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The Sonic Habitués of the Strip

From their curvilinear pathways to the padding in the stools, casinos are designed to produce addiction. Behavioural psychologists and anthropologists know that sound design for slot machines affects speed of play, time spent gambling and risk aversion, but scant attention has been paid to how the soundscapes of the Strip cultivate pathological modes of listening. This paper draws upon Vegas field recordings from the 1960s until today, alongside philosophical constructions of captivation and habit, to examine how casino design has evolved to produce a certain disposition of the ear. Insofar as Vegas has been disseminated as a model for urbanisms around the world, these reflections lead towards a critique of listening's role in global capitalism today.

The paper is structured around two converging theoretical concepts. First, it pursues a line of thought passing through Heidegger, Uexküll and Agamben that seeks to examine the animal's *absorption* in its environment. The human being, by contrast, is in this tradition defined by its ability to disengage from the world around it. The history of slot-machine design shows how sound plays a central role in cultivating a form of human captivation. While Odysseus binds himself to restrain the effects of listening, gamblers tie themselves to their chairs as seemingly voluntary prisoners precisely because they are sonically enraptured. Second, this paper asks how the soundscapes of the casino floor promote a certain *habit* of listening. Ravaisson's eighteenth-century theory connects habit to the medical domain. Recent readings of this text by Derrida, Deleuze and Malabou suggest, though, that habit is not simply a disease of machinic repetition and routine mechanism. Insofar as habit may be contracted it is a habit of changing. Ravaisson's theory already heralds the deconstruction auto-affectation. His idea that habit is the indistinction of activity and passivity helps to explain the pharmacological modalities of listening—both addiction and grace, poison and cure—that are produced on the Strip.

Naomi Waltham-Smith is Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests sit at the intersection of recent European philosophy and sound studies. Her book *Music and Belonging Between Revolution and Restoration*, forthcoming with Oxford University Press, examines listening and the politics of community. She is currently undertaking a fieldwork project on urban soundscapes and insecurity, as well as writing a speculative book entitled *The Sound of Biopolitics*.

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