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The world according to sound

Investigating the world of Walkman users

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Abstract

Through the analysis of Walkman use I propose a re-evaluation of the significance of the auditory in everyday experience. I argue that the role of sound has been largely ignored in the literature on media and everyday life resulting in systematic distortions of the meanings attached to much everyday behaviour. Sound as opposed to vision becomes the site of investigation of everyday life in this article. In focusing thus, I draw upon a range of neglected texts in order to provide a dialectical account of auditory and technologically mediated experience that avoids reductive and dichotomous categories of explanation. I propose a new evaluation of the relational nature of auditory experience whereby users manage their cognition, interpersonal behaviour and social space. The Walkman is perceived as a tool whereby users manage space, time and the boundaries around the self.

Key words

auditory • auditory mnemonic • being with • cognitive contingency • dialectic • everyday life • place • relational experience • space

For twenty five centuries Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing. . . . Now we must learn to judge a society by its noise.
(Attali, 1985: 3)

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*, 6 Oct. 1993: 49)

Sound has remained an invisible presence in urban and media studies since the pioneering work of Schafer.¹ It is as if we inhabit a world in which sight is the only sense available to us. Visual epistemologies dominate our understanding of the use of communication technologies, rendering invisible the specific contribution of auditory experience to everyday life. If the world is for hearing as Attali suggests, then there exists an unexplored gulf between the world according to sound and the world according to sight. Going down the auditory path requires taking a fresh look at what has been written of the senses, technology and everyday experience. Sound has its own distinctive relational qualities as Berkeley observed, 'sounds are as near to us as our thoughts' (quoted in Ree, 1999: 36). Sound is essentially non-spatial in character, or rather sound engulfs the spatial thus problematizing the relation between subject and object. Sound inhabits the subject just as the subject might be said to inhabit sound, whereas vision, in contrast to sound, represents distance, the singular, the objectifying (Jay, 1994). The relational qualities of the two senses are completely different, yet despite these distinctions, visually based paradigms are invariably used to explain the nature of all urban experience including the auditory.

How can listening be explained when the subject in recent theory has been situated, no matter how askew, in the web of the gaze, mirroring, reflection, the spectacle and other ocular tropes? Visually disposed language, furthermore, favours thinking about sound as an object, but sound functions poorly in this regard: It dissipates, modulates, infiltrates other sounds, becomes absorbed and deflected by actual objects, and fills space surrounding them (Kahn and Whitehead, 1992: 4). The differing relational qualities of sound in the placing and spacing of experience will be drawn upon in the following analysis of Walkman use. In so doing I sketch out what an auditory epistemology of everyday life might look like.²

Since Walkmans were introduced by the Sony Corporation in 1979 they have sold consistently in their millions. Walkmans have become a truly international tool used in New York, Tokyo, Berlin, Paris or any metropolitan environment. Given this immense success Walkmans have been strangely invisible within sociological literature. Other popular forms of aural consumption such as radio use have also been under-researched in comparison to research into television.³

In addition to their aural reconfiguration of experience, Walkmans have one other highly distinctive feature; they can be used almost anywhere. They permit a reorganization of public and private realms of experience,

where what is traditionally conceived of as 'private' experience is brought out into public realms in the act of individualized listening. It is important to recognize, however, that Walkman use questions the very constitution and meaning of 'private' realms of experience. Walkman use also allows the user to prioritize their experience in relation to their geographical, social and interpersonal environment and as such enables them to attempt to exist within their own private soundworld. The site of experience is therefore reconstituted through the medium of the Walkman. In this sense urban experience becomes, in a significant manner, technological experience.

RESEARCHING WALKMAN USE

Existing accounts of Walkman use reflect a singular lack of empirical investigation. They are either anecdotal,⁴ situated in the realm of 'representation',⁵ or are theoretical meditations upon 'imaginary' Walkman use.⁶ Actual Walkman practice remains strangely invisible in existing accounts which invariably leads to teleological and reductive accounts of Walkman use that fail to adequately address the everyday lifeworlds of subjects (Fiske, 1989). Equally, an intellectual division of labour appears to exist in much cultural and urban theory in which the role of communication technologies in everyday life are rarely discussed, while research on the use of communication technologies often remains within the confines of the living room (Lull, 1990). The present work attempts to overcome these theoretical and empirical restrictions through a combination of a phenomenologically inspired ethnography coupled with a dialectical understanding of social experience.

In the following pages I sketch out a critical phenomenology of Walkman use which is dialectic, experiential and qualitative and which results in a structural yet non-reductive typology of use and user practices. In doing so, social practices are placed under strategies of use rather than in terms of individual users. By using this methodology in conjunction with critical theory I propose to produce a serious dialectic between structure and experience. This is carried out through the development of a critical phenomenology in which a dialectic between forms of intention (active) and contingency (passive) is investigated through the mediated nature of Walkman use in mundane everyday practices. Phenomenological method is useful as it is attentive to the way in which social meanings are bedded down in individual forms of experience.

The funded experience of a life, what a phenomenologist would call the 'sedimented' structure of the individual's experience, is the condition for the subsequent interpretation of all new events and activities. (Natanson, 1967: xxviii)

Phenomenological method successfully permits the dual study of the structure of experience together with the spectrum of individual habitual experience. The pressing need for proper phenomenological ethnography in studies of everyday life has been called for in the recent work of Silverstone (1994) and Rojek (1995). If phenomenology casts light upon that which is overlooked then it appears to be eminently suitable for an investigation of auditory experience. Walkman use possesses a 'veritable dailiness' which is inscribed into the daily rituals of users and this requires a methodology that can encompass the way users construct this dailiness without resorting to either mere subjective description or teleological accounts of use. I take as my starting point the methodological proposition that any personal stereo user can operationalize a variety of uses or strategies during any single usage. Individual users may use many different strategies of use as the following user quote demonstrates:

The music leads you to something and then you go back to the music. It leads me to different thoughts. Sometimes it gives me other ways. Other directions for my thoughts but it doesn't change my mood. I feel stronger. Not because I've got music. If I feel stronger it's because the music gives, like a frame for my thoughts and with my thoughts I feel stronger. It's not the music because anyone else can have the same tape on their Walkman, but not my thoughts. Sometimes I like not to think at all. I just listen to the music and feel good. I just follow the music. (Claudia)

The above description captures the fleeting and complex nature of Walkman use. Explanations using psychological dispositions or static dualistic concepts of freedom or colonization are thus inappropriate. Close analysis of interview material demonstrates a complex set of Walkman practices with each user engaging in a multiple set of uses, motivations and responses. Use therefore does not necessarily render itself susceptible to linear and non-contradictory analysis as the same user, for example, may at times withdraw from the public through a dream state and at other times confront the social spaces of the city in a confrontational or aggressive manner. An analysis that focuses upon strategies of use is thus able to potentially transcend any static explanatory dichotomies.

In discussing forms and 'structures' of use it should not be implied that anything resembling an 'essentialist' caricature of a typical Walkman user is created. This misses the main objective of a phenomenological analysis. Not all Walkman users are the same. People use Walkmans like many other forms of communication technologies for a variety of reasons and in a variety of circumstances. Neither does this methodology flatten out the meanings relating to the diversity of usage. For example, while more female users than men describe using the Walkman as a strategy to avoid unwanted interpersonal communication, this is investigated in the present study under the rubric of the 'interpersonal' and the 'look' and is discussed under

strategies of use. Indeed the Walkman can be used as a strategy to transcend gendered space thus potentially empowering women through its ability to enable them to control space and vision more successfully. This issue becomes part of a wider phenomenology that discusses Walkman use in terms of the management of experience. The same is true of sub-cultural use which might focus upon specific types of music used in relation to fashion and social activities, whereas a phenomenologically orientated interpretation situates interest in the mere fact that music is listened to in certain everyday situations. The technology of the Walkman cannot be easily disentangled from the technology of sound listened to through the Walkman. However the structural placing and role of the Walkman in everyday experience can be analytically distinguished from that which is listened to. Of significance to this study is that 'something' is listened to and that the use of a Walkman facilitates an auditory re-prioritization of forms of urban experience. So while Walkman users will describe music as an activating force facilitating a variety of feelings and will describe their fantasies to music, I am more concerned with the role of Walkmans in the construction and transformation of experience. I address this through juxtapositioning the empirical subject matter with an approach informed by critical theory's work on technology and experience. By attending closely to how Walkman users describe their activity, it is possible to develop a structural framework that incorporates notions of space, place, time, cognition (looking, listening, thinking, remembering) and the interpersonal within a critical framework encompassing the concepts of control, management, contingency and asymmetry.

A DIALECTIC OF AUDITORY PLACE AND SPACE

The most original contribution to an aural experience of space is some 60 years old and comes from the work of Kracauer who indicates how an auditory investigation of everyday life might look:⁷

Who would want to 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 own potentially active boredom, do not even grant one's modest right to personal boredom. Silent and lifeless, 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; they are badgered by the news hounds, and soon no one can tell who is the hunter and who is the hunted. (Kracauer 1995: 333)

Kracauer, an early collaborator of Adorno's, notes that it is primarily the headphones that create the private space for the user while the radio messages are deemed to vaporize and de-spatialize space. The relation of the 'far away' to the physical domain of the listener is rendered problematic. It

is through the technological medium of radio signals and the headphones that the listeners 'intentionally' put themselves 'elsewhere'. The distinction between the receiving and the creating of experience is already blurred in Kracauer's description. This ambiguity concerning the location and meaning of experience is an early example of the spatial and conceptual re-organization of experience typical of Walkman use.

Kracauer's radio users transcend geographical space through the act of listening which takes them away from the mundanity of their domestic space. They no longer commune with those in physical proximity to them but with the voices transmitted through the ether, preferring them to any discussion with the person adjacent to them.⁸ The technology of the radio and the headphones enables users to prioritize their experience socially. Kracauer in this description addresses the nature of cognitive, aesthetic and moral spacings of urban life, but he does so through the technologization of these realms. Walkman use is different in one very significant way to Kracauer's radio user; Walkmans are inherently mobile. Just as radio use transforms the space of the living room so Walkman use transforms the urban spacings of the street. The transformed social dynamic of the living room is taken out into the street. Walkman use permits an investigation into the social dynamics of the technology of sound on spatial urban experience. Kracauer's analysis also points to the dialectical nature of experience as he describes subjects actively and publicly retreating into mediated private realms of experience.

THE WORLD OF WALKMAN USERS

Users often wake up to sound. They normally have music on while getting ready for the day, whether it be their stereo system or their favourite radio station. Many users will have gone through their rituals of selecting their tapes and recharging their batteries the night before. Walkmans have their place in the home and have a variety of attendant daily activities attached to their use. The following house is a well-stocked house:

Everybody in the house has a Walkman and we have a shelf. The Walkman, because we don't use tapes in the house, we tape CDs principally for the Walkman you see. So there's a shelf in the house for all of the tapes, the Walkmans and the stock of batteries. (Sue)

Some users will have determined the night before what their tape of the day will be while others would rather wait to see what mood they are in, or alternatively may be swayed by what they hear in the morning on the radio. Others will look frantically through their tapes in order to find the 'right one'. For some users this never poses a problem as they might only use three or four tapes in a year on their Walkman invariably using just the one tape for a period of weeks or months. For many users the choice of

music is important and is more selective or specific than that which is listened to in the home:

I find that music is a very personal thing and I mean especially on a Walkman. You're taking all the ones you really like and all the personal tracks, putting it on a disc tape and listening to it out of choice on your Walkman. So I think that the music you listen to on a Walkman is more personal than that which you listen to at home. (Sue)

Invariably, many users have special tapes containing music only listened to on their Walkman. This music might have some personal association for them functioning as an 'auditory mnemonic' or alternatively might merely put them in the desired mood for the journey or day ahead. The following user is typical when he states:

If I'm in a bad mood then I'll get my Walkman. I've got this heavy rock thing and I'll play that. I try to sustain the mood by forwarding. When I wake up in the morning (listening to the radio) the first song I hear on the radio is the song that will go in my mind the whole day. So I play my Walkman and try to get rid of that song. I'll play my favourite song in the morning, of the tape that I'm listening to, and then I suppose I keep forwarding, rewinding it. (Jade)

Users also aim to minimize internal cognitive contingency:

I only have, maybe, four tapes that I listen to on a Walkman and two of them are very kind of, specific or particular, are kind of essential tapes. One is more calming and the other more motivating – never fails to do the trick. . . . If I'm stressed or not knowing where I'm at or ever. I listen to those two tapes and it always, always guarantees to work. . . . It keeps me on track. (Karin)

The metaphor of keeping 'on track' is instructive as it indicates a joining together of mood and duration. By keeping on track the subject reduces the contingency of the relationship between desired mood and time.

Maintenance of mood or the need to be in a particular frame of mind features prominently in users accounts. Some users desire merely to listen, immersing themselves in the tape until they know it completely. They often describe feelings of pleasure when they discover something 'new' in a familiar tape. Many users also desire to take something that is familiar with them while outside in order that it might share the journey or day with them. For regular users the idea that they might go outside without music is often described as distressing, as is the failure of the Walkman to function correctly in use. Other users may decide not to use it on a particular journey but nevertheless prefer to have it with them 'just in case'. The 'just in case' also extends to having spare tapes to cover the possibility of mood changes thereby minimizing the possibility of not having the 'right' tape to play. Failure to have the correct music invariably makes the personal stereo

dysfunctional, leading users to switch their machines off as a preferable alternative to listening to 'incorrect music'. Incorrect is defined in terms of the sounds not matching either the mood of the user, or their surroundings. The user's daily plan might also take into account possible alternative moods or the circumstances of their return journey home later in the day or evening. Users might divide the day into activation times in the morning to calming ones in the evening. If users desire to maintain their mood irrespective of their surroundings or time of day then the same tape tends to be used continually as in the following case:

It was just the same one and I listened to it over and over again. It was really nice listening to something over and over again. (Amber)

The facility to 'repeat' transforms the ability of the user to maintain their mood by permitting them to remain 'static' within the flow of time and place. Users habitually turn their Walkmans on the moment they leave their homes or sometimes even before. Regular users almost never leave their homes without it, even if only venturing out into the streets for a very short time as these two young users demonstrate:

I use it more now, even just down the local phone box, you know. I'm lodging at the moment at a house in Lowerburn and even just walking down the phone box – in they go. (Paul)

I listen to it so ardently, that, the Walkman, whatever I do, whatever I do. I'll be in the kitchen, washing or eating. I'll have it on. I go downstairs to put the heating on. I'll listen to it. Or I go across the road to ask the neighbour for some milk or something. Then I'll still listen to it. Just for that short journey. (Ron)

Out in the street many users concentrate on getting themselves activated and often describe this in terms of 'hitting' the day positively. Users describe needing something to get them 'going':

In the mornings I'll tend to listen to that sort of stuff (Hard Core) and it really wakes me up. (Kim)

You put a track that's made you feel good in the past. You sort of wake up. It gives you adrenaline. (Sara)

You need a rhythm. Chart music. It's always got a beat. (Frank)

Yeh. I need some sort of aerobics music. (Betty)

The physical environment of the street is invariably described in neutral terms by users, if mentioned at all. Users are much more attentive to their

own mood and orientation which is facilitated by sound being pumped through the Walkman in harmony with their desired mood, orientation or surroundings. Walkmans are invariably played with sufficient volume to drown out the industrialized sounds of the city. The following commuter explains the necessary strategies for maintaining the pleasure of listening while travelling on the tube:

I need to have it loud because of all the noise and all that. It's the loudest on the tube. More often than not it's on so loud I can't hear anything. (Matt)

Walkman use is often in contest with the sounds of the urban environment with users having to be attentive to changing sound levels within their environment in order to maximize their self-orientated experience. The following 27-year-old commuter explains this dynamic in the following manner:

Even the loudest of loud. My headphones aren't that good that they cut out all the sound. You've got to be able to hear something. I just have it as loud . . . I try to drown out as much extraneous sound. You find that loud motorcycles and police sirens, but the rest is blocked out. (Stephanie)

Walkman use re-orientates and re-spatializes experience which users often describe in solipsistic and aesthetic terms. They describe the Walkman as providing them with an invisible shell within which the boundaries of both cognitive and physical space become reformulated:

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 because you're coming. Because you're really aware it's just you. Only you can hear it. I'm really aware of 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 or out. All those things that you hear. Like when you've got a Walkman on you don't hear any of those. You've got your own soundtrack. You see them and it looks like they're moving differently because you've got a rhythm in your head. The way that they walk, they flow past you more. (Karin)

In this example the users 'horizon' of experience is described auratically whereby representational space is transformed into 'spectacle'. This aestheticization of experience may well represent a monumentalization of experience in which experiential contingency is negated.⁹ This perfection of control is described in the following terms:

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 it. (Magnus)

In contrast to the above example the following user describes her experience in terms of a cognitive control that extends no further than the maintenance of her mood:

I'm locking myself in a bit more. It locks the rest of the world out. Because it locks the outside world out. You don't feel anxiety. I feel less stress. I relax on the bike. It desensitizes any pain or stress that I might be feeling. It just takes me away. (Robina)

Walkmans are multi-faceted transformative devices for users. Their use may give an added physical presence to a subject's sense of interiority often achieved through the very physicality of the music, while at the same time displacing the sounds associated with the movements and activity of the everyday.

Walkman users like to construct familiar soundscapes to accompany them through their urban journeys. They often describe this in terms of never leaving 'home'. The use of a personal stereo represents something that is both individual and intimate, helping the user to maintain a sense of identity within an often impersonal environment. Use can be understood as facilitating a 'memory bank' of 'significant narratives' by providing an aural mnemonic while users move through the 'alien' spaces of daily life. The prominence given to the personal narrative taking place conceptually in the users 'own space' represents a re-appropriation of the past in the present while the present is experienced as 'removed'. Theirs is a private narrative actively reconstructed in public, but shrouded in a form of public invisibility that produces in the user a tentative invulnerability.

Urban environments however are not always perceived as alien. Users are just as likely to use their Walkmans in 'friendly' or known environments demonstrating that users are not always responding to the outside urban environment but to their own cognitive and emotional pre-dispositions. Walkman use enhances experience, providing the mundane with an exiting, sensual or spectacular soundtrack. Alternatively users may reconstruct their experience through the construction of imaginary scenarios in which they are either spectators or performers. Throughout all these examples, users describe Walkman use as enhancing their sense of control both internally and externally. Strategies of everyday management are intrinsic to personal stereo use and while some users have a heightened sense of presence, other users attempt to block out thoughts, or any sense of presence in order to 'go with the flow' of the music. In doing so unwanted or uncontrollable thoughts are often blocked out.

There's a lot of empty spaces in your head. Too much time to dwell on your everyday problems [at work]. . . . It [Walkman use] distracted you from what you were doing but it helped you with what you were doing. (Ben)

In these situations use can act as an emotional stabilizer to the person producing the desired state of mind. This 'correct' frame of mind enables them to successfully confront whatever the day holds for them. Many users, for example, report arriving at work in a much better frame of mind after using their Walkman.

In these daily strategies of management, time is also repossessed and made 'their own'. Commuters going to and from work extend ownership of their time through the use of their Walkman and often report that time becomes more 'productive' and 'pleasurable' for them in doing so. The environment, along with work, is perceived as something 'other' remaining out of their control or alternatively is thought of as merely 'boring', 'meaningless' or 'unpleasant'. Walkman users move through these spaces, either by withdrawing to be at 'home' with themselves or by aesthetically recreating their experience, whereby a personalized fiction is created from the environment. Through Walkman use public spaces invariably become both transformed and personalized. Walkmans 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.

Walkman users construct a range of interpersonal strategies which are inherently asymmetrical. 'Being-with' a Walkman is to be absorbed in a continuous flow of sound that acts as an accessory, mediator or constructor of the user's activity. Its use represents a choice, even if it is habitual, of the user's management of their time and space. The act of listening also, necessarily, mediates the realm of the interpersonal by changing the relationship between the user and others. Use permits the user to stop or ignore communication at any time, with users often evaluating the significance of, or interest of, discourse in relation to use. As such, normal discourse is often perceived to be in competition with the heightened quality of Walkman use. The following examples are typical:

If there's a topic of conversation that doesn't interest me then I'll get into my Walkman. (Donna)

If I like the person or if they say something that interests me I'll switch it off. If not I'll keep it on. If I don't like them I sort of shut out everything that I don't like by putting my Walkman on. (Kim)

Forms of auditized looking are also developed which are inherently non-reciprocal, functioning to bolster up the user's sense of power and control in urban space. The auditory look might also become an omnipotent look with reciprocal gazing perceived as being impossible:

It's like looking through a one way mirror. I'm looking at them but they can't see me. (Julie)

It is a recurring theme among users to refer to looking without being seen. The above description of vision as a one-way mirror is merely the most succinct metaphor for escaping the 'reciprocal gaze'. The viewing subject can disappear into an unobserved gaze:

It's easier to have eye contact with people, because you can look but you're listening to something else. You don't feel you're intruding in on people, because you're in your own little world. (Stephanie)

The above user both looks and does not look. Eye contact has a different meaning if the recipient of the gaze can see that the person is 'somewhere else' signifying that the gaze is not a penetrative gaze but rather an unintentional or distracted gaze. This type of gaze, according to this user, does not constitute an 'incursion' into the private space of another due to the lack of intentionality held in the gaze. In a sense, the look isn't a look at all. Users often approach the public one step removed and this affects how they interact and respond to situations that confront them. Equally, users might withdraw into themselves due to fatigue, boredom or through the desire to have music feature as an all-encompassing facet of their journey.

Walkman use enables users to successfully ignore the environment traversed. The following description comes from a young female secretary travelling home on the tube after a days work:

If I'm quite tired it just washes over me. It's background. It's something to drown out the noise of the train. If you want, just want to switch off and be in a room of your own you put that on and you close your eyes and shut your ears and it's a way of not being interrupted. (Mags)

Another user describes using her personal stereo to walk home after work:

It just seems one minute I'm walking. The next minute I'm there. I don't notice when I'm listening to things. I just appear. I just end up there. I'm not thinking about where I'm going because I'm used to it. My feet just take me there. (Catherine)

Users inhabit industrialized sound worlds whether in the home, at work, or in the street. Listening to recorded music or the radio is also to receive industrialized sound. Sound becomes a habitual companion to users' lifeworlds, with Walkman users frequently referring to feelings of unease when there is nothing but 'natural' sound, unadorned, around them. The 'silence' of normal sounds is often experienced negatively, as something to be filled in:

I don't like the silence. I hate it at night. I suppose it's 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 the music on for.
(Donna)

In a world filled with noise, rather than craving for silence, users demand their own noise. 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 Walkman 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 Walkman. This is graphically demonstrated by the following 17-year-old respondents who were asked in a group interview to describe how the atmosphere changes with the switching off of their Walkmans:

An empty feeling. (Kayz)

Got nothing to do. (Zoe)

Just sitting there and get bored. (Donna)

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)

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.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF PERSONAL STEREO USE

Walkman use becomes 'second nature' to many users in their negotiation of everyday urban life. The auditory and technological nature of Walkman experience transforms our understanding of a range of everyday urban experiences. For example, the auditory look differs significantly from the non-auditory look. Strategies of Walkman 'looking' often involve a successful avoidance of reciprocal looking or interaction. 'Looking' takes place within the users privatized and auditized soundtrack that constitutes a state of 'being with'¹⁰ operationalized within a range of behaviour that heightens both the nature of the urban and the user's own interior experience.

Walkman users engage in multiple strategies of controlling the 'gaze' through the establishment of zones of separation constituted through the subjective auditory nature of the Walkman. Geographical notions of personal space are thus discounted by being re-inscribed as a 'private' conceptual space in which the Walkman acts as a facilitator for solipsistic strategies of

empowerment. The 'gaze' of Walkman users are both empowered and non-reflective.

While much Walkman experience can be understood aesthetically it is not necessarily visually. Users often refer to an 'interior' flow of experience in which the 'visual' has minimal significance. When operationalized visually, users transform or appropriate urban space by integrating it into their own mediated aesthetic fantasies unlike classic accounts of flanerie.

Walkman use also demonstrates a clear auditory re-conceptualization of the spaces of habitation often embodied in users' strategies of placing themselves 'elsewhere' in urban environments. Users tend to negate public spaces through their prioritization of their own technologically mediated private realm. This re-prioritization of subjective experience is operative in a range of interpersonal behaviours whereby they use their Walkmans both as a form of communication demarcator and as a communication enhancer. Walkman users' sense of self-prioritization is enhanced through their power to disengage at will from a variety of forms of interaction. Forms of face-to-face interaction are continually in competition with simulated forms of experience with users often finding the simulated more attractive than the face to face.

Walkmans transform the site of experience into a form of 'sanctuary'. Within this 'sanctuary' Walkman users both prioritize and centre their experience. They often construct personal narratives through forms of auditory mnemonics and are thus able to transcend geometrical space reconstituting it as imaginary space of personal narrative. The nature of this technologized space is experienced as all engulfing, enabling the space of habitation to be infused with its own sense of heightened experiential aura. The manufactured aura of Walkman use re-inscribes space and time with significance and permanence. This re-inscribing transforms the perceived void or oppressiveness of empirical space and time. Walkman use enables users to manage and minimize their apprehension of everyday contingency. Users habitually exist within forms of accompanied solitude constructed through a manufactured industrialized auditory. Walkman use colonizes the space of users thereby working to transform their mood, orientation and reach so as to provide them with a sense of empowerment, coherence and narrative, precisely by negating the contingent nature of experience, both geographically and volitionally. In doing so Walkman users have a greater sense of control over areas of urban experience previously considered immune from control. The exclusion of all forms of intrusion constitutes a successful strategy for urban and personal management.

Auditory experience produces its own specific understanding of the meaning of habitual, daily experience. Walkman users both present themselves via technology and construct the social via technology. Walkman users do not appear to display a confidence concerning themselves or the

social unadorned. Rather, experience becomes both manageable and significant precisely through the technologizing of that experiential flow. Walkman use represents an example of the technologizing of daily experience. Walkman users turn away from the geographical and social present in order to construct safe technologized habitats where they can experience time and place through dwelling within an interiority that is itself made habitable only through cultural mediation in the form of industrialized and personalized soundworlds.

Walkman use is usefully described as a 'device paradigm' whereby subjects withdraw from 'the manifold engagement with things' that surround them (Taylor, 1989). The process is a dialectical one in which users withdraw in order to 'be with' a mediated elsewhere, desired by and fulfilled through Walkman use. The discounting of the public nature of the urban into a reconfigured personalized private in the public refers to a re-embedding of space and time whereby everyday experience is reconfigured with personalized meanings. The lived experiential manner of these strategies can be understood through Foucault's notion of heterotopia in which the subject creates a space beyond or outside of surveillance for themselves. This notion of heterotopia can itself be understood dialectically in as much as the subject opens themselves up via mediation in order to enact successful strategies of social closure (Foucault, 1986). This mediated space 'beyond' becomes part of a technologized device paradigm in which the subject lives.

The analysis of Walkman use indicates that it is necessary to link the nature of auratic forms of experience embodied in use to a set of relational concerns in urban experience by focusing upon a qualitative assessment of a technologized site and horizon of experience. Embodied in Walkman practices is a set of tacit assumptions about experience and its relationship to the world. The manner in which these values are embedded and how they assert themselves in everyday life are in need of further investigation which I undertake in detail elsewhere (Bull, 2000).

The present work indicates that future research into the use of aural technologies including, most importantly, the mobile phone, but also automobile use should move away from an unreflective use of visually based epistemologies of explanation. This will reduce the tendency of explaining everyday life with a theoretical set of dualisms (active/passive, public/private, subject/object and so on) which derive largely from such visually based epistemologies.

This study also provides a corrective to non-empirical accounts of urban and cultural behaviour which often read the meaning of everyday behaviour teleologically from a pre-ordained theoretical base rather than investigating the empirical behaviour itself. Thus everyday behaviour is often derived from postmodern notions of subjectivity in which subjects are described as decentred, despatialized beings (Chambers, 1994; Hosokawa, 1984).

Alternatively, traditional theoretical or literary concepts are operationalized to explain contemporary behaviour. In these scenarios subjects become latter-day flaneurs (Jenks, 1995; Tester, 1994). At other times, the meaning of everyday behaviour is read off semiotically from advertising images in which subjects become the mirror image in advertisements (du Gay and Hall, 1997). In all of these accounts there is a failure to come adequately to grips with the detailed and rich ethnography of everyday life from which potentially new meanings, concepts and frameworks might arise.

Yet equally, much empirical work fears to move beyond the merely descriptive and so tends to move within overly narrow theoretical frameworks. The study of the living room for example might be seen to bear no relation to the habitation of the street, and so on. Equally, experiential and social categories that are themselves in need of interrogation such as 'experience', 'leisure', the 'public' and 'private' often become taken for granted in otherwise interesting descriptive accounts of experience. The above analysis of Walkman use points to the ability of a critically informed phenomenology of experience to overcome these limitations of explanation.

NOTES

- 1 Schafer, in *The Tuning of the World* (1977), uses the term 'soundscape' to describe the total experienced acoustic environment. This includes 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 have in shaping human behaviour. While Schafer's work promised to open up the world to the investigation of sound, his work is now largely neglected in the field of media and cultural studies. The reasons for this neglect are clear. Schafer's own studies are embedded in an antipathy to technologized sounds. Pedagogically he wished to make people more attentive to the complex sounds in their environment. Schafer describes modern soundscapes in terms of 'schizophony' by which he means soundscapes saturated with sounds that no longer originate from their 'natural' source. That is technologized sounds. Work on sound in this tradition has either concentrated on how to make soundscapes equitable for people who perceive industrialized sound in terms of their polluting qualities or move into the micro study of sound. Typical of these studies are the investigations of soundscapes in cowsheds and the like (Poysko, 1994). The texture of sound in culture is more commonly studied by ethnomusicologists in non-industrialized contexts (Feld, 1990; Waterman, 1990). It is hardly surprising that Schafer's work has been unable to shift the dominant visual epistemological nature of contemporary social thought, given his largely negative assessment and largely romantic dismissal of contemporary soundscapes.
- 2 The article draws upon empirical data of Walkman users carried out primarily in London over a two-year period from 1994–6. The study consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews with Walkman users. Interviews were conducted both with individual Walkman users and with groups. Supplementary material was gained

through the use of diaries. Subjects represented a cross-section of Walkman users in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and occupation.

- 3 Despite the fact that the radio is the oldest domestic electronic form of mass media it has received relatively little academic attention. Recent work has tended to ignore the specific aural nature of radio listening (Barnett and Morrison, 1989). Equally, Crissell often misses the way in which sound operates in the everyday life of radio listeners. His reference to radio as 'blind' implies that it is inferior in some way to television consumption (Crissell, 1986: 219). Equally Barnett and Morrison continually refer to radio listening negatively in relation to visual modes of consumption (1989: 5). The most comprehensive ethnography of radio sound, a study of radio sound in Bristol homes, remains unpublished (Tacchi, 1997).
- 4 Typical of this is a little piece written by Ian Chambers (1994) which is invariably invoked as evidence of Walkman use.
- 5 This is the case with the recent publication by the Open University team (du Gay and Hall, 1997) where representation is confounded with use. Throughout the publication no empirical evidence of Walkman use is presented to substantiate any of the claims being made.
- 6 This perspective stresses the visual prioritizing of much urban experience. Walkman use becomes a form of 'flânerie' and as such constitutes a form of urban aesthetics. Alternatively Walkman use becomes a mobile form of urban contestation (Hosokawa, 1984).
- 7 Relational experience is a qualitative relationship and describes how users relate to themselves, others and the urban spaces passed through. Bauman conceives of this in the following way: 'Social space ought to be seen as a complex interaction of three interwoven, yet distinct processes – those of cognitive, aesthetic and moral "spacings" – and their respective products' (Bauman, 1991: 145). However, mainstream accounts of urban behaviour, including Bauman, either fail to address how technology, in this instance the Walkman, impacts upon these three concerns or ignores the specific relational nature of auditory experience in the daily lives of people.
- 8 Critical theorists recognized the historical constitution of the senses which became central to their evaluation of the relationship between agency and social structure. Therefore notions of 'looking', 'seeing', 'remembering' and 'hearing' become mediated cultural practices and strategies as indeed does the very constitution of 'experience'.
- 9 Monumentalization is a term used by Walter Benjamin to describe the denial of the contingent and the passage of time. In the text I use the term to highlight the way in which Walkman users tend to monumentalize their experience through the auditory as an everyday experiential strategy.
- 10 'Being with' is a process described somewhat unsystematically by Adorno to describe the substitution of direct experience by technologically mediated forms of experience. I understand this term to refer to a qualitative relationship between the subject and that which is experienced.

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