Hildegard Westerkamp

Soundtracks Everywhere

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Introduction and the *Zone of Silence*

Like an increasing number of sound artists and sound designers, I work in what R. Murray Schafer has called a *schizophonic* medium, a medium that speaks exclusively through microphones and loudspeakers. Whether we create sound for film, video, video games, the Web, CDs, or any other electroacoustic medium, the reality is that we create a soundtrack that will be heard through loudspeakers or headphones. The other reality is that when electricity fails, all our sounds, musics and soundtracks will fall silent. They simply vanish. Aside from realizing that the rope on which we balance is a thin one, and that this rickety scaffolding supports our life's work – assuming it will be heard by future generations – more immediately, we become aware of how much time and space all these musics, sounds and soundtracks occupy in our lives. When electricity fails (and there are no backup generators), we are stopped in our tracks and feel an immediate sense of loss, as if a great vacuum had suddenly opened up in front of us. But even the most frustrated person will eventually find ways to cope. We may even begin to enjoy the sudden silence, the pause, the unexpected release from hurriedness and pressure, and the "live" communication with other people that inevitably results – seeking help, sharing what we have, altering our habits for that time span. We may even enjoy the versatility that we find we have in the face of such lack.

But of course the assumption is that such a situation is an extraordinary one, a crisis, and things will go back to "normal". With the return of electricity we probably all heave a sigh of relief and return to the status quo of a world filled with schizophonic soundtracks of mostly music, voices and electrical hums.

Years ago I experienced three weeks of truly extraordinary quiet, as I camped with a group of artists in a Mexican desert called the *Zone of Silence*. There was no electricity that would have enabled us to listen to music, and the only motorized sounds we heard in that time were two distant jets and, only occasionally, the motor of the truck that had brought us there. I discovered that the sparseness of sound and music in this environment and over such a long time span created a natural *desire* for sound, soundmaking and listening in us. Our ears tended to reach out, searching actively for anything audible in the environment. This is an age-old, natural hearing process that enables us to consolidate and understand our place within the surrounding soundscape, helping us to orient and locate ourselves within a given place and eventually transmitting a sense of safety and belonging to us. In other words, our desire to listen actively in this environment is motivated precisely by its acoustic sparseness.

This environment also puts us acutely in touch with a desire to *make sounds*. Our own sounds of walking, breathing, and talking were usually the loudest in this quiet place and told us, via the feedback process, where and who we were. Since we were without any possibilities of listening to music we eventually also felt an acute desire for *musical* explorations, singing, and soundmaking with whatever materials the environment provided us.

Apart from wind sounds, occasional birdsong, our own sounds and the crickets singing at night, the desert was silent. I was the only composer in the group of artists and had brought my sound equipment to make recordings. Very quickly after our arrival in the *Zone of Silence* I realized that the recording process would be very different here than in most other soundscapes. Here the microphone, like the ear, had to search for sounds and we could only find them by touching the plants with our hands: by playing on the spikes of cacti, by rubbing hands along the fat leaves of a maguey cactus, by knocking and banging on dried up palm tree leaves, by exploring the resonances of the many fascinating rocks, and so on. This suggested itself quite naturally under the given circumstances of extreme quiet. By holding the microphone very close-up, the most unexpected and extraordinary percussive resonances were revealed from the interior of these plants.

This process also revealed to me the most fundamental steps involved in making culture: making music from the materials of a specific place. In the absence of any soundmaking devices and musical instruments, this landscape's materials became our instruments for soundmaking, the beginnings of a cultural activity in, for and of this

place. It seemed not unlike children's first steps of cultural creation through play, with the materials available to them. Despite the desert's barrenness, or perhaps precisely because of it, this wilderness offered us the ingredients for cultural creation and artistic production. But more importantly perhaps, it also gave us the rare opportunity to be mindful of *how* we introduced additional sounds into this quiet. We made the discovery that such an environment, by its very nature, tends to encourage an ecological relationship between place and the people inhabiting it.

We had gotten in touch with ourselves as soundmakers in a rather profound way here and had become conscious of how actively we were contributing with our own soundmaking to the overall acoustic atmosphere of this place. There were no distractions coming from slick music tracks and no one masked the quiet with motor noises. All sounds were acoustic in nature and it was not possible to "turn up the volume" of any of them. As a result we were able to hear both our own sounds and those of the surrounding soundscape without one masking the other. One could call this a balanced acoustic relationship in its purest form between environment and inhabitant.

Such an extraordinary experience of living in a world without electricity and motors for three weeks offers the potential for a powerful new perspective, a new ear. It cannot be simulated in any way and has to be experienced for what it is. We had become so sensitized during our three-week stay in the *Zone of Silence* that the impact of noise and musical soundtracks pervading the urban environments to which we returned was simply overwhelming. It highlighted to what extent we not only routinely numb our senses but also put our nervous system on higher alert in order to deal with the higher sound stimulus of cities. In fact, this situation is rather similar to experiencing a smoke-free environment for long periods of time, like we do on the West Coast of Canada, and then arriving in places where smoking is still allowed in most public places.

The time spent in the desert clearly highlighted the role we played as soundmakers in that soundscape, but more importantly it also demonstrated that we play such a role wherever we are, at any time, and in any place. All too often though, we tend to be out of touch with that fact and with the impact of our soundmaking on the environment. And this in turn is precisely the non-listening condition that can impose and accept mindless soundtracks of any type on our daily lives, including schizophonic soundtracks. How many films, videos and games, even radio programs, are out there where music is applied mindlessly as background accompaniment?

Only recently I witnessed an example of this in a documentary about scientists researching signs of global warming in Alaska. The viewer had to contend with background music dominating the soundtrack that was totally unrelated to the gorgeous images of spectacular mountain landscapes, of glaciers, and of the frozen tundra. Only very occasionally were we allowed to hear the water, wind and ice sounds, but never once was an attempt made to expose us to the intense silence in such a landscape. This was particularly ironic, as the film addressed highly relevant environmental issues. But in its production of the soundtrack, all environmental consciousness was abandoned. Unfortunately this is only one of many examples from the world of films.

Although I am not proposing that we need to return to a world without electricity – although one day it may end up that way if we do not proceed more mindfully in environmental matters – nor that we need to give up our work of making film soundtracks, electroacoustic compositions and sound art, I *am* proposing that we expose ourselves every so often to such an extensive period of quiet if at all possible, precisely because it gets us in touch on a very visceral level with an unmediated relationship to our environment. And this in turn may inspire us to approach our work of creating soundtracks from a more deeply felt ecological perspective.

Musical Soundtracks and *Muzak*

Whether we want it or not, we cannot avoid hearing music in our daily lives, piped in from somewhere into the public environments through which we move. It has become so all-pervasive that a day without some sort of background music may seem strange to many. I am convinced that we did not end up accidentally in a world of musical soundtracks everywhere. What started as soft background music, masking the silence in elevators, may nowadays function as a masking soundtrack of loud street noises on listeners' iPod headphones. Joseph Lanza in his book *Elevator Music* puts it this way:

> As Kurt London contends "The silent film without music had no right to exist." When this same maxim proved true for most sound films, it began to seem that, without something like Muzak to enliven our off-screen tragi-comedies, neither did we.[1]

My personal dislike for background music motivated me to examine how it was that Muzak had managed to become so widespread and had met with very little opposition. Thus began my research in the 1980s for my Master's thesis entitled *Listening and*

Soundmaking: a Study of Music-as-Environment. The thesis defines music-as-environment as music designed not-to-be-listened-to (traditionally called background music or Muzak), and then it traces Muzak's success in conditioning the general population to accept background music as a seemingly "natural" accompaniment to daily life. Joseph Lanza expresses similar puzzlement about this "success" when he writes:

> Think of "elevator music," and the first sounds that come to mind are of "syrupy" strings, "homogenized" horns, and "whipped-cream" Wurlitzers languidly laboring to make us relax. Like all stereotypes, this one has some truth, but few critics appreciate why the music is purposely made this way and why, notwithstanding all the whining, griping, and cheap jokes, most people have welcomed its intrusion into their lives at one time or another despite themselves.[2]

Later on in the book he brings together musical film soundtracks with Muzak's soundtracks designed to accompany our lives:

> From its inception, the science of film scores helped to articulate the background music industry's needs. Early movie soundtracks in general and the soundtrack to *Grand Hotel* in particular most likely inspired Muzak's arrangements of the scores of our lives. Music by Muzak, like Hollywood film scores, provides seamless segues between waking and dream life in the service of what Claudia Gorbman calls a "bath of affect." Background music on both sides of the movie screen minimizes discontinuities of space and time and draws subjects into suspended disbelief.[3]

Historically, music-as-environment's "voice" has become louder and more present in the urban soundscape, and has moved more closely to our ears. While it started with quiet background music, barely noticeable, it was brought closer to the ear by so-called "foreground music" in the 1980s. This is original music, not re-recorded or re-orchestrated as background music is, but performed by the original artists and played back at a higher volume. Finally headphone listening through the appearance of the Walkman cassette recorder has brought the sound right up to our ears, to the exclusion of all other sounds. And now the iPod enables us to listen in that way for many more

hours than the Walkman did. All three types of music-as-environment can exist simultaneously in the soundscape. The concourses of shopping malls, for example, are usually pervaded by background music, many of the individual stores have their own foreground music, and some of the people walking through the mall and the stores may listen to their own music on their personal headphone systems.

How then did we end up in a world addicted to musical soundtracks? *Music by Muzak* was the first company that played a major part in introducing background music into the environment, and as Attali says, was "one of the most characteristic firms dealing in the music of silencing."[4] Its appearance as an antidote to noisy soundscapes and stressful working conditions may have laid the basis for the widespread acceptance of music-as-environment. Its philosophy of creating music *not to be listened to*, underscored by its own expert research into the effect of such music, as well as the specific intent behind its "psychological design," may have been largely responsible for its success.

Essentially experienced as background to other activities, Muzak forms the sonic environment that surrounds us. The music is itself a commodity and determines the *tone* of commodity exchange. In fact it conceals, through its very "tone" and design, its relationship to money and power, its function as mediator of human relations and as "mood-setter." Music-as-environment has established itself as a cultural system, a "place" in the world, and it considers itself to be a comforting, womb-like part of modern living. But it is highly doubtful that music whose tone and rhythmical/timbral structures are created exclusively with corporate profit in mind can in fact provide true nourishment.

The Muzak Corporation is a relatively old corporation. It got its start in 1934, supplying music to industry at a time when a fair amount of informal experimentation with music in factories had already taken place.[5] It grew and came into its own during the 1940s when it had been shown that music could be a definite aid to production efficiency in industry, specifically in the war industry. An estimated 2,000 to 4,000 factories were using music in the United States in 1942-1943. By 1945 that number had risen to approximately 6,000 factories.[6] At that time Muzak was the largest supplier of background music, also called functional music, and continued to be the largest supplier for many years after.

At the time I wrote my thesis, portable headphone listening was a relatively new phenomenon. The Walkman, initially brought onto the market by the Sony Corporation, suddenly became a must, especially for the younger generation. Carrying

a ghetto blaster around was no longer "cool" and had also become illegal in some areas. With the Walkman, music listening became, for the first time ever, a private experience in public space, and the acoustic environment became further removed from the Walkman listener's consciousness.

Portable headphone listening is now more than twenty years old. But nowadays the iPod provides hours and hours more of music than the Walkman cassette recorder ever could – music of one's own choice, easily downloaded from the Internet and all in a tiny little piece of equipment that fits into any small pocket. What I wrote then still applies.

With headphone listening people move through a private world of music that shuts out noise and social realities. If the community with its noise and social problems does not exist for the listener, then *concern* for these may also have been eliminated from the listener's framework. It is a logical extension of what music-as-environment has been successful in creating: a sense of illusory comfort inside the music environment no matter what else may be going on in one's life and community. However, whereas people were once passive receptors of background music, with headphone listening they have become *active* and *willing* participants in the creation of musical soundtracks that accompany their lives, and potentially separate them more efficiently than Muzak does from the social realities of their lives.

Of course, there may be all sorts of good reasons why such a separation from community may be desirable at times, and in some cases it may be a consciously strategic act of protection. In fact, Walkman or iPod wearers may say that they have become more active listeners, choosing their own music and designing its flow for the day ahead. But in many cases headphone listening may also be, just like Muzak was in the early days, an antidote to less than desirable living, working, or environmental conditions. In other words, while the music may make an unsatisfactory situation more bearable, it may also cover up deeper and very real problems with one's life.

Another factor to consider is that the listener's chosen acoustic space through headphones is tiny, even though reverberation of the music often gives the illusion of a large space, and that their voice is totally silenced. In addition, music heard continuously and close to the eardrums may – like loud noise – transform the ears even further into passive receptors or may in fact fatigue them. The ear's capacity, which we experienced in the Zone of Silence, for listening over large distances and for discerning the tiniest and subtlest details in an expansive environment, may simply become neglected and underused through headphone use. It is as if we voluntarily atrophied an existing

muscle. There is also the danger of causing hearing loss if the music is played back at high volume over the headphones. In addition, with a signal so close to one's ears that one cannot hear one's own voice, such strong sound input simply does not *invite* any form of soundmaking. The imbalance between listening and soundmaking is complete. The silencing is complete: a chosen, voluntary silencing.

In other words, the issues that I explored in much deeper detail in my thesis twenty years ago have not gone away. In fact, they have become more relevant, more urgent, especially when we consider that the need for musical soundtracks as a backdrop to daily living may have become an *addictive* need that distracts us from a real connection to, and concern for, the environment in which we live.

Today, in 2008, the Muzak Corporation continues to contribute its soundtracks to our lives more actively than ever. When I checked Muzak's website recently, I found a very up-to-date corporation swinging with the modern iPod times.[7] We would be hard-pressed nowadays to call it "a firm dealing in the music of silencing", as Attali did twenty years ago. Muzak's language has changed; in fact, it *had* to change in order for the corporation to stay in business. Not a word anymore about *music-not-to-be-listened-to*. Instead it aims to affect people's emotions quite directly and openly. Here is some of the language that makes up the tone of Muzak's website:

> MUSIC IS OUR SOUL. IT IS THE PASSION THAT RACES OUR PULSE. THE KICK THAT SPURS US TO THINK, "WHAT'S NEXT? WHAT IF? WHY NOT?" BUT MUZAK ISN'T ABOUT MUSIC PER SE. WE'RE ABOUT THE EMOTION BEHIND THE MUSIC. [...] WHAT REALLY MAKES US DIFFERENT IS THE WAY WE TRANSFORM MUSIC FROM SOMETHING HEARD TO SOMETHING FELT.[8]

This language speaks of course to Muzak's customers, i.e. other businesses, who want to increase their profits by creating a consumer-friendly atmosphere through music. But it is also intended to appeal to *any* consumer, to put it simply. Over the years Muzak has had to adjust its approach, as consumers on the one hand grew deaf to its soft background music and were seemingly unaffected by its subtle manipulation. On the other hand, a younger generation became increasingly savvy audio consumers, purchasing Walkmans, iPods and light portable recording equipment, thus transforming

into more active and perhaps more selective music listeners. In addition, computer software that allows anyone to compose music in the digital domain has created a new generation of potential music makers.

In Muzak's community outreach program, which each self-respecting corporation now has to have, I found two areas that address these technological changes and appeal to a young generation of would-be musicians and composers. In other words, Muzak's own approach now is to create an active music-making culture. First it developed a *Talent Show* for its employees and involves the website visitor in the process with the following paragraph:

> This one stumped us. How do we show the **Muzak culture** in a way that's true to our curiosity, creativity and passion? Then it hit us. *American Idol*. We'd hold our own talent show and ask our colleagues to communicate **the heart of Muzak** in their own way. During one lunch hour, 150 people sang, danced, read poetry and performed spoken word. It was wild. It was inspiring. It was us. [My emphasis]

In other words, the music created for the Talent Show was successful because it communicated "the heart of Muzak", which as we know is ultimately the cold heart of money. And this is precisely what the corporation calls "Muzak culture." Secondly, with its charitable organization, which it calls the *Heart & Soul Foundation*, Muzak aims to appeal to kids' love for music and

> [...] amplifies that passion by redefining music education in a way that makes it fun and relevant. We do more than put instruments in hands. We put possibilities in minds.

Cleverly it calls this program for young people *Noise!* In its words on the website:

> *Noise!* is an innovative program for teens who long to understand and someday be a part of the music business. *Noise!* is loud! Life-altering, mind-bending and dream-inspiring fit the description, too.

The message is: *Noise!* is cool. Muzak is cool. Muzak wants to appeal to the boundary-pushing energy in teenagers who like noise, need noise in order to make themselves

heard in the face of parental and institutional authority. It seduces by offering a much-needed creative outlet to teenagers, but which ultimately educates them to create music speaking the "heart of Muzak" and thus successfully subsumes their creative talents into "Muzak culture."

In its 75 years Muzak has gone from quiet background music to *Noise!*. But in fact, nothing much has changed, besides the phraseology and the musical structures. Just as the original background music of Muzak drained all vitality out of music by re-orchestrating it, the corporation now puts much enthusiastic effort into taking the vitality out of a new teenage generation by training it to compose music for its own profit-driven Muzak culture. This culture ultimately is still a corporation with nothing but financial interests at heart. Its heart is quite empty and if one listens carefully, one can hear it in the music that is generated and produced under its wing.

In the best-case scenario one can only hope that a program like *Noise!* creates young musicians who simply learn to enjoy music making and eventually find the real music that springs from their own warm hearts and inspiration. In the worst-case scenario, *Noise!* creates a whole generation of musicians/composers who continue to create music for profit, helping to perpetuate Muzak's status quo of distracting the unconscious listener away from social realities and concerns, into the illusory world of consumption and false comfort.

At a time when concern for the environment has come to the forefront of most people's consciousnesses, it may be absolutely necessary to understand the role that soundtracks can play in seriously disconnecting us from the environment and thus also from a real concern for it. Not only the soundtracks of the iPod listener, of restaurants, lobbies, offices and shops, but also the more or less consciously designed soundtracks of films, videos, video games, Web worlds and even some sound art are included in my thinking here.

Film Soundtracks

Earlier in this article I quoted Joseph Lanza as saying that "from its inception, the science of film scores helped to articulate the background music industry's needs." I would venture to reverse this statement and say that the psychological research of the Muzak Corporation and the pervasive, homogenized "tone" of the background music industry have greatly influenced what kinds of film soundtracks are being

created nowadays. Only in exceptional films can we hear soundtracks of a very different nature.

> [...] The most successful sounds seem not only to alter what the audience sees but to go further and trigger a kind of *conceptual resonance* between image and sound: the sound makes us see the image differently, and then this new image makes us hear the sound differently, which in turn makes us see something else in the image, which makes us hear different things in the sound, and so on. This happens rarely enough [...][9]

When are soundtracks walls that cover up life's realities and disconnect us from deeper experiences? When do soundtracks inspire us to listen more deeply than usual? When is film music a cover-up," when does it reveal? When do soundtracks numb our perception, when do they enliven, when do they oppress, when do they energize? Which soundtracks dare to include silence as a sound? Walter Murch in his foreword to Michel Chion's book *Audio-Vision, Sound on Screen* states:

> The danger of present-day cinema is that it can crush its subjects by its very ability to represent them; it doesn't possess the built-in escape valves of ambiguity that painting, music, literature, radio drama, and black-and-white silent film automatically have simply by virtue of their sensory incompleteness – an incompleteness that engages the imagination of the viewer as compensation for what is only evoked by the artist. By comparison, film seems to be "all there" (it isn't, but it seems to be), and thus the responsibility of filmmakers is to find ways within that completeness to refrain from achieving it. To that end, the metaphoric use of sound is one of the most fruitful, flexible, and inexpensive means: by choosing carefully what to eliminate, and then reassociating different sounds that seem at first hearing to be somewhat at odds with the accompanying image, the filmmaker can open up a perceptual vacuum into which the mind of the audience must inevitably rush.[10]

Ideally, when we hear a film soundtrack we are becoming aware listeners to a listening medium. In such a case we are witnesses to a *soundtrack-that-listens*. A soundtrack

listens through its microphones to the world, to human voices, to the environment, to music. And the way it listens to the world is entirely determined by the recordis behind the microphone, by the film sound designers, editors and directors. Film sound tracks then listen through the cultural positioning and perspective of these film creators. Ideally these soundtracks will find resonance within the audience and encourage an equally conscious ear in audience members as they leave the movie theatre or gallery, with an inspiration to listen more closely to the world, to their lives.

What kind of ear, what kind of attention, is required to create a soundtrack that listens, that does not overload, a soundtrack that inspires? Although I could name various examples, I want to speak about one in particular for the simple reason that I know it best. I believe that American director Gus Van Sant has created a soundtrack that listens in his film *Elephant*. The film is a re-enactment of the Columbine School shootings near Denver, Colorado. For this film he used, among other pieces and sounds, excerpts of existing compositions of mine. It was both rewarding and a rather strange experience to be involved in such a way, which I expressed in an email to Gus Van Sant like this:

> I want to thank you for the way you have included excerpts from my two compositions in *Elephant*. Not knowing in any detail what might be done with the excerpts I was pleasantly surprised and very much moved by the way they were integrated into the tone of your film. Specifically, I never had much of a relationship to my piece *Türen der Wahrnehmung/Doors of Perception* and felt that perhaps the real reason why I composed it years ago was for your film! The way you and your sound designer used the chosen excerpts is brilliant and completely fitting. Regarding the excerpt from *Beneath the Forest Floor*, it is deeply ironic to me that a portion from a composition that was really trying to speak of the peace experienced in our West coast indigenous forests here in Canada, would work so excruciatingly well after one of the most shocking moments in the film! On the other hand it is not surprising, as the same piece also tries to access the deeper darker aspects of forest, the eerie and unsettling parts.
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> So, what really touches me about the whole thing is that artistic work *can* be transformed profoundly (even enriched) in a different context without losing its own integrity, without being distorted

or exploited in some way – even if the intent of the original work is seemingly completely different. And this in turn helps to heighten the experience of the new context – in this case, the scenes in your film. I was just lucky that that transformation was handled with care and attention. My thanks go to you and your sound designer for the care that was taken. And congratulations to the success of the film. I found it riveting and moving.[11]

One and a half years later, after Gus Van Sant had included excerpts of *Türen der Wahrnehmung/Doors of Perception* in another film entitled *Last Days*, I wrote to him again, this time with a more specific question relating to sound design.

> *Last Days* is a very good film, but I found it definitely much harder to watch – simply because it shows such a painful state of being human and you portray it without fear of moving deeply into that state. I was surprised how well the excerpts from *Türen der Wahrnehmung/Doors of Perception* worked in this film and how foregrounded they appeared. I would have never thought of using it in this context – since I know the background and context of my piece intimately well. It is endlessly fascinating to me to see how you and Leslie Shatz have worked with it, precisely because you do not know those contexts!
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> I was happy to see that Leslie won the Technical Grand Prize in Cannes for this. However, it is a mystery to me how they could have sorted out what his work and what mine was, short of them knowing *Türen der Wahrnehmung* intricately well. Please do not misunderstand, I am curious not because I am questioning Leslie's creative work, but because I am wondering whether the boundaries between sound designers and composers such as myself can ever be clear in such a context? It seems to me that Leslie works just as much compositionally as I do and I work just as much as a sound designer as he does. So, my question really has to do more with the process of jurying something like this than anything else [...][12]

His answer came immediately:

> [...] Yes it is a sort of muddled method of critique, deciding what the sound is, and who is responsible for it. Leslie's main contribution on *Elephant* and on *Last Days* was his insistence on us using a stereo mike. Our location sound guy, who is also making decisions about the sound, was pretty against it. Location guys are used to using one mike, because two mikes become useless in a conventional sound mix, because the filmmaker is generally cutting quite a bit, and stereo becomes disorienting. Since we weren't cutting very often, Leslie knew that a stereo mike should be very useful. Once we had a stereo mike and a couple of body mikes for dialogue, we pretty much had a finished sound track. We didn't add any more sound. Except of course your music.
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> When it comes to placing your music in there, and the other pieces, in *Elephant*, that was all done by me. I was the "music supervisor/editor." And I just trial-and-error'd it in where I thought it would go. You were the composer, and the compositions were already finished, and I put them in. In the case of *Gerry*, we were using Arvo Pärt, and I was placing it where I thought I wanted to hear it.
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> Same with *Last Days*, I placed the music in the areas you hear it. Traditionally the sound designer would be doing a lot more work, which is why they are called the sound designer... In our case we've condensed it in a lot of ways [...]
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> Using existing music is nice because you are editing with the finished music.[13]

This last statement is particularly interesting to me, as it confirms something I hav wondered about. How is it that he could take whole unaltered excerpts of my piece and fit them so well? Rather than throwing in the music at the end of the proces as often happens, it seems that he edited the images of his final version to thes compositional excerpts!

Perhaps this email exchange gives some idea of how the excerpts of m compositions were applied in two of Gus Van Sant's films. More importantly, I an hoping that it reveals a way of listening and of creating soundtracks that is diametricall opposed to a general trend towards musical blandness and sonic sameness, audible i

the majority of film and television soundtracks and in many public environments with piped-in music. No matter how successful Muzak and other leased music companies claim to be, their so-called success lies in the fact that they have managed to condition the majority of people to neither listen to the musical product nor to pay serious attention to its real function of increasing productivity and profit in the marketplace. This same "success" can be transferred to the bulk of the feature film and TV industry, where large audiences accept similarly bland and often meaningless musical soundtracks.

Real and profound success, however, is registered when people wake up from their passive, non-listening stance and can no longer accept blandness and sameness in film and real-life daily soundtracks. It is through soundscape and listening workshops, through soundwalks, specific workshops on film soundtracks and more, that ears can be opened in such a fashion, never to close again. Similarly there have always been and will continue to be film directors like Gus Van Sant, who recognize the crucial role of sound in film and take the creation of soundtracks as seriously as all other aspects of filmmaking. In such cases, film soundtracks play an active cultural role in triggering "a kind of *conceptual resonance* between image and sound"[14] and thus between audience and film. Ideally this experience of resonance is carried out of the cinema into the real world and may continue between people and environment. In conclusion, I want to quote Randolph Jordan, who describes in different words a similar conceptual resonance between image and sound, triggered in Gus Van Sant's film work through his unusual use of my music.

> A major point of consideration here is how Van Sant's use of Westerkamp's work relates to the ubiquitous practice of adopting pre-existing music for use in a film, a practice that pre-dates synchronous sound. The use of music that wasn't designed for the film in which it appears poses a fundamental question of ecology: how does the removal of a piece of music from its context of origin and re-situation within the environment of a film affect the music itself, its point of origin, and the new cinematic world in which it comes to rest? [...]
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> [...] I suggest that the use of Westerkamp's work in the films of Gus Van Sant offers an intriguing model for the re-contextualization of existing music within the cinematic environment. The use of her compositions *Beneath the Forest Floor* and *Doors of Perception* in the director's last two films provides a powerful example of the simultaneous strangeness and familiarity that results from situating existing material in the context of new work. The difference here, compared with the use of pop songs as part of a film's compilation soundtrack, is that Westerkamp's soundscape compositions are not pieces of "music" in the conventional sense. Within the films they operate more on the level of "sound effects" than of "music" or "score." One could easily go through the entirety of these two films and believe that the sounds of Westerkamp's work were actually elements created by sound designer Leslie Shatz. [...] And yet there is a prevailing sense that when we hear Westerkamp's work in these films, we are hearing something decidedly unsettling in its appropriate-but-not-quite-perfect bond with the audiovisual elements that surround them. [...]
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> The intrigue lies somewhere between Westerkamp's compositional intent and Van Sant's tap into this intent, a tap that brings the substance of her work forth while draining the vessel that once gave it shape.[15]

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1 Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music – A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong* (New York: Picador USA, 1994) 58.
2 Lanza 38.
3 Lanza 56.
4 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 111.
5 R.L. Cardinell, "Music in Industry," *Music and Medicine*, eds. Dorothy M. Schullian and Max Schoen (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971) 353.
6 Cardinell 356.
7 However, like many other corporations Muzak was also affected by the recent economic downturn. In February 2009, Muzak Holdings filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. For details see: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/11/business/11muzak.html>. But "the company expects to continue to operate. A statement said it had 'sufficient means' to support itself through a bankruptcy reorganization."
8 See: <http://www.muzak.com/>.
9 Walter Murch, foreword to Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision, Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) xxii.
10 Murch xix-xx.
11 Personal communication, June 16, 2004.
12 Personal communication, January 16, 2006.
13 Personal communication, January 17, 2006.
14 Murch xxii.
15 Randolph Jordan, "Soundwalking through the Doors of Perception: The Work of Hildegard Westerkamp in the Films of Gus Van Sant." *Sounding Out 3* symposium, University of Sunderland, UK, September 7-9, 2006.