

Sounding Out! Podcast #43: Retail Soundscapes and the Ambience of Commerce

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Abstract

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Soundscapes and the Ambience of Commerce SUBSCRIBE TO THE SERIES VIA ITUNES ADD OUR PODCASTS TO YOUR STITCHER FAVORITES PLAYLIST What is the ambient sound of commerce?

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Cultural Studies, Listening, Noise, Place And Space, Podcast

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What is the ambient sound of commerce? Equally reviled and revered, the programmed soundscapes of retail space combine wonderful serendipity with quotidian blandness. This podcast examines field recordings from luxury megastores, suburban fast food joints, and everything in between. As it turns out, the corporate ambience of chain-store retail isn't so far away from the high-brow ambitions of ambient music. Ambience is whatever surrounds us, and it's embroiled within the same kinds of aesthetic, political, and economic struggles that have been recognized in architecture for centuries.

While a long line of thinkers have identified the links between retail and modernity, surprisingly few have addressed the phenomena in auditory terms. Following up on Jonathan Sterne's 1997 inquiry regarding environmental music in the Mall of America, this podcast examines new developments in ambient sound that have accompanied the rise of e-commerce and the decline of brick-and-mortar stores. Segmentation of markets, nostalgia for the past, and the early history of recording are all addressed, as we take a listening trip through consumer culture.

The podcast presents highlights from field recordings from retail stores, accompanied by voice-over narration. Field recordings were captured with a Zoom H4n handy recorder, at Menlo Park Mall in Edison, NJ, Dover Street Market New York, Parsonage Road Target in Edison, NJ, Wal-Mart Route 27 in Edison, NJ, and Dunkin Donuts Route 27 in Edison, NJ. Also includes excerpts from Brian Eno's "Ambient 1: Music for Airports" (1978) and Disconscious' "Hologram Plaza" (2013).

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[James Hodges](#) is a PhD student in media studies at Rutgers University. His research focuses on the relationship between promotional culture and media preservation. James is the cofounder of a media archaeology working group at Rutgers, and he runs a small cassette label for fun.

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