illustrate these through a digital artwork: a Story Map of artisanal coffee-offices in Vancouver, Canada. Story Map is a platform for interactive storytelling that prioritizes location-based narrative using Open Street Map. A result of over six years of sonic ethnographic observations, recordings, and decibel measurements, the *Soundscape of Productivity* Story Map¹⁰ is a collage of different coffee shop ambiances that can be experienced as a cartographic journey and even as a SoundCloud playlist. It aims to unsettle and contextualize coffee shop soundscapes in specific urban cultural localities, in contrast to platforming technologies that universalize sonic environments into experiential plug-ins for life. This project presents an opportunity to historically and politically link scientific discourses of sonic productivity with the modern practice of productivity playlists and bridge them together with emergent acoustic environments for work.

In the Story Map *Soundscape of Productivity* I trace a specific and localized phenomenon of artisanal working cafés in the East Side of Vancouver. According to global rankings, Vancouver is a highly desirable city; however, the cost of living makes it precarious and hostile to many. Previously thriving ethnic communities and industrial areas are rapidly gentrifying, bringing with them (white) hipster culture, fusion cuisine, CrossFit gyms, and artisanal coffee shops where baristas are “latte artists.” Such establishments and activities are symbiotic with media work in its lack of set schedule, endless need for creative inspiration, and an appreciation for the flexibility of creative labor itself. Artisanal urban cafés have become the playground for the independent freelance worker: a technological cyborg that seamlessly blends from one mode to another, from physical space to virtual space. Yet the promise of total control has a habit of breaking down, despite our best apps. The coffee shop is both a familiar cultural object¹¹ and a mixed public space where unprogrammed events may occur and interfere with efficiency or concentration. Within the “mediapolis,” then,¹² the working café is a kind of “third

space” for the creative information economy, signifying both resistance and compliance with neoliberal regimes of work. The question is, Where does the coffee soundscape fit within the continuum of evolving strategies for sonic self-control?

THE SCIENCE OF SOUND FOR PRODUCTIVITY

Functional music can be dated all the way back to antiquity: Organized sonic patterns that accompany traditional social rites are a feature of all indigenous societies.¹³ Organized soundmaking, in other words, has always been functional. The deliberate use of music to support other logistical or commercial functions is, however, a more recent phenomenon. There are important aspects of musical experience lost in the more contemporary genre of mood curation; primarily, that music isn’t simply about emotion: it is about whole-body affect. In the history of Western world music, composition became both an aesthetic expression and a commodity.¹⁴ In particular, the early classical period instantiated an economic relationship between composer and patron, with bespoke compositions bracketing times of the day and marking special occasions. Compositional structures evolved around the functionality of these compositions; for instance, Haydn’s famous horn sections were incorporated at particular intervals to awake his patron from afternoon slumber. The mathematical basis for baroque’s *counterpoint* manifest compositional structures that would be enjoyed by the ear *and brain* for their rhythm and complexity, while showcasing a performer’s virtuosity for hire. Arguably this toolset for aesthetic design transitioned to a science of productivity when modernity’s logic of rapid industrialization entered the factory workplace. By 1911, some of the first experiments with the industrial science of work efficiency were underway, and in 1920, Wired Radio Inc., soon to become the Muzak Corporation, began piping music into offices.¹⁵ Industrial economist Frederick Taylor was among the first to use music in factories to boost efficiency and production: a notion that was aggressively pursued by quasi-scientific consumer research throughout the 20th century. The idea was that playing specific music at different times of the day would aid productivity in repetitive factory work, where productivity was defined as items produced per time period, and reduction of error:

In 1995, a report commissioned by Muzak claimed, somewhat implausibly, that its programme had produced an 18.6% increase in production and a 37% decrease in the number of errors made by office employees at the Mississippi Power & Light Company.¹⁶

3M was the original manufacturer of “tapes for work”: a concept that, by the 1940s, was popularized by the Muzak corporation with the scientific name *stimulus progression*. In the second part of the 20th century “Muzak” came to be known first as “elevator music” and subsequently as the ubiquitous musical background of malls, shops, waiting rooms, and similar commercial establishments. In other words, within the same decade, music for productivity became music to increase consumption, measured in sales revenue, as well as music to increase turnover in restaurants measured in number of patrons served. Over time, Muzak became synonymous with “a kind of dated easy-listening music infuriatingly

drifting through every public place.”¹⁷ In his 1997 paper on the Mall of America, Sterne notes the difference between stimulus progression and its sister concept, *quantum modulation*, with particular relevance to how they culturally construct the “listener” as worker and consumer, two very overlapping categories. In both cases, behavior is seen as malleable and able to be modulated with sound. Stimulus progression uses a formula to arrange 15-minute instrumental segments in particular succession to produce emotional responses through a sort of background, subliminal listening.¹⁸ The same approaches, using melody, rhythm, and tempo as the basis for succession, were previously used in factories to “manipulate workers’ fatigue curve.”¹⁹ Quantum modulation adapts the same logics but toward a foreground listening experience, creating consistent flow and mood.²⁰

An important historical aspect of music-for-work involves the intersection of “industrial psychology” with the educational mandate of public radio through the MWYW (Music While You Work) BBC radio program.²¹ The aim of the station was to provide a public service to modern factory environments whereby background music “entrains the movements and psychologically stimulates the mind of the working self.”²² Specifically tailored to relieve the boredom and tedium of repetitive tasks, the MWYW station was also contextually adjusted to be played in factory environments: It was recorded and mastered in such a way as to maintain volume to overcome factory workshop noises, provide rhythm for manual labor, and employ “deliberately forceful and energetic” performance to motivate work. In this sense the station departed from the public mandate of the BBC to foster music appreciation, and instead catered to an explicitly utilitarian audience. In this vein, over the 20th century Muzak gradually left the workplace in favor of retail environments while labor become increasingly intellectual and nonrepetitive and the workplace itself decentralized in atmosphere and physical setting. The quasi-scientific approach to utilitarian background music, however, has continued to reincarnate in new commercial spheres. As an example of a modern sensory brand, Starbucks has built an atmosphere of coffee consumption that semiotically complements flavors with colors, furniture, and musical ambience. Kassabian frames the Starbucks music label as a class genre signifying an imagined clientele of stylish urbanites sipping complex drinks and enjoying “world music.”²³ More importantly, Starbucks has built a global brand that delivers a consistent sensory brand experience whether you are in Michigan or New Delhi. At the same time, coffee shops are increasingly becoming sites for urban contract work, which requires establishments to rebrand as flexible workspaces. Though labor is no longer manual and repetitive, the contextual approach to sensory branding echoes the industrial science of MWYW: Cognitive multitasking and creative stimulation are elicited by the irregular and almost chaotic soundscape of the café.²⁴ Note, for instance, the total sensory design reflected in this excerpt from the *Soundscapes of Productivity* Story Map, featuring a daily sonic chronology tailored to the habits of the creative working class:

A constant hum coming from the kitchen (industrial oven + fan + refrigeration unit) is engulfing customers in a warm fragrant embrace. Matchsticks wants you to work here, yes, but also eat and drink, rather than leave to go elsewhere. They are a full-service café:

if freelance laptopers are going to hang around all day they want to at least meet all your nutritional and drinking needs. Music is minimal and most of the ambience is generated by the density of customers and the sounds drifting in from the open kitchen. Yet, at lunchtime, similarly to other food-producing establishments, the music easily stays around 85dB stimulating turnover, and filling up the space left by departing customers. The warm painted wood, tin chairs, hanging live plants, and white tile creates a “family kitchen” feel reflected in the smooth bass of easy-listening ambient music that sonifies this environment.²⁵

In the next section I’ll argue that this type of sensory approach to background music simultaneously links back to the history of sound for work and branches off from the more general field of consumer mood curation.

SOUND FOR MOOD CURATION

Featuring loud music, expensive drinks, and energetic atmosphere Nemesis is a laptop café that is too busy for its own good to be a laptop café. Or at least that’s the kind of creative chaos that the Innovation folks in the building above like to work in. There was something ironic in the music system blaring “Fuck Donald Trump” as if everything about the atmosphere, sensory design, and decor didn’t already signal anti-establishment chic.²⁶

As Sterne points out, quasi-scientific approaches to programmed music have defined not only commodified forms of listening but also the function of music in the cultural life of North America.²⁷ In turn, the characteristics and implications of programmed music underlie contemporary platforms for productive listening: whether for relaxation, meditation, work, study, or creative pursuits. These economies of functional music represent several distinct but overlapping categories: music as wallpaper or imaginary space; music as virtual tourism; music as architecture; and music as cultural branding. In many senses what unites these assemblages is their structural and organizational function as “aural architecture.”²⁸ They are similarly all based in consumer research that aims to monetize auditory psychology toward the sonic optimization of work. Just as Muzak defines the architectonics of the mall with its background presence, much of mood music geared toward at-home consumption shifted to music specifically designed to engender sonic dreaming:

... music as wallpaper played in the background at home to add a mood, to generate a particular atmosphere, or to convey the sounds of exotic, otherworldly places that the consumers might dream of visiting.²⁹

Despite the aspirational sentiment of such collections, Connell and Gibson remind us that mood music has distinctly gendered histories in relation to work: While women were targeted for sonic tourism to avert the monotony of housework, men were sold the possibility of relaxation and sleep aid to mitigate job stress.³⁰ A notable phenomenon in this ecology of functional music is Irv Teibel’s compilation CD series called *Environments*, which in 1969 rode the crest of the New Age wave in America, combining virtual

tourism, relaxation, and the folk psychology of nature sounds as healing.³¹ Curiously, there is nothing natural about these nature recordings: They are, akin to the work optimization model, carefully engineered to sound pleasing, unobtrusive, and endlessly unique. The pursuit of the “perfect ocean” in *Environments* included working with neuropsychologists and Bell Labs; at a time of burgeoning technological innovation and an endless search for meaning, *Environments* was promoted as a “cure for insomnia” and a great tranquilizer for the hustle of modern life. Teibel was an entrepreneur first and foremost: He “presented nature not as it is, but as we hope it’ll be, the lullaby of waves without the sand in our trunks.”³² In effect, this soundscape collection foreshadows neoliberal regimes of productivity, where the illusion of pleasure (do what you love!) obfuscates the slippery operationalization of efficiency where the creative work is never done.

While there is no universal science of how music affects us, there have been many attempts to perfect mood curation with music. From questions of familiarity, tempo, and loudness to pragmatic issues such as levels and duration of concentration needed, many studies have attempted to automate and package mood music.³³ One common theme in all these scenarios: The physical gathering space has to be inviting yet open for patrons to insert their own mood music if/when needed. Urban cafés have perfected this as multiuse spaces that combine gathering, sociality, and work. These establishments embody the intersection between the science of music for productivity and its retail offshoot, genre music. Genre retail music starts with music’s appeal to cultural identity, class, and politics to build sonic environments that target commercial audiences.³⁴ In many ways cafés have always manifested as anti-establishments, yet they operate on the same logics as other retail spaces in terms of constructing a sense of place and authenticity.³⁵ Music genre, loudspeaker quality, and even particular artists build the café’s brand while leaving the sonic canvas open enough for patrons to create their own mood music enclaves. In a study of Portland coffeehouses, Broadway, Legg, and Broadway identify several key aspects that make this particular brand of social gathering space so popular and adaptable, including a feeling of home, strong attachment to place, and conviviality.³⁶ The sensory qualities of the café can thus directly impact the sort of social engagements that can happen within and the type of patrons that it draws. With urban artisanal cafés “catering to an increasingly discriminating clientele many of whom define themselves by their own patterns of consumption,”³⁷ mood music is much more than a vehicle for social engagement provided by the establishment itself; it is also a medium for the synergies of different spheres of work and pleasure, managed by discerning individuals armed to the teeth with technologies of the self.

As one of the first hip coffee shops to open in “East Village”—aka Hastings Sunrise Platform 7—is mixed-purpose. Mid-morning it seems to be home to a million parent-tot gatherings, while most of the day till close it is home to many students and laptop workers. They carry Stumptown cold brew and specialize in “technology coffee”—various contraptions of pour-over served on a wooden paddle tray. It is loud: The owner cranks up indie rock in a way that interferes with the already loud coffee shop conversations, resulting in a rather busy, dense atmosphere. It sports an industrial “steampunk” vibe hearkening to iconic Portland coffee culture.³⁸

By the 2000s the genre of “programmed music” had already become a bit of a cliché³⁹ and couldn’t compete with much cheaper alternatives for mood curation, especially with the decentralization of music sharing (remember Napster?). In streaming music platforms such as Spotify and Pandora we see a resurgence and repackaging of the pop psychology that produced mood music; however, the legitimacy of consumer science is replaced by the logics of automation: Why not trust Spotify to curate a playlist based on preferences and listening history? Music recommendation algorithms even perform technical analysis of music structure, genre, and tempo, which replicates both the science of *quantum modulation* and the labor of professional curation. This has resulted in applications and services in the broad “productivity” genre not only to help make our work and learning more effective but also to make our sleep, relaxation, and meditation activities more efficient.⁴⁰ The oxymoron of a “more productive” meditation seems to be lost in the pleasure of using apps for control and self-management.⁴¹ There are at least two pre-conditions then for contemporary soundscapes of productivity that both perpetuate and break with traditions in functional music: the promise of personalization and control of sonic space, and the *affect* of “ubiquitous listening.”⁴²

PRODUCTIVE LISTENING AS TECHNOLOGY OF THE SELF

While mood music or music as emotive context predates mobile listening, the technology of the personal audio player and subsequently the smartphone established a different kind of affective relationship to space, and to everyday life. Drawing on the cybernetic concept of ubiquitous computing, Kassabian argues that the gradual move toward embedding music into all aspects of cultural and social life constitutes ubiquitous listening. Ubiquitous sound, Kassabian argues, invites a particular act of listening, whether it is to discreet events (e.g., at a restaurant) or to a flow of events blended together by a unifying soundtrack. It “engages us in sensual and sensory affective processes to situate us in fields of distributed subjectivities.”⁴³ In a more recent work on technologies for sonic self-control, Hagood proposes a model for personal media that is “neither representational nor informational, but rather relational.”⁴⁴ Both formulations of ubiquitous listening gesture toward the “multivalent potentials” of sonic mediation, and the collective rather than individuated relationship to cultural objects such as music playlists or sonic management apps. Distributed subjectivities imply a layered experiential matrix that accounts for situational and individual factors but also the performance of shared cultural scripts.⁴⁵ Consider a crowded city bus where a majority of passengers are listening to individual soundtracks, simultaneously *there* inhabiting the space, and not. Or a “coffice” where some patrons are enjoying the musical ambience and conversation, while others are listening to their own music, and yet others are involved in semiprivate teleconferencing: All are types of affects, and also acceptable cultural performances for the space.

Turks represents an older version of Commercial Drive through its combination of old wood (rather than repurposed new wood) with its original creaky qualities; a conglomeration of mismatched armchairs with torn upholstery; an old bookshelf of games, books, and toys; and rugged walls with local art. I’d best describe the interior as

hippy baroque: a collage of items accumulated over the years, meaningful and well-loved, almost musty atmosphere, warm and earthy feel. The acoustics of the space are like a bubble, intimate and small and that is reflected in the unobtrusive indie music permitting both conversation and personal soundscapes. It feels like being in a small room with friends, rather than a big sterile gallery.⁴⁶

In the scenario described above, the physical space itself—the café—is a container technology with multivalent potentials functioning at once as a workplace and as a community gathering space that promotes place attachment in part owing to its material and sonic atmosphere. Place attachment, Waxman explains, has “the potential to offer predictability in a daily routine, a place to relax from the more formal roles of life, and the opportunity for control.”⁴⁷ In that, sonic mediation—both individual and constructed by the establishment—reflects different levels of control within increasingly diverse spheres of life. Alongside the idea of sonic mediation as relational, both Kassabian and Hagood consider ubiquitous listening to be primarily about *affect* and in particular designing private enclaves with select affective possibilities. One of the biggest shifts in the framing of ubiquitous listening over the past two decades is a focus away from the possibility of aestheticization to an enactment of self-governance. While for Bulland DeNora the portable audio player is a technology of the self—an extension of sonic agency in an increasingly chaotic environment—more contemporary theorists critique the exercise of control as a replication of neoliberal regimes of disciplinarity and commodity fetishism.⁴⁸ This is precisely what links the histories of mood music and its foundations in labor productivity science with technologies for sound conditioning.⁴⁹ The concurrent developments of these cultural technologies signify a continuity in the historical relationship between sound and work embodied in flexible notions of efficiency. Sonic control is no longer crystalized into a specific portable technology but exists in a set of practices by the discerning urban listener to manage, condition, and curate both emotional moods and states of productivity.⁵⁰ These sets of practices are mobile and can be taken into any environment; at the same time they frame a central cultural tension between signal and noise, between wanted and unwanted sound.

In the 1950s and '60s, sound conditioning machines offered individuals escape from incessant industrial noise and a productive approach to effective rest.⁵¹ These contraptions worked on an interesting basis that reflects the technological orientation of modernity: masking noise with noise. More specifically, noise machines reflect a certain cybernetic logic predicated on human psychology in that they mask intermittent sounds of varying frequencies with “white noise”—a kind of sound screen that contains all audible frequencies in the spectrum, thus equalizing distracting individuated sounds. Following the signal-noise model of early audio recording technology and under the guise of customization, both ubiquitous music and sound conditioning media present us with an opportunity to “tune out” any affects that challenge or displease us.⁵² Returning to mood music for a moment, we can now reframe the throughline of its historical development as one of *control*: Along with Sterne, Lanza likens background music to a thermostat that allows us to control our environment and regulate our affective experiences in

a given space.⁵³ Hagood similarly suggests that mood media has the ability to “negate itself as content” and instead function as an *ability* to modulate experiential aspects of life.⁵⁴ As such, technologies for sonic self control such as personal mobile devices are more than technologies of the self; they are a form of “orphyic mediation”:

*Orphyic media foreground a deep desire for control as freedom, a desire that motivates the use of nearly all electronic media today.*⁵⁵

Orphyic technologies function through what Hagood calls “background relations” that connect the public and private worlds of a neoliberal subject.⁵⁶ They operate at the level of “microperceptions”⁵⁷ and involve the attenuation and diattenuation of stimuli: a selective adjustment of sensory aspects of the environment, which produces the illusion of control while obfuscating the subject’s lack of macro-level agency.⁵⁸ In essence, the early cybernetic logics embedded in sound for productivity: Logics such as managing biorhythms, employing psychology principles, and increasing efficiency are transposed into the orphyic mediation techniques of the postmodern quantified self. There, microperceptual control is employed toward distinctly utilitarian aims: sleep, concentration, creativity, meditation. In their study of Portland coffeehouses Broadway, Legg, and Broadway situate the eco-hipster brand of urban cafés in Portland as “place ballet”⁵⁹—in other words, environments that are highly spatially and temporally choreographed, embodying the same values of sensory micro-control as sound conditioning technologies of the self while also distantly echoing the industrial psychology of stimulus progression:

When Spade opened its doors earlier in 2018 I figured it would be the newest brunch spot. The indoor atmosphere of light, white walls and ceilings, and “live wall” of plants made me think of healthy hemp smoothies. Spade, however, has become the newest work café on the Drive. While it’s always possible to see the occasional parent and tot in there, it’s mostly work meetings and laptop workers setting up shop for the day. Aside from pour-over coffees Spade offers a variety of brunchy items, Avocado toasts, and even a small selection of beer and wine. Who knows, some freelancers might prefer a craft brew in the daytime over artisanal coffee. When minimally full Spade is a reasonably quiet and serene experience. Music is barely perceptible. Lunch hour features higher levels of (faster) music—an old “stimulus progression” trick to stimulate turnover and maximize profit at the peak hours of the day. Mid-afternoon the music again mysteriously moves into the background allowing for the working stragglers to zone out on Facebook.⁶⁰

IF PRODUCTIVITY IS THE SIGNAL, WHAT IS THE NOISE?

Repurposing noise from an industrial by-product to a productive ambience has been a project of post-World War II America.⁶¹ Beginning in World War II, as industrial tycoons were piping stimulus progression music into factories, the US military began experimenting with sonic beats for army training.⁶² Vets suffering from war-related afflictions were treated with binaural beats to help with sleep and condition the brain. The then-emerging science of psychoacoustics suggested that brain waves could be

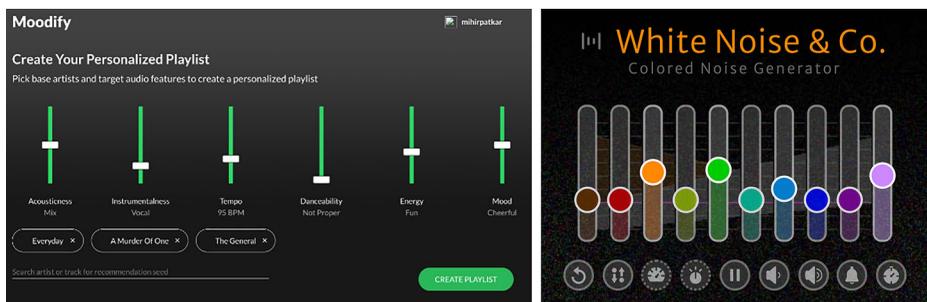


FIGURE 1. Mixing boards offer optional selections in apps for sonic self-control. Left: Moodify; right: myNoise.

controlled sonically, as certain soundwaves could stimulate sympathetic brain waves. Postwar America harnessed and domesticated both noise and binaural beats toward a science of sleep and relaxation in a search for a new quiet.⁶³ In the 1960s Marpac rebranded their mechanical noise machine from sleep aid to a tool for concentration. Thus Sleep-mate, a “blend of soothing sounds” became Sound Screen: “Yes! Now you can do something about those thought distracting noises beyond your control.”⁶⁴

Today, these logics are transposed onto mobile platforms that offer customization of sonic elements toward any and all performance needs: focus, relaxation, or sleep (see Figure 1). Here specific outcomes are replaced with a general call for improvement of efficiency and productive activity.⁶⁵ For instance, Noise.li promises to “mask annoying noises in order to keep you sane, improve your focus and boost your productivity” through a set of possible combinations of different sounds. A contemporary version of sound conditioning machines, Sleep Stream combines binaural beats with randomized natural environments and guided meditation toward a range of functional uses: As advertised on Apple’s App Store, it “helps you leave your busy day behind with a rich selection of calming sounds, soothing melodies, effective brainwave programs, and beautiful visualizations.” MyNoise features a whole suite of situations (e.g., “I need to study” or “I am a student with ADHD”) presented via a mixing sound board of “noise bands” that the user can slide up and down to create a custom soundscape. Utilizing the same mixing board approach, Moodify offers microperceptual design for custom music playlists based on adjustable settings such as “acoustic-ness, instrumental-ness, danceability, tempo, energy, and mood.”

The science of Muzak can most easily be gleaned in contemporary playlists for study and work: e.g., YouTube’s famous livecast “lofi beats to study to.” Rather than a genre of music, lo-fi is an unobtrusive ambience with specific timbral, rhythmic, and melodic characteristics: “dirty” crackly aesthetic, soft claustrophobic dynamic range specifically crafted to be experienced privately via headphones, no lyrics, minimal melodic content, muffled beats. What this livecast has in common with other “concentration” background music is the lack of lyrics and musical minimalism. Whether EDM or “acoustic coffeehouse” jazz, this genre of ambient music follows the quantum modulation model of consistent flow that maintains rather than modulates attention, keeping itself in the background while filling in the subject’s sonic space.⁶⁶

Studying at Hogwarts.

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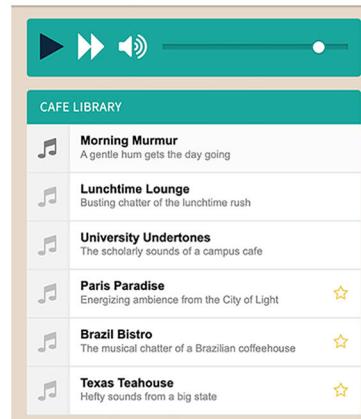


FIGURE 2. Mixing board view of sociality soundscapes. Left, “Studying at Hogwarts” on Ambient-mixer; right, Coffitivity the app.

In the realm of what I would term “sociality” soundscapes, Ambient-Mixer deserves a mention. Ambient-mixer is not only a platform but also a community where users share custom-built soundscapes with one another. The soundscapes are organized around fan themes such as popular movies, games, books, and general nature ambiances. Each themed soundscape is presented with a mixing board option where the user can increase or decrease the presence of different soundscape elements such as fire crackle, chatter, page flips, wind (see Figure 2). The logic of this orphic mediation, again, is control at the microperceptual level presented as freedom: a freedom to design efficiency on an individual level, trusting that the platform itself is scientifically sound and expertly developed. As a large sound conditioning platform myNoise contains sociality soundscape modules, including a café ambience (Figure 1), advertised in the App Store with the tagline, “A good coffee shop is an oasis for the creative mind. It’s where you go to get away from the bad habits and distractions of your home office. It’s where you go to get your creativity flowing and to get some work done.” This is presented as a truism in the genre of productivity sound and again underpinned by the science of creative cognition with the same consumer research paper.⁶⁷ On the flip side of customization, Coffitivity the app offers a set of “designer” coffee shop ambiances (Figure 2): the free ones aspire to a stimulus progression model from “morning murmur” to “university café” as degrees of concentration or focus along a daily biorhythm; the premium ambiances offer a component of virtual (cultural) tourism: “Paris paradise” or “Texas teahouse.”

The main difference between sound-conditioning apps such as Noise.li or Moodify and Ambient-mixer or Coffitivity is that the former create an affective experience with a historically scientific basis, while the latter offer a surrogate space whose parameters can (potentially) be micro-controlled. This brings up the important question of context: Under what circumstances and in what setting would one immerse themselves into this ambience? Coffitivity imagines that listening will occur at home when the alienated media worker is missing the productive clatter and bustle of working in a café. This

question brings us back to the focus of this paper: the coffee shop ambience as a quintessential soundscape of contemporary productivity, specifically tied to neoliberal models of work and efficiency.

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF COFFEE SHOPS

Just as the global coffee trade has brought with it postcolonial and economic power considerations, the physical space of the café has held a special role in the Western world and North America as a kind of “third place” public sphere. Referencing Oldenburg’s original concept, Broadway, Legg, and Broadway argue that urban coffeehouses embody the history of the café as a site for political mobilization; a place “situated between the private sphere of the home and family life and the public sphere of the state and court.”⁶⁸ This is precisely why the café is such a rich site for cultural analysis. Given its historic sociopolitical function, this space provides an opportunity to untangle the layers of influence dating back to the turn of the last century and involving intersections between industrial psychology, consumer science, and the rise of individualist techno-fetishism. While sound may not be central to this picture at first glance, it is indeed central to the evolution of technological self-management, mood curation, and the emergence of sonic enclaves.⁶⁹ The rebirth of productivity science into audio playlist curation has in effect shifted the role of the café from that of a third public sphere to that of a second workplace, replicating the hegemonic ideals of work efficiency. And yet, as manifest in the *Soundscapes of Productivity* Story Map, the conviviality of coffee shops persists: They still draw parents of young kids, retirees looking for community, and other local connections.⁷⁰ Therefore, I use the coffee shop soundscape here as a case study in order to bring the genealogy of sound’s relationship to productivity in conversation with neoliberal realities of creative/media work.⁷¹ The coffee shop soundscape is a special acoustic composite of musical leisure designed to modulate customer activity mixed with industrial sounds while also serving as a blank canvas for individual sonic management. The urban “coffice”—typically located in transitional, gentrifying areas—is emblematic of what Deuze describes as media work in the modern economy. Liquid modernity, Deuze posits, is marked by uncertainty, flexibility, and labor precarity framed by neoliberal ideology as both problems and opportunities to be tackled on an individual basis. As if by design, the chaotic soundscapes of artisanal coffee shops fit the cognitive demands of creative and intellectual work just as factory music fit repetitive manual labor with its unobtrusive melodies and regular tempo.

JJ Bean is another long-standing feature of Commercial Drive, otherwise known as the only place without wifi. I’m not sure if that is an attempt to ward off freelancers hanging out on their laptops all day, or a valiant stand to reclaim the traditional role of the café as a place of conversation and socializing (or both). The overwhelming feel inside is dark wood, and it feels crowded in a homey sense, not a minimalist hipster haven. It’s quite a dense atmosphere filled with lots of people chatting and lining up, music, and the sounds of coffee prep.⁷²

One of the first things to note in the *Soundscapes of Productivity* Story Map is tensions in the shifting cultural function of cafés from social gathering places to working environments. The collection is an example of urban spaces being re-politicized through design. The coffee signals a target clientele and invokes affective response in a very ambient way at the same time as it is *itself* a political event of gentrification in transitional neighborhoods. A traditionally Italian and Portuguese community, Commercial Drive is a telling example of sonic diversity in Vancouver's East Side that reflects the area's mixed population and increasing economic precarity. Renzo's, formerly an Italian tailor shop, features at once groups of old Italian men loudly discussing politics over coffee and creative working professionals who alternate teleconference calls with laptop work ensconced in music concentration playlists. Simultaneously, the café's sonic profile features contemporary hipster mood music; its open windows invite the permeable soundscape of a nearby park, and the inside is bustling with coffee machines and conversation. Hardly a designer concentration soundscape, Renzo's is nevertheless emblematic of the tenacity of cultural diversity in the neighborhood, which is arguably its own genre of productivity: an effectively inclusive space. The reality is, both working professionals and students engaged in "media work" often don't have access to traditional office space; the profound alienation of freelance work further compels the search for shared mixed-use environments where not only the music but also the acoustic soundscape in its entirety creates "transitory communities" of spontaneous human contact.⁷³

The coffee shop, then, is the new factory for media work: the space is open ended and customizable to allow tailoring of personal environments, but also to provide a shared ambience. Like the factory, the coffee shop contains repetitive mechanical sounds that include the cash register, grinders, steamers, clinking of cups and dishes, blenders, and fancy percolators. The acoustic soundscape is augmented with ubiquitous music in a comforting and familiar fashion, modeled after human biorhythms to maximize turnover and energize its patrons. Unlike Starbucks, which replicates the sonic tourism model to create a global soundtrack of familiarity,⁷⁴ independent urban coffee shops sonically brand themselves through contemporary styles to create unique and identifiable cultural fit. In Strathcona, for instance—another transitional area of Vancouver's East Side—artisanal "coffee" spaces stand in stark contrast with the ethnic roots of the neighborhood. As Chinatown has gentrified, establishments aimed at young white hipster audiences signal themselves through deliberate design choices, including loud electronic music that infuses the space and visual design choices such as communal tables, cast iron and wood accents, and tall exposed ceilings. There is no ethnic mixing here: Coffee shops are islands of neoliberal familiarity, and just like on Commercial Drive, they provide a third space that bridges the gap between the cost of living and lack of access to working space for freelance work. Needless to say, the decibel levels in the typical coffee often match or exceed local work-safe recommendations developed for industrial commerce. Hovering between 70 and 86 dB, this sonic environment sits right within factory noise levels, which ironically is what inspired work-safe policies for hearing protection in the first place. Given that many workers linger in cafés for over four hours at a time, the environment arguably creates hearing damage—not to mention the staff who work full

eight-hour shifts! The ambient hustle and bustle, however, is evidently conducive to creative work: while Mehta, Zhu, and Cheema don't name an optimal space for their concept of "creative cognition," the coffee shop manifests as the ideal neoliberal workplace for the modern economy.⁷⁵ Indeed, as early 20th-century factory music developed specifically to complement noisy open spaces and repetitive work,⁷⁶ the opposite sonic environment has emerged as the soundtrack to creative productivity: dense, social soundscapes with genre-specific music in a space that is both a "third place" for gathering and a "second place" for work.

One important characteristic of media work, Deuze posits, is the inseparability of work from pleasure and sociality. The ideology of "doing what you love" is rightfully critiqued by feminist scholars as one of the most exploitative conditions of the creative industries.⁷⁷ It erases both the precarity of actual economic survival and the boundary between work and leisure by masquerading work *as leisure*. This is perfectly embodied by the coffee shop soundscape, which is simultaneously a place for work and for lively socialization, as well as an industrial workplace for its employees without industrial work protections. The way these different levels of productivity are externalized in the coffee shop reflects both the layered historical realities of stimulus progression and the technological imaginary of micro-perceptual management through sound conditioning.⁷⁸

As a customizable space for the enactment of various forms of control, the coffee shop is a site of continuities and ruptures in the genealogy of sound's relationship to work. We can trace the traditional productivity model of early Muzak in the ebbs and flows of café background music aimed to direct consumer behavior. The Taylorist model of productivity as an increase in units manufactured and a decrease in margins of error is replaced in the media work economy with a metaphorical productivity that has to do with the management of individual goals and the optimization of biorhythms and time.⁷⁹ In the third space of the coffee shop, productivity is a slippery and aspirational concept in which passion is entrepreneurial and work is to be enjoyed. This aspirational productivity is sonically managed to oscillate between everyday tasks such as concentration, meditation, and creativity amounting to (an illusion of) totality of life control. Levels of productivity are also determined by the degree to which personal space is formed and managed through technological mediation. And while sonic management continues to employ the cybernetic logic of control, in the neoliberal work setting this control is self-administered.

A UNIQUE BRAND OF SOUNDSCAPE FOR PRODUCTIVITY

The critical point in this genealogy of sound-work models is that we have essentially adopted the surveillance and control model of modernity's scientific-corporate complex, and instead of being forced to listen to Muzak to be more productive, we ourselves monitor and apply strategies to fine-tune our performance, to clean out the "noise" and produce the "signal" that is work productivity. We use "sonic drugs" to stimulate lapsed efficiency and create an environment of collectivism, making ourselves increasingly dependent on the stimulation of sonic space with specific tonal, rhythmic, and genre characteristics. We invest in the popular science of different sonic stimuli for particular purposes

almost as if applying an algorithm to a problem: e.g., binaural beats for meditation or sleep; white noise for concentration and work privacy; coffee shop ambience for creative cognition. In turn this obfuscates urban labor precarity and the loss of meaningful community in the quest for technological self-control. Having internalized the governmental rubrics of stimulus progression,⁸⁰ we replicate the problems that consumer culture creates in order to sell us products, so we can take pride in finding solutions through apps and spaces like the “coffice” to feel like we are living up to our full neoliberal potentials. The case study of artisanal café soundscapes in Vancouver illuminates the ruptures of control, the “glitch” moments in this profoundly postmodern work practice in coffee shops.

As a multipurpose environment the coffee shop lends itself well to a sensory approach to branding, as research shows customers often forge significant connections to specific cafés and develop a deep sense of place.⁸¹ The *Soundscapes of Productivity* Story Map, then, is meant to be read both as a critique of coffee shop work in its compliance with contemporary models of efficiency and as an element of resistance to the fantasy of total control: As can be heard in the recordings, despite the initial impression of monotonous clatter, unexpected events occur all the time that pierce the private enclaves of coffice workers, and create temporary acoustic communities of shared experience transcending the possibilities of sonic management. Considering the coffee shop to be a new “factory” environment for creative urban labor opens a new way of understanding productivity in a neoliberal context. Ultimately, the coffee shop soundscape signifies both the proletarianization of intellectual labor now performed in noisy shared spaces and at the same time replicates the tactile, vibrational experience of togetherness as a necessary antidote to the alienation of work “flexibility.” ■

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