

# Thinking Outside the Pod

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On a bustling Wednesday morning when most other New Yorkers were thrusting their elbows through the thick herds, desperate to reserve their space in the newly arrived Lexington Avenue downtown 6 train, two individuals were caught staring at the subway but unable to board it. He was a middle-aged man, in a business suit and khaki trench coat, with the requisite leather briefcase in hand; she was a young twenty-something, hip, blonde, with an oversized purse and slim-fitting faux vintage jeans à la Abercrombie & Fitch. They were both in a hurry to catch the train, but unlike on other mornings when boldness constituted enough of a weapon with which to wiggle one's way through the crowds, today two people were stuck, or, one might say, bound, together. This morning, when he rushed by her, some instrument on his coat or briefcase had gotten caught onto the wires dangling from her ears. At first unaware, he proceeded to rush for the closing doors and, linked with him as she was, she could do little more than follow and attempt to get his attention. When he noticed his predicament, dismayed, he reluctantly turned toward her and tried, albeit hurriedly and slightly recklessly, to free himself of the knot. But it was too late. By the time they had found an effective way to unravel the awkward mess, the train had passed, and they were left behind, branded the mornings victims of subway mayhem, disgruntled and impatient people with five unwanted minutes on their hands, annoyed New Yorkers. They were also two strangers united by an iPod.

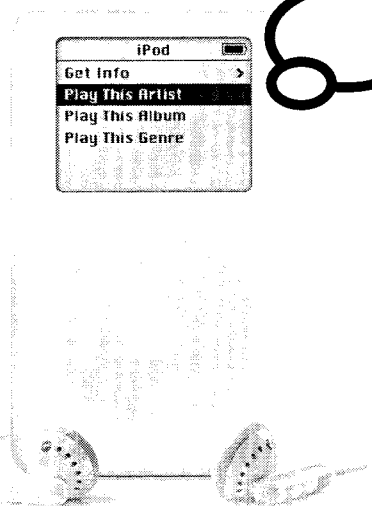
In an age of rapidly advancing technologies that portend to improve life's quality and productivity, there is no shortage of discourse about the diminishing state of man's existence. Perhaps fearful that the broad and eager embrace of new technologies demonstrates the complacency of the masses, social and cultural critics have appointed themselves the watchdogs of such social trends. They are often out to prove that technology is as dangerous as it is alluring, that progress, depending upon an accumulation of fancy and tiny silver toys, is merely the façade of comfort. Such critics would add that, rather than merely making the world a smaller place, technology

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is rendering it fractioned and fundamentally unfair. Is the iPod the latest icon to be found driving such fraction? The cute, shiny box may be a device for benign entertainment, but is it also an instrument of social alienation?

Anyone walking the streets of an urban center, or riding its subways, or sipping macchiatos in its comfy cafes, cannot avoid the ubiquity of personal entertainment devices and their implicit declarations of privacy. Given the increasing rarity of the prehistoric un-iPoddite, I wonder whether I am alone in seeking him out to ask for directions or the time. Why bother someone who wants to listen to music they have chosen and which they have publicly declared to be more important than the cacophony of outdoor life? More than merely a statement of socioeconomic class, the iPod is also a silent agreement between strangers: I am busy enjoying my music, says the head bobbing oh-so-slightly to the iTunes, I am not to be disturbed. Enclosed in this self-styled cocoon is the individual who wants to be alone, who prefers to know what he is going to hear rather than offer his vulnerable self to the gods of spontaneous mingling. One recent iPod commercial states, referring to the iPod's ability to 'shuffle' tracks, "life is random." But for

I'm tired of being admired, bored of being adored... I'm so bored...  
Goddamit I'm pooped!



*Nothing glorious can happen when your subway ride is as predictable as your Playlist.*

the person listening to songs they know well, life is decidedly not random. Nothing glorious can happen when your subway ride or walk to school is as predictable as your Playlist. Then again, what is progress if not a promotor of free will: of the will to experience as much as the will to ignore? And therefore, if alienation really is a social tragedy served in a small white encasement, surely it can only be analyzed by means of an honest appraisal of its allure.

Several weeks ago I was speaking with a good friend who recently moved to New York for a graduate program at N.Y.U. Feeling she needed to fit in and 'look' like a New Yorker, she added a few funkier scarves to her wardrobe, acquired a slightly edgier haircut and confessed a little secret: the other day on her way home from school she put in her iPod earphones and, upon noticing that the machine had run out of battery, kept them in anyway. "I wanted to look cool, like everyone else!" she said to me, embarrassed but humored by the extent of her own desire to assimilate. I laughed at the image of her walking the city and riding the subway, hearing a muffled version of events and conversations because mute speakers hung from her head – but what could I say? At a given moment it had seemed

critical for my friend to sacrifice a measure of individual integrity for the sake of 'belonging' to a larger community of iPodders. To her the iPod was not just a symbol of popularity and style, it was membership into a band bound by an aesthetic, and the common refusal to share each other's company. The paradox of this seems ineluctable: how can the same device simultaneously serve as a "wall" between people but also a "window" by which people see each other, and upon which people see themselves reflected?

A bold advertising campaign for health insurance by the Freelancer's Union resonates with the experience of belonging to a community and yet needing to retain agency as a self-governing individual. The campaign decorates streetcars with the phrase: "We are all on our own, together, with health insurance." The same company also describes itself with another advertisement, "Freelancer's Union: Unity but no Hugging." Replacing the word "unity" with "iPod" in these phrases can be revealing: does the iPod necessarily eradicate unity so much as redefine the boundaries of community? So what if the iPod's opaque white tendrils hinder interaction between strangers? Since when was reading a book on the subway conducive to communication? Certainly iPod wearers are more immune to the random talkative creep who preys on the disinterested, but literature is not exactly an overture for friendliness either. And so what? What if iPods and their predecessors have engineered a new social landscape in which people are satisfied by the mere recognition of each other, looking to identify external commonalities but uneager to pursue them? And what if the iPod unites people by fostering a community that respects the individual's temporary retreat into his or her own sonorous head, a community that agrees that there is a way for us to transform the public pandemonium of the rush hour into a few personal minutes of spiritual reprieve?

Perhaps the iPod mirrors core social characteristics. If strangers are not running to greet each other in the

streets, maybe this does not reflect a society governed by soulless technological contraptions so much as our desire to do what we like, enjoy what we know, and surround ourselves with, well, ourselves. For what does the iPod reveal about the individual other than the decision to have as much me, myself, and "i" as one can get? For now,

the magnificent way in which technology has captured music's role and harnessed its function in people's lives has as little to do with the culpability of technology as it has to do with man's inclinations and desires.

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In his meditations, Confucius writes: "Be stimulated by the

Odes, take your stand on the rites and be perfected by music." Confucius' invitation is tempting, and I wonder whether, instead of inquiring about the dubious reaches of technology and what the iPod draws from us, we should be asking what exactly it is that draws us to the iPod. As of yet, it does not seem to be a craving for self-reflection or perfection, nor the need to worship a vessel of doom or increasing divisiveness.

Two strangers got caught in a subway station on a Wednesday morning during rush hour. They missed the train because of it. Was it the iPod that brought them together? Maybe. Maybe not. For now, we're not looking for unity – at best, we'll settle for being entangled.