

# Sound Off Exegesis

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## Noise? What Noise?

### Sonic pollution in restaurants

“What is at issue is ‘popular culture’ – how we should think about it, how we should study it, how we should value it.”<sup>1</sup> - Simon Frith and Jon Savage

The purpose of this project is to address the above quotation by showing the difficulties involved in conveying through popular media the information necessary to increase popular awareness of an unhealthy element in everyday American life. Because it is so common a part of our popular culture, excessive noise in restaurants—and indeed excessive noise in public spaces throughout our urban areas—is “accepted” to the point where it is hardly noticed. Yet it is a “tragedy of the sonic commons” as the sonic assault accumulates. Such noise takes its toll, a toll which is physical, psychological, emotional and even spiritual.

Noise is unwanted sound, regardless of volume. Although the unwanted sound is usually loud, it can also be soft, such as the annoying hissing from an appliance. The degree of annoyance is proportional to the loudness of the noise, and high-frequency noise is more annoying than lower frequency.<sup>2</sup> The problem with restaurant noise is that people accept it as “normal”, believe that they have no right to control its use, and are not aware how many other people also dislike its ubiquitous occurrence. Because we are a visual culture, we pay attention primarily to visual problems. *Sonic* problems are generally accepted—unless one’s neighbor happens to have a jet landing strip in his back yard. Tom Shachtman in 1995 lamented the inarticulateness of American society, and stated “The inarticulate society will not be mute; rather, it will be full of noise, music and conversation and have very little space in it for silence or for the reflective thought...”<sup>3</sup> Today, fifteen years later, were he to stop by many restaurants, he would find even conversation seldom possible, with restaurant goers often reduced to communicating in inarticulate shouts and gestures. How can members of this society be articulate if they cannot even communicate over the noise in public places such as restaurants?

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1 S. Frith and J. Savage, “Pearls and swine: intellectuals in the mass media,” from S. Redhead (ed.), *The Club Cultures Reader*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997)

2 A. Baucom, “Chapter 5 – Hearing and Acoustics,” in *Hospitality Design for the Graying Generation*, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1996)

3 T. Shachtman, “Nation’s public discourse gets dumb and dumber,” *Insight*, April 17, 1995, p. 19

The journalistic opinion piece (“Killer Decibels”) written for this assignment is a plaintive call to arms. It is a feature article that complains, because an article that complains about a subject with which most readers can identify is much more likely to be read than one that simply discusses that small percentage of restaurants which do *not* have the problem. It is written in the first person because readers can identify more easily with a *individual's* personal perspective than with an "objective" and "non-biased" discussion of the issue. As Frith and Savage write: “If the academic's task is to tell people what they don't already know, the journalist's is to tell them what they do.”<sup>4</sup> “I” the writer have experienced this. You the reader have experienced this. Therefore we are both experts and have a bond, a special understanding “just between you and me.” Because of the style and context of the writing, it is not necessary to back up claims with specific facts; the anecdotal is proof enough. “You and I both know our experience is true.” A simple "researchers have found" or “studies show” will do for any knowledge we haven't personally experienced. The style of writing appeals to the emotions rather than the intellect. The reader can remember similar situations which he or she has experienced at restaurants and re-experience those situations by "re-feeling" the emotions and discomfort. As Frith and Savage state, the job of a columnist “is less to make readers think than to save them from thought, less to make them see events anew than to ensure a breakfast-table conversation that is held in cliches.”<sup>5</sup> Surely noisy restaurants are prime fodder for such breakfast-table conversations.

However, getting the reader to *feel* the problem may be insufficient to motivate the reader to *do something* about the problem, or to convince others of the need for action. What is needed, if the writer would like to see some change result, is to stimulate if not anger at least ire in order to generate opinions and discussions about noise in restaurants; to help produce the “I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore” effect. For that to come about, some actual facts and figures, perhaps even reference to believable authorities, may be needed to supplement the experiential emotions, and there is seldom room for this in a typical newspaper or magazine article. Although the key element in solving the problem of restaurant noise involves actions taken by restaurant owners, there is unlikely to be space in a lifestyle article for the rather dreary specifics of acoustical calculations, reverberation factors, decibel level relationships and other technical topics that are essential to improving the acoustics of a space but unlikely to excite the attention of the typical reader. Those specifics will end up in trade journals for the food and restaurant industry. At best, a lifestyle article will incite patrons to complain to restaurant management or even visit a website such as [www.nonoise.org](http://www.nonoise.org) but without an organized movement, either within a city or nationally, most articles will remain cries in the wilderness providing but temporary amusement to the reader. Restaurant patrons have apparently been thoroughly dominated and intimidated by restaurant owners and what is needed is some of Michel de Certeau's “resistance.”<sup>6</sup> As Brian Morris describes it, “‘tactical' appropriations of space [use of a particular space that runs against its dominant and 'proper' heteronormative construction]’...are an instance of 'resistance' to an official order, a victory of the weak over the strong.”<sup>7</sup> Patrons regaining some control over the sonic atmospherics of a restaurant would be a case of the public appropriating [or *reappropriating?*] some control over a private space rather than the reverse. Morris also quotes John Frow who suggested that there might be some “complicity in and acceptance of domination” on the part of people<sup>8</sup> [in our case, restaurant diners.] I would suggest that in the case of restaurant diners, there is far too much

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4 Frith and Savage, op. cit., p. 10

5 *ibid.* 12.

6 B. Morris, “What we talk about when we talk about 'walking in the city' ,” *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 5, September 2004, p. 678

7 *ibid.* p. 678

8 *ibid.* p. 681

complicity and acceptance. One useful future area of research would be to determine just why restaurant patrons are so passive in their submission to excessive, conversation-destroying noise in restaurants.

Food and restaurants are an essential part of popular culture but are such a normal part of everyday life that we seldom include them with more obvious pop culture areas such as music, film, television or fashion. Popular culture is important to us because we live in it, we think it, we speak it, we act within it; and, because it is so important, it is often hardly noticeable. Because of the apparent normalcy of eating, even at restaurants, most people see food simply as an essential activity, but food has its own rules and fads, and every country has not just unique foods but a unique culture of dining etiquette and ritual. Although we all eat, and many of us eat often at restaurants, those most affected by food fashions are the dedicated “foodies” who follow famous chefs and new restaurant openings. For them, food truly matters. They are as dedicated as any Star Trek fan, though they strive to present themselves with more aplomb. Waves of food fashions sweep through restaurants as do styles of design for those restaurants. Changing food fashions affect ingredients, preparation, presentation, and certainly prices. “Trendy” restaurants frequently look and cook alike, although each strives to present some sort of unique individuality.

Writing about popular culture presents challenges that seldom occur when writing about other subjects. Because most Americans are familiar with popular culture—as is a fish with water—they consider themselves experts on popular culture—at least *their* popular culture. Since everyone eats, and most go out to restaurants—even if only fast-food—everyone has an opinion about the culture of food. Restaurants are part of the upscale lifestyle, the trendy lives of the fashionable. Many chefs have achieved deity status in the culinary world; particularly those with television shows. When it comes to food and wine, almost all writing is celebratory. It is about the exciting new restaurant, the innovative young chef, the fascinating new fusions of food tastes, the star restaurant designer, or the debonair winemaker. Why would writers who get free meals, free wine, and free trips to wine regions write critically about the industry itself or the sometimes dark side of its people and practices. Why would food and wine advertisers pay to support articles that are anything less than fawning over their industry? Who writes about the winegrape grower who passes off a load of grapes as a variety with much higher value? Who writes about overpriced wine in restaurants, or the passing off of cheap wines in fancy bottles? Who suggests that combining three or four countries' ingredients into one dish makes a mockery of the traditions of food cultures going back centuries, or that simply because something has never been done before is no justification for doing it now? How often does one read about the primarily tips-only wages of wait staff and the tricks they can do to get you to leave bigger tips, the illegal immigrants in the kitchen, the phony wait times for table reservations when one calls ahead by phone to give the impression of a busy restaurant, the cocaine in the changing room to keep the servers on their toes, or the ways restaurants can use menu design to get customers to order high-profit items or to move yesterday's leftovers?

Nor will the *politics* of food be mentioned in most lifestyle magazines and newspaper sections. The increase in food prices (ignored in cost-of-living statistics by the U.S. government), the lack of access to sufficient healthy food (a serious problem for many in the U.S. and a catastrophe worldwide), the expanding use of genetically modified and transgenic foods, the patenting of millenia-old plants, and the increasing control of production and distribution of the world's food supply by a diminishing number of transnational megacorporations are not considered suitable topics for those who wish to read about the latest food fads or diet tips.

Are there intense discussions about the sonic environment of restaurants? Despite the fact that noise is a major complaint of restaurant goers, you will seldom see it mentioned in the media; particularly in the upscale food and wine magazines and newspaper sections of our media. As Rob Watling, in an article in *The Curriculum Journal*, quotes Lee Masterson “One of the tasks of media education, then, is to hold up to question the media's 'decorative display' of what goes without saying. It is to challenge the media's common-sensed representations by asking whose interests they serve.”<sup>9</sup> In short, many people neither discuss serious questions about food nor complain about restaurant noise because they lack the education—through media—which would inform them that they have the power to question, to complain and to act. Further in the article, Watling quotes Sheldon Wolin in saying “Action is often role-breaking or custom-defying, for frequently it seems to defend the collectivity against evils that are sanctioned by rules and traditions.”<sup>10</sup> While this may seem overdramatic when applied to the problem of restaurant noise, it would seem that it is time for the custom of passivity exhibited by restaurant patrons to be defied, and for the collective to establish a new understanding of the sonic rights of restaurant patrons. The problem also is that in many cases the magazines and newspapers that carry articles on popular culture do not have the space for detailed critical analysis of pop culture subjects. Readers want entertainment and tidbits. Perhaps internally they recognize that the usual subjects often *deserve* no more attention than that. Readers end up shortchanged as much as writers, and neither group attains the depth or perspective that they are capable of and deserve.

Restaurants are meeting places where people socialize; gathering places for the public. In terms of ownership, they can be seen as liminal spaces, not exactly public but not exactly private. Although some restaurants may be owned by a governmental or non-profit entity, they are primarily privately owned as for-profit businesses. As such, the owners have the right to conduct their business as they wish—within certain limitations. But do members of the public give up their rights when they enter a restaurant? Do “human rights” include “sonic rights?” Do we have the right to have a healthy and pleasant sonic environment, or are we at the mercy of whomever owns or controls the physical space? Governments already protect some rights in restaurants, such as health regulations, external noise control and, in many areas, non-smoking laws. The World Health Organization considers noise to be a “serious health hazard.”<sup>11</sup> It can damage hearing, cause increases in blood pressure, increase stress and fatigue, and reduce efficiency and productivity. A recent study in the US showed that prolonged exposure to loud noises could lead to a two to three-fold increased prevalence of angina pectoris, myocardial infarction, chronic heart disease, and isolated diastolic hypertension compared to people that work in quieter places. The results were particularly strong for young male current smokers. The definition of “loud” in this study was “noise so loud that you had to speak in a raised voice to be heard.”<sup>12</sup> That is a level that is very common in restaurants. We all have our own subjective levels of tolerance for sound, but in most cases the problems are denial and complacency. Denial because many people do not even know that their soundspace is polluted as they “turned it off” psychologically (or neurologically) long ago. Complacency because people do not recognize that they have “sonic rights,” by nature do not like to complain, and feel powerless to change policy in what they consider a private place, subject to the whims of the owner. Perhaps most importantly, they know that if they do not like

9 R. Watling, “Practical media work and the curriculum of the future,” *The Curriculum Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2 Summer 2001, p. 214-215

10 Ibid. p. 220

11 World Health Organization, “Occupational and community noise, face sheet #258”, *WHO Media Centre* at [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs258/en/](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs258/en/) on 28 December 2010

12 W. Gan, H. Davies and P. Demers, “Exposure to occupational noise and cardiovascular disease in the United States: the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 1999-2004” (2010), *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 5 October 2010

the sonic environment of a restaurant, they can simply not return, and go instead to another restaurant next time. The growing dilemma, however, is that the problem is systemic. More and more there are fewer and fewer restaurants that are free from this level of sonic pollution.

Restaurants also have a liminal quality in relation to their *function* in a community. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg proposed a category of public places that he called “Third Places.”<sup>13</sup> These are neither the home, nor the work place, but a *third* place that serves as a community gathering site. These typically include local bars or public houses, cafés or coffee shops, and even bowling alleys and beauty parlors—all places easily and inexpensively accessible. They are “hangouts” where residents of the area—usually a neighborhood—know that they are likely to run into friends and neighbors, perhaps at any time of day, perhaps at certain almost ritualistic times. While some restaurants may fall into the Third Place category, most of them—at least the more informal of them—reside on the edge of that category; a place where people may join a pre-established regular table—a *Stammtisch* as the Germans would call it—or may simply drop in with a friend or business colleague, but greet others who are also dining in the establishment. Certain restaurants tend to be popular with certain types of persons, such as one that favors politicians and lobbyists in a state capital, or another near a county courthouse that tends to attract lawyers. The important point is that restaurants are far more than a place to dine. They are essential ingredients to the social and business life of a community. Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore refer to Socrates' alleged quotation: “I have nothing to do with the trees of the field, I have to do only with the man of the city.”<sup>14</sup> Restaurants are meeting places for the man—and woman—of the city. This is why it is so important that a restaurant be a place that is conducive to cordial, comfortable conversation as well as to nourishing dining.

In much of Western society, thought is seldom given to the sonic space of a building and the sonic energy that will occupy it. Hiring an acoustic engineer before construction or renovation of a restaurant is often avoided in order to keep expenses down. As Steen Eiler Rasmussen emphasizes, “It is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it...You must experience the great difference acoustics makes in your conception of space: the way sound acts in an enormous cathedral, with its echoes and long-toned reverberations, as compared to a small paneled room well padded with hangings, rugs and cushions.”<sup>15</sup> The structure of a restaurant is critical to the atmosphere of the restaurant. The “cozier” it may be, the more conducive it is to social intercourse. Unfortunately, the current trend in restaurant design is toward the industrial, commonly built with hard floors, stone or concrete walls, hard and flat ceilings, and a great deal of stainless steel and other metallic surfaces. Carpeting is frequently non-existent, tables do not have tablecloths, chairs are not cushioned, and walls have few if any coverings, tapestries and other wall hangings being largely relics of another era. The current fad of “open kitchen” restaurants means also that the clanking of kitchen pans, the whirl of electric mixers and the shouts of kitchen staff can now permeate the dining area. It could easily be said that today's “fashionable” restaurant is anti-human. The result in many cases is a sound level that is not only annoying but unhealthy, particularly for its employees. The contemporary trendy restaurant has isolated itself from the community and renounced its function as a gatherer and nourisher of social energy.

There is a tendency of restaurant owners to believe that loud is good. Noise means energy, and the more energy the more customers. This may sometimes be true; certainly in the case of nightclubs. But there is a large downside to restaurant noise that owners need to take into account. There can be a

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13 R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press 1999)

14 K. Bloomer and C. Moore, *Body, Memory and Architecture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) p. 5

15 S.E. Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962), p. 33

negative effect on patrons, on staff, and ultimately, on the restaurant's profits. It is very possible to have a high energy room in which diners can still talk comfortably—even with music. Other forms of music can be used than Top 40 or even classical. For example, ambient music<sup>16</sup> (a term coined by Brian Eno), or generative music<sup>17</sup>, a genre pioneered by Eno.

Philip Kotler in his groundbreaking paper *Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool* (1973) quoted a restaurateur to say that “Customers seek a dining experience totally different from home, and the atmosphere probably does more to attract them than the food itself.”<sup>18</sup> That dining experience is part of popular culture, and over the years its quality has degraded. A restaurant's interior should be comforting, offering warmth and security. It should protect from the sounds of the urban world outside or, if in the countryside, serve as a bridge between the sheltered structure of nourishment and the beauty and life of nature. It should be a place of refuge, which one can enter to escape the heat of a summer's day or the chill of a winter's storm. A restaurant which offers only stainless steel, pre-programmed repetitive music and the clamor of shouts, bouncing voices and electrical appliances is not a refuge but is at best a brief shelter, only slightly preferable to the weather outside.

Frith and Savage close their article with, “It is time to reclaim pop from the populists: they have said much of nothing, but their chit-chat still poisons the air.”<sup>19</sup> I suggest that it is time to reclaim the dining experience from the noisemakers: they have contributed nothing to the quality of our lives, but their decibels still poison the air. It is the public's air, and the public deserves to once again recognize, reclaim and re-experience its value. It is essential that the academic community recognize that the food and restaurant culture is an integral part of the greater popular culture and worthy of serious study. It is time that historians, sociologists, musicologists and media and law experts join the currently engaged marketing and food experts to study this culture and its significant and essential ongoing contribution to civility, discourse and the psychic and physical health of the public.

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16 *Ambient Music Guide*, www.ambientmusicguide.com

17 *Generative Music*, www.generativemusic.com or *Intermorphic*, www.intermorphic.com

18 P. Kotler, "Atmospherics as a marketing tool," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 49, No. 4 Winter 1973-1974

19 Frith and Savage, op. cit. p. 17

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