

READING G

Iain Chambers: 'A miniature history of the Walkman'

[...] Could it be that we come to the city in order to achieve solitude? Such has been the unspoken premise of the modern city of utopian individualism. By solitude I do not mean isolation. Isolation is a state of nature; solitude is the work of culture. Isolation is an imposition, solitude a choice. (Hatton, 1988)

1990 is the tenth anniversary of the Sony Walkman. Launched in the Spring of 1980, this urban, hi-fi gadget was based on an idea that came to Akio Morita, President of Sony, while, rather appropriately, walking in New York. Over the decade the Walkman has offered access to a portable soundtrack which, unlike the transistor radio, car stereo and the explicitly opposed intention of the bass-boosted 'ghetto blaster' or 'boogie box', is, above all, an intensely private experience. But such an apparent refusal of public exchange and regression to individual solitude also involves an unsuspected series of extensions. With the Walkman there is simultaneously a concentration of the auditory environment and an extension of our individual bodies.

For the meaning of the Walkman does not necessary lie in itself – it sits there, neat, usually black, often wrapped in leather, and quite oblivious – but in the extension of perceptive potential. Although people walking around with a Walkman might simply seem to signify a void, the emptiness of metropolitan life and its 'streets without memory' (Siegfried Kracauer), that neat little object can also be understood as a pregnant zero, as the unobtrusive link in an urban strategy, a semiotic shifter, the crucial digit in a particular organization of 'sense [...]

In the apparent refusal of sociability the Walkman act nevertheless reaffirms participation in a shared environment. It directly partakes in the changes in the horizon of perception that characterize the late twentieth century, and which offers a world fragmenting under the mounting media accumulation of intersecting signs, sounds and images. With the Walkman strapped to our bodies we confront what Murray Schafer in his book *The Tuning of the World* calls a 'soundscape', a

soundscape that increasingly represents a mutable collage: sounds are selected, sampled, folded in and cut up by both the producers (DJs, rap crews, dub masters, recording engineers) and the consumers (we put together our personal play lists, skip some tracks, repeat others, turn up the volume to block out the external soundtrack or flip between the two). Each listener/player selects and rearranges the soundtrack or flip soundscape, and, in constructing a dialogue with it, leaves a trace in the network.

In this mobile, wraparound world, the Walkman, like dark glasses and iconoclastic fashion, serves to set one apart while simultaneously reaffirming individual contact to certain common, if shifting, measures (music, fashion, aesthetics, metropolitan life ... and their particular cycles of mortality). So the Walkman is both a mask and a masque: a quiet putting into act of localized theatics. It reveals itself as a significant symbolic gadget for the nomads of modernity, in which music on the move is continually being decontextualized and recontextualized in the inclusive acoustic and symbolic life of everyday life (Hosokawa, 1984)¹. But if the Walkman so far represents the ultimate form of music on the move, it also represents the ultimate musical means in mediating the media. For it permits the possibility, however fragile and however transitory, of imposing your soundscape on the surrounding aural environment and thereby domesticating the external world: for a moment it can all be brought under the stop/start, fast forward, pause and rewind buttons.

The fascination of the image of the Walkman, apart from the inner secret it brazenly displays in public (what is s/he listening to?), is the ambiguous position that it occupies between autism and autonomy: that mixture of danger and saving power, to paraphrase Heidegger's quotation from Hölderlin², that characterizes modern technology. Therefore, to understand the Walkman both involves multiplying on it diverse points of view and appreciating that it does not subtract from sense but adds to and complicates it. Pursuing this we might say that our relationship to the Walkman 'will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of technology' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 3). By 'essence' (*Wesen*) Heidegger intends something that endures through time, that dwells in the present, that offers a 'sense' of technology that is not merely reducible to the 'technological'. Despite the

nostalgia for authenticity that hangs over Heidegger's discourse we can perhaps bend his words in a suggestive direction. To the question what is technology and, in this particular case, the Walkman, we can answer that it is simultaneously a means and a cultural activity. To continue with the German philosopher's concerns, the Walkman is an instrument and activity that contributes to the casting into, or en-framing (*Ge-stell*), of sense in the contemporary world. In retracing the etymology of 'technology' back to the Greek *techne* and its ancient connection to the arts, to *poiesis* and knowledge, Heidegger suggests a means of revealing its sense, its particular truth.

But as both instrument and activity, the Walkman is not simply an instrument that reveals the enduring truth of technology and being; it is also an immediate reality and activity. As part of the equipment of modern nomadism it contributes to the prosthetic extension of our bodies, perpetually 'on the move', caught up in a decentred diffusion of languages, experiences, identities, idiolects and histories that are distributed in a tendentially global syntax. The Walkman encourages us to think inside this new organization of time and space. Here, for example, the older, geometrical model of the city as the organizer of space has increasingly been replaced by chronometry and the organization of time. The technology of space has been supplemented and increasingly eroded by the technology of time: the 'real time', the 'nanoseconds' of computer chips and monitor blips, of transitory information on a screen, of sounds snatched in the headphones. It leads to the emergence of a further dimension. 'Speed suddenly returns to become a *primitive force* beyond the measure of both time and space' (Virilo, 1988, p. 15; see also Virilo, 1984).

To travel, and to perform our *travail*, in this environment we plug in, choosing a circuit. Here, as opposed to the discarded 'grand narratives' (Lyotard) of the city, the Walkman offers the possibility of a micro-narrative, a customized story and soundtrack. The ingestion of such a privatized habitat in public spaces is a disturbing act. Its uncanny quality lies in its deliberate confusion of earlier boundaries, in its provocative appearance 'out of place'. Now, the confusion of 'place', of voices, histories and experiences speaking 'out of place', forms part of the altogether more extensive

sense of contemporary semantic and political crisis. [For a further discussion of the politics of 'place', see Chambers, 1990.] A previous order and organization of place, and their respective discourses, has had increasingly to confront an excess of languages emerging out of the histories and languages of feminism, sexual rights, ethnicity, race, and the environment, that overflow and undercut its authority. Is the Walkman therefore a political act? It is certainly an act that unconsciously entwines with many other micro-activities in conferring a different sense on the *polis*. In producing a different sense of space and time, it participates in rewriting the conditions of representation: where 'representation' clearly indicates both the iconic or semiotic dimension of the everyday and potential participation in a political community.

In Bruce Chatwin's marvellous book *The Songlines* we are presented with the idea that the world was initially sung into being.

I have a vision of the Songlines stretching across the continents and ages; that wherever men have trodden they have left a trail of song (of which we may, now and then, catch an echo); and that these trails must reach back, in time and space, to an isolated pocket in the African savannah, where the First Man opening his mouth in defiance of the terrors that surrounded him, shouted the opening stanza of the World Song, 'I AM!'. (Chatwin, 1988, p. 314)

The Nietzschean vision of the world, that is a world of our making, dependent on our activity and language for its existence, is here laid out as the human adventure in which the movements of peoples and the rigours and rhythms of bodies, limbs and voice set the patterns, the design, the nomination, of the land, the country, our home. The religious aura of this physical and sonorous nomadism has clearly waned in the more secular networks of Western society. Perhaps it still continues to echo inside the miniaturized headphones of modern nomads as the barely remembered traces of a once sacred journey intent on celebrating its presence in a mark, voice, sign, symbol, signature, to be left along the track.