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1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation
Beerens, Colin Maxwell, "The Music is the Massage" (2012). *Honors Projects*. Paper 136.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects/136

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Colin Maxwell Beerens

The Music is the Massage

Humanity is a social creation. While animals may communicate, and thrive in groups, humans are the only species to have created a written language. Marshall McLuhan posits that the phonetic alphabet is the “technology that has been the means of creating 'civilized man'” (120). Many of our technological advancements are a direct result of our ability and need to communicate. From a starting point of mere orality, humanity has progressed to the point where written or spoken communication can be transmitted nigh instantly across the globe.

Yet, for all of its dependence on communication, humanity has been closing itself off from itself more than ever in the last few decades. We are no longer forced to interact with those directly around us. The need for communication can be fulfilled by anyone, anywhere. Thus, there is no need to put up with anything less than relationships that approach an ideal. Our global community is so specialized that the notion of being unable to find like-minded friends is rapidly approaching extinction. Even if there are few people within the entire world that fit someone's specifications and desires, it is possible to find them. This absolute realization of interaction requirements manifests itself in an unique fashion: headphones dangling from every other ear.

Regardless of the form, ear bud or head encompassing, these headphones send a direct message: this person is closed off from the world. The primary sense is engaged, to the detriment of all others. Depending on the message being transmitted through them, it may override all other stimuli. It short-circuits the multitask intentioned brain, inherently forcing a divided attention, without a corresponding uptick in action. Communication with the individual becomes an uphill battle, requiring either entirely overriding the sounds coming from the headphones, or directing engaging someone's sight or touch. A person pulled out from their isolated world will

often be irritated at this encroachment, unless a more pleasant experience or reward is presented rapidly.

The situation as it stands is not a pleasant one, nor does it announce an auspicious future. In an age of endless bombardment of the senses, our fractured attention can only manage so much. To always be listening to something that is not present, is a form shutting down, of escapism, of neglect of oneself. To be separated is to no longer function in the world of man. While music was once a means of connection with others, it now stands as a barrier to reality. As the amount of hardware necessary for this solitude continues its downward trend, those who engage in it will inhabit a parallel downward spiral: the easier it is to provide a personalized soundtrack to life, the less engaging it will seem to participate with society. At the risk of sounding misanthropic, there seems be little that can combat this desire to withdraw, and even though the needs of communication are technically being fulfilled, it is being done in such a way that turns the organic nature of our civilization into a cybernetic one.

It is worth turning attention first to the nature of sound and hearing. While Hans Jonas' piece, The Nobility of Sight, is clearly focused on this visual, it does so through a phenomenological examination of differences between the senses. For the most part, hearing is the only sense it is impossible to refuse participation in. To touch requires the desire to feel something, the effort to physically engage the object, and the consent of both parties. It is rare when someone is forced to feel something: pain is the closest scenario, and that is a product of the brain, not tactile stimulation. In the same way, taste is not an involuntary action. The remaining senses are more passive, yet are still easy to limit. While one can not 'shut' one's nose, breathing is just as feasible through the mouth. Additionally, more so than any other sense, it is both temporally and physically limited, and unpleasant scents can be avoided. Sight is the

simplest sense to refuse, with a mere closing of the eyes.

Hearing is uniquely unavoidable. Blocking the ears can destroy outside noise, but the brain will compensate, and create sound to fill the sudden void. While it is temporally locked as scent is, distance is not nearly as limiting. Even the most pungent of scents will dissipate rapidly, but the explosion of Krakatoa, believed to be one of the loudest noises in recorded history, was heard over a third of the way around the Earth. On a daily basis, humans have to put up with extraordinarily loud noises that they have no consent in hearing. In light of this, it is understandable why people would seek to limit and control what they listen to. Even if there is the desire to focus on a particular source of sound, it is control of attention, and not of the ears themselves, that enables it. However, this also means that it is largely impossible to participate in hearing multiple sounds simultaneously while making sense of them. If attention is not directed specifically, the noise blends into a buzz of competition. In addition, sound, along with smell, rarely announces itself beforehand. Sight can detect things from a distance, and as mentioned, touch and taste are largely voluntary. Who can know, however, when a car will honk, will a plane will pass overhead, when thunder will strike, when a bird will sing, when the wind may whistle? Even if we are desirous of the sound being produced, we often have no control over the volume at which it is produced.

From a biological standpoint, this makes sense. Sight and sound are the two senses arguably vital for existence. Sight can warn of things from a distance, but it is limited in scope. Hearing exists in all directions at once, and is the last point of defense when all other senses are not engaged. Sound, more so than any other data revealed by sense, is focused on the immediate. It is the product of an action, unlike sight, smell, taste, or touch. As soon as the action is complete, the sound vanishes. The only remnants are echoes and memory. Not only does sound

rely on the present moment, but it also requires constant activity. Sound can not be reduced to an instant; a single beat of a symphony is meaningless. Rather, any quality of the moment is "just a point of passage in the transition from the preceding [moment] to the subsequent one, with each of which the sense-content completely coincides at a given state" (Jonas, 508). Sound, like sight, is a primary mode of communication. Before the advent of language, sight reigned supreme. However, sound quickly took place as the more formal method of communication once it was viable. Text can disseminate widely and quickly, but matters of import were left to speech. Mere words on page are easy to interpret in whatever form the reader wishes. An angry impassioned speech can become irritated complaining. Sound leaves much less room for confusion. Even to this day, when words on a page or screen can be whisked around the world in an instant with ease, leaders of businesses, nations, and all other organizations still take the time to converse on the direct level of speech, because without it, a vital element of communication is irrevocably lost.

Having established sound as immediacy, the present headphone crisis becomes disturbing indeed. What makes it that much more frightful is that these headphones, more so than anything else, are being used to listen to music. This is not to indict music for this trend. If anything, it is in defense of music that one should fight against this headphone ubiquity. The privatization that headphones allows almost entirely works against the history of music. Before the phonograph, and to some degree, the phonautograph, music was not reproducible. It was tied to the immediacy of sound, dying away as soon as the performance was complete. Musical notation helped to replicate and standardize compositions, but there was no accounting for the individual fluctuations or specificity of the artist playing. Feeding a notated script into a player piano could produce a technically accurate Chopin composition, but no one would argue it was as seeing the

artist himself would have been. Thus, the performance of music occupied a somewhat sacred position until the 1870's. From ancient tribal ceremonies to the symphonic orchestrations of Beethoven, each performance created a separation from the rest of the world that nevertheless brought audience and performers together. A moment was created that could not be recreated. It would forever be solely the possession of those present. Even if it was a song shared only between a lover and his beloved, the primary goal was not to isolate them, but to create shared meaning. By engaging in something so ephemeral, and by the nature of sound, something that naturally takes precedence over other stimuli, listens and performers alike were cemented in the immediate. Thoughts would not be on the future, the past, the distant, but on the sounds that invited all to join in the same experience.

When the phonograph was created in 1887 by Edison, it changed the nature of music entirely. While live performances maintained their unique nature, it was no longer the primary method of delivery. The same performance could be listened to endlessly, with almost no change, aside from the natural degradation of the disc it was recorded on. While it took time for the technology to take hold, it eventually became the foremost method of the listening to music. Thus, the mythic nature of music was no longer its trademark. What was once an irreplaceable instant could be common place. This shift was the first step towards regarding music as secondary. It could now be placed in the background without worry. It was not as if some special moment would be missed. However, the immediacy of sound could not be countered entirely. Listening to music was still an inherently public activity. One could only limit the sound if they limited those around them. Even if it was no longer a shared moment between performer and audience, the audience was still suspended in the moment of the listening. Additionally, while phonographs became more and more common, for some time it remained a luxury good. In the

early years, those who could afford them gathered guests when there was a new recording to listen to. In some ways, a party sitting and listening to a performance never heard before still maintained some of music's original sacred element.

The next major musical development was the radio. While the listener sacrificed control over the content, what they gained in ease, cost, and variety was substantial. A one time investment literally offered years of entertainment. In some ways, it even restored the immediacy that the phonograph has surrendered. While the records were the same, it was not possible to listen to one multiple times, short of hoping the record would be played again. It even made live performances available to the masses, albeit in a limited sense. There are obvious differences between attending a concert and listening to one at home, but the sound, the vital portion, was largely the same, and the people sitting at home could enjoy that sacred bond between performer and listener, knowing they were partaking of something that was fixed firmly in the moment. Considering the radio became widespread right around the time of the Great Depression, its communal nature still worked in its advantage. One radio was all that was needed for dozens to share.

This remained more or less the status quo until the seventies. The phonograph companies and radio stations fought for listeners, but the nature of the music was largely unchanged. It was the invention of the cassette tape, and eventually the Walkman that changed the music entirely. Suddenly, control was in the hands of the listener. A performance could be stopped, rewound, or skipped entirely. The moment of the music was destroyed. This is not to deny the inherent emotional power or connection that music could create on its own terms. However, music was no longer something entirely outside of oneself. The Walkman also destroyed the communal nature of music. While headphones had existed prior to the Walkman, they were largely bulky,

uncomfortable, and largely reserved for professional equipment. The advent of the 3.5mm headphone jack in the Walkman made music an absolutely personal experience. Now, sound could be controlled. Transistor radios were small and portable, yet still produced sound to the air. With headphones, one could listen to music anywhere, without disruption, or disrupting others.

Music had lost almost all of its ritual at this point. Only one aspect remained special, and only limitedly so. Cassettes, while portable and personal, remained physically dependent. The sound was recorded onto tape, and that controlled how much could fit onto a single cassette. As with phonographs and turntables, each recording was an individual purchase. For those who could not afford to indulge their musical taste, that meant saving up for specific artists, and borrowing or sharing tapes. In every college dorm where poor students gathered around the record player and listened to a new album, there was still the element of the spiritual, of the shared moment where each person was experiencing the same thing. Then came the MP3 and file sharing.

CD's eventually replaced cassettes, and were far easier to reproduce, but the impact of that technology is a footnote compared to what the digital audio file did to music. Both the cost and the physical aspect disappeared. Music became free and acquirable. The only hindrance to collections became the amount of memory on one's computer. Music was no longer obtained solely because it was desirable, but because it merely existed. Based off of the statistics of a recent smart phone application, roughly 81% of the average music library is rarely listened to (Motel). Websites offer entire discographies of artists, which can number into the dozens of albums. The product of years of work on the behalf of a band can be downloaded in less than a day. MP3 players were the final veritable nail in the coffin of music's sacred aspect. An entire musical library, numbering into the thousands, could be carried in a pocket. Music became

convenient in a way never rivaled.

This is the genesis of our current communication crisis. The same technology responsible for the MP3 created the global village. People originally separated by countless miles could trade banter in seconds. Regardless of the population of a town, friends could be found. The musician who released one album and then disappeared had his own fan website, devoted to dissecting every song. Every interest, no matter how niche, had a community. On the surface, to every teen who felt disconnected from his peers, or to the college grad who had to leave his friends behind, or to the recently transplanted employee in a new city, this was a nothing but an improvement over the state of affairs. However, actions breed reactions, and this online connection facilitates an offline disconnection. After spending time in an echo chamber of like-minded friends, who in their 'right mind' would desire the conversation of strangers, or worse, those we dislike? As William Gass says, “We can be bores as catastrophic as quakes, causing even the earth to yawn. Talk can be cruel and injurious to a degree which is frightening; the right word wrongly used can strike a man down like a club, turn a heart dark forever, freeze the feelings” (211). The outside world turns aggressive, annoying, shallow and pedantic. On the internet, every interaction is by choice. One can lurk on a website, and merely enjoy the back and forth of others. This influx of communication can be more than enough to provide for some people. No person is required to put themselves forward. Even if called out, or vilified for a response, retreat can be instantaneous and eternal. Additionally, while the internet is (for the most part) instant, it is not immediate. Although it is slowly becoming more omnipresent, we are by no means expected to be eternally connected to the web. The internet invites, and encourages participation in every way, but it ultimately is at the user's control.

In many ways, the internet is the antithesis to reality. Real life intrudes upon a person at

every moment. It does not wait at beck and call, but forces itself upon everyone. Chaos is king, and assumptions are always up in the air. An average trip to the grocery store is a maelström of uninvited particularities. Do you look presentable to the public? What is the weather like? Will traffic be difficult? Is the item desired in stock? How much time will it take to get through the lines? Above all else, what will the people be like? Will fellow drivers cut you off? Will children run in front of your cart and harass you? Will the person manning the register be friendly or irritable? What about the people on either side of you in line? Will they try to engage you in conversation? About what? None of this can be predicted, or more importantly, changed to suit one's preference. The world is immediate, and intrusive, anathema to dweller of the internet.

It is here the destructed form of music combines with the cybernetic mentality. Music, robbed of its sacred quality, is background noise. However, it still possesses the immediacy of sound. People still hold an inherent respect for sound's temporal immutability. Therefore, the outside world is kept somewhat at bay. Listening to music, privately, will rarely be viewed as rude in a public place. As long as it is bothering no other person, and attention is not demanded by the circumstances, why would anyone be offended? Thus, a shield is created that cannot be assailed. This, unfortunately, is not forefront in the mind of the user. Rather than thinking of it as a conscious decision to avoid humanity, it is reflected on as a basic right.

There is yet more damage that this mentality creates. From a phenomenological perspective, noise still demands attention more so than any other sense, due to its basic nature as a survival sense. There are two cases that can result from this. If the music is literally nothing more than background noise, then the person is functionally impaired in inhabiting the world. The sound may block other people, but it also blocks noises that may be critical. The horn of car, while loud, may be unable to cut through the sound isolating nature of ear bud headphones. The

University of Maryland School of Medicine found over a hundred accidents from 2004-2011 caused in part by pedestrians who could not hear cars or trains, 81 of which resulted in death (Park). While not epidemic, it is clearly a matter for concern. In the same vein, as sound demands attention, even background noise can divide the attention that should be focused on important tasks.

The second case, while less life threatening, is just as troubling. If the music is not merely a sonic buffer, then it calls into question what is going on inside the brains of the individuals who walk around entirely cut off from the world. It may seem logical, that those who go around listening to music actually listen to it, but if that is the case, what happens to their thoughts? Orchestrations allow for thoughts to overlay the music, but it is fair to assume that classical compositions are not the genre of choice for the majority of music listeners. If anything, the popular music of the 2000's tends toward the genres of pop and hip hop. The former is characterized by shallow lyrics that are universal but meaningless, and the latter by rapid fire lyrics that consists of brags and boasts. Neither is conducive to the production of thoughts. Yet, it is now the general milieu that headphones are as accepted attire as scarves. The assumption is that if communication with others is not expected, music should be employed. Why not? Why would one want to be subjected to the crass noises of society?

So we are left with a society that either walks through life with little more attention than somnambulists, or one that thinks, as one #1 charting song goes, "Hey I heard you were a wild one/Oooh/If I took you home/It'd be a home run/Show me how you'll do/I want shut down the club/With you/Hey I heard you like the wild ones/Oooh," and doesn't really think at all (Flo Rida). The future does not look auspicious either. As before, there is little to criticize this trend. Legislation is debated about banning headphones when crossing traffic, but is unlikely to pass,

and nigh impossible to enforce. Those who merely hide behind their headphones are all but encouraged to do so. On top of it all, listening to music has only become easier over time. The bulky and immobile phonograph gave way to the Walkman in less than a hundred years. The Walkman gave way to the MP3 player in less than fifty. The rate of technological expansion has only ever increased exponentially. Google already has glasses in the works that would overlay the world with a virtual interface. It is not overly audacious to imagine a society where an implant can stream an entire music library directly into the aural nerves. Soon, it could be impossible to tell who is listening to music, forcing the general assumption that anyone could be, and thus further reduce the limited social contact humanity is forced into.

Any of these issues should rally humankind to its defense. Laid out in basic terms, they appear like the consequences of a dystopian novel. However, the rewiring of the human brain will never reach the front page of the newspaper, unless it is referring to a literal wiring of a brain, which is not an unforeseeable possibility. These are silent transitions that will never have public outrage. As the world seems less inviting, the barriers will only grow stronger, which will make each intrusion from reality that much more irritating. Then, there will be no one looking around at anyone else to notice. The only notifications being received are an ilch refusal to participate in basic human interaction, and, as mentioned, the ubiquitous earbuds, piping what was once the absolutely distillation of the present into ears that do not listen.

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