Thinking about Sound, Proximity, and Distance in Western Experience: The Case of Odysseus’s Walkman

The individual is constantly here and elsewhere; alone and linked to others. . . . the twentieth century stroller with a Walkman or cellular phone remains alone, communicating not with passers-by but to those to whom he or she is connected.

Patrice Flitky, *Dynamics of Modern Communication*

Bishop Berkeley, in commenting that “sounds are as close to us as our thoughts” (quoted in Rée 1999: 36), recognized the spatial nature of sound and experience, an observation that has subsequently been buried within a largely visually inspired epistemology of experience that informs much of contemporary social scientific investigation. In this chapter I discuss the absence of sound in contemporary accounts of media consumption and the social science disciplines’ consequent failure to understand the complexity of proximity, distance, and mobility in forms of media consumption. I then offer an alternative, “historically” informed analysis of sound experience by looking at three iconic moments of sound consumption in Western culture: the meeting between Odysseus and the Sirens as described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1973) and early-twentieth-century accounts of the use of the radio and phonograph, drawn from the work of Sigfried Kracauer and Michael Taussig, respectively. One example is situated in the mythic prehistory of Western culture, the other two in its “heroic” period of mechanical reproduction.
I use these examples to point to what an analytical framework for understanding contemporary states of aural proximity and distance might look like. In doing so, I argue that the use of sound technologies can be understood as part of the Western project of the appropriation and control of space, place, and the “other.” In particular, I focus on the specific relational qualities attached to sound through which subjects relate to their surroundings, others, and themselves, especially the central role that aestheticization plays as a strategy of control over place and space. The context for this argument is an analysis of that most mobile and privatized of media artifacts: the portable radio or cassette player popularly known by the name Walkman.

**Reevaluating Proximity and Distance in Media Consumption from a Sound Perspective**

The structuring role of the media in daily experience has long been recognized (Livingstone 2002; Lull 1990; Silverstone 1999). Yet social scientists have largely ignored the contribution of sound, as distinct from the role of vision, in the daily consumption of media, just as they have largely ignored the increasingly mobile and predominantly sound-oriented nature of much media consumption (DeNora 2000; McCarthy 2001; Urry 2000). The analysis of sound experience presented here permits me to cast fresh light on the historical antecedents underpinning the experience and desire for proximity and distance in much of contemporary urban life.

The exclusion of the aural in media accounts of the experience of proximity and distance has led many media sociologists to neglect or misinterpret the historically situated meanings attached to these terms. A well-known and significant example of this failure is Raymond Williams’s understanding and use of the term “mobile privatization” to describe the act of television viewing more than twenty-five years ago (Williams 2003 [1977]). In effect, Williams observed that, increasingly, “experience” was no longer located primarily in public spaces such as the street but rather in domestic spaces; the living room was to become the modern emporium of visual and auditory delight for the contemporary Western urban citizen. Williams thought mobile privatization was a largely unproblematic phenomenon: “it is not living in a cut off way, not in a shell that is just stuck. It is a shell you can take with you, which you can fly to places that previous generations could never imagine visiting” (Williams 2003 [1977]: 171). By watching television, urban citizens were to experience on screen, through acts
of privatized consumption, events that took place beyond the screen. Dwelling places were to be filled with the mediated public world of sounds and images of the television and radio.

Underlying Williams's observation was the normative expectation that experience and aesthetics were indissolubly linked. This expectation has been perpetuated in the work of a wide range of cultural theorists who invariably view the aestheticization of everyday life as normatively neutral (Baudrillard 1993; Bauman 1993; Debord 1994; Denzin 1995; Friedberg 1993). Unrecognized in Williams's formulation is not only its "romantic" depiction of the experiencing subject but also the unreflective appropriation of all that stands before the subject. Williams’s concept of mobile privatization is firmly rooted in the Enlightenment project of the domination of space, place, and the other.

Mobile privatization has subsequently become a significant concept in the analysis of media consumption:

It is necessary for us to ask about the ways in which technology serves to "mediate" between private and public worlds—connecting domestic spaces with spheres of information and entertainment that stretch well beyond the confines of family and locality. Communication technologies have, I will argue, played an important part in the symbolic construction of "home"—whilst simultaneously providing household members with an opportunity to "travel" elsewhere, and to imagine themselves as members of wider cultural communities at a national and transnational level. . . . The multiple ownership of television sets allows household members to make independent journeys to distant locations and locate themselves within different collectivities. (Moore 1993: 22–23)

While this perspective might well be perceived as symptomatic of the emptying out of urban public experience into fantasies of privatized empowerment, it also poses a question about the relationship between communication technologies, experience, and space. In doing so, however, it fails to adequately address the nature and meaning of mediated interaction. What, indeed, is meant by "distant locations," "independent journeys," and "different collectivities"? The subject who "looks out" through the television screen remains as opaque as the ambiguity of experiencing "the world" aesthetically through the mediated messages of the culture industry.

Whereas notions of media-generated "distance" remain to be adequately explained, the meanings attached to "proximity" have recently been recognized, if not the specifically "sound" nature of that proximity.
Robert Putnam has commented upon the “false sense” of companionship and intimacy created through the use of television (Putnam 2000: 242). This observation mirrors the much earlier work of Adorno, who was one of the few sociologists to recognize the significance of mediated sound in the ecology of urban life. It is no accident that much of Adorno’s work concentrated on the auditory nature of urban experience, and it is there that we find an initial analysis of proximity in a mediated and increasingly media-saturated world.

Adorno argued that the consumption of mechanically reproduced music was increasingly used as an effective substitute for community, which was often lacking in capitalist cultures. It achieved this effect by producing states of “we-ness” or “accompanied solitude” among twentieth-century consumers. “We-ness” refers to the substitution of direct experience by technologically mediated forms of experience. The consumption of music integrates and permits the subject to transcend the social precisely by integrating him or her more fully into the everyday:

The feeblest the subjects’ own sense of living, the stronger the happy illusion of attending what they tell themselves is other people’s life. The din and to-do of entertainment music feigns exceptional gala states; the “we” that is set in all polyphonic music as the a priori of its meaning, the collective objectivity of the thing itself, turns into customer bait. . . . Thus the jukebox in an empty pub will blare in order to lure “suckers” with the false pretense of revelry in progress. . . . Music as a social function is akin to the rip off, a fraudulent promise of happiness which instead of happiness, installs itself. (Adorno 1974: 45)

The experience of the social is thus transformed through the subjects’ colonizing of “representational space,” enacted through the consumption of forms of aural communication technologies. Adorno, writing well before mobile sound technologies came into use, was nevertheless sensitive to the transformative role of reproduced sound in the potentially mobile spaces of consumer culture: “Loudspeakers installed in the smallest night clubs to amplify the sound until it becomes literally unbearable; everything is to sound like the radio” (Adorno 1991 [1928]: 58). Adorno never succumbed to the temptation to split off spheres of experience in his analysis of Western consumer culture; for him the experiences of the street and the spaces of the home were always intimately linked. His work on media technologies reflected upon the role these communication technologies played in the experience of increasingly mediated spaces of urban everyday life. For Adorno, the Western
consumer desired “connection” in an increasingly privatized world. Sound provided this connection more readily than any other medium.

Recent work on media consumption demonstrates how solitary domestic consumption often appears to fuel feelings of omnipotence within realms of dependency (Bull 2000; Livingstone 2002). Equally, domestic use of the media teaches consumers how to “fill in” the spaces and times between activities as they become increasingly accustomed to the mediated presence of the media in their own private settings. Forms of “accompanied solitude” thus become increasingly habitual.

Ironically, as Williams was developing his “stay-at-home” epistemology, more consumers were spending increasing amounts of time “on the move” (Putnam 2000). Over the past forty years, Western consumers have been provided with a wide range of communication technologies that enable them to transform both the experience of movement and the spaces they move through. These technologies of “movement” are largely aural—the cassette player in the automobile, the personal stereo, and now the mobile phone (Bull 2001; Katz and Aakhus 2002). Much movement through the city is solitary, between destinations and meetings. This is a more literal form of mobile privatization in which sole occupancy is often the preferred mode of travel in automobiles (Brodsky 2002), while personal stereo use is by its very nature privatizing.

These technologies of accompanied solitude appear successfully to deliver a desirable and intoxicating mixture of noise, proximity, and privacy for users on the move. They inform us about how users attempt to “inhabit” the spaces of the city they move through. Mobile privatization is about the desire for proximity, for a mediated presence that shrinks space into something manageable and habitable. Sound, more than any other sense, appears to perform a largely utopian function in this desire for proximity and connectedness. Mediated sound reproduction enables consumers to create intimate, manageable, and aesthetically spaces in which they are increasingly able to, and desire to, live. As consumers increasingly inhabit media-saturated spaces of intimacy, so they increasingly desire to make the public spaces passed through mimic their desires. The meaning and nature of these desires have cultural prehistories that are, as yet, inadequately charted.

**Sound, Distance, and Proximity, Historically Speaking**

In a well-known passage in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno analyze a section of Homer’s *Odyssey* in which Odysseus
pits his wits against the Sirens, whose song evokes “the recent past, with
the irresistible promise of pleasure as which their song is heard. . . . Even
though the Sirens know all that has happened, they demand the future
as the price of that knowledge” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 33).
All who hear the song inevitably perish. Odysseus’s aim is to ouitw
the Sirens by having himself tied to the mast of his ship, thereby
enabling him to listen to the enticements of the Sirens’ song without
being destroyed on the rocks like all others before him. In order for his
strategy to succeed, he orders his oarsmen to block their ears with wax,
rendering themselves deaf. The oarsmen become unable to hear either
the Sirens’ song or Odysseus’s increasingly desperate orders to steer
the ship onto the rocks. Horkheimer and Adorno correctly identify Odysseus’s
desire for pleasure as being sublimated into aesthetic experience; he can
hear the Sirens’ song but can do nothing about it. However, they gloss
over the specific auditory nature of the experience. It is precisely the
aural configuration of the experience, especially Odysseus’s confronta-
tion with the Sirens, that I wish to investigate here in terms of the seduc-
tion of sound and its relation to the space that Odysseus and the Sirens
inhabited.

The auditory nature of their meeting means that for Odysseus to
experience the Siren’s song and thereby gain knowledge of “all that can
be known,” he merely needs to hear their song. It is not the seeing or
touching of the Sirens that motivates Odysseus but the hearing of their
song; it literally enters him. As he listens, tied safely to the mast, the
song transforms the distance between his ship and the rocks from which
the Sirens sing. Their song colonizes him, and yet he uses the experience
to fulfill his desire for knowledge. In doing so, Odysseus becomes a
rational and successful shopper of experience. Aesthetic reflection is a
price worth paying for gaining the seductive experience of song.

Although Horkheimer and Adorno point out that Odysseus’s ability
to experience the Sirens’ song is purchased at the expense of the sailors’
lack of this experience, and that Odysseus’s aestheticization of the world
is predicated upon the absence of the auditory for the oarsmen, they
concentrate on the “social class” element of the experience to the exclud-
ion of the sound and spatial elements. Yet what Odysseus desires,
the sound of the Sirens’ song, originates beyond him. It is the Sirens
who construct Odysseus’s soundscape. Yet Odysseus intervenes in the
nature of this soundscape by having the oarsmen’s ears blocked with
wax. The soundscape now encompasses only Odysseus and the Sirens;
it exists only between him and them. Socially speaking, Odysseus is in
his very own soundworld. This passage from Homer is significant, in
part, because it is the first description of the privatization of experience through sound.

Odysseus is also a traveler who makes himself through his journey. He outwits the Sirens and in doing so furthers his self-development. He becomes an early “tourist” of experience (Todorov 1993), in search of aestheticized experience. Unlike the contemporary consumer seduced by sound, Odysseus has to experience the Sirens’ song only once; he does not need to replay it. The Sirens form an aesthetic presence in his biography, representing in part the draw of the exotic and the forbidden as encountered in his travels and mastered through his intellect.

Horkheimer and Adorno describe sound before the dawn of mechanical reproduction, before its commodification and routinization. With the rise of mechanical reproduction, the exotic appears to come home in the space where it, the magical, and technology meet. After Thomas Edison sang “Mary had a little lamb” into the first phonogram in 1877, he exclaimed in delight and fascination upon hearing his own voice played back to him, as if by magic. The magical and the scientific became blurred in the transformation of experience that was often pursued by both inventors and users of the new communication technologies of the voice at the beginning of the twentieth century. Leigh Schmidt has described the “psychophone” created and used by Spiritualists in the early 1920s to hear “supernatural voices,” and he notes that the telephone became a technology “of the disembodied voice . . . turned from exposing the illusions of supernatural voices to providing acoustic proof of them” (Schmidt 2000: 241). Many early accounts of aural reception remark on the “magical” quality of the experience of hearing the recorded voice, before this experience became routinized through the steady incorporation of reproduced sound into domestic and public spaces.2

It appears that technologies of sound and their use disclose something about both the user and the culture from which they come. For example, Michael Taussig (1993) described the early use of the phonograph among explorers, who often took gramophones with them into the colonial spaces they were to study and exploit. Their aim, he argued, was to display the scientific magic of the West to the rest, to record the exotic and to play records to themselves. In his analysis, the gramophone already has an element of routinization attached to its consumption.3 The sometimes obsessive nature of this activity is captured in

Werner Herzog’s delirious effort in his film Fitzcarraldo, set in the early twentieth-century Upper Amazonian rubber boom and constructed
around the fetish of the phonograph, so tenaciously, so awkwardly, clutched by Fitzcarraldo, the visionary, its great earhorn emerging from under the armpit of his dirty white shirt, Caruso flooding the forests and rivers, the Indians amazed as Old Europe rains its ecstatic art form upon them. Bellowing opera from the ship's prow, it is the great ear-trumpet of the phonograph. (Taussig 1993: 203)

Taussig's description differs considerably from that of the use and reception of sound found in Horkheimer and Adorno's account of Odysseus and the Sirens. On display in Taussig's account is the magic of Western technology and sound. Fitzcarraldo takes his own Western soundworld with him, and it is this soundworld that re-creates the Amazon jungle for him, making it what it is. The jungle becomes aestheticized as a function of Fitzcarraldo's imagination, mediated through the sounds of Caruso voice. The presence of "Caruso" in the jungle is maintained only through continuous sound, through the repeat. For Fitzcarraldo, the aesthetic impulse is both literal and dependent upon the sound of Caruso's voice, unlike the case for Odysseus, whose experience of the Sirens travels with him, internalized and sublimated. In contrast, Fitzcarraldo needs the voice of Caruso to maintain his image of the jungle and his place in it. Compare Fitzcarraldo's use of sound with the soundworld of an indigenous population of a rainforest to discover the seductive similarity and dissimilarity of non-Western appropriations of sound:

[Turnbull] elaborates on how Mbuti imagination and practice construct the forest as both benevolent and powerful, capable of giving strength and affection to its "children." For this to happen Mbuti must attract the attention of the forest, must soothe it with the strength of sound that is fully articulated in the achievement of song. The sound "awakens" the forest ... thus attracting the forest's attention to the immediate needs of its children. It is also of the essential nature of all songs that they should be "pleasing to the forest." (Feld 2000: 255)

Colin Turnbull, like Steven Feld in his analysis of the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea (Feld 1990), points to the symmetrical nature of the soundworld of the inhabitants of the rainforest, whereas Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo are both "colonizers" of space and experience. Just as sound colonizes them, so they use sound to re-create in their image the spaces they inhabit. Their experiences take place in the grand and heroic vistas of a world "tamed" through their aestheticization of it. This stands in
contrast to Kracauer’s description of early radio use in the domestic spaces of Berlin in the 1920s:

Who could 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 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; the news hounds badger them, and soon no one can tell who is the hunter and who is the hunted. (Kracauer 1995: 333)

Kracauer’s radio users transcend geographical space; listening takes them away from the mundanity of their domestic place. Radio sounds transform the immobile space of domestic habitation as users no longer commute with those next to them but with the “distant” voices transmitted though the ether. The radio enables them to prioritize their desires. Just as Odysseus prioritizes his desires over those of the oarsmen, so the privatization of aesthetic desire of Kracauer’s radio user has social consequences. The radio listeners privatize their already “private” space of experience. Who, indeed, can compete with the “Eiffel” noises of the radio as the inhabitants of this privatized space sit “silent and lifeless” next to one another? The technology of the radio is used to prioritize the experience of the listener, who is taken far away into the aestheticized space of the “Eiffel” noises. Kracauer accurately identifies the reconfiguring of space in which the power relationship between the consumer of sound and the producer remains ambiguous. Yet what remains clear is the enticement of the radio sounds for the user, who is transported out of his domestic boredom into the magical realm of communion with the “faraway” and enticing sounds of the radio.

These brief examples suggest a framework within which to situate the role that sound may play in the contemporary geography of Western urban culture. They indicate a powerful motivation to use sound to reorganize users’ relation to space and place. In each case, sound colonizes the listener but is used to actively re-create and reconfigure the spaces of experience. Odysseus, Fitzcarraldo, and Kracauer’s radio listeners all repossess their spaces of habitation in order to make them conform to their desires. Through the power of sound, the world becomes intimate, known, and possessed. These examples highlight the
powerfully seductive role of sound, which appears to root the user in the world with a force that differs from those of the other senses (Simmel 1997; Welsch 1997). In demonstrating the role sound can play in reconfiguring the relational qualities of experience, the examples also point to a specific Western mode of appropriation and transformation of experience through the manipulation of sound. The manner in which Odysseus, Fitzcarraldo, and our radio users inhabit social spaces calls attention to a specifically Western narrative about the cognitive, aesthetic, and moral makeup of social space as experienced through sound.

The Aesthetic Nature of Mobile Aural Solipsism: Odysseus’s Walkman

Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo aestheticize their world and in the process make themselves through their travels. Odysseus’s success is dependent upon both the Sirens and his own guile, whereas Fitzcarraldo relies on the technology of the phonograph and the voice of Caruso. In contrast to Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo, Kracauer’s radio listeners are immobile—the world comes to them through the radio and transforms their domestic and mundane world from within. In all three examples, time and space become aestheticized.

In contemporary consumer culture, we no longer have to travel to the far away in order to aestheticize it. The communication technology that enables the drawing together of the threads of the previous examples is the Walkman, which enables 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. Walkman sound is direct, with the earpieces placed directly in the ears of the user, overlaying the random sounds of the environment. Walkman users can aestheticize both the mundane everyday of the city streets and the faraway spaces they visit with their Walkman sounds. Indeed, the everyday and the far away appear to become increasingly similar in the experience of many Walkman users.

Walkman users represent the amalgam of Odysseus, Fitzcarraldo, and Kracauer’s radio listeners. They are often mobile, the Walkman becomes the wax in the ears, and the privatizing of space is enacted through continual use of mediated sound. Walkman users habitually take sound with them during those “in-between” times while traveling, often replaying the same track over and over in order to maintain their mood,
rather like Fitzcarraldo, communing with the disembodied yet intimate sounds of the culture industry. This “colonization” of urban space is deeply social, yet the relational nature of any such aestheticization is often downplayed in urban and cultural studies:

The beauty of “aesthetic control”—the unclouded beauty, beauty unspoilied by the fear of danger, guilty conscience or apprehension of shame—is its inconsequentiality. This control will not intrude into the realities of the controlled. It will not limit their options. It puts the spectator into the director’s chair—with the actors unaware of who is sitting there, of the chair itself, even of being potential objects of the director’s attention. Aesthetic control, unlike any other, gruesome or sinister social control which it playfully emulates, allows to thrive the contingency of life which social spacing strove to confine or stifle. Inconsequentiality of aesthetic control is what makes its pleasures unclouded. . . . I make them [people] into whatever I wish. I am in charge; I invest their encounter with meaning. (Bauman 1993: 6)

Although Bauman captures the asymmetrical nature of aesthetic experience, the ramifications of this form of social asymmetry, when broadened into a mode of “being in the world,” tend to be rendered harmless through a conceptual slippage concerning the aestheticization of daily experience as distinct from the viewing of a painting or the listening to a piece of music. Bauman, despite his interest in the nature of “moral” spaces of experience, fails to note this distinction. Axel Honneth (1995: 23) more accurately perceives the aesthetic as inversely proportional to the realization of a habitable social: “I think all concepts of the ‘post-modern’ have at least one affirmative feature in common, viz., to see in the process of the ‘dissolution of the social’ the chance for an expansion of aesthetic freedom for individuals.”

Aesthetic colonization plays a significant role in people’s daily use of Walkmans. Walkmans are used both as mundane accompaniments to the everyday and as a way of aestheticizing and controlling that very experience. Their use greatly expands the possibilities for users to aesthetically re-create their daily experience. Walkman users construct their own privatized and intimate spaces of reception. They move in their own soundworlds, like Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo, and they, too, can achieve the illusion of omnipotence through proximity and “connectedness.” As one man I interviewed, Magnus, said of his Walkman use: “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.”

Walkman use reorganizes users’ relations to space and place. Sound colonizes the listener but 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. Sound enables users to manage and orchestrate their spaces of habitation in a manner that conforms to their desires. Walkman users construct their own privatized and intimate spaces 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)

Walkman users also experience the world as a form of “we-ness” while 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 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 Walkman users, in their colonization of space, are equally concerned with solipsistically transcending the urban. If indeed they aestheticize it, they do so, unlike the flaneurs of early-nineteenth-century Paris—by drawing it into themselves, making it conform to their wishes, in order to make it in their own image (Friedberg 1993; Jenks 1995). In this transformation of representational space, “personal space” is often defined in terms of a 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 Walkman 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).

In this aural solipsism, Walkman users often become 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 simile of a wall aptly demonstrates the impenetrability of many users’ states, or desired states, in relation to the geographical space of experience. Walkman users appear to achieve a subjective sense of public invisibility. They essentially disappear as interacting subjects, withdrawing into their chosen privatized and mobile states.

The world beyond their “Walkman sounds” becomes a function of the user’s desire and is maintained through time, like Fitzcarraldo's world, through the act of listening. The world is brought into line, but only through a privatized yet mediated act of cognition. Users’ sense of space is one in which the distinction between private mood or orientation and surroundings is often abolished. The world becomes one with the experience of the personal stereo user in a potentially perfect mimetic fantasy that denies the contingent nature of the user’s relationship to the world beyond his or her chosen soundworld.

**The Proximity of Sound Movement, Technologically Speaking**

For Fitzcarraldo, his journey across the Amazon is both an adventure and a way in which he constructs his own narrative, to which the Amazon provides the backdrop. The music of Caruso, rather than giving him the desire to be elsewhere, makes the experience what it is. The Amazon and Fitzcarraldo’s experience become one as he imposes himself on the space thus inhabited. Equally, Odysseus makes himself through the construction of his own private soundworld. These examples merely indicate a trajectory or moment in Western sound desire. The implications of this sound history have recently been commented upon by Philip Bohlman (2000: 188), who argues that “in order to invest itself with the power to control and maintain its external domination and its internal order, Europe has consistently employed music to imagine its selfness.”

The sounds of Caruso enable Fitzcarraldo to exert order and control over himself. Odysseus, as we have seen, carries the internalized song
of the Sirens within him as he travels, and Walkman users equally inhabit their own privatized spaces. They carry their culture with them in the form of mediated sounds wherever they go. Their response to the spaces they inhabit might be indifferent, aesthetic, or a strategy to exclude others:

I have the warmth but I don’t have all the crap around me. I can eliminate that and I can get much more out of what the ocean has to offer me. I can enjoy. I feel that listening to my music, I can really pull the sun’s rays. Not being disturbed by screaming kids and all that shouting, which is not why I went there. I went to have harmony with the sea and sun. The plane journey, flying out and back, you listen to different music, but it just helps me to still my mind and to center myself, and I feel that by taking this tape with me I’m carrying that all day and I feel that I’m able to take more from the day and give more to the day. Whether that’s right or wrong I don’t know, but that’s how I feel. (Jay)

The environment becomes reappropriated and experienced as part of the user’s desire. By listening to “her” music, the listener gets more out of the environment, not by interacting with it, but precisely by not interacting with it. This indicates that Walkman use can make the environment “what it is” for users. The environment is received as a personal artifact via the Walkman. This is achieved by users’ repossessing space as part of, or constitutive of, their desire and provides a clear example of the way Walkman users might colonize and appropriate the here-and-now as part of their “re-inscribing” of habitable space. They might be described as the privatized Fitzcarraldos of contemporary consumer culture or as sound consumers of a manufactured intimacy.

Walkman users increasingly live in a world of technologically mediated sounds and images in which states of “we-ness” are learned and embedded in communication consumption in the home and elsewhere through television, radio, and music reception. The intimacy of a world experienced through mediated and technologized sound becomes a taken-for-granted backdrop for Walkman users’ daily experiences: “I can’t go to sleep at night without my radio on. I’m one of those people. It’s really strange. I find it very difficult. I don’t like silence. I’m not that sort of person. I like hearing things around me. It’s like hearing that there’s a world going on sort of thing. I’m not a very alone person. I will always have something on. I don’t mind being by myself as long as I have something on” (Mandy).
Walkman use creates both the experience of being “cocooned”—by separating the user from the world beyond—and, simultaneously, a different “space” whereby the user lives in the mediated space of the culture industry. Walkman users, rather like Kracauer’s radio listeners, do not perceive themselves as being alone; theirs is an accompanied solitude. The mediated sounds of the culture industry transform the space of habitation for users. The “outside” world becomes a function of the desire of users and is maintained over time through continuous listening. The world is brought into line, but only through a privatized yet mediated act of cognition:

Because when you have the Walkman it’s like having company. You don’t feel lonely. It’s your own environment. It’s like you’re doing something pleasurable you can do by yourself and enjoy it. I think it creates a sense of kind of aura sort of like. Even though it’s directly in your ears you feel like it’s all around your head. You’re really aware it’s just you, only you can hear it. It makes you feel individual. Listening also constitutes “company.” If there’s the radio there’s always somebody talking. There’s always something happening. (Alice)

This sentiment is contrasted with the observation that nothing is happening if there is no musical accompaniment to experience. The aura that the user inhabits collapses. When the Walkman is switched off, accompanied solitude falls away, and the users’ experience is diminished. Users need their Walkmans in everyday life, just as Fitzcarraldo needed the sounds of Caruso in the jungle to make and enhance its meaning for him.

Conclusion

Representational space becomes primarily an aural space for Walkman users. In the contemporary world of Walkman desire, like that of Kracauer’s radio listeners, space is inhabited by the sounds of the culture industry coming directly into the users’ ears. Like Odysseus’s, their soundworld is constructed through the transmitting of sound from elsewhere. But in this instance, the Siren’s voice is a domesticated and mechanically reproduced one. Unlike Odysseus, users suffer no penalties for listening. Equally, their own listening does not preclude others from listening. However, each listener, like Kracauer’s radio user, must inhabit his or her own private and mediated soundworld. Contemporary Walkman users live in a more democratized consumer culture in which
many are rather like Odysseus and fewer are “oarsmen.” Walkman practices of aesthetic colonization appear to be both utopian—and hence transcendent in character—and located firmly in alienating and objectifying cultural predispositions that deny difference within culture (Sennett 1990). “The absence of encounters with different subjects is more restful, since it never puts our own identity into question” (Todorov 1993: 344). Equally for Adorno, according to Honneth (1993: 45), consumers “can stabilise their identity only through continual exclusion of all sense experience that threatens to impair the direct pursuit of the principle of control.”

My brief analysis of Walkman users’ construction of their aurally mediated experience suggests that users are both colonized and colonizing. They negate notions of difference in order to inhabit a transcendent and safe space of experience, a managed and controlled space that might be referred to as a sonorous envelope (Anzieu 1989). Sound and forms of “ontological security” appear to be closely related in the world of Walkman desires. If consumers are seeking ontological security through consumption, then the consumption of sound is highly successful in operationalizing this desire. States of “we-ness” are indeed states of ontological security.

Walkman users’ sense of “being in the world” comes about through the re-inscription of the everyday through the technologies of the Walkman and reproduced sound. These strategies are neither merely emotional nor cognitive but both. Users are cognitively active in their construction of ontological security, which itself is the result of the construction of a virtual connection to, a “being-with,” the products of the culture industry. Hence, Walkman users place great faith in the ability of their Walkmans actually to deliver what they want. Walkman use can produce a powerful sense of centeredness, of being in control, enabling users to manage their thoughts, emotions, and memories, together with their relationship to the world they inhabit. Just as Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo controlled their soundscapes, so the urban consumer might be seen, not so much as protecting the site of experience from others, but as creating, albeit ambiguously, a utopian space of habitation.

The fragility of this space is rendered more secure as the space becomes “occupied” by signifiers of an imaginary and reassuring presence in the form of chosen sound. The Sirens hold no fear for today’s Walkman users, nor are users overtly concerned with impressing the “other” with the cultural status of the West, as Fitzcarraldo was. Today’s Walkman user often experiences everyday life in a conceptual
space somewhere between those of Odysseus and Fitzcarraldo. The sounds of “home” as experienced by Odysseus through knowledge become for Fitzcarraldo the jungle re-inscribed through the voice of Caruso, whereas Walkman users habitually aestheticize their daily experience through sound in order to transcend their geographical space and manage their sense of presence in the world. Listening takes them away from the mundanity of their domestic place, their domestic thoughts and desires. The spaces of urban culture become both their jungle and a domesticated but effective siren song. It appears that as consumers become immersed in their mobile media sound bubbles, so those spaces habitually passed through in daily life increasingly lose significance and turn progressively into the “nonspaces” of daily life that users try, through those self-same technologies, to transcend. The need for proximity and for accompanied solitude expressed 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.

Notes

1. Murray Schafer, in The Tuning of the World (1977), used the term “soundscape” to describe the total experienced acoustic environment. This included all noises, musical, natural, and technological. Schafer, a composer by trade, was concerned to analyze the changing historical and cultural configuration of soundscapes, arguing that it was necessary to understand what effect the configuration of sounds in our environment has in shaping human behavior.

2. Kracauer (1995: 333) describes the transformation of space from individual to collective space through sound: “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.” For more on the history of the phonograph and its use and significance, see Gitelman 1999 and Kittler 1999.

3. Connor has recently commented on this routinization of technological innovations: “Although there were some who were intrigued and amazed by the new invention, in many ways, the contemporary reaction of the coming of the telephone seems to have been ‘about time too.’ The telephone had been in use only for months before users began wondering irritatedly why the sound
quality was so poor. . . . In periods like the late nineteenth century, and like our own, in which the technological imagination outruns technological development itself, new inventions have a way of seeming out of date, or used up, on their arrival, like a birthday present with which you have been secretly playing in advance” (Connor 2000b: 411). However, I wish to point to the attraction these routinized forms of consumption have in the successful management of experience.

4. Throughout this chapter, the reader will be aware that I use “music” and “sound” interchangeably. This is not to deny their distinctiveness. However, I wish to foreground the nature of sound’s proximity to users and the power it gives them relationally, rather than discuss the distinctive role of music over the voice. For example, Kracauer’s radio listeners are listening to the “voice,” as are some of the Walkman users subsequently quoted.

5. The ethnographic material in this chapter comes from a study of Walkman users that I conducted between 1994 and 1996, to which I recently added in 2001. It consists primarily of in-depth, qualitative interviews with over one hundred personal stereo users living in and around London and, more recently, Cambridge and Brighton. The interviewees represented a cross section of users in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and occupation. Walkman users proved to be particularly elusive subjects. By the very act of wearing a Walkman, they send out “do not disturb” messages. Younger users came from schools, colleges, and youth clubs. Others were contacted in their places of work through contacts and contacts of contacts. Perhaps the difficulty of contact is one explanation why, in the Open University text on the Sony Walkman (DuGay, Hall, and Mackay 1997), no attempt is made to interview Walkman users, despite a chapter’s being given over to users’ consumption practices. Here, I discuss Walkman practices through illustrative user accounts. For a fuller discussion of the methodology, see Bull 2000.