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## **iPod Listening as an I-voice: Solitary Listeners and Imagined Interlocutors across Cinema and Personal Stereos**

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### **“Listening speaks”**

Towards the beginning of the 2009 high-school movie musical *Bandslam*, there is a moment when the teenage protagonist—a self-professed indie rock fan—sits on the back of a school bus wearing an iPod and staring into empty space, aurally and spatially detached from his peers (see Figure 33.1). On the soundtrack, through a voiceover playfully addressed to his idol David Bowie, the character describes a sense of estrangement from his immediate social environment. “Dear David Bowie,” the voice goes, “today, in my Human Studies class, my teacher Miss Wittenberg said the two words I dread more than any others in the English Language: ‘Buddy Up’” (see Video 33.1).

The use of the iPod as a signifier of teen isolation rehearses a dominant discourse that has accompanied personal stereos since their early commercialization in the 1980s, one that can be traced back to the earliest sightings of the Walkman stereo in American cinema. Yet

this scene also helps identify an idea that in some ways seems to complement (or compensate for) the notion of the iPod as a technology of sensory and social isolation. Through a mix of aural cocooning and first-person voiceover, personal stereo listening is here presented as a particular kind of speech, an utterance that is both internal *and* shared with an imagined interlocutor. Instead of hearing the music the character is hearing, we hear thoughts directed to the musician whose music the character is listening to. It is a simple sonic substitution, though one that is conceptually complex, and *Bandslam* performs it coolly, absorbing it into an otherwise conventional style and story line. The strategy of iPod-motivated voiceovers is used a few other times during the film as a way of providing a personal and humorous commentary over the action on screen, justified by the fact that we know the character regularly writes letters to Bowie, as well as listening to his music.

[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 33.1 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT LINK TO VIDEO 33.1 ABOUT HERE]

Michel Chion would call this voiceover an I-voice: a floating, first-person utterance that belongs to one of the characters on screen but that remains relatively independent from the images on screen.<sup>1</sup> Positioned “half outside” the diegesis, as Christian Metz would put it, this is a voice that—like many voiceovers—flirts with the suggestion of becoming the point of origin of the narration.<sup>2</sup> In a fundamental sense, this chapter tries to understand what it means for iPod listening to be turned into an I-voice. What kind of conventions, discourses, and phenomenological structures need to be in place for a listener’s private act of listening to pass as cinematic speech? And what can this tell us about iPod listening and the transmedia relationship between cinema and personal stereos?

I will argue that what is at stake in this representation of iPod listening as an I-voice is a fantasy of communication: a communication that blurs the lines between introspection and confession, between listening and speaking, between hearing one's own voice and being heard by an imagined other. More specifically, I will use *Bandslam* to explore how cinema can feed (and feed into) a broader cultural construction of personal stereo listening as a highly individualized activity that is always imaginatively open ended, suggesting that this can prompt us to rethink what is cinematic about personal stereo listening.

In his theorization of the I-voice, Chion focuses on the acousmatic power of the disembodied voice, which returns to haunt the narrative. Here, what interests me is the power of the imagined listener and the specific identities it dons. What kind of "You-listeners" does this I-voice presuppose? If, as Roland Barthes famously put it, "*listening speaks*,"<sup>3</sup> then who is meant to be listening? Talking to "David Bowie," I hope to show, reveals a range of "media fantasies" revolving around iPods and Walkman stereos, and draws attention to the structural importance of imagined "others" in both cinematic and personal stereo listening.

### **Listening alone? The Cinematic iPod**

There is empirical evidence to support the idea that cinema plays an important role in how personal stereo users make sense of their listening practices. Through wide-ranging ethnographic research, Michael Bull shows that iPod and Walkman users "often refer to their experiences as being 'cinematic' in nature," alternatively imagining themselves as the filmmakers, actors, characters, and spectators of their own lives.<sup>4</sup> While analyzing "a spectrum of filmic-type experiences" and noting that "almost any experience can be construed as filmic by personal-stereo users,"<sup>5</sup> Bull focuses on how mobile listeners aim to create "a privatized sound world that is in harmony with their mood, orientation, and surroundings" by way of dwelling in musically mediated forms of "solipsistic

aestheticization” that detach them from the material realities of their immediate social environment.<sup>6</sup> A common thread running through Bull’s analysis is thus the idea that personal stereos tend to foster “asymmetrical” forms of “auditory looking,”<sup>7</sup> whereby “reciprocal gazing [is] perceived as being impossible.”<sup>8</sup> As Bull puts it, users often refer “to looking without being seen,”<sup>9</sup> and they

appear to achieve, at least subjectively, a sense of public invisibility. They essentially “disappear” as interacting subjects withdrawing into various states of the purely subjective. Subjective in the sense of focusing or attending to themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Bull’s words point to a broad analogy between the personal stereo listener and the “transcendental subject” of apparatus theory, a film spectator occupying a private, despatialized, and unified viewing position constructed by rules of continuity, technological equipment, and institutional forces.<sup>11</sup> At the center of Bull’s analogy is a widespread understanding of cinema as an experience underpinned by what scholars such as Stanley Cavell and Linda Williams would call a “wish for invisibility,” whereby viewers are allowed to “see and hear everything without being seen or heard themselves.”<sup>12</sup>

The techniques and technologies of film sound have helped shape the notion of the cinematic that underpins Bull’s work.<sup>13</sup> From Rick Altman and James Lastra’s analysis of the “ideal auditor” of early sound film<sup>14</sup> to Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece and Meredith Ward’s discussion of how cinema’s evolving architecture, aural acoustics, and regulatory practices have worked to control and downplay the sounds (as well as sight) of other spectators,<sup>15</sup> today we have powerful and detailed historical and theoretical frameworks for understanding how the standardization of cinematic sound and the optimization of listening environments have worked (in different ways, and at different points in time) to promote absorption and

private aural experiences by suppressing audience awareness of their actual circumstances. In this sense, “cinematic listening” and “personal stereo listening” certainly share an orientation towards privatization and individualization. This is more and more evident as films are increasingly consumed on small (often portable) screens, with “the separated spectator,” as Stephen Groening puts it, emerging as a crucial figure that “looms over the new digital era of cinema culture.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet this process of individualization only tells part of the story. As Shelley Turkle reminds us, sensory separation and technological mediation do not just “isolate us,” but rather they redefine the architectures of our intimacies and—for better or for worse—also have the potential to redefine what communication means in the first place.<sup>17</sup> The presence of “others”—and the relationship between “self” and “other”—remains significant, but is reconfigured. Indeed, the complex technologies, architectures, disciplinary discourses, and formal strategies required to privatize cinematic and personal stereo experiences already put the idea of a solitary, “transcendental subject” in a dialectical perspective. For a start, all the labor required to sustain that cinematic “wish for invisibility” betrays the fact that aural absorption is a fragile ideal that inevitably jars with the material reality of theatrical exhibition and mobile listening. In this sense, both Ward’s recent study of the American cinema soundscape and Bull’s ethnographic work show ways in which the real *bodies* of others continue to play an important role, even just as a residual trace—a noisy glitch “in the system” that complicates the idea of solitary media experiences.<sup>18</sup>

And new developments in film phenomenology and sound studies are increasingly accounting for a broader range of interpersonal interactions. Julian Hanich’s work on the “audience effect” has highlighted a range of “positively attracting, negatively repelling, or simply neutral” ways in which, even though the cinema is designed to “hide us visually from others” and to drown “our noises,” the fact that “we are not alone can be vividly *sensed*

otherwise,” and affects our experience of film.<sup>19</sup> From an ethnographic perspective, recent work on personal stereos has similarly aimed to expand our understanding of the range of interactions revolving around seemingly private media experiences, for example through practices of “sodcasting” or headphone sharing.<sup>20</sup>

In this chapter, I try to build on these considerations by zooming into a different kind of “other.” Not the other as an irreducible material presence that has to be constantly managed and tolerated, nor a physical other we might decide to share our private listening practices with, but rather an *imagined* other—one imagined to share in the act of listening. An implied companion, that is, that *might* take a concrete, physical shape, but who is discursively constructed and does cultural work by taking over a symbolic function that—I will suggest—is crucial in the phenomenological structure of cinematic listening and in the cultural fantasies that circulate around personal stereos.

Traces of this “other” can be found in Bull’s ethnographies. While Bull’s overarching focus is on how personal stereos are used to pursue radical forms of the “purely subjective,” the author also addresses the sense in which users are “floodlit” in “interpersonal resonance” and enter “a state of privatized ‘we-ness’”<sup>21</sup> through their communion “with the products of the cultural industry.”<sup>22</sup> Sound historian William Kenney famously coined the phrase “listening alone together” to suggest that through and around the use of records, “geographically and temporally dispersed” audiences . . . have always “entered into an imagined community of shared musical experience.”<sup>23</sup> Kenney was primarily concerned with the solitary use of phonographs in America around 1900, but the idea of listening in the presence of imagined others has played an important if changing role in the discourse around personal stereos since the early 1980s. While Bull doesn’t see these forms of “communion” as genuine acts of communication (an issue I will come back to later),<sup>24</sup> and does not talk about this aspect of personal stereo listening in specifically “cinematic” terms, I want to use

*Bandslam* to show that cinema has a particularly important role when it comes to fleshing out the imagined others of personal stereo listening.

### **The Spectator as a Vicarious Addressee**

To the extent that cinematic representations of personal stereo listening often rely on cinema's ability to render the acoustic bubble of personal stereos, they epitomize the sense in which film and personal stereos converge as theoretical constructs of aural individualization. The I-voice is a good example of how cinema's techniques of listening can simulate the effects of private listening, in public. In keeping with Chion's definition, the voice in *Bandslam* is not just characterized by "the use of the first person singular," but also by "its placement—a certain sound quality, a way of occupying space, a sense of proximity to the spectator's ear."<sup>25</sup> It also suppresses other sounds (such as the voices of other teenagers on the bus) by drawing clear auditory boundaries between characters on screen. In other words, whilst replacing the sound of the iPod, the I-voice preserves the sonic qualities of headphone listening in a public space.

Yet cinematic representations of private listening are paradoxical, because—in the very act of establishing an analogy between the individualized spectator and the personal stereo listener—they inevitably enlist the spectator as a vicarious companion of the solitary listener on screen. The I-voice in *Bandslam* spells this out. From a narrative perspective, the letters to Bowie provide an opportunity for the filmmakers to have a protagonist speak to the audience while remaining within the conventions of cinematic realism. The spectator, granted the power to overhear the protagonist's inner dialogue, is positioned in the role of a vicarious confidant who has privileged access to the protagonist's thoughts and feelings. In the terms of Jean-Pierre Oudart, we might say that the I-voice foregrounds the place of the "Absent One,"

the subject created by the cinematic discourse. It calls upon the spectator as the constitutive absence of cinematic representations.<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, listening to the I-voice is emblematic of the split positionality of cinematic listening. Film scholars have long talked about the so-called “dual look” of film: the way film channels the spectator’s gaze both through the camera and through the character’s own patterns of looking.<sup>27</sup> Listening can present us with a similar duality, which is evident in how scholars have theorized the intimacy of cinematic voices. Thus, while for Chion the “*close-miking*” and “dryness” of the I-voice functions as “*a pivot of identification,*” because we hear the words resonating “in us as if it were our own voice, like a voice in the first person,”<sup>28</sup> Altman talks of the lack of reverberation of point-of-audition sound as an example of how cinema addresses the individual audience member as a confidant. As he puts it, “The choice of reverbless sound . . . appears to justify an otherwise suspect urge towards eavesdropping, for it identifies the sound we want to hear as sound that is made for us.” “It is sound spoken *toward* me rather than away from me . . . sound that is pronounced *for me.*”<sup>29</sup>

Along these lines, we can see how iPod listening in *Bandslam* engages us in what Metz famously called “primary” and “secondary” identification.<sup>30</sup> To the extent that hearing the (meta-diegetic) I-voice is a means of experiencing through the character’s subjectivity, we take part in Metz’s secondary identification, an imaginary mis-cognition of another as oneself. Yet insofar as we are thereby granted a sort of aural omniscience, hearing the protagonist’s thoughts goes together with the absent look of the camera, encouraging a primary mode of identification with the cinematic apparatus. In lieu of a shot/reverse-shot (which would only highlight the imagined nature of the interlocutor), we get a moment of audiovisual suturing.

Thus, in *Bandslam*, insofar as I am positioned in the character’s subjective point of audition while I also step in for his imaginary confidant, I become an active part of the



fantasy that I am witnessing on screen: listening *to* and *with* the protagonist and overhearing his inner thoughts, I fulfil the character's fantasy of being heard and I experience personal stereo listening as an utterance that is both inwardly and outwardly oriented. More broadly, insofar as this I-voice can be seen as a limit case of cinema's customary use of the sounds and lyrics of popular music to provide inner focalization, it shows the irony of representing solitary acts of listening on screen: it is a literal example of the basic sense in which—by situating us in a solitary character's point of audition—cinematic representations can train us to experience the privacy of listening as an utterance and a form of interpersonal communication.

The situational nature of cinematic spectatorship adds a further level to this. If we accept, with Hanich, that mainstream cinema's technologies and techniques of individualization do not preclude awareness of being part of a larger collective, then the I-voice carries a message that is both intimate *and* accessed by all film patrons. More precisely, this voice—which not only is *for me* (Altman) but also resonates *in me* (Chion) as if it were my own voice—provides a somewhat *internal* connection between me and other spectators, perhaps an example of the “underlying” cinematic “communication” that Jean Mitry located at “the level of feelings and fascination,”<sup>31</sup> and that Hanich's phenomenology recuperates, counteracting a long-standing theoretical emphasis on the idea that “cinema is made for the *private individual*.”<sup>32</sup> While Hanich is mostly concerned with physical co-presence and the theatrical exhibition, the form of shared listening that I am sketching out here extends to what he calls “medial co-presence” (where spectators have real-time feedback of each other's presence), and beyond, to situations where the (synchronous or asynchronous) presence of displaced spectators can only be presumed.<sup>33</sup> As a spectator, whether I attend to this representation of iPod listening in a movie theatre, at home, or on my own mobile device, I share my own aural experience with a public of *Bandslam* viewers who might be physically

co-present, geographically and temporally dispersed, or imagined. Which is to say that not only do I act as a vicarious interlocutor for the on-screen protagonist, but I also “listen, alone together,” with a range of potential others. In this sense, the scene’s spectatorial address and the nature of film viewing encourage me to vicariously experience personal stereo listening as a structurally and strangely open ended activity: *structurally* because the element of withdrawal from the immediate social context is compensated or complemented by the constitutive presence of You-listeners, rather than actual, empirical listeners; and *strangely* because these You-listeners straddle different levels of (fictional and extra-fictional) reality.

### **The Romantic Other as an Implied Listening Companion**

At first glance, notions of cinematic address and collective spectatorship might seem to mark a significant difference between cinematic and personal stereo listening. After all, listening to personal stereos does not seem to involve I-voices and You-listeners, nor does it seem to rely on suturing techniques and the positional fluidity demanded by cinematic representations, nor lend itself to the communal sharing of experiential objects. Yet *Bandslam*, I want to suggest, can help us identify ways in which the discourse around personal stereos too, often posits an absent other, and one whose identities seem to emerge synergetically from the stories told by film and marketing.

Our chosen film doesn’t take long to oblige. In keeping with the conventions of high school movies, *Bandslam*’s protagonist is soon provided with a heterosexual love interest. She materializes soon after our moment of iPod listening, and is immediately incorporated within its mise-en-scène, joining him on the bus where he previously sat in a solitary conversation with Bowie. Soon they share the little white earbuds (see Figure 33.2).

[PLEASE INSERT HERE FIGURE 33.2 (A/B)]

The gesture of annexing a romantic other to the iPod reflects a broader trend in the cultural history of personal stereos. Media scholars William Uricchio and Carolyn Marvin talk of the early moments in a technology's life as characterized by a "struggle for media identity"<sup>34</sup> and by a proliferation of "media fantasies" that take part in the negotiation of the technology's cultural meaning.<sup>35</sup> In the early days of the Walkman, this struggle for identity revolved around the extent to which (and ways in which) the personal stereo could be conceived as communicative and social in nature. At the time of launching the first Walkman, some of the major personalities within Sony were worried that the new device could be seen as promoting social seclusion.<sup>36</sup> As a way of addressing this concern, Sony built into their first prototype (the TPS-L2) the possibility of a second listener: the first Walkman featured two headphone jacks, and also included something dubbed the "hotline function," a button that would activate an internal microphone and allow the two headphone wearers to talk to each other from within the space of the headphones. In this sense, sharing the Walkman was conceived in relation to a model of verbal communication, with a particular kind of speech—a voice both internal and shared—providing the bridge between the two listeners.

If the second jack and the hot line function opened up an imaginary place within the symbolic structure of personal stereo listening, the marketing ploys typically filled this place with the image of a romantic other (Figure 33.3). Some of the early Walkman models labelled the two outputs "Guys & Dolls" (Fig. 33.3a), and on the products' boxes (Fig. 33.3b) and instruction manuals (Fig. 33.3c), and in various print ads for the Walkman, the romantic couple provided a framework for making sense of the new forms of "listening alone together" that the Walkman was supposed to engender. It afforded a way of re-coding the privatization of listening as the chance for an intimate form of communication. Other commercial

campaigns of audiophile technologies tapped into this, using the heterosexual couple as analogous to stereophonic sound on the move: a small, essential (social and sonic) unit, mobile, symmetrical, and complete in itself (Figure 33.4).

[PLEASE INSERT HERE FIGURE 33.3 (A/B/C)]

[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 33.4 JUST BELOW FIGURE 33.3]

The hot line function and the second jack were soon discontinued. They marked a brief moment in the history of personal stereos and a peculiar find of media archaeology, but cinema has continued to situate the love interest within the private space of headphone listening. While for Marvin media fantasies are common in the early days of any given technology and then, as Paul Young puts it, they tend to become “obscured by institutional conventions and sheer, mundane familiarity,”<sup>37</sup> Young’s own work on cinematic fantasies also draws attention to the fact that “‘struggle and argument’ over the conventional uses and institutional identities of media do not end when the institutions settle into a pattern,”<sup>38</sup> and can continue within Hollywood stories and technologies. More specifically, I am suggesting that cinema’s representations are a space where the possibilities of personal stereo listening continue to be negotiated.

Sharing the personal stereo has become a staple of cinematic romance, found in movies ranging from some of the earliest to feature a Walkman stereo (such as *La Boum* (1980)) to some of the most recent, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Baby Driver* (2017). In these examples and many others, the idea of romance provides a framework within which listening is always on the verge of turning into speech. Indeed, as the montage in Video 33.2 shows, these cinematic moments tend to emphasize the music’s verbal content by means of lip-synching (*Begin Again*, 2013), or moments of singing along (*500 Days of*

*Summer*, 2009), or by having the stereo owner passing on the headphones in the manner of a private serenade (*La Boum* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*). The onscreen couple becomes the context within which the generic “Is,” “yous” and “wes” of popular music’s lyrics acquire specificity; a context within which the song’s message is negotiated. Thus sharing the stereo turns the act of listening into a powerful, intimate utterance—a private confession which is shared while remaining internal, and whose agency is often ambiguously oscillating between the singer, the song’s persona, and the two listeners.<sup>39</sup>

[PLEASE INSERT HERE LINK TO VIDEO 33.2]

These representations also stage a form of “interpellation”—one analogous to mechanisms of spectatorial address, in which, as Jim Buhler sums up in his discussion of the cinematic *dispositif*, a “set of institutional devices . . . [prepare] in advance the place of the cinematic subject.”<sup>40</sup> Typically, the scene establishes the private act of listening, but opens up a gap for the love interest to walk into. In the 2004 romantic film *Happily Ever After* the gap is rendered through strikingly asymmetric framing and narrow focus, creating an empty space on the left-hand side of the listener that is promptly occupied by a romantic interest (see Video 33.3a). In a further example provided in Video 33.3b, from *500 Days of Summer* (2009), the gap is first established visually—the male actor moves to leave space for the romantic other and then she walks into the frame, so that the prospective couple can be framed in a conventional two-shot—before the leakage of sound opens up the private act of listening to the possibility of romance.

[PLEASE INSERT HERE LINK TO VIDEO 33.3a]

[PLEASE INSERT HERE LINK TO VIDEO 33.3b]

The order of events: (1) the solitary act of listening, (2) the visual asymmetry and/or sound leakage, and (3) the forming of the couple dramatizes the sense in which, in this cinematic trope, the idea of romance is often implied before a love interest actually materializes; a listener is posited, *a priori*, to complement (and sometimes productively unsettle) the private act of listening. In this sense, these scenes emphasize how—within the context of mainstream cinema—personal stereo listening is always extendable (and often tends towards striking forms of “stereophonic heterosexuality”) because underpinned by a broader commitment to the ideological notion that the romantic couple is the natural extension of the solitary individual. Of course, this commitment to the normative couple also pertains to how films such as *Bandslam* conceive of their target audience. To the extent that romantic comedies address the individual spectator as half of a heterosexual unit—whether a couple that goes to the cinema together or individuals attached to absent or imagined others—it provides a further example of how the fantasy on screen is played out through the process of cinematic spectatorship, with the spectator at once acting as the protagonist’s vicarious interlocutor and expected to summon up his or her own implied companions.

### **The Star Singer as an *Écoutêtre***

In the early years of the iPod, the idea of listening alone together took another significant turn. As Justin Burton has shown, at the time of launching its device in the already crowded market of MP3 players, Apple did much to promote the notion that the iPod (and its associated software iTunes) could provide an intimate connection with the artist.<sup>41</sup> One of the ways in which this was achieved was by securing the endorsement of a range of bands and solo musicians. The endorsement took the form of a series of cross-promotional thirty-second music videos and gave life to Apple’s iconic “Dancing Silhouettes” commercials, a global

marketing campaign which ran from 2003 to 2008. One of the earliest and most prominent examples featured the Band U2 performing the song “Vertigo” from their 2004 studio album *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*. Burton discusses how the iPod in these commercials acts as a symbolic channel of communication between listeners who inhabit the same abstract setting, are energized by the same music, and virtually join in a collective dance. But—as Burton similarly notices—the “Vertigo” video also uses the iPod as a connecting device between the listener and the band: powering guitars and microphones, Apple’s white cables act as a visual link that bridges across performing and listening spaces. Bono seems to sing straight into the listener’s ears, in a gesture that bypasses (or at least condenses) the complex mediating role of the recording industry (Fig. 33.5).

[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 33.5 (A/B) ABOUT HERE]

The I-voice takes this fantasy to its ultimate consequences. It draws on the broader idea that the personal stereo can provide a special connection between artists and listeners, and it reverses the flow of the message, presenting us with an instance of an iPod listener actually speaking back.<sup>42</sup> What’s more, the film ensures that David Bowie eventually *hears* the iPod listener. As is the case in many contemporary music-driven high school films, *Bandslam*’s narrative culminates in the self-fulfillment of its teen protagonist. In the film’s obligatory happy ending, our iPod listener—aptly named Will—becomes the producer of a successful high school band and wins the respect of his peers. In a grand display of cinema’s teleological powers, narrative closure is further achieved by realizing the protagonist’s utmost fantasy. The surprise is delivered by a stylistically marked tracking shot. It starts with a medium close up of a MacBook pro on a small table in a cafe, a man’s legs just visible off-screen. On the laptop, we see a YouTube recording of our protagonist’s band. As the camera

circles around the coffee table, it reveals the onlooker to be Bowie himself, plugged into a set of black earplugs, looking and listening intently at the performance on screen. His interest is piqued, and we see him contacting our protagonist through a MySpace account: “Dear Will Burton ...”

The circle is closed. (See Video 33.4.) In a long-range shot/reverse-shot of Schenkerian proportions, the image of the solitary teen plugged into his iPod and talking to an imagined “Bowie” (Figure 33.1) is eventually matched by an image of a Bowie of celluloid flesh and bones, plugged into a portable computer, voicing his email to our solitary character (See Figure 33.6). And, as Bowie’s voiceover reads out the message, we cut to our protagonist, who—astounded by the fact that his imagined interlocutor can “speak back”—falls to the floor, finally *speechless* in a shot that indirectly acknowledges the fantastic nature of the onscreen events.<sup>43</sup>

[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 33.6 HERE]

[PLEASE INSERT HERE LINK TO VIDEO 33.4]

In his famous theorization of the omniscient, omnipotent, ubiquitous, and all-seeing *acousmêtre*, Chion talks of how “An entire image, an entire story, an entire film can . . . hang on the epiphany of the *acousmêtre*. Everything can boil down to a quest to bring the *acousmêtre* into the light.”<sup>44</sup> Chion notices how the I-voice itself can sometimes act as an *acousmêtre*, in the sense of a voiceover searching for a body within the diegesis. However, in *Bandslam*, the story culminates with the epiphany of the imagined listener. The identity of the I-voice is never in doubt, and it is the body of the You-listener that is brought, surprisingly, into the light. Paraphrasing another one of Chion’s famous *dicta*, we could say that here we have a *listening function* in search of a body.<sup>45</sup>



The fact that Bowie himself would provide such body is particularly unexpected not only because of the last-minute cameo of a global music star in a teen-pic of rather modest ambitions, but also because it asks us to revise our understanding of the role of “Bowie” as a mere placeholder for the audience. By claiming a listening function that we had assumed was part of the mechanism of cinematic address, the star singer takes on the quasi-mythical powers of an *acousmêtre*, though one that hid in silence throughout the film and was only heard indirectly and briefly—if acousmatically—through some of his songs; an *acousmêtre* defined by his quasi-mythical powers to receive the message, rather than by a voice haunting the narrative. Similarly to Chion’s “acoustic being,” this “listening being”—this *écoutêtre*, if you will—owes his aura to the way his delayed on-screen appearance complicates the boundaries between enunciation and enunciated. It appropriates “the power of the Absent One,” as Buhler puts it.<sup>46</sup> Yet the shift from verbal powers to hearing powers marks a significant difference, which reverses the characteristic narrative economy of Chion’s *acousmêtre*. Whereas the presence of the disembodied voice typically requires a solution because it threatens the unity of sound and image that gives coherence to the cinematic apparatus, the presence of a disembodied listening function in *Bandslam* (our Dear David Bowie) creates no comparable tension, because it is fully in keeping with the mechanism of cinematic address. In other words, whereas disembodied cinematic voices are assumed to be (fictionally) real, until proven otherwise, the listening function is expected to be fictional, until Bowie actually materializes on screen. In this sense, whereas cinema’s typical *acousmêtre* plays with the strangeness of giving the Absent One a voice, the visualization of Bowie on screen plays with the strangeness of giving a body to the You-listener of cinematic and personal stereo listening.

Of course, the filmmakers find an indirect, pseudo-logical way to turn the imaginary conversation with Bowie into reality. The protagonist is “heard” once he becomes a music

producer, his musical message conveyed by the amplifying power of social media. And, in *order* to be heard, the protagonist's "voice" has to change meaning and material, from being a letter written to a specific (if extremely unlikely) reader, to being music posted to a broad audience on YouTube. The cinematic rendering of this conversation—mixing spoken and written words, giving sound to the letter to Bowie and to Bowie's reply—thus produces a text whose material hybridity is perfectly in keeping with the language of social media.

In this sense, the representation of iPod listening as an I-voice is tied to some of the ways in which the idea of communication is being redefined by social media. To the extent that DIY music making, amateur YouTube videos, and social networking websites such as MySpace are mobilized to realize the fantasy of communicating with Bowie, we could say—using Jim Macnamara's words—that the film taps into a broader discussion of social media as "an empowering development contributing to the democratization of voice." Yet as Macnamara and Nick Couldry remind us, the fact that "'speaking up' has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces"<sup>47</sup> always raises the question of who is listening, because in social media, "unlike public speaking or physically assembled groups of people, media audiences . . . are doubly assumed and imagined—assumed and imagined to exist and assumed and imagined to listen."<sup>48</sup> And they are also assumed and imagined to be "fragmented" and "atomized," in keeping with the characteristics of new media environments. In other words, social media can function here as the natural extension of that act of listening because both media engagements are marked by a wish to be heard. In this sense, *Bandslam*'s final epiphany shows how cinema—thanks to a large dose of "poetic" license, a commitment to narrative closure, and synergies with the music industries—can draw upon the media persona of the rock star (here seen in his last, pre-posthumous cinematic appearance) in order to give a fantastical body to the imagined audiences of social media, film, and personal stereos.

## **From a Wish for Invisibility to a Fantasy of Being (over)Heard**

Bringing an imagined other inside the bubble of personal stereo listening, *Bandslam* provides an alternative route through the transmedia relationship between cinema and personal stereos. The I-voice creates a hybrid You-listener that is positioned across fictional and extra-fictional layers—part global star with quasi-magical powers of ubiquity, part overdetermined romantic interest, part Absent One—and shows how both cinematic and personal stereo listening rely on the presence of imagined interlocutors. While cinema and personal stereos offer powerful models of asymmetrical looking and solitary listening, turning iPod listening into an I-voice brings into focus a different kind of media fantasy: not just a wish for privacy and invisibility, but also a desire to be heard and overheard.

In a sense, these fantasies are two sides of the same coin. To the extent that the communicative act is fully consumed within the listener's own subjectivity, and that our interlocutors are confined to the solipsism of aural cocooning, the representation of iPod listening as an I-voice is in keeping with a reading of personal stereos as merely bathing in the illusion of social communion; it is a fantasy in Arjun Appadurai's sense of something solipsistic and escapist, private, "even individualistic" and "divorced from projects and actions." Yet things get more complicated when we consider the range of conventions, discourses, technological designs, and phenomenological structures that support that on-screen fantasy.<sup>49</sup>

As we have seen, cinema doesn't just give us *representations* of personal stereos as technologies of interpersonal communication. The fantasy on screen goes to the core of a fundamental aspect of the phenomenology of cinematic listening. At the level of cinematic exhibition and distribution, as well as representation, private sounds are designed to be meaningfully heard by others. Listening is required to speak, and cinema works hard to turn

us into each other's You-listeners. It routinely invites us to step into (structurally) spacious and (strangely) porous aural bubbles that straddle fictional and extra-fictional spaces, spanning across the worlds on screen and the spaces of cinematic reception. What's more, thanks to a complex feedback loop with the making and marketing of sound reproduction technologies, the idea of listening as communication is grounded in material cultures and echoed across different media channels. Fleshed out through the film's narrative trajectory, extending across multiple cultural artefacts, underpinned by a layered media archaeology, and experienced vicariously, the cinematic rendering of listening as a voice thus provides an example of how cinematic listening can shape our understanding of what may count as communication across a range of media experiences.

At a time when distanced and asynchronous forms of interaction are reconfiguring the forms of our social intimacies, the theoretical ramifications and actual impact of these fantasies deserve greater attention. Films such as *Bandslam* seem to insinuate new ideas about what it means to experience something "together" in an age of ubiquitous technology while also ultimately subscribing to normative models of subjectivity and communication. They show how mainstream cinema—because of its commitment to the ideal of the couple and to ideals of self-fulfillment, because of its power to conjure up pop stars and romantic attachments, and because of basic patterns of cinematic address and the nature of film spectatorship—tends to complicate the boundaries between inward and outward space while also falling back on ideas of the bounded self and the heterosexual couple; it blurs lines between music and speech while essentially reiterating the language of music marketing; and it can engender new ways of thinking of listening as collective action while also typically prioritizing verbal models of interaction.<sup>50</sup> Asking us to experience listening as an utterance while also resisting some of the more radical implications that being alone together has on our ability and means to communicate with others, the voice of iPod listening tells us to

explore the cinema as a transmedia site where the possibilities of listening and the aural boundaries of subjectivity are being renegotiated.

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Chapter 3 in Michel Chion's classic text, *The Voice in the Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See Christian Metz, *Impersonal Enunciation, or the Place of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "Listening," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 245–60: 252. Emphasis in the original. Adopting a model that broadly reflects his tripartite theorizations of meaning and semiotics, Barthes argues that there are three types of listening: (1) listening as a way of being *alert* to meaningful sound indices, (2) listening as a way of *deciphering* signs, and (3) listening as performative act that develops "in an inter-subjective space where 'I am listening' also means 'listen to me.'" (246).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 86. *Sounding out the City* was published a little before the first iPod went on sale, but Bull's body of work expands on this point. See in particular *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) and a range of articles published on the Oxford Handbook series, including "iPod Use, Mediation, and Privatization in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies Vol. I*, edited by Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 103–117.

<sup>5</sup> Bull, *Sounding out the City*, 96.

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<sup>6</sup> Bull, *Sound Moves*, 40. See also Bull, “iPod Culture: The Toxic Pleasures of Audiotopia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, edited by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 526–43.

<sup>7</sup> Bull, *Sound Moves*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Bull, *Sounding out the City*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> Bull, *Sounding out the City*, 77.

<sup>10</sup> Bull, *Sounding out the City*, 79.

<sup>11</sup> For an influential account of the “increasing privatization of viewing behavior and the textual homogenization of positions of subjectivity,” see for example Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> The quotes are respectively from Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 40, and Linda Williams, *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible,’* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 32. Both are quoted by Julian Hanich in his recent review and critique of this widespread theoretical emphasis on invisibility. See Hanich, *The Audience Effect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>13</sup> In talking about the techniques and technologies of listening, I am invoking a distinction made by Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). See in particular Chapter 2, “Techniques of Listening.”

<sup>14</sup> Altman and Lastra have explored how filmmakers and engineers, in the early days of (vococentric) sound film, not only aimed to present dialogue with optimal clarity in (almost) all circumstances, but also conferred it the intimacy of a voice spoken/pronounced for the individual spectator (mostly through lack of reverberation). See Rick Altman, “Sound Space,” in *Sound Theory/Sound Practice*, edited by Rick Altman (Abingdon: Routledge,

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1992), 46–64, and James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> See Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, *The Optical Vacuum: Spectatorship and Modernized American Theater Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Meredith Ward, *Static in the System: Noise and the Soundscape of American Cinema Culture* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Groening, “No One Likes to Be a Captive Audience: Headphones and In-flight Cinema,” *Film History: An International Journal* 28, no. 3 (2016), 114–38: 117.

<sup>17</sup> See Shelley Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> In her recent study of the American cinema soundscape, Ward reminds us that “no attempt to block out noise is ever entirely successful,” a comment that applies even more to the novel conditions of watching films on the move, where the responsibility to negotiate the relationship between private and public has shifted from producers, architects, and exhibitors onto the individual user. See Ward, *Static in the System*, 145. For Bull’s analysis of how personal stereo listeners micro-manage their interpersonal strategies and attempt to erase troubling difference see in particular Chapter 3 of *Sound Moves* [“Sounding Out Cosmopolitanism”]. And the sense in which the sounds of others are (significantly) never fully erased and continue to shape the experience of personal stereo listening emerges with yet greater clarity in David Beer’s work. See in particular David Beer, “Mobile Music, Coded Objects and Everyday Spaces,” *Mobilities* 5, no. 4 (2010), 469–84.

<sup>19</sup> Hanich, *The Audience Effect*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> On “sodcasting,” see Wayne Marshall, “Treble Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies Vol.2*, edited by Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 43–76. On sharing earpods, see Tyler Bickford, “Earbuds Are Good

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for Sharing: Children’s Headphones as Social Media at a Vermont School,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies Vol. 1*, edited by Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 335–58.

<sup>21</sup> Bull, *Sounding Out the City*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Bull, *Sound Moves*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Writing from an explicitly Adornian perspective, Bull sees these forms of ‘we-ness’ in overwhelmingly negative terms because unavoidably “mediated by the hand of commerce and ideology.” Bull, *Sound Moves*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> Chion, *The Voice in the Cinema*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Pierre Oudart, “Cinema and Suture,” *Screen* 18, no.4 (1977–8), 35-47.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Mulvey provides a critical discussion of these “looks” and their imbrication with patriarchal ideology in her classic study “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 6–18.

<sup>28</sup> Chion, *The Voice in the Cinema*, 51. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> Rick Altman, “Sound Space,” 61. For a powerful argument about the “for-me-ness” of sound (and music in particular) see also Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>30</sup> See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986). Metz’s framework has, of course, been subject to extensive criticism. Among other things, scholars have denounced a tendency to characterise processes of identification as homogeneous and overdetermined. Here, I am adopting categories of “primary” and “secondary” identification in order to show how, as a listener, I am encouraged to stretch across conceptually contradictory positions. In this sense,



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I am in agreement with Elizabeth Reich and Scott R. Richmond, who argue that Metz's scheme remains productive if we use it to describe how spectators can identify "dynamically across the filmic experience, technics, and text." See Elizabeth Reich and Scott R Richmond, "Introduction: Cinematic Identifications," *Film Criticism* 39, no. 2 (2014), 3–24: 18.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 321. A larger excerpt of this quote provides the opening epigraph of Hanich's *The Audience Effect*.

<sup>32</sup> Hanich *The Audience Effect*, 8. Hanich is here quoting Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, 95–6, with emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> For Hanich, who is interested in the sharing of specific emotions, the differences between these collective experiences are crucial (and rightly so). The reason I am deliberately blurring such differences here is that my argument is based on the mere fact of a shared activity, without presuming a broader cognitive alignment.

<sup>34</sup> William Uricchio, "Television, Film, and the Struggle for Media Identity," *Film History* 10 (1998), 118–27.

<sup>35</sup> Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 59.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Young, *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals: Media Fantasy Films from Radio to the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxiv.

<sup>38</sup> Young is here drawing upon Raymond Williams's work, particularly *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992). See Young, *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals*, xv.

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the “Is,” “yous,” and “wes” of popular music and of how lyrics “leave themselves open to . . . completion and appropriation,” see Tim Murphey, “The When, Where, and Who of Pop Lyrics: The Listener’s Prerogative,” in *Popular Music* 8, no. 2 (1989), 185–93. Murphey compares pop lyrics to inner speech and to commercial messages that offer multiple opportunities for identification.

<sup>40</sup> Jim Buhler, *Theories of the Soundtrack* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 235.

<sup>41</sup> Justin Burton, “Dancing Silhouettes: The Mobile Freedom of iPod Commercials,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies Vol. 1*, edited by Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 311–36: 328.

<sup>42</sup> It could be argued that the notion that the flow of the message can be reversed is already present in the Vertigo commercial, if we agree with Burton that the song’s lyrics (“you give me something I can feel”) insinuates the idea that the listening silhouettes can “transmit via those same wires.” See Burton, “Dancing Silhouettes,” 329.

<sup>43</sup> The character receives Bowie’s email on a Nokia phone, in a detail that betrays the fact that the fantasy of iPod listening as communication here predates the commercialization of iPhones, where music listening and verbal communication would converge in the same device.

<sup>44</sup> Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 23–4.

<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 9 [“The Voice that Seeks a Body”] in Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of how Michel Chion’s acousmètre builds on Pascal Bonitzer’s work on onscreen and offscreen voices see Buhler, *Theories of the Soundtrack*, 242–3. As Buhler niftily sums up, Bonitzer argues that “the power of the voiceover . . . lies in twining its ‘absolutely other’, that is, its transcendent position, where it is ‘presumed to know’, with an address to someone ‘who will not speak’, namely, the spectator.”

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<sup>47</sup> Kate Crawford, “Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2009), 525–35: 526.

<sup>48</sup> Jim Macnamara, “Beyond Voice: Audience-Making and the Work and Architecture of Listening as New Media Literacies,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 27, no. 1 (2013), 160–75: 161.

<sup>49</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8. In his famous analysis of cultural imagination, Arjun Appadurai traces a distinction between “fantasy” and the “imagination.” In Appadurai’s words, “fantasy can dissipate (because its logic is so often autotelic—has a purpose in itself), but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action.” In this sense, imagination for Appadurai is “central to all forms of agency, [and] is itself a social fact” (31). To the extent that we see the representation of iPod listening as an I-voice as an on-screen visualization of a solipsistic and escapist gesture, it is a cultural fantasy in Arjun Appadurai’s sense of the term. Yet I am suggesting that the distinction between short-lived impressions and more significant discursive interventions is extremely difficult to trace when it comes to media fantasies and that—once we couch it in a complex set of discursive and material traces—the fantasy of iPod listening as an I-voice takes on some of the more concrete qualities of Appadurai “cultural imagination.”

<sup>50</sup> On the changing boundaries of listening, and their implications on questions of agency, see the introduction to this Handbook, and Sander van Maas, ed., *Thresholds of Listening: Sound, Technics, Space* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015). On the constantly evolving definition of “communication” and its implications for the changing boundaries between self and others, see John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).