

## **Automobility and the Power of Sound**

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# Automobility and the Power of Sound

*Michael Bull*

... the car becomes a comfortable platform for the boomin' on-board sound system. ... The car emerges from this as a place of listening, an intrepid, scaled-up substitute for the solipsistic world of the personal stereo, a kind of giant armoured bed on wheels that can shout the driver's dwindling claims upon the world into dead public space at ever-increasing volume. (Gilroy, 2001: 96–7)

In the monad of the car the bourgeois dream of personal autonomy is partially realized; the more the outer world is excluded, the more this dream seems to be realized. (Stallabrass, 1996: 127)

**T**HE SOLITARY movement of people moving through the city each day represents a significant yet under-researched aspect of contemporary urban experience. This solitariness is often chosen as a preferred mode of movement, whether this is strolling down the street (Bull, 2000) or driving one's automobile (Brodsky, 2002; Putnam, 2000).<sup>1</sup> This desire for solitude in the automobile or in the street is mirrored in the desire for solitude in the home as many retreat into the most private spaces of their already privatized homes (Livingstone, 2002). Yet paradoxically this desire for solitude is often joined to compulsiveness towards social proximity and contact in daily life (Bauman, 2003; Katz and Aarhaus, 2002). This solitude is an accompanied solitude in which people walk to the personalized sounds of their personal stereo or drive to the sounds of their favourite radio station or CD.<sup>2</sup> An increasing number of us demand the intoxicating mixture of noise, proximity and privacy while on the move and have the technologies to precisely and successfully achieve these aims. The use of these largely sound technologies informs us about how we attempt to 'inhabit' the spaces within which we live. The use of these technologies appears to bind the

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disparate threads of much urban movement together for users, both 'filling' the spaces 'in-between' communication or meetings and structuring the spaces thus occupied. The use of sound, music and speech while on the move, whether it be in automobiles, through personal stereos or on mobile phones, appears to represent wider social transformations in everyday life. The intimate nature of an industrialized soundworld in the form of radio sounds (Hendy, 2000; Tacchi, 1999), recorded music and television (Livingstone, 2002) increasingly represent large parts of a privatized everyday life-world of urban citizens. This impacts upon habitual everyday notions of what it might mean to 'inhabit' certain spaces such as the automobile, the street, the shopping arcade (DeNora, 2000; McCarthy, 2001) or indeed the living room (Livingstone, 2002; Silverstone, 1994).

While the segmentation of the domestic living environment into privatized nodules of 'sound' consumption has long been widely recognized and studied (Livingstone, 2002; Meyrovitz, 1986; Williams, 1977), the movement of people through the 'public' spaces of cities to the sound of their personal stereo, radio and portable music system has gone relatively unnoticed in academic literature. Most empirical research involving the use of media and communication technologies has tended to focus solely upon fixed and primarily domestic forms of media use (Lull, 1990; Morley, 1992). Similarly, urban geographers have often ignored or discounted the significance of these technologies in discussing the geography of the street while the automobile has been largely neglected in urban and cultural (Urry, 2000).

The understanding of the meaning and relationship between the management of experience within mobile spaces of existence through the use of consumer technologies thus remains in its infancy. While social theorists have recently begun to explore the nature of 'mobilities' (Urry, 2000) and fluidities (Bauman, 2000, 2003) in urban experience, more often than not, many theorists still work within an 'immobile' and spatially discrete understanding of social space and place. Typically, in these accounts space is either understood statically or as a 'given', rather than in terms of how it is inhabited, appropriated and engaged with. For example, subjects are either seen to be in retreat from an urban overkill of the senses (Bauman, 2003; Sennett, 1990; Simmel, 1997) or to be moving sonambullistically through the anonymous 'non-spaces' of urban life (Augé, 1995). This over-determination of the structuring role of representational space tends to void both the role of the subject's volition and the way in which users habitually operationalize their experience through communication technologies. In this article I concentrate upon the experience of privatized movement to the sound of communication technologies in the automobile. This work follows on from my research into the nature and meaning of personal stereo use in urban culture (Bull, 2000).<sup>3</sup> The present work draws upon primary qualitative research into forms of automobility based upon interviews with car drivers undertaken over the last three years in the UK.<sup>4</sup> The study of the use of sound technologies in automobiles is particularly

useful as the automobile acts as a confluence of these mobile sound technologies: the mobile auditory system, the radio and now the mobile phone. I concentrate on structures of use rather than subcultures of use with the purpose of articulating the meaning of a spectrum of social practices enacted through a range of communication technologies. The investigation of the use of these technologies sheds light on the dialectic of ‘technology’ both as ‘artefact’ and ‘practice’. For example, the use of sound systems in automobiles is a particular form of technologically mediated experience in which experience itself appears to be ‘technological’ as the user actively constructs the meaning of their space through a range of strategies ranging from forms of auditory looking to forms of cognitive solipsism. In the following pages I demonstrate how users use these technologies to re-appropriate urban space actively and ‘fluidly’. For the purposes of this article ‘fluidity’ refers to the proposition that the meanings attached to automobility, or rather, automobile habitation, cannot be dissociated from the way in which consumers use the media in the home and, by extension, how many perceive the public realms of the city from the vantage point of the automobile. Fluidity is thus both literally about movement through geographical space and cognitive, in as much as users are able to transcend these very geographical spaces through the use of sound technologies.

### **Sonic Bridges and Automobility**

Since the 1960s automobiles have increasingly become sophisticated mobile sound machines equipped with CD players, digital radios, multiple speakers and of course mobile phones. Yet the use of sound technologies in automobiles pre-dates the 1960s. Significantly, the beginning of mass ownership of automobiles in the 1920s was also co-terminous with the growth of many domestic technologies of cultural reception – the radio, the gramophone and the telephone. Just as the home was becoming transformed into a space of aural pleasure and recreation for many, so the car was becoming the emblem of individualized freedom of movement. Yet privatized and mobile listening pre-existed the car radio – it had been possible to use portable crystal radios many years earlier. Earlier still, from the turn of the century the city dweller could plug into jukeboxes located outside railway stations and in cafes. Even home listening was often privatized as listeners to the radio often used headsets to listen to the sounds emanating from the ether (Kracauer, 1995). As early as the 1930s American auto manufacturers associated the radio with individualized listening in automobiles. In the space of five years, between 1936 and 1941, over 30 percent of US cars were fitted with radios (Butch, 2000). The use of sound in the car furthered the increasing mobility of sound use in Western culture in general:

The invention of the transistor in 1947 meant that by the mid-1950s increasing numbers of Americans were participating in what the industry called ‘out-of-home’ listening. At work, in the car, on the beach, people – especially the young – brought radios with them and used them to stake out their social

space by blanketing a particular area with their music, their sportscasts, their announcers. With transistors, sound redefined public space. (Douglas, 1999: 221)

The rise of the cassette deck in the 1960s further revolutionized the nature of automobile habitation, while today many cars are fitted with digital radios and sophisticated sound systems that work with push-button efficiency, enabling the driver to switch seamlessly between radio, cassette and CDs at will. This has helped to transform automobility from an experience of 'dwelling on the road' to one of 'dwelling in the car' (Urry, 1999, 2004).

For many contemporary drivers the proximity of the aural now defines car habitation. Drivers often describe the discomfort of spending time in their cars with only the sound of the engine to accompany them. Driving without the mediation of music or the voice qualitatively changes the experience of driving. Many drivers habitually switch on their radio as they enter their automobile, describing the space of the car as becoming energized as soon as the radio or music system is switched on:

In the mornings I feel relaxed when I get into my car. After rushing around getting ready, it's nice to unwind, put on my music and the heater and get myself ready for the day. (Jonathan)

I suppose I feel at ease, I put the radio on, put the keys in the ignition and I'm away. I've had new furry covers put on the car seats, so they are really comfortable and snug. In a way too, I suppose after getting out of the house, getting into Ruby [the car] is a way for me to relax and unwind. (Alexandria)

It comes on automatically when I switch the ignition on. Like I never switch the power off, so it automatically comes on as soon as I start the car. (Alicia)

Well it's on anyway. When the car starts it switches on. So it comes on automatically. (Gale)

I can't even start my car without music being on. It's automatic. Straight away, amplifiers turned on. Boom boom! (Kerry)

It's lonely in the car. I like to have music. (Joan)

I put it on to Radio 4, because I knew I had a long drive. So it depends what kind of drive, Radio 4, I wanted someone talking to me, yes, I need someone talking to me, so I put it on Radio 4. I want to be listening to a voice telling me about various bits of news. (Sharon)

It connects me to the world because you've got someone talking to you, to connect you. (Ben)

Mediated sound thus becomes a component part of what it is to drive. The sound of music competes with the sound of the engine and the spaces

outside the automobile. The use of personalized sound helps to produce a seamless web of experience from door to door. Automobile use mirrors personal stereo use in this context with users describing putting their earphones on as they leave home. Equally, both automobile users and personal stereo users often report that the first thing they do on arriving home is to switch on the television or radio. The we-ness of sound use in automobility is thus contextualized by the use of the mediated presence of sound in domestic contexts.

### **The Automobile as a Sonic Envelope**

The car is a little bit of a refuge. In a way, although people can see into the car and see what I'm doing, it's almost as if this is my own little world and nobody can see what I'm doing and if I want to sing loudly to the music, talk to myself or whatever it is, I don't have anyone else to answer to. I don't have to consider anyone else. I can behave exactly the way I want to. (Lucy)

I'm in a nice sealed, compact space. . . . I like my sounds up loud, it's all around you. It's not like walking around the kitchen where the sounds are not quite as I want them. (Trudy)

The automobile becomes a successful and personalized listening environment that is difficult to replicate in other domestic or public spaces unless one uses a personal stereo. Automobiles are potentially one of the most perfectible of acoustic listening chambers. Unlike living rooms, where manufacturers cannot control room size, furnishings and numbers of people, it is possible for acoustic designers to create a uniformly pleasant listening environment (Bose, 1984). Acoustic design permits even the drivers of convertibles to experience the immersive qualities of sound in the car:

I don't like not having music. I love driving my car. I've got an MXS (convertible). It's the only way to drive. . . . I change the music. If it's a nice sunny day it's more old-time jazz or something quite up and happy, some really good chirpy classical – it's nice and loud – in my car I've got speakers in the headrest, so although it's quite loud it's not very intrusive for everybody else. (Jane)

The more sound, the more immersive the experience, although the above driver is also aware of the seepage of sound, which in this case has a technological fix in the form of speakers in the headrests of the seats:

I quite like driving to dance music, because it's quite mindless in quite a nice way. I tend to tune into some fairly intense, particularly in London, techno-orientated dance music, which are the kind of tapes I would play as driving music. I also like sort of classic rock band sort of stuff, for a similar type of reason, it's not very challenging, but it's immersive. (Kate)

Drivers are able to coordinate the soundscape of the automobile to match

their mood or their journey. The automobile becomes a perfect listening booth for drivers who thus deny the contingency involved in their traversal of these routine spaces and times of daily life. Drivers thus construct visual space according to a privatized soundworld:

I've been on holiday driving. In the States we hired a convertible and we had to have a soundtrack, it's like a soundtrack of your holiday and it became actually quite a joke that it had to be certain music that we were listening to. Sort of like anything from America, stuff like Simon and Garfunkel through to sort of classic trashy American rock. Somehow it managed to make sense in that context whereas like driving round London something slightly more like Radiohead, sort of more intense, might somehow – you know. And then if it's kind of a, a grimy Sunday afternoon and you, you know you kind of, you feel like you want something really familiar so you'll put on, like a CD with something you really, really like and you feel kind of more at home with. (John)

While the 20th century is sometimes interpreted as both the century of the automobile (Brandon, 2002; Sachs, 1992) and of the moving image, it is also the century of mechanically reproduced sounds. While the juxtapositioning of two flows of experience, the actual movement of people through space with the spectatorship embedded in everyday consumer practices is provocative, it by no means exhausts the meanings attached to acts of 'looking'. While cities might well float by as some kind of filmic embodiment (Baudrillard, 1989) it is read as if this simulation takes place in silence. Drivers might thus become spectators through the simple act of looking through a windscreen. Thus the looking through a shop window or the watching of television become foundational elements of the experience of automobility. Despite its correct association of automobility with domestic spaces of consumption a visualist reading of automobile habitation assumes that drivers are continually looking out onto the world, in acts of 'objectification' rather than being preoccupied with living within the intimate space inside the automobile itself, or desiring the environment to mimic their desires. Paradoxically, visually based accounts of automobility may well mistake the mediated nature of the visual in automobility through their misunderstanding of the role of sound in transforming the visual apprehension of place. Vision is invariably audio-vision. Equally, audio-vision plays no role in the understanding of the dynamics of sound solipsism embedded in automobility.

### **Mobile Solipsism and Sound**

The management of experience through sound technologies is tied to implicit forms of control, control over oneself, others and the spaces passed through. Hence, it is unsurprising that drivers often prefer driving alone. In this way they are able more successfully to re-appropriate their time. Time possessed is more likely to be time enjoyed. The experience of immersion

in sound is thus enhanced by sole occupancy, which also permits the driver to have enhanced feelings of control and management of their environment, mood, thoughts and space beyond the gaze of ‘others’:

I can sit back in my car, enjoy the drive, listen to my sounds, not have to talk. (Trudy)

I don’t think there’s anything pleasant about being in a car with somebody else. . . . For me it’s quite a solitary thing. You just do it. You’re not thinking about – it’s quite – in many ways it’s quite like doing sport – you just switch off. . . . You’re just thinking little thoughts, you’re not really thinking about . . . it’s really quite contemplative and having to make conversations while you’re doing that . . . sometimes you want to make conversation but then you’d sooner not be driving around. I just like to get there. (Sarah)

Yes, because I can do all the driving. I can concentrate on the driving. I do really get quite absorbed in driving. I can listen to the radio or have the music on as a sort of atmosphere-provoking thing. Whereas if someone else is in the car I feel I shouldn’t have the music on ‘cause you can’t hear them and I can’t stand that, fighting for noise or quiet. I also find it more relaxing driving on my own because I don’t need to worry about them being uncomfortable and feeling that I’m going too fast. (Lisa)

I do a lot of thinking in the car. I find it quite a good time to be by myself and to sort of think things through and work out lists of food that I need on the way to the supermarket. . . . I drive more safely when somebody is not distracting me. I find that when there’s somebody in the car I feel that I have to talk to him or her. It’s not so much looking at them, it’s more that I find the mere listening to what they’re saying is making me less aware of the things happening on the road. I don’t like not to have that complete control. (Sara)

The automobile offers drivers a space to be alone with their mediated thoughts, a space that is pleasurable precisely because it offers no contradiction to the preoccupations of the driver. Automobiles thus become spaces of temporary respite from the demands of the ‘other’ while the driver is often sitting in gridlocked unison with all the other drivers who are in illusory control of their environment.

### **Sound Performances**

The car is a space of performance and communication where drivers report being in dialogue with the radio or singing in their own audited/privatized space. Baudrillard’s bubble is a fragile one, however, in which even aural absorption doesn’t fully protect the aural bubble of habitation. The space of a car is both one to look out from and to be looked in to. It is simultaneously private and public. Drivers both lose themselves in the pleasure of habitation and may also become increasingly aware of the ‘look’ of others. Many drivers sing or talk to their radio while driving:

Actually that's one thing I love about my car – she's all mine. I don't have to share her with anyone. I can do what I like in my car – with reason – I can turn the radio up full blast and have a good sing song without anyone looking at me. Actually, sometimes I suddenly realize that I'm merrily singing along, and the person in the next car is having a good laugh at me, but I forgot that people can see in and I get really embarrassed. (Alexandria)

I'll sing along at the top of my voice and I always worry what people in other cars think when they see me. They think I'm talking to myself or something. . . . I just sing along all the time. I don't stop, like every song that comes on. 'Cos I watch a lot of music channels at home, so I know the words to a lot of songs. If I'm listening to the radio, I'll sing along to practically every song that comes on. (Alicia)

I'm sitting there mouthing off to it. You talk, as you would any time when you're on your own. If the TVs on and there's some news programme, I'd talk, like that's a load of rubbish etc., I'd chatter away to it. (Sharon)

The space of the car becomes a free space in which the driver feels free to indulge their aural whims with no inhibitions. Houses have other occupants or neighbours to inhibit any such desire:

The louder the better. In fact, I use my car, I use it more than in the house, because I don't want to annoy the neighbours. But in the car, traffic is very noisy, so nobody can hear you. I sing incredibly loudly, especially on the motorway – In fact I have certain cassettes that I'll put on to sing incredibly loudly to. (Susan)

The sound of music, together with the sound of their own voice, acts so as to provide a greater sense of presence as well as transforming the time of driving. Mediated sound thus becomes an opportunity for interactive dialogue, of a personalized performance. Drivers, whether singing or listening, are not of course hermetically sealed from the outside world.

### **Talking Technologies**

Automobiles are also increasingly being used as spaces of interpersonal communication between drivers and 'absent' others. Paradoxically, while many drivers prefer to be alone in their automobile, increasing numbers also report using their driving time to communicate directly with others:

I hold the phone to my ear. . . . I often use it to catch up with people that I haven't spoken to for a while. It's a time when I know I'm going to be in the car for a while. I have had journeys that the journey may have been three hours long and I have spoken to three people during the journey, one for 45 minutes, another for half an hour, so I may have spent virtually the whole journey talking on the phone. (Lucy)

Using a mobile phone permits drivers to maintain social contacts during

‘road’ time. Time and journey are thus transformed into an intimate ‘one to one’ time:

It’s a good way to spend your time, talking and catching up. If I get bored, I’ll just put it onto my list, list of numbers. I will just flit through and . . . say I haven’t spoken to that person for ages . . . so the people at the beginning or the end of the alphabet do quite well! (Jane)

If users of mobile phones in the street transform representational space into their own privatized space as they converse with absent others, then this scene is replicated in the everyday use of mobile phones in automobiles. The automobile becomes a mobile, privatized and sophisticated communication machine through which the driver can choose whether to work, socialize or pass the time.

Sound technologies provide a form of accompanied solitude for consumers. Just as the technologies that make us feel secure on the street are also to some extent illusory forms of security, so ‘automobile self-sufficiency’ is equally an ideological or virtual self-sufficiency. The disjunction between the interior world of control and the external one of contingency and conflict becomes suspended as the occupant develops strategies for managing their experience of travel mediated by music or voice. Many drivers describe their automobiles as surrogate homes, yet these homes are far more dangerous than the non-mobile homes that many of us live in. The aural space of the automobile is perceived as a safe and intimate environment in which the mobile and contingent nature of the journey is experienced precisely as its opposite, in which the driver controls the journey precisely by controlling the inner environment of the automobile through sound.

### **Moving through Urban Space**

People do not flock to these temples in order to talk or sociate. Whatever company they may wish to enjoy they carry with them, like snails carry their homes. (Bauman, 2003: 98)

When I’m sat in a traffic jam or at traffic lights, in town especially, to ease the boredom, I quite enjoy watching what’s going on around me. I look in other people’s cars, and watch people walking down the street. I like to see what they’re doing and where they’re going. As I am in my car a lot, I do need something to take away the boredom. The radio is good for that too. Actually I find music in the car changes how I look at the outside. It entertains me to watch other people with my music on. It is as if they are walking along to the music. (Richard)

Simmel was perhaps the first sociologist who attempted to explain the significance and desire of urban citizens to maintain a sense of privacy, to create a mobile bubble, while on the move. Simmel’s concerns were with

sensory overload, crowds, strangers and the noisy maelstrom of the city from which citizens retreat.<sup>5</sup> Simmel charted the changing nature of bourgeois civility within the increasingly technologized urban geography of the early 20th century, addressing the relational nature and problems associated with people continually on the move in the city (Simmel, 1997). While the street was perceived as invariably unpleasant, travel often posed an equally impossible burden, with occupants of railway carriages having to sit and stare at strangers in close proximity for hours on end (Schivelbusch, 1986).<sup>6</sup> The alien nature of the city street thus became inscribed into mainstream urban studies. Richard Sennett describes a passivized urban space in which the urban subject falls silent:

Individual bodies moving through urban space gradually became detached from the space in which they moved, and from the people the space contained. As space became devalued through motion, individuals gradually lost a sense of sharing a fate with others . . . individuals create something like ghettos in their own bodily experience. (Sennett, 1994: 366)

Sennett perceives the geography of the city to be both neutral and repelling in the cognitive orientation of the Western City dweller. Bauman takes the repellent nature of the city one stage further by making it a moral imperative for the urban citizen to escape the street by getting into the secure space of the automobile:

For every resident of the modern world, social space is spattered over a vast sea of meaninglessness in the form of numerous larger and smaller blots of knowledge: oases of meaning and relevance amidst a featureless desert. Much of daily experience is spent travelling through semiotically empty spaces – moving physically from one island to another. (Bauman, 1993: 158)

Thus the perception of the automobile as a dominant means of escaping the street has become accepted in 20th-century accounts of the city (Kay, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Sachs, 1992). In support of this position, automobile users often claim that the spaces they habitually travel through hold little interest for them. They ‘look’ for the purposes of driving of course but prefer to be otherwise engaged with the sounds of music or voice. Many routine journeys take place in the ‘non-places’ of urban culture:

Clearly the word ‘non-place’ designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces. (Augé, 1995: 94)

For the purposes of my argument ‘non-places’ might refer to any space passed through in an automobile. As such a ‘non-space’ might be understood as signifying both a ‘quality’ of the space or as a cognitive orientation

to space. Augé significantly locates sound as the defining feature in the experiencing of time in non-space:

What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment. Since non-places are there to be passed through, they are measured in units of time. Itineraries do not work without timetables, lists of departure and arrival times. . . . Most cars are fitted with radios; the radio plays continuously in service stations and supermarkets. . . . Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news. (Augé, 1995:104)

Augé argues that we experience time in the continual present. However, this mistakes the shopping mall and the airport for the automobile interior. To exist in public non-places like shopping malls can be like being suspended in the continual present (DeNora, 2000). However, automobile habitation provides drivers with their own regulated soundscape that mediates their experience of these non-places and manages the flow of time as they wish. The meaning of these non-places is overlaid by the mediated space of the automobile from which meaning emanates. Drivers can choose the manner in which they attend to these non-places, or indeed transform these spaces into personalized spaces through the use of their sound technologies. Equally, drivers are not merely responding to the street but are often concerned with making the space of the automobile into one that reflects their desire for accompanied solitude.

The use of sound communication technologies in automobiles demonstrates a clear auditory reconceptualization of the spaces of habitation embodied in users' strategies of placing themselves 'elsewhere' in urban environments. Users tend to negate public spaces through their prioritization of their own technologically mediated private realm. These technologies enable users to transform the site of their experience into a form of 'sanctuary' (Sennett, 1994). Thus users are able to transform space through the use of these technologies. Users habitually exist within forms of accompanied solitude constructed through a manufactured industrialized auditory, either through mediated music or the voice of the 'other'. The preferred exclusion of many forms of intrusion constitutes a successful strategy for urban and personal management. Users tend to reclaim representational space precisely by privatizing it. As such the aural space of the automobile becomes a safe and intimate environment. Users feel empowered and safe but only as long as the sound of communication is turned up.

### **Sound Thinking**

The sensory environment of the city – like the habitual way in which we look, hear and experience – is closely tied to recent technological developments that are informed by the implicit assumption that it is possible to manage or control one's own social space (Bull, 2000). In constructing the above account of automobility and urban experience the work of Theodor

Adorno has cast a long shadow in developing an understanding of fluidity in relation to urban space. Unlike many writers in the field, Adorno was invariably sensitive to the fluidity of experience. For him, the front doors of our houses were always fragile and insubstantial barriers to the 'outside' world (Adorno, 1991). Yet the social world in the age of mechanical reproduction posed problems in terms of how subjects orientated themselves towards the problematic and ideological notion of autonomous subjectivity. While Adorno's work on technology and culture has often been understood in terms of its deterministic qualities, this should not overshadow the radical and utopian dimension to his social thought in these areas, whereby subjects strive to achieve satisfaction through the consumption of products of the culture industry (Leppert, 2002; Nichol森, 1997; Zuidervaart, 1991).

Adorno probably would not have been surprised by the success of mobile communication technologies – they are implicitly written into his critical theory of society. Both Walter Benjamin (1973) and Theodor Adorno (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973) understood that the very meaning of what it is to 'look' or 'hear' is irredeemably media-linked, with Benjamin focusing upon the visual while Adorno concentrated on the aural. Adorno recognized that sound technologies in particular transform our understanding of connection and proximity. Adorno described the nature of this aural proximity in terms of states of 'we-ness', the substitution or transformation of 'direct' experience by a mediated, technological form of aural experience. In typically dystopian terms Adorno argues that:

The feebler the subject's own sense of living, the stronger the happy illusion of attending to what they tell themselves is other people's life. The din and to-do of entertainment music feigns exceptional gala states; the 'we' that is set in all polyphonous music as the a priori of its meaning, the collective objectivity of the thing itself, turns into customer bait. Thus the jukebox in an empty pub will blare in order to lure 'suckers' with the false pretence of revelry in progress. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973: 56)

Adorno had already left the living room to walk out into the street in his analysis of sound technologies and the social expectations embedded in their use. The warmth of media messages is contrasted with the chill of the immediate, and the inability of structured forms of the social to satisfy the desire for proximity:

By circling them, by enveloping them as inherent in the musical phenomena – and turning them as listeners into participants, it [music] contributes ideologically to the integration which modern society never tires of achieving in reality. . . . It creates an illusion of immediacy in a totally mediated world, of proximity between strangers, the warmth of those who come to feel a chill of unmitigated struggle of all against all. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973: 56)

Increasingly this sense of mediated 'intimacy' becomes associated for Adorno, although not exclusively so, with a wide variety of forms of domestic

media consumption. The following comes from Adorno's understanding of television in the early 1950s:

The world, threateningly devoid of warmth, comes to him like something familiar, as if specially made just for him. . . . The lack of distance, the parody of fraternity and solidarity has surely contributed to the extraordinary popularity of the new medium. (Adorno in Leppert, 2002: 52)

Adorno perceives the urban subject as increasingly and actively seeking out forms of mediated company within which to live. Auditory media embody a form of compensatory metaphysics whereby subjects seek solutions to their everyday life. Adorno's work in this area can be creatively applied to the experience of driving; to looking in and looking out from the interior space of the automobile in order to assess what it might mean to 'look out' and 'move through' the world from the auditory box that the automobile has become. In focusing upon these concerns I re-appropriate Adorno's use of 'warmth' and 'chill' to denote the contrast between the mediated role of sound in expectations of the social and the 'chill' of the immediacy of 'public' areas of daily life. 'Warmth' becomes associated with various normative conceptions of 'home' while 'chill' is associated with the urban spaces we daily move through. These two variables are dialectically linked, the warmer one gets, the chillier the other becomes. This 'warmth' is both social and hence 'relational'. The warmth of media messages is contrasted with the chill of the immediate, and the inability of structured forms of the social to satisfy these desires.

The desire for company or 'occupancy' while moving through the city is thus contextualized through the daily or habitual use of a variety of media. The array of mobile sound media increasingly enables users to successfully maintain a sense of intimacy while moving through the city.

Analysing the use of mobile sound communication technologies in automobiles and elsewhere permits me to point to a transformation that has taken place within urban culture over the past 40 years. This transformation lies in urban citizens' increasing ability and desire to make the 'public' spaces of the city conform to a notion of a 'domestic' or 'intimate' private space. As consumers increasingly inhabit 'media saturated' spaces of intimacy, so they increasingly desire to make the public spaces passed through mimic their desires. In doing so drivers reclaim representational space precisely by privatizing it. The consequence for any notion of shared urban space appears serious as the warmth of privatized and mediated communication produces the 'chill' that surrounds it. Proximity and solitariness are increasingly dialectically linked in the mobilization of contemporary forms of sociality in such a way that in the future we may all become like Paul Gilroy's driver, shouting out, impotently, into dead urban space.

*Notes*

1. Putnam has recently pointed to the dominance of sole occupation in automobiles in America:

One inevitable consequence of how we have come to organize our lives spatially is that we spend measurably more of every day shuttling alone in metal boxes among the verticities of our private triangles. American adults average seventy-two minutes every day behind the wheel. . . . Private cars account for 86% of all trips in America, and two thirds of all car trips are made alone, a fraction that has been rising steadily. (2000: 247)

Equally Brodsky has commented upon the automobile as being ‘the most popular and frequently reported location for listening to music’ (2002: 219). Comparative analysis discloses that this privatizing tendency within automobility is largely a ‘western’ phenomenon. For example, Hirschkind (2001) demonstrates that taxis in Cairo are often spaces of contested politicized discourse. Automobiles are profoundly social: they enact the social, both in their denial of other people’s private space and in their reconfiguring of urban space generally.

2. Jonathan Sterne has recently argued that the history of the media in one sense is about ‘the construction of a private acoustic space’ (2003: 155).

3. This work investigated the interface between technology, the urban and the construction of everyday experience through personal stereo use. The analysis focused on three key themes: the specific auditory nature of personal stereo use; the role of the personal stereo in users’ strategies for managing urban experience; and the place of personal stereos in reconfiguring the relation, and the difference between public and private spheres.

4. This comprised qualitative interviews and diaries collected between 2000 and 2002 of 87 automobile drivers in London, Brighton and Cambridge. Data on the following have been referred to in this article:

Jonathan: a 36-year-old male, who is married with two children and who works in retailing. He has driven for 17 years and lives in London.

Alexandria: a 24-year-old female who has a clerical job in an insurance office. She has driven for two years.

Alicia: a 27-year-old nurse who has driven regularly since the age of 18.

Gale: a 20-year-old student.

Kerry: a 23-year-old hairdresser who has driven since the age of 18.

Joan: a 32-year-old administrator.

Sharon: a 35-year-old clinical psychologist, married with one child, who has driven since the age of 18.

Ben: a 37-year-old self-employed male, married with two children, who has driven since the age of 18.

Lucy: a 32-year-old charity worker who has driven since the age of 20.

Trudy: a 47-year-old female who is an academic administrator. Married with three children, she has driven for over 20 years.

Jane: a 28-year-old female who works in publishing.

Kate: a 23-year-old female who is a clerical worker in London.

John: a 36-year-old advertising executive who lives in London and is married with one child. He has driven since the age of 18.

Lisa: a 37-year-old administrator who has driven since the age of 18.

Sara: a 20-year-old student.

5. Urban conditions require:

. . . an inner barrier between people, a barrier, however, that is indispensable for the modern form of life. For the jostling crowdedness and the motley disorder of metropolitan communication would simply be unbearable without such psychological distance. Since contemporary urban culture, with its commercial, professional and social intercourse, forces us to be physically close to an enormous number of people, sensitive and nervous people would sink completely into despair if the objectification of social relationships did not bring with it an inner boundary and reserve. (Simmel, 1997: 178)

The blasé attitude constituted a defence against the perceived threat of city life in which engulfment was conceived of as both physical and psychical. The belief that urban subjects are subjects in retreat has become a core explanatory framework of everyday urban behaviour.

6. Schivelbusch charts the popularity of reading habits on trains in the 19th century:

The face-to-face arrangement that has once institutionalised an existing need for communication now became unbearable because there no longer was a reason for such communication. The seating in the railroad compartment forced travellers into a relationship based no longer on living need but an embarrassment. . . . As we have seen, the perusal of reading matter is an attempt to replace the conversation that is no longer possible. Fixing one's eyes to a book or newspaper, one is able to avoid the stare of the person sitting across the aisle. The embarrassing nature of this silent situation remains largely unconscious. (Schivelbusch, 1986: 74–5)

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