
Sounds of the salon: the auditory routines of hairdressers at work

Harriet Shortt

Department of Business and Management,
University of the West of England,
Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol. BS16 1QY, UK
E-mail: Harriet.Shortt@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract: This article broadens the landscape of sensual ways of knowing and understanding and takes account of what we hear at work. In particular, I examine what role sounds play in the everyday lives of employees and why sounds are notable in organisational research. Central to this exploration are data gathered from a study of hairdressers working in hair salons. The findings presented here demonstrate that employees use sounds to sensually and creatively ‘tune out’ the emotional labour encountered as part of their work. It is argued that these auditory routines are used as a way of escaping work that is different to other strategies of escape; it is less about resistance or dis-identification, and more about respite and ways of relocating the ‘self’ elsewhere.

Keywords: auditory environment; emotional labour; escape; hairdressers; noise; salons; senses; sound; space; work; work routines.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Shortt, H. (2013) ‘Sounds of the salon: the auditory routines of hairdressers at work’, *Int. J. Work Organisation and Emotion*, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp.342–356.

Biographical notes: Harriet Shortt’s professional academic career to date includes a BSc in Sociology from the University of Southampton, MSc in Management and PhD from the University of Bath. Her academic teaching includes course leadership and programme management in the areas of organisational behaviour, coaching and mentoring and leadership studies. Her pedagogical approach encompasses reflective practice and the use of visual methods. Her current research focuses on organisational space, the materiality of work, aesthetics and identity. She has an expertise in innovative visual methodologies, specifically, participant-led photography and collaborative photo-interviews. She is also currently leading a research and consultancy project with the Environment Agency, Bristol where she explores the impact of work space on employees’ well-being. Her research has been published in journals such as *Visual Studies*, *Management Learning* and *Sociological Research Online*.

1 Seen and not heard: introduction

It is through organisational aesthetics that we, as researchers, can understand more about the cultural, sensory, and social knowledge and experiences that exist within organisations (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999). Within this framework of

understanding, the sensory dimensions are varied and yet for the most part it has been through the visualisation of organising and organisation that we have come to investigate the culture, emotions and experiences of everyday life. In response, this article intends to broaden the landscape of sensual ways of knowing and understanding and takes account of what we *hear* at work. In particular, I examine what role sounds play in the everyday lives of employees and why such sounds are notable in organisational research.

The existing literature and research on the sounds of work is scant. Contemporary organisational research appears, as Corbett argues, ‘a strangely silent world’ (2003a, p.265). In addition, it is noted in the work of architects (Yang and Kang, 2005), and those in geography (Garrioch, 2003) and cultural studies (Bull and Back, 2003), that frequently the ‘aural’ is ignored and subsequently we remain ocularcentric in our outlook on both wider cultural experiences and more specifically, our working worlds.

It appears that in the hierarchy of the senses sight remains dominant. As Ackerman notes, ‘our language is steeped in visual imagery’ (1990, p.230) and images themselves make up a vast part of contemporary society. Indeed, research in visual sociology and visual anthropology (Bateson and Mead, 1942; Collier and Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002), visual culture (Berger, 1974) and recent visual/ aesthetic/ material studies of work (Gagliardi, 1990; Linstead and Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999; Warren, 2005, 2006) have all been significant in their ability to underscore elements of the social, cultural and indeed working lives that surround us, holding up a mirror (or sometimes camera) to what we see.

Yet, as Schafer expressed over 40 years ago, the supremacy of the visual in society excludes the ‘ear’ and the ability to *listen* (1977). In his work on ‘soundscapes’ Schafer foregrounded the significance of sound and the acoustic features of everyday life and how, with a better awareness of the sounds around us, we could become better attuned to our environments, communities and relationships. Certainly Schafer’s work is particularly pertinent to some of the ideas discussed later in this article since he unifies the relationship between “man [sic] and the sounds of his [sic] environment and what happens when those sounds change” (1977, pp.3–4) and draws together an understanding of how sound is experienced in particular spaces and places.

It is advocates of sound (including noise and music) such as Schafer and others, such as Adorno (1974) that should encourage us to renegotiate this hierarchy of the senses and put into perspective that to which the eye is blind. As Ackerman eloquently puts it, “sounds thicken the sensory stew of our lives, and we depend on them to help us interpret, communicate with, and express the world around us” (1990, p.175). As such, there is an emerging field of work and interest that has started to pioneer how sound impacts on our lives. We may simply consider how organisations have developed their cultures and identities through the use of music and anthems we hear in the media (Corbett, 2003b; Donkin, 2001) and as consumers we are now ‘sensual shoppers’, often at the receiving end of sensory marketing, and where retail sounds and auditory tools are used to lure us into purchase (Underhill, 2000, 2004).

Yet, what are the sounds of the *workplace*? What do employees hear when they are at work and what do these sounds mean to them? This article offers an exploration of sound at work from an employee perspective. As a response to the more ‘managed’ sounds of organisations, and the prevailing gap in the literature, it calls for organisational researchers to re-consider the auditory nature of work. It also asks what of the ‘unmanaged sounds’, the murmurs and auditory normality of everyday life? – the clicking of heating pipes in a radiator, the gentle whir of a laptop, the bubbling boiling

kettle, the hum of the photocopier or the sound of traffic outside. What do these sounds mean to workers, what do they do or represent for the individual and why should we care about the whispers and whirs of everyday life? As is often the case with the familiar and the ordinary, we let it pass us by and rarely stop and examine (or listen to!) how these aspects of work may generate rich data and give us greater insight into the cultural experiences of everyday life in an organisation.

This article begins by examining sounds in organisations. It considers literature from a variety of fields and discusses how certain sounds can ‘manage’ us as workers – acting in some sense as a form of power and control. In addition, drawing on research from cultural studies, the more subjective notion of sound is presented, acknowledging that sounds locate and relocate us and shape our experiences, memories and the spaces and places we occupy. Following this, the research design and context is described – the hair salons and the hairdressers working there. The data presented includes six sets of narratives that show how the hairdressers use particular everyday sounds as a way of ‘escape’. They discuss the rituals, routines and relationships in their working days and identify how they tune out of work and in to particular sounds to help them create, what I call here, ‘sound walls’. Typically, hairdressing is an occupation that requires the display of particular emotions. Emotional labour is often identified as part of hairdressers’ work (see Black, 2004; Cohen, 2010; Gimlin, 1996) and as such these sounds allow them to tune out some of the often emotional interactions they have with clients, counter the emotional labour they experience, and situate themselves within a seemingly more ‘private’ world. Finally, I develop the concept of sound walls as a means of escape at work.

2 Listening to what’s out there: a review of the literature

Much of the work that explores the sensorial dimensions of work currently occupies an ocular-centric outlook and sound remains on ‘mute’ particularly in the study of organisations and work; ‘how places are heard’ (Rice, 2003) is largely neglected from a wealth of research enquiry. It is therefore the aim of this paper to draw attention to this gap in our knowledge and note why sound should be heard in the field of organisation studies and more explicitly the relationship between employees and the sounds they experience at work. With an emergent and under-researched topic such as this, we may turn to a range of inter-disciplinary fields in order to gain a better picture of the significance of the sounds around us. Specifically however, the literature used here emerges from cultural studies since the detailed exploration of sound in what Bull and Back call the recent ‘sensual revolution’ (2003) is where valuable theoretical and empirical work is currently located. This research is particularly relevant here since, for example, it examines Western approaches to sound, sounds experienced in developed cities, the soundscapes of industry and the meaning of music in industrial societies and is thus applicable to the present study of sound in Western organisational life.

Accordingly, in order to understand how we can make sense of sound this review firstly considers how sounds can ‘manage’ us as workers – acting as a form of power and control. Secondly, the more subjective notion of sound is presented, acknowledging that sounds locate and relocate us and shape our experiences, memories and the spaces and places we occupy. Importantly throughout, differentiations are highlighted between

sound as noise and sound as music in order to establish meaning behind such terms and to help develop the concept of sound further.

2.1 Sounds manage...

Sounds have historically played a role in organising and organisations. In the pre-industrial era workers were known to make their own 'sounds' during the working day – they made their own music. Sailors and manual labourers would sing as they worked and it was clear 'music and work were mutually constituted to a significant degree, with the rhythm and pace of one informing the rhythm and pace of the other' [Korczynski and Jones, (2006), p.146]. However, as the industrial age developed and work in factories increased, music and songs at least, were synonymous only with leisure pursuits and even whistling at work was a finable offence [Hammond and Hammond, (1917/1995), p.20].

A significant change can be seen when broadcasting music in British factories during the Second World War was used to increase productivity and efficiency (Korczynski and Jones, 2006). Songs on the BBC programme *'Music While You Work'* were piped into the factory floor through loudspeakers and were thought, certainly by the Human Relations Movement, to sustain a 'background of brisk, cheerful but unobtrusive music' [Hutchison (1942), co-producer of *Music While You Work*, cited in Korczynski and Jones, (2006, p.149)] and to encourage workers to work more effectively. This background music was not autonomous but produced and then managed by the organisation with clear rules as to what music may be played and why and the aim; to meet the needs of factories as opposed to the listeners/workers themselves.

Music can therefore be regarded as organised sound (Schafer, 1977; Shepherd, 1991), and may be linked to power, control and viewed as a tool with which to manage. Indeed, in the past, as Dale and Burrell (2008) remind us, what we hear has played a significant role in our 'organisation'; the monastic bells calling monks to prayer, or the bells used in Victorian houses to summon the servants from below stairs. Bull and Back also remind us that, historically, the organisation of Jeremy Bentham's prison was not only an all-seeing space of surveillance but one that was all listening "...through a series of tubes, the inmates could be heard at all times" (2003, p.5). The use of sounds as a form of power and control at work still exists in similar ways. Thomas Cook's call centre in Falkirk uses 'sensorama' – not only piping the smell of coconut oil into the workplace but the sounds of the seaside and relaxing music, in order to make employees feel as though they are on holiday (Donkin, 2001) and to embrace the culture of the organisation. But as Willmott (1993) remarks, it is the management of culture using such methods that seduces employees into conformity and manipulates the workforce.

In addition, corporate, company songs and anthems also help organisations develop strong cultures and encourage employees to adopt the identity of the organisation (Corbett, 2003b). Unlike the work songs sung by the sailors and manual labourers as noted above, these songs are not autonomous expressions of feeling, they are designed to communicate and express the organisation's identity. Corbett's examination of these songs from companies such as GE, HP and Wal-Mart only serves to demonstrate the importance some organisations place on the power of music within their symbols of culture.

These brief historical and current considerations of music in organisations illustrate how sounds have a function rooted in the regulation and management of employees. The

use of music in this context makes us reconsider our relationship to and our experiences of power and how music may be a sensory tool with which our workplaces attempt to dominate and define who we are and what we do. Indeed, it is worth emphasising how the employee is conceptualised in much of this literature; workers can be manipulated by music since they receive it in the way the organisation intends – to make them work more productively or assume the corporate brand. But what of the more subjective, individual and personal experiences of sound? How do sounds play a part in locating and relocating us and how do they shape our experiences, memories and the spaces we occupy? It is to the consideration of sound and its connection to how it locates us in spaces – be they physical or metaphorical, I now turn, drawing on literature from cultural and urban studies.

2.2 *Sounds locate and relocate...*

Although the broad literature on space and organisation/ workplaces has agreed on the importance of the material and visual in constructing identities, relationships and personal meanings (see for example Baldry, 1999; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Gagliardi, 1990) and our lived experiences of space (Lefebvre, 1991), it is perhaps deaf to the sound of the workplace and such studies have not extended to the *auditory* environment. Sounds, including both music and noise, also help to construct identities and relationships, and thus carry personal meanings (Bull and Black, 2003; Garrioch, 2003). As Rice notes, sounds and our interpretation of them provide a social compass as well as a material and spatial one (2003). “Sounds have to be located in space, identified by type, intensity, and other features. There is geographical quality to listening” [Ackerman, (1996), p.178] in relation to both *space*, where we experience freedom, openness and movement and *place*, where we might pause and feel private and secure (Tuan, 1977). As such, sounds of urban, work, and personal life all go towards locating us in spaces and places we occupy and indeed relocate us in memories or other ‘metaphorical’ places. Importantly then, music (as organised sound) and noise (which may be viewed as disorganised sound) serve as tools that facilitate our location and relocation. As previously mentioned Schafer’s landmark work on soundscapes identifies just this point and throughout demonstrates how sounds underpin our very experience of space and place.

By adopting this perspective then, it may be argued that one dimension of sound is that it can locate us in private worlds in public spaces – it can help us tune out of what surrounds us and tune in to a more ‘private’ space. Bull (2003) talks of how we attempt to escape noisy city sounds and often use personal stereos to create personal surroundings and ‘anesthetise our surroundings’; by tuning out of the city and into our music, “sounds...transform public space into private property” [Bull and Back, (2003), p.9]. Tonkiss (2003) extends this further and investigates ‘social deafness’ in the city, arguing that ‘an urban freedom’ can be found in the personal stereo or mobile phone, offering users a ‘private soundscape’ and as a result, otherwise public spaces become temporarily privatised (pp.304–305). This use of sound can create private zones for personal reflection and escape.

Sound can also relocate us within private memories, identities or other metaphorical places in one’s own mind. As Bull and Back (2003) describe, with their reference to the ‘aural landscape’, we only need to think of a particular song or hear a meaningful sound such as a school-yard chant, the faraway drone of an aeroplane or a ticking grandfather

clock and we are metaphorically transported to another place and perhaps become lost in our own sonic universe, situating our selves elsewhere.

Others too make connections between the 'self' and what is termed 'atmospheric texture' (Tian and Belk, 2005). The use of radios (Tacchi, 1998) and electric fans (Belk and Watson, 1998; Tian and Belk, 2005) are seen to be used in the workplace in order to provide 'white noise' or create 'walls of sonic texture' so that employees can create a sense of privacy and metaphorically relocate themselves away from the noise and/ or interactions with others. Filling the air with these sounds appears to cocoon individuals and create a personal space where they might escape undesirable sounds and mentally situate themselves elsewhere, away from physically public spaces.

Another dimension of sound, suggested by those who have explored the city and urban space, incorporates how sounds colonise space and firmly locate us where we are, as we experience it – for example, it can help us tune in to public, social spaces. In de Certeau's work (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the city is walked and the sounds (and sights) are ways, he argues, in which we embody experiences of city and street life. Walking in the city and being attuned to the auditory landscape is key to noticing cultural practices and how sound impacts on people and their behaviour. Schafer (1977) and Garrioch (2003) also explore cities, where sounds form a "semiotic system" that 'convey(s) news, help(s) people locate themselves in time and in space and (makes) them part of an 'auditory community'" [Garrioch, (2003), p.5].

Other urban/architectural studies that examine how such sounds colonise space note these are not always welcome sounds. Our social experiences of city sounds for example include numerous noises that can cause users of such public spaces annoyance, including traffic and sirens (Yang and Kang, 2005). It is perhaps no wonder that within the modern urban landscape, individuals seek to become 'lost in their own personal sonic universe' [Tonkiss, 2003, in Bull and Back, (2003), p.9], using music on personal stereos to situate themselves in a 'private world' elsewhere.

Broadly then, in cities, at home and at work, as members of society or an organisation we are surrounded by sounds that both manage us and locate us. More pertinently to this article, sounds can relocate us in 'private worlds' and help us tune out and they can help us tune in to where we are, locating us in specific spaces. Here we have gained insight into how we might start to address questions such as those posed by Corbett; "what function, if any, do sounds/silence have..." (2003a, p.275) and questions such as what do sounds do or represent for the individual? In what follows I intend to address such questions specifically in relation to the workplace and in the context of hair salons and the hairdressers who work there.

3 Research design and methodology

The research findings presented here are drawn from a wider nine-month study that explored the significance of organisational space and materiality in the construction of individual work identities (see Shortt, 2010). Of key interest to the study was the exploration of the subjective experiences of work space and identity construction for those working in ostensibly shared and 'fluid' work spaces. Much of the previous research on organisational work space considers the corporate environment and explores the lives of those working at desks and on chairs (see for example Albrecht and Broikos, 2001; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Gagliardi, 1990). In contrast, this study located its interest

in employees who do not possess a great deal of ownership over their work space and those who work in rather more physical occupations – it focussed on hairdressers working in hair salons. It was conducted in 5 hairdressing salons in the UK of varying sizes and formats; two were large, luxurious and modern in design, located in the centre of London; another was a small salon on the outskirts of Worcester city centre, run by one hairdresser alone; another, a salon in the middle of Bath city centre; and finally a salon located within the home of the hairdresser, situated in her utility room.

All members of the salons (and some clients) formed part of the fieldnotes made over the nine-months, but the study focused specifically on 42 hairdressers across all 5 salons. This included a range of male and female hairdressers between the ages of 17 and 50 and consisted of experienced stylists, those who were newly qualified, and ‘junior’ hairdressers – those still in training. This broadly represents the workers in this industry, although this does not include mobile hairdressers – those who work in clients’ homes, or session stylists – those working in media, fashion or film.

Core to the study was the use of visual methods, namely, participant-led photography. Disposable cameras were handed to all participants and they were asked to take pictures of meaningful spaces and objects that ‘said something about who you are at work’. As a guide, the hairdressers were asked to take up to 12 photographs – although many used all 24 exposures. The hairdressers took their pictures over a period of 3 days and once the cameras had been collected from the participants, the photographs were developed and analogue images produced, as well as digital copies. Individual, face-to-face semi-structured photo-interviews were then conducted; photo-interviews often involve the researcher sitting with each participant and their photographs and asking them to talk about what they have captured and why. This probing and exploratory questioning, sometimes referred to as ‘photo-elicitation’ (for example, see Collier, 2001), should encourage participants to discuss the meaning their photograph(s) hold and allow them to recount stories, experiences and memories that they associate with the image. The photo-interviews in this study were conducted as such and were digitally voice-recorded. Following this, interview transcripts were produced and key themes established and explored as part of a ‘tripartite analysis’. This method of visual analysis was used in order to take account of:

- 1 the meaning assigned to the image by the participant in the photo-interview
- 2 the themes that subsequently emerged from the discussions between the participant and researcher in the photo-interview and the coding of transcriptions produced thereafter
- 3 the additional themes assigned to the images by the researcher, once removed from the field of research, based on the contents of the photographs – what the image is actually *of*.

This tripartite approach allows the photograph to consistently lead the analysis, acknowledges that the meaning-making is led by the participants (those who capture the images), and makes space for the researcher to read the contents of image and recognise that the image is of *something* (see Shortt, 2010).

Whilst this article is one that explores sound at work, the broader study from which this emerged was a visual one; not only was it concerned with the visual with regards to its epistemological assumptions, but methodologically too. Nonetheless, during the

fieldwork I made notes on the many sensory aspects of the salons and noted how such workplaces are rich with continuous sounds [I was ‘earwitness’ (Schafer, 1977) to the fact that salons are not quiet places!], strange tastes in the air, pungent and pleasant smells, and the visual landscape around me. Furthermore, in the participant-led photographic interviews and the stories the hairdressers shared about their everyday lives at work, the concept of sound was seen (or rather heard) to be significant and important. Yet it was only after the data were collected and in revisiting the coded transcripts (and some fieldnotes) that it became clear that sound has great meaning to these workers and so here, I make a shift from considering the *visual* landscape of work to examining an auditory one. As such, the images from the research are not included here and references to the photographs the hairdressers captured have been removed. In addition, some of the data presented in this article were not used in the original study (Shortt, 2010) and are presented here as a set of exploratory findings drawn from the original research.

The aim, therefore, is not to offer comprehensive data from a soundscape study, but rather to provide examples from my empirical research that emphasises why sound is valuable to our knowledge of organisational life and how we might theoretically develop a deeper understanding within this emerging field. Below are six sets of data from hairdressers that illustrate how and why sounds hold meaning during their working day.

4 Sounds of the salon: findings

During the participant-led photographic interviews, a number of hairdressers identified sounds outside the salons that form an important part of their everyday routines and how they ‘escape’ from specific everyday work encounters. Many of their narratives, much like those captured in other research on hairdressers (Black, 2004; Cohen, 2010; Gimlin, 1996; Parkinson, 1991) included discussions about the emotional dimensions of their work (predominantly interactions with clients), emotional labour, and subsequently where they liked to ‘escape’ to, what they did there and importantly, what sounds they tuned in to. Participants in this study have been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms, unless they specifically asked to be identified.

Ali, a hairdresser in a small salon on the outskirts of Worcester city centre frequently works alone and has a lengthy list of loyal, long-standing, weekly clients. Spending time in her salon, it is clear to see she has close relationships with her clients and she is often a shoulder to cry on and lends a sympathetic confidential ear to those who need it. Nonetheless, Ali attempts to make momentary escapes each day:

Ali: “I love them (her clients) but I like to slip away from the salon now and again, just slip out away from everyone and get out to my little fag (slang term used to refer to a cigarette) spot outside and just listen to the traffic.” (This is on the pavement of the main road into Worcester, outside the salon by a patch of grass).

Researcher: “But isn’t it noisy out there?”

Ali: “Oh yeah! But I like it (she laughs) it’s actually quite calming! It’s nice to be out there listening to just...noise...rather than talking. Even if I go to the loo (slang term used to refer to a toilet or rest-room), they (her clients) keep talking to me because you can hear right through the walls. Even when I pee! They just keep on talking at me! If I go outside I’m actually away then...and the traffic, well it just drowns stuff out y’know...”

Within Ali's narrative, there is a sense that the pavement '*fag spot*' outside offers an important space to which she can escape during moments of the day. Importantly however, it seems the noise in this space helps her to construct this public space into a more private space. The loud traffic noise allows Ali to be alone with her own thoughts, temporarily on the periphery, and situated away from the emotional interactions with her clients. This certainly contrasts starkly with previous research that considers traffic noise and urban sounds to be disruptive, unpleasant and a source of pollution (Lebiedowska, 2005; Schafer, 1977; Yang and Kang, 2005), and as something that most would want to 'tune out' (Bull, 2003).

Ali was not alone in her preference for these noises outside the salon and others too escaped to these sounds. For example, Tara, a senior stylist working in a busy London salon also talked about finding a moment to herself:

Tara: "It's so nice just to get outside and be calm for a minute, just away from the madness and noise of the salon...people talking and the music. We do get to choose our music downstairs...it's like we're the young and funky ones...the music upstairs is older, y'know, the boss plays what he wants! But sometimes you need to get out...and I come out here" (Tara showed me the doorway where she stands, about 50 yards away from the salon, on a busy side street just off Regent Street in London. There are sounds of traffic, sirens, construction and crowds of people).

Researcher: "But isn't it noisy out there on the street?"

Tara: "Yeah, but that's what I like I guess, just the sound of stuff going on and the street. It's just different isn't it and it's not anything...just noise and just like...the buzz of the city, I like that...I love London! I live here and I love hearing it!"

Tara, like Ali, reveals that the urban noises she hears when she leaves the salon as part of the city soundscape, help her to gain some respite from her work and feel more connected to her 'self' outside work. Indeed parallels can be drawn here between Schafer's connections to sounds and a community's identity as well as Garrioch's (2003) analysis of the sounds of 18th century London. Garrioch talks about the 'acoustic community' where 'familiar soundscapes created a sense of belonging', such as barking dogs and clanging buckets (p.14), and certainly elements of this can be heard in Tara's story – these sounds of traffic and the '*buzz of the city*' where she lives relocate her 'self' elsewhere. Thus far, we may start to depart from the notion of 'good' and 'bad' noises as having very particular auditory characteristics in connection with our socially constructed meanings and understandings of sound (Shepherd, 1991), i.e., traffic noise is 'bad' and 'unpleasant' (Lebiedowska, 2005), and instead consider what sounds represent or 'do' for the individual. Noisy escapes such as these serve to free up the mind for private thoughts and contemplations and help to situate the self away from work, albeit temporarily.

Other hairdressers identified sounds *inside* the salon they escape to. A number of the junior hairdressers identified toilets as essential spaces for relaxation and escape from daily chores and instructions. Many appeared to use the toilets in the salons as personal territories and quiet sanctuaries where they were able to temporarily distance themselves from work. James told me about 'hanging out' in the salon toilets (where he would often text-message his friends and rest his tired feet) and explained that it was the muted sounds and background hubbub of the salon in the distance that helped him tune out for a while:

James: “When you are in the toilet...you can just be quiet. I mean you can still hear the salon, but it’s, like, faraway...a nice hum...and no one’s shouting at you to do something! It’s just in the background, over there, in the distance. I can sit here and chill, send a few texts, feel connected with the outside world and my mates...I rest my head on this wall and close my eyes...it’s quite nice in there!”

Again, we see how sounds offer respite from the hairdresser’s often emotionally challenging work and provide an opportunity to situate the self elsewhere outside of work and *‘feel connected with the outside world’*.

Other sounds that were used to ‘escape’ work were those that emerged from the hairdresser’s labour itself and often emerged *during* interactions with clients. Kate, a junior hairdresser in a large London salon discussed how the sound of the water from the taps at the wash basins helps to drown out (literally) other sounds of the salon, and often, her conversational dealings with clients:

Kate: “If you’re feeling stressed and you’re uptight...it’s good that you’ve got places like these (the backwashes – basin areas of the salon where clients have their hair washed). It’s really calming here...with the candles and it smells nice too...it’s at the back of the salon as well, so kind of in a quiet corner. If I’m like ‘argh’ I can just put the tap on (the shower heads used to wash hair) and just listen to the water while I work, y’know, wooshhhhhhhhhh (Kate imitates the sound of running water)...it’s just nice to be with yourself...I go off to my own little world and it’s just nice y’know...I don’t have to talk or ask about their holidays or kids!”

Turning on the taps and listening to the sound of running water affords Kate secluded solitary moments despite her physical engagement in a work activity, and in an imaginary sense, encases her in her *‘own little world’*, rather than the ‘real’ world of work. This insight resonates with urban design research, such as Yang and Kang’s (2005) study, where the sounds of water, fountains and water features are noted as some of the most tranquil, pleasurable sounds experienced by users of urban squares and public spaces. Yet importantly this finding also highlights how these workers use their sensory environment in creative ways in order to gain a sense of emotional reprieve.

Carly, a junior hairdresser in another large London salon uses the music that surrounds her as a way of sensually blocking out work:

Carly: “It’s so chilled out in there (Carly refers to the backwashes – the sinks at which clients’ hair is washed - located in a separate part of the salon)...the funky music is upstairs in the actual salon and then here it’s the calm, like y’know...plinky plonky music. I just zone into that whilst I’m giving a head massage or whatever...I just listen to my music and get on...”

Carly and Kate both appear to escape work and find some refuge in ostensibly public spaces (the backwashes) but they use the music and the sound of water as routes to escape, a way out of the routine of work and potentially emotionally laden conversations with clients. The melodic sounds of what Carly calls the *‘plinky plonky music’* (generic ‘easy listening’ relaxation music on CD) offer her a way of tuning out. This insight echoes Tonkiss’s notion of a personal sonic universe (2003) and Loktev’s reflections on the “car radio [that] envelops you in its own space” (1993, p.37). In addition, there are also connections to be made with Shepherd’s conceptualisation of sound (1991) or rather music – when listening to a meaningful piece of music an individual can get a sense of who they are, a sense of belonging. Although in this sense, Carly is using the music at

work, not to create a sense of belonging to the organisation, but rather more a sense of self away from work.

It is also worth noting here that the music used by the salon in this space has been chosen for the *clients* – relaxing, soothing music is often used in the backwash areas of large salons in order to add to the customer experience, along with soft lighting, a head massage, the use of sweet-smelling luxury products and a complimentary cup of coffee (Austin-Smith, 2004). The sensory, aestheticised nature of these spaces is carefully designed to create an overall experience for those visiting high quality salons. Nonetheless, these findings demonstrate how workers creatively manipulate and assign their own meanings and representations to such sensory dimensions in order to escape the very work they are employed to perform.

Emma, a senior stylist working in a small inner-city salon in Bath extends this concept further with the use of her tools. She talks about how she enjoys moments of being able to tune out and escape from the often intimate and emotionally-loaded conversations she has with her clients. Rather than turning on the tap to tune out, Emma turns on her hairdryer:

Emma: “Sometimes it’s such a relief when I put the hairdryer on, y’know, I can just switch off for a bit, go somewhere else, think about my own stuff...not what they client wants to talk about or what Greg (Emma’s manager) wants me to do next! I know we’re all supposed to ask about holidays but it’s nice sometimes to get away from what we’re supposed to say, y’know, just, like, think and be chilled, be quiet for a few minutes in my head!”

Researcher: ‘Do you think it’s difficult anyway to interact...or have a conversation with your clients when the hairdryer is going?’

Emma: “Yeah, sometimes...but I guess that’s a good thing for me....sometimes. It’s like you never get away and sometimes you just want, y’know, you just want 5 minutes to yourself...not talk talk talk all the time”

Researcher: “It’s quite hypnotic anyway, the sound of a hairdryer...”

Emma: “Yeah I know, I’ve always thought that...it’s quite soothing y’know...I put it on and it’s like ‘ahhhhhh’...”

Again we see the creative use of sounds of the hairdresser’s labour as a way of dealing with such interactions. Yet for all the hairdressers in this study the sensual tuning out does not seem to suggest total disengagement – they appear not to totally disconnect from their work. Rather, they are temporarily ‘drowning out’ or fading out elements of their work and interactions. This finding suggests something more subtle and complex with regard to employee strategies for escaping work and it is to this I now turn.

5 Open ears: discussion

From the research findings above, we gain a deeper insight into the auditory dimensions of organisational life. The sounds the hairdressers have identified as significant are both outside and inside the salon and include traffic and urban noises, the background and faraway hubbub of the salon, running water, music, and the hum of a hairdryer. However, what is most important is the meaning and function of these sounds for these workers.

The hairdressers create and use auditory routines, either escaping *to* sounds (traffic heard at street corners or the hubbub background sounds heard from toilets), or escaping

through sounds produced from their labour (running water or the hairdryer) and thus create 'sound walls' around them. Ackerman (1990, p.182), in her detailed exploration of the senses, describes how sounds can be used as 'emotional curtains' and that if we focus on particular sounds during moments of stress or distress they can help us distance ourselves, albeit perhaps metaphorically, imagining ourselves elsewhere. This notion of distancing oneself is echoed in relation to personal stereo use in the city creating 'privatised spaces' (Bull, 2003) and the use of fans as 'white noise' in the office (Tian and Belk, 2005). Creating such privatised spaces is comparable with the hairdresser's accounts of using such sound walls to cocoon themselves, removing themselves either physically or metaphorically, from the verbal emotional interactions with their clients.

As we heard, Ali and Emma for example try to find moments away from the personal stories clients share and the display and expression of emotions often expected of them as regular 'confidantes', counsellors and mentors (see also Black, 2004; Cohen, 2010; Parkinson, 1991). These sorts of conversations are part of this profession and are social conventions of this type of work. Thus, in order to find respite from the emotional labour experienced, the hairdressers construct architectures of sound around them; the hum of a hairdryer or the noise of traffic, forming sound walls that protect, encase and offer sanctity, however briefly, during the working day. In essence, their emotional labour is countered by a sensual 'tuning out' using the auditory landscape around them.

It is pertinent to note at this juncture another of Corbett's questions when considering the sounds of organisation; 'what is the sound of emotional labour?' (2003a, p.275). Perhaps here we might start to address this – emotional labour may sound like the conversations and emotionally-laden talk between hairdressers and clients but part of how these employees cope with, and are *able* to engage with such work (talking about holidays, children and family life), is to seek relief using sounds like traffic, urban life, running water or a hairdryer.

However, as noted above, the sensual tuning out and escape from work identified here is different to other strategies of escape identified in previous research (see for example Cohen and Taylor, 1976/1992; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). Such research is usually connected to concepts of power and control and is presented as an overt form of resistance by employees (Cohen and Taylor, 1992; Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Workers are seen to engage in routine practices of cynicism (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) and/or dis-identification with the wider organisation and actively resist and "distance themselves from the roles they play" [Fleming and Spicer, (2007), p.39]. Yet this is not what is happening here. In fact, many hairdressers in the study talk about how pleasurable their work can be and recognise the important roles they play in their clients' lives as part of what makes their job so satisfying.

Instead, escape here appears to be much more about the ability to tune out or fade out elements of work. Just as one might adjust the volume or equaliser on a stereo to filter certain sounds and make others more prominent, the hairdressers, it could be said, are doing something similar – the sounds of the salon provide them with the ability to make these adjustments and create moments of respite. It could therefore be argued that escape at work is more subtle than the typical resistance and struggle between employer and employee. It may be that we should start to explore escape at work as that which is sensually experienced. We should consider how the auditory environment is used by workers to cope with interactions, relocating them, freeing up the mind and temporarily situating the self elsewhere, on the periphery, making connections to the 'outside world'.

6 Sounds of escape: conclusions

The purpose of this article is to broaden the landscape of sensual ways of knowing and understanding and take account of what we *hear* at work. I have examined what role sounds play in the everyday lives of hairdressers and why such sounds are meaningful to them. This exploration of sound draws a rich picture and demonstrates that the workplace is not full of meaningless fragments of sound and is instead an evocative soundscape for workers where they seemingly create their own auditory routines during the working day. The narratives here shed light on how employees use sound as a way of escaping work - creating sound walls and gaining respite from the emotional labour they experience.

This article therefore contributes to and deepens our understanding of how workers cope with emotional labour. It certainly extends our understanding of how such *service* workers seek relief from emotional labour – current debates suggest *spatial* practices and the use of backstage zones, such as staffrooms, where “different emotion rules may apply” [Fineman, (2012), p.76 – see also Fineman, 1998; Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983]. This article suggests auditory routines also have a role to play in how workers seek to cope with this sort of work. Indeed, for workers such as hairdressers who are often ‘on display’ in shared, open work spaces and who often lack the ability to regularly seek refuge in backstage zones, the use of sensorial escapes is perhaps made even more pertinent.

In addition, findings here add to some of the existing literature on space. The hairdressers’ creative use of their auditory environment in order to tune out from work deepens our understanding of how lived experiences of space (Lefebvre, 1991) are *sensually* lived and sound has an important role to play. Strategies such as the use of sound to relocate/situate the self elsewhere, offer different perspectives on what it means to socially produce space and broadens the dimensions of what we mean by the ‘embodied experience’ of space.

This research emerges from a wider study and perhaps limitations can be seen with regard to the fact that the original study from which these data are drawn was a visual one. Yet conceivably, given the sound-rich data that emerged from these participants’ stories, this research only serves to highlight the inextricable links between the visual, sight and sound (and other senses of course). It should therefore encourage us, as often ocular centric beings, to sometimes close our eyes and open our ears. This article however, is not a call for audio-centricity but for a more holistic appreciation of the aesthetics of everyday life at work – to be alert to the sounds of the workplace.

The future of organisational aesthetics lies in researchers continuing to broaden this sensory horizon and to recognise that sound is a fundamental part of how we know and understand work. In addition, I would argue that this future also lies in researchers exploring under-researched and often over-looked data sites that may offer rich stories of sound. We might ask, for example, what sounds are meaningful to other workers who engage in intimate/body/emotion work, such as beauty therapists, osteopaths or nurses? How might these workers use their auditory environment to escape everyday interactions? What are their auditory routines? We should open our ears and start to listen.

References

- Ackerman, D. (1990) *A Natural History of the Senses*, Phoenix/Orion Books Ltd, London.
- Ackroyd, S. and Thompson, P. (1999) *Organisational Misbehaviour*, Sage, London.
- Adorno, T. (1974) *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, New Left Books, London.
- Albrecht, D. and Broikos, C.B. (2001) *On the Job: Design and the American Office*, Princeton Architectural Press and the National Building Museum, Washington, DC.
- Austin-Smith, A. (2004) *The Fantastic Hairdresser*, TC Publishing, Surrey UK.
- Baldry, C. (1999) 'Space – the final frontier', *Sociology*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp.535–553.
- Bateson, G. and Mead, M. (1942) *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, New York Academy of the Sciences, New York.
- Belk, R.W. and Watson, J.C. (1998) 'Material culture and the extended and unextended self in our university offices', *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp.305–310.
- Berger, J. (1974) *Ways of Seeing*, BBC, Pelican Original, London.
- Black, P. (2004) *The Beauty Industry: Gender, Culture, Pleasure*, Routledge, London.
- Bull, M. (2003) 'Soundscapes of the car – a critical study of automobile habitation', in Bull, M. and Back, L. (Eds.): *The Auditory Culture Reader*, pp.357–374, Sensory Formation Series, Berg, Oxford.
- Bull, M. and Back, L. (Eds.) (2003) *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Sensory Formation Series, Berg, Oxford.
- Cohen, R. (2010) 'Rethinking 'mobile work': boundaries of space, time and social relation in the working lives of mobile hairstylists', *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 24 No. 65, pp.65–84.
- Cohen, S. and Taylor, L. (1976/1992) *Escape Attempts – The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London.
- Collier, J. and Collier, M. (1986) *Visual Anthropology: Photography as Research Method*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
- Collier, M. (2001) 'Approaches to analysis in visual anthropology', in van Leeuwen, T. and Jewitt, C. (2001) *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, Sage, London.
- Corbett, M. (2003a) 'Sound organisation: a brief history of psychosonic management', *Ephemera*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp.265–276.
- Corbett, M. (2003b) 'I sing the body (in) corporate: identity, displacement and the radical priority of reception', paper presented at the *CMS (Critical Management Studies) Conference 2003: Stream 21: Music at Work*, 7th–9th July, Lancaster, England, UK.
- Dale, K. and Burrell, G. (2008) *The Spaces of Organisation and the Organisation of Space – Power, Identity and Materiality at Work*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- de Certeau, M. (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, The University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- Donkin, R. (2001) *Tomorrow's Workplace* [online]
http://www.richarddonkin.com/x_tomorrows_workplace.htm (accessed 30 May 2012).
- Fineman, S. (2008) *The Emotional Organization – Passions and Power*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Fineman, S. (2012) *A Very Short Introduction to Work*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Fleming, P. and Spicer, A. (2007) *Contesting the Corporation – Struggle, Power and Resistance in Organisations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gagliardi, P. (Ed.) (1990) *Symbols and Artifacts: Views of the Corporate Landscape*, Walter de Gruyter, New York.
- Garrioch, D. (2003) 'Sound of the city – the soundscape of early modern European towns', *Urban History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp.5–25.
- Gimlin, D. (1996) 'Pamela's place: power and negotiation in the hair salon', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 5, pp.505–526.

- Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin Books, London.
- Hammond, J. and Hammond, B. (1917/1995) *The Town Labourer, 1760–1832*, Longman, London.
- Harper, D. (2002) 'Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation', *Visual Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp.13–26.
- Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- Korczynski, M. and Jones, K. (2006) 'Instrumental music? The social origins of broadcast music in British factories', *Popular Music*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp.145–164.
- Kunda, G. (1992) *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Lebiedowska, B. (2005) 'Acoustic background and transport noise in urbanised areas: a note on the relative classification of the city soundscape', *Transportation Research Part D*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp.341–345.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Linstead, S. and Höpfl, H. (Eds.) (2000) *The Aesthetics of Organization*, Sage, London.
- Loktev, J. (1993) 'Static motion, or the confessions of a compulsive radio driver', *Semiotexte*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp.37–53.
- Parkinson, B. (1991) 'Emotional stylists: strategies of expressive management among trainee hairdressers', *Cognition and Emotion*, Vol. 5, Nos. 5/6, pp.419–434.
- Rice, T. (2003) 'An acoustemology of sound and self in the Edinburgh royal infirmary', *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp.4–9.
- Schafer, R. (1977) *The Tuning of the World*, Knopf, New York.
- Shepherd, J. (1991) *Music as Social Text*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Shortt, H. (2010) *The Hair Salon – Constructions of Space and Identity*, Unpublished PhD thesis, School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, England, UK.
- Strati, A. (1999) *Organization and Aesthetics*, Sage, London.
- Tacchi, J. (1998) 'Radio texture: between self and others', in Miller, D. (Ed.): *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, pp.25–45, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Tian, K. and Belk, R.W. (2005) 'Extended self and possessions in the workplace', *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp.297–310.
- Tonkiss, F. (2003) 'Aural postcards – sound, memory and the city', in Bull, M. and Back, L. (Eds.), *The Auditory Culture Reader*, pp.303–310, Sensory Formation Series, Berg, Oxford.
- Tuan, Y. (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Underhill, P. (2000) *Why We Buy – The Science of Shopping*, Texere, New York.
- Underhill, P. (2004) *The Call of the Mall – How We Shop*, Profile Books, London.
- Warren, S. (2005) 'Photography and voice in critical qualitative management research', *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 6, pp.861–882.
- Warren, S. (2006) 'Hot-Nesting?: A visual exploration of personalised workspaces in a 'hot-desk' office environment', in Case, P., Lilley, S. and Owens, T. (Eds.): *The Speed of Organization*, pp.119–146, Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen.
- Willmott, H. (1993) 'Strength is ignorance; slavery is freedom; managing culture in modern organisations', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp.515–552.
- Yang, W. and Kang, J. (2005) 'Soundscape and sound preference in urban squares: a case study in Sheffield', *Journal of Urban Design*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp.61–80.