
Sound connections: an aural epistemology of proximity and distance in urban culture

Michael Bull

Media Studies, University of Sussex, Essex House, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9RQ, England;
e-mail: m.bull@sussex.ac.uk

Received 9 January 2002; in revised form 29 November 2002

Abstract. In this paper I analyse the nature of proximity and distance as experienced through the use of sound-communication technologies. I argue that contemporary media-based analyses of communication technologies often fail to take into account the specific relational qualities attached to forms of ‘sound’ consumption. The meanings and uses attached to sound technologies are then conceptualised through reinterpreting three iconic historical moments of sound consumption in Western culture: Horkheimer and Adorno’s account of the meeting between Odysseus and the Sirens in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and early-20th-century accounts of the use of the phonograph and radio taken from the work of Kracauer and Taussig. One example is situated in the mythic prehistory of Western culture, the other two from its ‘heroic’ period of mechanical reproduction. These examples are used to point to what an analytical framework for understanding contemporary states of aural proximity and distance might look like. The paper points to the manner in which the use of sound technologies can be understood as part of the Western project of the appropriation and control of space, place, and the ‘other’. In particular I focus upon the specific relational qualities attached to sound through which subjects relate to their surroundings, others, and themselves, focusing upon the central role that aestheticisation plays as a strategy of the control of place and space. The analysis is contextualised through a contemporary analysis of that most mobile and privatised of media artefacts, the Walkman.

“The individual is constantly here and elsewhere; alone and linked to others... the twentieth century stroller with a Walkman or cellular phone remains alone, communicating not with passers-by but to those to whom he or she is connected.”
Flichy (1995, page 168)

“A phonograph seduces doubly every time: it fulfils its little nasal function and roots me in reality as I cannot imagine. It reproduces and it symbolises, the one with the other, the one inside the other, inseparably... A machine corresponds necessarily to a call of the imaginary... a machine corresponds to what the user expects of it but also provides him with an unprecedented, unformulated response of which itself is the idea.”
Grivel (1992, page 35)

Reevaluating proximity and distance in media consumption from a ‘sound’ perspective

The structuring role of the media in daily experience has long been recognised (Livingstone, 2002; Lull, 1990; Silverstone, 1999). Yet, the contribution of sound, as distinct from the role of vision, within the daily consumption of the media has been largely ignored by social scientists, as has the increasingly mobile and predominantly ‘sound’-orientated nature of much media consumption (DeNora, 2000; McCarthy, 2001; Urry, 2002). Sound is largely a ‘proximity’ sense, the analysis of which casts fresh light on the historical antecedents underpinning the experience and desire for proximity and distance in much of contemporary urban life. The exclusion of the aural in many media accounts of the experience of proximity and distance has led many media sociologists to neglect or misinterpret the historically situated meanings attached to these terms.

A well-known and significant example of this failure is Williams's understanding and use of the term 'mobile privatisation' to describe the act of television viewing twenty-five years ago (1977). In effect, Williams observed that 'experience' was no longer primarily located in 'public' spaces such as the street but rather in domestic space; the living room was to become the modern emporium of visual and auditory delight for the contemporary Western urban citizen. Williams thought that 'mobile privatisation' was a largely unproblematic phenomenon: "It is not living in a cut off way, not in a shell that is just stuck. It is a shell you can take with you, which you can fly to places that previous generations could never imagine visiting" (1977, page 171). Urban citizens were to experience events beyond the screen, on the screen, through acts of privatised consumption; dwelling places were to be filled with the mediated public world of sounds and images of the television and radio. Underlying Williams's observation was the normative expectation that experience and aesthetics were indissolubly linked. This linkage is continued in the work of many cultural theorists who invariably view the aestheticisation of everyday life as normatively neutral (Baudrillard, 1993; Bauman, 1993; Debord, 1977; Denzin, 1995; Freidburg, 1993). Unrecognised in Williams's formulation is not only its 'romantic' depiction of the experiencing subject but its unreflective appropriation of all that stands before it. Williams's concept of 'mobile privatisation' is firmly rooted in the Enlightenment project of the domination of space, place, and the other. 'Mobile privatisation' has subsequently become a significant concept in the analysis of media consumption. Thus:

"It is necessary for us to ask about the ways in which technology serves to 'mediate' between private and public worlds—connecting domestic spaces with spheres of information and entertainment that stretch well beyond the confines of family and locality. Communication technologies have, I will argue, played an important part in the symbolic construction of 'home'—whilst simultaneously providing household members with an opportunity to 'travel' elsewhere, and to imagine themselves as members of wider cultural communities at a national and transnational level... The multiple ownership of television sets allows household members to make independent journeys to distant locations and locate themselves within different collectivities" (Moore, 1993, pages 22–23).

Although this perspective might well be perceived as symptomatic of the emptying out of urban public experience into fantasies of privatised empowerment, it also poses the question as to the relationship between communication technologies, experience, and space. However, in doing so, it fails to address adequately the nature and meaning of mediated interaction: what indeed is meant by 'distant destination', 'independent journey', or 'different collectivities' or indeed by 'unexampled mobility'? The subject who 'looks out' through the screen remains as opaque as does the ambiguous nature of experiencing 'the world' aesthetically through the mediated messages of the culture industry. If notions of media-generated 'distance' remain to be adequately explained, the meanings attached to 'proximity' have recently been recognised, if not the specifically 'sound' nature of that proximity. Putnam has commented upon the 'false sense' of companionship and intimacy created through the use of television (2000, page 242) as has Claude Lefort, who refers to this phenomenon as a "constant illusion of a between-us, an *entre-nous* in which the media provoke an hallucination of nearness which abolishes a sense of distance, strangeness, imperceptibility of otherness" (Lefort, quoted in Merck, 1998, page 109). These observations mirror the much earlier work of Adorno, who was one of the few sociologists to recognise the significance of mediated sound in the ecology of the urban life. It is no accident that much of Adorno's work concentrated on the auditory nature of urban experience, and it is here that we find an initial analysis of proximity in a mediated and increasingly media-saturated world.

Adorno argued that the consumption of mechanically reproduced music was increasingly used as an effective substitute for community, which was often lacking in capitalist cultures. It did so by producing states of ‘we-ness’ or ‘accompanied solitude’ amongst 20th-century consumers. We-ness refers to the substitution of direct experience by technologically mediated forms of experience. Music integrates and permits subjects to transcend the social precisely by integrating themselves more fully into the everyday through the consumption of music. Thus:

“The feebler the subjects’ own sense of living, the stronger the happy illusion of attending 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 ... Music as a social function is akin to the rip off, a fraudulent promise of happiness which instead of happiness, installs itself” (Adorno, 1974, page 45).

The experience of the ‘social’ is thus transformed through the colonisation of ‘representational space’ by the consumption of forms of aural communication technologies. Adorno, writing before the use of mobile sound technologies, was nevertheless sensitive to the transformative role of reproduced sound in the potentially mobile spaces of consumer culture: “Loudspeaker’s installed in the smallest night clubs to amplify the sound until it becomes literally unbearable: everything is to sound like the radio” (1991, page 58).

Adorno never succumbed to the temptation of splitting off spheres of experience in his analysis of Western consumer culture; for him the experiences of the street and the spaces of the home were always intimately linked. Adorno’s work on media technologies reflects upon the role that these communication technologies play in the experience of increasingly mediated spaces of urban everyday life. For Adorno the Western consumer desired ‘connection’ in an increasingly privatised world. Sound provided this connection more readily than any other medium functioning as a form of ‘accompanied solitude’ or we-ness. Thus:

“Collective perception is the basis of musical objectification itself, and when the latter is no longer possible, it is necessarily degraded almost to a fiction—to the arrogance of the aesthetic subject, which says ‘we’, while in reality it is still only ‘I’—and this ‘I’ can say nothing at all without positing the ‘we’” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973, page 19).

Recent work on media consumption demonstrates how solitary domestic consumption often appears to fuel feelings of omnipotence within realms of dependency (Bull, 2000; Livingstone, 2002). Equally, domestic use of the media teaches consumers how to ‘fill in’ the spaces and times between activities as they increasingly become used to the mediated presence of the media in their own privatised settings. Forms of ‘accompanied solitude’ thus become increasingly habitual.

Ironically, as Williams was developing his ‘stay at home’ epistemology more consumers were spending increasing amounts of time ‘on the move’ (Putnam, 2000). Over the past forty years Western consumers have been provided with a wide range of communication technologies that enable them to transform both the experience of movement and the spaces they move through. Some of these technologies of ‘movement’ are aural: the cassette player in the automobile, the personal stereo, and now the mobile phone (Bull, 2001; Katz and Aakhus, 2002). Much movement through the city is solitary, in between destinations and meetings. This is a more literal form of ‘mobile privatisation’ in which sole occupancy is often the preferred mode of travel within automobiles (Brodsky, 2001), whereas personal-stereo

use is privatising. These technologies of ‘accompanied solitude’ appear successfully to deliver a desirable and intoxicating mixture of noise, proximity, and privacy for users whilst on the move. The use of these sound technologies informs us about how users attempt to ‘inhabit’ the spaces of the city they move through. Mobile privatisation is about the desire for proximity, for a mediated presence that shrinks space into something manageable and habitable. Sound, more than any other sense, appears to perform a largely ‘utopian’ function in this desire for proximity and connectedness. Mediated sound reproduction enables consumers to create intimate, manageable, and aestheticised spaces in which they are increasingly able to, and desire to, live. As consumers increasingly inhabit ‘media-saturated’ spaces of intimacy, so they increasingly desire to make the public spaces passed through mimic their desires.

The following examples are taken from Horkheimer and Adorno’s account of the meeting between Odysseus and the Sirens in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1973), Taussig’s account of Fitzcarraldo and his phonograph (1993), and Kracauer’s account of early radio use (1995). They point to what an analytical framework for understanding contemporary states of aural proximity and distance might look like. In particular, I focus upon the specific relational qualities attached to sound, through which subjects relate to their surroundings, others, and themselves.

Sound, distance, and proximity, historically speaking

“The allurements of the Sirens remains supreme, no one who hears their song can escape.”

Horkheimer and Adorno (1973, page 19)

In a well-known passage from *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno analyse a section from Homer’s *Odyssey* in which Odysseus pits his wits against the Sirens, whose song evokes: “the recent past, with the irresistible promise of pleasure as which their song is heard ... Even though the Sirens know all that has happened, they demand the future as the price of that knowledge” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973, page 33). All who hear the song inevitably perish. Odysseus’s aim is to outwit the Sirens by having himself tied to the mast of his ship, thereby enabling him to listen to the enticements of the Sirens’ song without being destroyed on the rocks as all others had done before him. For his strategy to succeed he orders the oarsmen of his ship to block their ears with wax, rendering them deaf. The oarsmen become unable to hear both the Sirens’ song and Odysseus’s increasingly desperate orders to steer the ship onto the rocks. Horkheimer and Adorno correctly point to Odysseus’s desire for pleasure as being sublimated into aesthetic experience: he can hear but do nothing about it. They, however, gloss over the specific auditory nature of the experience. It is precisely the aural configuration of the experience that I wish to investigate here: specifically, the confrontation of Odysseus with the Sirens in terms of the seduction of sound and its relation to the space that Odysseus and the Sirens inhabit.

The auditory nature of their meeting means that for Odysseus to experience the Sirens’ song, and therefore gain knowledge of ‘all that can be known’, he merely needs to hear their song. It is not the ‘seeing’ or ‘touching’ of the Sirens which motivates Odysseus but rather the ‘hearing’ of their song: the Sirens’ song literally enters Odysseus. As Odysseus listens, tied safely to the mast of his ship, the Sirens’ song transforms the distance between his ship and the rocks from which they sing their song. Their song colonises him and yet he uses this experience in order to fulfil his own desire for knowledge. In doing so Odysseus becomes a rational and successful shopper of experience. Aesthetic reflection is a price worth paying for gaining the seductive experience

of song. Although Horkheimer and Adorno point out that Odysseus's ability to experience the Sirens' song is purchased at the expense of the sailors' lack of this experience, and that Odysseus's aestheticisation of the world is prefaced upon the absence of the auditory for the oarsmen, they concentrate on 'social class' element of the experience to the exclusion of the 'sound' and spatial element of the experience. Yet what Odysseus desires, the sound of the Sirens' song, originates beyond him. It is the Sirens who construct Odysseus's soundscape.⁽¹⁾ Yet Odysseus intervenes into the nature of this soundscape by having the oarsmen's ears blocked with wax. The soundscape now encompasses only Odysseus and the Sirens: it exists only between him and them. Socially speaking, Odysseus is in his very own sound world. This passage from Homer is significant in part as it is the first description of the privatisation of experience through sound.

Odysseus is also a traveler who makes himself through his journey. He outwits the Sirens, thus furthering his self-development and in doing so becomes an early 'tourist' of experience in search of aestheticised experience. Unlike the seductions of sound in contemporary consumer culture, Odysseus has only to experience the Sirens' song once: he does not need to 'replay' the experience. The Sirens form an aesthetic presence in his biography, representing in part the draw of the 'exotic' and the forbidden as encountered in his travels and mastered through his intellect. Odysseus might accurately be perceived as an early 'tourist' of experiences (Todorov, 1993).

Horkheimer and Adorno describe sound before the dawn of mechanical reproduction, before its commodification and routinisation. With the rise of mechanical reproduction the 'exotic' appears to come home in the space where the exotic, the magical, and technology meet. Thomas Edison sings "Mary has a little lamb" into the first phonogram in 1877, and playing it back to himself he exclaims delight and fascination with hearing his own voice played back to him, as if by magic. The 'magical'-come-scientific transformation of experience was often pursued by inventors and users alike of the new communication technologies of the voice at the beginning of the 20th century. Schmidt has pointed to the creation of the 'psychophone' created and used by spiritualists in the early 1920s to hear 'supernatural voices'; the psychophone, little more than a telephone, becomes a technology "of the disembodied voice... turned from exposing the illusions of supernatural voices to providing acoustic proof of them" (Schmidt, 2000, page 241). Many early accounts of aural reception point to the 'magical' quality of the experience of hearing the recorded voice before this experience became routinised through the steady incorporation of reproduced sound into domestic and public spaces.⁽²⁾ It appears that technologies of sound and their use disclose something about both the user and the culture from which he or she comes. For example, Taussig describes the early use of the phonograph amongst explorers, who often took a gramophone with them into the 'colonial' spaces they were to study and exploit. Their aim, he argues, was to display the scientific magic of the West to the rest, to record the 'exotic' and to play records to themselves. In his analysis, the gramophone already has an element of

⁽¹⁾ Schafer, in *The Tuning of the World* (1977) uses the term 'soundscape' to describe the total experienced acoustic environment. This included all noises, musical, natural, and technological. Schafer, a composer by trade, was concerned to analyse the changing historical and cultural configuration of soundscapes, arguing that it was necessary to understand what effect the configuration of sounds in our environment has in shaping human behaviour.

⁽²⁾ Kracauer describes the transformation of space from individual to collective space through sound: "Even in the café, where one wants to roll up into a ball like a porcupine and become aware of one's insignificance, an imposing loudspeaker effaces every trace of private existence" (1995, page 333). For more on the history of the phonograph and its use and significance see Gitelman (1999) and Kittler (1999).

routinisation attached to its consumption.⁽³⁾ The sometimes obsessive nature of this activity is captured in:

“Werner Herzog’s delirious effort in his film *Fitzcarraldo*, set in the early twentieth-century Upper Amazonian rubber boom and constructed around the fetish of the phonograph, so tenaciously, so awkwardly, clutched by Fitzcarraldo, the visionary, its great earhorn emerging from under the armpit of his dirty white shirt, Caruso flooding the forests and rivers, the Indians amazed as Old Europe rains its ecstatic art form upon them. Bellowing opera from the ship’s prow, it is the great ear-trumpet of the phonograph” (Taussig, 1993, page 203).

Taussig’s description differs considerably from the use and reception of sound found in Horkheimer and Adorno’s account of Odysseus and the Sirens. On display in Taussig’s account is the magic of Western technology and sound. Fitzcarraldo takes his own Western sound world with him and it is his sound world that recreates the Amazon jungle for him, making it what it is. The jungle becomes aestheticised as a function of Fitzcarraldo’s imagination mediated through the sounds of Caruso’s voice. The presence of ‘Caruso’ in the jungle is maintained only through continuous sound, through the repeat. For Fitzcarraldo the aesthetic impulse is both ‘literal’ and dependent upon the sound of Caruso’s voice, unlike for Odysseus whose experience of the Sirens travels with him, internalised and sublimated. In contrast to this, Fitzcarraldo needs the voice of Caruso to maintain his image of the jungle and his place in it. Contrast Fitzcarraldo’s use of sound with the sound world of the indigenous populations of rain forests to discover the seductive similarity and dissimilarity of non-Western appropriations of sound:

“[Turnbull] elaborates on how Mbuti imagination and practice construct the forest as both benevolent and powerful, capable of giving strength and affection to its ‘children’. For this to happen Mbuti must attract the attention of the forest, must soothe it with the strength of sound that is fully articulated in the achievement of song. The sound ‘awakens’ the forest ... thus attracting the forest’s attention to the immediate needs of its children. It is also of the essential nature of all songs that they should be ‘pleasing to the forest’” (Feld, 2000, page 255).

Feld in his analysis of the Kaluli (1990) points to the symmetrical nature of the sound world of the inhabitants of the rain forest whereas Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo are both ‘colonisers’ of space and experience. Just as sound colonises them so they use sound to recreate the spaces they inhabit in their image. Their experiences take place in the grand and ‘heroic’ vistas of a world ‘tamed’ through their aestheticisation of it.

This is in contrast to Kracauer’s description of early radio use in the domestic spaces of Berlin in the 1920s:

“Who could resist the invitation of those dainty headphones? They gleam in living rooms and entwine themselves around heads all by themselves; and instead of fostering cultivated conversation (which certainly can become a bore), one becomes a playground for Eiffel noises that, regardless of their potentially active boredom, do not even grant one’s modest right to personal boredom. Silent and lifeless,

⁽³⁾ Connor has recently pointed to this routinisation of technological innovations: “Although there were some who were intrigued and amazed by the new invention, in many ways, the contemporary reaction of the coming of the telephone seems to have been ‘about time too’. The telephone had been in use only for months before users began wondering irritably why the sound quality was so poor.... In periods like the late nineteenth century, and like our own, in which the technological imagination outruns technological development itself, new inventions have a way of seeming out of date, or used up, on their arrival, like a birthday present with which you have been secretly playing in advance” (2000, page 411). However, I wish to point to the attraction that these routinised forms of consumption have in the successful management of experience.

people sit side by side as if their souls were wandering about far away. But these souls are not wandering according to their own preferences; the news hounds badger them, and soon no one can tell who is the hunter and who is the hunted” (1995, page 333).

Kracauer’s radio users transcend geographical space, listening takes them away from their mundane domestic place. Radio sounds transform the immobile space of domestic habitation. Users no longer commune with those next to them but with the ‘distant’ voices transmitted though the ether. The radio enables them to prioritise their desires. Just as Odysseus prioritises his desires over those of the oarsmen, so the privatisation of aesthetic desire of Kracauer’s radio user has social consequences. Kracauer’s radio listeners privatise their already ‘private’ space of experience. Who indeed can compete with the ‘Eiffel’ noises of the radio as the inhabitants of this privatised space sit ‘silent and lifeless’ next to one another? The technology of the radio is used to prioritise the experience of the listener, who is taken far away into the aestheticised space, of the ‘Eiffel’ noises. Kracauer points accurately to the reconfiguring of space in which the power relationship between the consumer of sound and the producer remains ambiguous. Yet what remains clear is the enticement of the radio sounds for the user, who is transported out of their domestic boredom into the magical realm of communion with the ‘faraway’ and enticing sounds of the radio.

These brief examples point to a framework with which to situate the possible role that sound plays in the contemporary geography of Western urban culture. They indicate a powerful motivation to use sound to reorganise users’ relation to space and place.⁽⁴⁾ In each case sound colonises the listener but is used to actively recreate and reconfigure the spaces of experience. Odysseus, Fitzcarraldo, and Kracauer’s radio listeners all repossess their spaces of habitation in order to make them conform to their desires. Through the power of sound the world becomes intimate, known, and possessed. These examples point to the powerfully seductive role of sound which appears to root the user into the world with a force that differs from other senses (Simmel, 1997; Welsch, 1997). They point to the reconfiguring role that sound can have on the relational qualities of experience. The manner in which Odysseus, Fitzcarraldo, and radio users inhabit social spaces points to the relational nature and significance of sound in the cognitive, aesthetic, and moral make-up of social space.

The aesthetic nature of mobile aural solipsism: Odysseus’s Walkman

“What? What are you talking about? The Sony Walkman has done more to change human perception than any virtual reality gadget. I can’t remember any technological experience since that was quite so wonderful as being able to take music and move it through landscapes and architecture.”

William Gibson *Time Out* (1993, 6 October, page 9)

Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo aestheticise their world and in the process make themselves through their travels. Odysseus’s success is dependent upon both the Sirens and his own guile whereas Fitzcarraldo relies on the technology of the phonograph and the voice of Caruso. In contrast to Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo, Kracauer’s radio listeners are immobile; the world comes to them through the radio and transforms their domestic and mundane world from within. In all three examples, time and space

⁽⁴⁾ Throughout this paper the reader will be aware that I use music and sound interchangeably. This is not to deny their distinctiveness. However, I wish to foreground the nature of the proximity of sound to users and the power it gives them relationally rather than to discuss the distinctive role of music over the voice. For example, Kracauer’s radio listeners are listening to the ‘voice’, as do some Walkman users subsequently analysed.

become aestheticised. In contemporary consumer culture we no longer have to travel to the ‘faraway’ in order to aestheticise it. The communication technology that enables the drawing together of the threads of the previous examples is the Walkman, which enabled contemporary urban users to create a seamless web of mediated and privatised experience in their everyday movement through the city and to enhance virtually any chosen experience in any geographical location.⁽⁵⁾ Walkman sound is direct, with the headphones placed directly in the ears of the user, overlaying the random sounds of the environment passed through. Walkman users can aestheticise both the mundane everyday of the city streets they pass through and the ‘faraway’ spaces they visit with their Walkman sounds. Indeed, the everyday and the ‘faraway’ appear to become increasingly similar in the experience of many Walkman users. Walkman users represent the amalgam of Odysseus, Fitzcarraldo, and Kracauer’s radio listeners. They are often mobile, the Walkman becomes the wax in the ears, and the privatising of space is enacted through continual use of mediated sound. Walkman users habitually take sound with them during those ‘in-between’ times whilst traveling, often replaying the same track over and over in order to maintain their mood, rather like Fitzcarraldo, communing with the disembodied yet intimate sounds of the culture industry. This ‘colonisation’ of urban space is deeply social yet the ‘relational’ nature of any such aestheticisation is often downplayed in urban and cultural studies:

“The beauty of ‘aesthetic control’—the unclouded beauty, beauty unspoiled by the fear of danger, guilty conscience or apprehension of shame—is its inconsequentiality. This control will not intrude into the realities of the controlled. It will not limit their options. It puts the spectator into the directors chair—with the actors unaware of who is sitting there, of the chair itself, even of being potential objects of the directors attention. Aesthetic control, unlike any other, gruesome or sinister social control which it playfully emulates, allows to thrive the contingency of life which social spacing strove to confine or stifle. Inconsequentiality of aesthetic control is what makes its pleasures unclouded... I make them (people) into whatever I wish. I am in charge; I invest their encounter with meaning” (Bauman, 1993, page 6).

Although the asymmetrical nature of aesthetic experience is captured by Bauman, the ramifications of this form of social asymmetry when broadened out into a mode of ‘being in the world’ tend to be rendered harmless through a conceptual slippage concerning the aestheticisation of daily experience as distinct from the viewing of a painting or the listening to a piece of music. Bauman, despite his interest in the nature of ‘moral’ spaces of experience, fails to note this distinction. Honneth more accurately perceives the aesthetic as inversely proportional to the realisation of a habitable social:

⁽⁵⁾ The ethnographic material comes from a study of Walkman users that I conducted between 1994 and 1996, which I recently added to in 2001. It consists primarily of in-depth qualitative interviews with over 100 personal-stereo users living in and around London and more recently Cambridge and Brighton. The interviewees represented a cross section of users in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and occupation. Walkman users proved to be particularly elusive subjects. By the very act of wearing a Walkman, users are sending out ‘do not disturb’ messages. Younger users came from schools, colleges, and youth clubs. Other users were contacted in their place of work through contacts and contacts of contacts. Perhaps the difficulty of contact is one explanation as to why in the Open University text on the Sony Walkman (DuGay et al, 1997) no attempt is made to research Walkman users despite a chapter being given over to consumption practices of users. In what follows, I discuss Walkman practices through illustrative user accounts. For a fuller discussion on methodology refer to my work on the Walkman (Bull, 2000).

“I think all concepts of the ‘post-modern’ have at least one affirmative feature in common, viz. To see in the process of the ‘dissolution of the social’ the chance for an expansion of aesthetic freedom for individuals” (1995, page 23)

Aesthetic colonisation plays a significant role in the daily use of Walkmans. They are used both as a mundane accompaniment to the everyday and as a way of aestheticising and controlling that very experience. Their use greatly expands the possibilities of users to recreate their daily experience aesthetically. Walkman users construct their own privatised and intimate space of reception. The users of Walkmans move in their own privatised sound world. Like Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo, they too can achieve the illusion of omnipotence through proximity and ‘connectedness’:

“It enables me to sort of bring my own dreamworld. Because I have familiar sounds with my music that I know and sort of cut out people around me. So the music is familiar. There’s nothing new happening. I can go into my perfect dreamworld where everything is, as I want” (interview with Magnus, Walkman user).

Walkman use reorganises users’ 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. Sound enables users to manage and orchestrate their spaces of habitation in a manner that conforms to their desires. The sound of the personal stereo is direct, with headphones placed directly in the ears of the user, thereby overlaying the random sounds of the environment passed through with privatised sounds. Walkman users construct their own privatised and intimate space of reception:

“It fills the space whilst you’re walking. It also changes the atmosphere. If you listen to music you really like and you’re feeling depressed it can change the atmosphere around you” (Catherine).

“I think it creates a sense of kind of aura. Even though it’s directly in your ears you feel it’s all around your head. You’re really aware it’s just you. Only you can hear it. I’m really aware of my personal space. My own space anyway. I find it quite weird watching things that you normally associate certain sounds with. Like the sounds of walking up and down the stairs or tubes coming in and out, all of those things you hear. Like when you’ve got a Walkman on you don’t hear any of those. You’ve got your own soundtrack” (Karin).

Thus Walkman users experience the world as a form of ‘we-ness’ whilst on the move:

“I don’t necessarily feel that I’m there. Especially if I’m listening to the radio. I feel I’m there, where the radio is, because of the way, that is, he’s talking to me and only me and no one else around me is listening to that. So I feel like, I know I’m really on the train, but I’m not really... I like the fact that there’s someone still there” (Mandy).

Yet, Walkman users, in their ‘colonisation’ of space, are equally concerned with solipsistically transcending the urban. If indeed they aestheticise it, they do so, unlike traditional flaneurs, by drawing it into themselves, making it conform to their wishes, and making it in their own image (Freidberg, 1993; Jenks, 1995). In this transformation of representational space, ‘personal space’ is often defined in terms of a nonspatialised conceptual space. As geographical notions of personal space become harder to substantiate and negotiate in some urban environments the construction of a privatised conceptual space becomes a common strategy for Walkman users:

“Personal space. I think personal space is gone, in town anyway. Everyone’s packed in. I think it’s inverted. Because I think your personal space is inside, in the music. You can be in a crowd in town and everybody’s crunching up. If you listen to the Walkman. It doesn’t really matter that someone’s pushing up behind you” (Paul).

In this aural solipsism Walkman users often become indifferent to the presence of others:

“When you’ve got your Walkman on it’s like a wall. Decoration. Surroundings. It’s not anyone” (Ed).

The metaphor of a ‘wall’ aptly demonstrates the impenetrability of the state, or desired state, of my Walkman users in relation to the geographical space of experience. Walkman users appear to achieve a subjective sense of public invisibility. The users essentially ‘disappear’ as an interacting subject, withdrawing into their chosen privatised and mobile states.

The world beyond their ‘Walkman sounds’ becomes a function of the desire of the user and is maintained through time, like Fitzcarraldo, through the act of listening. The world is brought into line but only through a privatised yet mediated act of cognition. Users’ 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 personal-stereo user: a potentially perfect mimetic fantasy that denies the contingent nature of their relationship to the world beyond their chosen sound world.

The proximity of sound movement, technologically speaking

For Fitzcarraldo, his journey across the Amazon is both an adventure and a way in which he constructs his own narrative. The Amazon provides the backcloth to this. The music of Caruso does not provide him with a desire to be elsewhere but rather makes the experience what it is. The Amazon and Fitzcarraldo’s experience become one as he imposes himself onto the space thus inhabited. Equally, Odysseus makes himself through the construction of his own manufactured privatised sound world. These examples merely indicate a trajectory or moment in Western sound desire. The implications of this sound history have recently been commented upon by Bohlman, who argues that: “In order to invest itself with the power to control and maintain its external domination and its internal order, Europe has consistently employed music to imagine it’s selfness” (2000, page 188).

The sounds of Caruso enable Fitzcarraldo to exert order and control over himself. Odysseus, as we have seen, carries the internalised song of the Sirens within him as he travels, and Walkman users equally inhabit their own privatised spaces. They carry their culture with them in the form of mediated sounds wherever they go. Their response to the spaces they inhabit might be indifference, aesthetic, or a strategy to exclude ‘others’.

“I have the warmth but I don’t have all the crap around me. I can eliminate that and I can get much more out of what the ocean has to offer me. I can enjoy. I feel that listening to my music, I can really pull the sun’s rays. Not being disturbed by screaming kids and all that shouting which is not why I went there. I went to have harmony with the sea and sun. The plane journey, flying out and back you listen to different music, but it just helps me to still my mind and to centre myself and I feel that by taking this tape with me I’m carrying that all day and I feel that I’m able to take more from the day and give more to the day. Whether that’s right or wrong I don’t know but that’s how I feel” (Jay).

The environment becomes reappropriated and experienced as part of the user’s desire. Through listening to ‘her’ music the listener gets more out of the environment, not by interacting with it, but precisely by not interacting with it. This indicates that Walkman use can make the environment ‘what it is’ for users. The environment is received as a personal artefact via the Walkman. This is achieved by users repossessing space as part of, or constitutive of, their desire. This provides a clear example of the

way Walkman users might 'colonise' and 'appropriate' the here and now as part of their 'reinscribing' of habitable space. They might be described as the privatised Fitzcarraldos of contemporary consumer culture or as sound consumers of a manufactured intimacy.

Walkman users increasingly live in a world of technologically mediated sounds and images in which states of 'we-ness' are learnt and embedded in communication consumption in the home and elsewhere through television, radio, and music reception. The intimacy of a world experienced through mediated and technologised sound becomes a taken-for-granted backcloth for Walkman users' daily experience:

"I can't go to sleep at night without my radio on. I'm one of those people. It's really strange. I find it very difficult. I don't like silence. I'm not that sort of person. I like hearing things around me. It's like hearing that there's a world going on sort of thing. I'm not a very alone person. I will always have something on. I don't mind being by myself as long as I have something on" (Mandy).

Walkman use creates both the experience of being 'cocooned' by separating the user from the world beyond, and a different 'space' whereby the user lives in the mediated space of the culture industry. Walkman users, rather like Kracauer's radio listeners, do not perceive themselves as being 'alone'; theirs is an 'accompanied solitude'. The mediated sounds of the culture industry transform the space of habitation for users. The 'outside' world becomes a function of the desire of users and is maintained through time through continuous listening. The world is brought into line, but only through a privatised yet mediated act of cognition.

"Because when you have the Walkman it's like having company. You don't feel lonely. It's your own environment. It's like you're doing something pleasurable you can do by yourself and enjoy it. I think it creates a sense of kind of aura sort of like. Even though it's directly in your ears you feel like it's all around your head. You're really aware it's just you, only you can hear it. It makes you feel individual. Listening also constitutes 'company'. If there's the radio there's always somebody talking. There's always something happening" (Alice).

This is contrasted to the observation that nothing is happening if there is no musical accompaniment to experience. The aura which the user inhabits collapses. When the Walkman is switched off, 'accompanied solitude' falls away and the user's experience is diminished. Walkman users' sense of space is one in which the distinction between private mood or orientation and their surroundings is invariably abolished. The world becomes one with the experience of the Walkman user as against any threatened disjunction between the two. Users need their Walkmans in everyday life, just as Fitzcarraldo needed the sounds of Caruso in the jungle to make and enhance its meaning for him.

Conclusion

"Addicted conduct generally has a social component: it is one possible reaction to the atomisation which, as sociologists have noticed, parallels the compression of the social network. The addict manages to cope with the situation of social pressure, as well as his loneliness, by dressing it up so to speak, as a reality of his own being; he turns the formula 'Leave me alone!' into something like an illusory private realm, where he thinks he can be himself."

Adorno (1976, page 15)

Representational space becomes primarily an aural space for Walkman users. In the contemporary world of Walkman desire, space, as with Kracauer's radio listeners, is inhabited by the sounds of the culture industry coming directly into the users' ears. Like for Odysseus, their sound world is constructed through the transmitting of sound from elsewhere. But in this instance the Siren's voice is a domesticated and

mechanically reproduced one. Users suffer, unlike Odysseus, from no penalties from listening. Equally, their own listening does not preclude others from listening. However, each listener, like Kracauer's radio user, must inhabit his or her own private and mediated sound world. Contemporary users live in a more democratised consumer culture in which many are rather like Odysseus and fewer of us are 'oarsmen'. Walkman practices of aesthetic colonisation appear to be both utopian, and hence transcendent in character, as well as located firmly in alienating and objectifying cultural predispositions that deny difference within culture (Sennett, 1990). Thus: "The absence of encounters with different subjects is more restful, since it never puts our own identity into question" (Todorov, 1993, page 344).

Equally for Adorno, according to Honneth, the consumer: "can stabilise their identity only through continual exclusion of all sense experience that threatens to impair the direct pursuit of the principle of control" (Honneth, 1993, page 45). My brief analysis of Walkman users' construction of their aurally mediated experience points to users as both colonised and colonising. The analysis appears to suggest that users negate notions of 'difference' in order to inhabit a transcendent and safe space of experience that is characterised as a managed and controlled space which might be referred to as a sonorous envelope (Anzieu, 1989). Sound and forms of ontological security appear to be closely related in the world of Walkman desires. If consumers are seeking 'ontological' security through consumption, then the consumption of 'sound' is highly successful in operationalising this desire. States of 'we-ness' are indeed states of ontological security. Walkman users' sense of 'being in the world' comes about through the reinscription of the everyday through the technologies of the Walkman and reproduced sound. These strategies are neither merely emotional nor cognitive but both. Users are cognitively active in their construction of ontic security, which itself is the result of the construction of a virtual connection, of a 'being-with' the products of the culture industry. Hence, Walkman users place great faith in the ability of their Walkman to actually deliver what they want. Walkman use can produce a powerful sense of centredness, of being 'in control', enabling the user to manage their thoughts, emotions, memories together with their relationship to the world which they inhabit. Just as Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo controlled their soundscapes so the urban consumer might be seen as not so much protecting the site of experience from others but as creating, albeit ambiguously, a utopian space of habitation. The fragility of this space is rendered more secure as the space becomes 'occupied' by signifiers of an imaginary and reassuring presence in the form of chosen sound. The Sirens hold no fears for the Walkman user of today and neither are they overtly concerned with impressing the 'other' with the cultural status of the West as Fitzcarraldo was. The contemporary Walkman user often experiences everyday life in a conceptual space somewhere between that of Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo. The sounds of 'home' as experienced by Odysseus through knowledge becomes, for Fitzcarraldo, the jungle reinscribed through the voice of Caruso, whereas Walkman users habitually aestheticise their daily experience through sound in order to transcend their geographical space and manage their own sense of presence in the world. Listening takes them away from the mundane domestic place, from their domestic thoughts and desires. The spaces of urban culture become both their 'jungle' and a domesticated but effective Siren song. It appears that as consumers become immersed in their media sound bubbles so those spaces habitually passed through in daily life increasingly lose significance and progressively turn into the 'nonspaces' of daily lives which users try, through those self-same technologies, to transcend. The need for proximity and for 'accompanied solitude' expressed through the mediated sounds of the culture industry masks and furthers the trend of public isolation in the midst of privatised sound bubbles of a reconfigured representational space.

References

- Adorno T, 1974 *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (New Left Books, London)
- Adorno T, 1976 *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (Continuum Press, New York)
- Adorno T, 1991 *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (Routledge, London)
- Adorno T, Eisler H, 1994 *Composing for the Films* (Athlone Press, London)
- Anzieu D, 1989 *The Skin Ego* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT)
- Baudrillard J, 1993 *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Sage, London)
- Bauman S, 1993 *Postmodern Ethics* (Blackwell, Oxford)
- Bohman P, 2000, "Composing the cantorate: Westernizing Europe's other within", in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* Eds G Born, D Hesmondhalgh (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA) pp 187–212
- Brodsky W, 2001, "The effects of music tempo on simulated driving performance and vehicular control" *Transportation Research Part F* 4 219–241
- Bull M, 2000 *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Berg, Oxford)
- Bull M, 2001, "Soundscapes of the car: a critical ethnography of automobile habitation", in *Car Cultures* Ed. D Miller (Berg, Oxford) pp 185–203
- Connor, S, 2000 *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford)
- Debord G, 1977 *Society of the Spectacle* (Black and Red, Detroit, MI)
- DeNora T, 2000 *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)
- Denzin N K, 1995 *The Cinematic Society* (Sage, London)
- DuGay P, Hall S, Mackay H, 1997 *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (Sage, London)
- Feld S, 1990 *Sound and Sentiment: Birds Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL)
- Feld S, 2000, "The poetics and politics of pygmy pop", in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* Eds G Born, D Hesmondhalgh (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA) pp 173–201
- Flichy P, 1995 *Dynamics of Modern Communication: The Shaping and Impact of New Communication Technologies* (Sage, London)
- Freidberg A, 1993 *Window Shopping* (California University Press, Berkeley, CA)
- Gitelman, L, 1999 *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA)
- Grivel C, 1992, "The phonograph's horned mouth", in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde* Eds D Kahn, G Whitehead (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Honneth A, 1993 *The Critique of Power* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Honneth A, 1995 *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (SUNY Press, New York)
- Horkheimer M, Adorno T, 1973 *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middx)
- Jenks C (Ed.), 1995 *Visual Culture* (Routledge, London)
- Katz J, Aakhus M (Eds), 2002 *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Kittler F, 1999 *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA)
- Kracauer S, 1995 *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Livingstone S, 2002 *Young People and New Media* (Sage, London)
- Lull J, 1990 *Inside Family Viewing* (Routledge, London)
- McCarthy A, 2001 *Ambient Television* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC)
- Merck M, 1998 *After Diana* (Verso, London)
- Moore S, 1992 *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption* (Sage, London)
- Putnam R, 2000 *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, New York)
- Schafer R M, 1977 *The Tuning of the World* (Alfred A Knopf, New York)
- Schmidt L E, 2000 *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Sennett R, 1990 *The Conscience of the Eye* (Faber and Faber, London)
- Silverstone R, 1999 *Why Study the Media?* (Sage, London)
- Simmel G, 1997 *Simmel on Culture* Eds D Frisby, M Featherstone (Sage, London)
- Taussig M, 1993 *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, London)

-
- Todorov T, 1993 *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Urry J, 2002 *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty First Century* (Routledge, London)
- Welsch W, 1997 *Undoing Aesthetics* (Routledge, London)
- Williams R, 1977 *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (Verso, London)