

Playing *with* the Music: Ecologies of Attention  
and Understating in the Classical Music  
Education Project of *Sesame Street*

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## Introduction

If I have done anything right this paper should be easy to read. I think that is the kindest thing a writer can do. If I have done anything right this paper should also not be quite like anything you have seen before. I might say that is the second kindest thing a writer can do.

In the spirit of easy reading, here's a summary of what lies ahead:

This is a paper about the ecologies of attention and understanding evident in and emergent from the presentation of classical music on the classic children's television program *Sesame Street*.

The paper takes three parts. The first part is an analysis of context, attention, and education on the program, framed through the analogy of bird-watching. I argue that the classical music education which is presented on the program deviates from the humanitarian norm of "uplift" and absolute aesthetics—the bird's-eye view—and instead presents an understanding of music which resonates with ideas of "listening with"—the view of the bird watcher, or in the words of Jenny Odell, the bird *listener* who observes and is observed; who through acts of attention learns to perceive the world around them pluralistically. In this section I argue that while *Sesame Street* engages with aspects of critical pedagogy, it is ultimately resistant to educational classifications. The program is itself *ecological*, composed of many interacting and competing parts which create a program whose character is emergent and consistent, but not unified.

Part two is an analysis of classical music performance on the program, framed through the analogy of the worm-listener—they who listen as outsiders to the arcane sound of the world beneath our feet. This section deals with questions of parody, virtuosity, and childhood. It contains three character studies of classical

musicians who made appearances on the program: Yo-Yo Ma, Evelyn Glennie, and Lang Lang.

In this section I argue that *Sesame Street* takes part in a long tradition of classical music parody which welcomes the outsider while at the same time engages the classical music native and initiate—that is, the worm, who has spent its life embedded in the classical strata. *Sesame Street* neither challenges nor exalts the classical music canon, but rather serves as an enabling technology, a *geophone*, which allows for the areal listener to perceive and engage with the arcane sounds of underworld.

This project takes shape in two media: one is what you are reading right now, the “white paper” presentation of the research. The other is a non-striated recreation of the field in the form of a Multi User Domain, or MUD. The third section of this paper deals with the themes of diversity, equity, and liberation which inform the project.

Each part begins with a prologue—or dare I say, a dramatic monologue—written in first-person perspective which grounds the following discussion. If the chapters look at musical and educational ecologies, the prologues give lived context for the geological bedrock on which these ecologies are based.

I’ll count myself off: LIGHTS. CAMERA. ACTION!

## Prologue: In *media res*

On a summer evening in Saint Louis I was listening to the radio in the kitchen. In the research for this paper, which had grown from a character study on Yo-Yo Ma to encompass the themes of education and public broadcasting, I had decided that I should actually own some kind of broadcast receiver. After looking into mini televisions, I settled on the conservative option of a radio. As I chopped onions, my local NPR station's weekend programming buzzed in the background.

A program on the recent events in Afghanistan had ended and the PSA space, where a commercial station would have run adds, began. I heard a woman's voice say "This is Saint Louis Public Radio. Understanding Starts Here."

My ears perked up. What an intriguing declaration. It is not "This is Saint Louis Public Radio, your source of news," or "This is Saint Louis Public Radio: hear the nation." Instead, the slogan is a promise to increase your *understanding*. NPR is offering not just to inform you, but moreover to provide some kind of ethical education, presumably into cultural-socio-political events such that one comes away *understanding*.

A strange word, "understanding." In the context of the socio-political, cultural and economic topics under the purview of national public radio, something seems very kind about the word. It feels emotionally laden and steeped in empathy.

Its usage does not imply factual understanding, something like "Let us factually explain what's going on in Afghanistan," but rather, "cultivate an understanding of the human experiences of Afghanistan along with us."

Etymologically, the "under" in the first half of the word "understand" does not denote the more modern "below," but rather among or in-between.<sup>1</sup> To understand

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1. "understand (v.)," accessed October 31, 2021, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/understand>.

is to stand among. What *NPR* is offering, then, is empathy in a broadcast.

This is continuous with the founding rhetoric of *NPR* and its focus on hearing common people speak. *All Things Considered*, now one of the most listened-to programs on American radio, debuted with the chaotic coverage of what at the time was the biggest anti-Vietnam war protest to date. It consisted of tape gathered by multiple reporters at the event with no overarching narrative. It was unlike anything on the radio at the time. Its chaos was intended to capture the chaos of the moment, but was also part of a larger aesthetic and political trend on the program to hear the voices of normal Americans. Something now known as the “public radio sound.”

The sound is recognizable to this day by its lack of a narrator and the featuring of the voices of common people. It was pioneered by the “founding mother” of *NPR*, radio journalist Susan Stamberg. She was inspired by the cinema verité of the time, saying that the idea “was to tell a story without telling it— just sound through chunks.” This meant no authoritative radio voice, but instead just giving everyday Americans time to talk before moving along to another speaker. The work of narrative interpretation is left to the listener, who is given a more rhizomatic view of the events— a radical new direction in radio journalism and broadcast culture more generally.

One particular aspect of the public radio sound was the use of “cross talk,” a technique in which two voices are layered onto one another in polyphony, which was inspired by Glenn Gould’s “contrapuntal storytelling” in *The Solitude Trilogy*.<sup>2</sup> Stamberg retrospectively described the debut as having “no interfering narrator.”<sup>3</sup>

The showcasing of alternative voices was so central to the ethos of the young

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2. Jeff Porter, *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 197.

3. *Ibid.*, 185.

network that *NPR* turned down a \$300,000 donation from the Ford Foundation contingent on the network hiring well-known broadcast journalist Edward P. Morgan as host of *All Things Considered*. Morgan, recipient of a Peabody Award, would have certainly brought the new network credibility, but *NPR* feared that the authoritative voice would get in the way of the alternative voices that they wanted to showcase. The ethos of “standing among” seems to be baked in to the entire project of public radio.

This ethos is visible in public television as well. In the mid-1960s Ralph Lowell, Board Chairman of the Boston Educational Television station proposed that the Oval Office put together a commission on educational television. President Johnson, believing that this was a job for the private sector, turned to the Carnegie Corporation. What was formed was a diverse team known as the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. Among others, this team included writer Ralph Ellison, concert pianist Rudolph Serkin, and labor leader Leonard Woodcock.<sup>4</sup>

The commission put together a report titled *Public Television, A Program for Action* which stressed the artistic and transformative value of the medium and the importance of using it to resist the pressure toward uniformity found in commercial television but instead seek out and satisfy the needs of the nation’s diversity.<sup>5</sup>

The need for this shift in broadcasting came about because the United States Government had granted access to the airwaves to commercial stations first, only adding public stations to the media landscape as part of Great Society era reforms. Canada and England, on the other hand, created public broadcasting first and only later opened the airwaves to commercial stations.<sup>6</sup>

It was this same era of reform that lead the Carnegie Corporation in search of

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4. John Meany, “The Insitution of Public Television,” *The Review of Politics* 30, no. 4 (1968): 409.

5. *Ibid.*, 410.

6. *Ibid.*, 412.

a way to increase the reach of their humanitarian educational programs for inner-city preschoolers.<sup>7</sup> Lloyd Morrisett, the vice president of programs at the Carnegie Corporation<sup>8</sup> and a psychologist<sup>9</sup> had noticed his own daughter's fascination with the television medium when his three-year old got up early in the morning to watch the pre-broadcast RCA test patterns.<sup>10</sup>

Morrisett then tasked Joan Ganz Cooney, a publicity specialist for the *United States Steel Hour*, a twice-monthly series on CBS,<sup>11</sup> with the project of producing a study on the educational possibilities of children's television, backed by a \$15,000 grant. The resulting report, *The Potential Uses of Television in Children's Education* analyzed the ways that the relatively new technology of television could be used as an educational supplement for preschoolers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It was this report which lead to the creation of the program at hand, *Sesame Street*.

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7. Michael Davis, *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street* (New York: Viking, 2008), 15.

8. Jans Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education," 1966, 7.

9. Davis, *Street Gang*, 15.

10. Ibid., 11.

11. Ibid., 27.

# Part I

The Bird-Watcher:  
Attention, Education, and Entertainment



## Entertainment: Welcome to *Sesame Street*

*Sesame Street* needs little introduction. One of the longest running shows in the history of television,<sup>12</sup> it has been a cultural staple of generations of children—and their parents—in the United States and worldwide.

While *Sesame Street* is an educational program, it is notable for its entertainment value. This stems from the realization by the original producers of the program that in order to compete with the non-educational television competition only a turn of the dial away, televised preschool education would have to be just as entertaining.<sup>13</sup> This is especially true given that at the program's premiere in 1969, there was nothing like it in the children's media landscape.<sup>14</sup> This means that there were no models for the production of the program, nor for its reception—they could not trust that children knew how to watch educational programs.

This realization led to a fundamental characteristic of the production structure of the program: rather than hire child development and education specialists to produce the show, they used education research to inform decisions made by seasoned TV, radio, and Broadway producers, writers, composers, and actors. This decision was informed by the observation that children respond well to adult television and were known to recite ads for beer and cigarettes, as well as having their attention held by adult variety shows such as *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*.<sup>15</sup>

But *Sesame Street* is not just entertaining for children. In order to encourage parents to watch the show along with their children, a move which would also help keep preschoolers focused, the producers aimed to make the show entertaining

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12. "Sesame Street," *Britannica Academic*.

13. Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Children's Education," 38.

14. Davis, *Street Gang*, See chapter 3 for a survey of the contemporary children's television landscape.

15. Kathryn A. Ostrofsky, "Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children's Interactions with Pop Music's Aesthetics in the 1970s," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 3 (2012): 16.

enough for parents to want to watch it along with their children.<sup>16 17</sup>

In terms of music, you see to this effect the featuring of musical performers that parents would know, often playing educational parodies of their own work. For example, Norah Jones...

Entertainment, the producers understood, is a tool for cultivating attention.

## Listening with: Attention as Grounds for Ethics

The philosophy of music on *Sesame Street* was perhaps best summarized by Joe Rapso, the first music director of the program, in a 1971 press release. The program's diverse music, he said, would help bridge cultural divides when the kids were grown up and "bring all kids together, whether they live in Grosse Point or on 148th Street in the Bronx... And the beauty of our music is maybe that the child in the Grosse Pointe home is hearing gospel and blues for the first time and the black child in the urban ghetto is hearing a harpsichord and flute for the first time. Someday, when they grow up, they'll have one more thing in common."<sup>18</sup>

By using entertainment to focus attention and expose children to music from other social and economic contexts, Rapso is promising not only a musical education, but also an ethical one. Having "one more thing in common" is perhaps here grounds for the social understanding which is historically valued by public media.

This understanding through sonic exposure resonates with the theories of media developed by Jenny Odell in *How To Do Nothing*, a book at the intersection of media

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16. Kathryn A. Ostrofsky, "Sesame Street as a Musical Comedy-Variety Show," in *Music in Comedy Television: Notes on Laughs*, ed. Liz Giuffre and Philip Hayward (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2017), 294.

17. Mixed-age television targeting likely began on the television program *Captain Kangaroo*. Davis, *Street Gang*, 46

18. Ostrofsky, "Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children's Interactions with Pop Music's Aesthetics in the 1970s," 297.

theory and ecology. Odell places attention as the center of ethics. We decide who is seen, who is heard, and who has agency, through acts of attention.<sup>19</sup>

Echoing Pauline Oliveros, Odell describes a way of engaging with the world similar to that of bird watching, which she says is better described as bird *listening*. By listening with the birds—listening in a way which acknowledges one's own subjectivity and their location as another sounding element of the sonic world—the listener learns to differentiate and identify the sounds of the different birds in an environment, and thereby becomes aware of the ecology around them and their place within it.<sup>20</sup>

This ecological, attention-based understanding of the world requires that one gives up the idea of discrete entities, simple origin stories, and simple one-to-one causalities, and above all, requires time. The direct product of this attention, Odell says, is context. That is, paying close attention can help us better understand the nuanced ecologies of being and identities that make up the ecological relationships of an environment. The longer that the attention is held, the more context appears.<sup>21</sup>

This is musically apparent in the skits of Muppet Simon Soundman. In one skit, Simon visits a music store, where he tells the shopkeeper that he is in the market for a “nice, shiny—” and then we hear a long trumpet lick as his mouth moves in time.

“Uhh... Ohh... Would you mind repeating that, sir?”

“No, indeed. What I said was I’d like to buy a nice, shiny—” and then the trumpet sounds again.

The shopkeeper goes off-screen and returns with an instrument.

“Here you are, sir. A beautiful new violin.”

“No, no, no... I don’t want a—” this time he makes violin sounds. “You see,

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19. Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2019), 154.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 155.

because what I asked for was a nice, shiny—”

And the skit goes on like this with for a number of minutes with the shopkeeper bringing back the wrong instruments and Simon Soundman referring to them only through impeccable renditions of their sound.

This skit uses a simple and entertaining gag to expose children to the sounds, names, and appearances of several common instruments. Like Odell discusses leaning to identify birds by their sounds, children are taught here to learn to identify the sounds of several common instruments that you would find in the environment of music store or a big band—the sound that the shopkeeper himself makes once Simon leaves, saying “that fellow was pretty good. Huh. I should have asked him if he would like to play in our—.”

But Rapso’s statement on music goes beyond awareness and context of musical instruments. It is primarily one of social context. To quote a pioneering broadcast journalist Edward R Murrow, the role of television is to make the world aware of itself.<sup>22</sup> By creating a media platform through which children of different backgrounds can gain exposure to each other’s music, they will have an increased awareness and understanding of each other. Implicit in all this is the idea that this will relieve social and class tensions. Rapso was implying a social and ethical education based in context and understanding through attention.

This attitude, the social context of listening, is apparent in a number of musical skits on the program.

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22. Davis, *Street Gang*, 54.

### **Case Study 1: Itzhak Pearlman and “What’s Easy for You is Hard for Me”**

Fading in from black, there is a simple stage set with three folding chairs. On the third to the right is an instrument case. Entering from the bottom of the frame, a girl runs up the big grey steps to the stage and takes a seat to the left, smiling. She looks in the direction she came from. Itzhak Pearlman enters with a cane in each hand. He begins to climb the steps to the stage, swinging each stiff leg up to the next level and climbing one step at a time.

There are three big steps, presumably made from grey plywood, and then a small step up to the stage. By the second step, the girl begins to fidget. By the third step her smile has faded and she looks to the side and kick her feet while she waits, perhaps to avoid staring.

Pearlman climbs the small remaining distance between the steps and the stage and turns to sit down.

“Ooff. Those steps,” he says.

In order to bend at the waist and hips to sit, he unlocks his leg braces with an audible click and a rotation of his hips. He sits down and pulls his hands out of the metal rings of his canes.

“You know,” he says, turning to the girl, “some things that are really easy for you are hard for me.”

He picks up his violin and checks the tuning with two quick plucks with his fingerboard hand and then a quick bow across each adjacent string pair, eyes closed. His tone is rich and bright, even when tuning. He

launches into an impressive flourish, starting with double stops followed by a long run up and down the fingerboard, ending with a right hand pizzicato chord. He does this all with a certain light effortlessness.

“Yeah, but some things are easy for you that are hard for me,” the girl replies. She lifts her violin and plays a minor melody. She carries the tune, but her intonation is unstable.

Pearlman tilts his head and leans in with appreciation as she plays. They both smile when she finishes.

The view of classical music which we gain access to here is not a traditional one. This is not a performance for an audience, but instead a intimate moment of discourse and vulnerability between two musicians. Here, classical music is not seen from the birds eye view, that of objective distance, looking over the musical landscape, but that of the bird listener listening along with. There is no audience in this skit, it is more about the interaction of the two musicians and how they listen to and acknowledge each other’s lived experiences of music and the world. We may be watching from home as a television audience, but what we see is not the somber performance of canonic works, nor is it an accessible presentation of a classical music program for non-initiates. What we are watching is a demonstration of ecological musical listening, of listening with.

One might object that this is *media*, and that what we are seeing is fake, a construction. That is, in fact, the case. However, that does not reduce the potential of an ecological reading of this skit, nor its efficacy as a demonstration. What we are seeing here is a representation of an empathetic and ecological experience and a sandboxed recreation of real life, inasmuch as the producers created an actual experience on the set which we can view the recording of—an experience which speaks

to actual, lived, human encounters.

This encounter is no less real for being filmed. Pearlman actually limped up the tall steps onto the stage as he had done countless times outside of the *Sesame Street* set—this time was no easier than any other. The girl actually played as she has obviously done for hundreds of hours, and this time was no easier than any other. Though what we at home are seeing is a representation of a social encounter, it is a recreation of actual experiences.

And its sandboxing does not detract from its meaningfulness, but rather, it is only through this sandboxing that it can be made into entertainment and education such that it can contribute to an ethical education.

I say all of this to argue that an ecological reading and ecological education can come out of “constructed” media, that ultimately, it is not un-reality which is created, but a guided slice of reality, made in order to facilitate the ecological goal of awareness and context.

This next skit similarly features a disabled artist, deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie. However, while the Perlman skit called attention to ability and disability, the following skit chooses not to address disability directly and instead focuses on musical and social listening in the context of a classical music performance.

### **Case Study 2: Glennie and Linda**

Glennie is first introduced by an off-screen voice: “And Now, Evelyn Glennie, world famous percussionist, will perform a duet with her friend Linda.”

Glennie walks in followed by Linda.

“Now, I’ll tell *you* when to come in. Okay,” Glennie says, signing and

speaking simultaneously, and hands Linda a single mallet."

Glennie launches into an impressive piece of solo classical marimba for four mallets.

At the beginning of an impressive run, Linda taps Glennie's shoulder.

"Now?" she signs and mouths.

"Not now, not now," Glennie responds, lifting her mallets. She continues with the run down from the high end of the Marimba to the middle. A small hiccup at the end of the phase suggest that she is slightly flustered, but only slightly. She continues on to the next phrase, displacing Linda, who stands by her side watching closely, which each step as she moves up and down the instrument. With a massive run upwards she finishes the phrase and raises her mallets into the air. Linda taps her shoulder.

"Now?"

"Not now," Glennie shakes her head.

Glennie crosses the stage to an assortment of unhitched percussion instruments, including a snare drum and numerous cymbals and other pieces of resonant metal. Glennie plays a very modern sounding solo, impressive in its wash of timbres and coordination. At first Linda plays close attention, but after a few moments she starts to look bored and disappointed, crosses her arms, and lets her head droop.

Glennie plays a roll on the snare and looks at her partner expectantly. Linda is not listening. She tries again. The response is the same. Glennie taps the splash cymbal lightly. She pokes Linda's shoulder. She looks up.

"Now!" Glennie gestures at the cymbal with a large gesture.



Surprised, but excited, Linda raises her mallet and strikes the cymbal. The audience breaks out in applause. The two look at each other with a smile and shake hands.

They walk to the center stage and take a bow, first to the camera— representing the concert-hall audience—and then to each other. A girl walks up to them and hands Linda, the amateur, a bouquet of flowers. Glennie watches, miffed. She puts her hands on her hips and with a look of shock and disappointment on her face. Linda, soaking up the applause, smiles, and hands Glennie back her mallet, a gesture much like the lead ballerina pulling a single rose out of her bouquet to hand to her partner. Glennie takes the mallet, and storms off the stage, frowning. Linda turns back to camera and smiles.

Whereas the first skit centered on ability and disability, this skit does not present the two deaf performers as encountering any difficulty, not including interpersonal relationships. This is, in fact, where the humor of this skit comes from: their inability to listen to each other and their resultant misunderstanding of the meaning of a duet. There is a comic symmetry to their misunderstanding: Glennie is unfair to Linda, during the performance, and Linda returns the favor at the end.

By focusing on this misunderstanding, deaf interaction is normalized, attention is drawn away from disability to the point that one might not even realize that the two performers are deaf—not in an erasure of disability, but through the showcasing of Glennie's musical virtuosity, her domination of the stage, and the skit's focus on the friction which this creates between her and Linda.

This friction presents, as part of the musical lesson of the skit, what a duet is *not*, and in so doing suggests more fair ways that children might play with each other, musically or non-musically. This aspect of play is an enduring aspect of the musical

performances on *Sesame Street*, where adults often act in childlike ways. Analogs for children, Glennie and Linda show what can go wrong if we fail to listen—however it is in all of our human diversity that we do so. This skit presents an ethics of attention based not only in listening, but also in giving space for others to speak, make sound, and communicate. Through a comical demonstration of misunderstanding, it delivers a lesson on how understanding starts from fair and balanced communication.

## Education

*Sesame Street* was met with a completely heterogeneous appraisal of its educational model after its debut.

Echoing the thoughts of many traditional educators, preschool authority Carl Bereiter of the Ontario Institute for Studies in education wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* the morning after the program's premiere that the program was too far removed from "structured" teaching and warned that the program could fail because "it's based entirely on audience appeal and is not really teaching anything in particular."<sup>23</sup>

It received an equal amount of criticism from progressive educators, some of who thought that the program was too traditional. Frank Garfinkle, a professor of education at Boston University wrote in the alumni magazine that "any claim that *Sesame Street* is a major educational or media innovation is preposterous. The values implicit in the form and content—strictly three Rs with a mixed bag of dressing—are traditional... The image of *Sesame Street* as a unique vanguard of educational experience is a mirage."<sup>24</sup>

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23. Davis, *Street Gang*, 200.

24. Ibid., 201.

When the program was later slotted to be shipped abroad in international co-productions, the BBC turned it down. Children's program chief, Monica Sims, described the program "authoritarian" referring to its aims to change children's behavior and its emphasis on right answers.<sup>25</sup> This last observation is at odds with the intentions stated by Joan Ganz Cooney in her inaugural research for the program: almost all of the experts she interviewed wanted to see the teaching of cognitive habits—as defined by Jerome Kagan to be analysis, generating hypotheses, and reflection—rather than trying to teach them skills such as how to read. The idea was to teach how to think, not what to think.<sup>26</sup>

That there were such varied responses to the educational model of the program speaks to its complexity and its resistance to educational labels.

On the face of it, *Sesame Street* quite literally conforms to the broadcast model of education. The whole project is, after all, inherently instructivist: it was created as a response to the question "how can we use new technology to give preschool education to as many children as possible?" The program uni-directionally streams educational material to the learner watching and listening at home, who is left to absorb the information. The learner has no say in constructing their own education. When it comes to the educational material it presents on basic literacy and numeracy there are, as noted by the BBC, clear right and wrong answers. Furthermore, the program has a curriculum designed by education researchers with intended outcomes and takeaways for each lesson.<sup>27</sup>

Literacy and numeracy education are, however, only part of the educational project of *Sesame Street*. A great deal of the programming can be interpreted as, and has been expressed by its creators, as giving kids a cultural and emotional edu-

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25. Davis, *Street Gang*, 211.

26. Cooney, "The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education," 23.

27. Davis, *Street Gang*, 117.

cation.<sup>28</sup> A majority of this cultural and emotional education is open ended. In the skit with Itzhak Pearlman, viewers are exposed to the stunning playing of a professional, the attainable playing of a child, disability, ability, and co-mutual visibility. When the two musicians play for one another, they do so to express their mutual relationship, not simply so that the other may listen. They are both listening and playing with.

What is a child at home supposed to get from this? This is where *Sesame Street* may be instructivist and broadcast-based, but is moreover *non-striated*. The listening with aspect of its educational model drops the learner into an existing network of understanding, discourse, and culture, such that what they take away from the lesson depends on their personal proclivities and needs, whether that is simply hearing the master violinist play, or the understanding that some thing that is easy for one person can be hard for others.

I use this term *non-striated* to denote a space which is not hierarchical and bounded like striated space as understood by Deleuze and Guatari, but does not fall into the “nomadic” and free spaces which they describe as “smooth.”

The educational analyses in this paper are informed in large part by Ivan Illich and his book *Deschooling Society* where he argues that learning would be improved by the abolition of formalized compulsory education. Along these lines, Illich says that it is delusional to think that we can determine what is necessary education for others and what is not.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Illich demonstrates the ways that the traditional classroom asserts itself as the only worthwhile source of education, which Illich argues actually limits the number of skilled and educated people<sup>30</sup>

*Sesame Street*, on the other hand, understands that it is not the only source of

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28. Ostrofsky, “Talking Sesame to the Streets: Young Children’s Interactions with Pop Music’s Aesthetics in the 1970s,” 297.

29. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (Hasbro, 1970), 12.

30. Ibid., 39.

education, nor does it attempt to be. In this way its educational material can be much more open ended and nuanced.

In one of Yo-Yo Ma's appearances on the program in the 1980s' he plays a classical quartet with the Muppets. Bob the music teacher appears, but he does not lead any lesson. In fact, he is pushed off the stage by a conducting Big Bird who tells him to take a seat after Bob hints that he finds the whole affair silly.

Where is the schooling, where is the teacher, in this skit? The traditional teacher is physically forced off the stage, leaving no clear instructor. Perhaps the teacher is the program itself. While the producers have presumably decided what should be taken away from this lesson—have in a sense decided what should be learned—there is no direction or guidance into how it should be watched. Ivan Illich proposes that in the place of traditional educators we have pedagogical counselors who would advise a student on where to seek instruction, what methods of learning would be appropriate for their skills, and the like. A role more like that of a subject librarian or a museum curator combined with a personal tutor.<sup>31</sup>

The presentation of classical music in this skit falls more in line with this style of focused curatorship; The producers of *Sesame Street* present to children a number of performances deemed appropriate for their age and level of understanding, but do not coerce their view or their understanding in one direction or another.

Of course, this is a written out, synthetic performance. It's not footage of Ma playing at Carnegie Hall, but something written with the express purpose of educating and entertaining children. While children are free to make their own judgements on the performance and learn from it on their own, it is sandboxed. It is a slice of worldly music—Yo-Yo Ma—fictionalized into an entertaining and open-ended skit.

Illich argues that "childhood" as a period of life separate from infancy, adoles-

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31. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 43.

cence, or youth did not begin to appear until the Renaissance, and not in its present form until industrialization.<sup>32</sup> He continues that childhood is not only a modern invention, but is also a burden to the adolescent, who is prevented from being whole person.<sup>33</sup>

One might argue, then, that a true Illichian education would disavow the entire idea of children's media and simply present children with performances of worldly art—perhaps in this case simply with *The Muppet Show*. This idea holds less water when you acknowledge that, again, the role of the Illichian counselor is to curate materials appropriate to the skills and understanding of the learner, not just to throw them into the deep end of, say, molecular biology and tell them to swim. Anarchist education entails the lack of coercion, not the lack of guidance.

Illich also argues that obligatory schooling divides society into the realms of the “academic” and the “non-academic” and thereby renders education non-worldly and the world non-educational.<sup>34</sup> On *Sesame Street*, the musical education is more worldly than it is “educational,” giving children a more or less direct look into the world of popular music. Even the show's set, based on actual streets and buildings in Harlem<sup>35</sup> has a worldly character to it where children learn *casually*—by which I mean, even when they are not being taught a lesson in spelling, they are being exposed to themes of difference and coexistence, not to mention exposure to kinds of

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32. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 13.

33. *Ibid.*, 14.

34. *Ibid.*, 12.

35. Davis, *Street Gang*, 154, Inspired by a PSA on the urban life of children as part of the "Give a Damn" ad campaign by the New York Urban Coalition, Jon Stone decided that the show have an urban set. This came in part from the realization that "For a preschool child in Harlem, the street is where the action is. As often as not she is housebound all day while her mother works, and, from the vantage point of her apartment, the sidewalk outside must look like Utopia. Outside there are kids hollering, jumping double Dutch, running through the open hydrants, playing stickball. Our set had to be an inner-city street, and more particularly it had to be a brownstone so that the cast and kids could 'stoop' in the age-old New York tradition, sitting on the front steps and watching the world go by." The set was modeled after the actual streets and buildings of Harlem by set designer Charles Rosen. In particular, Stone wanted a movie style set, in all its detail, not the cardboard and canvas of children's television at the time.

music which they may not have heard otherwise. In this way, the world is rendered educational. Likewise, education is rendered worldly as, for example, B.B. King singing about words that start with B. This is a lesson in literacy presented through music which is very much “of the world” and has its own real racial, social, and historical discourses which are rendered in its very vibrations. This is not “childrens music” or music built from scratch particularly to teach children words that start with B, but rather a worldly art form adapted for this particular lesson-context.

This all makes sense given that the program was developed in order to help close the gap between underprivileged and higher class preschoolers.<sup>36</sup> These are learners who, definitionally, have not yet been schooled. Therefore all of their learning so far has been casual and incidental. Illich addresses this exact problem when he argues in the introduction to *Deschooling Society*, that poor students will always be behind their wealthier counterparts<sup>37</sup> because most learning happens casually, as a result of interest or circumstance.<sup>38</sup> A non-striated, Illichian education, then makes perfect sense for a televised early-childhood supplement.

I say all of this not to make the hard-line argument that *Sesame Street* is virtuous and non-traditional, but rather that is resistant to educational classifications. It is somehow at once instructivist yet open-ended. This is what I mean when I say that *Sesame Street* is non-striated: It is not a reproduction of the traditional classroom where students are coerced into learning what their teachers deem important, but instead learners are free to interpret the skits to find whatever emotional or cultural meaning that they themselves need. Neither is it a smooth Deleuzeian space with no educational goals or structure at all, but instead a sandboxed, curated space of open-ended cultural and emotional learning.

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36. Cooney, “The Potential Uses of Television in Childrens Education,” sec. 1.

37. Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 5.

38. Ibid., 7.

## **The question of funding and political backgrounds**



## Part II

The Worm-Listener:  
Parody, Virtuosity, and Childhood

## Prologue: The Worm Listener

I spent something like a quarter of my life on the south side of Chicago. There was a summer during that period where I got into the habit of biking down to the 63rd street beach to comb the sandy shore for pebbles. There were two kinds that interested me: shiny black pieces of anthracite coal, and pale grey honeycombs of steel slag. Some thirty miles down the coast, at what now is the Indiana Dunes National Park, the beach is littered with pebbles of all kinds, glittering happily beneath the surf or ice of the ancient lake. Here, however, in the scorched earth left behind by the bonfire that built and destroyed America, the pebbles were largely fossils of that recent past.

That summer I went on a sound walk organized by the Midwest Society of Acoustic Ecology at the former site of the US Steel foundry. A section of the massive industrial campus had been re-wilded and returned to its pre-steel state of freshwater marsh. Some birds chirped, we saw an egret, but it had turned out to be one of those hot summer days where the air is still, heavy, and all the more stifling for its enveloping silence.

At some point the walk took us to a part of the wooded hammock where the artists had driven microphones—geophones—into the earth. When my turn came around I put on the headphones and listened.

I was immediately made aware of my own weight on the ground beneath me. Any small motion and I would hear myself in the microphone like an earthquake. Any large motion and the bugs, which I now realized were all around me, would stop and I would have to wait for some time before they started to move again.

I had never heard anything like it. It was a sound impossible to describe in terms of our air-based hearing. And I was part of it. The subterranean bugs heard

and responded to me just as I to them. Through the assistive technology of contact microphones and digital amplifiers, I was given access to the worm's-ear view of the ever-present world beneath my feet. The sounds were foreign, but in no way unpleasant. Is this the sound of an ant, a worm? I don't know, but I like it. For me as an air-based listener, this was the sonic experience of a complete outsider.

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The Bernstein Young Peoples Concerts...

## Listening *with* the Music: Ecological Humor

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