RUUKKU
Taiteellisen tutkimuksen kausijulkaisu
Studies in Artistic Research
Tidskrift för konstnärlig forskning

Issue 12 (2019)

PERIPHERIES

Voice

ruukku.journal.fi

Image: Screen capture from Vincent Roumagnac's exposition *There is Nothing Outside the Stage Any Longer*

Affective Labour of Stimulus Progression

SEPPO KUIVAKARI

Abstract: Following text interprets the affective space of Mika Taanila's record "Stimulus Progression" in terms of affective labour and capitalism. Analysis of the record, combining post productive mixes of muzak history and soundscapes of consumerist spaces of nowadays Helsinki, elaborates the question of affects as encounters or becomings. Artist plays with the history of muzak as part of affective capitalism and questions the technological capacity of it to control and master the physical environment in the modern world. The disruptive stimuli of the record does not submit the modern progression and it's aspiration for standardization, but deterritorializes the geographies between pleasure and consumption within an affective atmosphere. This deterritorializion, with peripheral signs, I'm decoding in my paper after Malcolm McCullough's original idea as "ambient commons".

Keywords: Affect, Affective Labour, Sound Art, Muzak

My text interprets the affective space of Mika Taanila's record "Stimulus Progression" (2015) in terms of affective labour and capitalism. Analysis of a record, combining post productive mixes of muzak history and soundscapes of consumerist spaces of nowadays Helsinki, elaborates the question of affects as becomings of different intensities and capacities. Affects have been researched only to some extent within the framework of sound studies. In my article, I am referring to a few of crucial and foundational texts from this field of study.

As a discipline, sound studies reaches generally from the mainstream of sounds – like music – towards the sounds of the everyday, intimate and private respective their implicit politics relating to e.g. colour, gender and consumerism. This interdisciplinary field suggests that sounds not only passively register the social reality. Resolving the socio-cultural equation of soundscape cannot bypass human activity and agency (Leppert 2012, 417). Pivotal is the conception of sounds as social and cultural phenomena.

From the standpoint of affects, highlighted is then the relationship of sounds with the surrounding world. I am aware of the critique of affect theory, saying it is flattening the poststructuralist inquiry by ignoring its counter-hegemonic contributions and by positioning affect as "the answer" to contemporary problems of cultural theory (Thompson & Biddle 2013, 10). Yet I am asking how the question of affects could conceptualize the work of culture in a modern world of consumer

capitalism, the very encounters between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic formulas of different sounding cultures. This approach allows me to emphasize the reading of affects as conditions of exchange.

Thus, the thematic logic of my article – coupling of affect theory with sound studies – pronounces interaction between sounds and addresses their affective encounters with different cultural surfaces and structures, abstractions even; as Steve Goodman pinpoints, sonic algorithms or artificial acoustic agencies are "abstract machines" (Goodman 2010, 124). As abstract phenomena, these machinic phyla do not solely rely on material and physical modifications of matter (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 2004, 370; 448; 451). Muzak Corporation's stimulus progression is one of these sonic algorithms.

Muzak is a brand for background music, and stimulus progression a pseudoscientific method created by the corporation in the first half of the 20th century in order to stimulate energy in 15-minute intervals with arousing music and increasing tempo. It is an operative and qualitative force with a psychodynamic acoustic structure as an imperative for this "quarter-hour music".

The becoming of intensities and capacities is the very "labour" of an affect, making affect a site of a potential praxis and work, preserving a certain degree of uncertainty as its ethics. Instead of a closure, affect stretches across real and imaginary social fields and sediments, being labour-intensive process of sensing modes of living as they come into being. It hums with the background noise of promises and resting points. (Bertelsen & Murphie 2010, 156; Stewart 2010, 340.) Affects work, intensely. Paraphrasing Hardt and Negri, Ben Anderson argues that affective labour is a subset of immaterial labour that produces or manipulates affects such as feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion (Anderson 2010, 166).

As an acoustic agency – and an abstraction – muzak is such a relaxing haven, a bearer of magic that affects our moods. First, it pretexts the technological imperative of consumer capitalism. Moreover, it saturates a broader field of sensuality. Brandon LaBelle says that muzak uncovers a range of potentials for manipulating and engineering physical and emotional experiences (LaBelle 2010, 180), relaxation being one of its key tasks and consumer delight as its fulfillment (Ibid, 168). Muzak stands for the designed, artificial construct within which the listener is located and dominated as a consumer (Ibid, 179). As a sounding culture, it has a firm part in the industrialized tradition of atmospheric music (cf. also Braun 2012, 62-65).

Within aforementioned range, affects make mindsets for misleading disorientations also possible. Affects do not necessarily work only within the authentic territories of belonging, attachment, and affiliation, and other traces of traditional identity politics (Thompson & Biggle 2013, 16). In sound studies, affects are to be thought arising in the midst of in-between-ness, in the capacities to act and be

acted upon; seen as a passage of forces or intensities, the excluded middle; understood as a transformative force and a process of modulation (Ibid, 6-9). For the affect theory, this means the becoming of an affect as the promise of disclosure and heterogeneous ”universes of reference” (Bertelsen & Murphie 2010, 156).

It is these tonal universes of exchange record is processing, as entailed “deconomics” of sound and the tonic influence of muzak. With disclosure, every type of commodification of sound will be perpetually postponed. I base my claim on Jean-Luc Nancy’s idea of a work that is much less the completed production than this very movement, which does not “produce” but opens and continually holds the work open (Nancy 2007, 65). By contrast, what is put on hold in Taanila’s work, is the acoustic agency of a rational-scientific method.

PREMISES AND PROMISES OF STIMULUS PROGRESSION

Both sides of the record are 15 minutes long, and it has been featured as elevator noir. However, in terms of affects, is it “noir” as black, or dark? In our listening, are we dealing with an authentic counter-culture of industrialized atmospheric music? As an exchange, could it be merely foregrounding the reflective shade of this “elevator music”, as muzak is commonly described? For such an interpretation, another kind of terminology for interaction between sounds is required. It is necessary to combine artistic approaches with a larger cultural spectrum of initiatives.

Capacity of different sounds in “Stimulus Progression”, both music and noise, affirm and agitate, but does not – as in the case of muzak – affiliate us into sociocultural orders and conventions of consumerism and labour. Contrary to this, artist plays with the role of muzak’s past as part of affective capitalism that affirms consumerism affective in terms of joy, relaxation, and happiness, by agitating the randomizing role of noises in this atmospheric architecture, and therefore questioning the technological capacity of sound to control and master the physical environment in the modern world (cf. LaBelle 2010, 173; Thompson 2002, 4). Joseph Lanza analyzes this soundscape, also filled with random sounds from electronic devices and elevators, in his liner notes of the record:

> ”Composition becomes cluttered by falling objects, broken dishes, moving furniture, indecipherable chatter, and the bedlam of crying children, captured in the jingle-jangle echoes of daily life“

Taanila is decomposing the composed space and, as a consequence – the becoming – of occasions of distraction and unease, also muzak's imperial ability to colonize hearing (cf. Voegelin 2010, 44). In the same manner of speech, Michael Bull argues (2000, 9) that technologies of sound affect our relationship to the spaces we inhabit. Bull also points out (2012, 205) that sound does not only colonize the listener, it also recreates and reconfigures the spaces of experience. In this affective labour of sounds, I can see three general geopolitical attunements available:

1) Totalization and domination of territorialization (LaBelle 2010, 179), muzak as its (manu)scripted masterpiece. 2) Changes of withdrawal from the engagement with things that surround us to solipsistic strategies of empowerment (Bull 2000, 22; 103; 191; 193; Bull 2012).

Listening the record unveils assemblages of sonic interference within the designed and artificial constructions. Placement of sounds of the everyday is continually disrupting the furnished hegemony, the imposed structure of muzak. With respect to Erik Satie's 1917 idea of furniture music, furniture's are changing places, as Lanza also notes. In these circumstances of exchange, progression, understood here as diverse manipulation, brings forth only the ambiguity of sound, "stimulus digression" as its eventual outcome. This is the third possibility for attuning a soundscape, 3) possibility of deterritorialization. This statement, not that of territorialization, not of a withdrawal, but one for conditioning deterritorialization with moving affective vectors of sounds, stands for the argument of my article.

To assure this argument, we can compare the affective labour of both muzak and Taanila's decomposition side by side in a condensed and visualized form, analyzing sound as affective protocols of attunements, affiliation, agitation and affirmation. In my mind, these protocols finally constitute the "abstract machine" upon the materiality of sound. Both agencies are recognizable in the soundscape of the record.

First, the affective labour of muzak is a premise for sonic governance:

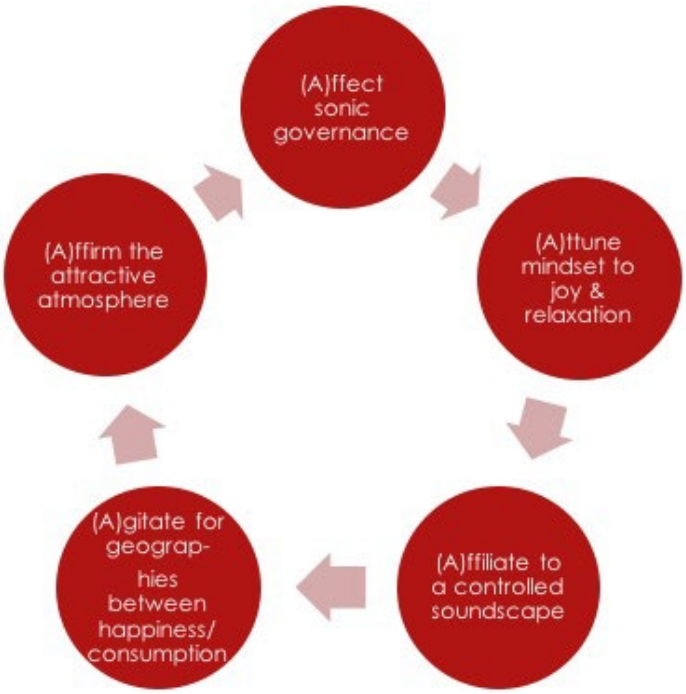

Figure 1. Affective protocol of muzak as unbroken, accumulating chain.

From this standardization of space we can see how muzak does not only sketch the sonic modernity, it also territorializes it (Attali 2012, 30); besides this maintenance, it stimulates and influences emotional rather than rational powers of consumerism (cf. LaBelle 2010, 177). Following Freya Jarman, we can think of muzak as a ubiquitous system that does not require our attention and still generates conceptualizations of the space we hear (Jarman 2013, 190). In this regard, muzak tunes the space from waste into digestive consumption and adds a promise for happiness with coherent qualities of pursuing good life (cf. Ahmed 2010). Conversely, Taanila recalls attention by turning stimulus progression into affective distraction and problematizes the noise control of any authorial institutionalized sound. Taanila is turning the tables of muzak's conceptual guidance: as Goodman says, "stimulus progression constituted an early form of sonic discipline" (Goodman 2010, 144).

Here lounges the cruel philosophy of Taanila's formula; a betrayal of muzak and it's acoustic agency. According to Nancy, what truly betrays music – understood here as muzak – and diverts or perverts the movement of it's modern history is the extent to which it is indexed to a mode of signification and not to a mode of sensibility (Nancy 2007, 57). It is a substantial, affective change. The recasting of disparate bodies of sound mobilizes forces of uncertainty in the listening. Sensibility loss intensifies awareness of critical distance.

Noise is pin-balling between modulations of clear Hi-fi and scattered Lo-fi acoustic perspectives without any recognizable algorithm. What follows, then, is an exchange between premise and promise, between the keynote implementation and an experiment. Direction of arrows in the chart show an erratic arrangement of stimuli in Taanila's machinic phylum. Instead of a sonic governance as a premise for desirable affects, we might start analyzing the soundscape of the record from the standpoint of noise, which is a promise to

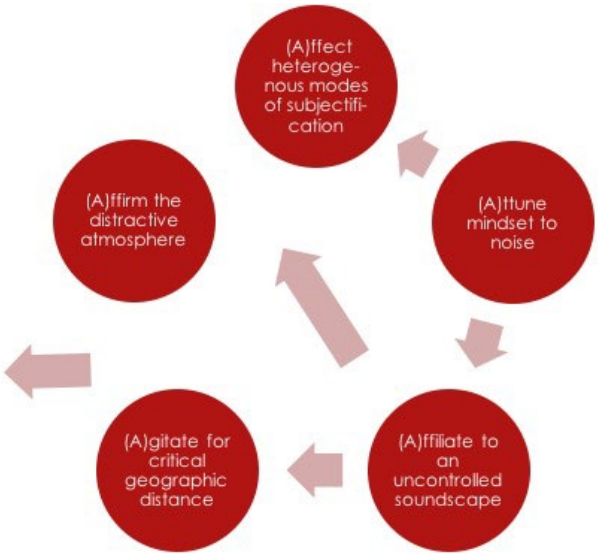

Figure 2. The coordination of time and a living space is entangled, blurring sustained structure of the political economy of muzak. In the chart is opened the heuristics of a "deconomy" of noise, an economy that perpetually dismantles itself as a taxonomy of sound

Taanila's sonic occupations break the affective capture of muzak's classified schema, determining coherent qualities of lifestyles. Noise becomes a social signifier of invisible issues of accumulation and other invented dichotomies between the subject and the object – between us and the soundscape. Anxious soundscape modulates "life itself" (Stewart 2010, 353; Anderson 2010, 165), deconstructing different pathologies of consumer capitalism.

As Fredric Jameson points out, one of consumer capitalism's pathologies is the incapacity to deal with time and history (Jameson 2009, 9-10), with a deeper logic of a system losing its capacity to retain its own past and to live in a perpetual present (Ibid, 20). In this regard, muzak attunes us to now-time, the jetz-zeit of the present, while the refrains of life mean worlding, worlding of affects (Stewart 2010), that break the normative orbits around which procedural parameters for negotiation and advocacy are set (Clough 2010, 222). These occurrences of noise brings forth the possible autonomy of affects through the purposelessness of the signifying practice of listening (cf. Voegelin 2010, 180); the intimate experience of accidents and occasions that does not comfortably settle within muzak's governing

schemas of affects. As Jacques Attali puts it, “in noise can be read the codes of life” (Attali 2007, 7). We can think of these refrains of life as type of refrains that collect or gather forces in order to go outside the territory, sometimes bringing on a movement of deterritorialization (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 2004, 360).

In this sense, “worlding” of affects withstands the rational-scientific agency of muzak and the intervals of happiness. To me, it is the very exchange between the social and the private sounds that shreds the lifestyle arranged with consumerist conventions, and denotes the boundaries of economics and personal desires anew (cf. LaBelle 2010, 178). Above all, compositional events and relations in the record intersect the temporal contours of past and present, simultaneously exposing a dialogue between accumulations of ease and unease.

Perhaps these repositories of time structure the “sounding logic” of Taanila’s artistic oeuvre (cf. Kuljuntausta 2011). As Erkki Huhtamo (2015) says, Taanila’s “thinking differently” amidst an increasingly calculated, uniform, and commercial culture makes him frequently visit such influences. Instead of a solipsist strategy, his affective labour advocates several cultural frameworks through various media practices of negotiation. These methods of exchange include sampling and re-mixing.

AMBIENCE IN THE POLITICS OF FREQUENCIES

Paraphrasing Brian Kane, Christoph Cox says that sound art reveals the true nature of sound: art can never disclose the sonic flux but can exemplify or refer to properties embedded within systems of signification and representation (Cox 2018, 9). This cartography of sound that can never describe sound as such, but only ever, how it is construed within a particular auditory culture is an obvious solution to signify also deterritorialization of sounds in “Stimulus Progression”. In-between-ness of affects breaks the demarcation line between rationalism (muzak) and experimentalism (art), resulting in multiple sounding cultures within one soundscape.

Soundscapes have been the subject of study in sound art for a long time. The more sampling, the more postmodern this practice could be dubbed. What follows, of all these miasmatic acoustic forces, is an idea of “ambience” as the geopolitical attunement of the record. It is an “echo land”, as Wolfgang Ernst has put it, meaning, acoustic space is not linear, but synchronous, simultaneously from every direction at once (Ernst 2016, 59). This the very idea of sample can verify: it is a reflection Taanila is contesting, with echoes also Lanza has paid attention to.

Figure 3. Affective labour of Taanila's Stimulus Progression. Diagram shows, how affects and affective labour could be understood as a transformative force.

Contrary to muzak's intentions of domination and technological standardization, sonic occupations of the record are not profiting any "original" as counterpart for the artificial, controlled "atmospheric architecture" (cf. LaBelle 2010, 173), but interlocking several indications of critical sound art to this affective space: distortion, repetition and diverse manipulation of any given coordinates. As affective vectors arrange the uncoordinated becomings of stimulus digression, we begin to understand how vulnerable even algorithms are.

Therefore, relations between multiple sounding cultures ought to be decoded as ambient commons within a complex immaterial economy. For Malcolm McCullough, ambient commons mean emergent environmental territories, being shaped by peripheral signals, found in new dynamics and located in-between objects of attention. As a commons, they are exposed to both colonization and expressions of resistance. (McCullough 2013, cited in LaBelle 2015, 315.) Sounding cultures of "Stimulus Progression" are precisely these commons, ambient by the sounding logic of the record. Ambient is not uniform, stresses McCullough (2013, 194). Instead of a univocal agency, we hear a sonic city in flux. A soundscape.

Distorting affective labour of private, public, and institutionalized sounds from the record turns the clocks of capitalist time into different orders than those proposed by Jameson as a mode of production as it reprograms and restructures life rhythms, cultural habits and temporal sense of its subjects to follow its own inner logic (Jameson 2007, 284). This is the political in Taanila's record. Noises, shouts, varying announcements and muzak mixes as cross-temporal refrains: it is these affective coincidences from where the critical language of Taanila finds its motivation (cf. Voegelin 2010, 179). The becoming of disruptive stimuli does not submit the order of modern progression and its aspiration for standardization. Disparate bodies of sound deterritorialize the geographies between pleasure and consumption within this "affective atmosphere" (cf. Callagher et al 2016, 9).

Noteworthy, atmosphere is a design matter (McCullough 2013, 194). As Goodman remarks (2010, 143), muzak's agency foregrounded the idea of background music, that has come to known as "ambient". For his behalf, Taanila captures the more peripheral status of ambience. We can consider this status as McCullough has done (2013, 20), with a deeper look upon the etymology of a Latin concept that designates ambient as an atmosphere (*aer ambiens*) of encounters (*ambire,* as "visit in rotation", or "embrace").

These encounters install the very idea of commons. Visit in rotation: as an economy of sound, ambient is not undoubtedly one-dimensional, rational, or predictable. It is "common" in many respects. As labour, life itself pushes back in refrains, uncolonizing the tonal qualities of muzak's pursuing passion and satisfaction. Entangled everyday noises from the record are the sonic occupations that finally modulate aural separability, the very unease of modernity.

31.12.2019

References

Ahmed, Sara: *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press, Durham & London 2010.

Anderson, Ben: "Modulating the Excess of Affect", in Gregg, Melissa & Gregory J. Seigworth, (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, Durham & London 2010.

Attali, Jacques: "Noise and Politics", in Cox, Christoph & Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture. Readings in Modern Music*. Continuum, New York & London 2007.

Attali, Jacques: "Noise: The Political Economy of Music", in Sterne, Jonathan (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader*. Routledge, London & New York 2012.

Bertelsen, Lone & Murphie, Andrew: "An Ethics of Everyday Infinities and Powers", in Gregg, Melissa & Gregory J. Seigworth, (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, Durham & London 2010.

Braun, Hans-Joachim: "Turning a Deaf Ear? Industrial Noise and Noise Control in Germany since the 1920s", in Pinch, Trevor & Karin Bijsterveld (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*. Oxford University Press, New York 2012.

Bull, Michael: *Sounding Out the City. Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life*. Berg, Oxford & New York 2000.

Bull, Michael: "The Audio-Visual Ipod", in Sterne, Jonathan (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader*. Routledge, London & New York 2012.

Callagher, Michael et al: "Listening geographies: Landscape, affect and geotechnologies". *Progress in Human Geography*, phg.sagepub.com 2016.

Clough, Patricia T.: "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies", in Gregg, Melissa & Gregory J. Seigworth, (ed.), *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, Durham & London 2010.

Cox, Christoph: *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018.

Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Continuum, London & New York 2004.

Ernst, Wolfgang: *Sonic Time Machines. Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity*. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2016.

Goodman, Steve: *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. The MIT Press, Cambridge & London 2010.

Huhtamo, Erkki: *[Retro]Futures and Their Discontents On Mika Taanila's Art*. Booklet supplement to *Stimulus Progression*. Apparent Extent, Cologne 2015.

Jameson, Fredric: *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, London & New York 2007.

Jameson, Fredric: *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*. Verso, London & New York 2009.

Jarman, Freya: "Relax, Feel Good, Chill Out: the Affective Distribution of Classical Music" in Thompson, Marie & Ian Biddle (eds.) *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*. Bloomsbury Publishing, New York & London 2013.

Kuljuntausta, Petri: "Äänellä on värinsä", in Aro, Eero & Mikko Viljanen (eds.), *Korville piirretyt kuvat. Kirjoituksia kuunnelmasta ja äänitaiteesta*. Like, Helsinki 2011.

LaBelle, Brandon: *Acoustic Territories. Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. Continuum, New York & London 2010.

LaBelle, Brandon: *Background Noise. Perspectives on Sound Art* (second edition). Bloomsbury, New York & London 2015.

Leppert, Richard: "Reading the Sonoric Landscape", in Sterne, Jonathan (ed.), *The Sound Studies Reader*. Routledge, London & New York 2012.

McCullough, Malcolm: *Ambient Commons. Attention in the Age of Embodied Information*. The MIT Press, Cambridge & London 2013.

Nancy, Jean-Luc: *Listening*. Fordham University Press, New York 2007.

Stewart, Kathleen: "Afterword: Worlding Refrains", in Gregg, Melissa & Gregory J. Seigworth, (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, Durham & London 2010.

Thompson, Emily: *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933*. The MIT Press, Cambridge & London 2002.

Thompson, Marie & Ian Biddle: "Introduction: somewhere between the signifying and the sublime", in Thompson, Marie & Ian Biddle (eds.) *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*. Bloomsbury Publishing, New York & London 2013.

Voegelin, Salomé: *Listening to Noise and Silence. Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*. Continuum, New York & London 2010.

RUUKKU – Studies in Artistic Research. Publisher: The University of The Arts Helsinki, Aalto University, University of Lapland. www.ruukku.journal.fi

This voice was originally published in a webpage format. This PDF, created in 2026, has a different layout and visuals.

Copyright and license: The author retains the copyright. The publisher uses the following license statement from issue 15 onwards: All contents of this journal, excluding individual logos, images, sound files, videos and other artistic outputs are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.