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The Sonic Composition of the City

Jean-Paul Thibaud

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A common phenomenon now marks the ordinary experience of city dwellers : walking through the city to music. Geared with headphones, the walkman listener strolls along and takes in the musical scenery on his/her way. A kind of tuning in is created between his ear and his step. New sonic territories are composed in the course of this mobile listening experience. As the body moves in sync to the music, the listener transforms the public scene and provides a new tonality to the city street. His footsteps seem to say what his ears may be trying to hide. How does music with headphones mobilize the walker's gait? What does this contemporary form of urban mobility stand for? How should we consider this micro-ecology of musical navigation?

Using a walkman in public places is part of an urban tactic which consists in decomposing the territorial structure of the city and recomposing it through spatio-sonic behaviors. Double movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. This new urban nomad is here and there at the same time, transported by the secret rhythm of his walkman and in direct contact with the place he's walking through. The bounce in his step, the variations in his stride and the unexpected change of his daily route explain at times his imaginary drift but always brings him back to where he started. « All music of the body is music of the body of the earth » affirms Daniel Charles (1979). Musicalization of the step and pattering of sonic rhythms go together.

We see him fully absorbed, lost in his sonic universe, whereas just one more step, a scream, or a glance is all it takes to bring him back into contact with his surroundings. We mustn't be mistaken, the walkman-listener is not entirely cut off from the urban environment. His being rooted in the urban space leans more towards an instability of perceived forms. The precarious balance it creates between what he hears and what he travels through, between what he sees and what he listens to, between what he perceives and what he expresses, reveals a delinquent practice consisting of « living not in the margins but rather in the thresholds of social codes that are foiled and displaced » (de Certeau, 1984).

Using a walkman is part of a process of derealization of urban space which depends on the technical mediation of spatio-phonic behaviors. As a transposable object, the walkman offers itself as one of the most advanced stage of *musica mobilis*. It involves *mobile listening*. As an involvement shield, the walkman « momentarily allows us to position ourselves outside the social theatre » (Kouloumdjian, 1985). It is part of *secret listening*. As a schizophonic object, the walkman develops « the separation between an original sound and its electro-acoustic reproduction » (Schafer, 1979). It participates in *listening of elsewhere*. Thus, as a manager of sensorial channels, it questions the relationship between the dweller and his environment and enables new modes of experiencing the city.

1. The hidden sides of the city

The walking listener reveals the hidden sides of the city according to three movements. The first movement : *from visible to audible*. By affirming the importance of sound as an essential feature of his urban experience, the walkman user brings us to reconsider the visual paradigm that predominates in the social sciences (Bull, 2000). It is less a question of adopting a new point of view but rather a question of listening to the voices of the city. The city is also to be heard and not only to be seen. In this respect, listening with headphones on is like a wonderful decoding instrument of the urban sonic environment. The walking listener uses it not only to protect himself from the sonic aggressions of the city but also to filter and enhance the events which give the place its meaning. Depending upon the places and what is happening in them, the sound volume of the walkman is used in order to be able to listen to or to mask conversations, bells ringing, children screams, traffic noise, etc. What comes out of the urban rumour are the sounds that signify the place, those which qualify the space with a singular voice. Thus, this selective listening enables a hierachization of everyday sounds and a decomposition of the urban soundscape. A new figure of the city dweller may be in the midst of being born. Instead of the eye-oriented *flâneur* dear to Walter Benjamin, mustn't we substitute the discriminating listening of the musicalized passer-by ?

Second movement : *from perception to action*. Using a walkman is not limited to reintroducing the audible in our experience of urban space. It also reveals everyday sounds as closely related to social practices. There is no such thing as pure perception, free from the course of action and practical activities in which the perceiving subject is involved. If the walkman voices are superimposed to those of the city, the steps of the city dweller also interfere with what he hears : « the walkman brings with him a mixture of music and body and the walkman user invents the art of coordination on a daily level in order to settle into the space he occupies, a 'short' circuit. » (Hosokawa, 1984). A few more feet are sometimes

enough to pick up the reception of a radiophonic station, a sudden swaying may affect the music of the walkman starting to lack energy, arriving at a noisy crossroad makes the long-awaited favorite song suddenly inaudible. Walking is also a sonic action which mobilizes the step as much as the ear. The passer-by with headphones navigates through several worlds at once, the one in which he hears and the one in which he walks. Passer-by *par excellence*, he orchestrates « a synthesis and a coordination between two heterogeneous series » (Deleuze, 1969) : entanglement between the ear and the step.

Third movement : *from private listening to public secret*. The walkman phenomena presents a particular heuristic interest in the sense that it also reveals the taken for granted of everyday life. « Breaching experiment » Harold Garfinkel (1967) would say. Making observable what usually goes unnoticed, the walking listener provides partial access to the mystery of appearance. By establishing a disjunction between the visible and the audible, a disturbance of the human sensorium and a form of strangeness in everyday life, it questions the evidence of the « perceptive faith » (Merleau-Ponty, 1991). Thus, between the fully explicit and overt behavior and the complete secret, the walkman user provides a whole range of intermediary opérations : dancing pace which escapes the understanding of others, incongruous movements and gestures which only make sense to the listener, speech with strange voices while listening to the music, etc. What are the minimal conditions for a space to be public ? The problematic nature of these phenomena can be explained by the fact that they render public – by not following□ them – the social codes from which the expressive order of the body constitutes a shared signifying system. In other words, these kinds of intersubjective discordance uncover the unsuspected background of social life (Thibaud, 1994).

These preliminary remarks bring us to consider the way public places are experienced. It requires thinking in terms of thresholds, knots, and configurations. A constant reminder of in-between practices. Thresholds when the walkman user leaves his house : interpenetration of private and public. Knots when he makes use of his senses : interferences between the ear, the step and the built environment. Configurations when he moves around the city to music : interstice of lived itineraries.

2. Doors, bridges, and interchanges

The transition from one's home into the public realm represents a special moment in walkman use. Many walkman users have specific daily habits in the street. They carry out a series of operations which use a very precise and regular order. Public places are marked by

an access ritual characterized by a repeated ordering of thresholds enabling the walkman user to fit into the rhythm of the street.

Doors. The door of the house may also function as a sonic door. On one hand, the door serves as a transition between two places of distinct status ; on the other hand, as an intermediary between two kinds of listening experience. Leaving one's home is often synonymous with turning on the walkman and coming home is equated with turning it off. It is paradoxical that access to public space is associated with the beginning of private listening whereas entering the private realm is associated with disponibility and openness towards the surroundings. What is the relationship between coming through the door and turning on the walkman? Where specifically is the threshold which marks the change in listening? The exit door serves as a transitional space between getting the walkman ready and turning it on: « I usually put my headphones on when I walk out the door or they are already positioned on my head and all I have to do is press a button ». Listening to headphones begins outside the home. The distinction established between putting on the headphones and starting to actually listen leads to a differentiation between leaving one's home and entering a public space. Closing the door to one's home is still considered a private act even if the person is physically outside. « Turning on » the walkman can be understood in two ways : as the moment one begins to listen to the walkman and also as the beginning of the walkman user's voyage. Hearing the music marks the moment that the individual admits that he has entered into a public space. The threshold between public and private is defined less in terms of physical access (stepping out the door) and more in terms of a change of perceptual orientation. We are dealing here with a « *paradoxical territorialization* » in the sense that this approach to the public realm implies restricted sonic accessibility combined with an increased visual exposure. This exiting ritual reveals the differentiated status that we give to speech according to the type of space we find ourselves in. The contact which joins the city dweller to his domestic space must be maintained up until the last moment, in other words, up until the door is closed : « When I'm outside, I lock the door, turn on my walkman, ensure that all is working well, that everything is hooked up. Sometimes I turn it on before but it is difficult to say goodbye to the person I live with ». This description validates the hypothesis according to which the walking listener changes his perceptual orientation once he left his house. Whereas it seems appropriate to remain sonically accessible in domestic places, being available in public places seems less necessary. A first type of threshold can be revealed: we call « sonic door » this border point where the contact with the family life has still to be maintained or on the contrary can be interrupted. In other words, the sonic door deals with the phatic function of communication. It involves the possibility to shift our modes of attention towards others.

Bridges. Spatial transitions of the walking listener are not always expressed by such radical changes of perceptive attitude. Sonic continuity can be sought in the passage of one place to another. Listening with headphones establishes a « sonic bridge » between domestic and public spaces : « I close the door before listening to the music unless there's a good song on the radio, but then I locate it on my walkman as soon as I turn it on to be able to continue listening to the song ». This is what may be referred to as a « *phonic deterritorialization* » of the urban environment in the sense that the walking listener neutralizes the sonic delimitations between domestic and public spaces by establishing a continual listening between the two spaces. This musical link tends to neutralize the sonic identity of the places. The spatial decontextualization of listening with headphones creates a sonic bridge between the interior and exterior. We call sonic bridge the listening device which encourages the reaching of a material limit without requalifying the sonic space of the listener. Contrary to the sonic door which marks the reaching of a threshold through modifying the sound context, the sonic bridge establishes an auditory continuity independent of the places traveled through. It is part of a double movement of retrospection (the past listening affects the sonic program to come) and anticipation (turning on the walkman occurs before the walkman listener's stroll outside). Sometimes even a momentary overlap is produced between the radiophonic domestic diffusion and diffusion of the same program by the walking listener : « Sometimes I listen to King FM at home. If the radio is always on and I put King FM on my walkman, it produces amplification of the music. It's almost like when you are in a cave ». Creating a resonance between different sonic emissions makes the listener incapable of developing a sonic place marker. Acoustical characteristics of these sonic productions being practically identical, no clue makes it possible to differentiate one from another. This confusion of diverse sonic sources constitutes an interesting example of neutralization of the territorial power of sound.

Interchanges. A third type of threshold consists in adjusting the sound volume of the walkman in terms of movement, modulating the listening conditions according to the sonic context of the street : « When I go out, I adjust the volume of my walkman so it is neither too loud nor too low, because there could be noises from a car or something like that. So I need to adjust the volume in harmony with the situation ». Becoming attuned to the situation consists in stabilizing the level of intensity between the sounds of the walkman and the one of the urban environment. Regulating the volume of the walkman makes it possible to maintain the preponderance of electro-acoustic productions without necessarily masking urban noises. The listener is looking for the minimal intensity gap between these two sonic sources : « neither too strong nor too weak » we were told. We are referring in this case to « sonic interchange » in the sense that a reversal of the foreground-background relationship could occur at any

given moment : outside voices, perceived as sonic background, can suddenly mask the musical emission and show up in the foreground. This is what happens in particular when the walking listener enters a public space. Adjusting the volume consists in stabilizing the foreground-background relationship and attempting to maintain the same balance of intensity throughout the walking route. We witness a « *sonic reterritorialization* » of the urban space in the sense that sonic urban occurrences are recomposed in terms of musical dynamics. While researching audible thresholds, the walking listener creates a new sonic organization of the street based on a relative mastering of sonic urban masks.

As soon as we no longer limit accessibility of free circulation of the body in space, we may pose a question about public sensorial instrumentation. By upholding the existence of a plurality of transitions to public places, the walking listener makes the « in-between » an essential category of structuring urban territory. We must then « start in the middle, from the middle, enter and exit, neither begin nor finish » (Deleuze, 1980).

3. The knots of the urban environment

Listening to headphones creates powerful and complex links with the characteristics of the urban milieu. The walking listener enters into a relationship with the urban environment - sonic, built and visual - by experiencing situations of interference, in other words, situations in which different types of space-time connect.

Particularly intense urban noises - road noise, sirens, warning signals - punctuate the flow of the musical audition and conditions the degree of autonomy of listening with headphones. Acoustic permeability of headphones doesn't fully predict the total intrusion of voices of the city in the listener's perceptive field. When a sonic parasite is imposed, several solutions are imaginable. It is either possible to rewind the tape and play the piece again in which listening was momentarily interrupted: « If there is an intense noise in the street and I can't hear the music, I put the song on again ». The other possibility is to turn up the volume: « When there's a great deal of noise around, I make the walkman louder ». Or resignation may be explained as a waiting period for calm to occur: « If I turn up the volume and I still can't hear, I just have to wait ». In any case, people are not always annotated to this situation of sonic interference. It may also be sought after by the user or may be somewhat beneficial. Certain sonic occurrences are not just parasitic ; they provide informational value which may be momentarily significant in terms of musical audition. The listener voluntarily goes from listening to headphones to listening to the city by intentionally increasing the porosity of his earphones: « The other day, I lowered the volume because I wanted to hear the bells, I wanted

to know the exact time, so I lowered the volume to hear the chimes ». Whatever the tactic applied, the walkman user is situated within two simultaneous sonic worlds. We are referring in this case to an « *interphonic knot* », in other words, the point of convergence between two sonic spaces of a different nature – that of the walking listener and that of the street.

The built environment also interferes with listening to the radio. Buildings are sometimes an obstacle to the propagation of Hertzian waves and limit the reception of radio programs. The architecture of spaces and the height and form of edifices become audible through the use of headphones: « It's hard to pick up a radio station in the city because of all those huge and tall buildings. Buildings are a sort of screen ». A transduction occurs between the material urban forms and the perceived sonic forms, the visible becomes audible. Depending on the particular case, the listener momentarily loses the station that he's in the midst of listening to or picks up two at a time. It is remarkable that walking listeners are capable of localizing zones of hertzian disturbance so precisely. On their walking route, they identify radiophonic territories in the city and acquire their own knowledge. Different individuals, unknown from each other, make us aware of the same urban phonography. The town center is often evoked in similar terms: « When you are in the center, reception is not very good so you have to find a radio station which gets better reception », « It depends on the radio station I want to listen to, it's really bad in the city center ». Regarding the lake in the city center, « Reception of the radio station Bellevue is better on this side of the lake, you lose the station when you are on the other side », « On one side of the lake, I listened to two stations at once, but I moved the tuner and I lost one of them ». The position of the listener in regards to the built environment is significant in terms of the conditions of radiophonic reception. We are referring in this case to a « *topophonic knot* », in other words, the interference point between media listening and architectural space. This invisible urban side brings us closer to the experience of Fernand Deligny (1980), who when retracing the daily walking patterns of autistic children, revealed the existence of « chevêtres », common areas to all children without previous disclosure of these places. « Communal » relationship occurs when the walking listeners are linked to each other by a community of behavior and territory which has not been outwardly expressed.

Finally, listening to headphones establishes strange connections between the visual and the musical landscapes. Depending upon the music listened to, the city takes on variable tones and moods. The attention paid to the elements of the visual landscape seems to depend in particular upon the musical style: « Sometimes when I listen to classical music while I'm walking, I notice the trees and nature surrounding me, much more than I normally would. Listening to rock and roll makes me notice the cars that pass by... ». These cultural

associations between sound and image are undoubtedly largely influenced by stereotypes found in film and television productions. This extract illustrates a phenomenon of aesthetization of the visual environment through music. Many authors have studied this significant trait of urban visual culture and have insisted on the particular role that the walkman plays in this evolution. Ian Chambers (1986) considers the walkman an aesthetic device of the city, Paolo Prato (1984) calls it a « spectacularization process » and Claus-Dieter Rath (1986) affirms the birth of the city-screen by referring to the role that the walkman plays in this regard. The objects seen are not apprehended in an equivalent and neutral manner. They are subjected to choices and visual reconfigurations in terms of headphone listening: « There is often a coincidence between what I listen to and what I see, so I can see things that are a bit more elementary, occasionally a bit clearer, and something reaches me ». The walking listener is particularly sensitive to the connection established between the eye and the ear, to the « rhythmic harmony between the music, the listener's body, and the exterior environment » (Cave and Cotton, 1984). We are alluding then to the « *visiophonic knot* » to designate this research of a convergence point between the audible and the visible, a discovery of synchronized intersensorial sequences.

The walkman should not be reduced to the status of a simple object of the environment among many: it is interposed between the user and his milieu rather than situated at a distance from the relationship. This analysis is close to the definition of « quasi-objects » provided by Michel Serres: « This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world, it is also a quasi-object, since it marks or designates a subject which without it wouldn't be » (Serres, 1980). The walkman is a third term to be situated at the level of the man-milieu relationship, it is on one hand inseparable from the perceived subject (of the user) and nonetheless distinct from him. The knots we have just referred to must not be confused with the « center » of the « city center » where city dwellers would come to be together but rather as a « pluralist aesthetics of the situation » (Serres, 1972) which connects the diverse socioecological components of passing places.

4. The interstice of lived itineraries

Rather than uncover urban territories based on the spatial and visual order of the city, the walking listener makes it possible to identify several navigational practices. The musical walking patterns of the walking listener could be synthesized through a typology of strolls. Each stroll can be regarded in two ways, first as an art to master the act of getting around, and

secondly, as a means to reveal the complex relationship between listening and moving. If both listening to music and walking involves time, the typology that we are offering underlines various kinds of spatio-sonic procedures. We may distinguish six types of walking practices which often overlap.

The « route » consists in choosing a musical itinerary which goes from one place to another. This itinerary proposes two variants. On one hand, when a route is taken regularly, daily, as for example, the path to work, the walking listener rediscovers it each day by changing the music he listens to. The same route may be heard in different ways. On the other hand, an occasional or exceptional itinerary could be listened to with the same sonic program as that of another route. The walking listener appropriates the space he walks through in terms of his familiarity with the musical pieces. Thus, the route *superposes* a double temporality – one of which is walking around and the other is the music. This diversifies or, to the contrary homogenizes, the perception of the urban environment.

The « stride » consists in minimizing occasions for stopping and in encouraging continuity of the walk. Not saying « hello » to an acquaintance on the street, limiting the possibility of speaking to others, neutralizing visual stimulation in the street and synchronizing one's steps to musical rhythms are just some of the tactics allowed when listening to headphones. The stride gives priority to musical rhythms, provides partial autonomy to the urban temporality and restricts occasions for diversion offered by the street. The walkman user's step remains regular in the sense that certain « exterior » sonic events are still out the user's perceptive realm. The stride *substitutes* the musical listening temporality over the one of the public environment.

The « gait » consists in establishing variations of walking speeds, and modulating the step according to the music. These variations are set off either by particularly intense sonic occurrences coming from the street (acceleration of the walk to escape acoustic parasites and reestablish quality headphone listening) or changes in musical tempos. In the second case, the variation is expressed by an acceleration or slowing down of the walk and can be voluntarily sought by the walking listener (programming the gait in particular of joggers). The act of listening may concern the urban soundscape or the musical programs on the walkman, but in both cases the gait *transposes* the rhythmic qualities of sonic time at the level of the walking expression of the listener.

The « style » consists of composing figures through the help of gestures, putting movements into form in a way that makes them aesthetic. The walking listener decomposes the music he listens to in rhythmic sequences and in sonic flows and makes up for it through

gestures. By reacting in this way, he provides an original form of getting around - sort of a in-between walking and dancing - and thus metamorphoses the place traveled through just as a result of his presence. The street becomes an urban scene in which an improvised choreographic scene takes place more or less exhibited and remarked. The style *configures* the urban space by partially defunctionalizing the act of getting around and by establishing an intertwining of the bodily rhythms of the passer-by and the musical rhythms he hears.

The « detour » consists in increasing the travel distance in regards to the most direct route going from one place to another. It can be revealed through various practices : avoiding noisy areas which prevent headphone listening, choice of a route with the least amount of social visibility which enables the dance-walk, backtracking when the walkman user gets lost in his music. Whether freely chosen or not, the detour traces a winding itinerary in terms of the expressive and perceptive behavior of the walkman user or in terms of his awareness of his surrounding social environment. By indirectly or directly taking paths linked to headphone listening, the walking listener *retraces* his own urban cartography, he demonstrates it as he maps it out.

The « shortcut » consists in shortening effectively or subjectively the time of the walk, in taking the shortest route to get from one point to the next. While it may be contrary to the detour, it does not necessarily involve contrary elements. The walking listener may of course decide to go home by the most direct route when the battery of his walkman is low, but he can also be so absorbed in listening that he doesn't notice the time spent for his stroll. Forgetting part of the trip subjectively reduces the duration of the trip and offers a time-saving element in regards to commuting time. By concentrating on the experience of the walkman listener's sonic time, the shortcut *miscounts* the clocklike time in favor of musical dynamics.

This typology makes it possible to specify the resources available to the walkman listener to show others how he appropriates and redefines urban territory in terms of headphone listening. Through his body expressions and through his organization of itineraries, the passer-by renders public and accessible to others these ways of navigating through the city. He recounts his musical perception of the urban space in his walks like Stillman, in the *City of Glass* by Paul Auster, draws the letters from a coded message through the movement of his steps...

5. The sensibilization of urban life

The walkman functions like a technological device which introduces the senses within the urban territory. The thresholds, knots, and arrangements it creates need to be apprehended

phenomenologically, according to the variable combinations of visibility and audibility. To conclude, we wish to show - based on musical nomadism - how new modes of appearance and behavior in public are constituted.

A spacing regulating device. The use of the walkman in urban environments is linked to the art of behavior which sets up intervals and regulates spacing. Headphones are what we could call a « primary earshell », in other words, an envelope which becomes part of the listening condition of the passer-by, but can be also taken off anytime. The walking listener filters the information delivered by the urban environment and plays with the perceptual orientation possibilities offered to him. He can adopt diverse points of view and listening not entirely based on the position of his body in space but also on the modalities of headphone listening. This technical mediation guaranties a diversity of perspectives, a moving off centre of the self. It orchestrates diverse types of distancing by operating a separation of the eye and the ear. This active reconfiguration of perspectives by the walkman listener contributes to the possible creation of a common public space : « the common world is over once we view it from only one point of view, when it is only allowed to present itself from a single perspective » (Arendt, 1961).

A mobile operator of configurations. Through his meanderings, his stride and his gait, the walking listener shapes the urban space without necessarily providing a reason for his actions. By keeping the content of his headphone listening a secret, he hides elements of a pragmatic context which would enable the observer to give meaning to the walkman listener's behavior. But again, by demonstrating diverse types of instability of perceived forms, the walking listener questions the expressive power of appearance. It is not really a question of revealing perceptible forms but rather of showing how these forms are made and then unmade : morphogenesis when gestures and steps adjust to musical rhythms, anamorphosis when sonic emissions are filtered by headphones...The difficult problem of the relationship between sensoriality and intelligibility is introduced. The walking listener instantly invites us to respond to Karl Mannheim's already ancient request : « the most obvious task that we must accomplish is to be able to think at the very base of frames of mobile reference ».

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