

SYLWIA MAKOMASKA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5565-3354>

Institute of Musicology, Faculty of History, University of Warsaw

Erik Satie – the ‘progenitor’ of muzak or the precursor of ‘pipedown’ movement? On the concept of musique d’ameublement

ABSTRACT: Erik Satie (1866–1925) was a colourful and intriguing artist in the world of Parisian avant-garde. In the turbulent times of the early 20th century he created the concept of *musique d’ameublement* (‘furniture music’) – a vision of music that did not require attentive listening because it was supposed to play an extravagant role (as it was perceived in that period) of an acoustic background accompanying all everyday events.

A change in recording and sound reproduction techniques in the 20th century that led to the ubiquity of music in the contemporary world seems to confirm that Satie’s ‘furniture music’ can be treated as a prophetic idea. However, the problem of how the concept of *musique d’ameublement* should be interpreted still remains ambiguous.

The main aim of the present paper is to discuss the two contrary ways of the interpretation of ‘furniture music’. The first approach assumes that Satie can be treated as ‘the progenitor’ of muzak – a musical genre initially associated with the activities of Muzak company and then gradually identified with any background music provided on a mass scale to the public space.

The second approach is an attempt to interpret the concept of *musique d’ameublement* in a completely different way – as an expression of opposition to an increasingly mechanized Western world dominated by progress and technology, where the role of music boils down only to the function of the acoustic background. Therefore, Satie becomes one of the precursors of the actions taken by the opponents of muzak (e. g. pipedown movements), who seek to eliminate the imposed background music from the public space. The reconstruction of *musique d’ameublement* (basing, inter alia, on selected source materials) is treated as a starting point for the discussion that leads to the acoustic ecology perspective.

KEYWORDS: Erik Satie, *musique d’ameublement*, furniture music, muzak, acoustic ecology, pipedown campaign

[A]ll that is serious in life comes from our freedom. [...] What, then, is needed to transform all this into a comedy? Realising that our apparent freedom conceals the strings of a puppet master and that we are, as the poet [Diderot – S. M.] said ‘humble marionettes/ Whose strings are held in the hands of Necessity’.

(Bergson, 1900, p. 39 after Potter, 2016, p. xii).

Introduction

Erik Satie (1866–1925) occupies a special place in the vast and varied panorama of 20th century cultural phenomena. As an extremely colourful figure of the Parisian avant-garde of the turn of the century, he functioned not only in the world of music, but his artistic activity stretched ‘from cabaret to religion, from calligraphy to poetry and playwriting’ (Potter, 2013, p. xiii). He collaborated with many leading artists such as Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Sergei Diaghilev, René Clair, Claude Debussy, Darius Milhaud and Igor Stravinsky. He witnessed and participated in many cultural, social and technological breakthroughs. Ambiguity is a feature that seems to best characterize his creative attitude, so it is not surprising that during his lifetime and many years after his death Satie escapes all attempts at classification. As Ornella Volta notes:

[h]e never adhered to any ‘movement’; indeed he vigorously proclaimed ‘the independence of his aesthetic’. Yet at different times a wide range of schools including Symbolism, Cubism, Neo-Classicism, Dada, Surrealism, conceptual art, repetitive music, minimalism, Fluxus, New Age, and Ambient music, have seen him as one of theirs (...).

Satie has always disturbed people, as much in recent years as in his lifetime, but not always for the same reasons. Some of his inventions, which at the time were considered completely preposterous (...) have since become common coin. (...) Satie still seems, even now, contemporary, because the problems he brought to light remain unresolved (Volta, 1996a, p. 9).

The group of ‘unresolved problems’ undoubtedly includes the concept of background music, which Satie described as *musique d’ameublement* (furniture music). This intriguing and shocking vision of music, which does not require attentive listening, because it is supposed to be treated as an acoustic background accompanying all everyday activities, was created

when the culture of the masses and mass-media had not yet infiltrated daily life. What was known as ‘grande musique’ (as opposed to ‘musique légère’, the light music of the common people) was the preserve of the élite and their formal occasions, or the intimate circles of connoisseurs, artists and poets who, as in Balestrieri’s famous painting of Beethoven, held their heads in their hands as they listened in the shadows to some renowned performer (Volta, 1998a, p. III).

From the very beginning of his creative path Satie sought to blur the border between high and low genres, he was critical of the canons of tradition and postulated bringing music closer to life in its everyday manifestations (Jarzębska, 2004; Skowron, 1995). The concept of *musique d’ameublement* is, on the one hand, a manifestation of a new understanding of art and, on the other hand, a prophetic vision, especially in the context of changes in the technique of sound recording and reproduction in the 20th century and the omnipresence of music

in the contemporary world, in which music increasingly often plays the role of an acoustic background both in an individually shaped acoustic space and in public places (Makomaska 2015a, 2016, 2017).

The term probably the most identified with background music in public places is muzak. This word, written with a capitalized initial, refers to the name of the American company Muzak, which since 1936 for over seventy years had been supplying specially programmed background music to various public places, such as restaurants, bars, railway stations, means of transport, shops and, above all, workplaces. These activities were carried out on a massive scale, so it is not surprising that over time the name muzak (written in lowercase) and its synonyms such as easy listening music, pipe music, elevator music or canned music, began to be used to describe any background music that the listener only notices when it stops (see also Lanza, 2004; Makomaska, 2017). Although the roots of the muzak date back to the early twentieth century, when George Owen Squier (1865–1934) began research on wireless signal transmission for the American army, in many scientific works Satie appears in the role of a precursor to this genre and Muzak’s activities.

But is he rightly described by contemporary researchers as ‘Muzak’s true progenitor’? (Lanza, 2004, p. 17) Is there any reason to treat the concept of *musique d’ameublement* in a completely different way – as an expression of opposition to an increasingly mechanized world dominated by progress and technology, where the role of music boils down only to the function of the acoustic background? Therefore, can Satie be ‘on the other side of the barricade’ as one of the precursors of the actions taken by the opponents of muzak (e. g. pipedown movements), who seek to eliminate the imposed background music from the public space? In search of answers to such questions, it is worth taking a closer look at the main assumptions of the concept of ‘furniture music’.

Musique d’ameublement – an attempt at reconstruction

The time when the concept of ‘furniture music’ was created or rather formulated, as well as its sources of inspiration, were themes that appeared from the beginning of research on the life and work of Erik Satie (including Tempelier, 1932; Myers, 1948; Shattuck 1969), as well as in later books (including Orledge, 1992; Whiting, 1999; Kahn, 2001; Davis, 2007; Potter, 2013). These considerations, however, appeared on the margins of the overall works devoted to the composer. A breakthrough was undoubtedly the critical edition of *Erik Satie: Musiques d’ameublement pour petit ensemble* edited by Ornella Volta, who in the foreword to the score attempted to reconstruct the concept of ‘furniture music’ (Volta, 1998a). In the following years Volta’s research was significantly deepened thanks to the publications of Caroline Potter, who in her last comprehensive work on Satie’s life and work (Potter 2016) included previously unknown sources (see also Potter, 2015) and thoroughly discussed the context in which the composer had functioned.

The quite diverse source materials published so far (in French and in translations – mainly into English) in the form of facsimile editions or critical editions (e.g. the composer's writings or *musique d'ameublement* scores i. a. Volta 1979, 1996b, 1998b, 2003) and quite rich subject literature (especially the composer's biographies) provide a very good starting point for a full reconstruction of the concept, as well as for its further in-depth analysis. This is not an easy task, and the complexity of the research may be evidenced by the fact that in the composer's latest biography, prior to the beginning of the basic text in the *Personalia* section, Potter lists and cites short biographical notes of over eighty (sic!) key figures from the world of the Paris avant-garde with whom Satie had the opportunity to cooperate and who influenced his artistic path to a greater or lesser degree (Potter, 2016, pp. xx-xxix).

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the scientific literature the discussion on the concept of 'furniture music' is dominated by the theme of 'cross-disciplinary' context of the composer's work, and in particular the sources of inspiration from visual arts are highlighted. Such an approach, although justified, does not reflect the whole issue. This is because an important complement is brought by a look at the *musique d'ameublement* through the prism of the listening experience of the composer, who was dealing on a daily basis with 'light' background music performed, among others, in restaurants and cafés in Paris at the time.

The second lead points at an episode, which in the context of the genesis of 'furniture music' is probably the most frequently cited in both scientific literature and popular scientific works. It refers to an event that took place in one of Parisian restaurants at the beginning of the 1920s. According to an account by the painter Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Satie was to make an appointment for lunch with his friends. Unfortunately, the meeting was a failure, because all attempts at conversation were disturbed by the orchestra playing in the restaurant, which performed the music so loudly that it was not possible to hold a normal conversation. This unbearable music made the friends leave the venue, and Satie was to comment on the situation with the following words:

Furniture music [fr. *musique d'ameublement* – S. M.] is something that should be created – that is, music which would be part of the ambience, which would take account of it. I imagine it being melodic in nature: it would soften the noise of knives and forks without dominating them, without imposing itself. It would furnish those silences which sometimes hang heavy between diners. It would save them from everyday banalities. At the same time, it would neutralise those street sounds which impinge on us indiscreetly (Léger, 1952, p. 137 after Potter, 2016, p. 144).

Only more than thirty years after the meeting, in the French magazine *La Revue musicale* in a special issue entitled *Erik Satie: son temps et ses amis* (published in June 1952) and edited, among others, by one of Satie's first biographers – Rollo H. Myers, Léger quoted words that Satie was supposed to say after leaving the restaurant. According to Potter, it is unlikely that an artist who knew Satie only superficially and maintained contact with him only in the last years of his life would be able to quote the composer's words exactly after such a long time. In this context, it seems more justified to assume that this is a paraphrase rather than a faithful quotation (Potter, 2013, 2016). However, despite doubts about

the degree of accuracy of the relation from the meeting itself, the essence of the concept of ‘furniture music’, understood as an unobtrusive and non-disturbing acoustic background, has been preserved.

This is confirmed by, among other things, an analysis of a note made by the composer probably around 1917 and addressed to Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) – a French poet, playwright, film director, screenwriter, painter, as well as a choreographer, with whom Satie has repeatedly collaborated on a ballet *Parade* staged by Sergei Diaghilev’s Russian Ballets:

‘Furniture Music’ is something which is manufactured. What usually happens is that people make music on occasions when music has *no purpose*. People play waltzes, ‘fantasies’ based on operas, & similar things, written for another reason.

We, however, want to establish a musical genre made to satisfy ‘needs’. Art doesn’t come into it. ‘Furniture Music’ creates vibrations; it has no other aims’ it fulfils the same role as light, heat and *comfort* in all its forms (Volta, 1979, p. 190 after: Potter, 2016, p. 145).

The above quotations show a rather coherent concept of background music, which is supposed to be only a ‘comfortable’ part of the environment and does not require an attentive listening. It has nothing to do with art, but instead it fulfils other (extra-aesthetic) functions: it soothes and neutralizes the sounds of the environment, as well as fills uncomfortable and awkward silence, which, for example, may appear between people eating together. In the concept of the French composer, ‘furniture music’ becomes something between (usually undesirable) ambient noise and silence. At the same time, it is supposed to be a counterbalance to the then dominant popular music, which functioned in public space as an acoustic background.

Such an interpretation may also be supported by the analysis of some of the facts from the composer’s life, especially from the first phase of his career, when at the turn of the century he played the piano in cafes at Montmartre (Orledge, 1992; Potter, 2013, 2015). It is then reasonable to assume that this experience contributed to the development of the perverse idea of creating ‘furniture music’. It is very possible that the repertoire performed by the composer in cafes consisted of the aforementioned ‘waltzes, “fantasies” based on operas, and [other] similar things’, hence the sarcastic tone in a note addressed to Cocteau. Of course, it would be too simplistic to treat this activity as the only starting point for the concept itself, because the multidisciplinary context of Satie’s work is an important element – a theme discussed in the composer’s subsequent biographers.

Volta draws attention to the inspirations coming from visual arts. She emphasizes that the concept of background music perceived as decoration or wallpaper has been present in Sati’s work from the very beginning. In the preface to the score *Erik Satie: Musiques d’ameublement pour petit ensemble*, the author notes that Satie was

[f]ascinated by the serene harmony of Puvis de Chavannes’ frescos, he aspired from the 1890s to compose ‘decorative’ music, not in the sense of ornamental music but rather as part of a sonic environment uniting, in an ideal symbiosis composer, interpreter and listener. With his three preludes for [Péladan’s play] *Fils des étoiles*, he made this clear when he specified the ‘decorative themes’ that inspired them, which corresponded simply to the décor and ambience in each act of

the play: the Night of Kaldea, the Low Room of the Grand Temple and the Terrace of the Goudéa Palace (Volta, 1998a, p. iv).

According to Volta, then, the work of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898), a French painter, one of the representatives of symbolism in art, was the source of inspiration for the preludes *Le Fils des étoiles*. It is worth noting that Puvis de Chavannes did not paint frescoes, and the paintings (found in Amiens, Paris Town Hall and Pantheon, Poitiers, Marseille, Sorbonne and the library in Boston) are made on canvas glued on the wall. The author also refers to Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), a French novelist who founded the Salon de la Rose-Croix du Temple, bringing together painters, writers and musicians, especially representatives of symbolism, in the years 1892–1897. It was for the salon de la Rose-Croix Satie that he composed in 1891 *Le Fils des étoiles*, which Volta sees as one of the first examples of background music.

Robert Orledge (1992) points to different sources of inspiration from visual art. He notes that the desire to create music, which was to accompany all everyday events that did not absorb the listener's attention, resulted from the fascination with Henri Matisse's (1869–1954) artistic concepts. This French painter and graphic artist is considered to be the creator of fauvism, a trend in French painting at the beginning of the 20th century, created as

reaction and protest against impressionism and symbolism [...] The name of the direction was derived from the opinions of outraged French critics who called the exhibition in the Autumn Salon in 1905 *cage de Fauves* (a cage of wildcats); supporters of fauvism assumed the use of patches of pure colour in sharp, often contrasting juxtapositions, harmonizing with a strongly simplified, deformed drawing (Słownik Sztuki, 2008, p. 153).

Orledge (1992, p. 222) after Myers (1968, p. 60) quotes the statement that Matisse: 'dreamed of an art without any distracting subject matter which might be compared to a good armchair'. The perception of art in terms of comfortable furniture seems to be an appropriate starting point for the *musique d'ameublement* concept, especially with regard to the name 'music furniture' itself. Satie's friendship with André Derain (1880–1954), whom the composer considered to be the greatest painter of fauvism, may also be a confirmation of his close relations with the Fauvist group, which was active between 1905 and 1908. It was Satie who, in 1912, convinced the painter to continue his work after the crisis caused by alcoholism.

According to Potter (2016), the key moment of crystallization of the *musique d'ameublement* concept was the period of World War I, when Satie, surrounded by various artists, stayed in the Montparnasse district, on the left bank of the Seine. Due to the fact that during World War I the places where concerts traditionally took place were closed, the artists were looking for alternative spaces for their work. One of such unconventional places, which had not been associated with performing music before, was the artistic studio at 6 rue Huyghenes. Its owner was the painter Émile Lejeune (1885–1964). Many artists such as Georges Auric (1899–1983), Louis Durey (1888–1979), Arthur Honegger (1892–1955) and Satie presented their compositions there. The group *Les nouveaux jeunes*, initiated by Satie, was formed around the studio. It is worth mentioning that

this group can be regarded as the original figure of the later formed group *Les Six*, bringing together composers such as Auric, Durey, Honegger, Darius Milhaud (1892–1974), Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) and Germaine Tailleferre (1892–1983).

Referring to the activities of the studio at 6 rue Huyghenes, Lejeune described his memories of Montparnasse in a series of articles published in 1964 in the *Tribune de Genève*. An intriguing story about Satie can be found among them:

Poets also collaborated in these events [at 6 rue Huyghens]. For our catalogue, Jean Cocteau and Blaise Cendrars each wrote a poem dedicated to Satie. The latter, swearing me to secrecy, warned me that during the exhibition opening he would sit at the piano and discreetly improvise. He said ‘It would be furniture music. I want the visitors to circulate: I’m counting on you and your friends, to whom I have also spoken, to set the tone’ (Lejeune, 1964, p. I in Potter, 2016, p. 151).

In his account Lejeune refers to an event that took place on 17 November 1916 when two songs were presented: *Hommage à Erik Satie* by Cocteau and *Le Musickissime* by the French poet and writer Blaise Cendrars (1887–1961). Unfortunately, the account of the meeting was not confirmed by other sources, but assuming that it is true, we can conclude that the concept of ‘furniture music’ was born in an artistic, multidisciplinary context. This is also confirmed by the fact that the first experiments with *musique d’ameublement* appeared in Satie’s oeuvre at the time when the one-act ballet *Parade* composed in 1916–17 for Sergei Diaghilev’s Russian Ballets was created. It is worth mentioning that the ballet premiered on May 18, 1917 in the Parisian Théâtre du Châtelet and was the result of cooperation with Jean Cocteau (libretto), Pablo Picasso (costumes and set design) and Léonid Massine (choreography).

Alicja Jarzębska describes *Parade* as a ‘scandalous spectacle’ in which ‘[c]haracteristic for the Dada movement, sarcastic and contesting aesthetic attitude’ was reflected (Jarzębska, 2004, p. 146). It is worth recalling the words of Hans Richter, one of the co-founders of Dadaism, who claimed that

[d]adaism was not an artistic direction in the traditional sense of the word, it was a storm that fell on art at the same time as the World War collapsed on nations. This storm [...] left behind a new day, when the energies accumulated in and emitted by dadaism expressed themselves in the form of new forms, at the same time turning towards new people. Dadaism had no uniform formal determinants like other styles, but it carried with it a new artistic ethic, from which [...] new forms of expression emerged (Richter, 1986, p. 9).

According to Jarzębska, Satie could also have been influenced by ‘the movement called surrealism, which took shape in the 1920s and which gave a particularly important place in human activity to creativity and art’ (Jarzębska, 2004, p. 143–144). This assumption is most justified given the fact that in 1917 Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) used the term ‘surrealism’ in a program written on the occasion of the presentation of the performance of *Parade*. This was probably the second situation in which the term was ‘officially’ used. It appeared for the first time in the subtitle of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, the Apollinaire’s play, which he described as *drame surréaliste* (after: Jarzębska, 2004, p. 144). The concept of *musique d’ameublement* seen from the perspective of Dadaism and surrealism

can be treated as a vision of 'liberated artist', anarchic, not afraid of shocking grotesque, caricature or provocative mockery (Jarzębska, 2004, p. 145).

If we add to this the manifesto Cocteau *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* (1918), which echoes the 'manifestation of a new spirit' (*l'esprit nouveau*) expressed by Appolinaire and Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris (known as Le Corbusier), then 'furniture music' becomes a response to the proclaimed 'need to bring artistic creation (high) closer to applied (low) music, associated with the circus, musical, cabaret', shocking 'prudish bourgeoisie' and 'creating "daily music", whose basis would be a simple melody and raw harmony of sounds devoid of over-subtlety and esotericism' (Jarzębska, 2004, p. 147).

These elements are supplemented by a fascination with the urbanised and 'mechanical world'. In such an approach, the automated and infinitely repeated works that the composer himself described as *musique d'ameublement* seem to fit perfectly into the vision of a modern, yet absurdly coloured world. Original titles: *Tapisserie en fer forgé* (Wrought iron tapestry), *Carrelage phonique* (Sonic floor tiles), *Sons industriels* (Industrial sounds), or *Tenture de Cabinet préfectoral* (Wall hanging [or curtain] for a prefect's office) and, in the case of the first two works somewhat grotesque notes of the composer on the margins of manuscripts, explaining in which spaces and on which occasions they should be performed, also confirm this assumption (see also Makomaska, in press).

However, the concept itself, as well as its practical realization, takes on a completely different meaning in the context of the less known and at the same time surprising image of the composer, which Orledge outlined in *Satie the Composer* (1992). He notes that Satie

hated travel and upheaval as much as he hated the telephone and other modern inventions. He never sought to record his music for posterity (as Debussy and Fauré did), he never possessed a radio or listened to one, and he even refused to use the Métro. In short, his essential world idealized the medieval past rather than the present or the future, and he showed an unexpected distrust of modern technology and the conventional concept of progress. Only as far as music was concerned did he have a futuristic vision, which more than compensated for his other deficiencies (Orledge, 1992, p. 16).

The presented – surprisingly 'conservative' – profile is perfectly complemented by the words of Volta, who claimed that

Satie has often been described as a champion of ironic conformism. It is true that when faced with a situation he disliked, he would rebel against it simply by pushing it to its extreme consequences. By magnifying the effects, he hoped everyone would see it through his eyes (Volta, 1998a, p. III).

Epilogue

There is no doubt that 'furniture music' is a perverse and innovative quality on the basis of compositional concepts. This is probably the first attempt to intentionally manage the recipient's attention in such a way as to deliberately achieve the effect of a non-interfering and non-absorbing background (more in

Makomaska, in press) and in this sense we can speak of a certain analogy between *musique d’ameublement* and muzak. However, when we add to the image of an extravagant composer-innovator the image of a man slightly terrified by the mechanistic vision of the world, then ‘furniture music’ takes on a different resonance.

If, according to the archaeology of the audiosphere postulated by the pioneer of acoustic ecology, R. Murray Schafer, we extend the research perspective to the problem of ‘what was, in the place and time of the living creator, his home, the most widely understood acoustic context’ (Gołąb, 2011, p. 25), then the *musique d’ameublement* appears as a kind of ‘funhouse mirror’, in which the soundscape of Paris of that time is reflected, among other things, thanks to the barrel organs, which are a peculiar symbol of the new, mechanized world. According to Potter:

mechanical musical instruments had a strong impact on Satie’s music because of their repertoire (which focused largely on popular tunes) their sonic qualities and the repetitive nature of mechanical performance. Mechanistic repetition with surprise interjections is also a key component of humour, a quality so often associated with Satie (Potter, 2016, p. xii).

Following the course of the argument proposed by Maciej Gołąb,

if we commonly believe that a musician ‘hears more’ and reacts more vividly to acoustic impulses (not necessarily of a musical nature) coming from the sound environment, then we are a step away from the question, whether the audiosphere surrounding it does not influence not only conscious compositional strategies (such as program music or *imitatione della natura*, which has been established for centuries), but also the psychologically conditioned type of creativity, not always conscious, and perhaps sometimes, in extreme cases, fundamental for the aesthetics of expression (Gołąb, 2011, p. 26).

In Satie’s case, simplicity and mechanical repetitiveness are the features that dominate the construction of works classified by the composer as a *musique d’ameublement* and which seem to be an element of a conscious compositional strategy. As a result, Satie seeks to exaggerate a phenomenon which he feared and probably wanted to oppose. Such a conclusion, however, leads to a discussion about the presence of background music in public space and the compulsion to listen to the imposed ‘pseudo-music’. Witold Lutosławski drew attention to this problem in the 1960s, when he undertook actions on international scope aimed at eliminating from public space the so-called ‘elevator music’, identified with the activities of Muzak (see more in Makomaska, 2015a, 2015b).

The problem of ‘pollution of the soundscape’ is also one of the leading topics discussed by researchers gathered around the interdisciplinary current of acoustic ecology (e.g. Schafer, 1977) and ‘grassroots movements’ initiated in various countries of the so-called Western cultural circle. For example, since the 1990s there has been an organization in Great Britain called ‘Pipedown’, which runs ‘The campaign for freedom from piped music’. It is supported by many famous figures from the world of music, including Julian Lloyd Webber, Lesley Garette and Simon Rattle, who have one thing in common: they hate piped music, loathe its incessant jingle and detest the way they can’t escape it in pubs, restaurants and hotels; in the plane, train or bus; down the phone (pipedown.org.uk). The organization calls for signing the petition against piped music and

television in hospitals and doctors' surgeries, places which people have to visit and where forced music may be literally impossible to escape, and promotes background-music-free venues, by, among other things, publishing a guide to piped music-free pubs, and an on-line guide to many different types of quiet places.

Jean Cocteau, with whom Satie collaborated on many artistic projects, claimed that '[t]he smallest work by Satie is small the way a keyhole is small. Everything changes when you put eye to it – or you ear' (Cocteau in Volta, 1996, back cover). If we follow his suggestion, then in a perverse way it may turn out that *musique d'ameublement* is in fact a rather eccentric attempt to draw attention to the problem of the quality of soundscape, especially in relation to large cities, where technology gradually dominates and acoustic pollution has become a specific attribute of everyday life.

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