Book Review/Compte rendu

Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod culture and Urban Experience*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 192 pp. $US 42.95 paper (978-0-415-25752-7), $US 100.00 hardcover (978-0-415-25751-0)

In the opening sentence of *Sound Moves*, Michael Bull accurately declares the Apple iPod the first cultural icon of the twenty-first century. This revolutionary technology has inspired many commentaries, but most focus on its marketing success or its impact on the music industry. Bull prefers to address a more important theoretical issue: how does this device transform urban subjectivity and our relations in public? In framing the discussion this way, he makes a strong case for merging urban and media studies.

Bull's urban dwellers are not like Gergen's saturated selves, overwhelmed by the frequency, intensity, and variety of social relationships enabled by modern transportation and communication capabilities (*The Saturated Self*, 1991). They are resourceful creatures, using devices like the iPod to reconfigure and aestheticize their everyday lives. But the urban environment that surrounds them is bleak and alienating. For his characterization of the city and the mediated urban subject, Bull draws from the Frankfurt School, Bauman, Simmel, Sennett, and Augé, committing him to a tragic narrative of declining public life that calls for an "ethnography of solitude." Because "any urban space can become a non-space" devoid of meaning, individuals do not only desire but depend on mobile technologies to simulate intimacy and filter out unwanted sensations. Excerpts from Bull's own survey data describe how iPod users delight in designing the sound bubbles that envelop them as they move through the city, and resent any intrusion of this fragile shred of privacy. iPods, then, do not simply contribute to the impoverishment of the social in a straightforward fashion; it represents a partial strategy for resistance that ultimately feeds what causes the isolation in the first place. Bull refers to this as a dialectic:

> The more we warm up our private spaces of communication the chillier the urban environment becomes, thus furthering the desire and need to communicate with absent others or to commune privately with the products of the culture industry. Media technologies simultaneously isolate and connect. (p. 9)

Bull is clearly in his element when his focus is the use of mobile technologies. The highlight for me was Chapter 6, "Mobilising of the social: Mobile phones and iPods," where he offers an insightful comparison of the two devices. Both are "tethering technologies" that provide continuous connectivity and a resource for generating intimacy anywhere. But each represents a different mode of managing time and space. The mobile phone creates a discontinuous world marked by contingency; incoming calls "puncture" time, interrupting face-to-face interaction and transforming the quality of physical co-presence as the mobile phone user, whether texting or speaking, becomes cognitively oriented somewhere else. Whatever division existed between public and private life disintegrates as workplaces and significant others alike take advantage of around-the-clock availability which essentially amounts to total surveillance. The iPod, in contrast, creates continuity. Auditory control facilitates a seamless passage through the city, either on foot or in the car. Even at work it helps to avert interruptions and focus concentration.

Sound Moves provides us with an intelligent analysis of iPod use, but not, as the subtitle promises, of iPod culture. That sort of study would entail an investigation of the social aspects and meanings of iPod technology. Collective uses are sometimes acknowledged in passing, but they are repeatedly downplayed or given short shrift in order to sustain the argument of the iPod as the ultimate privatizing technology. But as soon as one considers how iPod users acquire the cherished files downloaded onto their devices, they no longer appear so isolated. Instead, we find a vibrant social world of taste communities on and offline. Even college students, who grew up with this technology, continue to rely on friends and "mavens" in their social networks to find new music. With the inventions of "Web 2.0", it has become easier for members of taste communities to share playlists and critical opinions beyond one's personal circle of acquaintances using iTunes itself or Napster's progeny. Through social networking sites like MySpace, iPod users cannot only acquire music files for free; these flattened social worlds provide opportunities to develop what David Beer calls "flickering friendships" with the artists themselves. The culture industry might eventually infiltrate these spaces. In the meantime, they represent important avenues for social interaction and the dissemination of music that is relatively independent, further qualifying the "one-dimensional" thesis of media colonization Bull wants to avoid.

It could be that the social dimension of iPod culture was neglected because of the author's interest in "urban experience", the other phrase in the book's subtitle. This certainly explains the emphasis on commuting, which has become a fact of life in contemporary postindustrial so-

cieties. Public spaces in urban centres are no longer areas where inhabitants congregate, but generic, a-historical "non-spaces" that we must pass through on our way somewhere else. In this context, iPods are indeed a privatizing technology that urban dwellers cling to when travelling solo in order to make these environments more bearable. But the city offers more to its inhabitants than home, work and the commute in between. An important source of its allure and its energy is that it offers an array of destinations, including formal and spontaneous cultural events, which appeal to people of every social background and persuasion. Mobile technologies are not removed and disabled once urban dwellers arrive at these destinations; they are threaded into their experience. Digital devices are now permanent fixtures everywhere, from birthday parties at restaurants to free concerts in the park. They are not only being used to record images and sounds that are texted immediately to absent others; they are also central to rituals of recognition and affection among co-present individuals.

Depending on how you look at it, analysts of technology are either cursed or blessed by its constant evolution. Since the publication of *Sound Moves,* iPods and mobile phones have merged into one device, while video recording and Geographic Positioning Systems have become standard features. Looming on the horizon is "cloud" computing, which will simultaneously de-center our media universe and shorten our tethers to it. But a key to understanding these developments, and their relation to urban experience, is the music emanating from those iconic white ear-buds. If Bull had playlist data in his survey, it was underutilized. In *Swinging the Machine* (2003) Dinerstein suggested that the crucial cultural form for modernity was jazz. Early twentieth century African American music, specifically big-band swing, "made sense of factory noise" while the lindy-hop dance "gave the opportunity to get with the noise." While European machine age art either worshipped or condemned new technologies for the social values they embodied, jazz simply made music from the roar of its machines. The postindustrial city remains a primarily aural experience, but its polyrhythms only confront the subject as unordered and chaotic if one has not developed an ear for it. Perhaps we do not need to choose between worshipping iPods for the sonic shield they provide and condemning them for enabling us to turn away from each other in public space. Instead we might consider them as instruments that allow us to tune in with postmodernity and groove.

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