

SOUNDWORK

The Coffee-Office: Urban Soundscapes for Creative Productivity

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The soundwork audio file is openly available online at:
<http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/189054/186746>

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED the term “coffice,” or coffee-office, in a tweet: a fitting beginning to a hipster portmanteau that references an ever-popular urban labour practice – working in a coffee shop. The tweet also referenced the notion of “coffitivity,” or the kind of productivity one derives not only from the stimulation of the coffee drink itself but also from the chaotic, communal, semi-public space of the urban café. Coffitivity is also an app: a service that delivers the coffee shop ambience to your personal headphones, whether you are at home, school, or wherever you happen to work. The app combines a selection of trademarked coffee shop ambiances with your chosen music tracks, promising to “boost your creativity and help you work better.” The company cites a 2012 study conducted by Mehta, Zhu, and Cheema (published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*) entitled “Is Noise Always Bad?” as a way of legitimizing its service. The study suggests that ambient sound levels above a certain decibel level – one we typically think of as too loud to be conducive to intellectual work and concentration – are actually conducive to “creative cognition.” While not defined in terms of tasks (but, rather, in terms of brain activity) creative cognition appears to involve typical creative freelance tasks: graphic design, a combination of repetitive and inspirational labour, instant communication, and multitasking. The “sweet spot” noise level for this creative cognition is suggested to be around 70dB – incidentally, the average ambience level for most North American cafés based on my six years of unstructured observations and decibel recordings, primarily in Vancouver, British Columbia.

There are many historical exteriorities here (to invoke Jonathan Sterne) that coalesce into the emergence of this particular material practice: the abstraction of the coffee shop ambience into a customizable transplantable

sonic environment in the service of the creative media contractor. We can find it situated at the intersection of the reproducibility and objectification of music (Attali 1985; Mowitt 2012), the mobility of music listening itself (Bull 2000), the crystallization of headphone technology and its phantom “stereo” image (Dyson 1996), the emergence of field recording as a creative practice (Leonardson 2015), the decades-long science of music designed for consumption and productivity (Sterne 1997), and, of course, the displacement of digital labour outside traditional working environments (importantly, environments that are protected by third-party health and safety regulations). Such soundscapes of productivity, as embodied by the café ambience, are also the most recent examples of changing attention spans, cognitive functioning, trends in multitasking and productivity, and stress management: hence, they have become the subject of studies like the one with which I began. And, while we think of social networking and e-consciousness (Turkle 2012) as globalized developments, there is a pertinent *locality* to the coffee soundscape. How does the coffee sound in Vancouver?

There is at least one other way of understanding this phenomenon, and I would argue for adding it to the mix precisely for its potential to tap into *locality*: thinking of the coffee shop as an *acoustic ecology*. According to Schafer (1977) sound ecologies, just as natural ecologies, may be well functioning or not, and they are emblematic of the environments and communities they represent. Our understanding of these urban soundscapes is, of course, also contingent upon the tools we use to record and analyze them (Krause 2013). In this short piece I bring some of the relevant literature together in order to construct the local café as an urban soundscape of productivity (and one that finds itself memorialized and abstracted into an app) as well as to draw links to the tradition of acoustic ecology as a paradigm for making sense of this particular trope of urban sonic environment and its relevance to the life in a city like Vancouver. Into this, I also weave the state of some of the sound-related city regulations and bylaws to help externalize the assumptions implicit in the presence and absence of institutional control. Finally, I nuance the notion of tools in research by comparing stereo to binaural recordings of coffee shops in my own ethnographic work, hoping that this outline will serve as a fresh model for approaching the increasingly mediated nature of urban labour practices.

LISTENING AS A PRODUCTIVE SUBJECTIVITY

The very reproduction of sound in its most basic form is already a product, as many cultural theorists of sound have pointed out. And so is the type of listening associated with commercial music and recorded sound. Listening modes and listening publics have been the subject of growing scholarship in the cultural studies of sound (Thompson 2002; Lacey 2013). The idea is that the emergence of mass media and technologies for the reception of displaced sound form macro-level socio-historical patterns of listening that are both reflective and indicative of larger societal shifts towards individualism, mediated and networked publics, commodity fetishism, and the consolidation of public and private space. Taking mobile audio as a case of mediated listening reveals several themes germane to this discussion:

- Personal mobile listening can be understood as a kind of **auditory cocoon**, contingent upon the ease of customization and individualization of everyday experience (Bijsterveld 2010).
- Personal mobile listening is a practice of the **management of everyday life** – self-regulation and self-care (Bull 2000).
- Personal mobile listening can also be seen as a **mixed-reality cinematic experience**, whereby real and “virtual” sensory components intermingle into unique geo-auditory dynamics (Droumeva 2016; Thulin 2013).

Additional considerations of this specific mediated listening experience include the commercialization of identity elements that are part of mobile technology as a “technology of the self,” including personal ringtones and other alerts as well as interactive uses of smart devices as part of either creative practice and/or the “quantified self” (Gopinath and Stanyek 2014). The themes mentioned above (which are by no means comprehensive) connect curiously well with another historical trend in music reproduction and the commodification of listening experience: music engineered for productivity. From the manipulation of piped-in music in retail environments to the careful orchestration of work productivity, the *stimulus progression* algorithms of the post-Second World War era (Sterne 1997) are a crystallization of harnessing the affective and physiological power of music towards controlling and regulating the worker-consumer subject. Personal mobile listening is then the inversion of that – subjects performing the management and regulation that was

previously performed for them – on themselves. Among other chosen soundscapes of productivity, such as work music mixes, tonal ambiances, and other meditation compositions, the coffee shop soundscape serves a particular function in that ecology – one that arguably abstracts and replicates the particular affective and physiological experience of working in a café.

THE ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY OF THE COFFEE SHOP

So what is it about the coffee shop that makes it at worst tolerable and at best a preferred and sought-after work soundscape? First off, we are talking about a particular coffee shop ambience – the “boutique” urban coffee house of Vancouver as an imitation Silicon Valley start-up city, increasingly geared towards the creative freelancer through the popularity of café co-working spaces. This coffee shop ambience is the home of pour-over and hand-press artisanal coffee (and occasional teas), and the similarly artisanal selection of indie folk, rock, or atmospheric electronic music. This coffee shop is also characterized by the specific acoustics of wood and steel (and cast iron) interiors, sturdy communal tables, relative density, tall airy ceilings, and open drink/food prep area. Such materials themselves speak of Vancouver as the always-in-renewal “city of glass” that has a reputation for tearing down old buildings and, with them, old acoustics and rebuilding with new modern materials – a note Schafer (1977) had already made in the late 1960s and 1970s. Aside from the murmurs of mostly working creative professionals and the occasional old-fashioned conversation over coffee, the Vancouver café also emits a continuous soundscape of taps and bangs (e.g., shaking off the espresso cup attachment), cutlery and porcelain clanks, the hissing of the milk steamer, the roar of the blender, the growl of the coffee grinder, and the soft beeps of register and various equipment as well as the keynote of the refrigeration display cases. These sounds are intermittent, not exactly rhythmic, sometimes startling in their sharp guttural timbres, and spectrally overlapping each other, constructing what Schafer, the founder of acoustic ecology, would term a “lo-fi,” or unbalanced, soundscape due to the masking of sounds and the ensuing reduction of one’s acoustic horizon. Which brings us to noise. What about those levels?

According to the study quoted above (Mehta, Zhu, and Cheema 2012), levels around and below 50dB are not deemed conducive to creative labour, and levels over 85dB also prove to be too disruptive: the sweet



Figure 1. The Coffee: Soundscapes of Productivity. Photos by the author.

spot is in the 65 to 75dB range. Aligning the results of this study with local bylaw noise regulations reveals some interesting overlaps: 85dB is the cutoff identified by WorkSafeBC as a noise level above which exposure can be harmful to human health and hearing. On the other hand, libraries typically maintain “silent reading/study” areas at below 50dB using both physical barriers and architecture (Mattern 2007) – interesting what this says about the creativity of the intellectual labour that is happening inside. It’s important to note, too, that WorkSafeBC (n.d.) regulations apply to workers only. There are indeed ambient level regulations for the public mandated by the city of Vancouver (2016), but they revolve around times of day (not before 7:30 a.m. and not after 11:00 p.m.) and are quite liberal in terms of noise levels. For instance, the city mandates that “pubs, restaurants and cafés” post public advertisements

of high noise levels *only* if they exceed 90dB. It is telling that cafés are lumped in with pubs and restaurants as entertainment venues – a reality that most certainly does not account for the emergent role of urban coffee shops as co-working spaces, with respective workplace ambience.

Over the last six years, I've been collecting decibel measurements, photos, and recordings from boutique cafés around Vancouver. In that time I've seen a shift from the urban café as a social semi-public space meant for lively conversation to the “coffee” as a boutique social working environment for the lone creative freelancer, student, or intellectual. The recorded soundscapes I've brought home have consistently struck me as chaotic, dense, and somehow unhealthy, despite my resistance to Schafer's ontologies, which normalize cities as already unhealthy sound environments. To check my own assumptions, when teaching the basics of acoustic ecology I've been playing my students examples of ecologically “healthy” soundscapes, such as rainforest habitats populated by rhythmic bird and animal calls, juxtaposed against supposedly “unhealthy” urban coffee shop ambiances. I typically ask students to make a live notation of these soundscapes and expect that they will find the coffee house immensely more difficult to graph. In our post-discussions, however, a trend has emerged in the last number of years – students uniformly favour the sonic environment of the café and feel detached and leery of rainforest ambiances. Probing further, it appears that, where I find café soundscapes dense and chaotic, they find them familiar, comfortable, and predictable. One student pointed out that, when he works or studies, what he likes is not just the coffee house soundscape but the physical sensation of being around other people: the materiality of the café space itself.

Compare these recordings I've used in demos:

<https://soundcloud.com/ambient-sonic/blenz> (recorded seven years ago)

<https://soundcloud.com/ambient-sonic/jjbean-ambience-vancouver> (recorded one year ago).

My own impression of the coffee shop ambience finally shifted when I started using a binaural recording kit (see audio file). According to Foucault (1982), “equipment ... is the medium through which logos is transformed into ethos.” In the years that I had been using a stereo field recorder and, most often, my iPhone, different coffee shop ambiances all blended into a dense, compressed wall of sound, uniform in their timbral quality, moving like slow rivers of sound with the occasional accent of typical café sounds. Recording binaurally was a reminder of the artifice of recording itself – that a recording doesn't in fact represent

the “real” ambience but, rather, a stereo image of it, quite compressed, both spectrally and in terms of dynamic range. Binaural recordings instantly differentiated various café environments, giving them both local specificity and individual character; they created spatiality, which allowed for settling into a listening position rather than listening from the outside in. Playing back my binaural recordings reinfused me with a sense of the café’s space and character – a sense that stereo recordings had so far lacked. It also brought back specific events that had occurred. Binaural recordings gave sounds distinct character and spatial location; they perceptually decreased the overall volume of the recording, making it much less chaotic and rather richer both spatially and temporally.

Compare the above audio to a binaural recording:

<https://soundcloud.com/ambient-sonic/vancouver-buro-cafe-gastown-binaural> (recorded Spring 2017).

In my recordings and observations, the average decibel level of the urban “coffice” is precisely around 72 to 75dB: arguably, the sweet spot for creative labour (Mehta, Zhu, and Cheema 2012). The emergent soundscape composition (in Schafer’s terms) is then more tactile than audible. Ironically, although this is predictable, it is not entirely customized to conform to the way in which work music playlists function as a self-prescribed regulatory practice. Instead, the creative freelancer willingly consents to what Ursula Franklin (1994) terms “unprogrammed” auditory events: a continuous, ever-unfolding but always varied soundscape composition of urban activity. Perhaps the sense of locatedness in a shared soundscape of productivity allows the alienated urban freelancer a closer approximation to the office than does the immersion into a soothing world of musical anesthesia that my younger students tend to prefer.

My suggestion here is that an acoustic ecology perspective allows us to bring in descriptive accounts of the social dimensions of acoustics and sound behaviour as a way of gaining access to the shared social meanings and relations produced by common materials (e.g., wood, granite, steel, and glass) and common architectural features (e.g., high resonant ceilings, wide-open coffee preparation area, and open concept flow) alongside, of course, powerful mounted speakers piping in atmospheric musical character. By focusing on the locality of such soundscapes we can trace histories of urban development as well as municipal noise regulations that, together, tell us a story about the emergence of the café ambience as a soundscape of productivity. This allows us to meaningfully juxtapose these everyday sonic experiences with globalized versions of “coffitivity”

embodied by generic coffee shop soundscapes as musical products. Such a discussion, seen through the lens of soundscape research, can constructively inform both an understanding of everyday practices (de Certeau 1984) and, specifically, the production of space and labour (Lefebvre 1991).

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