

Listening for the Hiss: Recording Aesthetics and Listening Modes in Lo-Fi Music

Alexandra Supper

Abstract for Session 14: *Music, Materiality and Subjectivities*

Theme: Social Change in Science and Technology, STS Conference Graz 2015.

Contact information:

Department of Technology and Society Studies

Maastricht University

PO Box 616

6200 MD Maastricht

the Netherlands

a.supper@maastrichtuniversity.nl

In this paper, I want to analyse the recording aesthetics of so-called lo-fi musical practices. Musicians engaging in these practices deliberately eschew state-of-the-art technologies and high-fidelity recordings in favour of supposedly obsolete recording technologies, which many of them associate with more authentic approaches. Technical flaws and artefacts in the recordings, such as distortion and tape hiss, are often described as characteristic of lo-fi music. However, I want to argue that lo-fi music is not merely defined by the presence of such artefacts and imperfections, but also by an aesthetic which deliberately draws attention to them. Lo-fi musicians often acknowledge the materiality and technologically mediated nature of music; rather than regarding recording technologies as neutral machines or vessels, they view them as musical instruments or even co-performers. In this way, they undermine traditional notions of recording transparency (the belief that a recording can accurately capture sound, without altering it in any way) and train their audiences not to indulge in the illusion of a transparent recording. Drawing upon the work of Jonathan Sterne, I show that lo-fi music is embedded in particular 'audile techniques' and invites specific modes of listening: listeners are asked to listen *for* rather than *past* the hiss and imperfections. Album liner notes that draw attention to the lo-fi character of the recordings play an important role in constructing such genre-appropriate modes of listening, and therefore constitute my primary empirical material for this study of the materiality and aesthetics of musical practices.