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14

'TO EACH THEIR OWN BUBBLE'

Mobile spaces of sound in the city

Michael Bull

> In the 1950s, in the United States ... teenagers took their dates to the drive-in movie in their first car. Without leaving their car, they passed from the sound bubble of the car radio to the visual bubble of the cinema. Today, the users of Walkmans and cellular phones, like Baudelaire's stroller, transport their private sphere with them. They are in an anonymous crowd, listening to the music they like; they are absent from their home or office yet in potential telecommunication with the whole world.
>
> (Flichy 1995: 168)

> The media do not simply occupy time and space, they also structure it and give it meaning.
>
> (Livingstone 2002: 81)

The social spaces of urban habitation are being transformed right in front of our ears. These transformations have slowly crept up on us over the last thirty years or so, beginning in the 1960s with the placing of the cassette recorder in automobiles, to the development of the Sony Walkman in 1979, culminating in its most visible manifestation in the mobile phone. People are now buying mobile phones faster than they bought television sets in the 1950s. An increasing number of us demand the intoxicating mixture of noise, proximity and privacy whilst on the move and have the technologies to successfully achieve these aims. The use of these largely sound technologies informs us about how we attempt to 'inhabit' the 'public' spaces of the city.

Yet to understand the use and meanings of these mobile and aural technologies we need to situate them within traditional and 'fixed' media technologies such as the telephone, gramophone, radio and television. These are the technologies of the twentieth century that have largely transformed the activities and meanings associated with 'being at home'. The use of these more recent sound technologies, mobile sound systems, mobile phones and personal stereos has increasingly confounded and questioned the meaning of public and private spheres of existence and our shifting and often contradictory relationship to them. It is interesting to note that today many mobile phone users will find the

use of other mobiles in confined spaces annoying yet will use their own phone with impunity in the same spaces. Are they appealing to some idea of a communal space; the right to be left alone in silence; or merely the relativization of their own sense of being wanted?

Does the street conform to what I want it to be as I walk through it using my personal stereo; does the space of habitation in the automobile appear safe and secure to music; does the voice of the absent other transform the spaces of the street for me into one imbued with proximity and connection, and what becomes of the 'others'? In what sense do these users transform the representational space of communication into a mobile and privatized sphere of communication with absent others or the mediated comfort of the culture industry in the form of voice or music? In this chapter, I address the meanings attached to the sounds of the social as they are enacted on 'the move'.

Sounding out privatized space

First, I wish to briefly discuss what is meant by 'private' space. Most people in the West feel entitled to their own 'private space', whether this is in their room, their home, their restaurant table, a certain space on the street or a space around the automobile on the road. The 'entitlement' to 'private space' is entrenched in Western thought, in principle at least since the Enlightenment. Operationalizing this idea of an individualized 'private space', however, increasingly involves the subject in an array of potential contradictions, both domestically and in 'public'.[1]

Private space has often been associated with property, the ownership of space and place. In the UK, the phrase 'an Englishman's home is his castle' still resonates ideologically, even if the state has largely put paid to it as a viable concept. A geographically identifiable space of bricks and mortar would appear easy to define and defend; yet many of us are wary of the 'prying' eyes of neighbours and erect high fences to protect 'our' space from the gaze of others. Less successful are defences against noise. In the UK, for example, an increasing number of people complain about the noise of neighbours, the noise of aircraft flying overhead, the sound of automobiles entering into our domestic spaces of habitation. The defence against the seepage of noise into one's private space is virtually impossible; sound in its multidimensionality has no respect of space. One resorts to increasing the sound of one's television or sound system, thus increasing the general noise level. Today, noise pollution in British cities is ten times greater than it was a decade ago. In 2002, the UK Noise Association (NSCA 2002) claimed that 32 million people in Britain were exposed to high levels of noise. Noise tests one's notion of the social to its limits.

If the idea of 'private space' is increasingly difficult to maintain even in fixed habitats, then the problem increases whilst we are out on the move. Simmel was perhaps the first sociologist to attempt to explain the significance and desire to maintain a sense of privacy, to create a mobile bubble, whilst on the

move. Simmel's concerns were with sensory overload, crowds, strangers and the noisy maelstrom of the city from which citizens retreated. In his analysis, Simmel charted the changing nature of bourgeois civility within the increasingly technologized urban geography of the early twentieth century, addressing the relational nature and problems associated with people continually on the move in the city (Simmel 1997). These concerns took a special form in the twentieth century, namely, the search for aural privacy, made possible by new and mobile media technologies.

A dialectic of noise and privacy in the city

Ever-present sound was not always a requirement for 'retreat' as it tends to be today. In the nineteenth century, middle-class train travellers found the activity of reading sufficient to create their 'private bubble'. These readers were motivated both by the boredom of travel – they were disconnected from the world beyond the window of the speeding train – and by the discomfort experienced by the seating arrangements within the carriages where they were obliged to look at a changing array of passengers opposite them.[2] Yet, historically, the construction of a 'private bubble' of experience often required a level of silence, often institutionalized, as in prohibitions on talking loudly in library reading rooms or, more recently, in cinemas and concert halls. Silence, indeed, has long been thought to be a precondition for thought. Rousseau, as early as the eighteenth century, describes escaping to the countryside to escape the noise of the city in order to be alone with his thoughts (Rousseau 1979). Silence has not, however, been a very successful strategy in the streets, despite a healthy history of noise abatement campaigns (Bijsterveld 2001). With the development of modern road systems and millions of automobiles, this option is now harder to find as millions of us travel to get away from it all, in grid-locked unison (Brandon 2002; Sachs 1992). However, many are not seeking 'silence' but their own, very personalized noise or soundscape.

The dominant view, however, held by many urbanists is that we have fallen silent in the urban street (Sennett 1994). Sennett describes the twentieth-century city as one in which we have become increasingly immersed in our own concerns, passively moving in silence, looking but neither understanding nor recognizing the 'differences' that confront us. The city, according to this view, is increasingly experienced as a 'non-space' (Auge 1995). For others, in contrast, the street has become an aestheticized space (Jenks 1995), in which the street becomes 'spectacle'; a potential visual emporium of delight (Debord 1977; De Certeau 1988). Elsewhere, I have discussed the redundancy of *flânerie* as a contemporary concept, and whilst the notion of 'aestheticization' has potentially great explanatory power in explaining aspects of urban experience, it need not contradict the notion of 'aural solipsism' through which subjects experience the street mimetically, aesthetically making it 'their own' (Bull 2000).

An analysis of the use of mobile sound communication technologies permits me to point to both a continuum within Western urban experience, and a shift that has taken place over the past thirty years. The continuum represents new developments in the search for public privacy and a discounting of the 'public' realm, whilst the transformation lies in urban citizens' increasing ability and desire to make the 'public' spaces of the city conform to their notion of the 'domestic' or the 'intimate', either literally or conceptually. As we increasingly inhabit 'media saturated' spaces of intimacy, so we increasingly desire to make the public spaces passed through mimic our desires, thus, ironically, furthering the absence of meaning attributed to those spaces. We no longer desire quiet, but noise! We demand our own space, but increasingly discount the space of others. Richard Sennett's urban street is now inhabited with people exposing their private lives in public through their mobile phones, largely indifferent to others, whilst some walk past in their aural solipsistic dreams using their personal stereos. Meanwhile, automobile drivers pass by often engrossed in listening to their sophisticated car sound systems or talking on their mobile phones.

Much of our movement through the city is solitary, in-between destinations and meetings. Sole occupancy is often the preferred mode of travel in automobiles throughout Europe and North America (Brodsky 2002; Putnam 2000), whilst personal stereos are by their very nature a largely privatizing technology. Meanwhile, mobile phone users are able to fill the 'empty' urban spaces of the city with their 'own' reassuring noises (Puro 2002). As such, I restrict my discussion here to 'solitary' movement through the city. The use of these technologies binds together the disparate threads of much urban movement for users, both 'filling' the spaces 'in-between' communication or meetings and structuring the spaces thus occupied. The use of sound, music and speech whilst on the move, whether it be in automobiles, through personal stereos or on mobile phones, is usefully understood as representing wider social transformations in everyday life. The intimate nature of an industrialized soundworld in the form of radio sounds (Tacchi 1999; Hendy 2000), recorded music, and television (Livingstone 2002) increasingly represents large parts of a privatized everyday lifeworld of urban citizens. This impacts upon habitual everyday notions of what it might mean to 'inhabit' certain spaces such as the automobile, the street, the shopping arcade (DeNora 2000; McCarthy 2001), or indeed the living room (Livingstone 2002; Silverstone 1994).

In this chapter, I seek to pose a dialectical relationship between media-generated forms of intimacy and the non-spaces of urban culture by arguing that the greater the need for proximity and connection, as expressed through the use of mobile communication technologies, the more alienating the public spaces of daily existence become.[3]

Mediated intimacy/displaced places

From home to street, from private setting to public arena, the media have helped us link these two areas of daily life together in unexpected ways. Whilst there has been much discussion on the nature of space/time compression involved in the use of communications technologies, from the telegraph to the Internet, and on the privatizing potential of television (Harvey 1996; Winston 1998), most empirical research involving the use of these technologies has focused solely upon domestic consumption in fixed locales – in an assumption that media effects and influences stop at the front door! Alternatively, urban geographers often ignore or discount the media as unimportant in discussing the geography of the street.

Some theorists, however, understood that the very meaning of what it is to 'look' or 'hear' is irredeemably media linked. Both Walter Benjamin (1973) and Theodor Adorno (1973) recognized this in their own way, the former focusing on the visual, the latter on the aural. Adorno recognized that sound technologies transform our understanding of proximity, for example, employing the term 'we-ness' in his discussion of sound recordings in the 1930s and 1940s:

> By circling them, by enveloping them as inherent in the musical phenomena – and turning them as listeners into participants, it contributes ideologically to the integration which modern society never tires of achieving in reality. It leaves no room for conceptual reflection between itself and the subject, and so it creates an illusion of immediacy in a totally mediated world, of proximity between strangers, the warmth of those who come to feel a chill of unmitigated struggle of all against all.
>
> (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 46)

Increasingly, this sense of 'intimacy' appears to be associated, although not exclusively, with a wide variety of forms of domestic media consumption:

> The fostering of 'we-ness,' dialogical inclusion, and intimate address have remained at the core of broadcasting to this day. ... The early history of broadcast talk consisted largely in the attempt to create a world in which audiences would feel like participants. Today both the programming and reception of most commercial media, in the United States at least, actively cultivate a sense of intimate relations between persona and audience. Media culture is a lush jungle of fictional worlds where 'everyone knows your name,' celebrities and politicians address audiences by first names, and conversational formats proliferate.
>
> (Peters 1999: 215–17)

Claude Lefort has referred to this media phenomenon in similar terms to Adorno, as a 'constant illusion of a between-*us*, an entre-*nous*' in which the media 'provokes an hallucination of nearness which abolishes a sense of distance, strangeness, imperceptibility ... of otherness' (Lefort, quoted in Merck 1998: 109).

Raymond Williams understood this phenomena in terms of 'mobile privatization'. Not the street, but our living rooms, and increasingly our bedrooms, become emporiums of visual and auditory delight. Recently, Sonia Livingstone (2002) has charted the consumption of the media among teenagers within the home. She found that teenagers increasingly liked to consume the media privately, whether television or music: 'The home increasingly becomes the site for individualised media consumption with children spending the majority of their home media use alone in their bedrooms' (Livingstone 2002: 40).

Sole consumption is both pleasurable (especially as compared to consuming with parents) and controllable. Moreover, domestic consumption appears to fuel feelings of omnipotence, as there is no one there to contradict the consumer. Equally, domestic use teaches consumers how to 'fill in' the spaces and times between activities. We increasingly become used to the mediated presence of the media in our own privatized settings.

The desire for company or 'occupancy' whilst moving through the city is thus contextualized through the daily or habitual use of a variety of media. The array of mobile sound media increasingly enables users to successfully maintain a sense of intimacy whilst moving through the city. How, then, do these mobile technologies simulate the intimate spaces of habitation desired by many of our urban users of mobile sound technologies?

Intimate auto-mobility

> Today the highway might well be the site of radio's most captive audiences, its most attentive audience. The car is likely to be your most intensive radio-listening experience, perhaps even your most intensive media experience altogether. Usually radio is a background medium, but in the car it becomes all-pervasive, all consuming ... the car radio envelops you in its own space, providing an infinite soundtrack for the external landscape that scrapes the windshield. The sound of radio fills up the car, encapsulates you in walls made of words.
>
> (Loktev 1993: 203)

When Baudrillard coined the phrase 'to each their own bubble', he was thinking visually. In mobile terms, cities are said to float by as some kind of filmic embodiment (Baudrillard 1989). The daily act of television viewing shifts to the everyday mobile spectatorship of the occupants of automobiles watching the world through the transparent barrier of the windscreen,

hermetically sealed off from the duress of the world beyond the screen. The interior of the automobile is likened to a moving living room from which to view the world, a 'phantasmagoria of the interior'. In this way, it is claimed that the visual nature of auto-mobility increases the conceptual distance between the interior (for this read private or domestic space) of the automobile and the world beyond: the public spaces through which we travel (Morse 1998).

Yet sound plays an altogether more 'intimate' role in automobile experience than vision:[4]

> When I get in my car and turn on my radio, I'm at home. I haven't got a journey to make before I get home. I'm already home. I shut my door, turn on my radio and I'm home.
>
> (Jay)

> I can't even start my car without music being on. It's automatic. Straight away, amplifiers turned on. Boom boom!
>
> (Kerry)

> Being inside my car is like, this is my little world, it's my car, it's getting away from work, any hassles I've got ... it's an opportunity for me to let my mind focus on all sorts of different things, I might be thinking about work, I might be thinking about relationships, I might be thinking about family. It's because I'm in my own little bubble, in my car that's an environment and I'm in complete control of all the distractions around me.
>
> (Lucy)

Sound technologies make the automobile more 'habitable'. Pleasure and sound increasingly appear to go together as drivers use their car radio and music systems. Recently, Brodsky (2002) found that 'the automobile is currently the most popular and frequent location for listening to music'. Equally, many drivers prefer listening to music in their automobiles whilst alone (Sloboda 1999). Automobiles are potentially one of the most perfectible of acoustic listening chambers. Unlike living rooms where manufacturers cannot control room size, furnishings and numbers of people, it is possible for acoustic designers to create a uniformly pleasant listening environment (Bose 1984). Speakers in the car's front, rear, or in the seats themselves produce an aurally satisfying listening booth:

> I'm in a nice sealed, compact space. ... I like my sounds up loud, it's all around you. It's not like walking around the kitchen where the sounds are not quite as I want them.
>
> (Trudy)

The automobile becomes a successful and personalized listening environment that is difficult to replicate in other domestic or public spaces unless one uses a personal stereo. The more sound the more immersive the experience. These feelings are enhanced by sole occupancy, which also permits the driver to have a greater feeling of control and management over his or her environment, mood, thoughts and space beyond the gaze of 'others'. As Trudy comments, 'I can sit back in my car, enjoy the drive, listen to my sounds, not have to talk.' And Lisa:

> I can concentrate on the driving. I do really get quite absorbed in driving. I can listen to the radio or have the music on as a sort of atmosphere provoking thing. Whereas if someone else is in the car I feel I shouldn't have the music on cause you can't hear them and I can't stand that, fighting for noise or quiet. I also find it more relaxing driving on my own because I don't need to worry about them being uncomfortable and feeling that I'm going too fast.

Instead, drivers often prefer to be accompanied by the reassuring voice of the radio:

> There's something about R4 [BBC Radio 4] that's just something about the tone, style and delivery that's very reassuring and comforting. That you know the voices are the same, well they're not always the same but they have the same kind of delivery, that particular style ... it's also the routine.
>
> (Sarah)

The aural space of the automobile becomes a safe and intimate environment inhabited by the mediated presence through 'sound' of consumer culture. The mobile and contingent nature of the journey is experienced precisely as its opposite, whereby the driver controls the journey precisely by controlling the inner environment of the automobile through sound.

Automobiles are also increasingly being used as spaces of interpersonal communication between drivers and 'absent' others.[5] Paradoxically, whilst many drivers prefer to be alone in their automobile, increasing numbers also report using their driving time to communicate directly with others:

> I hold the phone to my ear. ... I often use it to catch up with people that I haven't spoken to for a while. It's a time when I know I'm going to be in the car for a while. I have had journeys that...may have been three hours long and I have spoken to three people during the journey, one for forty-five minutes, another for half an hour, so I may have spent virtually the whole journey talking on the phone.
>
> (Lucy)

Using a mobile phone permits drivers to maintain social contacts during 'road' time. Time and journey are thus transformed into an intimate 'one-to-one' time:

> It's a good way to spend your time, talking and catching up. If I get bored, I'll just put it onto my list – list of numbers. I will just flit through and ... say, I haven't spoken to that person for ages ... so the people at the beginning or the end of the alphabet do quite well!
>
> (Jane)

If users of mobile phones in the street transform representational space into their own privatized space as they converse with absent others, then this scene is replicated in the everyday use of mobile phones in automobiles. The automobile becomes a mobile, privatized and sophisticated communication machine through which the driver can choose whether to work, socialize or pass the time. As such, the mobile phone adds to the armoury of available aural technologies in the automobile, thus making it a perfect home-from-home.

Intimate streets: the personal stereo

Users of personal stereos also move in their own privatized soundworld. Like automobile drivers, 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.
>
> (Magnus)

Personal stereo use reorganizes users' relation to space and place. Sound colonizes the listener, but it is also used to actively re-create and reconfigure the spaces of experience. Through the power of sound the world becomes intimate, known and possessed. This points to the powerfully seductive role of sound, which appears to root users in the world with a force that differs from the other senses (Simmel 1997; Welsch 1997). 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 privatized sounds. Personal stereo users construct their own privatized 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)

Personal stereo 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 [the DJ is] 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 personal stereo users, in their 'colonization' of space, are equally concerned with solipsistically transcending the urban. If indeed they aestheticize it, they do so by drawing it into themselves, making it conform to their wishes, to be more like themselves. 'Personal space' for users can be defined in terms of a non-spatialized conceptual space. As geographical notions of personal space become harder to substantiate and negotiate in some urban environments, the construction of a privatized conceptual space becomes a common strategy for personal stereo 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)

Here, Paul has already discounted geographical notions of private space. For him space is conceptual, existing inside; in the music. By focusing on this conceptual notion of space, the geographical aspect of space ceases to be of primary concern as it is replaced by a privatized, conceptual space 'in the music'.

Personal stereo users are often 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 here of a 'wall' aptly demonstrates the impenetrability of many users' state, or desired state, in relation to the geographical space

of experience. Personal stereo users appear to achieve a subjective sense of public invisibility. The users essentially 'disappear' as interacting subjects withdrawing into various states of the purely subjective.

The space of reception might be described as a form of mobile home. The 'outside' world becomes a function of the desire of the user and is maintained through time through the act of listening. The world is brought into line, but only through a privatized, yet mediated, act of cognition. The users' sense of space is one in which the distinction between private mood or orientation and their surroundings is abolished. The world becomes one with the experience of the personal stereo user.

Intimate sounds of the voice

Mobile phone use is a recent addition to the transformation of public space. Over one billion people now use mobile phones world-wide, with over 70 per cent of the UK population possessing at least one mobile phone. Mobile phones, like other successful consumer technologies, tap into pre-existing, everyday, desires. The desire to be always available; I talk therefore I exist! 'All that separates desolation from elation is a phone call' (Peters 1999: 201).

Mobile phones have quickly become both habitual and necessary for most users, as these comments attest: 'I really don't know how anybody met anyone without mobile phones' (Catherine). 'I just feel lost if I don't have my phone on me' (Sally). Whilst text messaging is also frequently used, nothing quite substitutes for the sound of the voice.[6] The telephone has long been recognized for its intimate qualities (Fischer 1992). The power of intimacy within a spectrum of routinized voices is graphically articulated in the following account of the playwright Arthur Miller, who describes talking to his wife-to-be, Marilyn Monroe, on a landline, of course:

> The motel owner woke me one night to tell me I was wanted on the phone ... her voice [Marilyn Monroe's] was barely audible. ... I kept trying to reassure her, but she seemed to be sinking where I could not reach her, her voice growing fainter. I was losing her ... and suddenly I realized I was out of breath, a dizziness screwing into my head, my knees unlocking, and I felt myself sliding to the floor of the booth, the receiver slipping out of my hands. I came to in what was probably a few seconds, her voice still whispering out of the receiver over my head. ... We would marry and start a new and real life once this picture was done. ... Yes and yes and yes and it was all over, and the healing silence of the desert swept back and covered it all. I left the highway behind me and walked toward the two cottages and the low moon. I had never fainted before. I loved her as though I had loved her all my life; her pain was my pain. My blood seemed to have spoken. The low lunar mountains outside my window, the overarching silence of this

> terrain of waste and immanence – I felt my happiness like a live glow in all this dead, unmoving space.
>
> (Miller 1987: 380)

The space between Hollywood, from where Monroe calls, to the Nevada desert, where Miller receives the call, is transformed by the power of the voice into an erotic space of aural reception, a privatized soundworld inhabited only by Miller and Monroe. Whilst this is an 'exceptional' example, it displays the intimate power of the voice that is re-enacted daily in more routine and mundane settings. Mobile phone use enables us to enact these intimate voice scenarios in public and on the move:

> When I am surrounded by people I don't know I can easily connect with a familiar voice. ... So speaking on my mobile phone enables me to distance myself from an uncomfortable situation and brings me closer to a feeling of ease.
>
> (Amy)

For many users, the space of reception becomes re-inscribed and colonized by the voice of the other. Public speech to an 'absent other' has had to overcome the inhibitions created by Western cultures that have traditionally put much stock on the right to have secrets, or to have a personal life beyond the ears and eyes of others. Yet mobile phone use seems increasingly to deny these prerogatives of Western-based cultures. Looked at in another way, we might argue that the desire to be 'connected' is more important than issues of 'privacy' for many users, or that notions of a meaningful 'public' have already been so discounted that it is 'as if' no one else is there to eavesdrop.

Although personal stereo users engage in forms of pleasurable mobile solipsism whilst connected to the mediated messages of the culture industry, mobile phone users' strategy for being connected is to make a call, or to make sure that their phone is always switched on so that they are always available to receive a message. The world might indeed be perceived to be full of pregnant messages!

To speak in public is to transform that space. The relational qualities of the space become transformed both in the orientation of the user and for others who are able to 'involuntarily' listen. Users often discount notions of 'listening' others whilst making phone calls:

> When I'm on the phone it's – I'm concentrating, I'm talking to this person I'm talking to and what's going on around me is of secondary ... In my own little world. I'm not particularly aware – I work on the assumption that these people don't know me, I don't know them, so they can only hear one half of the conversation and it's not going to be particularly interesting to them anyway.
>
> (Lucy)

Whilst notions of public reserve still occur, they appear to be diminishing. Recent research indicates that the meanings attached to public space amongst many mobile phone users is converging, despite other cultural differences:

> There is virtually no place where Israelis do not use their mobile phone: on public buses and trains, in restaurants, banks, offices, clinics, theatres and classrooms, and of course in the street. Judging by its omnipresence, it seems that there are few limits and restrictions that people abide by. In fact, it is not uncommon for people to use their mobile phone in places where it is prohibited by law, such as in certain parts of hospitals and gas stations.
>
> (Schejter and Cohen 2002: 40)

> Filling public transportation space with chatter, which is virtually nothing but noise to her neighbouring passengers, the phone caller does not seem inclined to restrain her telephone behaviour. Not so long ago, it was normally considered shameful to talk about private business in public. ... These manners seem to have evaporated in this era of perpetual contact.
>
> (Shin Dong Kim 2002: 65)

What we are witnessing today is a profound change in the way many people engage with notions of the public. Mobile phones act to privatize public spaces (Puro 2002) as private discourse fills the street, classroom and every other conceivable public space. In so doing, speakers 'absent' themselves from the spaces they inhabit. In a world where most of us are talking to 'absent others', the street becomes a potentially lonelier place (Harper 2002: 212). Mobile phone use appears to encourage the privatization of public space:

> The use of the mobile phone amplifies the process already under way of ever more frequent exposure of private matters and intimacy in the public sphere. In an interesting counterpoint, though, it also represents the encroachment of intimacy on the territory of extraneousness and of the private on the public.
>
> (Fortunati 2002: 48)

Within this public isolation we are, however, available all of the time, with mothers checking on their children, lovers checking on each other, and employers checking on employees. This 'we-ness' can also be 'fusional' in the efforts to possess and track down one another more effectively. Yet recipients also have the power to disengage, switch off, put us on hold. However, by invoking the perpetual possibility of contact the mobile phone gives the illusion of power to users (De Gournay 2002), in the same way that the home gives the illusion of 'privacy' to its occupants.

Conclusion

> Individual bodies moving through urban space gradually became detached from the space in which they moved, and from the people the space contained. As space became devalued through motion, individuals gradually lost a sense of sharing a fate with others ... individuals create something like ghettos in their own bodily experience.
>
> (Sennett 1994: 324)

> We might conceive a series leading from the man who cannot work without the blare of the radio to the one who kills time and paralyses loneliness by filling his ears with the illusion of 'being with' no matter what.
>
> (Adorno 1991: 78)

In the introduction to this chapter, I asked in what sense do users of mobile phones, personal stereos and sound systems in automobiles transform the representational spaces of the city into a mobile and privatized sphere of communication. These technologies all 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 or talking. These technologies permit users to prioritize their experience in relation to their geographical, social and interpersonal environment, enabling them to exist, in a variety of ways, within their own private soundworld. The site of experience is, therefore, reconstituted variably through the medium of the personal stereo, the automobile and the mobile phone.

The use of these technologies demonstrates a clear auditory reconceptualization of the spaces of habitation 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. The use of these technologies enables users to transform the site of their experience into a form of 'sanctuary' (Sennett 1994). Thus users are able to transcend geometrical space through the use of these mobile sound technologies. The nature of this technologized space is often experienced as all-engulfing, enabling the space of habitation to be infused with its own sense of heightened experiential aura. Users habitually exist within forms of accompanied solitude constructed through a manufactured auditory environment, either through mediated music or the voice of the 'other'. The attempted exclusion of all forms of intrusion constitutes a successful strategy for urban and personal management, a re-inscribing of personal space through forms of 'sound' communication. In so doing, users re-claim representational spaces precisely by privatizing them. Representational space has often been perceived for its engulfing or colonizing properties. Lefebvre's original formulation implies this:

> Living bodies, the bodies of 'users' – are caught up not only in the toils of parcelized space, but also in the web of what philosophers call 'analogons'; images, signs, symbols. These bodies are transported out of themselves, transferred and emptied out, as it were, via the eyes: every kind of appeal, incitement and seduction is mobilized to tempt them with doubles of themselves in prettified, smiling and happy poses; this campaign to void them succeeds exactly to the degree that the images proposed correspond to the 'needs' that those same images have helped fashion. So it is that a massive influx of information, of messages, runs head into an inverse flow constituted by the evacuation from the innermost body of all life and desire. Even cars may fulfil the functions of analogons, for they are at once extensions of the body and mobile homes, so to speak, fully equipped to receive these wandering bodies.
>
> (Lefebvre 1991: 99)

Lefebvre concentrates on the visual nature of the street here, in which space becomes saturated, thus 'voiding' subjects of the occupancy of their own experience. Yet my analysis of mobile sound media use suggests that consumers actively use these media to re-inscribe the meanings of the spaces they inhabit. Indeed, they use them often to discount them altogether into the spaces of speech, as in mobile phone use, or use sound to blank out or manage their space of habitation, as in personal stereo use. Automobile users often claim that the spaces they habitually travel through hold little interest for them. They 'look' for the purposes of driving, of course, but prefer to be otherwise engaged with the sounds of music or voice.

Auge (1995) has argued that urban dwellers experience time in the continual present, being subject to the prescribed sounds of the shopping mall, airport lounge or the car radio where everything is repeated and everything feels disconnected from place in the non-places of everyday culture. To exist in these public non-places is like being suspended in the continual present. However, this mistakes the shopping mall and the airport for the automobile interior and, of course, even in the shopping mall one can use a personal stereo or mobile phone.

Automobile habitation provides the driver with his or her own regulated soundscape that mediates his or her experience of these non-places and manages the flow of time as he or she wishes. The meaning of these non-places is overlaid by the mediated space of the automobile from which meaning emanates. Drivers can choose the manner in which they attend to these non-places.

The aural space of the automobile becomes a safe and intimate environment. The mobile and contingent nature of the journey is experienced precisely as its opposite, in which the driver controls the journey precisely by controlling the inner environment of the automobile through sound. Much of this is true for personal stereo users who also reconfigure their relationship to the world through sound. They feel empowered and safe – but only for so long as the music plays, whilst mobile phones offer the availability of the voice no matter where.[7]

It would appear that as we become more and more immersed in our mobile media sound bubbles of communication, so then those spaces we habitually pass through in our daily lives increasingly lose significance and progressively turn into the 'non-spaces' of daily lives which we try, through those selfsame technologies, to transcend. The need for proximity either through speech with an absent other or through the mediated sounds of the culture industry masks and furthers the trend of public isolation in the midst of privatized sound bubbles of a reconfigured representational space. In a world of increasing mobility, technology provides a successful and intimate fix for consumers. Yet in the creation of these 'aural solipsistic ghettos' we increasingly appear to enact strategies that deny the recognition of 'difference' encountered in our everyday world (Sennett 1990). The movement through urban space in mediated and privatized 'sonorous envelopes' (Anzieu 1989) may well produce and bolster-up feelings of empowerment. Yet these fragile and often alienating strategies may well be self-defeating in an urban world in which physical proximity and everyday movement are still the *a priori* grounds upon which much of daily life is founded.

Notes

1 Of course, definitions of private space differ. A culture with no notion of entitlement to space in public would have very little 'road rage', as in India for example. The contradictions involved in defining and maintaining 'private space' whilst driving are described by Adorno: 'And which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of the engine, to wipe out the vermin on the street, pedestrians, children and cyclists?' (Adorno 1974: 40). This, perhaps the first description of 'road rage' (Adorno wrote this in 1942), captures the contradictory nature of the automobile embodied in everyday use whereby the driver is simultaneously all-powerful yet controlled.

2 Schivelbusch charts the popularity of reading habits on trains in the nineteenth century: 'the face to face arrangement that had once institutionalised an existing need for communication now became unbearable because there no longer was a reason for such communication. The seating in the railroad compartment forced travellers into a relationship based no longer on living need but on embarrassment. ... As we have seen, the perusal of reading matter is an attempt to replace the conversation that is no longer possible. Fixing one's eyes to a book or newspaper, one is able to avoid the stare of the person sitting across the aisle. The embarrassing nature of this silent situation remains largely unconscious' (Schivelbusch 1986: 74–5).

3 This is not to imply that all spaces become 'emptied' of meaning. Parts of the city, such as Covent Garden in London, also become arenas of spectacles with an array of performance artists performing before a mobile public. I am more concerned to articulate the meaning of the mundane and everyday nature of much urban experience.

4 The following interview extracts are drawn from a series of qualitative interviews of Walkman users (1995–1998), automobile users (1999–2001) and mobile phone users (2001–2002) carried out in London, Cambridge and Brighton by the author.

5 Despite the widespread use of mobile phones in automobiles there has been almost no study undertaken on the subject. Recent work on mobile phone use fails to mention automobiles (Katz and Aakhus 2002), despite the fact that increasing numbers of drivers report using the phone whilst driving. The Transport Research Laboratory Report, undertaken for Tesco Insurance Company in 2002, found that use in the UK varied according to the age of the driver: 34 per cent of all people say that they make calls from cars – 52 per cent aged between 25 and 34 years, and 16 per cent aged between 55 and 64 years (*Guardian*, 22 March 2002, p. 11).

6 Whilst I discuss the role that sound plays in notions of proximity in mobile phone use, I do not discount its other functions such as text messaging. Many users prefer to text precisely because there is no sound and therefore it is more 'private'. Texting can be done beyond the surveillance of others at work or in the back of the classroom.

7 To be sure, the use of mobile sound technologies has also impacted upon how women perceive and experience the public spaces of the city. Female Walkman users, for example, often feel empowered, both by being 'accompanied' by the friendly sounds of music and by developing strategies of non-reciprocal gazing through the use of the Walkman (see Bull 2000, especially chapter 6). Equally, women have embraced the mobile phone on a par with men, often using it as a security device, despite the apparent dangers of using these technologies in public. More women are now driving than ever before, and this is not necessarily connected to extensions of the traditional domestic role occupied by women (Brandon 2002).

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