

Reconfiguring the 'Site' and 'Horizon' of Experience

from M. Bull, Sounding Out The City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life, 2000.

Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.

G. Bachelard *The Poetics of Space*

... Aura is inseparable from ritual. Ritual ... is a form of technology, a means of organising and controlling the environment.

H. Caygill *Walter Benjamin*

Personal stereo use reorientates and re-spatializes the users' experience with users often describing the experience in solipsistic and aesthetic terms. Personal stereos appear to provide an invisible shell for the user within which the boundaries of both cognitive and physical space become reformulated. I begin this section of the phenomenology with an analysis of the way in which personal-stereo users inhabit space.

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: Interview number 43)

Personal-stereo users often describe habitation in terms of an imaginary communion with the source of communication. Mandy is twenty-one. She spends four hours each day travelling across London and uses her personal stereo throughout this time. She likes to listen to both the radio and to taped music on her machine. She listens to music habitually, waking up to it and going to sleep to it. Her description of

listening sheds some light upon the connections between technology, experience and place. Using a personal stereo appears to constitute a form of company for her whilst she is alone, through its creation of a zone of intimacy and immediacy. This sense of intimacy and immediateness, following Adorno, appears to be built into the very structure of the auditory medium itself. The headphones of her machine fit snuggly into the ears to provide sound which fills the space of cognition. The 'space' in which reception occurs is decisive, for just as the situation of the television in the home changes the structuring of experience there, so the use of a personal stereo changes the structuring of experience wherever it is used. Mandy describes herself as being where the 'music' or the 'DJ' is. She constructs an imaginary journey within a real journey each day. The space of reception becomes a form of 'mobile home' as she moves through the places of the city. The structuring of space through personal-stereo use is connected to other forms of communication strategies enacted through a range of communication technologies. Users live in a world of technologically mediated sounds and images. The imperative towards experiential states of 'we-ness' is usefully thought of as learnt and embedded in the consumption of television, radio and music reception in the home and elsewhere. The desire for mediated forms of technologized experience becomes part of the sedimented meaning structure of users' everyday experience. This is demonstrated in the following remark by Mandy:

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: interview number 43)

Mandy goes on to describe her feeling of centredness, of being secure with her personal stereo by excluding the extraneous noises of the city or at least her ability to control this:

Because I haven't got the external sort of noises around me I feel I'm in a bit of a world of my own because I can't really hear so much of what is going on around me. (Mandy: interview number 43)

The use of a personal stereo either creates the experience of being 'cocooned' by separating the user from the outside world or alternatively

the user moves outwards into the public realm of communication 'culture' through a private act of reception and becomes absorbed into it. This demonstrates the dialectical nature of personal-stereo use. The user does not perceive herself as being 'alone' but understands that neither is she 'really there'. Using a personal stereo makes her feel more secure as it acts as a kind of 'boundary marker' for her.¹

Her use of a personal stereo transforms her experience of place and social distance. Through use, the nature and meaning of being 'connected' within a reconfiguration of subject and object itself becomes problematic. The very distinction between them appears to be blurred. The following description of situatedness is typical in which the user describes use as filling:

The space whilst you're walking . . . It also changes the atmosphere as well. If you listen to music, like, and you're feeling depressed it can change the atmosphere around you. (Sara: interview number 50)

The auditory quality of listening is described as being all engulfing. The site of experience is transformed from the inside out. Effectively it is colonized. Habitable space becomes both auratic and intimate:²

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: interview number 6)

This is contrasted with the observation that nothing is happening if there is no musical accompaniment to experience. The auratic space of habitation collapses. The nature of a world of 'we-ness' is a world accompanied by mediated messages of culture and its social formation in which patterns of habit exist along a gradient that moves in the direction of dependency. When the personal stereo is switched off the 'we-ness' falls away and the user is left in an experiential void often described with various degrees of apprehension or annoyance. Left to themselves with no distractions, users often experience feelings of anxiety. This is apparent in the many users who either put their personal stereos on to go to sleep or alternatively go to sleep with sound or

music from their record players or radios. The activity is of course pleasurable in its own right:

I like something to sing me to sleep. Usually Bob Marley because I don't like silence. It frightens me. If it's silent and it's dark as well. It helps me think. Because I have trouble sleeping so if I have a song I like; it's sort of soothing. It's like your mum rocking you to sleep. I like someone to sing me to sleep. (Jana: interview number 47)

I don't like silence. I hate it at night. I suppose it's at night and you're on your own. I just don't like being alone. I just have to have someone with me or if not with me some type of noise. That's why I have music on for. It kinds of hides it. It just makes me feel comfortable. (Kim: interview number 25)

Just having the noise. If it's not music I have the TV. If there's the radio there's always someone talking. There's something happening. (Sara: interview number 50)

These responses contextualize the role of personal stereos to other forms of communication technologies that also act as forms of 'we-ness'. Dorinda, a thirty-year-old mother describes using her personal stereo whilst cycling. For her the state of 'being with' is very specific. She plays one tape for months on end on her personal stereo. At present it is Scott Walker sings Jacques Brel. The tape has personal connotations for her and whilst listening she describes feeling confident, as if she's 'with' the singer. The sense of security she gains from this imagined familiarity is conveyed in the following remark:

Yeh. It's me and Scott [Walker] on the bike. (Dorinda: interview number 32)

Other users also describe this in terms of a feeling of being protected. Their own space becomes a protected zone where they are 'together' with the content of their personal stereo:

If I'm in a difficult situation or in new surroundings then I think nothing can affect you, you know. It's your space. (Paul: interview number 45)

Use appears to function as a substitute for company in these examples. Instead of company sound installs itself, usually successfully. Jade, an

habitual user describes his relationship with his personal stereo in interpersonal terms in which the machine becomes an extension of his body. Users often describe feeling more comfortable when they touch or are aware of the physical presence of their personal stereo. These users normally don't like other people to use their machine:

It's a little like another person. You can relate to it. You get something from it. They share the same things as you do. You relate to it as if its another person. Though you can't speak to it. The silence is freaky for me. That is kind of scary. It's almost like a void if you like. (Jade: interview number 13)

The above extract is also indicative of the feeling of being 'deserted' when the music stops. This feeling might also be described in terms of communication technology enhancing the space and the time of the user. As such it becomes both taken for granted and 'everyday' in terms of the user's experience. Experience without it is seen as either void or at least inferior to experience through it. The spacing of experience becomes transformed as the following group of teenagers testify:

It fills the space whilst you're walking. (Rebecca: interview number 49)

It also changes the atmosphere as well. If you listen to music you really like and your feeling depressed it can change the atmosphere around you. It livens everything up. (Sara: interview number 50)

The invigoration and heightening of the space of experience enacted through use collapses the distinction between private mood or orientation and the user's surroundings. The world becomes one with the experience of the user as against the threatened disjunction between the two. Using a personal stereo colonizes space for these users, transforming their mood, orientation and the reach (Silverstone 1994) of their experience. The quality of these experiences are dependent upon the continued use of the personal stereo. This is graphically demonstrated by the following seventeen-year-old respondents who were asked in a group interview to describe how the atmosphere changes with the switching off of their personal stereos:

An empty feeling (Kayz: interview number 54)

amount of control and you don't have so much interruption ... What it evokes for me is that I didn't really have to worry about it at all because there's someone there who'll take care of me. In a sense like when you're little and you have your mum and dad, so that's what it would evoke for me, a feeling of security that it will be all right ... I don't like it (the urban) to totally take over. I have to have a piece of my own world (Jay: interview number 33)

Jay listens to tapes that she associates with her own world and memories. She does not visualize this sense of home literally in terms of concrete memories but rather relates to it in terms of a sense of well-being and security. In this sense, she does not demonstrate an interest in an ongoing communicative process with a socially constructed public state of 'we-ness'. Rather, certain tunes or songs give her a heightened sense of well-being reminding her of childhood and family.

Other users describe travelling back into their own narratives by visualizing situations or re-experiencing the sensation of pleasurable situations whilst listening to their personal stereos in discounted public spaces. Their imaginary journey takes precedence over their actual physical journey and their actual 'present' is overridden by their 'imaginary' present. Whilst daydreaming is a common activity, users appear to have great difficulty conjuring up these feelings and images of home and narrative without using their personal stereos. As such, daydreaming becomes mediated, constructed and constituted through the technological medium of personal stereos and music.

The control exerted over the external environment through use is also described in terms of clearing a 'space' for thoughts or the imagination. 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. 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 construction of a space or clearing for the imagination to, either function in, or be triggered by personal-stereo use appears to be connected to the habitualness of use rather than the type of environment within which the experience takes place. It often makes little difference to the user whether they are walking down a deserted street or travelling on a congested train in terms of the production of the states of 'being' discussed here.

Home and narrative appear to be closely connected in the lifeworld

of users. Personal stereos can be construed as functioning as a form of 'auditory mnemonic' in which users attempt to construct a sense of narrative within urban spaces that have no narrative sense for them. The construction of a narrative becomes an attempt to maintain a sense of pleasurable coherence in those spaces that are perceived to be bereft of interest. Users describe a variety of situations relating to this point:

The music sparks off memories. Just like that. As soon as you hear the tunes. (Kim: interview number 25)

I'll remember the place. I'll be there. I'll remember what I was doing when I was listening to that music. (Jana: interview number 47)

If I'm listening to Ben E. King's 'Stand by Me' I can imagine myself walking down Leicester Square because that's where I heard it with that guy. (Mandy: interview number 43)

I'd visualize it. Like if I heard a certain song at a party or something and when I heard it again on my Walkman I'd just be at that party again with my friends doing what I was doing. (Zoe: interview number 53)

Sometimes it brings back memories. Like how you felt. Some types of music and songs like, you only listen to them at certain times with certain people, so you listen to them on your own and it brings back memories ... atmospheres. (Sara: interview number 50)

Every time you listen to music it takes you back ... I visualize it. Like if I heard a certain song at a party or something and when I heard it again on my Walkman I'd just be at that party again with my friends doing what I was doing. (Rebecca: interview number 49)

Certain songs remind you of home, or of situations. The situation seems to stick in my mind. Oh! I was there when I listened to that. (Paul: interview number 37)

Especially here, where I don't have such a big network of social connections. It's like [listening to music on his Walkman] having a photo of old friends. (Magnus: interview number 21)

Personal stereo use therefore represents one form of biographical travelling. The narrative quality that users attach to music permits them

Got nothing to do. (Zoe: interview number 53)

Just sitting there and get bored (Donna: interview number 52)

It's like when you're in a pub and they stop the music. It's an anticlimax. Everyone just stops. You don't know what to say. (Sara: interview number 50)

Switching off becomes tantamount to killing off their private world and returning them to the diminished space and duration of the disenchanted and mundane outside world. The above appears to represent a world of use that is in itself technologized with the experience, the condition and object of that experience being indistinguishable.

The heightening and colonizing nature of personal-stereo use is clearly brought out in the following examples of holiday use. Personal stereos are a popular holiday companion for users:

I use it lying on the beach. You need music when you're tanning yourself. There's the waves and everybody's around. You just need your music. On the plane we were listening to Enigma and things like that. It fitted in... Not bored, it livens everything up. Everything's on a higher level all the time. It makes it seem a bit busier. You get excited. Everything's happening. (Donna: interview number 52)

Donna isn't describing use as an antidote to boredom but as a form of harmonizing the environment to herself. Using a personal stereo 'enhances' her experience helping her to create a 'perfect' environment. Use allows her to experience the environment through her mediated fantasies. The holiday brochure might also come to life through use as Jay's description demonstrates:

I use it on the beach. I feel that I'd be listening to my music. I have the sea, I have the sand. 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 those 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 the sun... The plane journey, flying out and back and 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: interview number 33)

The environment is re-appropriated and experienced as part of the user's desire. Through her privatized auditory experience the listener gets 'more' out of the environment, not by interacting with it but precisely by not interacting. Jay focuses on herself as personally receiving the environment via her personal stereo. There is only the sun and the user's body and state of mind.

Actual environments, unadorned, are not normally sufficient for personal-stereo users. It is either populated with people (Jay) or merely mundane (Donna). Music listened to through the personal stereo makes it 'what it is' for the user and permits the recreation of the desired space to accord with the wishes of the user. This is achieved by the user repossessing space as part of, or constitutive of their subjective desire. Personal-stereo users thus tend to colonize and appropriate the here-and-now as part of the re-inscribing of habitable space through the 'colonizing' of place.

Personal-Stereo Use: Home and Auditory Mnemonics

Just as representational space is transformed, so is the user's experience of 'habitable' space. As personal-stereo users traverse the public spaces of the city they often describe the experience in terms of never leaving 'home', understood either symbolically or sometimes literally. The aim here is not to reach outwards into a form of 'we-ness' but rather to negate distance enabling the user to maintain a desired sense of security. Using a personal stereo is often described in terms of a feeling of being surrounded or enveloped. This is what users frequently mean when they refer to feelings of being at 'home'. Only the auditory nature of experience appears to be so all encompassing and non-directional. The use of music that has personal associations or connotations heightens these feelings. Equally personalized music enables the user to recreate a sense of narrative that overlays or re-inscribes journeying in public. This represents an alternative route 'home'. Jay typifies the first point:

I like to have a piece of my own world. Familiar and secure. It's a familiarity. Something you're taking with you from your home. You're not actually leaving home. You're taking it with you. You're in your own little bubble. You're in your own little world and you have a certain

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 wrapped up in their own significance whilst existing in the perceived narrative anonymity or invisibility of their spatial present. Sound appears as the significant medium here as users rarely describe constructing narratives out of television-watching for example, at least whilst alone and in public areas.

Place as Body in Personal-Stereo Use

The use of personal stereos also helps users to reconceptualize their experience of the body as the 'site' of action. The relationship of sound to the body also demonstrates the dual nature of the auditory. It is both a 'distance' sense as is sight, as well as a 'contact' sense together with touch and taste. The physicality of sound is brought out admirably by the following user's description:

You hear things not just through your eardrums, but through your whole bones. Your whole body is vibrating. I suppose it cancels out the vibration from the traffic around you. (Karin: interview number 18)

Users often describe feelings of being energized. The following account of cycling to the sounds of the personal stereo is typical:

It's like when you've got music on and you're on your bike. It's like flying in a way. You're kind of away from things and you're not having any other contact with people. So flying above everything I suppose. You're more aware of cycling. Of the physical action of cycling. (Dorinda: interview number 32)

The experience of cycling is thus transformed. A heightened sense of the body as the site of action is commonly described by users, especially those who use them for physical activity. This type of use often results in an 'emptying out' of thoughts from the body together with a greater awareness of the body as the 'site' of action:

I'd enjoy the feeling of my body working hard. It made me more concentrated on that. I enjoyed the feeling. It was channelling you in on that feeling. I'm used to riding a bike as well. Riding the push bike for the same reason. Focusing inside. Getting in a rhythm. Certain tracks, get into a rhythm, follow the bass line. It's always dance music. It's got

energy. It's like clubbing or dancing. I get the same energy working or cycling. You become part of the bicycle. (Ben: interview number 4)

In these descriptions the physical body becomes the centre of action. This can be understood as a form of 'de-consciousness' by which I mean the giving over of oneself to the body as the site of 'action'. The closest analogy would be the experience of extended dancing at 'rave' evenings (Malbon 1998). Dorinda's account differs from Ben's, however, because whilst the body becomes a site of action, she is not alone. She is in the company of the tape and 'Scott Walker'. Whereas in Ben's account he is focusing in on the rhythm and is at one with that. In both accounts, however, the body is experienced as merging with the activity of cycling. As such the body tends to lose its weight and resistance, becoming consumed in the present thus banishing time. For users to successfully produce this experience the personal stereo must normally be played loudly in order to preclude the intrusive sounds of the world that would otherwise threaten to diminish the experience. Users are often aware of the possibility of sound encroaching into their world and respond by varying the sound level of their personal stereo appropriately, thus maintaining the hermetically sealed nature of their listening experiences.

Users' relations to representational space are transformed, enabling them to construct forms of 'habitable' space for themselves. In doing so users can be described as creating a fragile world of certainty within a contingent world. Users tend not to like being left to their own thoughts, not for them the reveries of a Rousseau who liked nothing more than walking in the solitude of the countryside in order to be alone with his own thoughts. Personal-stereo users prefer to be 'alone' with the mediated sounds of the culture industry. Users thus become empowered, paradoxically, over themselves. I discuss this in detail in the following chapter.

Notes

1. Goffman states that a boundary marker:

marks the line between two adjacent territories. Note when boundary markers are employed either on both sides of an individual or in front and back, they