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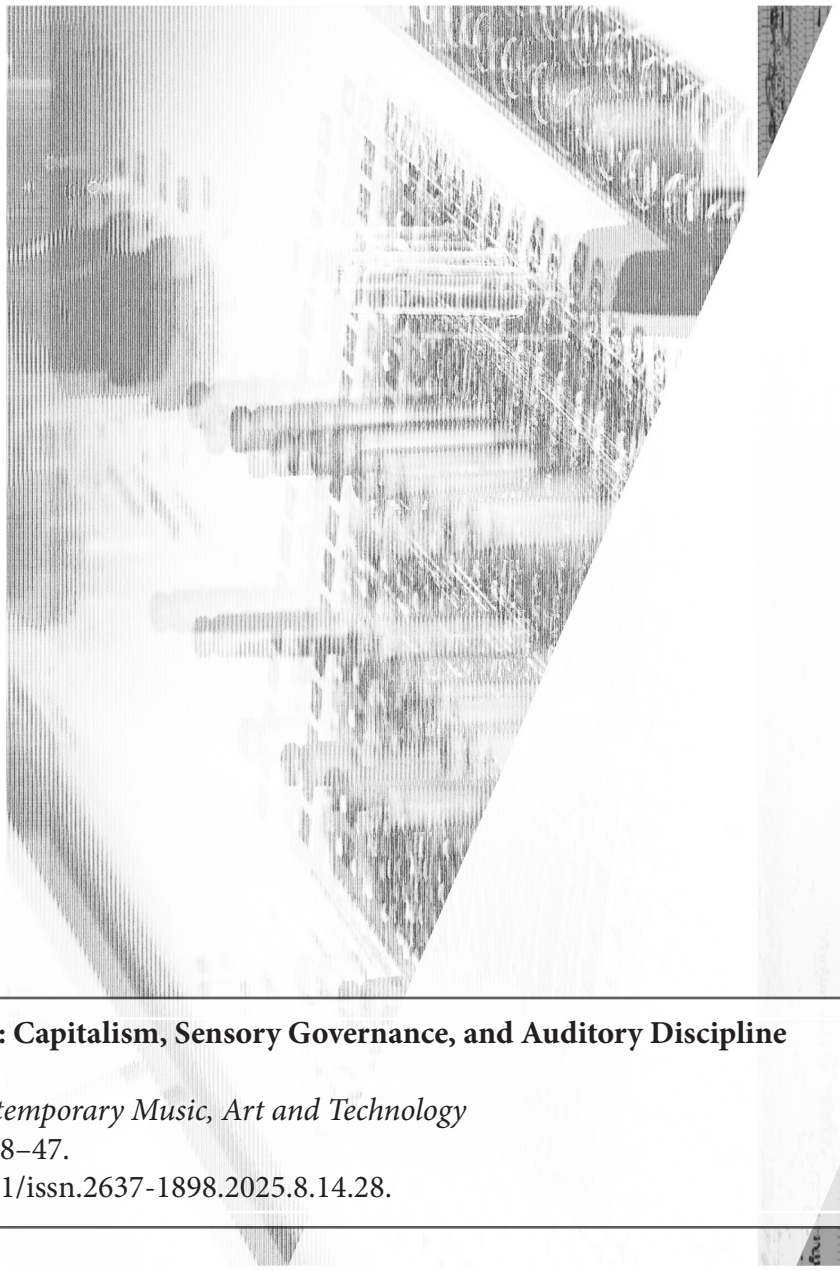
JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC. ART AND TECHNOLOGY



Policing the Listening: Capitalism, Sensory Governance, and Auditory Discipline

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INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology
No. 14, July 2025, pp. 28–47.
https://doi.org/10.51191/issn.2637-1898.2025.8.14.28.

DOI https://doi.org/10.51191/issn.2637-1898.2025.8.14.28

Original scientific paper
Article received: April 18, 2025
Article accepted: July 9, 2025

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POLICING THE LISTENING: CAPITALISM, SENSORY GOVERNANCE, AND AUDITORY DISCIPLINE[1]

Abstract: This article investigates the politics of listening in late capitalist societies, focusing on how auditory perception is shaped, regulated, and policed through spatial, technological, and affective regimes. Developing the concept of the policescape – a spatialized system of sonic governance – it examines how listening is disciplined in everyday life. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, the article outlines a postmusicological approach that shifts attention from musical objects to the politics of listening itself. Two key mechanisms of auditory discipline are analyzed: the public/private divide and what is termed *horror silentii*, or the fear of silence. These mechanisms enforce acoustic hierarchies, reinforce social boundaries, and suppress collective sensory presence. Central to this disciplinary regime is the fantasy of the auditory gated community – both as a physical structure and an aspirational fantasy of control – the neoliberal ideal of absolute control over one's sonic environment. Within this logic, unwanted sounds in private space are experienced not as mere disturbances, but as personal failures of sovereignty. Listening, I argue, is not a neutral sensory act but a political operation embedded in structures of power, rhythm, and exclusion.

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1 This study is the result of research done within the Institute of Musicology SASA, funded by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (RS-200176).

Keywords: listening, soundscape, rhythmanalysis, Henri Lefebvre, auditory discipline, sensory governance, *horror silentii*.

Introduction: Listening in the Policescape

This article is the first part of a two-fold research project that explores how listening is shaped, regulated, and policed within the broader landscape of late capitalist society.[2] It aims to demonstrate that listening is not a neutral or purely aesthetic activity, but a socially embedded and politically consequential practice – one that is increasingly subjected to forms of what I term *auditory discipline*. This discipline, operating through spatial segregation, technological mediation, and affective conditioning, is central to what I call the *policescape*: a system of sonic governance that structures everyday life by regulating the sensory field.

The article takes as its starting point the premise that *listening*, long considered marginal or secondary in political theory, is in fact crucial to the reproduction of capitalist power relations. In particular, listening practices are entangled with systems of spatial control, commodification of attention, and the privatization of perception. By shaping how, where, and to what we listen, auditory discipline contributes to the fragmentation of social experience and the suppression of collective auditory presence – what I will later call the *sonic commons*.

Grounded in a situated perspective shaped by post-globalization and peripheral urban experience, this study uses rhythmanalysis as both a methodological and epistemological framework. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concept of rhythm as the patterned organization of time, space, and energy, I propose a form of *postmusicology* that moves beyond the disciplinary confines of musicological analysis. Rather than centering music as an autonomous object, this approach centers listening as a critical lens for understanding capitalist modernity, urban transformation, and the political organization of everyday life.

2 The second article, titled "Listening Against: Sonic Commons and Radical Amateurism as Practices of Resistance," will build on this critique by shifting focus to practices of opposition and collective reappropriation of sound. There, I explore how destabilized and expressive forms of listening, together with modes of amateur sound production, offer a blueprint for resisting auditory discipline and reimagining the politics of listening from below.
Together, these two articles advance a conceptual and political framework for understanding the sensory logic of late capitalism and the possibilities of listening as a form of struggle.

This first article lays the critical groundwork by identifying and analyzing two dominant mechanisms of auditory discipline: the *public/private divide* in listening, and the phenomenon of *horror silentii* – a pervasive fear of silence that animates capitalist sonic culture. These mechanisms, I argue, not only condition listening habits but also suppress the emergence of the sonic commons, understood as shared auditory space open to collective attentiveness and mutual recognition.

This article builds upon my earlier explorations of rhythmanalysis and sonic governance, particularly those developed in the context of soundscape studies and post-Yugoslav political space. In previous work, I have analyzed how urban acoustic regimes operate as affective and spatial technologies of control (Atanasovski 2016), and how listening intersects with political subjectivity and resistance (Hofman and Atanasovski 2022). The present study brings these trajectories into a consolidated theoretical framework by introducing the concept of *auditory discipline* – a term that captures the way listening is shaped, modulated, and governed across sensory, spatial, and ideological registers. Rather than simply extending prior arguments, this article reframes them around a new conceptual lens that foregrounds listening not merely as a culturally or politically inflected activity, but as a site of disciplinary power. In doing so, it also sketches the contours of what I propose as *postmusicology* – a methodological turn toward listening as embodied, situated, and rhythmically structured practice. Both of these concepts – *auditory discipline* and *postmusicology* – are offered here as points of departure for a broader theoretical project on sonic governance and resistance.

Methodology: Rhythmanalysis and Postmusicology

Why Lefebvre?

Henri Lefebvre appears, perhaps ironically, as a thinker profoundly out of joint with his time (cf. Atanasovski 2016a). Operating at the intersections of Marxism, philosophy, and the critique of everyday life, Lefebvre never fully belonged to either the modernist orthodoxy or the postmodernist turn. This marginal position is precisely what makes his thought productive for the present. Lefebvre's theoretical work was never about the invention of new systems or the

staking of epistemic territory; it was about inhabiting contradiction, performing critique through conceptual displacements, and thinking from within the materiality of the world (Elden 2004, vii; Lefebvre 1991). In this spirit, Lefebvre proposed a science of space, a science of rhythm, and ultimately a form of theory inseparable from life. He did not write about everyday life – he wrote from it, listening not only to the sounds of the city but to the silences, murmurs, and repetitions that compose its secret scaffolding. Rhythm, in his hands, becomes something more than a temporal category: it is the vehicle through which the social becomes flesh, the everyday becomes legible, and critique becomes sensuous (Lefebvre 2004, 15–18). My interest in Lefebvre begins here – with the conviction that the analysis of sound, space, and listening cannot be reduced to technical procedures or representational logics. It must begin with the body, extend into the spatial, and return to the political. It must resist the fetishism of meaning and instead attend to the brute materiality of rhythm. It must, as Lefebvre insists, take seriously the possibility that to listen to a street, a house, or a city is no less legitimate than to listen to a symphony. That listening, too, is thinking (Lefebvre 2004, 27).

Rhythmanalysis as Situated Listening

Lefebvre's *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (1992) offers a singular approach to analysis: not a model to be applied, but a practice to be inhabited.[3] The rhythmanalyst does not interpret from afar; she listens with her body. Her ear is not attuned to meaning, but to pattern, cadence, return, interruption. She registers rhythms not as signs but as forces – temporal dispositions inscribed into space, the city, infrastructure, labor, the home, the breath. She does not decode; she resonates (Lefebvre 2004, 20–21). In this, rhythmanalysis is resolutely practical. As Lefebvre writes, "he listens – and first to his body; he learns rhythm from it, in order consequently to appreciate external rhythms" (Lefebvre 2004, 19). The

3 Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis and spatial theory have been taken up most extensively in the fields of architecture, urban studies, and critical geography, where they have informed analyses of spatial production, bodily regulation, and infrastructural governance. As Łukasz Stanek has demonstrated, these concepts emerged not as abstract philosophy but through Lefebvre's direct engagement with postwar architectural modernism and state-led urban research in France (Stanek 2011). While this interdisciplinary reception has been generative, it is notable that musicology has been comparatively slow to incorporate rhythmanalysis – despite its explicitly sonic vocabulary and clear relevance for embodied listening. This work seeks to address that gap.

body serves as a metronome – not metaphorically, but materially. The rhythmanalyst thinks with the body, not in abstraction, but in lived temporality.

Rhythm, crucially, is not synonymous with movement. Movement can be mechanical; rhythm is measured. Rhythm presupposes measure – the social inscription of repetition. Everywhere there is rhythm, there is law, norm, calculation, expectation. Rhythm is the medium through which capitalist modernity regulates the everyday, disguising obligation as flow, discipline as cadence. And yet, it is precisely through rhythm that interruption becomes possible. The same rhythmic structures that subjugate can be turned, twisted, broken, held too long (Lefebvre 2004, 15–16). This double valence – of control and subversion – is what makes rhythmanalysis politically charged. It reveals not only the structure of time, but its excess. As Lefebvre remarks: "Rhythms. They reveal and they hide." To listen rhythmically is to perceive both the law and its failure. To hear not only the beat but the silence that surrounds it (Lefebvre 2004, 20).

Toward Postmusicology

This attention to rhythm, materiality, and the lived grounds a methodological shift I describe as postmusicology. Unlike the critical musicology of the late twentieth century, which aimed to expand the canon and politicize musical meaning, postmusicology turns away from the musical object entirely. It refuses to privilege the work, the score, the composer, the performance. Instead, it begins with listening – as embodied, spatial, situated practice. Not listening to music, but listening as method (Voegelin 2010, 12). Soundscape studies, with their ecological orientation, have gestured toward this turn. But as I have argued elsewhere, the institutionalization of soundscape research has produced what might be called a conservationist paradigm – one that captures sound as heritage, fixes it in place, and distances the listener through technologies of mediation (Atanasovski 2016a; cf. LaBelle 2010). Rhythmanalysis offers a different approach: it insists on presence, on lived duration, on non-mediated listening as a way of inhabiting the social (Sterne 2003, 217–224). Here, the body becomes the site of knowledge – not as an object to be examined, but as an instrument of inquiry. Listening becomes political not because of what it hears, but because of how it listens. Postmusicology thus does not seek to repair musicology's blind spots. It seeks to desert its terrain. It imagines a musicology not bound to music, but to rhythm, body, and space. It turns from the score to the street, from the

symphony to the threshold, from the institution to the common. In doing so, it reclaims listening as a form of life, a technique of resistance, a way of making the world felt otherwise.[4]

The conceptual turn toward postmusicology cannot be understood outside the broader disciplinary crisis that musicology has faced since the late twentieth century. As several authors have noted, the field has undergone a process of epistemic omnivorism – adopting concepts and methods from anthropology, cultural studies, media theory, and philosophy (Kerman 1985; Born 2010; Atanasovski 2024). This interdisciplinary expansion has contributed to the fragmentation of musicology's identity and raised persistent questions about its central object, methods, and institutional role. In many post-socialist contexts, this crisis was sharpened by the delayed confrontation with questions of ideology, mediation, and materiality in musical research.

Against this background, postmusicology – as proposed here – does not reject the field, but reorients its foundations. Rather than organizing itself around a privileged object such as the musical work, it begins with listening: not as passive reception, but as situated, rhythmic, and political engagement. Postmusicology focuses on how sound functions within regimes of power, how bodies are disciplined through auditory norms, and how space itself is produced sonically. It argues that listening to an airport concourse, a protest, or a gated community may yield insights as musically and politically significant as listening to a symphony. In this way, postmusicology seeks to reclaim the politics of the audible and reimagine musicology as a mode of situated critique.

4 While this study privileges a rhythmanalytical and postmusicological perspective, it does so in dialogue with a growing body of research that approaches sound as an infrastructural and political phenomenon. Scholars such as Karin Bijsterveld (2008), Jennifer Stoever (2016), and Gascia Ouzounian (2021) have shown how auditory regimes emerge from historically situated practices of exclusion, spatial control, and institutional mediation. Bijsterveld's work on noise abatement in modern Europe, Stoever's analysis of the sonic color line in American racial politics, and Ouzounian's investigations into urban acoustic planning all demonstrate that listening is a deeply stratified, power-laden activity, one shaped as much by social policy as by cultural codes. This project shares their premise – that listening is never neutral – but differs in its methodological trajectory. Instead of tracing specific histories of sound regulation, it proposes rhythmanalysis as a way to grasp the spatial and affective textures through which auditory discipline operates.

The Public/Private Divide and the Policing of Attention

The division between public and private is not merely a spatial distinction – it is a sensory regime, a political rhythm, and a neoliberal fantasy. The fantasy takes shape in the figure of the *gated community*, not only as a form of physical enclosure, but as an aspirational structure of feeling. In late capitalism, the individual subject is judged by their ability to establish and maintain absolute sovereignty over their private environment, especially its sonic dimensions. To be a successful subject is to hear only what one chooses, and to exclude all else. The gated community thus becomes the auratic emblem of neoliberal maturity: a space of isolation presented as autonomy, of enclosure masquerading as freedom. Its auditory equivalent is the private home – or more precisely, the idealized, acoustically sealed unit. Within it, every intrusive sound from the outside – neighbors' footsteps, a distant siren, a barking dog – is not merely an irritant. It is an existential wound, a reminder of failure to maintain auditory sovereignty, and thus of one's shortfall as a neoliberal subject.[5]

The gated auditory space is not merely a metaphor for individualized control over sonic experience – it is a material aspiration encoded into everyday consumer choices. Soundproofing becomes a marker of class: to dwell in acoustic privacy is to live in structures built with superior windows, thicker walls, and sound-dampening materials. Cars marketed as "quiet rides," apartments boasting "double-glazed silence," and household investments in white-noise machines or noise-canceling headphones all reflect the same desire: to filter out the sonic presence of others. Listening to the urban outside – neighbors, traffic, street life – is increasingly framed not only as an inconvenience but as a failure of personal advancement. In this logic, unwanted sound becomes a symptom of economic precarity, while auditory isolation becomes a performance of self-sufficiency and neoliberal success. This framework, however, contains a contradiction: the

5 This logic mirrors what urban scholars have documented in the design and ideology of actual gated communities, which promise not only physical safety but the fantasy of complete self-sufficiency and detachment from collective life. As Setha Low argues, gated communities are not only about crime prevention; they are affective infrastructures that "manufacture the illusion of personal autonomy and control over the environment" (Low 2003, 13). The dream of the gated community is not simply to be safe – but to be uninterrupted. In the auditory realm, this becomes the fantasy of perfectly curated sound, untainted by the presence of others.

very processes that enable the expansion of quiet, gated soundscapes – urban redevelopment, new construction, infrastructure growth – are themselves sources of intense and prolonged noise. Construction sites, with their relentless sonic violence, interrupt the fantasy of sonic autonomy, even as they promise to extend it. This paradox becomes most apparent in moments where construction sites publicly "apologize" for the noise, posting preemptive signs that acknowledge and legitimize the sonic anxiety of neighbors (see Figure 1). Such gestures recognize the validity of the auditory discomfort, while asking for its temporary suspension.

Figure 1. Residential development in Belgrade, July 2025.

In contrast, those same sounds encountered in public space rarely provoke the same affective reaction. Why? Because public space does not promise sovereignty; it demands exposure. The sonic presence of others is anticipated, tolerated, or ignored. But once those sounds transgress the membrane of private space, they are experienced as betrayal. As Peter Szendy argues, the neoliberal subject is not simply an ear but an *eardrum of property*: the threshold of hearing becomes the threshold of ownership and control (Szendy 2008).

This sensory bifurcation is enforced and aestheticized by technologies of auditory enclosure: noise-cancelling headphones, soundproofed architecture, and increasingly, urban planning that manages sonic flows alongside pedestrian ones (Thompson 2002). As Michael Bull has shown in his study of personal stereos, such technologies do not only shield the individual from urban noise – they constitute micro-utopias of self-management (Bull 2000). They transform listening into a private, portable activity, divorced from the contingencies of public life.

This transformation of listening is mirrored in architectural practice, where sound has historically been treated as a problem to be eliminated rather than a dimension to be engaged. Modernist design has long privileged visual clarity and spatial transparency, while relegating acoustics to a subordinate technical concern – managed through insulation, absorption, and silencing, rather than treated as an integral part of spatial experience (Lahiji and Friedman 1997). The result is a built environment that encourages auditory passivity, where silence is designed, rather than discovered, and where sound appears only in its most functional or aestheticized forms. In this context, architecture becomes complicit in the production of auditory enclosure: not simply by blocking external noise, but by scripting sonic experience according to principles of control, efficiency, and containment. Walls, corridors, and ceilings are not neutral structures – they are acoustic interfaces that shape the rhythm and direction of listening. The contemporary subject thus moves not only through spatial partitions, but through carefully engineered auditory thresholds, designed to secure the comfort of the individual while minimizing the unpredictability of shared sonic space.

Auditory Discipline: Definition and Analytical Scope

The concept of auditory discipline refers to the systematic shaping of listening practices through spatial, technological, and social mechanisms that normalize how we hear and how we are expected to relate to sound. Building upon the Foucauldian notion of discipline as a form of micro-power that operates through the body, auditory discipline encompasses both the overt and subtle ways in which sound and listening are regulated in late capitalist societies.

It manifests in at least three interrelated domains:

1. Spatial organization of listening – The separation between public and private spaces enforces distinct auditory behaviors: disinterested inatten-

tiveness in public, and total control in private. These normalized modes suppress the emergence of sonic commons by foreclosing shared or collective auditory experience.

2. Technological mediation – Devices such as noise-cancelling headphones, soundproofing architecture, and close-miking techniques promote an individualized and controlled listening environment. Such technologies not only isolate the listener from the surrounding world but also internalize discipline by reinforcing sonic detachment as a desirable state.
3. Affective and aesthetic regimes – The pervasive fear of silence (*horror silentii*) in everyday life encourages the continuous presence of commodified or ornamental sound (e.g., background music), which reduces the auditory space to a backdrop for consumption. These regimes aestheticize and depoliticize sound, neutralizing its potential to disturb, interrupt, or politicize the listener.

Rather than being a neutral sensory act, *listening is a mode of inhabiting the political space* – a situated, bodily practice through which subjects are attuned to regimes of power. In this context, auditory discipline operates not by silencing, but by modulating attention: training individuals to hear selectively, disengage emotionally, and remain acoustically passive. In this sense, auditory discipline is a key mechanism of the *policescape*: the urban soundscape not as background, but as a tool of everyday governance, shaping what can be heard, how it is heard, and what remains unheard.

This politics of listening is further complicated by the ways in which sound is culturally and morally coded. As Marie Thompson (2014) argues, the very category of "unwanted sound" is not a neutral descriptor of volume or frequency, but a politically charged decision that reflects affective hierarchies and normative anxieties. Noise, in this view, is not just what disturbs – it is what does not belong. It is that which exceeds the sonic expectations of a given social order, often marked by class, race, or behavioral codes. Through this aesthetic moralism, certain sounds are designated as disruptive not because of their acoustic properties, but because of the threat they pose to imagined social coherence. Auditory discipline thus does not operate only through spatial or technological means; it also functions through moral economies of sound – where peace, civility, and clarity are associated with control, and noise with danger, excess, and contagion.

In this moralized soundscape, listening becomes a form of social sorting, and silence a reward for compliance.

Listening in Closeness and the Aesthetics of Sonic Insulation

One of the dominant auditory aesthetics of our time is *closeness* – the experience of hearing a voice, breath, or gesture as if it were located just next to the ear. This aesthetic, shaped by techniques such as close-miking,[6] compression, and stereo separation, creates a feeling of intimacy. But this intimacy is, in fact, engineered. What we perceive as closeness is often the result of technological insulation – removal of background, space, and context. In this way, the aesthetic of closeness parallels the broader tendency toward sonic isolation in everyday life. The listener is not immersed in a shared soundscape but protected from it. The world is filtered out. As Jonathan Sterne has noted, modern sound reproduction is built on the ideal of clarity, which depends on removing noise, distance, and reverberation (Sterne 2003, 217–224). The result is a highly selective listening environment that privileges the "pure" signal over its surroundings.

This preference for clarity is not neutral. It is connected to larger cultural values: control, precision, self-containment. The aesthetics of high-fidelity sound, quiet interiors, and focused attention all feed into the idea of the rational, self-directed subject. In this way, aesthetic choices reinforce forms of auditory discipline. To listen in this way is to learn what deserves attention and what does not. It is to internalize a hierarchy of sounds: central vs. peripheral, meaningful vs. ambient, private vs. shared.

This hierarchical logic pervades musical production and media design alike. Podcasts are produced to simulate the feeling of one-on-one conversation, even when broadcast to thousands. Audiobooks, ASMR recordings, and singer-songwriter ballads all rely on the same technique: remove the space between source and listener, eliminate environmental noise, and create the illusion of proximity (Kane 2014, 25–42).[2] But this is not proximity in the political sense – it is managed affect, a simulation of relationship that bypasses the social. Such listening

6 Close-miking is a recording technique in which a microphone is placed very near to the sound source – often just a few centimeters away. This practice minimizes the capture of ambient sound and reverberation, resulting in a highly focused, detailed, and intimate audio signal. Originally developed in studio recording to isolate instruments or voices in multitrack setups, close-miking has become a dominant aesthetic in contemporary audio production, from music to podcasts to ASMR content.

may feel intimate, but it is structurally isolating. What is left out – room tone, distant voices, ambient activity – is what connects the listener to the world. By filtering it away, sonic insulation discourages engagement with collective auditory space. It reaffirms the logic of enclosure: you hear what you are meant to hear, and you hear it alone.

There is also a temporal aspect to this aesthetic. Insulated listening is often immediate and compressed, optimized for short attention spans and individual consumption (Cox 2009, 19–26). In contrast, listening that includes noise, space, and delay requires patience. It slows down perception and opens space for ambiguity. In that sense, it carries a different political potential: not to deliver content efficiently, but to disrupt habits of attention.

Sonic Ignorance and the Habit of Not Listening

Modern urban life trains us not only in what to hear, but also in what to *ignore*. This learned inattention is not a personal failure or sensory fatigue – it is part of the auditory discipline that structures contemporary subjectivity. To live in the city is to be immersed in sound and yet to move through it without listening. Sirens, traffic, background music, automated announcements – all these sounds form a continuous auditory backdrop that we are expected to register, but not engage. It is a trained habit, a socially constructed form of non-listening. As Barry Truax notes, the human auditory system is capable of focusing attention on particular sounds while relegating others to the background (Truax 2001, 18–24). But what is heard and what is ignored is not merely a matter of biology – it is mediated by culture, architecture, technology, and ideology. Urban design contributes to this pattern. Public address systems, security alarms, ambient music in commercial zones – all rely on predictable auditory codes (Voegelin 2010, 42–45). These sounds are intended to signal compliance, orientation, or consumption. They are not meant to be questioned. Over time, they recede into the category of the unremarkable. The more often we hear them, the more they disappear.

This is the rhythm of regulated inattention. It organizes our experience of space without requiring active thought. Peter Szendy (2008, 31–38) describes this condition as one in which we do not possess our hearing – we are possessed by it. We become conduits for auditory information that structures our behavior without ever becoming fully present in our consciousness.

Crucially, not all sounds are equally eligible for ignorance. Some are coded as ignorable, others as attention-worthy. Muzak in elevators can be tuned out. An unexpected cough in a concert hall cannot. This reveals that not-listening is itself a hierarchical process. What is allowed to disappear and what must be heard reflects deeper social and political arrangements. These arrangements also work through repetition. Lefebvre (2004, 15–21) emphasizes that rhythm always includes repetition with variation. Repeated auditory patterns become environments unto themselves. Over time, we no longer hear the announcement on the train or the beep of a scanner at the store. Their function is fulfilled not by being noticed, but by being *there*. Their power lies in their banality (ibid., 38–43).

Yet, the very banality of these sounds makes them effective tools of governance. They remind us, subtly and rhythmically, of where we are and how we should behave. In that sense, sonic ignorance is not passive – it is regulated. It is part of what Lefebvre calls *dressage*: the training of the body to move, feel, and respond in predictable ways (Lefebvre 2004, 38–43). Listening, in this regime, is not encouraged. What is encouraged is acoustic compliance.

Understanding these patterns of non-listening is essential. Before we can ask how to listen differently, we must first understand how we have been taught *not* to listen.

***Horror silentii*: Capitalism's Fear of Silence**

In the sonic regime of late capitalism, silence is not simply the absence of sound – it is a structural threat. Silence suspends the rhythm of productivity, interrupts the circulation of meaning, and creates an opening for unpredictability. In a system built on regulation, flow, and the monetization of attention, silence is a void that demands to be filled. Its persistence feels intolerable, even dangerous.

I name this condition *horror silentii* – the fear of silence. Not merely psychological discomfort, this fear is embedded in the organization of space, time, and consumption. The everyday is saturated with background music, automated announcements, and ambient sound precisely so that silence cannot emerge. These sonic layers create an auditory buffer zone against stillness, holding the listener within a regime of managed perception.

This logic aligns with what William Bogard (2000) has theorized as the operation of "smoothing machines" – systems designed not to prohibit or repress,

but to regulate perception and behavior by eliminating discontinuity, unpredictability, and interruption. In his account, contemporary governance functions increasingly through processes of anticipatory modulation: instead of responding to disruption, these systems preempt it by engineering environments that are smooth, rhythmic, and frictionless. Applied to auditory life, this means that sound is not only curated – it is calculated, smoothed, and continuously adjusted to maintain affective equilibrium.

This horror of silence is especially visible in *threshold spaces* – airports, malls, corridors, hotel lobbies – zones of transition where people are not expected to dwell, but to move, consume, or comply (cf. Augé, 1995, 34–37). These zones mediate between public and private, mobility and stasis, anonymity and identification. These are the spaces where silence might otherwise arise: moments between activities, between decisions, between identities. But capitalism fears the threshold, because it carries the risk of ambiguity. To neutralize that risk, it fills these spaces with *designed soundscapes* – curated playlists, instrumental loops, tonal branding.[7] Music here functions not as art, but as temporal infrastructure (cf. Sterne 1997). Like the rhythmic churning of factory machines in an earlier industrial era, background music gives pace and direction to circulation. It keeps the body moving, the mood stable, the purpose clear. As Theodor Adorno (2002) observed in his critique of Muzak, such sound is not meant to be listened to – it is meant to listen for us: to pre-empt restlessness, to substitute presence with function.

Importantly, the fear of silence is not just institutional – it is also internalized. Many people report unease when in a quiet room, on a silent street, or in a car without music. This unease is not innate; it is learned. It reflects an auditory dependency shaped by continuous exposure to structured sound. As Salomé Voegelin (2010, 14–18) writes, silence invites the listener to hear themselves – to confront their body, breath, and interiority – and this can be deeply destabilizing. The commodified listener is trained to avoid that confrontation.

7 Airports, for instance, exemplify this logic to an extreme. They are transitional spaces par excellence: sites of surveillance and circulation, commerce and displacement. Their architectural and auditory design is aimed at suppressing uncertainty and enforcing behavior through predictable sonic cues – boarding music, PA announcements, ambient loops, and branding sound logos. In my study of the Belgrade and Vienna airports, the recent renovations of these spaces included not only infrastructural overhauls but also the introduction of curated sonic environments that match the national branding strategies of their flagship airlines (Air Serbia and Austrian Airlines; Atanasovski 2016b).

One can illustrate the logic of *horror silentii* by analyzing the placement of speakers in contemporary built environments. Just like CCTV cameras, speakers are installed at thresholds, corners, ceilings, and transitional zones – spaces where flows of bodies converge or shift. Both devices occupy the same topography of control: elevated, peripheral, omnipresent. Cameras monitor behavior; speakers modulate it. One sees, the other speaks – but both function as infrastructural tools of behavioral management, becoming infrastructurally interchangeable. This convergence is not accidental: it reflects a deeper fusion of audio-visual governance in everyday space, where the line between watching and commanding, seeing and sounding, blurs. Both technologies are not merely about presence – they are about regulation through presence.

In cafés, bars, and shops, speakers are often placed not at the center of activity but at the thresholds: above doorways, near windows, or directed outward toward the street (see Figures 2 a–b). This edge-positioning extends the auditory perimeter of the locale, colonizing the liminal zone between public and private and effectively projecting a curated sonic identity beyond the walls. Similarly, in residential buildings or office complexes, background sound – often in the form of soft music or artificial ambiance – is introduced into hallways, stairwells, and other in-between zones. These are not places where people dwell, but where they pass through, wait, or transition. In such spaces, silence is treated as a threat – a potential site of discomfort, hesitation, or reflection (see Figure 3).

In this sense, *horror silentii* is not a fear of a lack of sound, but a lack of command. It is the moment when the discipline of attention fails, when rhythm becomes uncertain, when perception is no longer guided. In silence, listening becomes open-ended, and with it, thought becomes uncertain. The subject may begin to listen in a way that is no longer useful to the system. The *policescape*, in its sonic form, is built precisely to prevent this. It fills space in advance of need. It anticipates silence as a failure and compensates with repetition. The logic is preventative: if every space is already speaking, the subject will not begin to hear otherwise (cf. LaBelle 2010). Understanding *horror silentii* allows us to recognize not only the presence of sound, but its function: to foreclose silence as a space of interruption, and thereby to foreclose the possibility of an alternative temporality, one not ruled by productivity, efficiency, or consumption.

Figure 2 a–b. Central Belgrade, July 2025.

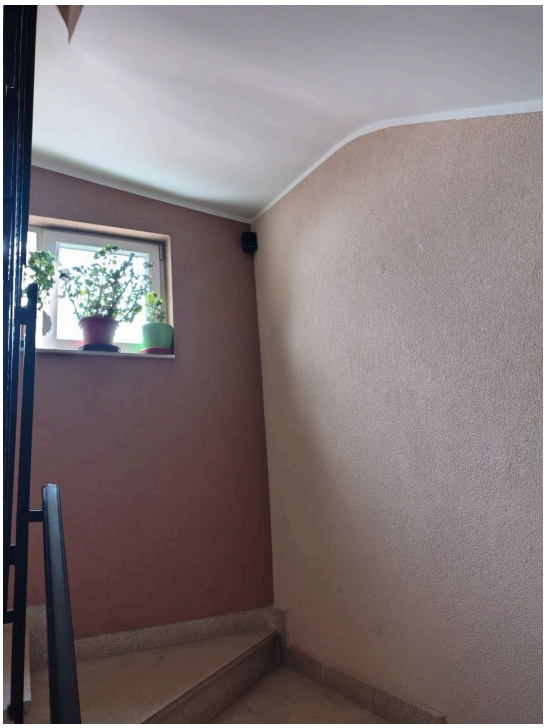

Figure 3. Residential building hallway in Belgrade, July 2025.

Conclusion: Listening, Discipline, and the Sonic Policescape

In this article I have argued that listening in late capitalist societies is not a neutral, individual act, but a deeply structured and socially disciplined practice. Through spatial segregation, technological mediation, affective habituation, and sonic saturation, auditory discipline functions as a subtle but pervasive form of governance. Listening becomes a regulated activity – split between public and private modes, enclosed by design, and shaped by cultural expectations of what should be heard and what must be ignored.

In particular, we have seen how the logic of the *gated community* extends into the auditory realm, producing a fantasy of self-containment and control over one's acoustic environment. This fantasy is sustained not only by architecture and technology, but by affective structures: annoyance at unwanted sound, comfort in familiar musical codes, and unease in the presence of silence. The individual subject is trained to seek acoustic sovereignty and to interpret any sonic intrusion as a failure of autonomy.

But as we have also seen, the policing of listening does not depend on loud prohibitions – it works through rhythm, repetition, and banality. From Muzak in liminal spaces to directional speakers in commercial thresholds, the sonic policescape anticipates silence as a threat and neutralizes it in advance. The subject is enveloped in sound, but alienated from listening. Hearing becomes passive, patterned, and depoliticized.

Yet precisely in the mapping of these mechanisms lies the potential for rethinking auditory life. To understand the disciplining of listening is to open space for its reactivation. If the ear has been trained to filter, ignore, and obey, it can also be retrained – to linger, to attend, to disobey. But that is the subject of another text.

In the second part of this project, titled "Listening Against: Sonic Commons and Radical Amateurism as Practices of Resistance," I will turn to the practices, gestures, and strategies through which listening can be reclaimed – not as a return to purity or authenticity, but as a collective, situated, and open-ended political practice. There, the focus will shift from critique to proposition, from analysis of discipline to exploration of possibility. For now, this text has traced the contours of the sonic policescape. It has shown that to listen today is to

inhabit a field of forces – not simply acoustic, but social, spatial, and affective. Recognizing that field is the first step in transforming it.

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SLUŠANJE POD NADZOROM: KAPITALIZAM, SENZORNO UPRAVLJANJE I AUDITIVNA DISCIPLINA

(rezime)

U ovom radu istražujem politike slušanja u uslovima poznog kapitalizma, sa fokusom na načine na koje se auditivna percepcija oblikuje, reguliše i disciplinuje kroz prostorne, tehnološke i afektivne režime. U središtu analize nalazi se koncept „zvučni pejzaž upravljanja" (*policescape*) – prostorno utemeljenog sistema zvučnog upravljanja koji kroz svakodnevne slušne prakse proizvodi subjekte podesne za reprodukciju kapitalističkog poretka. U metodološkom pogledu, rad razvija postmuzikološki pristup koji, umesto da se bavi muzičkim objektima u užem smislu, stavlja slušanje samo po sebi u središte analize. Ovaj pristup se zasniva na kasnoj misli Anrija Lefevra i njegovom konceptu analize ritma, koji omogućava razumevanje ritma kao materijalne i društvene sile koja povezuje telo, prostor i svakodnevni život. U tekstu se razmatraju dva ključna mehanizma auditivne discipline. Prvi je zvučna podela između javnog i privatnog, koja ne samo da strukturira prostorne odnose već i propisuje različite režime slušanja – ignorisanje u javnom prostoru, i potpuna kontrola u privatnom. Drugi je fenomen koji nazivam „horror silentii" – strah od tišine koji prožima savremene urbane prostore, naročito prelazne i potrošačke zone, i koji se rešava neprekidnim ozvučavanjem ambijenta kroz unapred programirane sadržaje. Središnji aspekt ove auditivne normalizacije je fantazija „zvučne ograđene zajednice" (auditory gated community) – neoliberalni ideal po kojem je subjekt uspešan onoliko koliko uspeva da uspostavi apsolutnu kontrolu nad sopstvenim zvučnim okruženjem. U tom okviru, svaki zvuk koji prodre u privatni prostor ne doživljava se samo kao smetnja, već kao znak neuspeha da se održi lična suverenost. Rad pokazuje da slušanje nije pasivna čulna aktivnost, već politički čin utemeljen u strukturama moći, ideologije i prostorne kontrole. Uspostavljanjem pojma zvučni pejzaž upravljanja i auditivne discipline, otvara se prostor za kritičko promišljanje svakodnevnih zvučnih režima i njihovog uticaja na subjektivitet, telo i društvenu imaginaciju.