# Portable audio equipment of the 80s in urban and domestic spaces: Walkmans and Ghetto Blasters as mobile listening tools.

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***Working paper***[1] *– **please do not quote without permission!***

During the last two or three decades, portable technologies as well as mobile consumption in general seem to have conquered our minds and everyday routines. We can grab a "coffee to go" on nearly every street corner; "portable puddings" are sold in freezers in American supermarkets, and the latest cell phones promise "mobile entertainment" anytime, anywhere. This paper is a cultural history enquiry into the portable audio pleasures of the 80s and the way they were experienced and explored in urban and domestic spaces by West German and American consumers. While the West German case serves as the main storyline, the American one contrasts it. I will focus on two items that ultimately became popular culture icons, namely the Walkman – which is often referred to as a "personal stereo" to avoid Sony's brand name –, and the boom box – which is a unit combining a radio and a cassette recorder in stereo quality. I will place these two audio devices into the larger context of consumer electronics and dominant music listening practices. However, this first outline will be sketchy, pointedly flashing out central cultural differences in the consumption of everyday technologies. Main sources are consumer and technical journals, advertising, media coverage and the scarce marketing studies, which are accessible.

On a theoretical level, I will challenge the term "domestication" and in particular, the research tradition that is related to it, namely the predominant bias of historians of consumption and technology to focus on the household and on that part of consumption which takes place inside this realm as the main unit of analysis.[2] In contrast, the portable electronics of the 80s were consumed in any spaces and even while "on the move". Furthermore, due to their compactness, the individual rather than the household used them. Both, the individual as well as the public consumption made producers and consumers emphasize the design and symbolic meaning dimension of technology – mobile audio technologies became lifestyle issues.

Furthermore, three aspects will be highlighted. Firstly, young people and teenager played an ambiguous role as lead users. In contrast with personal computers or stationary hifi units, which were used (or even partly self-constructed) by technical enthusiasts, teenagers – often without too much technical aspiration – were the first to become fond of portable audio gear. As low-end products, most portables were less technically sophisticated than their stationary counterparts, and thus, cheap. Teens not only valued the affordable price but also the mobility, as it enabled them to listen independently from the family set and to take the gear along to any meeting place outside. Secondly, the different consumer contexts in West Germany and the U.S. accounted for different

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[2] Cf. e.g. Silverstone/Hirsch who define the family household as the "moral economy" of consumption: Silverstone, Roger; Hirsch, Eric (Eds): Consuming Technologies. Media and information in domestic spaces. London, New York 1992.

user practices and socio-cultural meanings of portables. Thus, despite global designs – and the plainest example for a global design is the Sony Walkman –, there were local differences in consumption, related to prevailing norms regulating private and public behavior and performance, which however have not been traced in more detail yet.[3] But also within one local cultural setting or even within the micro setting of a household, one might find diverse user practices, related, among others, to race, class, and age. Also, gender was at stake here, however in a rather subdued way: The male public display of portable stereos was predominant, at least as it is reflected in the historical sources.[4] Women might have dominated usage inside the home, but like any rather discrete everyday behavior, this phenomenon is hardly described in historical sources. Thirdly, it was often non-users, or rather "anti-users", which dominated public discourse. The value that they ascribed to the new audio designs was often formulated in relation to extant music listening habits, which they considered as superior.

The 80s are the period during which wide strata of West German consumers included portable electronics in their everyday lives. Moreover, during the "electronic 80s", private and satellite television were introduced (1984/85), video games became popular, and at the end of the decade, nearly every third household used a VCR.[5] Personal computers found their way into the private households, in 1981/82, the CD was introduced, and in 1987, MTV Europe started its broadcasting of pop music video clips. This increase in electronic leisure offers was paralleled by two social changes: a growing demand for a mobile lifestyle in professional life, but also in leisure time and changing leisure patterns that began to emphasize individuality, flexibility and fun. As Robert Putnam argued in his book "Bowling Alone", in the U.S., individualized entertainment gained the upper hand over shared communal activities since the 70s.[6] The same happened in West Germany, however with some time lag, as will become apparent in the controversy that the Walkman stirred in this country. Hand-tailored electronics spelt both mobility and an individual control of one's entertainment, two aspects that contemporary advertising particularly dwelled upon: JVC for example promoted a boom box under the heading "JVC's portable music pleasure – for any time and any path" and highlighted that its owner would be able to listen to self-chosen music.[7] A carry-able, high-end hifi unit was promoted with the picture of a beach behind the set and under the title: "JVC. The most versatile way to experience hifi", while the text read, "JVC shows you yet another path to modern living. An active, sporty and mobile path. (…)"[8] Thus, the "Electronic Eighties" were the decade in which the mobile lifestyles of today's "urban nomads"[9] – in need of cell phones and coffees to go –

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[3] Cf. on the global introduction of the Sony Walkman and a discussion of the different marketing in the UK and Japan: du Gay, Paul; Hall, Stuart; Janes, Linda; Mackay, Hugh und Negus Keith: Doing Cultural Studies. The Story of the Sony Walkman. London 1997. On its present usage in the UK cf.: Bull, Michael: Sounding out the city: personal stereos and the management of everyday life. Oxford 2000. On cultural issues of the Philips Cassette: Millard, Andre: Audio Cassette Culture and Globalisation. In: Lyth, Peter; Trischler, Helmuth: Wiring Prometheus. Globalisation, History and Technology, Arhus 2004, pp. 235-250.

[4] Contemporary sociological studies on user behavior are devoid, but user studies might be available in some company archives or marketing departments. Recent cell phone studies similarly report the tendency that men are more likely to phone in the streets while women prefer semi-public places like cafés.

[5] Data by the Statistische Bundesamt on VCRs in West German Households: 1983: 6,8%, 1988: 26,2%, 1993: 48,5%.

[6] Cf. Putnam, Robert D.: Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York et al. 2000.

[7] Cf. ad in: Hifi-Markt, No. 3, 1980, p. 2.

[8] Cf. ad in: Stereo. Das deutsche Hifi- und Musikmagazin, No. 6, 1981 (back cover of the journal).

[9] The "urban" or "digital nomad" has been a figure of the recent decade to popularize wireless (computer) technologies, cf. e.g.: Makimoto, Tsugio; Manners, David: Digital Nomad. Chichester 1997. Jacque Attali was the

emerged. East Asian companies offered a whole variety of portable electronics to meet this demand:[10] "Sanyo comes with the mini and the slim!" reads the heading of a Sanyo ad from 1979; underneath, we see a boom box, a pocket radio, a portable TV, and a thin recorder – promoted as an "expression of a new lifestyle".[11] Similar developments were taking place on the American market, and here, even the homemaker was constructed as a potential consumer for portable electronics. *Good housekeeping*, the journal for housewives, for example, featured a portable hifi system with detachable loudspeakers, a palm-sized radio recorder, a credit card shaped radio, headphones, and a tiny color TV placed in the palm of a lady's hand, all included under the heading "Entertainment to Go". This variety of offers for all consumer groups is also stressed in a SHARP ad from the mid-80s (**PICTURE 1**).[12] Here, we see six distinct boom boxes, which represent different lifestyle aspirations and thus are each placed in the hand of a different person symbolizing a specific idealized consumer segment: On the left, an athlete carries the oversized boom box; the Walkman is used by a child skating. A Black basketball player in the middle holds the iconic boom box design. Next to him, the young urban and sportily dressed White man carries a more upbeat red version with double cassette drives with one hand—and with the other, a pizza. Behind him, we see the grandma type with a blue slim version, and finally, on the right, a trendy woman edges out of the picture carrying a retro-style recorder in the way she would carry a fashionable handbag. In retrospect, the variety of Walkman and boom box models available in the stores can hardly be overstated: For each generic product type, it grew into the hundreds, while the models also changed every year.[13] With this wide product differentiation manufacturers responded to the many customer lifestyles while arranging their product innovation accordingly. In particular, Sony was very successful by developing so called platform models which serve as a basis for a whole array of slightly modified models, thereby constituting one "product family" or product line.[14]

In contrast with this advertising vision, in the 60s and early 70s, the main target group for portable audio electronics had been the young. In its 1969 test report on cassette recorders, the

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first to use the term "objects nomads" to name for the portable music equipment of teenagers, cf.: Attali, Jacques: Bruits. Essai sur l économie politique de la musique. Paris 2001 (first ed. 1977), p. 199. For other recent (sociological) authors using the metaphor cf. the overview in: Urry, John: Sociology beyond Societies. Mobilities for the twenty-first century. London, New York 2000, p. 28f.

[10] East Asian companies were the leading producers of small consumer electronics. Their first product to be introduced in the West German was the pocket radio at the end of the 50s. In general, in the beginning of the 80s, the worldwide consumer electronics sales were dominated by the following companies: Matsushita with 22% share of the total sales, Philips with 14%, followed by Sony, Hitachi and Toshiba with around 10%, followed by: Sanyo, Thomson Brandt, RCA, and then, Zenith, Grundig, Pioneer, ITT which shared 2-4%. Cf.: Commission of the European Communities (Ed.): The European Consumer Electronics Industry. Luxembourg 1985 (researched by Mackintosh Internat. Ltd.), p. 68.

[11] Cf. the journal: ffh, No. 11, 1979, p. 43.

[12] Source: http://www.pocketcalculatorshow.com/boombox/decline1.html (date: Sept. 17, 2004).

[13] In the literature, different – and rather contradictable – numbers are named. For the U.S. market, more than 550 different models of Walkmans were spotted by analysing newspaper ads of the 80s, cf. Sanderson, Susan; Uzumeri, Mustafa: Managing product families: the case of the Sony Walkman. In: Research Policy 24 (1995), pp. 761-782. Wiesinger gives the following numbers for the 1994 German market: boom boxes: 1.160 models marketed under 99 different labels – Walkmans: 918 models (79 labels). Cf.: Wiesinger, Jochen: Die Geschichte der Unterhaltungselektronik : Daten, Bilder, Trends. Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 129 (numbers provided by the GfK and gfu).

[14] For the Sony Walkman cf. Sanerson / Uzumeri (early platforms models were: TPS-L2, WM 2, WM DD, WM 20, p. 768). On the differentiation of a product type along its life cycle cf.: Kunkel, Paul: Digital Dreams: the Work of the Sony Design Center. Kempten 1999.

West German consumer journal *TEST* pictured the average user as a young beatnik: The illustration showed a man with long hair, hippie clothes, and a cigarette, holding the recorder close to one ear.[15] In the U.S., audio industry targeted even younger consumers, as the 5-15 year olds were spotted as the main buyer group of cheap radios and phonographs. RCA termed this market segment, targeting it with a special Youth Products Program, the "$ 500 million kindergarten-to-high-school consumer electronics market".[16] In West Germany, cheap portables were contrasted with high-end audio technology, since hifi, as a hobby, became extremely popular during the 60s and 70s.[17] At a time when television had replaced radio as the lead – and still family-oriented – medium and radio had become a secondary medium, middle- and upper-class male audiophiles discovered music listening as a new domestic leisure practice. It not only demanded economic capital, but also some technical know-how and a highbrow cultural knowledge – aspects, which were reflected in the expression of the "serious music friend". In 1966, the German DIN 45500 "Hifi norm" even laid down technological criteria to evaluate the so-called "natural sound reproduction" that the Hifi hobbyists were striving for. Special interest journals gave advice on how to choose the appropriate equipment while widely neglecting the portables of young pop and rock listeners.

However, this did not mean that adults were not using any portables. They did so, but in a different way. The radio recorder gained a wide popularity as taken-for-granted acoustic equipment for a semi-mobile alongside listening. Since the end of the 60s, producers had packed radios and cassette players into one unit. By the mid-70s, a stereo function for both radio and cassette player was added – a design that in the U.S. became termed the "boom box".[18] Because of their universality and handiness, both the monaural and the stereo radio recorders were mass sellers. The illustration of the 1975 *TEST* report on cassette recorders now featured adults using a boom box, even if the report itself stated their high popularity with teenagers **(PICTURE 2)**:[19] A group of adult men is having an evening get-together in a semi-public indoor leisure setting, apparently a guesthouse. The music seems to provide a background for their chatting. As a secondary medium, adults listened to radio recorders while spending leisure time with others, or while working in the garden. They took it along to their weekend houses and used it back home to listen to the news in the morning. Housewives livened up their domestic chores with it, and

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[15] Cf. TEST, 1969, No. 12, pp. 27- 33 ("Musik zum Abspulen. Gute Noten für Kassetten-Recorder"). The recorders tested had prices from 150 to 350 DM. By the end of the 60s, when the Philips cassette had become a standard, around 1000 pre-recorded music tapes were available; however, their sound quality was quite low. Apart from the teenage use, adults used the cassette recorders in their cars and also back home; tape amateurs did sound recordings outside with this compact and battery-driven system. In particular in the U.S, many car drivers used tape recorders to enlighten their daily commuting or monotonous long distance drives. For this purpose, 8-track-players were widespread, but they never gained popularity in West Germany. On the Philips cassette recorder in the 60s, cf. the detailed and insightful article by Bijsterveld, Karin: "What Do I Do with My Tape Recorder…?" Sound Hunting and the Sounds of Everyday Dutch Life in the 1950s and 1960s. In: Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 24 (4), 2004, pp. 613-634.
[16] Cf.: Christian Science Monitor, Aug. 5, 1968 ("Young buyers 'dig' electronics").
[17] In the U.S., the hifi hobby was explored in the 40s and 50s (cf.: Keightley, Keir: "Turn it down!" she shrieked: gender, domestic space, and high fidelity, 1948-59. In: Popular music, 15, 1996, pp. 149-177). "High fidelity" as a term had been used since the 1930s to define audio equipment of high quality, which reached a high naturalness between original and reproduction. In West Germany, the hifi hobby was enforced by the Hifi norm from 1966. Around that time, many different high-end audio journals were established on the magazine market. Cf.: Gauß, Stefan: Das Erlebnis des Hörens. Die Stereoanlage als kulturelle Erfahrung. In: Ruppert, Wolfgang (Ed.): Um 1968. Die Repräsentation der Dinge. Marburg 1998, pp. 65-92.
[18] To get an impression on the many models of boom boxes, cf. the virtual "Ghettoblaster-Museum" assembled by two American Ghetto blaster collectors: http://www.pocketcalculatorshow.com/boombox/ (date: Sept. 17, 2004).
[19] Cf. TEST, H. 6, 1975, p. 320 ("Schwächen im Kassettenteil. Test: Radiorecorder I").

children listened to fairytale cassettes. The radio recorder thus literally took the place of the portable radio whose design it mimicked. Since the official West German statistics focused on domestic consumption and stationary equipment, it does not contain reliable data on the distribution of boom boxes in private households. Market and sociological studies suggest that, by the end of the 70s, more than 60% of West German households owned a radio recorder and that they used it on a regular basis for both listening and taping.[20]

Whereas for adults, the boom box was a handy temporary solution for those cases where the domestic set was out of reach, it were teenagers who ascribed a special meaning to it. First of all, the portability enabled them to listen independently and spatially remote from the parental audio sets. Besides, teenagers intensively used the recording function despite its low sound quality. Among others, the combination unit enabled them to make personal compilations of their favorite songs while these were broadcasted on the radio hit parade. Reacting on this practice, the well-known "Quelle" mail-order company even advertised the radio recorder as a tool "for the young hit hunter".[21] Furthermore, teens schlepped their portables around to nearly every clique-meeting place. **PICTURE 3**, an illustration from a consumer test report in 1980, shows five girls and boys in their early teens with a boom box.[22] They congregate around a bench in a public park, one boy sits on a so-called bonanza bike, which, back then, was the other hip mobile technology for teens to own. Every now and then, with their public music consumption, teens might have annoyed or actively provoked their environment by playing the music loudly.[23] Apart from the rather ritual complaints about loud teenage music listening however, the assimilation of the boom box did not spur a serious controversy. A sociological study from around 1990 finally dealt with teenager's use of the cassette. It analyzed its use by children aged 10-13 and emphasized the significance of this medium for kids, as it exceeded that of television.[24] Besides, and in contrast to television watching, parents mostly did not control what their children listened to and what cassettes they bought by their own money. Listening to self-chosen music as well as taping and exchanging music was a main element of the identity construction of teenagers by then, and many social activities were arranged around it. Furthermore, teenagers used their cassette recorders in a creative way, and every second child had taped her or his own cassettes. They recorded their songs, their own jokes and stories, or they imitated pop stars and popular radio broadcasts. Around 1990, 80% of both male and female teenagers had a cassette recorder, and even pre-schoolers listened to cassettes 20 minutes a day, on average.[25]

To sum up, one could get the impression that the widespread dissemination of the portable stereo

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[20] In 1978, 62% had radio recorders, 63% had a record player; numbers researched by the "Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung". They are reported in the technical journal: Funkschau, No. 20, 1978, p. 5 ("Eine Mark auf jede Leerkassette?"). 82% of the radio recorder owners did use it daily or at least several times a week, and 90% had at least once taped a cassette.

[21] Cf. Quelle Katalog 1977/78, p. 763.

[22] Cf.: TEST, H. 12, 1980 ("Billige Kombis für junge Hörer"), pp. 21-27.

[23] The same had happened with portable radios around 1960 and led to radio bans. In particular, any kind of music players with loudspeakers were banned from public transport and still is nowadays.

[24] Cf.: Treumann, Klaus Peter u. Volkmer, Ingrid: Die Toncassette im kindlichen Medienalltag. Rekonstruktionsversuche parzellierter Lebensräume durch Medien. In: Zentrum für Kindheits- und Jugendforschung (Ed.): Wandlungen der Kindheit. Theoretische Überlegungen zum Strukturwandel der Kindheit heute. Opladen 1993, pp. 115-162. An important fact is that most kids by now had rooms of their own, in this case, 78,4%.

[25] On possession cf.: Baacke et. al. (Ed.): Lebenswelten sind Medienwelten. Opladen 1990, p. 64. The consumption time refers to those aged 3-6, cf.: Schönbach, Klaus: Hörmedien, Kinder und Jugendliche: ein zusammenfassender Bericht über neuere empirische Untersuchungen. In: Rundfunk und Fernsehen, vol. 41, 1993, pp. 232-242. The empirical study was conducted in Bavaria.

had taken place without much discussion – only the music industry kept complaining about the financial losses due to home taping. Also, the generational struggle, which resembled the conflict between the "serious music listener" and the "young rock listener", had lessened since today's parents had been yesterday's beatniks. In the 80s, many parents bought their kids a radio recorder as a kind of "first electro-acoustic basic equipment".[26]

However, it was the public usage of the Walkman that spurred controversies. When Sony introduced it in Japan, then in the U.S. and Europe in 1979 and 1980, there was a wave of enthusiasm among music fans everywhere, because the Walkman was a new way to experience music. One could listen privately with headphones, an aspect that had previously been the prerogative of hifi hobbyists. Furthermore, the experience was made even more special insofar as the Walkman user listened individually while moving around in a public space. In West Germany, mainly young users were seen with their Walkmans while shopping, strolling, biking, skating or commuting. In 1984, 30% of the 12-15 year olds in West Germany owned a Walkman. This proportion shrank to 5% in the 25-29 year old segment.[27] At first, the public use of headphones seemed quite awkward for West-German contemporaries, as the immediate wiring of a user to his audio technology previously had been a stationary practice of the (predominantly male) hifi hobbyists or of just a few tinkerers who also went outside with their cyborg-like constructions, but were regarded as freaks.[28] On second thought however, the public usage of headphones was read as a sign of a social escapism of the young generation. An audio journal defined the Walkman as "a technology for a generation which has nothing to talk any more", and a leading German news magazine pictured teenagers eating and shopping with their friends while also listening to their Walkmans.[29] Critics placed the Walkman in the context of the then frequent debates about young people who seemed frustrated and appeared to lack any motivation for social engagement. Besides, the Walkman was discussed within the larger incipient social trend towards single households and individualization. In this context, the "yuppie" still represented the negative hero of the so-called "elbow-society", i.e. the rat-race society, before becoming more positively connoted at the end of the decade. Both individualization and mobility, in accordance with an increasing orientation towards post-material values of consumption and a diversification of lifestyles, had been on their way since the end of the 60s, but only took hold in the West

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[26] Cf. TEST, H. 12, 1980 ("Billige Kombis für junge Hörer"), pp. 21-27.

[27] Cf. Schönhammer, Rainer: Der „Walkman". Eine phänomenologische Untersuchung. München 1988, p. 64.

[28] This wired choreography was often compared to a prosthesis. For example, in a critical article by a schoolteacher from 1981, the pocket stereo use was associated with a prosthesis and a transfusion, cf.: Flößner, Wolfram: Homo Walkman. In: Schulpraxis, 1981, pp. 1-5, cited in: Schönhammer, p. 88 („Der Renner der Saison, so scheint es, ist der Walkman, jenes hörprothesenähnliche Gerät, dessen handliche Leichtgewichtigkeit wir – wie so vieles – der Raumfahrt verdanken; man trägt es als flache Schachtel am Gürtel und hängt mit dem Kopf an seinen Kabeln und Schläuchen wie zu einer Transfusion.")
Tinkerers had realized such constructions already with the radio, and the technical journals of the 50s every now and then reported on the ubiquitous usage of pocket sized radios with ear phones. Cf. for an early report, here even with a picture of the wired tinkerer walking in the outside: Funktechnik, 1952, pp. 376-78 ("Bauanleitung: ‚Bambino' - ein Reisesuper für Kopfhörerempfang"). Producers, around 1960, marketed such radios, which consumers obviously did not buy. Later on, at the end of the 70s, tinkerers combined small cassette recorders with headphones, thereby anticipating the Walkman design. Cf. e.g. the report of the audio journalist Klein, Larry: In: Radio-Electronics, 1989, p. 72f ("Audio Update. Happy 10th anniversary, Sony Walkman!")

[29] Cf. Stereoplay, No. 2, 1981, p. 13; Der Spiegel, June 8, 1981, pp. 210-213 ("High und fidel"). From a technical point of view, also the Sony engineers considered the public usage of headphones as potentially problematic because of the resulting masking of the auditive environment. Sony`s TPS-L2 (the first Walkman) and the subsequent clones of other companies thus were equipped with penetrable ear phones and a so called "Talkline" button which, once pushed, lowered the volume while an purposefully built-in microphone transmitted the sound of the environment.

German consumer society during the 80s.[30]

The situation in the U.S. was quite different. Here, it was not the creation of an individual, discrete soundscape in public that stirred confusion, but the opposite, namely its absence. American contemporaries were annoyed by the mass of people – mostly young and often black – carrying blaring boom boxes. Thus, what was perceived as an anti-social tool in West Germany, became a tool of social respectability in the U.S.[31] By 1980, the boom box had become a central technological element in the hip hop culture initiated by youths in the South Bronx, Harlem and other depressed multiethnic ghettos.[32] Hip-hop emerged as an African- and Afro-Caribbean-American youth culture composed of graffiti, break dancing and rap music during the second half of the 70s. Rap was like "sonorial graffiti", an audible pendant of the public statements of this subculture.[33] Hip-hop embodied resistance and explosiveness, and rappers emphasized oppression and violence. In her study on the emergence of rap in New York, Tricia Rose describes hip-hop as the attempt "to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity and community".[34] The early rappers and DJs initiated spontaneous public parties to reclaim the streets, and they often did so by connecting their turntables and speakers to any available electrical source including public streetlights. DJ sounds were disseminated by copying locally produced tapes, e.g. on double cassette decks or boom boxes with two drives, and by playing them publicly on large boom boxes. In its early phase before commercialization, as underground music, rap was not produced and marketed on records, since large corporations dominated these. Break-dancers reclaimed street corners by setting up their portable stereos and dancing; others carried their sound around, and they did so in a demonstrative way by carrying the boom boxes on their shoulders. In this subculture, for many African-Americans then, the boom box was a political statement, and to "pump up the volume"[35] also meant an auditive appropriation of public spaces and a protest against race and class oppression. However, as the black feminist bell hooks pointed out, rap also was a male dominated subculture, connected with sexism and disrespect for women.[36] According to her, the male creativity as expressed in rap and dancing needed wide spaces remote from the cramped (and feminized) domestic ones.

In this context, the slang term "ghetto blaster" emerged which reflects both the affection

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[30] Cf. Andreas Rödder, who claims a change towards a postmodern consumption society between 1965 and 1990 with a growing emphasise in the 80s: Rödder, Andreas: Wertewandel und Postmoderne. Gesellschaft und Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1965-1990. Stuttgart 2004. Cf. also: Inglehart, Ronald: The silent revolution: changing values and political styles among Western publics. Princeton, 1977; Inglehart, Ronald: Modernization and Postmodernization. Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies. Princeton 1997; Schulze, Gerhard: Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Frankfurt, New York 1992.

[31] This is not to say that there were no discussions on the potential escapism. However, this discourse was not so dominant than in Germany.

[32] Cf. on the emergence of rap in New York, its musical and technological inventions, and its racial and sexual politics: Rose, Tricia: Black Noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America. Hanover et al. 1994. The boom box is only mentioned as a side issue while Rose describes in some detail sampling and music production technologies. On the meaning of rap for black teenagers at the end of the 80s, cf.: Berry, Venise T.: Rap Music, Self Concept and Low Income Black Adolescents. In: Popular music and society, vol. 14, No. 3, 1990, pp. 89-107. The author interviewed 115 students, mainly 9th and 10th graders and emphasises the importance of rap music for the self-identity of the students. Cf. also: Cooper, Martha: Hip Hop Files. Photographs 1979 – 1984. Köln 2004.

[33] Cf. Chambers, Ian: Urban Rhythms. Pop Music and Popular Culture. New York, 1985, p. 190

[34] Cf. Rose, p. 36.

[35] This is also a title of a movie from 1990.

[36] Cf.: hooks, bell: Das Einverleiben des Anderen. Begehren und Widerstand. In: hooks, bell: Black looks. Popkultur – Medien – Rassismus. Berlin 1994, pp. 33-56, the following: p. 51.

that young teens living in poor urban conditions felt for their affordable music sources as well as the clichéd and racist view of many non-users.[37] With sociological studies and differentiated statistics on the usage of portable stereos missing, it is difficult to state who exactly the users of boom boxes were. In 1980, the African-American magazine *Ebony*, a well-established journal aiming at middle-class black readers, reported that "(t)he portable radio-cassette is no. 1 with the young", as everybody from 12 to 25 seemed to carry them along, namely "on buses and subways, while shopping downtown, on the beach, and even while roller-skating and riding bikes." *Ebony* also presented a series of photographs featuring different users, e.g. a high school basketball player strolling along the beach and carrying a box on a shoulder strap, a roller skating duo, a couple sitting on a park bench, and also a couple just checking out a store window full of consumer electronics. In contrast, in the leading newspaper journals, the public usage of the boom box, which was represented as a practice mainly of Caribbean- and African-Americans who were quoted or pictured as fans of the loud mobile sound tools, was less supportive. As I will argue later on, this practice of loud public listening was deprecated while the Walkman was favored as a silent and individual tool.

Also, manufacturers reacted to the new subculture that some boom box users were creating. At that time, manufacturers had already designed ever-bigger boom boxes, which included more and more technical features. In this respect, offers available on the West German market did not differ from American ones, and the main aim was to imitate the high-tech stationary hifis. "Some of the units have so many buttons, knobs and light-emitting diodes that they look like the kind of devices that launch men to the moon", it was stated e.g. in the *Ebony* report.[38] It was exactly this semiotics of space travel and technical power, which was referred to by the growing "featuritis" of both boom boxes and hifi units. (Public) boom box users linked this semiotics of technical power with the loud music on the street, while producers reacted to these practices by favoring bass and volume and also, by marketing their products accordingly. **PICTURE 4** shows an ad by Panasonic, which was displayed in the above mentioned *Ebony* article.[39] In the textual information of the ad, the "high-stepping highs" and "low-down bass" were emphasized, and " (...) sophisticated goodies like linear scale tuning, LED meters, Dolby, separate bass and treble controls and 2-way speakers with separate woofers and tweeters" were featured. According to the ad, all these technical characteristics promised power, "(e)nough power to bring the beat to the street." In such marketing efforts, the beat in the street however was not necessarily the sound of the rapper, but – as in this case – that of any popular mainstream rock music. Yet, in many ads, the boom box was visually associated with African-Americans. Panasonic, for example, had engaged the black funky rock band *Earth Wind and Fire* to advertise for its portable stereos. In the respective ad (Pict. 4), the band members were featured standing in a neighborhood street with different boom box models on their shoulders. JVC, in an ad for a portable component hifi system, featured the African-American basketball team *Harlem Globetrotters*, who were famous for their comic routines while playing basketball.[40]

The introduction of the Walkman in the U.S. thus was absorbed in the context of the

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[37] I could not find out where the term "ghetto blaster" originates, whether as a racist wording of anti-users or as one formulated by the users as a term of black, urban pride.

[38] Cf. "Taking Your Music With You", in: Ebony, June 1980, pp. 134-138, here p. 134. Even the smaller radio recorders of the 70s explored the semiotics of space travel - the catalogue company Neckermann, for example, promoted its recorder in 1970 as "a piece of Apollo computer". Cf. Neckermann-Katalog, 1970 ("Brandneu! Welt-Premiere. Minicorder ein Stück Apollo-Computer").

[39] Cf. Ebony, June 1980, p. 137. It is probably due to clever marketing that the ad is placed in-between Ebony's report on the boom box.

[40] Cf. for the ad: Rolling Stone, June 11, 1981, p. 15.

emerging boom box culture, and the first reactions on this new kind of portable music were shaped accordingly. The *Wall Street Journal* defined it as the "middle- and upper-class answer to the box" and as "one of the hottest new status symbols around". The newspaper wrote: "It's Sony Corp.'s Walkman, everything in a cassette player that the box is not. Inconspicuous, it can fit in a pocket. Light, it weighs less than a pound. Quiet, it comes with a set of tiny headphones of an ounce and a half."[41] In a similar vein, *New York Times* hailed the Walkman as "a civilized alternative to the portable radio-cassette players that blare on streets and subways."[42] What was neglected in this discourse were the different perspectives that different cultures might hold on communal versus individual consumption. Apart from some subversive teenagers and expressive rappers, who used boom boxes as a political weapon, not every boom box user did purposefully disregard social rules, but more often held dissenting norms on social behavior and public performance.[43] With the pointed remark, "North Americans may well be the only people in the world who go outside to be alone and inside to be social",[44] Marshall McLuhan, in 1976, hinted to the prevailing spatial norms of social behavior. According to him, Americans wished for "privacy out-of-doors". The boom box users disrupted such spatial norms once their sounds exceeded either the accepted level of loudness or the accepted spaces where to experience shared music. While urban street corners and public transport systems were seen as such a transgression, domestic spaces like the garden or the hobby room as well as some working spaces and in particular explicit leisure settings like the holiday beach represented spatial environments in which also the average American naturally took some music along.[45] Shared public music consumption then, as practiced in many multiethnic neighborhoods, did not correspond with the ideal of communal life that the average White American held, whereas inside the home, with 5 radios per household and two TVs in every second one, individually spent electronic leisure was a given fact.

In the urban setting, in the end, some cities banished boom boxes and radios from certain public areas (public transport often had already banned them, as in the German case) to restore the auditory order of the familiar urban soundscape.[46] In particular in New York, the increase of public music consumption led to several sanctions. For this city, the media expert Gary Gumpert,

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[41] Cf. "Hey, Man! New Cassette Player Outclasses Street People's `Box`". In: Wall Street Journal, June 23, 1980, p. 25.

[42] Cf. New York Times, April 17, 1981, p. B 4 ("Private Music and Public Silence"). A similar contrast was made in a market study on portable electronics some years later. Whereas the boom boxes of the past were defined "as weapons to infuriate the staid and proper", Walkman users were defined as teenagers as well as upscale people over thirty also owning a stationary hifi system back home: "It is the paything of the post-60's, turned-professional generation, the people who have joined society, but who insist on not abjuring totally the counter-culture claim they staked out a decade and a half ago." (p. 92) Ultimately, Walkman users were said to resemble the same market that also Apple was trying to reach with its personal computers, cf.: International Resource Development Inc. (Ed.): Personal Portable Consumer Electronics Markets. Norwalk, Connecticut, Report Nr. 587, Jan. 1984.

[43] This difference in rules for public behavior becomes apparent in the article on the Walkman in the *Wall Street Journal*. Here, a boom box fan is quoted that he wants to continue to use his box even if the Walkman delivers good sound because other people on the street can thus participate in his music.

[44] Cf. McLuhan, Marshall: Inside on the Outside, or the Spaced-Out American. In: Journal of Communication, No. 4, 1976, pp. 46-53, here p. 46. McLuhan sees evidence for this in literature, film, or technical objects like the car.

[45] Up to the 80s, in audio journals, "portable pleasures" were intrinsically linked to the holiday season. "Going to the beach without music is like watching a ball game without beer", begins e.g. a report in *Rolling Stone* on "Summer sounds to go" (July 21 / Aug. 4, 1983, pp. 105f).

[46] The specific notion of privacy in public space also could be an explanation why, in the U.S., cell phones were officially banned from certain areas (e.g. in New York cinemas and theaters in 2003). Furthermore, jammers have been used e.g. in restaurants to make cell phone usage impossible. Cf.: Levinson, Paul: Cellphone. The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything! New York et al. 2004, p. 67.

in his 1987 "Tales of the Media Age", asserted a "radio war" during which the "auditory aggression" turned into a "subject of police officials".[47] Boom boxes were confiscated, and in some areas of Central Park and the Coney Island beach music-free zones were installed.[48] In its report on the issue, the *Washington Post* actually interviewed some beach goers and boom box lovers and quoted one of them, Dolores Vitella, with the following statement which tells a lot about unequal power relations: "I´m sitting here worried that someone will steal my hubcabs. The beaches are dirty, and there aren´t any restrooms. And Koch [the mayor, H.W.] worries about radios? Give me a break."[49] Spike Lee's movie "Do the right thing", released in 1989, captures this "radio war" as well as the central meaning of the boom box for Black youths and the ensuing culture clash. The Italian pizzeria chef, who for years has been running a pizzeria in a Black neighborhood, destroys an African-American patron's huge boom box because the latter has refused to switch it off in his pizzeria. Ultimately, a riot starts in which the boom box user is killed by White police officers and the pizzeria demolished by African-American locals.

Around the mid-80s, and thus, with some time lag, West German youths began to absorb hip hop which by then was increasingly commercialized in the U.S. Break dancers along with their boom boxes appeared in West German pedestrian zones in 1983/4.[50] However, with global pop culture channels like MTV yet missing, the mediation of hip hop was improvised in the beginning and concentrated on break dancing, while in the long run, its wider reception became quite stereotyped. The first hip-hop movies shown in cinemas demonstrated the connectedness of graffiti, DJ-ing, rapping and break dancing. Accordingly, some West German youths began to spray trains and walls, to scratch records, and to form bands. The few hip-hop adepts met on weekends in party rooms and youth institutions and did rap in English. Only since the end of the 80s, German as well as other second native tongues of the teenagers (Turkish, Greek, etc) were used. However, by the transformation from one local context to another, the music and its lyrics were de-radicalized. Even if some of them addressed the many problems of the so called "immigrant children" born in West-Germany, the racial and social explosiveness was muted when compared to the situation in the U.S. and its devastated city areas. In the end, hip-hop was perceived rather as a fashion than a political statement. In this fashion, graffiti, brick walls, and the boom box became the stereotyped material icons of the American archetype.[51] However, as it

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[47] Cf. Gumpert, Gary: Talking Tombstones & Other Tales of the Media Age. New York, Oxford 1987 (chapter 4: Walls of Sound).

[48] Cf. The Washington Post, Aug. 2, 1985, p. A3 ("American Journal: New York City Lowers the Boom")

[49] Cf. ftn. 48.

[50] Cf. on first popular media reports on rap and early break dancers in pedestrian zones: Karlstetter, Paul: Breakdance, Rap und Graffiti: Ein expressiver Jugendstil? - Ursprung, Entwicklung, Rezeption in der BRD und sozialpädagogische Umsetzung. Landshut 1984 (Thesis in Education); the teenage magazine *BRAVO* featured break dance in a special issue in April 1984. On German rap in general: Verlan, Sascha (Ed.): Rap-Texte. Stuttgart 2003; Buhmann, Heide; Haeseler, Hanspeter (Eds): HipHop XXL. Fette Reime und Fette Beats in Deutschland. Schlüchtern 2001, p. 14ff – here, the beginning of rap in West Germany is dated to 1982. On Turkish youth culture in Germany and Austria, included rap since the end of the 90s, cf.: Schwann, Karina: Breakdance, Beats und Bodrum. Türkische Jugendkultur. Wien, Köln, Weimar 2002; on so called "gangsta" rap and political rap at the end of the 80s (as well as punk around 1980) and its conceptions of masculinity, cf.: Grimm, Stephanie: Die Repräsentation von Männlichkeit im Punk und Rap. Tübingen 1998.

[51] In 1984, e.g. a book for teenagers described how to do the so called electric boogie, the robotman and other dance forms. This author also had developed a television series on break dance for the public broadcast station ZDF. The book cover showed the de-radicalized clichés of hip hop: a graffiti on a brick wall, a boom box, and the author and his aide who wore white gloves. Cf: Gulp, Eisi: Breakdance. München 1984. The same iconic clichés are used in an ad for Maxell cassettes in 1988: We see the cassette in front of a brick wall, and a boom box is placed in front of it. Cf.: Audio, No. 4, 1988, p. 57.

seems, the production and distribution of rap was not that intrinsically linked to the boom box any more as in its beginning. In retrospect, a few punks are remembered to have used the boom box as a political tool to subversively express their anarchistic beliefs. In any case – and in contrast to the personal stereo – no comparable public controversy is documented in media coverage or pedagogical writing.[52] Maybe this is also the reason why the expression "ghetto blaster" actually became the dominant term for boom boxes in the German language.[53] But even if the political explosiveness of the boom box and hip-hop subculture was not at place in West Germany in the 80s, this tool of portable sound has had and still has a global presence in many forms of politicking. Music, played from huge sound trucks, is part of nearly every demonstration while sometimes also demonstrators carry along boom boxes with political sounds.[54]

As far as the Walkman is considered, its perception and usage by the West German consumer came closer to that of the American one in the latter half of the 80s. By and by, it had been losing its ambiguous semiotics that had oscillated between teenage toy and anti-socialness. In 1984, the technical journal *Funkschau* published a first test report on pocket stereos which yet began as follows: "Granted, it takes a bit of courage to appear as a no longer young person with a cassette player and mini headphones in the street or in public transport".[55] This quote reflects that by now, contemporaries began to attune to Walkman wearing teenagers, while adults using them were still rare. In the U.S., in contrast, Walkmans represented a mobile technology used by many more social groups. The *American Consumer Reports* of 1983/84 e.g. reported that they "are seen on countless people in innumerable pedestrian pursuits – from early morning joggers to weekend gardeners, from students between classes to messengers en route between destinations."[56] Here, the discussions around the potential solipsistic anti-socialness of the Walkman user never gained the forehand, even if, due to road safety issues, Walkmans were abolished in a New Jersey town when participating in traffic.[57] In the course of the decade however, more and more West German adults decided to be courageous and became Walkman adepts. Ultimately then, teenagers, through their ubiquitous wired appearance, had paved the way for adults to dare to wear headphones while on the move. Besides, neo-liberal trends had gained ground. Individuality turned into a positive value and along with it, youthfulness. The jogger with his or her Walkman – in 1980 yet a rare figure in West German cities –became the icon of the late 80s and it condensed mobility, flexibility, individuality, and sportiveness. At that point, the Walkman was seen as an adequate tool to blend out unwanted urban soundscapes by replacing them with one's

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[52] The archive of the (conservative) German newspaper FAZ e.g. contains many media reports on the Walkman but never collected similar socio-cultural articles on boom boxes.

[53] Not only the boom box is termed this way, but also a radio show bears the name (cf.: http://www.ghettoblaster-radio.de/ (date: Sept. 17, 2004)), or a software for DJs which is called "Ghettoblaster Pro" (cf.: http://www.vollversion.de/download/ghetto_blaster_pro_1986.html (date: Sept. 16, 2004)).

[54] One example is a political action in Munich, an "acoustical protest" against a NATO meeting in February 2002. Tapes and CDs with the "sound of war" (tanks, bombs, etc.) were previously distributed, and demonstrators were asked to play them on boom boxes. An artistic appropriation of the boom box as public statement is realized by the New Yorker Phil Kline who composes music for boom boxes. In 1992, he initiated a "Christmas caroling party" in the village during which the participants carried along his music to form a "sound sculpture". Cf. his CD "unsilent night" (2001), or: www.mindspring.com/~boombox.

[55] Cf. *Funkschau*, No. 16, pp. 29-31, here p. 29 ("Gebrauchstest: tragbare Kassettenspieler. Jeder ein Meister auf seine Art.").

[56] Cf. the article "Walkaround stereos", in: Consumer Reports, vol. 49, part 1985 Buying Guide (Dec. 1984), pp. 278-82, here p. 278 (condensed from Consumer Reports, Nov. 1983).

[57] Cf. e.g. the report in *Washington Post*, July 14, 1982, p. B1 and B6 ("Battle of The Ban"). The news coverage on the town of Woodbridge, N.J., was enormous, as the ban was considered as awkward.

own. In contrast to the Walkman from 1980, the Discman, introduced in 1985, was immediately embraced by white, male and well-off adults to carve out an intimate space while on business travels. Its laser technology promised to guarantee a hifi sound quality, even if it did not allow for jogging until well into the 90s. But also cassettes had reached hifi standard. The many pocket stereo models on the market included high-tech offers with many hifi features wrapped in exclusive metal cases as well as cheap low-end offers or even fun designs like the water resistant "Sports-Walkman". This ensured that everybody could find a suitable equipment. **PICTURE 5**, an illustration displayed in the consumer journal *TEST* in 1988, accounts for this. Instead of visualizing one typical user, it pictures the grandma, the outdoor enthusiast, the secretary, the reader and the rock lover as well as the toddler, each equipped with distinct pocket stereo designs.[58] Also, boom boxes came in many shapes and sported many features. Colorful cases replaced silver and black ones, the rectangular boxes were given soft edges, and slim-line versions were created. Producers began to experiment with designs evoking a fun-oriented and mobile lifestyle.[59] For those adults wishing for the technical perfection and seriousness of the 70s domestic hifis, refined high-end portable audio equipment was offered which followed this traditional line of design (silver heavy cases, many push buttons, etc.). This move to diversity also created a distance to the previous semiotics of anti-socialness and aggressiveness respectively, which mainly non-users – cultural critics as well as many adults in West Germany and WASP journalists in the U.S. – had ascribed to the audio gear with the help of their discursive power. The wide variety, the hifi quality attained, and above all, the changing lifestyles of adults let the latter embrace the portable music players, which in the previous decades had been the domain of teenagers. Looking more closely to the side of producers, for them obviously, the portable designs were a means for further expansion, since the traditional hifi market was stagnating around 1980.[60]

To sum up, the term "domestication" can hardly be used to describe the appropriation of mobile listening technologies. Neither does it grasp the spatial concepts at stake, nor the ambiguity of the technologies and their changing meanings due to a constant re-negotiation of the designs and practices between users, subversive users, non-users and producers. In most studies on domestication, the technology itself seems to be a "given" from the outside, a fact shaped by the producers; consumers then convert this "given" to their needs which might, in the figurative sense, involve a "taming" or "domesticating" of the artifact.[61] These wordings also are potentially confusing. It was the youths of the African- and Afro-Caribbean-American ghettos, which made the boom box "unruly" by their non-domestic use of it. They turned it into a cultural icon, and were subsequently re-enforced in doing so by the powerful models marketed to them. Conversely,

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[58] Cf. TEST, No. 1, 1988, p. 19 ("Mittelmaß ist tonangebend").

[59] E.g. the water resistant models, special kids models, or Philips so called "Roller Radio", a boom box with large two loudspeakers representing the form of roller skates, cf. on the latter: Heskett, John: Philips. A Study of the Corporate Management of Design. New York 1989 (pp. 135-140: "Roller Radio and Moving Sound").

[60] Cf.: International Resource Development Inc. (Ed.): Personal Portable Consumer Electronics Markets. Norwalk, Connecticut, Report Nr. 587, Jan. 1984.

[61] "Domestication" is used in a broader perspective in a book edited by Lie / Soerensen. Here, also non-domestic consumption is looked at; besides, a kind of mutual shaping of technology by producers and consumers is postulated, e.g. when stating, "This process of taming is characterized by reciprocal change", cf. Lie, Merete; Soerensen, Knut H. (Eds): Making Technology Our Own? Domesticating Technology into Everyday Life. Oslo et al. 1996, p. 8. Leslie Haddon enlarged the term to also include public consumption, while studying cell phone behavior, cf.: Haddon, Leslie: Domestication and Mobile Telephony. In: Katz, James E. (Ed.): Machines that Become Us. The Social Context of Personal Communication Technology. New Brunswick, London 2003, pp. 43-55.

one could say that, with slim-line models, producers later on "domesticated" the boom box so that grandmas could also accept a box in their homes. Furthermore, with boom boxes and Walkmans, listening to music in increasingly better quality became an integral part of daily and also non-domestic life, anytime, anywhere and even on the move. It encroached upon nearly all social spaces: the social sphere of childhood, all spaces in the home, and public spaces like urban streets, parks and subway trains in which their users often challenged traditional conceptions of acceptable public behavior. Boom boxes and personal stereos became a distinct element not only of our domestic routines, but also of our urban culture – the former as a means of enhancing the urban soundscape, the latter as a means for controlling which sounds to hear and which to ignore. Ultimately, these portables and their mobile users demonstrate that we have to re-think our traditional space conceptions. Rather than domestication, we here have forms of a "public-ization" of music listening, which previously had been considered as a private, domestic hobby. The sociologists Urry and Sheller recently claimed, "(t)he distinction between public and private domains should be dispensed with since nothing much of contemporary social life remains on one side or the other of the divide. Thus the problems of (and hopes for) democratic citizenship must be theorized in relation to these dynamic, multiple mobilities of people, objects, information and images, especially as these move in powerfully fused or hybridized forms."[62] The soundscapes of boom boxes and Walkmans moved wherever their users decided – or were allowed – to create them, and they easily crossed the divide between private and public. In sum then, new space relations have to come to the fore in consumption history, namely those between the domestic and the non-domestic; between what is considered private and what public; between the locality of consumption and the globality of production. Furthermore, we have to deal with the resulting hybridities and mobile spaces, which the consumer constructs by merging former space conceptions through mobile consumption. In the end, the different controversies in the U.S. and in Germany remind us that – despite an ongoing globalization process which is reinforced by mobile entities, be it the "urban nomads" or the artifacts themselves – , the mobility of people and their objects were and still are a highly culturally specific and explosive issue.

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[62] Cf. Sheller, Mimi; Urry, John: Mobile Transformations of "Public" and "Private". In: Theory, Culture & Society, vol. 20, 2003, pp. 107-125.

Sharp ad, 1985



Alongside listening during a social get-together, 1975



Young teenagers with a boom box, 1980



Ad from 1980



Walkman users as envisioned in the 1988 consumer report