Locative Media of Dispossession: The Secret Theatre Revisited
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This presentation looks at Shuhei Hosokawa’s influential essay, ‘The Walkman Effect’ (1984, originally written in 1981) not so long after the arrival of the Sony Walkman, in which he describes the influence of the Walkman (or as Michael Bull later proposes, the ‘personal stereo’) on the relationship between the individual, ‘self-enclosed’ listener and urban space. Most notably, in its pragmatic use the Walkman effect turns the device into a secret theatre and its user becomes a secret listener. I intent to take Hosokawa’s secret theatre notion further from a similar point of view:

“The walkman effect must be measured in terms of this practical mode of operation. Even when one switches off, or leaves it behind, theatrical effects are still active. The show must go on till the death of the gadget-object” (179).

If we can take this ‘death’ literally, as the pragmatic functions of the Walkman have been largely overtaken by digital audio media, such as the iPod, we can ask ourselves: how did the show go on, in its ‘locative’ afterlife? More narrowly, I wish to focus on these media for aesthetic practices, such as audio walks, and their social implications, so I ask myself the question: Which of Hosakawa’s statements need revision?

With the rise of a global iPod culture in public, urban spaces, the changing effects of these secret theatres for the ears to our listening modes, spatial relations and ultimately, to ourselves, have been explored by many artists, among which Janet Cardiff has been perhaps the most influential since the end of the 1990s. As a departure point, I take one of her more recent works, Alter Bahnhof Video Walk (presented at Documenta 13 in Kassel), to start exploring the ‘secret theatre’ concept for its relevance today.

The Secret Theatre Revisited

> Show example: Cardiff and Miller’s Alter Bahnhof Video Walk

The setting for this piece is Kassel’s main train station and as you can see, an iPod was given which displayed a visual recording of the itinerary of the sound walk mixed with Cardiff’s voice as off-screen narrator. The participant is asked to hold the iPod at all times in such a way to match the given perspective, while the voice guides him the way. By doing so, the iPod turns into an unsophisticated version of locative media. The participant is here the locative agent on command by the artist, turning the logic of ‘geo-annotation’ in human hands to reveal the exact location of these secret places. The participant becomes a detective following the traces of the hidden mastermind-editor-omniscient narrator personified by Cardiff’s disembodied voice.
In my research, I consider ‘acousmatization’ (to denote sound one hears without seeing its source body or originating cause, from Greek akousma meaning auditive perception, or literally ‘what is heard’) as essential to understand the impact of sound on listening, since every sound or voice is in a way always acousmatic. Yet, since the beginning of phonographic history, the recording technology has made us only more aware about sound’s ‘eerie’ powers on our cognition and hunger for meaning making. Mobile audio technology has made us more familiar with continuously disembodied sounds while inciting us to re-embody them through our headphones and walk acts; like Hosokawa describes:

“Whether it is the walkman that charges the body, or, inversely, the body that charges the walkman, it is difficult to say. The walkman works not as a prolongation of the body (as with other instruments of musica mobilis) but as a built-in part or, because of its intimacy, as an intrusion-like prosthesis (see Traverses 1979). The walkman holder plays the music and listens to the sound come from his own body (see Barthes 1982, p. 265)” (Hosokawa 1984: 176).

Moreover, Hosokawa speaks of a deterritorialized listening as part of the Walkman effect, against R. Murray’s territorialized listening in his attempts to make urban space familiar as a ‘space of security’ (Barthes 1982):

“It intends that every sort of familiar soundscape is transformed by that singular acoustic experience coordinated by the user's own ongoing pedestrian act, which induces an autonomous 'head space' between his Self and his surroundings in order to distance itself from - not familiarise itself with - both of them. The result is a mobility of the Self. Thus the walkman crosses every predetermined line of the acoustic designers. It enables us to move towards an autonomous pluralistically structured awareness of reality, but not towards a self-enclosed refuge or into narcissistic regression” (Hosokawa 1984: 175).

Cardiff touches the crux of Hosokawa’s strong belief and deconstruction of the Walkman user’s autonomy, the ‘autonomy-of-the-walking-self’ as urban strategy to contextualise the ever-becoming-complex reality in the 1980s while decontextualizing the city’s given coherence through individual, mobile sound experiences. Hosokawa seemed to respond to the negative outlook on the modern subject, who fails to make coherence. Adorno (2002) refers to the failure in the listener to read music as a meaningful whole. Rather, the modern listener abides by ‘atomistic’ listening. Many scholars after Hosokawa like Michael Bull have described the ‘personal stereo’ as a cinematic experience added like sunglasses to our daily lives and environments, which make them highly personal yet social in terms of establishing new coherence.
Cardiff places now besides the enclosing stereo headphones, a screen between self and surroundings – a screen that has the aura of a memory as much as a vision that sees more. Not only images give perspective on the physical space, also sounds create listening points to the otherwise unseen, offering us this “autonomous pluralistically structured awareness of reality” (Hosokawa). So far, her piece is in line with Hosokawa’s statements.

Through the initial statement “It is very intimate to watch people”, the iPod reveals a secret theatre, a promise to a deeper reality that only the bearer of the iPod has access to – it becomes a tool for a secretly shared reality between sounds/voice and self, just as Hosokawa envisaged about the Walkman. Yet this new audio-visually multi-layered and intimate space has also something perverse: watching and overhearing others as they move otherwise unnoticed but who now become part of the participant’s secret theatre discloses a deeper pathology that lies embedded in our attraction of these new, locative devices: a desire to overhear, oversee and gain secret information to which others have no access, while at the same time being subjected to the technology, as Cardiff remarks, “like those prisoners stuck in Plato’s cave”.

Subjectification: Ecouterism and the Art of Overhearing

As a next step, I will be focusing on two other works from around the same time as Cardiff’s piece: Dries Verhoeven’s Niemandsland (2012) and Judith Hofland’s Like Me (2013), which particularly highlight individual experiences of the self in relation to a new sense of sociability that materializes into real-time urban encounters with places and people. Like Cardiff’s piece, these ‘audio theatre’ pieces turn the privacy of the highly-individual experience of the secret theatre into a feeling of submission (a feeling of being subjected) to a piece of technology and a disembodied voice. Yet both focus on different experiences of human contact through breaking the distance.

> Show example: Dries Verhoeven’s Niemandsland (2012)

Dries Verhoeven shows us how distance can energize a socially engaged experience in a common yet secretly shared space. In Niemandsland, each participant is paired like in a speed date or blind date to a stranger, a foreigner, someone with a migration background. They meet each other, while wearing headphones and an iPod, in a station (it was done in Utrecht and Amsterdam Sloterdijk). Their random encounter, invisible to passers-by, turns into a pathway through a multicultural neighbourhood as much as a highly personal testimony in the lives of the other. The iPod is used here to show a slice of reality that goes otherwise unnoticed. Responses by participants range from a feeling of recognition to powerlessness against the social injustices they hear about. Dispossession here means literally the removal and exclusion from urban space as we know or assume to know it.
This audio walk or ‘theatre’ turns the sense of being ‘in charge’ as iPod user over one’s environment around and plays on a voyeurism in the mobile listening act, enhanced by the secrecy of the headphones which make one feel safe to look shamelessly at others who become part of one’s own secret theatre. This is what Michael Bull calls ‘auditized looking’, namely the ability of those listening to a personal stereo to make or escape eye contact with others in ways they would not otherwise.

Elisabeth Weis refers to this privileged listener as the écouteur (the eavesdropper, from French écouter, listening) as equivalent to the voyeur. Hence, she coins écouterism to describe the pleasure in aural stimulation as equivalent to voyeurism. To her, this phenomenon is central to the cinematic experience. Since mobile personal stereo devices such as Walkman and iPod have been compared to a cinema of the mind, I suggest to extend Weis’ notion – and thereby Hosokawa’s analysis – to the secret listening situation. She states:

“In every case the eavesdropper acquires some form of knowledge… a self-knowledge that the listener would not otherwise have recognized” (Weis n.p.).

She further refers to the so-called “primal scene” when Freud describes the impact of the child overhearing his/her parents engaging in sexual intercourse. She adds “It is often not important what words are overheard; rather, that knowledge is often of something momentous, terrible (anxiety producing), erotic, and secret – carnal knowledge” (Weis). It is as such that the iPod in Niemandsland produces very intimate, embodied experiences, which are playful, like a dance in urban space, and at the same time ‘terrible’ when overhearing someone’s life story and watching him/her from behind.

The distance is kept, even the voice is admitted to be one of an actor, which functions like a mask or a wall, and enhances the voyeurism, until the invisible curtain is dropped: the other person turns around and looks straight at you of which there is no escape. This moment reminds me of the description in a passage of Being and Nothingness, where Sartre recounts how a man peeps through a keyhole, which completely absorbs him in his investigating gaze towards what is unfolding behind the door. Suddenly, the man hears footsteps in the hall behind him. The resounding though invisible footsteps are threatening to the voyeur’s gaze, as Dennis Hollier (2004) comments:

“The gaze of the other, as Lacan praised Sartre for emphasizing, has entered the voyeur’s field of non-vision: it is an (offscreen) acoustic gaze, one experienced not visually, but acoustically, through the surprise of hearing another presence, of feeling him there acoustically, through one’s ears.” (164)
Sound can arrest your presence, pin you to a location, when it breaks through this fourth wall of secret listening. In the case of *Niemandsland*, it is the voyeuristic gaze turned round, which shocks the secret listener. When noticed, this precisely makes up the thrill of the secrecy of the Walkman effect.

**Breaking the Fifth Wall: Auditory Gaze or Navel-Gazing?**

What Dennis Hollier calls the lure and the shock of the auditory gaze as opposed to Bull’s auditized looking is primal to the way we sense ourselves as listening subjects, or as Steven Connor calls it: the modern auditory ‘I’ or self as way of embodiment and subjectivity in relation to the sounding world. Connor refers to Don Ihde:

> “‘My “self’,” declares Don Ihde, the most enthusiastic of audiophile philosophers, ‘is a correlate of the World, and its way of being-in that World is a way filled with voice and language. Moreover, this being in the midst of Word [sic!] is such that it permeates the most hidden recesses of my self.’” (Ihde qtd. in Connor 1997: 219).

Through the mediation of the headphones and technology, audio walks can give exactly this awareness of the auditory self, between the inside and outside world, full of sound and voice. Judith Hofland’s piece, *Like Me* (2013) takes this *being in the midst of World/Word* further by relating it to the voices we imagine when reading words in social media.

> Look at example: Judith Hofland’s *Like Me* (2013)

This interactive audio tour – done for Festival aan het IJ in Amsterdam around the Central station – also makes use of the iPod – in this case, an iPod Touch – which makes it possible to find and meet other spectators equipped with the same equipment. *Like Me* – in the double sense of ‘liking’ – makes us think how virtual life and the constant data stream of social media permeate our lives, changing our real encounters and interactions with people.

Here too the use of the iPod plays with the tension between surrender and control, which Hosokawa referred to as part of his autonomy concept. French sociologist Antoine Hennion referred to it as the iPod listener’s own construction of his passivity through his own control:

> “So instead of popular music pacifying the listener, as Adorno describes it, the listener actively chooses to surrender to the music and create a personal and emotional experience. As such the listener is very much in control throughout the listening. Even when he himself might describe it as ‘losing himself in the music’ the experience will often be staged and designed.” (Gomart & Hennion: *Music Lovers*, qtd. in Juslin & Sloboda, *Music and Emotion*; in Leong & Gram n.p.)
In Judith Hofland’s piece, the participant wilfully surrenders to a disembodied voice, called ‘Sascha’ who feeds him with options, possible perspectives and philosophical thoughts on his pathway through the station, while becoming a member of the secret voice’s social network, activating him. While walking, the participants answer questions about themselves on the touch screen and make connection with invisible, online friends, whose presence is marked through messages. Then, Sascha introduces him to one other person in the network through a picture one chooses from three options, taken from the web. They are both asked to give their first impression on the basis of the photo. Then suddenly, they meet physically.

Whereas Niemandsland broke with the proverbial fourth wall in making the audience aware of its own perception reaching through the invisible canvas that separates life from theatre, Like Me goes one step further by breaking the fifth wall, namely the metaphorical barrier in our interaction with the media and ourselves or “that semi-porous membrane that stands between individual audience members during a shared experience” (Davenport 2000 et al.). Through these pieces, we make the journey from an inwardly-drawn flâneur or secretive écouteur, dwelling in the colours or moods of their environments as a shared secret between them and the artist, to a socially charged environment, where the participant is given social agency and becomes an active ‘spect-actor’ (Boal) or perhaps ‘aud-actor’ (my term). In the end, the final question is being asked, ‘who do we prefer: the virtual Sascha or the real person?’

The digital afterlife of the Walkman in the iPod begs the question: do we want still the anonymity, the privilege and appeal of the secrecy? According to Hosokawa a comparable question had already become obsolete by the time of his article on the “Walkman Effect” in 1984, in which he reacts against all cultural pessimism that the Walkman would induce asocial behaviour, rather:

“Autonomy is not always synonymous with isolation, individualisation, separation from reality; rather, in apparent paradox, it is indispensable for the process of self-unification. Walkman users are not necessarily detached ('alienated' to use a value-laden term) from the environment, closing their ears, but are unified in the autonomous and singular moment - neither as persons nor as individuals - with the real.” (Hosokawa 1984: 170)

Let me repeat with Hosokawa: “It enables us to move towards an autonomous pluralistically structured awareness of reality, but not towards a self-enclosed refuge or into narcissistic regression” (175). And yet, today artists pose again the question with regard to social media and the way we make use of them through our iPhones and iPods: aren’t we all engaged in narcissistic navel-gazing under the pretext of being social?
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Judith Hofland’s interactive piece makes us see that these questions about how we relate to each other through social networks are intrinsically connected with how we occupy public space, how we ‘sound out’ our existence and welcome others in our private spaces. And this is precisely what locative media are about, according to Drew Hemment (2005):

“Locative Media foregrounds place and context within social and creative interventions, and explores ways in which the devices people carry, the fabric of the urban environment and even the contours of the Earth may become a digital canvas.”

(2)

Hosokawa’s deconstructive but positive stance towards the Walkman can give us some hope on how this digital canvas can be used as a creative strategy to re-socialize and reconnect with a new construction of collectivity and sociability. As locative media are becoming part of our everyday lives and the controversies of our social existence, Hofland gives us things to think about. But Hosokawa showed us, once more, how intimate relational experiences through the iPod can open our ears and eyes to our socially complex reality, rather than to shut them off.

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