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# Nomadic Listening and Onboard Systems: A socio-anthropological Approach

Anthony Pecqueux

Translation : Tresl Murphy

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- 1 In this article,<sup>1</sup> I intend to use a socio-anthropological approach to the systems (digital, for the most part) we currently use to experience music, focusing on listeners and their use of listening devices. The first part will provide the framework of my approach, and the second will put it to the test using an ethnographic study of nomadic listening through portable systems. This approach relies on a pragmatic epistemology of sound, in which sound represents the effects of activities,<sup>2</sup> and as such, events that can be studied. The current models of listening that establish hierarchical and normative differences between hearing/ listening are not suited to this kind of epistemology, which requires, on the contrary, a certain pluralism.

## Technological innovation and social practices

- 2 Before progressively outlining these elements, we will begin with a first example that sums up an everyday occurrence in today's public urban spaces. Four young adults, that display a few outer signs of the underprivileged French *banlieue* (clothing, overall look, movements, techniques, etc.), take over the sound in a metro carriage. They listen to rap turned up as high as possible through a mobile phone on speaker. The low quality of the mp3 file competes with the oversaturated bass to produce a sound that is quite painful to listen to for most of the people in the carriage (even for fans of the music). Fellow passengers look at one another in exasperation, and when the group leaves the carriage at the next station, the passengers talk to one another out loud about them.<sup>3</sup>
- 3 My next example takes us back to the early sixties (1963), and chapter four of Erving Goffman's *Behavior in public places*, dedicated to accessible engagement in public through the level of attention paid. The American sociologist details his precise

conception of situational attention and involvement using a number of concrete examples. They are often sound-related, as when he outlines the distinction between main and side involvement: “humming while working and knitting while listening are examples.”<sup>4</sup> While this distinction is linked to the individual’s capacity of splitting their attention according to whatever the situation is and requires, another distinction, between main and side involvement, is more ‘social’.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it is linked to the individual’s social obligation within a given situation. When outlining the notion of dominating and subordinate involvement, and the cultural and temporal evolution in these rules, Goffman examined North American teenagers who had, at the time [1963], more freedom in terms of their language and informal conduct in public places than previous generations. “At the same time, the vogue of the portable transistor radio has guaranteed a source of absorbing subordinate involvement that can be carried into a multitude of different situations.”<sup>6</sup> To prove his point Goffman includes one of his inimitable footnotes, citing an article from Reuters dated 1961, about the banning of transistor radios by Félix Kir, the mayor of Dijon, after a number of his constituents complained and a trip he made himself to the local swimming pool: “I had to leave”, he said. “I could not bear the cacophony of all the radios, it was like a fairground.”

- 4 These two examples explicitly describe – and to me they are quite effective in doing so, if a little caricatured – the crux of the hybridisation between technological innovation and social practices, the crux of the crossovers that we all cannot help causing; even the crux of the moral panic that can result from these crossovers. Thus, many current uses (mainly by adolescents) of digital music devices – mp3 players and more commonly, mobile phones – without earphones or headphones, with the speakers on; in short, non-individual or private (with headphones) use, but public, heard by all, are not totally new in public urban spaces.
- 5 Between the 1970s and the 1990s, we had battery-operated boomboxes or ghetto-blasters, oversized tape and radio players (that later played CDs also) with huge side speakers, that often came with chrome hardware and were carried on shoulders by young people as they wandered around the city.<sup>7</sup> In New York, they rapidly became popular among young people who were, at the same time, discovering rap, dance music and hip-hop culture in general (punk culture also came into play). The ghetto-blasters became a symbol of this culture. The double whammy of portability and powerful sound meant it allowed kids to listen to music and to dance wherever and whenever they wanted to, and, it must be said, to ‘scare passers-by’ with decibel levels and sounds they did not ask for, adding a subversive aspect.
- 6 Earlier, in the fifties, it was often felt that radio listening had been privatised with the technological progress in transistor radios, and was no longer a group activity centred around the only radio in the home, in communal rooms like the kitchen or living room. In fact, transistor radios not only paved the way for the privatisation of radio listening, they also facilitated its ‘externalisation’, its potential to develop in public places, with all of the urban disturbance that this entailed, at the public pool and elsewhere. We must consider then, that music’s portability and potential publicization are connected, but their usage is not necessarily absolute or dictated in advance.

## The portability, individualisation and publicization of music listening

- 7 It is important, in terms of the – yet to be written – history of sound and/ or musical provocation in public transport and in public places in general, to link the use of transistor radios in the fifties and sixties, of ghetto-blasters in the seventies to the nineties and the current use of digital music players with speakers (mp3 players, mobile phones...).
- 8 Indeed, these different innovations must be placed in the context of modern culture's long line of technological attempts to counteract the unrecoverable nature of sound. A sound cannot be touched, as soon as it is made it is gone. From the invention of the phonograph in 1877, to the current digital format through which music increasingly tends to be experienced, the miniaturization of sound is ongoing. Throughout cultural history, these miniaturizations can be seen as so many 'ruptures', or more precisely auricular ploys to 're-present' sound or music without the need to carry it around: we no longer need to have an orchestra in our living room to be able to listen to it.<sup>8</sup> From the transistor onward, three factors came into play: music became portable everywhere; listening became individualized (in one's room, with earphones, etc.); but also its potential for publicization increased (through sharing earphones with a friend but especially on speaker). These three factors shape the current dynamic through which technologies that privatize music listening are 're-located'<sup>9</sup> in public places. Any study should therefore include an analysis of all of the aspects of these plural and often overlapping dynamics; in particular, if we look at the example of two practices that appear to be similar and the contrast in perception (and levels of social disapproval) they lead to, which are firstly, listening to music in public as (for example) rap fans on public transport, and secondly, other 'young people' listening to music in other public places, like a public park or garden. The disapproval of the former is almost unanimous; there is a lot more leeway for the latter and even a certain amount of approval for what could be seen as a positive sign of young people socializing. This turnaround in terms of perception and evaluation can be explained in a number of ways: in a public park, sound is not enclosed like it is in a metro carriage, it is diluted in space and volume in the open air. The people present, the other park users, are not obliged to stay as close as they are in public transport. Finally, beyond the issue of potentially different types of music, the social background (even ethnic background) of those involved is not the same; to caricaturize the situation, there is a difference between 'students' and 'underprivileged kids from the projects'.<sup>10</sup>
- 9 Sound, as such, comes with a number of important dimensions in society as a whole; the example above shows how social, situational and spatial data can interact in a decisive way in the emergence of sound-related disruption, even the way our senses react. It also shows how the way these sounds are qualified fluctuates: noise by some, music for others, or the sign of sociability to be heard.<sup>11</sup>

## Auditive adjustments in situ

- 10 In the next part of this article, I will build on the groundwork I just laid, and put it to the test with an ethnographic study that takes a pluralist approach to music listening.

The study in question examines ‘walking listeners’, by which I mean users of miniaturized, portable music devices, ordinary urban-dwellers who listen to music through earphones or pods as they move around. I attempt to trace their musical mobility using an ecological approach to their experiences,<sup>12</sup> which means describing the interactions between, on the one hand, the walking listeners, and on the other, the places (in this case urban) that they pass through while listening. I carry out a participatory observation of their daily journeys, such as between home and work, tailing them ethnographically and cut it with interviews on the experiment and my own notes – that I refer to as the (post-) commented journey method.

- 11 In the light of previous discussions, what interests me here is to account for the way agents and environments structure and shape one another. Rather than postulating competition between them (for example between the music in earphones and the sounds of the city), I reject the idea of agents isolated within a private musical bubble that is protected from the surrounding sounds of the city. Indeed, this is the main purpose of the pluralistic model of listening I use in the interests of avoiding one-sided analyses (that walking listeners listen to either ‘this’ or ‘that’, in a mutually exclusive manner), and to also get away from the recurring image of a sound bubble. This pluralistic model, as William James might say, should show the ‘ands’ (principles of accumulation and addition) and not the ‘ors’ (principles of exclusion): it should show the paths of coexistence, of cohabitation between elements of sound. As we apply the ecological perspective as well as the listening model in tandem with an in-depth ethnographic study, we can highlight two main issues for the journeys of the walking listeners: optimum comfort in music listening; but also the success of their journey around the city, which means that they can hear city sounds that are relevant to their movements over the music (for example: messages over the loudspeakers in public transport or traffic noises that might alert them to danger). It means, yet again, that for walking listeners, the necessary relations between music listening and listening to surrounding sounds cannot be reduced to the univocal and equivocal hypothesis of the private bubble, but instead involves a measure of hybridization, of fundamental crossovers.
- 12 Therefore, we must highlight some of the procedures and methods used by walking listeners to adjust themselves to the sound levels of both their own music and the urban surroundings they are in. To begin with, I described the various ways they react to routine outbursts of sound during the course of their journeys and that particularly grab their attention. These reactions are grouped together under the general description of sensory torqueing, that displays the instability between a number of sensory engagements (toward musical listening and toward urban noise): the ‘ands’ cohabit but can include involvement in different activities. Secondly, I examine the less routine, more complex interactions between walking listeners and the surrounding urban soundscape, in order to underline the finesse with which we manage our hearing in the urban situations in which we find ourselves, mainly through the description of selective operations of urban sounds to hear during musical listening: some are relevant to the journey, others not; in this case, the ‘ands’ cohabit and this cohabitation must be managed, with some elements taking precedence and others taking a back seat.

- 13 I then cover a collection of social practices and auditive adjustments made by walking listeners during their urban journeys, from the routine response to a sound stimulus, to the operations of auditive selection of the sounds to be heard.

## Adjusting to outbursts of sound

- 14 We can account for the various reactions to sound distractions by the glance<sup>13</sup> in direction of where the noise is supposedly coming from: for example, in the direction of a car that has just blown its horn while the walking listener is about to cross the road. These glances and reactions depict an instability between a number of sensory engagements: between listening to music and paying attention to one's surroundings but also, at times, between, on the one hand attention to the environment, and on the other, listening to music as well as reading a newspaper, and handling a mobile phone (playing games, writing texts, checking a diary...). The common trait of instability between a number of sensory engagements allows us to group these various reactions to noises under the general descriptive structure of sensory torque, borrowed from Emanuel A. Schegloff's term 'body torque'.<sup>14</sup> For him, a body torque occurs when, during a conversation with someone you are facing with your body, an event occurs that causes you to turn slightly in another direction, then you come back to your original position or change positions relative to what the event leads you to do. Here, the absence of trust in the reliability of peripheral hearing due to music listening results in the surrounding sounds being all the more obvious, in as much as peripheral hearing is not in a position to ideally prepare the walking listeners by providing them with clues that signalled their occurrence in one way or another. This means that, if they erupt in the ears of walking listeners to such an extent, then the sounds of the city create a sensory, perceptive response that takes these 'noises' into account. These different glances also share the fact that they cause a reorganization of the individual's attention and activities, due to a tangible grounding in the shared world of the public space at the sound of a noise outburst in the environment. The reorganization of activities lasts but a moment in general, as long as the glance itself: once the normality of the surroundings has been checked and categorized, the activities of listening to music and reading (or other activities, reading being one example) can continue. The reorganization can last longer, in particular if the noise heard leads to a change in the journey; this said, even if this is the case, the sharing out of the individual's attention between activities tends to progressively go back to exactly what it was before the noise outburst and sensory orientation occurred. If we use the vocabulary we have been using up until now: a number of sensory engagements cohabit, with a measure of instability relative to the one that is dominant or subordinate.

## Selecting relevant sounds

- 15 Speaking of the auditive operations of selection leads us to slightly modify one of Georg Simmel's sociological statements (and that of other thinkers also), according to which the ear is "condemned to take everything that comes into its vicinity"<sup>15</sup>, unlike the eye that comes with an eyelid. In the case of walking listeners, the selection comes from the fact that while they potentially define all urban sounds as noise, which means sounds that negatively affect their music listening, nevertheless, they still find some of these

noises relevant. This is notably, and typically true of collective announcements over the loudspeakers in public transport. The resulting selection process occurs in two stages: the first is the potential relevance of the announcement among all the other urban noises; and the second is the categorization of the relevance or not of the current announcement (some are routine announcements, some are aimed at other passengers, etc.). These selective auditory operations are aimed at establishing the equivalent of what psychologists refer to as the ‘cocktail party effect’<sup>16</sup> through ethnographic material: in other words, that in a noisy environment, and when our hearing attention is focused on one source, we remain capable of treating other sources and reacting to them, at least when it comes to important information like a warning. We can thus come back to the hypothesis presented at the start of this part, of a double auditory issue for listeners during their urban journeys. This means, on the one hand, auditive (and relative) isolation from the urban sound surroundings for optimum comfort in music listening; and on the other hand, a permeability to certain urban sounds seen to be potentially relevant to the journey in progress.

- 16 In order to carry out operations of auditive selection well, one must use all of the practical part of the potentially changing structure of perceptive attention, between focused and peripheral grasp.<sup>17</sup> Ideally, if listening to music is truly their main engagement (it can also be subordinate to reading a novel at the same time), the listening walkers focus on listening to music, while remaining permeable, at least peripherally, to the surrounding urban soundscape. An outburst of sound provokes a disturbance in this hierarchical structure of varied length: focus on surroundings/ shift of music to background. To operate this reversal, the walking listeners rely, for the most part, on auditive adjustments. These include changing the volume on their device or pressing pause. Adjusting earphones reveals itself to be even more crucial, one or both in the ears, just one or both resting on top of the ears.
- 17 In conclusion, these different elements allow us to outline the descriptive structure of the auditive adjustments that walking listeners make in the form of sensory torques, and according to four general characteristics that are most often inter-connected:
1. The volume of the music, and the number of ear pods inserted or close to the ears;
  2. The urban environment, in particular due to the walking listeners’ practical knowledge of both the current or potential sounds that occur in the places they walk through, (i.e. the way stations, platforms, etc., provide information that can be relevant to their journey);
  3. The way they move during the journey: the truly mobile phases, the ones where they are actually walking imply a higher level of attention to the surrounding sounds, in comparison to the relatively immobile phases (not moving inside a mobile vehicle, like in public transport), or the totally immobile phases (in between two modes of transport, like waiting for a train on the platform or waiting for a bus at a bus stop);
  4. Their level of absorption in their activity or activities: in short, their attention availability.
- 18 These are the ways it seems to me to be possible, both on a conceptual and empirical level, for an ecological approach to urban experiences to coexist with the pragmatic epistemology of sound and listening.

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## NOTES

1. It is based on two, quite different, texts (Anthony Pecqueux, “Tempesta sonora o Fuoco di campo sonoro. Do *The Right Thing*, interazione e ascolto musicale (in) pubblico”, *Rivista Studi*



*culturali*, n° 1, 2013, p. 53-70; Anthony Pecqueux, “Les ajustements auditifs des auditeurs-baladeurs. Instabilités sensorielles entre écoute de la musique et de l’espace sonore urbain”, *Ethnographiques.org*, n° 19, 2009. [Online]: <http://www.ethnographiques.org/2009/Pecqueux> [consulted August 22 2019]), the themes of which I brought together for the Journées d’Informatique Musicale (Bayonne, May 13 2019) where I was invited to give a lecture. I am very grateful to Anne Sèdes for her invitation to rework the lecture for publication here.

2. John Dewey, *Art as experience*, London, New York, Perigree trade paperback edition, 2005, p. 245-246: “For sounds are always effects: effects of the clash, the impact and resistance, of the forces of nature. (...) Sound stimulates directly to immediate change because it reports a change.”

3. For the development of an ethnographic example, see: François Debruyne, « Faire et (se) défaire (d’) une expérience publique de l’écoute », *Culture & Musées*, n° 25, 2015, p. 69-93.

4. Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, New York, The Free Press, 1963, p. 43.

5. Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, New York, The Free Press, 1963, p. 44.

6. Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, New York, The Free Press, 1963, p. 49.

7. See the beautiful photo book by Lyle Owerko, *The Boombox Project: The Machines, the Music, and the Urban Underground*, New-York, Abrams Image, 2010.

8. These elements are inspired by Jacques Cheyronnaud’s pioneering work on the subject and my conversations with him. See: Jacques Cheyronnaud, « Rebut de sons. ‘Bruit’ comme terme de critique perceptive », *Ethnographiques.org*, n° 19, 2009. [Online] <http://www.ethnographiques.org/2009/Cheyronnaud> [consulted July 16 2019].

9. Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, Stanford University Press, 1990.

10. It is a question of highlighting relatively typical situations, and to observe effective situations in order to grasp to what extent the latter inevitably hybrid the former; see this recent anecdote: Pauline Moullot, “Est-il vraiment interdit de jouer de la guitare au jardin du Luxembourg?”, *Libération*, April 29 2019.

For cases of musical experiments that also rely on the places where they occur, and at times public urban spaces that are taken over: Olivier Roueff, “L’expérimentation musicienne à l’épreuve de ses réalisations. Tensions structurales et formations de compromis”, in Anthony Pecqueux and Olivier Roueff (dir.), *Ecologie sociale de l’oreille. Enquêtes sur l’expérience musicale*, Paris, Éditions de l’EHESS, 2009, p. 236-280.

11. Jean-François Augoyard, “Une sociabilité à entendre”, *Espaces et sociétés*, n° 115, 2004, p. 25-42.

12. Anthony Pecqueux, “Pour une approche écologique des expériences urbaines”, *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, n° 22, 2012, p. 27-41. [Online] <http://journals.openedition.org/traces/5418> [consulted August 23 2019].

13. David Sudnow, “Temporal parameters of interpersonal observation” (1972), in Jean-Paul Thibaud (dir.), *Regards en action. Ethnométhodologie des espaces publics*, Bernin, À la croisée, 2002, p. 57-81.

14. Emanuel A. Schegloff, “Body Torque”, *Social Research*, vol. 65, n° 3, 1998, p. 535-596.

15. Georg Simmel, *Simmel on Culture, Selected Writings*, Sage Publications, London, 1997, p. 115; For Simmel it is a sort of punishment for it being an “egoistic organ pure and simple”, it only takes – while the “eye cannot take without simultaneously giving”.

16. Colin Cherry, “Some experiments on recognition of speech, with one and with two ears”, *Journal of the Acoustic Society of America*, n° 25, 1953, p. 975-979.

17. Michaël Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article takes a socio-anthropological approach to a range of essentially digital systems through which we currently experience music, concentrating on the listener and their use of listening devices (from the transistor radio and ghetto-blaster followed by the Walkman to mp3 players and telephones). In particular, it uses an ethnographic study on walking listeners, to combine an ecological approach to urban experiences and a pluralist listening model, based on a pragmatic epistemology of sound.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Listening, walking listeners, pluralism, pragmatism, ecological approach

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After a thesis on the moral and even political significance of French rap, his current research generally focuses on developing an ethnography of perception, from an ecological approach, sensitive to urban experiences. He is co-editor in chief of *Tracés*.

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In 2007, he published *Voix du rap* (L’Harmattan) and *Le Rap* in 2009 (Le Cavalier bleu), and in 2012 directed “Les bruits de la ville” (*Communications* n° 90). With Olivier Roueff, he co-directed in 2009 *Écologie sociale de l’oreille* (EHESS éditions) and in 2015 « Écouter de la musique ensemble » (*Culture et Musées* n° 25).