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THE AURAL WALK

'One hundred solitudes form the whole of the city of Venice – this is its spell. An image for the man of the future'. Nietzsche's observation refers not to 'lonely crowd', that spectre of collective angst, nor to Poe's Man of the Crowd, who found a vicarious vitality among the throng, but to the artifice of luxurious solitude: solitude as the most exquisite refinement of all urbane design. Could it be that we come to the city in order to achieve solitude? Such has been the unspoken premise of the modern city of utopian individualism. By solitude I do not mean isolation. Isolation is a state of nature; solitude is the work of culture. Isolation is an imposition, solitude a choice.

Brian Hatton¹

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

For the meaning of the Walkman does not necessarily lie in itself – it sits there, neat, usually black, often wrapped in leather, and quite oblivious – but in the extension of perceptive potential. People who walk around with a Walkman might simply seem to signify a void,

the emptiness of metropolitan life, but that little black object can also be understood as a pregnant zero, as the link in an urban strategy, a semiotic shifter, the crucial digit in a particular organisation of sense. For the idea of the void, of nothing, always introduces us to the paradox that nothing can only be known by knowing nothing, that is, something.² So we might suggest that the apparent vacuity of the Walkman opens up the prospect of a passage in which we discover, as Gilles Deleuze reminds us in *Logique du sens* (1969), those other cities that exist inside the city. There we move along invisible grids where emotional energies and the imaginary flow, and where the continual slippage of sense maintains the promise of meaning.

In the manifest refusal of sociability the Walkman nevertheless reaffirms participation in a shared environment. It directly partakes in the changes in the horizon of perception that characterise the late twentieth century, and which offers a world fragmenting under the mounting media accumulation of intersecting signs, sounds and images. With the Walkman strapped to our bodies we confront what Murray Schafer in his book *The Tuning of the World* calls a 'soundscape', a soundscape that increasingly represents a mutable collage: sounds are selected, sampled, folded in and cut up by both the producers (DJs, rap crews, dub masters, recording engineers) and the consumers (we put together our personal play lists, skip some tracks, repeat others, turn up the volume to block out the external soundtrack or flip between the two).³ Each listener/player selects and rearranges the surrounding soundscape, and, in constructing a dialogue with it, leaves a trace in the network.

The Walkman, like the transistor radio, the portable computer, the mobile phone and, above all, the credit card, is a privileged object of contemporary nomadism. Yet, as Chantal de Gournay has pointed out, while the computer and global credit status transmit you through a-topic space in a 'virtual', rather than a corporeal, reality, where time is 'fatal' and space incidental, the Walkman, on the contrary, draws the world into you, reaffirms your body, and laconically signals a 'diasporic identity' put together in transit.⁴ Like Walter Benjamin's description of the Parisian arcades that let light into their interiors, the Walkman brings the external world into the interior design of identities.

In this mobile, wrap-around world, the Walkman, like dark glasses and iconoclastic fashion, serves to set one apart while simultaneously reaffirming individual contact to certain common, if shifting, measures (music, fashion, aesthetics, metropolitan life . . .

and their particular cycles of mortality). So the Walkman is both a mask and a masque: a quiet putting into act of localised theatrics. It reveals itself as a significant symbolic gadget for the nomads of modernity, in which music on the move is continually being decontextualised and recontextualised in the inclusive acoustic and symbolic flux of everyday life.⁵ Still, if the Walkman so far represents the ultimate form of the art of transit, it also represents the ultimate musical means in mediating the ambient. For it permits the possibility, however fragile and however transitory, of imposing your soundscape on the surrounding aural environment and thereby domesticating the external world: for a moment it can all be brought under the STOP/START, FAST FORWARD, PAUSE and REWIND buttons.

The fascination of the image of the Walkman, apart from the inner secret it brazenly displays in public (what is s/he listening to?), is the ambiguous position that it occupies between autism and autonomy: that ambiguous mixture of danger and saving power, to paraphrase Heidegger's quotation from Hölderlin, that characterises modern technology. Therefore, to understand the Walkman involves multiplying on it diverse points of view, and appreciating that it does not subtract from sense but adds to and complicates it. Pursuing this we might say that our relationship to the Walkman 'will be free if it opens our human existence to the essence of technology'.⁶ By 'essence' (*Wesen*) Heidegger intends something that endures through time, that dwells in the present, that offers a 'sense' of technology that is not merely reducible to the 'technological'. Despite the nostalgia for authenticity that permeates Heidegger's discourse we can nevertheless bend his words in a suggestive direction. To the question what is technology and, in this particular case, the Walkman, we can answer that it is simultaneously a technical instrument and a cultural activity. To continue with the German philosopher's concerns, the Walkman is an instrument and activity that contributes to the casting into sense, to the re-presenting, or en-framing (*Gestell*), of the contemporary world. In retracing the etymology of 'technology' back to the Greek *technē* and its ancient connection to the arts, to *poiēsis* and knowledge, Heidegger suggests a wider frame for thinking its sense, its particular truth.

However, as both instrument and activity, the Walkman is not simply an instrument that reveals the enduring truth of technology and being; it is also an immediate historical reality and practice. As part of the equipment of modern nomadism it contributes to the

prosthetic extension of mobile bodies caught up in a decentred diffusion of languages, experiences, identities, idiolects and histories that are distributed in a tendentially global syntax. The Walkman encourages us to think inside this new organisation of time and space. Here, for example, the older, geometrical model of the city as the organiser of space has increasingly been replaced by chronometry and the organisation of time. The technology of space has been supplemented and increasingly eroded by the technology of time: the 'real time', the 'nanoseconds' of computer chips and monitor blips, of transitory information on a screen, of sounds snatched in the headphones. It leads to the emergence of a further dimension. 'Speed suddenly returns to become a *primitive force* beyond the measure of both time and space.'⁷

To travel, and to perform our *travail*, in this environment we plug in, choosing a circuit. Here, as opposed to the discarded 'grand narratives' (Lyotard) of the City, the Walkman offers the possibility of a micro-narrative, a customised story and soundtrack, not merely a space but a place, a site of dwelling. The ingression of such a privatised habitat in public spaces is a disturbing act. Its uncanny quality lies in its deliberate confusion of earlier boundaries, in its provocative appearance 'out of place'. Now, the confusion of 'place', of voices, histories and experiences speaking 'out of place' forms part of the altogether more extensive sense of contemporary semantic and political crisis. A previous spatial hierarchy has had increasingly to confront an excess of languages emerging out of the histories and languages of feminism, sexual rights, ethnicity, race and the environment that overflow and undercut its authority. The Walkman is therefore a political act? It is certainly an act that unconsciously entwines with many other micro-activities in conferring a different sense on the *polis*. In producing a different sense of space and time, it participates in rewriting the conditions of representation: where 'representation' clearly indicates both the semiotic dimensions of the everyday and potential participation in a political community.

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

I have a vision of the Songlines stretching across the continents and ages; that wherever men have trodden they have left a trail of song (of which we may, now and then, catch an echo); and that these trails must reach back, in time and space, to an

isolated pocket in the African savannah, where the First Man opening his mouth in defiance of the terrors that surrounded him, shouted the opening stanza of the World Song, 'I AM!'⁸

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

NOTES

- 1 Brian Hatton, 'From Neurosis to Narrative', in Linda Brown and Deyan Sudjic (eds), *Metropolis. New British Architecture and the City*, London, ICA, 1988.
- 2 See Brian Rotman's interesting study of the question, *Signifying Nothing. The Semiotics of Zero*, London, Macmillan, 1987.
- 3 Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1977.
- 4 Chantal de Gournay, 'Citadins et nomads. L'espace public à l'épreuve des technologies de communication mobile', paper given at the Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation of the École Nationale Supérieure des Mines, Paris, 9 January 1992.
- 5 Shuhei Hosokawa, 'The Walkman Effect', *Popular Music* 4, 1984, pp. 171-3. This is a brilliant, pioneering essay on the question of the Walkman. It is extracted from a full-length study in Japanese: Shuhei Hosokawa, *Walkman no Shūjigaku*, Tokyo, Asahi Shuppan, 1981.
- 6 Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Harper & Row, 1977, p. 3.
- 7 Paul Virilio, *Lo spazio critico*, Bari, Dedalo, 1988, p. 15; *L'Espace critique*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 1984.
- 8 Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, London, Picador, 1988, p. 314.