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## Sound Pollution

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE  
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When I returned from the O-rena and the Magic NBA Playoff game last night I had a headache. Maybe it was a bad Pepsi, maybe the pounding the Bucks put on the Magic, or maybe it was the decibel levels of noise that once again assaulted my very being. I'm not talking about the screaming of the fans, but about the loud thumping music, the pounding of the bass, and the inane booming "voice of banality" that is the arena announcer.

Is this a real problem or am I just getting old? Is it part of modern sports reality that fans do not understand what they are watching? Can fans no longer figure out when to cheer, to boo, to shout and to scream without the prompting of a message board? I really don't think that the fans are all that clueless, except perhaps the high rollers in the \$1000 seats who are there only to be seen.

Standing at a concession stand in the concourse before the game I found I was able to identify everything that was going on inside the arena proper just by the noise. I knew exactly when the Bucks were introduced, when the introductions of the Magic began, and when the actual game began. I could have described to you most everything that was going on just by listening. Am I that conditioned from only a few years of attending games at the O-rena? Will I wake up in the middle of the night and jump out of bed to stand and cheer "YOUR'RE ORLAAAANDOOO MAAAAAGIC! "? Am I falling victim to the same problem as my students who work at Disney and wake up screaming when "It's a Small World After All" invades their dreams?

All of this is frightening and all of it points up to me the total deterioration of public places in America, and especially the sport's venues.

In fairness I should point out that it is not just in America. In Russia they too play "We will, we will, Rock You," at hockey games, and post-Soviet fans dutifully shout, "Rock You!" in pre-Soviet unison. In sport as in so many other areas of culture we have managed to export the worst America has to offer.

It is quite sad that arenas, stadia and ballparks have become places of sound and visual pollution as well sensory overload. Sporting events as places for relaxation are no more, conversation during an event is nearly impossible, and spontaneity of reaction to the games has been nearly wiped out.

This is only a blip on the radar screen signaling a much more troublesome trend. Public quiet has become a taboo in the new millenium. Another rule of physics has been discovered: "In the absence of sound, sound will appear." Sound abhors a silence.

The amount of background noise in our society is amazing. It is now virtually impossible to find a public space without a cacophony of sounds from a myriad of sources. CNN has become our constant companion. In the waiting rooms of doctor's offices and car repair garages, the CNN anchors are keeping us posted on the latest train wreck in India, plane crash in China, or car wreck on the freeways of life.

At the YMCA Wellness Center where much attention is paid to body, but none to the mind, there are television screens mounted on treadmills, plug-ins for CD players, and televisions hanging from the ceiling. Not satisfied with these options the clientele often bring along their own Walkman. Should you choose not to partake in one of these many options, and instead choose silence, you can not. Piped into the entire place is a soft-rock radio station playing the greatest hits of some decade past while bombarding you with radio commercials.

Not to belabor the issue, but I must point out that if you choose to listen to one of the many options provided via earphones, you must turn the volume up quite high. Why? To drown out the radio station.

Should you choose to escape all of this by staying home to watch the games on TV, your days of such escape are numbered. FOX is leading the way and others are beginning to follow. The sound affects added to the audio part of the telecast are sometimes cute, but more often than not, simply annoying. The pollution of the screen with messages, scoreboards, in-game commercials, graphics of all sorts- some even occasionally useful, is leading to hyperextension of the senses while watching television. One wonders how long it will be before psychologists identify a whole new set of syndromes tied to this trend.

One result of this assault will be the development of an ability to tune much it out, as humans adapt to the new levels of sound and visual pollution. In fact I have just about succeeded in training myself to watch a game without ever diverting my eyes to "ESPN's Bottom Line." But not quite.

Unfortunately once this screening process is complete the problems will not go away, because those who have decided we must be subjected to this level of pollution will simply turn up the volume to break through the barriers.

So what is to be done?

I know a man who had not attended an NBA game in thirty years. Two years ago he went to an Orlando Magic game. He left at halftime. He could not take the noise. He has never returned.

Let's hope it doesn't finally come to this.

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