iPod… iCon

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Introduction

The brand name 'iPod' seems to play on the first person verb form; iPod, uPod, he pods…[i] But the iPod is still a thing, a noun, something to be appropriated and consumed – Apple announced in April 2007 that they had sold 100 million iPods since 2001. The iPod as a material object has been bought and used in great numbers by many people in various settings but the idea and the possibility of the iPod is more significant than the number of users. I've heard it said that the fortunes of the Brazilian football team began to decline when, instead of doing the samba together before a match, they all listened to their iPods. The iPod, like the personal stereo, appears to emphasise individual identity, separating the person off from those around them, isolating them from their society and culture. This paper will argue that while it is true that the phenomenology of the iPod folds the body in on itself perceptually even more than the tape-base personal stereo, at the same time the object connects us to our society through its place in series of objects and networks over which we have very limited control. Far from enhancing identity within social contexts, the iPod is an icon that while turning us in on ourselves also embeds us within the circuits of the culture industry.

I want to deal with four aspects of the iPod here. Firstly, its development from personal stereo player – a role that was shaped by a previous iconic device, the Sony. Secondly, I want to explore the embodied phenomenology of the iPod – some of which it shares with other personal stereo systems, some of which is new. Thirdly, I want to discuss how as a storage system it signals a new system for rationalising of memories. Fourthly, I will explore the iPod as an iconic object and a brand that subsumes its user's identity within a corporate identity precisely through its phenomenological and rationalising features. I want to argue that what appears to be a device that enhances individual identity actually renders it subject to social processes that are not collective or democratic but which are elements of what Nigel Thrift (2005) calls 'soft capitalism'.

Identity and the personal stereo

The original Sony Stowaway (TPS-L2), the first commercially available personal stereo system sold in the UK in 1980, was designed with two headphone sockets and an internal microphone with a button, that when depressed, allowed the users to talk to each other, their voices overlaying the music that they were sharing. This first version of what became popular as the Sony Walkman and survived many generations of development, was

unusually sociable but this sharing functionality disappeared in future models. In fact the personal stereo became popular as an individualising device that connected the person to their own choice of music without imposing it on anyone else. It superseded the 'tranny' and the 'ghetto blaster', radio-based devices with speakers that were 'anti-social' because they intruded into the listening space of other people. But the Walkman was anti-social because it cut the wearer off, aurally, from those around them. The new device was truly 'personal' in a phenomenological sense, reinforcing the user's individuality and self-identity, enhancing their capacity for 'mobile privatisation' (Williams 1983; du Gay et al. 1997 24). In the seminal text on the role of the Walkman as a cultural object du Gay and his colleagues make the case that it was advertised to fit in with a variety of 'identities'; lifestyles, types of people and social groups (1997: 40, 65-7, 107). The device enabled a form of 'self-production' (Chow 1993 in du Gay et al. 1997: 140) that allowed the individual to create private space for themselves in public settings – trains, underground trains and buses for example – and this was seen as 'on the one hand, the purveyor of choice and increased freedom for the individual and, on the other, the destroyer of public life and community values' (du Gay et al. 1997: 113). The individual could be private from engagement with others in the home and could carry that privacy into the public spaces of society.

The academic analysis of the personal stereo has explored this link between the private person and the public space through what Michael Bull calls a 'phenomenology of the city' (2000: 11). A book or newspaper in front of the eyes completely interrupts one's direct view of surroundings, focussing attention and making moving about difficult. But the effect of earphones, rather like sunglasses that also move with the head, is to modulate ambient sound downwards, filtering other sounds but allowing movement, only partially disconnecting the listener from her or his surroundings. This has been the main focus of commentators on the phenomenology of the Walkman such as Michael Bull (2000; 2003) and Jean-Paul Thibaud (2003). Bull analysed the reported accounts of Walkman users who explained how they utilised their personal stereo system to create their own dreamworld, locking out the rest of the world and giving themselves their own space as they moved through the city. Pedestrians reported how they forgot to look when they crossed the road, cyclists told him how they 'saw' in a more detached way what was happening when they were being cut up by a taxi. The Walkman, says Bull, 'represents something that is both individual and intimate helping them to maintain a sense of identity within an often impersonal environment' (2000: 24). It gives the user a control over their experience, limiting the penetration of the outside world allowing them to repossess their experience through controlling its temporality. It can also be used to block out thoughts or to create an emotional context for dull activities like travelling. Thibaud (2003) takes the idea of the management of space further, arguing that

the device provides a ‘sonic door’ or ‘bridge’ through which the user manages their movement between public and private space. This analysis of the impact of the personal stereo emphasises the individual’s control of their environment – spatial, temporal, emotional and cognitive.

If the ‘phenomenology of the city’ that Michael Bull pursues is one derived from Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School I am more interested in how the personal stereo fits in with the phenomenology of the body. The Walkman provided the personalisation of control over the inputs to the senses and the iPod takes this a stage further because it is lighter and smaller and it carries a whole living room wall full of cassettes inside it. The iPod is, in effect, a pocket computer dedicated (at least in its original form) to playing music that accompanies its possessor wherever she or he is.

As this respondent, Sam, in Casey Bingham’s study of iPod users said:

> **“It’s strange. Once I put the headphones on, it’s like there’s an invisible wall all around me. I don’t really feel like I exist in the same way any more, like I’ll touch something and almost be surprised I can feel it.”**[ii]

The device partially separates the user from the physical space they are in, creating a distance from the environment that is emphasised by the quasi-cinematic effect of the music seeming to provide a soundtrack to the unfolding visual scene. Of course this is illusory because film music is carefully written or chosen to match an unfolding narrative to support a particular emotion intended by the filmmakers. The slightly less than real feeling about what is experienced by personal stereo users is because the tempo and temporality of the sound does not come from the situation.[iii] This phenomenological distance from the fullness of the material environment pushes the user of the device inwards into themselves rather like swimming underwater does and, as with coming to the surface of a pool, taking out the earphones reconnects the user with the full ambience of their surroundings.

The personal stereo user is less likely to hear a chance remark or to hear someone call their name the personal stereo player allows the user to withdraw from interaction with people, either the civil inattention to passers-by or a conversation that has become dull. The way they gaze at their surroundings is somewhat distracted and disconnected and there is no suggestion that they are looking <u>at</u> anyone. In contrast to the Walkman, the iPod has always offered a control screen to look at allowing the preoccupied looking-into-the-hand gaze, familiar from the gesture of ‘checking the moby’. Later generation iPods enable the viewing of album covers, photographs, video films and games as well as track. However, the principle use of the iPod is still for playing music. The playing of music normally requires a human performance with voices and instruments but once it has been recorded the listener

can take over the role of performance. With a personal music device, it is the listener who 'plays' a track, performing the actions of selecting switching on, adjusting volume and so on but they do it only for themselves. The choice of music may be culturally and aesthetically significant, but it is a strangely solipsistic expression of identity because, unlike one's clothes or even one's food, the choosing of music to play on the iPod is not a means for expressing identity socially and indeed saves the user from having to expose their taste to public scrutiny. There are iPod parties, docking devices and car audio links that mean that the music can be shared.[iv] The prime use of the device, nonetheless, is ***not*** to share one's choice in music but to demonstrate to those around simply that the listener has music and has control over it. In most situations playing music on an iPod is exclusively for reflecting back to the self the memories and identity associated with that music.

The embodied iPod

The personal stereo system brought the musical performance not only under the control of the listener but also within their body space. Their selection, from the range of favourites, to suit the mood, to revisit past pleasures, to reconfirm what one likes and to indulge the specificity of ones taste, is achieved privately in public. The cassette player and even the personal CD player required planning of the listening sequence – only a few tapes or CDs in a pocket or a bag were practical.[v] But since the first MP3 players appeared in 1999, they have simplified the process by containing the music within the device. The iPod has led the revolution, partly because of the physical design, but also because it has provided much more memory by using a hard disk drive rather than flash memory.[vi] The process of selecting and choosing has become internalised as the physical means of storing the music has been miniaturised.

The iPod's distinctive thumb wheel has condensed the human gesture required to control the device down to one digit stroking and pressing. It is particular to the iPod and sums up the designed-in intimacy of its owner's relationship with it – is part of the pleasure of interacting with the device.[vii] This single point of control – originally with its feedback click stages – has developed from being a manual wheel into a touch device like the touchpad on a modern laptop. This continues an evolutionary trajectory in which both the object and the gesture become progressively simplified. André Leroi-Gourhan (1993) pointed out that unlike other animal species, human evolution happens outside the body; 'tools were "exuded" by humans in the course of their evolution' (Leroi-Gourhan 1993: 239) as they became the hammers and knives that replaced fist and nails. The thumb wheel of the iPod is a highly evolved tool

for selecting that has become progressively simplified and has reduced to a minimum the bodily effort and involvement of the gesture for operating the device and making a selection.

The ‘chaîne operatoire’ or mechanical operational sequence that Leroi-Gourhan describes as acquired through human culture rather than instinct, becomes routine behaviour that uses tools to achieve effects (1993: 232). With the iPod, choosing whether and what to listen is the residual ‘conscious’ component in an operational sequence that in previous decades required extracting a twelve inch record or a CD from a rack, removing the disc from the sleeve, fitting it onto or into the playing device and either lining up the needle or pressing the button to begin. This sequence of complex body, arm and hand movements has disappeared inside the machine. As a tool for playing music, the iPod is the last stage on a trajectory that Leroi-Gourhan describes as a progressive externalising of the tool (1993: 245-249). Firstly, motor functions are transferred to the machine (the wind-up gramophone first stores energy and then electric motor power replaces human energy). Then the sequence of actions in the machine become progressively automated (the arm of the gramophone switches on the turntable, the pressing of buttons starts and stops the tape or CD player). Finally, the machine takes control of the whole sequence as the programme that determines the operational sequence is recorded and managed within the tool (the iPod finds, selects and plays music by following a ‘playlist’).

The human gesture needed to realise choice has evolved from the grasping hand and turning arm providing motor force as well as control, to the button-jabbing of modern automatic machines. But the gesture of control for the iPod has evolved to a single finger or thumb that strokes the surface of the face, gently pressing to initiate an action. The gesture has more in common with the circular gesture of the thumb when we rest a hand on someone else to give comfort, than with the gestures usually used to control tools. And the effect of the gesture is to directly control the memory on the device, moving a pointer up and down ‘menus’ to find what we are looking for. Instead of racking our brains to remember we can gently stroke the device that responds with a visual feedback system so precise that it is as if we are literally scrolling through the tunes, albums, memories.[viii]

When listening to recorded music, the bodies of the performers of the music are absent. But with a device such as the iPod, the body of the listener is also thrown into a curious sort of absence. Drew Leder (1990), extending Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) phenomenology of embodied being, writes of the ‘absent body’. He is pointing to the way that many aspects of the body are not present to the sensory experience we have of our bodies – most obviously its internal visceral life that goes on with little if any sensory awareness and no conscious intention or control. This aspect he refers to as the ‘recessive body’ and it includes the

internal digestive, respiratory, cardiovascular, urogenital and endocrine systems of the body that 'go back' beyond the reach of conscious awareness and control (1990: 53). These are bodily systems that have few nerves and require no intentional action on our part; they are autonomous, carrying on in the background only occasionally intruding into our conscious existence. Slipped into a bag or a pocket, the iPod becomes part of the recessive body like a hearing aid or another body-enhancing device that requires little attention.

Leder contrasts the recessive body with the outward facing sensorimotor apparatus of perception and motility that Merleau-Ponty has described in some detail. Leder calls this the 'ectstatic' body – the surface, the outward facing organs including the skin and in particular the perceptual organs of the eyes, ears, nose and mouth (1990: 21). The iPod is a device that shuts down some of the ecstatic body, turning it in on itself as the ears are filled and the eyes gaze unseeing. Unlike the hearing aid, what is being channelled into the ears is not from the world beyond the body but is from a subsidiary organ – the iPod. There is hardly any sensory awareness of this folding in of the body on itself because the 'in ear' phones can hardly be felt as they block the ear canal while the noise, vibration and the need to press buttons, change tapes and batteries of the personal cassette player have disappeared. Like the internal organs the device can be ignored by the wearer as it becomes part of the recessive body and achieves what Leder calls 'automaticity' (1990: 48). For Merleau-Ponty the senses and the mind are turned towards the world through the body so that 'consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body' (1962: 138-9). But if the thing that consciousness is turned towards is music coming from an iPod and the iPod is an on-body memory device, then consciousness is caught in a reflective moment and being is turned in on itself, consuming itself.[ix] The 'intentional arc' of bodily engagement with the world that Merleau-Ponty (1962: 136) describes is short-circuited to lead from the body back to itself. The effect is not unlike a partial dream or reverie in which the past self is replayed to the present self. Mood is managed, tuned to the tunes that have been chosen to create something like an affectual atmosphere within the body through what Leder would refer to as a sort of 'biofeedback system' (1990: 52-53).

An on-body memory

Writing in 1964 Leroi-Gourhan was concerned that humans would lose some of their capacity to think as they gave up not only tools but gestures to automatic machines; 'Not having to "think with ones fingers" is equivalent to lacking a part of one's normally, phylogenetically human mind.' (1993: 255). He would be pleased to see that humans are not regressing completely as they stroke their way through their memories with their thumbs.

Leroi-Gourhan anticipated the importance of the electronic memory (1993: 265) arguing that it was simply a matter of time before machines would be better able to achieve many of the functions of the human brain. Computer-based devices such as the iPod use memory in a double way, firstly to store the music as a digital sequence and secondly to store the programme of actions needed to replay the music; all that is left for the human user is to choose and listen. In making the body somewhat more absent to the self than is usually the case, it is not the broadcast culture of a radio, television or even the internet that is received but the person's own organised musical memories that threaten to disconnect them from their present situation.[x] Unlike the personal stereo, the iPod has a capacious memory that can contain more than a human can remember it contains. Musical memories can be lost and rediscovered, kept in the device but hardly ever 'replayed' – Bingham (2006: 14) writes of these 'lost tracks' as contributing to a 'hidden library of information' as to the identity of their owner.[xi]

What the iPod brings onto the body and into personal and leisure life is a way of organising files that has become a standard of late modern rationality. The use of files and documents to systematise bureaucratic organisation, work and the activities of the state and large corporations was identified by Max Weber as a key feature of modernity that characterised its tendency to instrumental rationality (1948: 196-198). Files, along with rules regarding their management and use, became a technical matter for experts in offices – bureaucrats. This does not mean that filing systems never became incorporated into private lives or that they were not realised in media other than documents. Samuel Beckett's prescient play, 'Krapp's Last Tape', first performed in 1958, catches precisely the problems with the mechanised bureaucratisation of private life.

The play opens with Krapp bending over a ledger, reading the entries:

> **Box... thrree… spool… five. (*He raises his head and stares in front. With relish*). Spool! (*Pause*) Spooool! (*Happy smile. Pause. He bends over table, starts peering and poking at the boxes.*) Box… three… three… four… two… (*with surprise*) nine! good God! … seven… ah! the little rascal! (*He takes up box, peers at it.*) Box thrree. (*He lays it on the table, opens it and peers at spools inside*).**
>
> **(Beckett 1959: 10)**

Krapp, who had recorded diary entries rather than music, used a ledger with brief descriptors – some of which clearly confuse him – to find particular entries on his tapes that are on reels in numbered boxes. The chaos of the boxes, the cryptic and idiosyncratic form of the entries in his ledger make finding the entry he wants frustrating ('Farewell to … love') – at one stage he sweeps all the tape boxes off the table. The gestures required are complex and fiddly because once found, the tape has to be loaded and cued but nonetheless he takes a certain

delight in the process and the equipment, expressed by his relish in the word ‘spool’. There is also an easy satisfaction with the process of playback in which he can just sit and listen to his past self relating how things were then. Sometimes his past self is commenting on even earlier aspects of his life, so concatenating three phases of Krapp’s self into one moment of reflection. What is so perceptive about Beckett’s use of the tape recorder is how he identifies the significance of an early form of personal audio recording as a way of organising identity. Krapp has devised a catalogue system for finding and identifying appropriate sections because audio recording runs in time and is not easy to scan; speeded up it becomes noise. This is a difference from the diary in which written words and supplementary images can be flicked through or scanned. Interestingly, Krapp’s audio diary is not apparently organised chronologically in the way written diaries usually are, neither does the ledger seem to be organised alphabetically, a second common way to organise information.

Later in the second half of the twentieth century, filing systems became intertwined with computerised methods of storing and retrieving information; the computers took over much of the work of the bureaucratic experts and many of the rules of office procedure were designed into software programmes. Storing data in digital format dramatically reduces the physical space it requires, enables it to be copied easily and cheaply and makes it simple to index and searchable. This computer-based technology has made the bureaucratic organisation of personal information (e.g. domestic letters, finance, address books) possible if rather limited and uninteresting. But the iPod, along with other MP3 players, uses ‘ID3 tags’ attached to each music track that identify it and add information such as title, artist, album, track number, genre, date or other details. The sets of tags can be copied into any number of directories without any need to copy the complex and relatively voluminous music data. This makes the filing system very flexible; it appears as if there are multiple copies of the music kept in different contexts or sequences.[xii] The user is not involved in deciding what to copy where, they simply ‘drag’ the visible label to where they want it to create the illusion of a complete new copy. In fact they are simply copying the tags which ‘know’ where the music file is.

The iPod’s content can be ordered by any of the tags to create ‘playlists’ to fit mood, occasion, genre, artist or Apple’s own playlists including ‘recently added’, ‘recently played’, ‘most played’ and ‘top rated’. Each playlist or the whole contents of the memory can also be ‘shuffled’ into a random order for playing. None of these versions of filing need destroy any other and they can be personalised in a variety of ways through the efforts of the user whose playlists are like a file of taste preferences, that once made, are for ever available for recollection at will. Old or ‘original’ ways of storing the files can be retained along with a

virtually infinite number of variations. The mechanical task of sorting or resorting a record collection (alphabetically by title… or by artists… or sectioned into genres) can be achieved almost instantly and each sort or sequence can be retained as a playlist without the expenditure of significant resources in copying or storing. Leroi-Gourhan charts the evolution of the index from making the codex book usable by people who were not already familiar with its contents, to the electronic memory – the index, he argues, is like a social form of memory about what the book contains (1993: 263-266). The 'i' in iPod could stand for 'index' since the data handling of the device is a series of variable indexes, but its software works not to socialise memory but to organise and systematise on-body memories in a way that is not possible with organic memories.

ID3 tags have brought a new, computer-based version of instrumental rationality (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979) into the private lives and identities of the users of MP3 players. The industrialisation of the culture industry has brought the systematicity, orderedness and regularity of bureaucratic filing systems of the to personal, emotional, individual, spontaneous, life-enhancing stuff of. The iPod would seem to make Krapp's troubles a thing of the past; a single invisible spool could hold all his audio memories, ordered systematically by date and title. With just a stroke of his thumb he could rifle through his memories and let his past selves speak to his present self. The gestures and difficulties that he had with tins, spools and machines would disappear into a black box for no significant cost… though most users of the iPod don't use 'playlists' to order their own diary entries. The iPod and with its playlists has however changed the way music is listened to; gigabytes of storage mean that a continuous listening session could last for days. The musical background for a whole day or evening or for a long journey can come from a playlist onto which music has been selected in advance. The music can be carefully sequenced by track, player or album or it can simply be shuffled so that there is a serendipity to what is played so that there are surprises even the person who chose the contents of the playlist. For example, one of Bingham's respondents said:

> **I've got loads of playlists. I love them. I really like the fact that you can get that feeling of knowing what the next track will be without having to listen to the same type of music. You can mess around with them, Like I have a playlist for on my way to work which starts off quite relaxed for when I'm still sleepy and slowly builds up to get me psyched up or whatever.**
>
> **(Jenny, Interview 3 – Bingham 2006: 8)**

An object, a series, a network, a brand – an icon

As an object the iPod appealingly elemental in its bright, reflective, cold, shaped chrome physically solid body presenting just two simple geometrical forms on its face; a rectangular window and a circular ring with four sets of marks in black – or white.[xiii] It is an example of what Donald Norman calls 'visceral design'; "*good graphics, cleanliness, and beauty play a role… Yes, we love sensuous curves, sleek surfaces, and solid, sturdy objects."* (Norman 2004: 67). It fits easily in the palm, fingers and thumb curling around its sides to take a relaxed grasp, presenting its face to the face of whoever picked it up. Like a wallet or a purse it slips easily into a pocket or a bag to be carried as a part of routine equipment.

The device follows Apple's aesthetic of obscuring the workings and manufacture of the object[xiv] – instead of the engineering cues of screws and sharp corners, precision and neatness are design cues that confirm this as a 'black box' that the user cannot get in (even to change the battery!). The icons on the face wheel suggest movement in different directions and offer the one word 'MENU' that suggests a choice of functions is to be found inside. The functionality that a few years ago would have taken up a series of linked devices requiring many cubic feet of space, a number of power sources and many controls and cables, have all disappeared inside this slim plastic and metal box without an on or off switch. The box comes to life when its face is pressed – the human user only knows whether it is really alive or dead by attempting to revive it.

Writing long before the iPod was a possibility, Jean Baudrillard pointed out that obscuring the functionality of an object and relieving human beings of having to do things, creates a myth of functionality that is itself a sign of modernity. As energy become intrinsic to the object and little absence or physical effort is needed we are obliged to believe in "an absolute and limitless functionality, in efficacy as the virtue of signs" (Baudrillard 1996: 57). There is of course no 'the' iPod; there is a series of models that have transmogrified through six successive generations. What is now called by Apple the 'classic' iPod has generated off-spring or sub-species; the iPod Shuffle, the iPod Nano, the iTouch and it is clearly a progenitor of the iPhone. The metaphor of organic reproduction is appropriate because this is how the consumer is encouraged to see them as interconnected, as sharing characteristics while being different. The design cues, which hide functional capacity within physical form are clearly linked to the brand of 'Apple' and its subsidiary brand of 'iPod' – this is an important issue I will return to later in the paper. The iPod is then iconic within a range of related products from one manufacturer.

The iPod is also iconic as a model in the series (Baudrillard 1996: 137) of other MP3 players – devices which store music digitally in a compressed form and which contain electronic

circuitry to load, organise and play this music through headphones with an audio quality that is at least equivalent to the radio or the record player of forty years ago. Despite being a more expensive version of the MP3 player than many rivals the iPod has sustained its iconicity within this series of objects by its superior storage capacity, its quality of manufacture and its. Like a BMW it has been able to sustain its cultural value as an icon in the face of cheaper options that fulfil the great proportion of user requirements. The iPod is also iconic as a model in the series of handheld, electronic devices, ubiquitous in contemporary material culture, that are held in the hand and can be carried in a pocket or lost under a cushion. They zap, snap, click, whirr, blink, flash, ping – and crack sickeningly when they are trodden on: mobile phones; remote controls; digital cameras; mini-databanks; electronic dictionaries; personal digital assistants; pocket computers; handheld dictation recorders; portable cassette, CD and DVD players; GPS devices and so on. This series of objects has kept threatening to merge as functional capacity is extended in one device to overlap with another – the mobile phone is here perhaps the leading device that has progressively incorporated computing, photography and audio storage. Nonetheless the iPod has offered a model of design with which many of these various types of objects are compared – even in this broad range of series of series of objects the iPod is iconic. So much so that its form, tactile interface (touch and stroke instead of push-button) and visual interface (colour, high definition screen) have lead to the iPhone which is threatening to become the new iconic model for this collection of devices – for a few months at least.

The iPod is culturally an iconic device in the sense that it is difficult not to know what one is or to recognise that it has cultural value – if only to other people. Clearly, not everyone owns an iPod but just about everyone owns and routinely uses many of the other devices in these series. The iPod is visible in advertisements, in media commentary and in people's possession and use familiar even to those who have no desire to use one. The idea of the iPod as a personal, handheld device that contains digital computing power that can be configured precisely to its users' desires is what is important, not its market share or the numbers of users.[xv] It is of course an item of the past. The 'classic' iPod is not quite a museum piece, or ready for archaeological attention or being 'rediscovered', but it is being sold off as an obsolete fashion item, a superseded model, consigned to product history. It is no longer an object that has cachet within journalistic discourse or amongst the young and trendy or the early adopters. There is just sufficient distance from the iPod's moment of glory to consider its cultural location without an adulatory or anticipatory concern (Kahney 2005).

However iconic as an object, however much it seems to enfold the body and the person back on her or himself, the ipod is a device of connectivity – an i-con – that is iconic of what

Jeremy Rifkin (2000) calls the 'age of access'. What the user purchases is the accessibility that it offers not simply to itself but to systems way beyond the device and its wearer. The access to the user's own audio collection is only available via a computer and via proprietory software – iTunes – that the iPod user cannot avoid. Even Krapp would have had to load his audio recordings via iTunes in a compression format and as a set of tagged files that the iPod could recognise and play. Somehow, I don't think he would have bothered! But for the user who wants to play music or podcasts seems to have little choice but to use iTunes which recognises and repackages whatever is to be loaded whether it has come from a CD, an audio file, an MP3 file ripped off the net… or a song bought from iTunes.

Patrick Jordan comments on the design significance of the graphical user interface introduced by Apple and which made computer technology 'user-friendly' through the office metaphor that obscured the technological procedure operating underneath the user interface (2000: 2, 18). This is something we take for granted nowadays - who under thirty can remember DOS? The Apple iPod has done something similar in shielding the user from any complexity and providing a user-friendly interface that relies on the cultural familiarity of the text labels, menus, symbols and icons that have become culturally ubiquitous through the widespread use of computers with graphical user interfaces. But the iPod does require that the user has access; to a computer, to the internet and to iTunes. Rifkin argues that accessibility is itself a form of capital, that the product life-cycle has been shortened and that goods evolve into services (2000: 85-95). The iPod has indeed gone through regeneration as a product roughly once every year and the 'good' that it offers the consumer is not so much that on-body memory device discussed earlier, as the 'services' that come with the accessibility via computer systems in general and by the iTunes website in particular.

Users may buy and buy into the single material object of the iPod that they connect to their body and feel in some way 'expresses' their identity. But of course they are also buying into an immaterial networked cultural repository shaped by recommendations, reviews, advertisements and information about 'best sellers'.[xvi] At a price, even the playlist of a celebrity or respected musician can be downloaded. iTunes is a system of ordering music, both in the sense of arranging it in systematic files in which it can easily be found, and in the sense of ordering it for purchase. The two processes are distinguishable by the magic of credit card details that can transform the first into the second type of ordering to extend the iPod user's choice, virtually infinitely.

When standardised formats and hi-speed internet access made sharing complex digital files easy, a generation of young people revelled in being able to exchange their music files through the internet, downloading them onto computers and MP3 players. This meant that

musicians could make and share music with other people quickly and easily over the internet and it was so cheap to do that they didn't need to seek payment. This was a feature of what Richard Barbrook, writing in 1998 called the 'Hi-Tech Gift Economy'.[xvii] He was drawing on the situationists' interpretation of Marcel Mauss's analysis of archaic gift economies that predated capitalism and in which while exchange was reciprocal, payment was not required in a predetermined form or at a specified time (1990). Barbrook saw the exchange of digital information free of the constraints of copyright – software, music, ideas, images – as contributing to a digital commons that provided a significant political response to capitalism. Indeed, in reviewing his earlier piece in 2005, he argues that the high-tech gift economy has moved into the mainstream through the activities of bloggers who give their time and efforts for free.[xviii] As Barbrook argues, the commercial economy needs the innovation and entrepreneurial imagination of the free economy so the two co-exist in a mixed economy and the early phases of music downloading provoked the development of sophisticated and attractive commercial sites of which iTunes is one of the most successful.[xix] This does not mean that the iPod itself or the systems of sharing and loading music have not been 'hacked' by those keen to disturb the networked economy that comes with iTunes; as early as 2002 a journalist in Time magazine was telling his readers about how to hack the software on an iPod claiming that it is 'how democracy works in the digital age'.[xx] a variety of programmes for controlling the iPod independently of iTunes restrictions on what music can be uploaded and download can easily be bought on the web and for the more adventurous, open source operating systems can be installed on the iPod releasing it from the restraints of the Apple network.

For all the different possible ways of using the iPod, it is probably best understood as an assemblage and as a brand rather than as a device for engaging with the digital commons. The iPod is not simply a unitary device that one carries on and connected to one's body but is an assemblage that extends through the file organising system, the computer that runs iTunes and the online system by which the software is maintained and the user is connected to an infinite supply of music. The way in which the iPod is configured in relation to iTunes connects the user's memory directly to the organ of the Apple corporation, demanding that everything is channelled through it's checks and balances. As well as a material assemblage, the immaterial continuity of the iPod can be thought of as what Celia Lury means by a 'brand' (2004). An extended and fluid object it is a crossing point for the flow of different types of knowledge practices – economic, legal, design, marketing, technological. The brand is a multi-layered, dynamic sort of thing that is, she says: '… simultaneously virtual and actual, abstract and concrete, a means of relativity and a means of relationality' (Lury 2004: 15). The name 'iPod' sounds like an abbreviation for identity-Pod, the container

for an identity and has become a popular and well-recognised brand in itself.[xxi] But the combination of the name 'iPod', the Apple logo of an apple with a bite out of it (that appears discreetly on the lower back cover of the iPod), and the distinctive physical object of the device, they constitute a very powerful and flexible compound brand. The device shares a brand identity through the design cues of Apple computers and accessories (solid, white or back, flat-surfaced boxes with curved corners). This chain of design and 'look' gives the Apple and iPod brands a fashion currency whose value is difficult to ignore – even if we can avoid the object. The cultural significance of the iPod, realised as a brand with a reputation, linked to talked about objects, extends the impact of the iPod as a device beyond those who own and use one. The iconicity of the iPod brand is more extensive and more successful than any other personal stereo system, even its predecessor the Sony Walkman.

As Lury points out, a brand is an asymmetrical legal object that establishes property rights in an object that may be more or less material (Lury 2004: 14). Apple retain property rights over the design, the technology, the software and even – if we've downloaded it – the music or podcast on our iPod. Those who lever open their iPod's – to change the battery, to adjust the tone, or hack the software – are not immune from prosecution on the grounds that they bought and own the object. Rifkin's paean for the age of access as displacing the age of property overlooks the property rights that are handed over in exchange for access. The iPod brings with it a set of legal issues about ownership and control that are not quite like anything we have seen before.

Conclusions

The iPod appears to be an iconic object in the cultural environment of late modernity but this appearance obscures a number of contradictions that have been explored in this paper. Firstly, it provides its user with continuous and mobile, access to the contents of the culture in which they live – but unlike broadcast or educational systems, the iPod tends to close its users to other people's selection of culture, to variation or newness. What is played, what is chosen is what has already been enjoyed and is merely chosen and played again. The randomness of 'shuffling' songs or the conjunction of a song with a visual environment give the illusion of cultural creation, of the operation of imagination – but in fact there is no originating intention, no player, no creator, just a mechanically determined chance. Secondly, rather than being an expression of individuality and identity or a way of interacting with the identities of others, the iPod turns the individual in on themselves, closing down the ecstatic body and extending memory in a systematic way through a device that becomes part of the recessive body.

Thirdly, the sequence of operations that would have in the past been learnt from the culture and so have connected the individual to their society, have been mechanised and internalised within the device, leaving only the residual gesture of thumb stroking and pressing. Along with the sequence of bodily gestures, the rational and instrumental labour of indexing and organising the emotional and social process of music has 'disappeared' into an electronic programme. Everything is tagged and searchable, it is arranged in precisely ordered sequences (alphabetical, categorised) and even the serendipity of the 'shuffle' system is mathematically random, devoid of meaning. This is instrumental rationality masquerading as self-identity – if we work within its frame, ordering our music, we are doing the work of soft capitalism, managing ourselves according to its model of mediated personhood (Thrift 2005). And fourthly, the illusion of an object that is possessed and owned by an individual person can be better understood as a brand that brings associations and which co-opts the user into a corporate network, a circuit of capitalism that operates across different media and series of objects. These contradictions should be enough to make us stamp on our iPod's! But, I don't suppose we will…

Tim Dant

2nd September, 2008

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[i] Dylan Jones's musical biography iPod, Therefore I am (2005) plays on this pun, especially in the Chapter entitled 'I Came, iPod, I Conquered'.

[ii] 'Sam, Interview 7' – this quotation from an interview comes from Casey Bingham's undergraduate dissertation 'Under my Thumb' that was submitted in June 2006 in part completion of his undergraduate degree at the University of East Anglia. I am most grateful for Casey's generous permission to draw on his exceptional but previously unpublished work for this article.

[iii] Some users in Bull's research (2000 :19-26) did report preparing tapes for certain journeys or types of journeys and some of Bingham's respondents had playlists for certain activities or places (2006 : 8). But in these situations the intention that attaches meaning comes from within the person, for the person – it involves none of cultural exchange of seeing a film at the cinema.

[iv] Bingham describes the 'podparty' and a number of other ways of sharing the contents of iPods (2006: 22).

[v] "What I like about my iPod is that it's all I need. Before [with my personal tape player] I had to think about how many tapes would fit into my bag. It was always a balance between not feeling loaded up with all these tapes and not wanting to suddenly realise that I didn't want to listen to anything I had on me" – Stephen, Interview 8 in Bingham 2006: 3).

[vi] Although of course both the iPod Shuffle and Nano use flash memory

[vii] Casey Bingham reported that all his interviewees mentioned the thumb wheel. One said to him: "It's really good the way it's so simple. When I first got it I kept on stopping tracks accidentally in the middle which was annoying. Now, when my friends do it, it makes me feel… I don't know, like it's mine; like I've got some special relationship with it or something. It's stupid, I know, but you kind of have to learn to use the scroll wheel. It's an organic process. People start off and they don't get it at all, but soon they've worked it out. It's quite satisfying I suppose." (Claire, Interview 5 in Bingham 2006: 17)

[viii] "I treat it like therapy. I just kick back and let the music sort of wash over me. It's weird cos it feels like its coming from inside your head, like the word of God or something. It's much more powerful than listening to music normally." (Sam, Interview 7 in Bingham 2006: 12)

[ix] As David Hansen-Miller pointed out to me, the effect has some of the potency of Lacan's mirror in which the self becomes mirrored back to itself and identity becomes embodied in an internal loop of awareness. Unlike the image in the mirror however, the iPod disappears into the recessive body, so the self is not *seen* as embodied and in the world but its reflexive loop means the self is experienced in and through its musical memories.

[x] One of the few comments of censure of the 15 Royal Navy sailors and marines seized by the Iranian forces in March 2007 was the remark by Sir Jonathon Band, the First Sea Lord, that a sailor in the navy 'should not have an iPod on him', referring to one taken from the youngest of the sailors (Guardian June 20th 2007).

[xi] 'Jack' told Bingham about a tune on his iPod that he had apparently danced to when he was little. H said 'I don't remember but apparently I loved it!'. 'Sam' told him about a track on his iPod that he associated with an ex-girlfriend and a trip to Glastonbury and said 'I don't know why I've got it on there'. (Bingam 2006: 13)

[xii] In bureaucratic filing systems the carbon copy and later the photocopy meant that copies of letters and other documents could be kept in more than one file. Cross referencing between files also meant that links between contexts could be maintained without copying. ID3 tags are a mixture of the effect of a photocopy of key information and a cross reference to the full set of data. However, they are time-space compressed to the extent that the apparently instant and infinitesimally small link is invisible and independent of a sequence of human gestures. This means that the filing system can be become part of the recessive body and apparently disappear into the self.

[xiii] The design has evolved through generations moving from white to black and silver, plastic to anodised aluminium, click wheel to touch wheel, buttons to menus.

[xiv] The object displays what Leroi-Gourhan calls 'functional aesthetics'; '…an object achieves functional beauty to the extent that it is divested of its figurative content…' (1993: 299).

[xv] It seems that the iPod's market share of hard-drive mp3 devices was up to 87% and 14million were sold during the last quarter of 2006. Since then its market share has dropped, partly in response to the availability of mobile phones with audio storage capacity. The days of the classic form of the iPod – the hard-drive, hand held music player – as a market leader are over. It is being replaced by flash drive devices with greater functionality that are catching up in memory size.

[xvi] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

[xvii] http://www.imaginaryfutures.net/2007/04/19/the-hi-tech-gift-economy-by-richard-barbrook/ - last accessed 19th February 2008.

[xviii] http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_12/barbrook/ Last accessed 19th February 2008.

[xix] In 2005 digital music sales were claimed to account for 4% of the American music market but iTunes was responsible for 70% of commercial downloads and sold more music than leading chains of music stores.

http://www.news.com/iTunes-outsells-traditional-music-stores/2100-1027_3-5965314.html Last accessed, 19th February 2008. These sorts of statistics are in themselves a mode of corporate advertising and cannot be treated as any more than a crude indicator.

[xx] http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1101020422-230383,00.html last accessed 02/08/08.

[xxi] Apparently the 'i' in 'iMac' originally signified it as a computer designed for internet use – but if users impute other meanings to a name then that is what brands are all about. The distinctive lowercase 'i' prefix followed by a capital and a word with vague connotative meaning has itself become a distinctive logo that others try to use.