
PERSONAL COCKPITS AND SOUND CAPSULES THE ADVENT OF HEADPHONES' CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

THE headphones' culture is an interesting phenomenon. It has its own specific background. One cannot deny its scope and range because it is enough for us to walk in the streets and see how many people use in-ear earphones, on-ear earphones and over the ear headphones. These devices and headsets have a history of their own. Today they make sense for us since we got used to the concept of "portable music" and we enjoy staying sharp in our own "audio environments". Much can be said about the personal cockpits of our jobs and the sound capsules we are fond of using while on commuting and on-the-go. In this text we will sketch its theoretical framework, its history and its appearance in some key works of fiction.

1 HISTORY, BRANDS AND FICTION

When it comes to headphones there are several types of headphones, as mentioned previously, but we will address them as commonly as possible, so we chose the term "headphones". It is undeniable that headphones as a culture are an advent of what Bull points out as "street aesthetics" (2005,

348). We look around and we see in cities, and also outside the cities, in the suburbs, in people walking to their jobs, jogging, shopping, always wearing their headphones. However, the headphones are not something entirely new. Thompson, for instance, argues that "In the 1950s, John C. Koss invented a set of stereo headphones 'designed explicitly for personal music consumption'" (2012, para.6). This we shall say, it is the official kickstart of the headphones' model as we know it today, the two speakers with an arm, cushions and plugged on a portable media device, which these days became the smartphone with up to 1 terabyte and a half on storage space. According to Thompson, Koss is the founder of the model that now is everywhere, with people using these devices on the street, from hip-hoppers to millennials. The headphones are a fashion symbol and also a statement of being fond of a certain brand of audio gear. They are a status symbol and display a lifestyle.

In another stage of the history of the headphones we have the United States Navy, since that for communication purposes they came up with a model of a headset that had both headphones and a microphone. This too is part of the history of the headphones culture. There is also a military background up to it. We are told by Thompson that "Baldwin's invention for the Navy has become a social accessory with an explicit message: I am here, but I am separate. In a wreck of people and activity, two plastic pieces connected by a wire create an aura of privacy" (2012, para.10). And this is the tipping point for the headphones' culture because it has triggered the personal cockpits its users are fond of and also the notion that the audio

environment could at once be personal, free of exterior noise, sharpening focus to whatever tasks we have at hand. We want to be in the real world, but with our own soundtrack. That is what the prehistory of the headphones kicks off, the beginning of the sound capsule, us being able to be cocooned with our portable sound machines. In his enlightening way, Marsden provides us a bit more context regarding the advent of the headphones' culture:

“The history of headphones, however, has had little to do with style; it's more a story of problem solving. Thomas Edison created a primitive version in order to listen to his new creation, the phonograph in the 1870s. The 1881 International Exposition of Electricity in Paris showcased a new service called the Théâtrophone, which piped operatic performances into wealthy people's homes over telephone lines. It eventually launched in Lisbon in 1885 (at the behest of King Luis), and subscribers to the service were provided with one of the very first sets of headphones” (2015, para.1).

Surprisingly, the headphones became much more than a Théâtrophone, because then it relied on physical connection. Today most headphones are Bluetooth-enabled, meaning they are totally wireless, allowing freedom of movements, and also these new headphones can last for days on a charge thanks to an improved battery life. “How did we get here?” is an interesting question. First there was the birth of the World Wide Web in the 1990s and so the MP3 music file format was the format of choice to share and download music. People began to listen to MP3. When in 2001 Jonathan Ive at Apple designs the iPod it became a monster hit. The iPod was basically a hard drive and a pair of white-branded headphones plugged in. The music player reproduced MP3 and it meant a bigger change. People were translating their Compact Discs to the iPod by resorting to a computer with iTunes installed as a mediator. People were also allowed to purchase records on the iTunes store in a Mac computer. But before the iPod there was a major agent that introduced the hardware format. In 1979 Sony releases the Walkman, a portable music player with a pair of headphones. Today we have more futuristic gear like the Google Glasses for Augmented Reality, but for example Apple AirPods seem very futuristic for the pair of Bluetooth-enabled earphones that they are. Since 2017 the AirPods have become trendy and now they are a fashion statement concerning digital gear.

In the meantime, a lot has happened that enforces the usage of the new age of wireless headpho-

nes. The music industry moved totally into the streaming territory, so people are streaming more music than they are purchasing CDs. It all began with the establishment of Spotify, the music streaming service back in 2008. Then came Tidal, Pandora and Apple Music in 2016. Beats by Dr.Dre, a headphone manufacturer marketed at pop culture and street culture youth was sold to Apple for \$3bn in May 2014. Also, brands such as Sennheiser, Bang & Olufsen, JBL, Bose, not to mention Sony, AKG and Samsung, all addressed the wireless speakers, the smart speakers and the wireless headphones market. Though, in fiction these devices already had appeared. Cyberpunk science fiction envisioned societies plugged in with devices for the ears and the eyes as well.

In François Truffaut's 60s version of *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury and Truffaut envisioned a world in which small earbuds were used for talking and listening to music. This was a precursor image of Apple AirPods, the iconic White Bluetooth-enabled earphones. In *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995) the protagonist uses EyePhones for Virtual Reality, so he calls them phones for the eyes. William Gibson in *Idoru* also portrays a similar scenario when a girl is connecting to VR. It was called “Thomson Eyeware”. Especially in cyberpunk fiction we see characters either watching videoclips or in the streets, with their earbuds, closed into their own private sound capsules, an 80s dream that came to be real. So we should best comprehend the theory behind these sound capsules and personal cockpits that fascinates users of audio gear and trendsetters.

2 THEORY

Sherry Turkle speaks about “cockpit behaviour” (2011) in her books, addressing the way teenagers use social media and their digital media to “zone out”. And this is exactly what the crowd from the headphones is doing too, they are zoning out. They do not want to be where they are, so music via headphones takes where they are into the most.

In 1971, George Steiner in the Book *In Bluebeard's Castle. Some Notes Towards The Redefinition of Culture*, the author is one of the first to speak of the “sound capsule” concept. Again he was referring to the youth using headphones. Back in the 60s, McLuhan spoke of “acoustic space” (1994), which for him were spaces that, unlike the visual space, could penetrate each other, overlay and provide what Elias (1999) calls “soundscapes”, the landscapes of sound. Erik Davis too

addresses the issue of the acoustic space and explores its polyrhythmic potential.

In 2010 Gibson allures to the fact of how the Walkman changed our cities. In Petrusich view, there is a lot to say about the advent of headphones' culture: "Is the ubiquity of headphones just another emblem of catastrophic social decline, edging us even deeper into narcissism and unsociability?" (2016, para.1). If we may answer, then it is "yes", we are less social while the headphones are on, but we are also more focused, free of noise. In her view, the outside world was a place we shared. Everybody was in the same auditory environment. And now there is a fragmentation. Each person is zoned-out in his own music world, what Petrusich calls "our own bubbles of self-programmed sound" (2016, para.1). Things get more serious as, according to a

"A 2014 survey by the "music lifestyle brand" Sol Republic found that fifty-three per cent of millennials—defined, for the survey's purposes, as adults between eighteen and thirty-four years old—owned three or more pairs, and wore headphones for nearly four hours every day" (Petrusich, 2016, para.2).

What is at stake here is that we are wearing our headphones to avoid interaction, the same thing we do with our social media on smartphones. Then there is the issue that headphones now are a fashion accessory. One cannot forget that the advent of headphones' culture means that the legacy of the headphones is that they are a symbol of the self-focused individual. Headphones mark the era of the inwardly focused subject. Each user stands in his own audio environment (Petrusich, 2016, para.3). We know for sure that the headphones help us demarcate private space, our own personal cockpit and sound capsule. While one wears headphones one is saying "I am safe and well alone".

There is an apex, for we have reached a tipping point in which headphones are no more than fashion icons that make us more lonely. The problem that Petrusich raises is that "If headphones allow for more introspection, do headphone users favour introspective sounds? If there's been a thematic through line in the past several years of pop music, it's been messages of self-reliance and liberation, songs that place us at the center of our own heroic arcs" (2016, para.5). It seems that the presence of music pushes via headphones into more closed, introspective worlds. All of this began with the Walkman in 1979. Portable audio plus MP3 plus streaming plus Bluetooth created a world per-

fect for disconnecting from the outside space of noise. While wearing headphones and listening to our soundtracks we feel like heroes in our own narrative.

The author Edward T. Hall in the book *The Hidden Dimension* [1986] explores the concept of "personal space" and "proxemics". Hall tells us that people have a "personal space" and they tend to communicate more in tables, while seated face to face, or in diagonal, but communication decays as we usually communicate less with people standing on our side. Sitting at a table with friends is more positive than sitting in the movie theatre or in the bus, because here we are all side by side. What this means is that perhaps headphones makes us more introspective, and also they make feel like we are side by side, but if this was not bad enough, we are standing there, but our "audio mind" is not.

Now, headphones change the game in some ways. They change the way music producers design music for people who wear headphones. Music via headphones sounds better and the new headsets with Active Noise Cancellation improve our connection to the audio environment while they disconnect us from the outside world. They perform as if they are sonic virtual reality sets. Headphones also increment the culture of enjoying soundscapes. They created a new type of audience, a more selfish, focused and detailed-sound based state which we embrace.

Cliff Richard in the videoclip "Wired for Sound" (Marsden, 2015, para.1) speaks about the people in the Walkman world. "Walking about with a head full of music," he sang, "Cassette in my pocket and I'm gonna use it... Stereo! Out on the street you know! Whoah-oh-oh..." (Idem, Ibidem). This vibe that the videoclip promotes is the vibe of the connected world. This is what we do while we are online, except now we even use music to improve de zone-out effect. "Portable music had arrived, and headphones were the medium by which we accessed it." (Idem, Ibidem). But there is more to say about it. For instance, there is this whole "aspirational culture" (Idem, Ibidem). People want to wear the iconic headphones from the top-notch brands. But the same people are helping a new category of digital gear to be fully-embraced: the wearables. As for now, wireless headphones stand on the same level as smart watches, tablets and smartphones. The audio environment is even what connects us better with the brand designers view of the future. This is why Beats was acquired by Apple. Music now is at the core of the brands, it connects us best with

their narratives. “For years, we’ve been told by the industry that wearable technology is the next big thing, and we’ve largely remained resistant. But our attitude towards headphones isn’t in the least suspicious” (Idem, *Ibidem*).

And what are exactly users of headphones doing with them? They listen to music, answer calls, but they are also prone to privatised and mediated sound reproduction. These people create intimate soundscapes they can manage; “aesthetised spaces in which they are increasingly able, and desire, to live” (Bull apud Marsden, 2015, para.1). One thing we do notice is this need for a personal soundtrack in which we are the protagonists. In fact, a customised soundtrack make us perform more efficiently (Idem, *Ibidem*, para.2). Hosokawa spoke of a place that was “out of space and time, a placeless place, where the user is taken to be disconnected from the world around them” (apud Marsden, 2015, para.5). Disconnection seems to be the goal of wearing headphones. The iPod when it came out was related to people’s absent states of mind. Its main feature was to allow people to carry a thousand songs in the pocket. Or an entire “collection” (Idem, *Ibidem*).

Zoning-out, sound bubbles, soundscapes, personal cockpits or sound capsules are just ways to label what is happening in a modern office, an open space kind. All around us people concentrate on the tasks at hand by wearing headphones. “(...) and the vast majority thinks it makes us better at our jobs. In survey after survey, we report with confidence that music makes us happier, better at concentrating, and more productive” (Thompson, 2012, para.2). We cannot argue against this. It makes sense. But we also have to say that the success of headphones lies in fact that “they create, in a public space, an oasis of privacy” (Idem, *Ibidem*, para.3). Thompson also argues that as the United States moved toward more services and a creativity-based economy, people at work need a means to focus at open space offices. That is where the headphones come in. The new jobs; “demand higher levels of concentration, reflection and creativity. This leads to a logistical answer:

“With 70 percent of office workers in cubicles or open work spaces, it’s more important to create one’s own cocoon of sound. That brings us to a psychological answer: There is evidence that music relaxes our muscles, improves our mood, and can even moderately reduce blood pressure, heart rate, and anxiety. What music steals in acute concentration, it returns to us in the form of good vibes” (Thompson, 2012, para.4).

Finally we could say that the advent of headphones’ culture means that we live in a services economy and demand zen modes for more proficient ways of working, and also that we need sometimes to privatize our public space and to customize our audio environment as these are an extension of our minds. We zone into whenever our music takes us. Music is key in this puzzle.

CONCLUSION

Headphones are not a new gear. We have discussed it. But their total acceptance and wide-spread use is new. It is becoming synonymous of living in a city. With our headphones on we are alone in our soundscape with our own thoughts. This is something Thompson says we can choose to share (2012, para.8). “People like to control their environment” (Bull apud Thompson, 2012, para.9). And headphones are just the beginning, since their inception in the Théâtrophone to the US Navy telecommunication headsets, they are just paving the way for some new form of gear. Kerckhove speaks of the “Augmented Mind” (2010). As we wear headphones our mind is augmented, we are distraction free. While we listen to our music playlists we are shielding ourselves from the outside world, it is a kind of real-estate we select to share or not. Please remember that since 2001 “The iPod user struggles to achieve a level of autonomy over time and place through the creation of a privatised auditory bubble” (Bull, 2005, 344). Also, it seems a fact that our sole consumption of a “uniform soundtrack” (Idem, *Ibidem*) happens to be the core of everything. We just want to listen to the sounds that are more connected to us, the ones that tell us something. Some may say that the headphones’ experience is a narcissistic one, other may say that these are “Non-spaces” (Idem, *Ibidem*, 345), much as Marc Augé’s “No-places”, but ultimately it is just a sound consuming culture. Each and every person suffer from the “Walkman Effect”. We are held hostage in our own privatised mediated soundworlds. “The personalized narratives of users’ music choices” (Idem, *Ibidem*, 348). We are just into our own “Auditory mnemonic” (Idem, *Ibidem*, 349). We are flâneurs with soundtracks, a version of the flâneur of modern times.

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