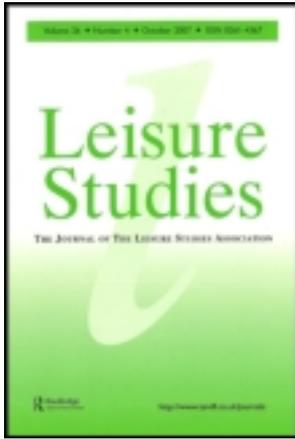


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No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening

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No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening

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ABSTRACT *In this paper I investigate the manner in which Apple iPod users re-inscribe their experiences of commuting through the use of music. I argue that the new technology of MP3 players gives users unprecedented power of control over their experience of time and space. They do so by managing their mood and orientation to space through the micro-management of personalised music. The paper analyses iPod users' management of daily urban experience through the use of empirical examples, locating the impulse to use mobile media such as the iPod in patterns of domestic media consumption. It draws upon a variety of urban and social theorists ranging from Sennett, Adorno and Lefebvre.*

KEYWORDS: *Apple ipod, mediation, solitariness, aestheticise, control, music, street*

Introduction

When I was a child, I used to watch a kids show called 'The Music Machine' and I always dreamed of having something like that. A device that plays any song there is. The iPod comes pretty close to the fulfilment of this childhood fantasy. (Sarah 2)¹

I can't overestimate the importance of having all my music available all the time. It gives me an unprecedented level of emotional control over my life. (Terry 3)

The solitary movement of people through the city each day represents a significant yet under researched aspect of contemporary urban experience. This solitariness is often imposed in the daily movement of people to and from their places of work, yet is equally often a preferable option for many as they either walk or drive to and from work (Bull, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Brodsky 2002). Yet this desire for solitude is often joined to a need for social proximity and contact in daily life (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Bauman, 2003). For many this solitude is an accompanied solitude in which people walk to the personalised sounds of their personal stereos and MP3 players.

With the introduction of MP3 technology the user is given unparalleled access to their music collection whilst on the move. Previous generations of personal stereos, whilst providing for portability, limited the consumer to a few choices of

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music due to their format, whereas machines like the Apple iPod enable users to store up to 10 000 songs. These entries can be arranged through 'play-lists' in any configuration the user desires. Technologies like the Apple iPod produce for their users an intoxicating mixture of music, proximity and privacy whilst on the move (Putnam, 2000; Brodsky, 2002).²

The use of these mobile sound technologies informs us about how users attempt to 'inhabit' the spaces within which they move. The use of these technologies appears to bind the disparate threads of much urban movement together, both 'filling' the spaces 'in-between' communication or meetings and structuring the spaces thus occupied. In the often-repressive 'realm of the eversame' (Adorno, 1976) or the 'ever-always-the-same' (Benjamin, 1973), the iPod user struggles to achieve a level of autonomy over time and place through the creation of a privatised auditory bubble. iPod users often refer to the magical nature of carrying their entire music collection with them wherever they go, thus giving them an unprecedented amount of choice of music to listen to. In this de-routinisation of time lies both the unalloyed pleasure of listening but also the management or control of the user's thoughts, feelings and observations as they manage both space and time.

It is to the notion of seamless auditory experience that the phrase 'no dead air' refers – this evocative phrase was used by Jean, a 35-year-old bank executive who was describing her morning commute to work in New York. She would scroll through her song titles looking for a particular song to listen to that would suit her mood at that particular moment and, whilst listening to that song, would scroll through her list for her next choice – her musical choices would merge seamlessly into one another during her journey time. Of course, this is merely one strategy for creating a seamless and aurally privatised listening experience for iPod users. More typically users will have a selection of play-lists that suit a variety of moods, times of the day or perhaps weather conditions or indeed times of the year. iPod users are often planners, spending hours creating play-lists for themselves in preparation for their routine journeys to and from work. Others, not so inclined, might just place their trust in the 'shuffle' mode of the iPod, which plays their music at random; in effect, giving themselves over to their music collection and the technology of the iPod. The ability to continually adjust music, whilst on the move, to moods with such sophistication and precision is relatively new if, indeed, the desire to do is not.

In my previous study of personal stereo use (Bull, 2000), I described the problematic strategies enacted by users in their attempt to judge what music to take with them on their daily commute. For some this was not a problem as they would play the same tape each day for months on end – forcing their environment to mimic the straight jacket of their own mindset. For others, however, a hastily bundled selection of tapes or CDs would go into their bag in the hope that it would serve the purpose. What united personal stereo users at the time was the claim that no music was better than the 'wrong' music, by which they meant music that did not correspond to their current mood. The development of MP3 players has now provided a technological fix to the management of the contingency of aural desire (most iPod users have a history of using other mobile listening technologies such as the personal stereo). Users now take their whole music collection with them in a machine that is not much larger than a small mobile phone. As one male user aptly describes, 'It gives me the ability to carry my entire music collection in my pocket

instead of a steamer trunk.’ (Mark 4). Equally, the personal stereo was commonly used as an ‘in-between device’ – from door to door – whereas the iPod expands the possibilities of use, from the playing of music through the user’s home hi-fi device, to plugging it into the automobile radio, to connecting it to the computer at work – giving the user unprecedented ability to weave the disparate threads of the day into one uniform soundtrack.

From home to street, from private setting to public arena, the media have helped link these two areas of daily life together in unexpected ways for many people. Whilst there has been much discussion on the nature of space/time compression involved in the use of communication technologies from the telegraph to the internet, and of the privatising potential of television (Harvey, 1996; Winston, 1998), most empirical research involving the use of these technologies has focussed solely upon domestic consumption in fixed locales, as if media effects and influences stop at the front door. Yet the sense of proximity created through modes of domestic use of the media acts as a ground to mobile use:

The early history of broadcast talk consisted largely in the attempt to create a world in which audiences would feel like participants. Today both the programming and reception of most commercial media, in the United States at least, actively cultivate a sense of intimate relations between persona and audience. Media culture is a lush jungle of fictional worlds where ‘everyone knows your name’, celebrities and politicians address audiences by first names, and conversational formats proliferate. (Peters, 1999: p. 217.)

Raymond Williams understood these phenomena in terms of ‘mobile privatisation’. Not the street, but our living rooms – and increasingly our bedrooms – become emporiums of visual and auditory delight. Recently, Sonia Livingstone has charted the consumption of the media amongst teenagers within the home. She found that they increasingly liked to consume the media privately:

The home increasingly becomes the site for individualised media consumption with children spending the majority of their home media use alone in their bedrooms. (Livingstone, 2002.)

Sole consumption is both pleasurable and controllable. Moreover, domestic consumption appears to fuel feelings of omnipotence (Morley, 2002). Equally, domestic use teaches consumers how to ‘fill in’ the spaces and times between activities. Consumers increasingly become used to the mediated presence of the media in our own privatised settings.

The desire for company or ‘occupancy’ whilst moving through the city is thus contextualised 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 whilst moving through the city. Theodor Adorno probably would not have been surprised by the success of personal stereos and iPods technologies – he recognised 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. For Adorno, music creates a form of sociability in a world that is increasingly bereft of it. As such, music performs an ideological function of integrating the user into the world:

People dread time, and so they invent a compensatory metaphysics of time because they blame time for the fact that in a reified world they no longer feel alive. This is what music talks them

out of. It confirms the society it entertains. The colour of the inner sense, the bright detailed imagery of the flow of time, assures a man that within the monotony of universal comparability there is still something particular. (Adorno, 1976: p. 48.)

For Adorno, the warmth of mediated music is contrasted to 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 & Adorno, 1973: p. 46.)

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 points to an emancipatory impulse in music reception. Lefebvre, coming from a similar dialectical position as Adorno, points to a 'spontaneity' in the everyday. Resistance, for Lefebvre, is located in the very nature of experience – there can be no identity between the 'subject' and 'object'; the iPod user and the world he or she lives in:

Moreover, the worker craves a sharp break with his work, compensation. He looks for this in leisure seen as entertainment or distraction. In this way leisure appears as the non-everyday in the everyday. We cannot step beyond the everyday. The marvellous can only continue to exist in fiction and the illusions that people share. There is no escape. And yet we wish to have the illusion of escape as near to hand as possible. An illusion not entirely illusory, but constituting a 'world' both apparent and real (the reality of appearances and the apparently real) quite different from the everyday world yet as open ended and as closely dovetailed into the everyday as possible. (Lefebvre, 1991b: p. 40.)

For Lefebvre, the partly illusory nature or compensatory factor in the above experiences does not detract from the fact that the experiences still might be understood as oppositional, creative and pleasurable. From this perspective, iPod users might be understood as creating spaces of freedom for themselves through the very use of technologies that tie them into consumer culture – yet, nevertheless, are not reducible to those technologies. The following iPod user points to the paradoxical nature of using a music technology to carve out her own sense of space in an effort to gain control of her daily experience:

Well, I think I've come to the conclusion that overall I feel pretty out of control in my life. Stores play music to get me to buy more. Work tells me what to do and when. Traffic decides how quickly I get from here to there. Even being in public places forces me to endure other people and their habits (the guy slurping his soup, the brat crying for a piece of candy.) I didn't realize how much I yearn for control and probably peace and quiet. Strange since I'm blasting music in my ears. I think I'm really tired of living on someone else's schedule. The MP3 digital music revolution has given me some control back. (Tracy 1)

In this article I demonstrate the power of music in enabling iPod users to construct meaningful and pleasurable narratives out of the routine linear and cyclical practices of their everyday movement through the city. In doing so I revisit and develop some of the themes first developed in my previous work on the nature and use of personal stereos. These issues concern the management of experience and the power of sound to direct experience.

This article is restricted to an analysis of the transformation of urban streets into privatised pleasure palaces. The recreation of urban mobile experience through the mediation of technology in the form of both music and the iPod itself points to a re-configuring of our understanding of both the meanings that we might attribute to the urban street and of meanings attributed to the time spent moving through those streets. iPod use, for example, appears to blur the distinction between work and leisure, between the 'non-spaces' of urban culture and the meaningful spaces associated with any individual's personal narrative. If users live within their chosen musical soundtrack then I argue that they attempt to reclaim the significance of their experience of time precisely in those areas of daily life that have previously been perceived to be of little significance in the literature on time, identity and experience: the daily movement of users through the city.

A Sound-Consuming Culture

Contemporary consumer culture is a sound-consuming culture in which daily life is increasingly mediated by a multitude of mechanically reproduced sounds (De Nora, 2000). We wake up to radio sounds, walk to music (Bull, 2000), drive to sound (Bull, 2003) and often relax and go to sleep accompanied by reproduced sound. Music follows us to work and is there when we shop, when we visit pubs, clubs and theme parks. Yet despite this routinisation of sound in consumer culture, it retains a largely 'utopian' place in consumer desire (Bull, 2004).

The ability of 'sound' to deliver what consumers want is increasingly wedded to the ability of consumers to create their own soundworlds. Privatised and mediated sound reproduction enables consumers to create intimate, manageable and aestheticised spaces in which they are increasingly able, and desire, to live. With the creation of Walkmans and now iPods we have seen a post-Fordist habitation of urban space. The packaged aural environment of the supermarket, departmental store or health club no longer necessarily fit the desires of the user. This despite the contemporary prevalence of niche marketing with health clubs and clothes stores creating an aural environment supposedly fashioned to their preferred consumers. iPod use demonstrates that, for many users, the uniqueness of their musical narrative and management of mood is no longer fulfillable even by the 'focused' production of auditory environments. iPod users often refer to the sense of power and wonderment achieved precisely through the individualising of 'representational space':

Since I was 8 years old I have acquired a CD/LP collection of more than 5000 items over the years. The biggest issue to me has always been what music to take along (on vacation, driving in a car, going out jogging or walking etc.). I made hundreds of compilation tapes (and later CDs), but what I was missing was the flexibility to listen to exactly the right song at the right time. With the 40 GB iPod, I can take most of the music with me that I own, and I can choose at any time, what song to listen to. (Daniel 5)

It was a revelation-having the ability to carry around several thousand songs (I think I've got about 3100 songs on my Pod now) and the ability to switch between them at will. It's a great deal of power to have over your environment. I love not being tied to the number of discs or tapes I can carry. (Kerry 6)

The personalised narratives of users' music choice is often incompatible with the 'muzak' found in an increasing number of public spaces. MP3 technology thus suits the progressively individualised aural taste of many consumers.

Sonic Bridges and Street Aesthetics

Each morning millions of urban inhabitants place a pair of headphones over their heads, or place ear-pieces directly into their ears, turn the music on as they leave home and tend to keep listening until they reach their destination. The focusing upon mood and the directing of intention often begins for the user at the start of the day:

I first put on my iPod either right before I leave my apartment in the morning, or right after. Most usually right before I step out the door, after my coat and bag is on. I set it playing once I've gotten outside on most days, though. There are mornings when I'll have a song stuck in my head when I wake up, and if that's the case it's usually the first song I put on when I turn on the iPod. If I don't have something specific in mind, I usually continue whatever had been playing when I turned it off the previous day. If it's not in the middle of something already, I'll just browse by artist until I find something that strikes my fancy. If I'm feeling indecisive I'll pick one of my big playlists set to random. The iPod generally comes off right before I get to the door to my office. If an album ends before I get there I'll take it off then. If a song is playing that I'm particularly fond of I'll take it off when the song is over. This means that some mornings I will take off my bag and coat and sit down with the headphones on, just so I can hear the rest of a really good song. If nobody's around I'll dance around a bit, too. (Kerry 6)

When I leave my apartment in the morning I grab my iPod and shove it in my pocket. By the time I get to the subway platform I am listening to my morning mix. This mix is 80s music ranging from Eurythmics to Blondie and The Smiths. It's an upbeat and a subtle mix that wakes me up and gets me motivated for my day. I will admit that some days I am not into the mood to go to work so I will put on something more sombre like Cat Power. I always plan what I will listen to and it reflects what I want to hear or feel at that time. Once I get in the elevator at my job I shut down the iPod so I can say 'Good morning' to my co-workers. (Joey 7)

Many users rarely mention the spaces that they daily pass through on their way to work; this may well be because they are so habitual as to not merit mention. However, users are often more attentive to their own mood and orientation which is facilitated by the sound pumped through the iPod in harmony with their desired mood, orientation or surroundings. iPod use re-orientates and re-spatialises experience which users often describe in solipsistic and aesthetic terms. Users frequently mention feelings of calm gained through listening to their iPod, in which the street is often represented as a mere backcloth, having minimal significance to the user. iPod use functions to simplify the user's environment thus enabling them to focus more clearly on their own state of being precisely by minimising the contingency of the street:

I feel as though life is a movie and is playing especially for me. If I listen to sad music, which I only listen to when I'm down (boyfriend break up, bad grade, just bad news) then everything sort of has a grey shadow over it, even when it's sunny outside. Music is like a drug to me, and not just one drug that does one thing, but many different drugs that magnetise your existing mood, or even sometimes the music is so powerful that it changes the mood you're in. Music can make you feel happy, horny, sad, wanting, etc ... It can do wonders. (Betty 8)

Frequently the iPod is more of a contemplative device than the actual thought of 'let's listen to music now'. Music is such a huge part of my life that it's almost imperative that I have something happening all the time. I have music stuck in my head almost nonstop for the same

reason. So, yes ... in certain moods, the iPod serves to extend and accentuate the mood rather than being a source of something to listen to. In fact, unless I'm listening to something specific (like a new artist), it's usually just there to have something playing in the background ... helps my thoughts along. (Brian 9)

Listening to chosen music enables these iPod users to focus in on themselves. In these situations the music enables users to clear a space for thought, imagination and mood maintenance. The random nature of the sounds of the street does not produce the correct configuration or force to successfully produce or create the focusing of thoughts in the desired direction. Users may also personalise the time of the journey through using music as a form of 'auditory mnemonic' through which they attempt to construct a sense of narrative within urban spaces. The construction of a narrative becomes an attempt to maintain a sense of pleasurable coherence through their journey. iPod use, in these situations, represents a form of biographical travelling. The narrative quality that users attach to music permits them to reconstruct these narrative memories at will in places where they would otherwise have difficulty in summoning them up. These memories provide the user with a feeling of being warmly wrapped up in their own personalised space – a re-inscribing of their spatial present:

There are certain playlists that I have put specifically together to fit certain moods (e.g. childhood, melancholy, road trips, party, dinner etc.). A song can transport me to any time and place in my life in a matter of seconds. It plays 'Wake Me Up, Before You Go Go' by Wham! and I am immediately walking down Oxford Street in my mind. It plays 'For a Few Dollars More' by Smokie, and I am back in my room at my parent's home, looking out of my window over the city of Zurich. It plays 'Unbelievable' by EMF, and I am back with my best friends in 'Serfaus' on our annual ski vacation that we used to have during the 90s. It plays 'Happy When it Rains' by Jesus and Mary Chain, and I am immediately back in the 'Swiss army', the time that I hated the most, but also brings back some of my most treasured memories, because my girlfriend was waiting for me at the train station, every time I got back home for the weekend. (Daniel 5)

For users who are habitually accompanied by music there arises a need for accompaniment as a constituent part of their experience. The world and their biography is recollected and accompanied by sound. This continuation of mood from home to street is achieved by bridging these spaces with music. Use can be described as creating a 'space' within which users unwind and unravel their emotions, thus providing a base for thinking more clearly or lucidly. If attended to the street becomes a function of either their mood and/or the music listened to:

I like to crank angry, loud music at night; the city seems so much more dark and brutal in the dark if I do that. Walking home, I sometimes listen to more soaring, passionate melodies and they make me see things differently (sorten Muld, in particular, has a lot of ancient-sounding hymns which are sort of trance-like, and they make everything seem to be reduced to more elemental things, just metal, wind, clouds and sunlight.) I listen to rhythmic and pulsating music sometimes, which makes me feel confident and secure ... I don't have to be anything but 'following the beat', so to speak. Sometimes I listen to piano music, and because most of my piano music is kind of depressing/saddening (in a good way), it makes the world seem more fragile and on the verge of collapse. Delerium's music always strikes me in this emotional, soul-searching way, and elevates even the smallest details to some greater significance; every movement of the people in the streets seems spiritual and sacred. Every once in a while I find songs that do this, and they really change everything. Massive Attack's 'Angel' is another one that does that-makes me swell up with this euphoric feeling! (Brian 9)

iPods tend to be non-interactive in the sense that users construct fantasies and maintain feelings of security precisely by not interacting with others or the environment. Aesthetic colonisation plays an important role in the daily use of iPod users. iPods are used both as a mundane accompaniment to the everyday and as a way of aestheticising and controlling that very experience. In doing so the iPod reorganises the user's relation to space and place. Sound colonises the listener but is also used to actively recreate and reconfigure the spaces of experience. Through the power of sound the world becomes intimate, known, and possessed. In consumer culture the imagination appears to work better with an accompaniment – iPod users find it difficult to aestheticise the street without their own individual soundtrack playing as a spur to the imagination.

Traditionally, street aesthetics have been understood through the notion of flânerie. Yet iPod users are no flâneurs; flâneurs traditionally imagined themselves in the shoes of those they observed – an alienated urban presence that wished to belong. iPod users rather make the urban street conform to their own aesthetic desire:

Just having my own personal soundtrack to life makes things more focused. When I have the music going I guess its best described as tunnel vision. Without it, everything going on is just sort of unordered and noisy and a mix of sounds and sights. There's 10 different conversations going on about 10 different things; people looking at you or doing their own thing. But when you have the soundtrack going it's like there's more a purpose. You're not just doing the motions that get me from my house to my classroom, but I'm making the trip between there. There's a definite purpose and sense of self. By sense of self, I mean that I can concentrate more on what I'm doing and less on what's going on around me with everyone else. (Matt 10)

Both the street and cognition become ordered, more focussed – creating a space for thought and imagination. The disjunction between the movement of the iPod user who walks to their own soundtrack and the movement of others and the buildings passed through cannot be underestimated. Essentially they are out of sync – one strategy of the iPod user is to create their own personal movie out of the scene they pass through. Traditionally, this aesthetic mode of being is non-interactive, in the sense that others are blissfully unaware and unaffected by the aesthetic impulse:

I see people like I do when I watch a movie ... there is a soundtrack to my encounters ... music to accompany my thought about others. It dramatizes things a bit, but it fills the silent void. (June 11)

For a start – and depending on what's playing – it can feel like you're in a film; your life acquires this literal 'soundtrack'. Secondly, I feel more insulated from what's going on around me. Other people appear to be extras in the film, rather than actors with whom I might end up interacting. (Adam 12)

The environment becomes less important for me, and seems to take on the aspect of the music. For example, there is a song by Radiohead called 'The National Anthem'. When I listen to this, the intense background noises in the song seem somehow to correspond with the crowds of people. I can imagine it's some sort of music video, as my visuals seem to work in tandem somehow with the music. (Sean 13)

For many iPod users the street is already being orchestrated to predictable sounds as they play their favourite play-lists. However some users play their music on random control, which means that they never know what part of their music

collection will be played next. For these users the surprise of what is played next throws up interesting aesthetic options for them:

I find that my iPod 'colours' my surroundings quite significantly; as it's on shuffle I don't know what's coming up next, and it often surprises me how the same street can look lively and busy and colourful one moment and then – when a different song starts – it can change to a mysterious and unnerving place. I like the sensation though. (Andy 14)

Some iPod users are more precise in their aesthetic re-creations, creating scenarios in which others play unwitting stand up parts:

For some reason, Talking Head songs seem to work best for this. Like, I will look at an old woman with a cane, and imagine her singing one lyric. Then move on to a hip-hop style teenage boy, and have him sing to the next line. My imagination really can take off. It sometimes makes me laugh and smile to myself – especially if a particularly amusing line comes up. It really does transform my surroundings – I sort of feel like I'm in my own music video. (Karen 15)

The world beyond the music being played through the iPod becomes a function of the desire of the user and is maintained through time through the act of listening. The world is thus brought into line through acts of privatised, yet mediated, cognition. The user's sense of space is one in which the distinction between private mood or orientation and their surroundings is often abolished. The world becomes one with the experience of the iPod user. This re-working of urban space and time further points to a post-Fordist urban stance enacted by iPod users through their individualising of space and time. This process is at odds with recent accounts of urban habitation centred on Auge's notion of 'non-space'. For Auge:

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. (Auge, 1995: p. 94.)

Yet my analysis of iPod use demonstrates that any space might be subjectively experienced by iPod users as a 'non-space'. Whilst motorways, for example, might be conceived of as non-spaces in the sense Auge means, the spaces experienced by iPod users are not structurally determined in the way that Auge assumes. The above analysis suggests that the meaning of space and time is also the result of a cognitive orientation to space. Auge also significantly locates sound as the defining feature of 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 time-tables, lists of departures 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. (Auge, 1995: p. 104.)

This structurally determined image of space and time is at odds with iPod users' accounts of urban experience. iPod use provides users with their own 'unique' regulated soundscape that mediates the experience of whatever space is passed through and regulates the flow of time as they wish. The meaning of these spaces, often received as 'non-spaces' by users, is overlain by the mediated space of their very own sonic envelope from which meaning emanates. iPod users choose the manner in which they attend to these spaces, transforming space and time into their own personalised narrative.

Crowded Streets

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

Simmel was perhaps the first sociologist to attempt to explain the significance and desire of urban citizens to maintain a sense of privacy, to create a mobile bubble, whilst on the move. Simmel's concerns were with sensory overload, crowds, strangers, and the noisy maelstrom of the city from which citizens retreat. Simmel charted the changing nature of bourgeois civility within the increasingly technologised 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). Whilst 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). The alien nature of the city street thus became inscribed into mainstream urban studies. Richard Sennett describes a passivised 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: p. 366.)

Sennett perceives the geography of the city to be both neutral and repelling in the cognitive orientation of the Western city dweller. Historically, it was the ears that were thought of as the most defenceless sense: the ears through which all sounds pass; unlike vision: you could always shut your eyes on the crowded train for example. The use of iPods empower the ears of the city dweller: the user can now re-organise the sounds of the city to his or her liking. This is both a continuation from the use of earlier 'privatising' technologies such as the personal stereo and a 'qualitative' transformation in as much as the user can now manage the interface between themselves and their environment through a multiplicity of music options. iPods empower the ears; auditory defencelessness is historicised. This empowerment also affects the other senses, as this paper has pointed out: the city becomes a personalised audio visual environment, yet even the sense of touch and the concomitant relational experience of the street is transformed, invariably making the iPod user happier as they move, empowered through the street:

It is usually a mood elevator or, at least, a mood intensifier. For example, if I'm wearing it on a crowded city street, the crush of people seems like an obstacle course and a fun challenge to wend my way through. Without it, I would be annoyed and frustrated at my lack of progress through the crowd, but with it, it's almost as if I'm dancing. If I'm frustrated or angry, intense, driving music makes me feel like I have company in my mood. Pleasant weather seems that much more pleasant with music to accompany me. I am aware that, even when I'm not singing along, the way I walk and move and my facial expressions are affected by what music is playing. (Malcolm 16)

When listening I find the rhythm of my path through people changes...I can ignore people better – the crowd dynamic in France is often difficult to handle (a lot of shoving), so the iPod reduces the impact of this. I also catch myself evaluating or thinking about people around me more when listening to music. (Patrick 17)

I must weave through a sea of people. I am usually in a big hurry and the music helps me do this weaving. I feel like I can slide in and out of peoples' pathways and not even brush up against them like the continuous beat of a song. Meanwhile sirens are going off, car horns honking, and people talking on their cell phones and so much urban chaos. I will have my iPod and be listening to music, staying focused on all the things I need to do. The iPod drowns out all this noise and chaos ... The subway is noisy with scratchy announcements and squeaking wheels. The noises make me irritated and nauseous, but if I have my headphones on it blocks the noises and makes me less irritable and impatient. If I wait on the subway platform for a half-hour I do not mind if I have my iPod to listen to. (Joey 7)

iPods can also be used as a form of conversational preserve, delimiting who the user wishes to converse with. On an everyday level, the use of an iPod is a method of not attending to interactional possibilities:

I treasure my commuting time as a much-needed private space. Having my iPod on decreases the chance that this will be invaded so makes me feel calmer. You see: the risk of a work colleague 'bumping into me', especially on the way home, and wanting to TALK(!) is reasonably high. The iPod helps. In fact, this evening, I was on the station platform and aware, out of the corner of my eye, that there was a colleague on the station platform. Having my iPod on made it possible for me to focus on the space in front of me (and so ignore him) without feeling that I looked disturbed! He's a nice bloke, of course; it's just that that commute time is the only real private time I get. (Adam 12)

Other users maintain their sense of autonomy as they move through the city. The following user describes walking through the streets of New York unfazed by both the attention of men and the blandness of her surroundings. She does not have to attend to the sounds of others or be captured in the glimpse of the eye as she moves to her own soundworld:

If I forget my iPod, it pretty much ruins my day. I crave it – need it – in order to tune out guys 'hey baby' -ing me, other people's conversations on the bus or subway, and colleague's phone conversations (work-related or otherwise). It also helps me feel less bored and soul-drained in malls, and less claustrophobic in crowds, which is very important to me. (Joey 7)

Users rather construct a range of interpersonal strategies that are inherently asymmetrical. Ways of audited looking are developed which are inherently non-reciprocal, functioning to bolster the user's sense of power and control in urban space.

Conclusion

The creation of a personalised soundworld through iPod use creates a form of accompanied solitude for its users in which they feel empowered, in control and self-sufficient as they travel through the spaces of the city. The disjunction between the interior world of control and the external one of contingency and conflict becomes suspended as the user develops strategies for managing their movement mediated by music. The mobile and contingent nature of the journey is experienced precisely as its opposite precisely by creating and managing their own soundworld. The iPod, in effect, warms up the spaces of mobile habitation for users.

The increasing ability and desire of users to make the 'public' spaces of the city mimic their desire for accompanied solitude also has other potentially ambiguous results. It appears that as users become immersed in their mobile media sound bubbles, so those spaces they habitually pass through in their daily lives may

increasingly lose significance for them and progressively turn into the ‘non-spaces’ of daily lives which they try, through those self same technologies, to transcend. The use of iPods demonstrates a clear auditory re-conceptualisation of the spaces of habitation embodied in users’ strategies of placing themselves ‘elsewhere’ in urban environments. Users tend to negate public spaces through their prioritisation of their own technologically mediated private realm. The uses of these technologies enable users to transform the site of their experience into a form of ‘sanctuary’ (Sennett, 1994). The attempted exclusion of all forms of unwanted intrusion constitutes a successful strategy for urban and personal management; a re-inscribing of personal space through the consumption of personalised music. In doing so, iPod users both re-claim representational space (Lefebvre, 1991a) and the daily ‘realm of the eversame’ precisely by privatising it.

Notes

1. The following empirical material derives from an ongoing qualitative research project on the use of iPods internationally. The 426 respondents are mainly from the UK, USA, Switzerland and Denmark. Respondents responded to interview requests posted on a variety of internet sites including Wired News, Macworld, BBC News Online and the Guardian Unlimited. Respondents completed a qualitative questionnaire of 35 questions. Individual respondents were then contacted again in relation to their specific responses. I have listed those used in this article below. The research is investigating the structural possibilities of iPod use and as such issues of local differences are not addressed in this paper. 1, Tracy is a 32-year-old publisher who works in the USA. 2, Sarah is a 23-year-old systems analyst living in Boston, USA. 3, Terry is a 23-year-old manager living in Calgary, Canada. 4, Mark is a 41-year-old network administrator living in the USA. 5, Daniel is a 37-year-old manager living in the USA. 6, Kerry is a 25-year-old medical technician living in Chicago, USA. 7, Joey is a 28-year-old researcher living in New York, USA. 8, Betty is a 21-year-old student from the USA. 9, Brian is a 17-year-old student from New York, USA. 10, Matt is a 21-year-old student from Washington, USA. 11, June is a 27-year-old insurance underwriter from Boston, USA. 12, Adam is a 35-year-old bank manager from New York, USA. 13, Sean is a 17-year-old student from Manchester, UK. 14, Andy is a 32-year-old journalist from Cardiff, UK. 15, Karen is a 25-year-old social worker from Washington, USA. 16, Malcolm is a 32-year-old salesman from Chicago, USA. 17, Patrick is a 31-year-old IT specialist living in Grenoble, Switzerland. 19, June is a 29-year-old student living in Los Angeles, USA.
2. The present article focuses on iPod users rather than MP3 users in particular. At present the iPod is by far the most popular MP3 player on the market, taking 70% of all sales worldwide.

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