

Silent Turnstiles

A Proposal for the MTA

by Joshua Hudelson

Walk into any store on Madison Avenue, and you will eventually be asked, "Is there anything I can help you with?" Coming from an overworked, underpaid employee, these words hardly seem sincere, but we assume that on behalf of the store that has trained the employee they are genuine enough. The store is offering to help us.

There is a hidden purpose to these words, however, which we usually ignore but never fail to feel: surveillance. The question lets us know that we are within the domain of the store, and our answer—regardless whether it's yes or no—upholds this. We thought that we had entered the store through the door, but we are only really on the store's turf after this interaction.

Afterward, our relationship with the products has changed. Perhaps we are now more seriously considering a purchase that had not seemed so important earlier. Perhaps we now begin to wonder whether we have a right to be shopping in a store with such expensive products. Perhaps it becomes more difficult—or even impossible—to leave the store without buying something.

Philosopher Louis Althusser called such an act "interpellation," and the standard example is when a person innocently walking down the street turns around upon hearing the words, "Hey, you there!" from a policeman. Similar episodes take place all the time, and not only in the realms of products or law. Consider the glance you receive from the usher handing you a playbill as you walk into a theater or concert hall. It does not explicitly mean "Be quiet!" but it does implicitly mean, "You are now a subject of the concert hall" with all the ideological baggage that carries.

What's scary is that we don't even need a human being present in order to find ourselves interpellated. This is the case with turnstiles on the New York subway. They are certainly not the loudest or noisiest characters there (screeching wheels, P.A. announcements, construction work, and musicians come well ahead), but the sounds they do make set the tone for our auditory experience.

There are three main noises: the loud beep of a Metrocard swiping successfully or unsuccessfully, the click of the lock, and the rattle of gears as the customer walks through the metal bars. These "soundmarks" do for our ears what the physical turnstiles do for our bodies: demarcate a new space within which we are

subjects—a space where screeching wheels and PA announcements are at home, and where we accept our place as listeners.

In light of these observations, I propose the following sound installation: temporary adjustments to the turnstiles at randomly and sporadically selected subway stops throughout New York.

Specifically, the adjustments would silence the three sounds of the turnstile and place sound-insulation along the inner surface of the turnstiles. Anyone who has walked in between huge bolts of carpeting knows the strange, slightly-claustrophobic effect of having one's ears close to insulating material. This, combined with the surprising absence of the familiar turnstile sounds, would eliminate the turnstiles as sonic interpellators and cast a fecund ambiguity onto the subway station experience.

Try to imagine what it would feel like to enter a subway station without these noises: no loud beep to indicate that you have paid, no click to indicate that you can walk forward, and no grind to indicate that you have just crossed sides. The effect may not be immediately clear, but that is precisely the point. The space would become unfamiliar. From the background, other sounds would emerge that would have otherwise been masked by the turnstiles. The approach of a train, while still familiar, would sound different when lacking the previous threshold experience—perhaps louder, more menacing, and gratuitous. Perhaps something else entirely.

It would be interesting to compare behavior at a station without turnstile sound with one functioning normally—do the customers keep a greater average distance from the tracks? Does overall human-produced sound decrease? Do customers respond positively or negatively to the change when surveyed?

One drawback of this plan is that the turnstile noises are important for visually impaired customers. One solution would be alerting station employees to spot and assist visually impaired customers at each adjusted station. Another solution would be to simply reduce the sound of the beeping without eliminating it.

It is important to recognize, however, that while these sounds are useful for the visually impaired, they were not intended specifically for them, nor are they the only kind of system that can accommodate everyone. Therefore, we should not fool ourselves into believing that they are necessary evils. Interpellation is the name of the game here, and its temporary cessation would be a valuable experience for all New Yorkers.