

The iPod: Development or Digestion?

Ben Byrne

Who could resist the invitation of those dainty headphones? They gleam...and entwine themselves around heads all by themselves (Kracauer 1995, p.333).

Descriptive as it is of the thin white wires that are now so commonly seen snaking up from bodies, bags and pockets of iPod users, this image was actually constructed by Kracauer in the 1920s in reference to the headphones of a Wireless. Though despite having been written decades ago in reference to much older technology, Kracauer's quip is still uncannily appropriate for the iPod and its distinct white headphones.

As is common with many new technologies, the iPod has had considerable mythology constructed around it in its short existence. Large claims are made about its effects – from predictions that it will spell the death of radio to proclamations that it will irreversibly alter societal relations. However, the iPod, fits into a lineage of communications technologies tracing back to the Walkman and the radio before that, and many of the issues now raised with regard to the iPod have been raised long before with regard to these previous technologies.

Sound Reconfigures Space

With the iPod, public space is recast as private – bus seats become lounge suites, streets begin to resemble hallways and public eateries are transformed into private kitchens. This is conveyed even in Apples' marketing of the iPod, in which anonymous silhouettes dance freely as if unwatched (as one would in the privacy of their bedroom or kitchen), all "jacked in" to the starkly contrasted white 'Pod and earphones.

According to Roland Barthes, "listening (from an anthropological viewpoint) is the very sense of space and time", so by turning on their iPods users are able to, at least to some extent, turn off all that surrounds them (Barthes 1985, p.246). However, as R Murray Schafer points out, "the radio was the first sound wall, enclosing the individual with the familiar and excluding the enemy" (Schafer 1977, p.93). And subsequently, as Michael Bull describes, the Walkman had also already "enabled contemporary urban users to create a seamless web of mediated and privatized experience in their everyday movement through the city and to enhance virtually any chosen experience in any geographical location" (Bull 2002, p.110). To this end, like the radio and Walkman before it, the iPod has become, in the words of Schafer, "the bird-song of modern life, the "natural" soundscape, excluding the inimical forces from outside" (Schafer 1977, p. 93). And this wording is significant, for it foregrounds the idea that iPod users are somehow trying to erect a "natural" soundscape and so must also somehow now find their own sonic environment unnatural and threatening.

Sonic Overpopulation

Today the world suffers from an overpopulation of sounds; there is so much acoustic information that little of it can emerge with clarity. In the ultimate lo-fi soundscape the signal-to-noise ratio is one-to-one and it is no longer possible to know what, if anything, is to be listened to (Schafer 1977, p.71).

As Schafer describes, it seems that the contemporary soundscape has become alien and unnatural to us, invoking feelings of intimidation and confusion. Barthes, in his essay "Listening", explains the effects of this noise pollution:

If the auditive background invades the whole of phonic space (if the ambient noise is too loud), then selection of intelligence of space is no longer possible, listening is injured; the ecological problem that is today called pollution – and which is becoming a black myth of our technological civilization – is precisely the intolerable corruption of human space, insofar as humanity needs to recognise itself in that space (Barthes 1985, p.247).

Consequently, we each look to combat this noise pollution by constructing our own natural soundscape, in which we feel comfortable and at home. Thought of in this way, personal listening devices are primarily technologies of privatization, enabling "consumers to create intimate, manageable, and aestheticised spaces in which they are increasingly able to, and desire to, live" (Bull 2002, p106). Each time we leave the privacy of our homes we are now able to take that privacy with us, constructed sonically with the iPod or Walkman.

And although Schafer posits the Industrial Revolution as the seed for the sonic environment we currently face others place its roots much deeper. For example, Michel Serres, in his book "Rome: A Book of Foundations", describes how "noise is born in the square, it swells, rises, fills the forum, slips in everywhere, seizes the city" (Serres 1991, p.242). In Serres account, "there is no longer a soundproof box...clamor: not everyone approves or participates, but all, even if they don't repeat it, at least hear it" (Serres 1991, p.242-243). Therefore, the attraction of the iPod, like that of the Walkman, is that it offers just such a "soundproof box", allowing the user to determine their own sonic environment, and deflect the assault of their surroundings.

Together, Alone and Alone, Together

Silent and lifeless, people sit side by side as if their souls were wandering far away. But these souls are not wandering according to their own preference...even in the café, where one wants to roll up into a ball like a porcupine and become aware of one's insignificance, an imposing loudspeaker effaces every trace of private existence (Kracauer 1995, p.333).

Beyond its function as a protector or shield the iPod, like the Walkman before it, comes to act as a sort of companion. In his article, "Sound Connections: An Aural Epistemology of Proximity and Distance In Urban Culture", Bull describes how consumers have "increasingly become used to the mediated presence of the media in their own privatized settings" and "forms of 'accompanied solitude' thus become increasingly habitual" (Bull 2002, p.105). Subsequently, the development of personal listening devices allows users to transport this sense of 'accompanied solitude' beyond their own private settings and into whichever public space they traverse. Paradoxically, iPod's come to offer both solitude and accompaniment simultaneously.

However, this "accompanied solitude" offered by the iPod touches on another issue raised by Kracauer in respect to the radio when he complains "an imposing loudspeaker effaces every trace of private existence" leaving us in "a state of permanent receptivity"(Kracauer 1995, p.105&332). With the iPod we are able to remain in a state of passive reception wherever we go and this becomes an option many apparently choose over interacting with others in the public sphere or, perhaps, even allowing themselves time with their own thoughts.

Sounding Social Relations

Regardless of its causes or necessity, preference for constructing private sonic spaces alters the very dynamic of social relations in the city as users are no longer required to engage in conversation with that person next to them on the bus or that salesperson in the shop they browse through on their lunch break. According to Bull "the users essentially 'disappear' as an interacting subject, withdrawing into their chosen privatized and mobile states" (Bull 2002, p.112). Those ever-present earphones act as a sort of barrier, preventing the user from being disturbed by the sounds around them and, more significantly, preventing others from even attempting to engage them.

Contradicting, Nigel Sheldon suggests that the iPod doesn't necessarily prevent its users from engaging in social environments, arguing that "it's just as likely that owners will talk about their recently organised music collections, share new tracks with friends and create playlists for parties" (Sheldon 2005, p.14). However the issue he ignores is that the iPod prevents (or perhaps excuses) users from engaging with unwanted or unpredictable social environments. The argument is not that the iPod stops users developing any kind of social life but rather that it allows users to avoid the unexpected or unsolicited when in uncontrolled social environments.

Michael Goldberg also does not see the iPod's effects on social relations as an issue, instead mounting a convincing argument that users are actually able to choose how their iPod affects their experiences. Using the example of his own experience using an iPod while on holiday in France he argues that his iPod serves different purposes depending on the situation he is in. On his flight to France he listened while trying to work on a novel and noted, "far from distracting me, music forms a protective audio bubble, letting me concentrate in a way that would otherwise be impossible", while when in Paris he found that the iPod helped him connect more intimately with his environment, allowing him to choose the perfect soundtrack to his experiences, and finally he found on one occasion that listening to his iPod in the car with his driver allowed them to overcome their language barrier, connecting through their shared experience of the music. It is hard to disagree with Goldberg's argument, my only contention being that his use of the iPod relied on his knowledge of its effects on him, perhaps something of which not all iPod users are aware. And even when they

are, it remains that the iPod empowers the user, providing them with a means by which to deliberately control (or colonise) previously uncontrolled space.

Sound World Contracts

Bull describes how Fitzcarraldo, in the Werner Herzog film of the same name, travels up the Amazon river with a phonograph playing recordings of opera singer Enrico Caruso and so "takes his own Western sound world with him and it his sound world that recreates the Amazon jungle for him, making it what it is"(Bull 2002, p. 108). This is true, but fails to capture the breadth of meaning in Fitzcarraldo's use of the phonograph. Gary Johnson explains it far better in his review of the film:

After the majority of Fitzcarraldo's crew has deserted him for fear of the incessant drumming emanating from the jungle, Fitzcarraldo sets a phonograph on a small table on top of the ship. When he drops the needle onto a record, the beautiful, rich voice of Enrico Caruso wafts through the jungle and bewitches the Indians. Soon afterwards, the drums stop, and the Indians row from shore in canoes to meet the ship and climb on board. They become Fitzcarraldo's surrogate crew. (Johnson 2004).

In this way Fitzcarraldo colonises the Amazon and its people with sound, taming the wilds of the jungle with the western tonality of Caruso's opera. It is the same when a user steps out their front door with headphones in place, whether they are listening to a radio, Walkman or iPod, they are colonising their experience of public space, aestheticising, and therefore taming, it. There is actually little difference between Fitzcarraldo and the average iPod or Walkman user on the street precisely because, as Bull explains, "the everyday and the 'faraway' appear to become increasingly similar in the experience of many Walkman users" (Bull 2002, p.110). The iPod or Walkman user defines their experience through the soundtrack to that experience the technology provides, just as Fitzcarraldo defines his experience of the Amazon through the recording of Caruso he plays throughout his journey.

Control to Order

In "Profane Culture", his 1978 investigation and comparison of biker and hippie culture, Paul Willis writes of "the bikeboys' exclusive preference for singles":

To play an LP was to be committed – unless you were prepared to go to a great deal of trouble – to someone else's ordering of the music. By and large, LPs are more popular with an audience which is prepared to sit and listen for a considerable period, and with a certain extension of trust so that unknown material can be appreciated and evaluated (Willis 1978, p.69).

Both the bikers' preference for singles and their reasons for it mirror the tendency of the average iPod user. It is rare for an iPod user to listen to an entire album and this has implications for how music is now being distributed. Just as the bikers could buy 45s, iPod users can now download track by track – picking and ordering their favourites. Furthermore, as a result of their preference for individual tracks over albums, it is most common for iPod users to listen to their music on "shuffle" or, more interestingly, create custom playlists of tracks that they can then listen to repeatedly and share with their friends. This appears to give users a sense of active involvement in their own listening culture.

Similar listening tendencies to those now seen in iPod users were also previously evident in Walkman users with the development of "cassette culture" in the 1980s and the tendency for many to produce "mixtapes" for their friends, a practice quite similar to the "playlist swapping" undertaken by many iPod users. However, it is true that the new technology has made creating a "playlist" to use and swap far easier (and less time consuming) than it was to create a "mixtape".

iPods allow their users to experience music in a way appropriate to their lifestyle, just as 45s suited the lifestyle of the bikers. After all, one would assume that the average iPod user, like the bikers, would be "usually moving, engaged in other activities, responsive to music only when its not boring, and most interested where music responds to their particular mood" (Willis 1978, p.70). However it also raises a worrying issue of whether iPods, and 45s for that matter, influence the mode of listening of their users and consequently the engagement of their users with that music.

Regressions In Listening

As I mentioned earlier, Roland Barthes argues that if the ambient noise of an environment is too loud then "selection of intelligence of space is no longer possible" and "listening is injured" (Barthes 1985, p.247). With this in mind, iPods do offer their users an escape from the noise pollution of the contemporary urban environment but are perhaps also noise polluters themselves, filling the sonic spectrum so as to allow no other space to be formed.

Theodor Adorno was heavily critical of the influence of the adoption of the radio on music and the way people listen to music, arguing that the radio encouraged "regressive listening". Furthermore, he describes the radio listener as "radio ham", commenting:

Of all fetishistic listeners the radio ham is perhaps the most complete. It is irrelevant to him what he hears or even how he hears; he is only interested in the fact that he hears and succeeds in inserting himself, with his private equipment, into the public mechanism, without exerting even the slightest influence on it (Adorno 1991, p.47).

A similar accusation could then be leveled at iPod users, for they engage in a mode of "distracted" listening in which the music serves as much as a shield against outside noise as it does as a legitimate and meaningful listening experience. And this, presumably, could influence further the listening choices made by iPod users, preferring to listen again and again to familiar and comfortable music rather than use the technology's advantages to listen as widely as possible and perhaps even assume a more active role, be it through sourcing new music through friends and other networks or even using the iPod as a means to produce work themselves.

Democratic Technology vs. Liberal Technology

In their book "Dialectic of Enlightenment", Adorno and Horkheimer cite a particular difference between the two most significant developments in communications technologies at the time, the telephone and the radio. The distinction between the two, they argue, is that the telephone is a liberal technology, as it allows all users to "play the role of the subject", while the radio is a democratic technology, as it "turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast

programs" (Adorno & Horkheimer 1995, p.122). Drawing a line of development from the radio to the iPod, I would describe it too as a democratic technology. Despite arguments, such as those I have mentioned earlier, around the ways in which the iPod allows its user to become a stakeholder in the communications in which they are involved through opportunities to create playlists and swap tracks with friends, it remains that the iPod does not allow two-way communications as does the telephone but rather narrowcasts directly to the user, similarly to the way the radio broadcasts to its listeners.

The radio would be the finest possible communications apparatus, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship rather than isolating him (Brecht 1932, p.52).

Writing during its infancy, Bertolt Brecht suggested that as a communications technology radio is "one sided when it should be two", hopeful that as the medium developed it would fulfill its promise (Brecht 1932, p.52). Decades later I think few would disagree that radio has remained a one sided, democratic, technology. However, as a reminder of the hope once held for the possibilities of radio Brecht's comment suggests the hope that could now be held for the possibilities of the iPod as a liberal communications technology. Nigel Sheldon suggests the development of podcasting, a new niche of narrowcasting in which anyone can produce content, often in the form of a radio show, to be distributed over the Internet for listening on iPods, offers a liberalizing influence on the iPod (Sheldon 2005, p.14). Unfortunately, while podcasting demonstrates the liberal possibilities of the iPod, it alone will not liberalise the technology as currently podcasting still only uses the iPod as a means of distribution, with content still to be produced elsewhere with other technologies. Instead, for the iPod to become a liberal technology, users must begin to use the iPod itself as a means of creative production as well as consumption – iPods must be used to record as readily as they are used to listen.

Whether or not this will eventuate is uncertain, and it is likely that the majority of iPod users will continue to use the technology passively. But, though it was initially impossible to record with the iPod, as the technology has developed, and due to consumer pressure, Apple has introduced models capable of recording and allowed third-party developers to produce peripherals designed to assist users in the recording process. So it would seem that there is momentum towards a possible shift in the iPod's identity, from democratic to liberal technology, though whether the majority of iPod users will embrace fully the possibilities of the technology remains uncertain and, perhaps, unlikely.

iPod as Development or Digestion?

Gregory Whitehead argues, "successive generations of technology do not so much displace as *digest* each other", and this would seem particularly true in examining the iPod (Whitehead 1993, p. 2). In his essay "Holes In The Head: Theatres of Operation for The Body In Pieces", Whitehead explains, "dissect a radio, and you will find the remains of a book; dissect the book, and you will find the remains of a larynx" (Whitehead 1993, p.2). Perhaps we could now extend that so that it reads "dissect an iPod, and you will find the remains of a Walkman; dissect the Walkman and you will find the remains of a radio". However, although the current arguments around the iPod have largely been held previously in reference to the Walkman and radio it is certainly true that the new technology does offer encouraging liberal possibilities. Now we must wait to see to what extent those possibilities will be fulfilled.

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