


ORIGINAL ARTICLE – DOSSIER “NEW SOUND ECOLOGIES”

# A Market of Noises and Sounds for Wellbeing (MONSWELL)

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**Resumo:** Este artigo faz a conjectura de um mercado emergente na paisagem comunicacional e aural contemporânea, um Mercado de Ruídos e Sons para o Bem-Estar (MERSBE). Tal mercado seria caracterizado por produtos ruidosos com sonoridades singulares que visam a diferentes formas de bem-estar: de melhoria física e psíquica, como o aprimoramento da memória, da concentração, da qualidade do sono, ao foco em atividades de estudo e trabalho, além de diversas formas de prazer, como os “orgasmos cerebrais”, relatados por consumidores de ASMR. A emergência do MERSBE revelaria, ainda, como a cultura contemporânea se abre para novos modos de relacionamento com aquilo que, outrora, a teoria da comunicação condenou como sua parte espúria: os ruídos. Passando de uma posição provocativa – como era o caso no Manifesto Futurista de Russolo, na Música Concreta e na *noise music* – e chegando à comoditização em mercado sônico global, os ruídos estão sendo docilizados como experiências terapêuticas.

**Palavras-Chaves:** MERSBE, Escuta, Ruídos.

**Abstract:** This article explores the conjecture of an emerging market within the contemporary communicational and aural landscape, termed the Market for Noise and Sound for Well-Being (MONSWELL). This market is characterized by noisy products aimed at various forms of well-being: from physical and psychological improvements such as enhanced memory, concentration, and sleep quality to focusing on study and work activities and various forms of pleasure, including “brain orgasms” related to ASMR. The emergence of MONSWELL also illustrates how contemporary culture is developing new engagements with what was once condemned by communication theory as spurious: noise. Transitioning from a provocative stance—as exemplified by Russolo's Futurist Manifesto, *Musique Concrète*, and noise music — noise is now being commodified in a global sonic market and domesticated into positive and therapeutic experiences. This shift redefines the cultural and economic value of noise and challenges preconceived notions of auditory aesthetics and well-being in the digital age.

**Keywords:** MONSWELL, Listening, Noises

A beige teddy sheep, measuring around 20 centimetres, is sold in the market of products for babies with a curious purpose: beyond the ludic and decorative object it seems to be, its body contains a small sound system, made of tiny speakers, a button for turning the device on and off, another one for adjusting the volume and four other buttons which, when pressed, reproduce different sonic ambiances that evoke whales communicating, rain, sea waves and a dawn in the woods (with birds whistling and a river burbling). There is also a timer button for setting the desired duration of the soundtrack – 25 or 45 minutes. In addition, the little sheep – which can be found in *online* stores by the name *Sleep Sheep* – has two Velcro straps on its body so that it can be connected to the outer part of a baby’s cradle. Once it is turned on, its main purpose is revealed: putting the baby to sleep and keeping the sleep quality. The marketing text states that “With eight soothing sounds and adjustable volume, at the touch of a button your baby will be nodding off in no time at all!” (Cloud.b, 2024).

A quick Google or YouTube search allows us to conclude that the sheep is not alone. Along with little tigers, owls, turtles, bears and other cute animals, it is part of a market that announces various kinds of noises and sounds destined to guarantee a child’s sleep quality. If we dive deeper into this universe, an infinite number of sonic products can be found which are aimed at the promotion of wellbeing, stretching far beyond the aforementioned issues of sleep quality and children’s ludic interests. There are auditory prescriptions for memory improvement, concentration, creativity, physical and mental relaxation, for the liberation of endorphin, dopamine and serotonin (which are considered to be the “hormones for happiness”), for learning amelioration, for the improvement of the immunosuppressive system, for healing the body and soul and even for having “brain orgasms”, among many other purposes, all committed to personal wellbeing.

Considering the sheer quantity of products offered – around tens of millions within just one video-sharing website (YouTube)<sup>1</sup> –, a claim can be made that a new class of sonic commodity is on the rise in contemporary aural culture. Now, beyond music, soundtracks and sound design for audiovisual and videogames, beyond sound branding, jingles and sounds which regulate relations between humans and machines, singular noises start to emerge as new communicational phenomena

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<sup>1</sup> The order of magnitude expressed here was obtained from searches on YouTube using keywords such as: 'sounds + well-being'; 'noises + well-being'; 'sounds for well-being'; 'noises for well-being'.

whose significations and values are still to be understood.

This article takes this class of sonic products for wellbeing as its center of investigation and proposes the acronym MONSWELL – Market of Noises and Sounds for Wellbeing – to refer to it. The argument is that the potential emergence of such a market would, in turn, require a deeper understanding of the products, actors, and dynamics associated with it, which could reveal possible modulations of listening, particularly in relation to noises, in contemporary aural culture.

## **1. Objectives**

As mentioned, the article interrogates what the emergence of a sonic market such as MONSWELL can reveal about processes of modulation of listenings in the present, when noisy auditory products seem to be revalued. In parallel, we hope to understand possible transformations going on within the contemporary aural culture itself. Our main goals are:

To conduct an initial exploratory, and thus non-exhaustive, presentation of MONWSELL, highlighting some of its key players, products, and promotional messages;

To articulate observations and reflections around processes and experiences of listening implied in the growth of this market and the revaluation of noisy sonic products, as well as around contemporary aural culture;

To present, in the end, questions and pathways which will act as horizons for further studies, developments and dialogues on the theme.

## **2. MONSWELL – Market of Noises and Sounds for Wellbeing**

A preliminary precaution we must take in order to describe this new sonic market is to clarify the meaning of three terms which are part of its name, i.e.: sounds, noises and wellbeing. Such precaution would be innocuous, however, if we simply followed the use made by the market itself, since there are plenty of ambiguities in the meaning it projects into the terms “noise” and “sound”. Some sonic products are presented as sounds even when, technically, they should be considered noises (and vice-versa). If a nominal exploration positing definite borders between sound and noise, then,

does not seem very useful, a broader historical perspective on these concepts, however, may come in handy – one that seeks a better comprehension of listening modulations through history and its current repercussions. The term “wellbeing”, on the other hand, is not historically connected to the investigations around sound and music, thus demanding extra care when approximated to our sonic concerns.

## *Sounds*

### The idea of sound as an autonomous theoretical object

only comes along recently, between the eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, when it becomes prominent in the studies destined to understanding the physics of sound waves and audition as a physiological process. (Pereira, Castanheira & Sarpa, 2010, p. 195)

A technical definition of sound – a concept which does not vary significantly from acoustics to physics textbooks – states that it is a phenomenon understood as a longitudinal and circumcentered propagation of a mechanical wave through material mediums (which have mass and elasticity) that may be solid, liquid or gaseous. A “pure” sound, that is, a sound which has only one tone, is represented as a sine characterized by regular oscillatory movements, and whose frequency can be evaluated by a measuring unit called decibel (dB). Beyond a technical definition, in order to completely understand how a physical wave is presented as a sonic expression as it propagates, and also how sounds are perceived and qualified, it would be necessary to retrieve neurological and psychoacoustic propositions about the functioning of the auditive system and about how listening is influenced by social and technical dynamics (Sterne, 2003). It is a complex task, which allows multiple approaches and which will be retaken in due time.

In the case of MONSWELL, the term “sound” is presented simply as a matter of conceptual rigor, since, among the set of sonic products offered, noises are not, technically, alone, once phenomena such as binaural sounds are also present, not to mention music. These, however, are aimed at specific ends related to wellbeing and, thus, prepared to act in a determinate fashion in relation to the minds and bodies of their listeners, as will be further noticed.

## *Noises*

The idea of noise is characteristically ambiguous ever since it was first defined, as Murray Schafer (2001, p. 18) points out before determining it simply as “undesired sound”. He observes that such a definition was already present in *The English Oxford Dictionary* of 1225. The term, then, is covered with a certain subjective character, which obliges researchers to consider evaluative modulations regarding noise in different historical periods and cultural contexts (Schafer, 2001, p. 367). A technical definition of noise, however, may be able to overcome the equivocality of the aforementioned interpretations and allow us to better discern noise when discussing MONSWELL products. In this vein, it can be thought of as audible expressions whose vibratory waves show up in aperiodic fashion. For acoustic theory, noise, as a set of vibrations with erratic periodicity, does not allow its frequencies to be auditorily detected in an accurate way. In this sense, white noise – which we will return to – presents itself as the prototypical example (Pereira, Castanheira & Scarpa, 2010).

Regarding MONSWELL, we will be interested in noises that – allegedly – work towards the betterment of some psychic and behavioural faculty or health aspect, as well as those that relate to pleasure sensations, all of which are aimed at the idea of wellbeing.

## *Wellbeing*

The history of the concept of wellbeing is intertwined with the history of philosophy itself, particularly when we think of the Greek term *eudaimonia* (“*eu*” = “good” and “*daimon*” = “spirit”), which can be understood as a synonym for happiness. As such, it comes up as one of the key concepts in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: it is the state to be achieved when complete virtue is achieved.

Another perspective on *eudaimonia* is to reach it by avoiding pain and experiencing pleasures, a viewpoint championed by Aristippus of Cyrene, Greek philosopher who lived at around 400 BCE. For him, happiness consisted on the sum of the greatest possible number of pleasurable moments lived. This conception of happiness and wellbeing was, hence, grounded on hedonism (Bianchi, Scalabrin & Penterich, 2006, p. 96).

Wellbeing as an object of scientific research, however, starts to show up during the second half of the twentieth century, gaining momentum in the nineties, especially along the lines of Positive Psychology and of studies that sought a scientific approach for understanding happiness. This theoretical path is conceived as the scientific study of the forces and virtues of an individual, and investigated feelings, emotions and positive behaviors, which make the promotion of human happiness its final goal (Scorsolini-Comin & Santos, 2010, p. 190).

In this vein, we are able to distinguish between, on the one hand, an objective wellbeing (*welfare*) related to basic institutional, material and social needs such as nourishment, health, social mobility etc. and, on the other hand, an individual wellbeing related to a single person's evaluation of their own life. When referring to this meaning, the acronym IWB (Individual Wellbeing) is frequently used, and is closely associated with the ideas of happiness and satisfaction. Literature review studies on this theme point towards a growing tendency to connect IWB to the promotion of health (Scorsolini-Comin & Santos, 2010).

It is clear, then, that the idea of wellbeing is in straight connection with the theme of health promotion, but, nonetheless, its philosophical roots cannot be ignored – whether in terms of its hedonistic vein or as an orientation towards the development of virtues. We therefore understand wellbeing as a set of practices aiming to promote physical or mental health and to develop individual potentials (which could, contemporarily, be considered as virtues, such as productivity and emotional control or resilience), but also to promote pleasurable experiences, like sleeping, relaxing and liberating hormones which include endorphin, dopamine and serotonin, all of which foster sensations of satisfaction and happiness. In brief, for the study of MONSWELL, the notion of wellbeing is related to the trinity of health, virtue and pleasure.

### **3. Sonic Products offered by MONSWELL**

The set of sonic products offered by MONSWELL encompass noises and sounds aimed at wellbeing. However, some specificities led us to subdivide them in a first series of groups whose characteristics should be taken into account.

### ***Coloured noises***

An initial exploration regarding noises sold at MONSWELL allowed us to observe that there is a big number of products presented in the form of “colored noises” – especially white noise, pink noise and brown noise. White noise, as mentioned above, consists in a big number of sound frequencies with random superposed periodicities, which gives it a spectral density of constant potency. Its name alludes to the color white, that assembles in itself the specters of every other color. Frequency modulations of white noise, via specific filters, for example, could produce other “colors” of noise, such as pink, brown, blue and violet.

These types of noises are advertised in MONSWELL as solutions to guarantee a good night’s sleep, but also to soften or obliterate the nuisance caused by unwanted sounds or noises such as other people’s dialogues, music, TV sets etc. They are also offered as ways to reduce the discomfort caused by *tinnitus* (popularly known as ‘ear buzzing’). A series of noises offered as “white” are actually produced from the functioning of devices and machines – including fans, air conditioners, hair driers, vacuum cleaners and even aircraft turbines – and also aimed at creating a sort of noise wall to mask other noises and/or sounds.

There are also “colored noises” for sale which supposedly potentialize concentration and focus on study and work, among other goals related to wellbeing. One buying guide (Bestbuy, 2024) states simply that “white noise helps you sleep, brown noise helps you relax, and pink noise helps you focus”.

### ***“Natural” sounds and noises***

Within MONSWELL, an infinity of products is supposed to simulate sounds and noises from nature: ridges, sea waves, wind, birds’ whistles, cetaceous’ calls, all sorts of animal sounds, etc. The benefits of such products, in general, are related to relaxation, sleep induction/maintenance and mind “harmonization” (Scalabrini, 2024). These sounds, of course, are known to humanity since the species’ beginnings. What is new is the way they are to be consumed and enjoyed contemporarily:

collected and heard through technological media and no longer solely in open air, rural soundscapes, forests and so on.

### ***Binaural sounds***

This particular class of sounds deserves special attention for the popularity it recently gained – one certainly related to the allegation of scientific backing that often accompanies these products. The so-called binaural sounds – and, more specifically, binaural beats or frequencies – are sounds which relate to both human ears. They are produced in a process of recording known as “dummy head”, in which two microphones are placed where the dummy’s ears are. The dummy may be a mannequin or whatever object that simulates the physical characteristics of a human head. Today, there are specialized companies offering a fully prepared recording system in the shape of a head. With it, one can simulate the model of the “natural” human listening, capable of distinguishing sound sources and recognizing their distances, movements and depths. Ultimately, it is a matter of recreating the experience of a “three-dimensional listening” accomplished by the use of stereo headphones.

In fact, sound recording via this binaural model is not able to acquire such an accurate three-dimensional realism unless the sound material is treated afterwards with an algorithm known as *Cetera*. This algorithm is responsible for sound pieces which afford a consistent illusion of an unmediated listening, allowing the listener to have a distinct perception of the distances and positionings of sound sources that seem to be around him, as is the case with the piece that popularized this experienced, called *Virtual Barber Shop*<sup>2</sup> and originally developed in 1996 by the company QSoundLabs.

### ***Binaural beats and isochronic tones***

The origins of the history of *binaural beats* are attributed to German physician Heinrich Wilhelm Dove, who discovered in 1839 that when two sounds of close frequencies are heard, each

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUDTlvagjJA>. Accessed 07 Nov. 2024.



one through a different ear, the brain tends to produce a third frequency that amounts to the difference between those two frequencies. For example, if a 200Hz sound and another 205Hz sound are heard at the same time – one of them sounding in the left ear and the other in the right one –, the sound actually “heard” will present a frequency of 5Hz.

A greater public starts to marvel at binaural frequencies when the work *Auditory Beats in the Brain* by Gerald Oster is published in 1973 in *Scientific American*. From this point on, speculations start to gain popularity around the hypothesis that the brain can have its pulsation (brain waves) rhythmically altered by binaural beats. The idea, then, was that when sounds whose binaural difference result in a low frequency (from 4 to 100Hz) are experienced, it would become possible to pace brain waves with the goal of achieving varied cerebral states – known as *Delta* (0,1 – 4Hz), *Theta* (4 – 8Hz), *Alpha* (8 – 14Hz), *Beta* (14 – 30Hz) and *Gamma* (30 – 100Hz). The objective was to experience multiple benefits, each one aligned with a frequency range of brain waves, such as relaxation, focus, memory, learning, energy, creativity, sleep quality, relief for illnesses such as stress, anxiety, pains, *tinnitus*, attention deficit, hyperactivity, etc. One such product claims to be “packed full of many binaural beats designed with pleasant sound waves to enable our mind to release stress and find a moment of true relaxation and focus” (Florea, 2024). We should note that all this speculation regarding the modulation of brain waves is not included in the original Oster (1973) article, which had as its goal the investigation of the use of the perception of binaural beats as a tool for medical diagnostics.

Isochronic tones are said to be a sort of variation of binaural beats and are announced within MONSWELL with the same purposes: “Brainwave entrainment (or synchronization), aims to cause our brainwave frequencies to fall into step with a periodic stimulus having a frequency corresponding to the intended brain-state. This can be used, for example, to induce sleep” (myNoise BV, 2024).

They consist of a sound made of only one tone – and not two, as in binaural beats – which pulses regularly. The frequencies to be used in isochronic tones should obey the frequencies of brain waves the listener is willing to obtain. Some users defend this type of sounds as the most effective in altering brain waves, one which has the additional advantage of dismissing the use of headphones (since it is made of a single sound).

### ***ASMR – Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response***

Another set of noises deriving from the application of binaural recordings is the one related to practices of ASMR – *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response*. Here, an infinity of noises is said to provoke bodily reactions such as the tingling of the head or of the extremities of the limbs, but also sensations of relaxation or sleepiness. Some users of ASMR refer to these sensations, particularly to head tingling, as “brain orgasms” (Vanbuskirk, 2024). These sonic products take the shape of videos made by people known as “ASMRtists”.

The noises are presented as triggers to sensations and include a huge variety of sounds, such as whispers, the sound of nail percussions on various objects and surfaces, chewing noises or sounds coming from simple domestic actions like preparing food and leafing through a book, blowing air, kissing, sounds made with the hands or mouth (tongue clicking, opening and closing the lips), noises made by rubbing objects made of various materials (combs, sponges, plastics) near the microphone, all of which intend to promote pleasurable sensations such as sleepiness and wellbeing in general.

It should be noted that ASMR products include, beyond sounds and noises, video images. However, our interest over ASMR is due to the key role sounds have and, also, to the nature of the sound materials present in this group of phenomena: bizarre and unusual if compared with the sounds produced by mainstream aural culture thus far.

### ***Sonic/digital drugs***

The hypothesis of binaural beats as a means to alter the frequencies of brain waves is also the base for the so-called digital drugs. The idea is simple: based on the mapping of altered states of consciousness induced by common narcotics, digital drugs were to alter brain waves in a similar fashion, via binaural beats, so that different types of effects can be attained. As stated by its foremost representative, the iDoser company, “this proven, safe, and scientific method of synchronizing your brainwaves can help you achieve a simulated state” (iDoser, 2024). Such an idea is backed by the notion that every neuronal activity of the brain has an electrochemical nature and could, therefore,

be modulated chemically (as is the case with regular narcotics) or through electric impulses (as is the case with sonic/digital drugs).

It is worth noting that, both in the case of binaural beats or isochronic tones and in the case of digital drugs, the majority of products announced come in the form of music. That is, binaural beats are incorporated as sounds and rhythms in certain tracks which, then, should lead to the benefits related to having a certain range of brain waves stimulated. This places the sonic product “music” as part of the sound set of MONSWELL, although we must recognize that it acquires a very specific nature: music as a means capable of carrying binaural beats as part of its composition.

It is also necessary to observe that, in the case of binaural beats, these products must always be listened to via headphones, without which the desired effects cannot be attained, precisely because of the direction of specific sounds needed for each ear. Headphones are said to be the way to guarantee a listening process which happens “inside” the brain.

#### **4. MONSWELL and the modulations of listening to noise in contemporary aural culture**

The emergence of MONSWELL highlights a robust and vast market for noisy sonic products. This demands a better comprehension of the modulations of the experience of listening which may be changing. To explore such a theme, we need to reconsider the ways in which urban societies dealt with noises, in a historical approach that is wide enough to embrace and compare different experiences.

It is clear that, throughout little more than a century, noises have oscillated as a phenomenon to be cherished and included within particular sonic codifications and, on the other hand, as a phenomenon to be rejected and considered noxious, especially when it comes to mental health. Such oscillations – which almost always occur in parallel within a given culture – are revealed by varied events and cultural movements that contribute to the modulation of auditive experiences, starting at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. It is a long and complex history, with diverse actors, even if the investigation were to be narrowed down to the strains that affirmed noises – strains way rarer than their opposites. Yet, some aspects of this complex and extended history should be considered, at least since the time when companies started offering apparatuses that demanded

specific listenings (Sterne, 2003), such as the stethoscope, radio and telephone. We also think of other *points de remarque* like Italian Futurism, particularly Russolo's manifest (2009), and other singular initiatives in the field of music, like the piece *Ionisation* by Edgar Varèse, the *musique concrète* movement, innumerable pieces by John Cage up to several contemporary groups, artists, and experimental movements like “circuit bending” or Japanese noise music. These seem to culminate in the emergence of today's MONSWELL.

Each of the aforementioned event or cultural movement offers pathways to explore a history of the modulations of the experiences of listening, as well as meanings and uses that noise has acquired in each socio-cultural context.

Exploring different nuances of the history of revaluation of noises, from modernity to contemporaneity, is part of the developments this study suggests. This enterprise, however, is too ambitious to be presented here. Nonetheless, some authors and events that are implied in this process of modulation of listening in recent times can be overheard on the next sections, along with some questions that may enrich the current reflection about MONSWELL.

### ***MONSWELL and scientific discourse***

One – apparently decisive – element contributing to the ongoing positive revaluation of noises is the supposedly scientific discourse which accompanies most of the sound products offered by MONSWELL. In almost all promotional messages, some allegation of scientific proof is to be found. The advertisement for the aforementioned *Sleep Sheep* describes it as “scientifically proven for the promotion of better sleep” (Cloud.b, 2024). The websites of companies that sell soundtracks for the alteration of brain waves – such as Binaural Beats Meditation<sup>3</sup>, Transparent Corp<sup>4</sup>. or iDoser<sup>5</sup> – contain allusions to scientific studies (Oster's article is often mentioned) and researches that are supposed to guarantee the efficacy of their products.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.binauralbeatsmeditation.com/>. Accessed 07 Nov. 2024.

<sup>4</sup> <http://transparentcorp.com>. Accessed 07 Nov. 2024.

<sup>5</sup> <https://i-doser.com/>. Accessed 07 Nov. 2024.

This scientific, or pseudoscientific, “seal of approval” seems to be an important element in the bringing together of noises and a public of listeners that can allow themselves, now, to enjoy an erstwhile bothersome, undesired and even abject sound material. In quite a modernist way, a rationalist and science-oriented logic seems to preside the listening experiences, assuring that the noisy material is not prejudicial to the listener’s health – on the contrary, it is to improve it and afford a new type of wellbeing.

Regardless of the real scientific evidences related to the sound products advertised by MONSWELL, this communication strategy is relevant as a subjacent message which proposes that listening processes occur in deeper dimensions than the auricular complex, such as brain instances. In addition, these experiences of listening are supposed to deflagrate effects beyond the merely sensory and emotional realms, altering brain dynamics and structures in favour of an enhancement of the listener’s quality of life.

### *Pure noises*

Another hypothesis one can bring forth to explain the revaluation of noises in contemporary aural culture is the – somewhat paradoxical – idea of a “purification” of noises aimed at a less intense and bothersome listening, one that could attain and maintain wellbeing. Such a perspective is backed by the idea that, since they are digital, noisy sound products could be reprocessed, “purified” or made “docile”, becoming pleasurable as a listening experience.

An underlying strategy of the discourses that promote noises and their positive effects, then, consists of affirming a certain control and “asepsis” of the aggressive and bothersome noises, a “purity” achieved through processes that transform noises into high resolution stereo pieces. The marketing messages (see, for example, SupernaturalMusic, 2024) produced by this strategy evoke terms and qualities compatible with “pure” listening experiences, such as “high definition” and “stereo sound”, as ways to soften the listening experience in relation to noises that, historically, are considered painful, bothersome, aggressive and disruptive (Hegarty, 2007, Novak, 2013).

***Private spaces vs. Noises***

A further interesting aspect to be explored and better comprehended in the context of the emergence of MONSWELL is the integration of noises in private spaces. This seems to be related to (and to contradict) a specialization of the experience of listening, which has as one of its goals the elaboration of a “modern sound” – controlled listening experiences, particularly in relation to private environments, so that desired sounds can show up in the clearest way possible and so that noises are excluded, or, at least, have their disturbing effects minimized (Sterne, 2003).

The works by Bull and Back (2003), the ones by Emily Thompson (2004), as well as those by Simone Pereira de Sá (2010), which references the first two when mapping pertinent issues for the field of Sound Studies in approximation with Communication Studies – all are valuable here. Thompson investigates the way the construction of concert houses in the United States – namely, Boston’s 1900 *Symphony Hall* (destined to classical music) and New York’s 1932 *Radio City Music Hall* (which could receive presentations using electronic sound amplification and registering) – represented and helped shaping the ideal sound of modernity. Among other characteristics of these houses were the control of the circulation of sonic materials within the house, as well as the control of noises, in order to guarantee a “clean” and “efficient” sound – an “efficacy measured for its clarity in the form of a ‘clean’ signal, without reverberations or any other environmental mark” (Sá, 2010, p. 99).

With the emergence of MONSWELL, this dynamic of sonic purification in private spaces seems to be challenged, once certain noises can be appropriated with the goal of enabling a good night’s sleep or creating a propitious environment for studying, working or meditating. Even though they may intend to generate a sort of wall-of-noise with the goal of isolating the environment from other unwanted sounds, still, these noises are paradoxically brought inside private spaces. Such a practice, in a sense, undermines known perspectives which state that social classes and cultures with more clear-cut notions of private property would be more sensible to noises, as some authors have pointed out (Sá, 2010).

Another aspect of this discussion is the mediation of listenings made via headphones, a common prescription for MONSWELL users aimed at fully attaining the wellbeing effects their

products promise. Descending from a lineage of modern practices of mediated listenings which includes binaural listening with the *Théatrophone* (which, as the name suggests, had the objective of transmitting plays and operas) and radio listening (Sterne, 2003, p. 192), headphones stimulate the production of an individualized, private listening space, even though it could take place in broad and public places ranging from workplaces to universities and homes.

Headphones, with the uses MONSWELL prescribes for them, reinforce the proposition of a private listening which, however, does not exclude but rather include noises. Once again, MONSWELL seems to challenge the common sense around modern listening, which tends to associate private spaces to a clean, noise-free listening. With the products sold at MONSWELL, contemporary communication seems to conciliate the privatization of spaces and the individualization of the experiences of listening to noise as one of the key characteristics of aural culture.

### *Cerebral listening*

Another topic the emergence of MONSWELL highlights is the displacement of the experience of listening – which has been theorized since early modernity as taking place in an ideal, “tympanic” ear (Sterne, 2003, p. 22) – towards an experience supposedly taking place in the brain. This aspect seems to contradict the others we have discussed thus far regarding a possible modulation of the experience of listening in contemporary aural culture.

The notion of a “cerebral listening” is suggested in practically all of the sound products of MONSWELL, whether they fit the categories of colored noises, binaural beats and isochronic tones, ASMR experiences or sonic/digital drugs. It is supposedly backed by scientific evidence showing that every listening process must be comprehended as taking place, effectively, on the brain – which implies that an auricular listening is a kind of auditive hallucination. This idea is coupled with the binaural beats explanation we discussed above (a single sound is the result of close but differing frequencies heard in each ear).

Regardless of the fact that every sensory experience effectively implies cerebral processes and dynamics, what is at stake here is the production of an ideal listening experience that, beyond

promoting a displacement of listening from the ear to the brain, restricts it to a single bodily organ. As Sterne points out, the construction of the ear as an autonomous organ for listening took place in the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and this conception has reigned for a long period, until psychoacoustic studies challenged it by including a complex of bodily regions and dynamics in the auditory experience.

Not only do the advertisements for MONSWELL sound products ascribe a key role to the brain as the regent of listening processes, they also identify the brain as the headquarters for the cognitive and sensory operations necessary for wellbeing: memory, attention, concentration, learning and even orgasmic pleasure, as some of ASMR users also state. Thus, every experience of listening related to the various mentioned products are supposed to rely on this leading role of the brain regarding hearing dynamics. It is possible that these ideas reflect the (pseudo?) scientific discourses used to legitimize MONSWELL products. In their turn, these discourses reflect other fields of knowledge that study the experiences of listening, such as auditory neurology.

## 5. Conclusions

Audition, as well as the other senses, is tied to evolutionary processes our species has gone through that defined an audible specter for humans ranging from 20 to 20.000 Hz. However, sensory experiences are also related to culture, which is capable of modulating a hypothetically “pure” sensory experience. In other words, the clash between biological determinations and culture shapes audibilities, which constitute the experiences of listening in a hybrid, biological and symbolical process of communication. This is also true for visualities (in regard to the experiences of vision), tactilities (in regard to tactile experiences) etc., as has been stated by authors ranging from Crary all the way back to Benjamin and Marx<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> From a materialist point-of-view, we may understand listening in relation to its mode of production, which not only produces an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object (Marx, 1987). In fact, the “the *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present” (Marx, 1988, p. 109), as happens when the technologies of cinema relate to a restructuring of human perception (Benjamin, 2011). Sensory capabilities can only emerge, according to Crary (2012), within everchanging systems of conventions and restrictions in which, so to speak, an observer can occur.



In this sense, it seems reasonable to suggest as hypothesis that listenings, just as other sensory experiences, are processes built from a complex relation between cultural dynamics and a common, corporeal and biological base. The gordian knot of the issue is to comprehend how these dynamics and interplays between cultural factors and biological grounds occur, and how they take part in the shaping of what comes to be called human senses. That is to say, the challenge is to achieve a minimal understanding of which dynamics inscribe themselves as symbolic, relatively flexible systems that are sensible to movements within culture and which dynamics are more directly due to the biology of the species and the materiality of bodies (objects implied in any given listening process, acoustical environments the aural experience takes place in, human bodies implied, their auditive systems, non-human neural networks etc.).

The preamble above is necessary in order to clarify that the research investigating the sonic field called MONSWELL seeks to consider different – symbolic and material – dynamics implied in the processes of a possible modulation of the listening of noises in contemporaneity, without establishing a clear-cut separation between these two groups. Such a frontier, we believe, is not only impossible to be kept, but also unprofitable for the investigative endeavor necessary.

The initial movements of a larger research have been presented in this text, whose first and foremost objective was to describe a new sonic market emerging in this day and age in order to get to know it better. MONSWELL, in this sense, further complexifies the contemporary aural culture through a series of characteristics, some of which we explored here, and which can be synthesized in the following points:

- (1) It is a market whose products are sonic materials, built from noises, sounds and, in some cases (such as binaural sounds), music – a music, though, whose purpose is not to entertain, but primarily to generate wellbeing;
- (2) Such products are mostly available online and can be either paid for or free to use. That is to say that most of the products is digital by nature, and thus capable of being downloaded. The exceptions are those products that take the shape of an object, which may be an electronic gadget – as in the case of the small noise generators which include teddy bears and the like;
- (3) Underlying almost all of the products offered by MONSWELL, there is a discourse that

aspires to be backed by science, particularly the sciences of the mind and several disciplines related to the biomedical and auditory fields, including bioacoustics, neuroaudiology, psychoacoustic medicine, among others;

- (4) Finally, the quantitative aspect of MONSWELL is still unknown. Beyond its evident growth, it may be interesting to ascertain its popularity in relation to different locations, which may lead to inferences contributing to a wide range of researches.

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