

Crying while Flying: The Intimacy of Inflight Entertainment

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Résumé/Abstract

This article proposes that the technological apparatus of inflight entertainment generates a culture of intimacy. Airplane media technology creates a relationship of extreme proximity between passenger and media form: the screen is but a few feet away from the viewer and the headphones put speakers virtually inside the body. The small size of the screen and accompanying the low-resolution image do not overwhelm the viewer, but together inspire active involvement and a level of intentness akin to the engagement associated with intimacy. Even though these devices seem individualized, they also exist in the space of strangers: screens placed in the back of strangers' seats, neighbors can see each other's viewing choices, with volume and channel controls embedded in shared armrests. This technological deployment of personalized media devices encourages another sort of intimacy with other passengers, who are often strangers. Given that the aviation industry's ideal genres for inflight movies are romantic comedy and comedy, it would seem that the industry itself has acknowledged the affective properties of the airplane's media infrastructure.

À propos de l'auteur/About the Author

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Especially if I'm on an airplane
— I don't know why, maybe
because you constantly think
you're going to die — I find
every movie, I cry if I watch it on
a plane.

Tim Burton¹

In what follows, I argue that the particular viewing situation of contemporary inflight entertainment proffers to the passenger a culture of intimacy. This intimacy emanates from technological apparatus of media exhibition and the material content of the cultural artifact through the passenger and permeates the cabin. The proximity of the screen to the passenger, the headphone device required for listening to the audio-visual content, as well as the style, genre, messages within the content itself create a personal, idiosyncratic, and emotionally involved relationship between technology, cultural form, and passengers. Therefore, I advocate a synthetic form of analysis that cuts across traditionally-held categories, arguing that we cannot fully separate film content, the cinematic apparatus, and the perceptual context of viewing.

The contemporary inflight entertainment apparatus that is present in many wide-body jet airliners embarked on transoceanic and/or transcontinental flights entail screens for each passenger, most installed into the back of seats, some fold into armrests, and a few first class cabins have larger high definition widescreens installed in the dividers between sleeping pods. In each of these configurations, the salient criterion of commonality is that each passenger is afforded a personalized screen. These inflight entertainment systems offer passengers a variety of choices in audio-visual entertainment, from music to video games, television shows to feature-length films. The apparatus of inflight entertainment, then, is aimed at satisfying the ideals of bourgeois personhood, in that each passenger is called upon to initiate and faced with making self-determined choices, as well as “the bourgeois idea of an aesthetic of intimacy, of separatedness, of detachment, in shot, self-seclusion and self-segregation, as a defense against the outside world,” that has been described and analyzed by a range of cultural theorists².

Many of the films shown on airplanes are usually middle-of-the-road in quality: neither trashy nor arty; the best they can hope for is to qualify as entertainment; for the most part they are merely distraction. Many of

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/movies/tim-burton-at-home-in-his-own->

² Fortunati, 155. In particular, the work of Walter Benjamin on the bourgeois interior is important here, but also George Simmel on hyperstimulus and the urban environment, as well as the work of architectural historians such as Beatriz Colomina and Charles Rice.

the offerings in-the-air are, in a word, bland. Partly this is because most inflight films are recycled from theatrical, pay per view, or cable release, many are then sanitized to avoid certain types of controversies. But it is precisely their bland and innocuous nature that makes their spectatorial captivation and emotional transportation so remarkable. This can be illustrated, first, anecdotally, then through a theoretical account of emotional response and generic conventions, and finally through a historically examination of the technologies which have coalesced into the inflight entertainment apparatus.

My first example comes from Bill Simmons, an American sports columnist, who, anxious to provide an explanation for why his sports column was written at the last minute, pointed to the movie on the flight during which he had previously planned to write the column:

I ended up getting sidetracked by the in-flight movie -- "Extraordinary Measures" with Harrison Ford and Brendan Fraser -- and only finished half the column. [...] I blame myself. Right as I started typing on the plane, I noticed the movie starting on one of those tiny, old-school airplane televisions above me. [...] I thought to myself, "OK, I'll watch two minutes just to see how bad it is, but I will NOT put the headphones on." Two minutes turns into five. That's when I realized that the girl from "Felicity" was Fraser's wife in the movie; she was just crying in every scene. I started thinking to myself about how much I love my kids, and how lucky I am that they're healthy, and within a few minutes, I was putting on those headphones. At that point, I thought, "All right, I'll just stick around until the 'work around the clock' scene," but by the time we finally got there, Fraser and Ford's quest to find a cure for Pompe disease had me hooked. Throw in Ford's overacting and it couldn't have been a better airplane movie: no surprises, some unintentional comedy, a couple of heartwarming moments, and every time the pilot interrupted us to tell us we were flying over something I couldn't see, the movie wasn't quite good enough to be ruined. Win, win, win and win. (Simmons 2010)

There are a couple of crucial points here, which I will be taking up later. First, that the headphones signal a kind of commitment to the film, as if listening equals acquiescing to the power of the film itself: sound here, then is treated as more powerful than the image (or at least less vulnerable to distraction and/or requiring more concentration). Second,

the fashion in which Simmons related his own familial situation to the filmic one so readily: it's not that Simmons identified with any of the actors per se, but more that the film portrayed a familial situation that caused Simmons, who at the time was far away from his family, to reflect on his own familial situation. Third, that the criteria for a good inflight film are different than, even oppositional to, the criteria for a quality film. Hence the success of pre-digested films, by which I mean Simmons already knew the film because he was familiar with the genre, the actors, and, through marketing, the details of the film itself.

The second example comes from a television studies conference I attended in 2010. Studying inflight film can be a good conversation starter at academic conferences, in the age of increasingly mobile intellectual labor, it seems nearly everyone at film, media, or television studies conference has a story about inflight movies. At this conference, a colleague told me that no matter what film was shown on the plane, she always found herself crying. In the moment, I was perplexed and intrigued; a strong connection between inflight entertainment and emotional transportation had not occurred to me as a possibility. I asked if she was anxious about flying, if she was often tired on flights, if traveling in general made her stressed; we speculated about the how departures and even arrivals could be positioned as sources of grief. Not surprisingly, our ad-hoc efforts to theorize and intellectualize this phenomenon failed to explain the production of affect by inflight films.

Crying while watching inflight entertainment is not limited to this single film scholar, either. The National Public Radio program *This American Life*, a program consisting of a potpourri of stories of everyday life in the United States broadcast an episode in 2008, with a segment on the phenomenon³. The correspondent, Brett Martin, told how he dissolves into tears while watching *Sweet Home Alabama* inflight. The particular moment that caused him to cry was the scene near the end when Reese Witherspoon punches Candice Bergen, not the tear and rain soaked reunion of Reese with her former lover/husband on the beach. He spent a few minutes explaining that he never cries in other situations, but he cries at every film he sees on an airplane. Martin called *Sweet Home Alabama* a terrible movie and he admitted this was the fourth time he's seen it. The middle part of Martin's radio segment consisted of interviews with his friends and acquaintances who also cry at films they see on airplanes, including a woman who starts crying at a film playing on her neighbor's screen, which she's not even listening to: *Freaky Friday* (2003, dir. Mark

³ Thanks to Dan Hassoun for bringing this program to my attention.

Waters). The list of films Martin and his interviewees admit crying to included: *Bend it like Beckham* (2002, dir. Gurinder Chadha), *Daredevil* (2003, dir. Mark Steven Johnson), *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004, dir. Guy Ferland), *Larger Than Life* (1996, dir. Howard Franklin), *101 Dalmatians* (1996, dir. Stephen Herek), *What a Girl Wants* (2003, dir. Dennie Gordon), and commercial for an American Express credit card. Martin ruminates on the reasons for this phenomenon, listing and rejecting possibilities such as travel anxiety, the dry air in the cabin, fear of flying, even something approaching a theory of the sublime — that the mere fact of being entrapped in a metal tube thousands of meters above the ground hurtling forward at hundreds of kilometers an hour is simply too overwhelming for the human animal — but he finally concludes that there's 'just something in the air.'

As we can see from this list of films is that the pre-digested, heavily marketed, and formulaic film dominates. These films are neither trashy or exploitative nor arty or prestige films. In fact, the list is fairly indicative of the kind of fare one would experience in economy/coach class on many airlines. What I find fascinating about this list is that none of them really falls in the category of a 'weepee' or a 'tear-jerker.' While each film may contain sad scenes, heatwarming moments, and a few instances of pathos, these films are more likely to be described as comedies, romcoms, light action, or children's fare than melodramas or tear-jerkers.

In August 2011, the 'crying-while-flying' phenomenon led Virgin Atlantic to add 'weepee warnings' in front of some of their films, after surveying passengers and finding that a majority of them admitted to heightened emotions in flight (Child 2011). *Water for Elephants* and *Just Go With It* were the first to receive this warning. The first, another Reese Witherspoon film, about an orphaned boy who joins the circus and fights animal cruelty while finding true love during the Great Depression seems almost hyperbolic in its weepee-ness and might be categorized as a melodrama. The second, an Adam Sandler Jennifer Aniston romantic comedy whose promos featured Brooklyn Decker in a yellow bikini, seems a less likely candidate for such a warning.

As is well known, airlines do not normally show films that include plane crashes, a guideline that has been deemed important enough to alter the production and postproduction of some films. For example, a second ending was shot for the 1994 film *Speed* in which the bus does not crash into a plane; even though in the original ending, the plane sits still in a hanger (Nichols 1995). This "no crash" guideline was instituted in the 1960s after TWA received complaints *from passengers* about films the airline considered suitable, since the Catholic Legion of Decency

approved them, but turned out to be too harrowing for the passengers who felt trapped watching the film (Serling 2003, p. 67).

The current editing standards are set by the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX), an industry consortium consisting of commercial airliners, electronics manufacturers, and entertainment companies. The 2011 “Standards” section on their website reads as follows:

Standards vary by airline and by region, but generally inflight editing standards (for main-screen exhibition) are similar to, but more conservative than, TV- editing standards. No airline crash scenes or references to airline disasters; caution in depicting orreferencing terrorism; no nudity/sex scenes (U.S./Asia more conservative than Europe); no profanity; no images of or references to other airlines; no racist comments or denigrating references to cultures, religions, or nationalities; caution in depicting violence and bloodshed (U.S./Asia less sensitive than Europe); caution in referencing guns, drug abuse and physical abuse. Most ideal inflight film genres are: comedy, romantic-comedy and light adventure⁴.

Air disasters are the first (and only clear) prohibition. Other content may be cautioned against (e.g. terrorism) and depends on region (sex and/or violence). But aside from making regional differences in taste explicit, the most revealing part of this paragraph is classifying the comedy, romantic comedy, and light adventures genres as “most ideal.” This would indicate that the purpose of inflight entertainment for the airlines is diversion. The technological system of eye- level screens in seatbacks coupled with “light” content constitutes a project of asking passengers to look away, to divert their attention away from their predicament as immobile and yet airborne. So here, it is the special place of the film exhibition technology (30,000 feet in the air) as well as the predicament of the passenger (strapped into a seat in close quarters, a ‘captive’ audience) that determines content for the cinematic space of the passenger cabin.

The romantic comedy is of special import here. The genre has close associations with the Depression Era studio system of Hollywood, a genre that surprised studio executives with its box office appeal and managed to

⁴ <http://apex.aero/Resources/Standards/tabid/202/Default.aspx>

participate in body of films that, as Kay Young states, “distract[ed] the country through the worst of the Depression years and World War II” (Young 1994, p. 258). As such, the narrative of the romantic comedy, which focuses on the foibles and entanglements of courtship and romance and often ends with a marriage (sometimes actual, but more often metaphorical), is predictable and mundane (both in its everydayness and lack of serious consequences); therefore it is light and unchallenging. The basis for the comic aspects of the romantic relationship(s) portrayed in romantic comedies, according to Brian Henderson, are predicated on the system of censorship and production codes originating more or less contemporaneously with the genre itself. Henderson claimed that the genre is impossible without a system of censorship and language prohibitions. This may make it less successful in the post- 1968 U.S. theatrical setting, and yet perfectly suited for free over-the-air television broadcasts and inflight screens, two exhibition windows who base their legitimacy (in the U.S.) on family- friendliness and censorship. Following Henderson, if the romantic comedy itself relies on transforming that which cannot be named (sex) into a joke, it is a genre well-versed in the art of diversion (Henderson 1978, p. 22).

Important to its status as the ideal genre for inflight entertainment is the culture of intimacy upon which the romantic comedy is built. The intimate nature of the story material, the narrative examination of private emotional lives, manifests in proximate camera-work. The reliance on the close-up, the unvaried composition of the frame (usually a two-shot of the couple in question or of one member of the dyad with a best friend), and characters who are defined more by type than by depth make the romantic comedy genre well-suited for the small screens which populate the airplane cabin. For Lauren Berlant, intimacy is marked by brevity as well as closeness (Berlant 1998). The smallest gesture is deeply expressive. The efficiency of a high affective to symbolic ratio present in the intimate material of the romantic comedy may very well make up for the small screen size in the airplane, as well as feelings of audience entrapment (due to lack of film choices, claustrophobic seating, and immobility). Unlike science fiction, the western, or the epic adventure, the romantic comedy is not invested in visual spectacles, nor does it rely on special effects and/or stuntwork to involve viewers. Further, the romantic comedy’s articulation of the utopian potential of romance depends on the wish-fulfillment fantasies of the viewer, who must be willing to accept the improbable, even magical, events resulting in the unification of the romantic dyad. In this sense, the narrative of the romantic comedy mirrors the narrative of the plane journey: the seemingly improbable fact of flight

must be accepted in order to achieve the happy resolution of arrival.

Additionally, the culture of intimacy portrayed on screen is mirrored by the close quarters in which the film is viewed. Onboard, the distance between the eye and the screen is often a meter or less, the viewer literally rubs elbows with strangers, and, unlike the darkened movie theater, the passenger cabin is often lit so that the viewer's reactions and investment in the screen is visible to others. One might call this form of intimacy stranger intimacy. Here intimacy may be formed through inflight conversations between strangers who share information about their personal and professional past, perhaps their travel anxieties, including fear of flying, the sometimes tragic or joyful reasons behind their travel; but also the physical proximity: sharing the same armrest, the constant rubbing of shoulders, knees; smelling each other; handing each other drinks, food; knowing when the person next to you has a full bladder. This environment of familiarity, in which the affect of the viewer is on display, their reactions to the filmic material available as sight and sound to others *who are not experiencing the same visual material* makes watching film on an airplane more revealing and intimate than in a theatre or at home. In this fashion, the airplane cabin as multiplex is a hybrid space, distinct from the (private) home and the (public) theatre.

Following Berlant, to engage the issue of intimacy is to enter into a critique of the public/private divide, the prevailing discourse on what is properly held to be private and what is the legitimate material for the public. The physical co-presence of strangers in the airplane cabin is of crucial importance here. In Brett Martin's radio report, he and those he interviewed seemed embarrassed by their public display of emotionality, and the survey performed by Virgin Atlantic similarly found the passengers invested energy in hiding their physical displays of emotion from other passengers. For some theorists of affect, it is precisely the outward manifestation of emotion that constitutes affect. Affect is the public display of privately felt emotions⁵. The particular social conventions of group transport act to regulate and minimize such displays, so that the passengers of trains, buses, ferries, and airplanes should be essentially affectless and non-intimate.

The predicament of the emotional airline passenger provides some insight then, into the relationship between social conventions regarding affect, the technological apparatus, and cinematic content. Steven Neale's article "Melodrama and Tears," in which he relies heavily on Franco Moretti, helps to elucidate this last point: the relationship between text

⁵ See, for instance Massumi 1995.

and the provocation of emotional display. For Moretti, tears arise from a kind of knowledge of the subjunctive on the part of the reader. The reader knows that things are not as they should be, but the way they are is inevitable, due to the irreversibility of time: “Tears are always the product of powerlessness. They presuppose two mutually opposed facts: that it is clear how the present state of things should be changed — and that this change is impossible.” (Neale, p. 8) In melodrama, and I would add, in many films that we call “romcoms,” the touching moments, those moments which moves us to cry arise from the viewers knowledge that characters simply do not see each other, or see each other’s point of view. Neale uses films such as *The Big Parade* (1925, dir. King Vidor) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919, dir. D.W. Griffith) to illustrate these points, but they could just as easily be applied to *Freaky Friday*, *What a Girl Wants*, or really any film in Martin’s list. For Neale, “poignancy stems from the discrepancies between narrative and character point of view,” which he finds textually expressed through the refusal (and/or deferment) of an exchange of looks between characters (Neale, p. 9). In other words, the gulf between how things are and how they should be, which moves viewers to emotional expression, is based on the non-reciprocity of vision, and the inability of characters to see (or visualize) each other, their own destiny, and happy ending. When points of view do coincide, when recognition is attained in melodrama, it often occurs after the death of a character, making the bridging of the gulf in perspective all the more tragic.

Neale modifies Moretti’s proposition about tears, powerlessness and the impossibility of reconciliation:

Tears in either case are still ‘the product of powerlessness’, though not necessarily always because ‘it is clear how the present state of affairs should be changed — and that this change is impossible.’ What is impossible is not change as such, but the spectator’s ability to intervene and make the change. The spectator is powerless not so much before each situation, the state of affairs at any one point in a film, but rather in relation to the course the narrative will take, whether the state of things changes or not. (Neale, p. 11)

Neale goes on to point out that the longer the spectator has to wait to find out how things will turn out — if things become as ‘they should be’ the more heightened the emotional response. Tears, here, are dependent on a particular form of suspense, and on the temporality of the narrative

itself. For Neale, at issue is the pleasure of tears. And indeed, such a notion seems contradictory to the very act of crying — that tears can be pleasurable. It's the paradox of the simultaneity of pleasure and tears that confuses Martin and his interviewees, who can not comprehend the fact of the tears and try to explain it in negative terms. Indeed, this misapprehension of crying afflicts mainstream journalists' coverage of crying while flying, and my previous attempt to my colleague's tears (Myers, Lim). Tears arise from fulfillment of the narrative, that the suspense is finally over (whether or not things have worked out). Inflight passengers, then, may have a sense of relief, and their tears may be those of a survivor.

But in order for this set of arguments to be applicable to the inflight situation, we have to suppose that the comedy, romantic comedy or light action film is somehow transformed into melodrama by the inflight viewing situation. Certainly the textual elements are there in minor form in *Extraordinary Measures*, *Larger Than Life*, *Freaky Friday*, and *Sweet Home Alabama*. Of course, genre categories are blurry and elusive, and since genre is just as much about producing audiences as it is producing a cultural text, many contemporary films attempt to appeal to as wide an audience as possible by incorporating textual aspects of several genres. But analyzed only from the standpoint of narrative, characterization, musical accompaniment, and even marketing, it's hard to see a group of film consumers categorizing these films as melodrama.

Neale identifies three qualities inherent in melodrama that arouse the physiological expression of emotion in the form of tears: powerlessness, suspense, and relief. I would argue that all three have an analog in the viewing situation of inflight entertainment, regardless of the content of the systems themselves, for these are elements possessed by airline passengers.

The subject position of the passenger is one of powerlessness. That is, the passenger, particularly the post 9/11 passenger, is incapable of intervening in the fact of flight. Here I am aligning the plight of the passenger with Neale's analysis of the spectator's position in front of melodrama — it is not powerlessness in the face of inevitability and the irreversibility of time's arrow — but the inability to alter the course of the airplane. Added to this feeling, of course, is the generalizable condition of being an airline passenger, from the moment one enters the airport, the routinized and bureaucratized inspection of the body, papers, and luggage, the regimentation of the seating process, compliance to the instructions of flight attendants, security guards, ticket agents, luggage handlers, and air marshals. And, like the lack or deferment of an

exchange of looks described by Neale in the film melodrama, passengers themselves are unable to see or even visualize their destination.

For many passengers suspense and relief are more likely to be subsumed as a combination of boredom and impatience. I am not intimating that passengers are actively worried that the plane might not land, but rather that they wonder when the flight will end, when the inevitable resolution will occur. Importantly, the length of the flight is positively correlated with emotional response. (The longer the ordeal, the more heightened the emotion). The during the flight, the quotidian temporality experienced on the ground (at work or home) is suspended. Like most experiences of waiting, time seems to stretch, and, while there is no doubt that eventually the waiting will end, the period of waiting, of nothingness, lacks rhythm and punctuation. Food and drink services, inflight entertainments, trips to the restroom, stretching exercises, and other inflight activities mitigate against the emptiness of the endured flight. And yet, perhaps because of the absence of everyday tasks and sociality, the disconnection from the ground achieved through airplane travel has is mirrored by a temporal disconnection. Eventually, however, passengers feel relief at the end of the flight, analogous to the relief felt by the spectators at the resolution of the melodramatic narrative.

Genre, of course, is a product of discourse — which would include the text, marketing, and audience expectations. But inflight, films discursively marked as one genre can be pushed by the viewing conditions into another category. Let me give you an example. In their coverage of Virgin Atlantic's weepy warnings, the English language daily China Today interviewed Ong Ken Seng, a theatre director, who confessed to crying while watching *Thor* inflight: "I cried because Natalie Portman's love (for Thor) was so far away and the bridge between their worlds was broken and they were no longer connected" (Lim). Seng's experience of the film sounds like a description of a melodrama. If the experience of viewing inflight turns a comic-book based action film into a melodrama, we might have to rethink our assumptions regarding film content, viewing conditions, and audiences.

The standard inflight film viewing apparatus differs from the theatrical apparatus. In theatrical viewing, the audience is arranged between projector and screen, a crucial arrangement for apparatus theory, while inflight, the by-now standard configuration places an electronic screen in front of the passenger (although it is true that the large screen with a film or video projector has been present in airplanes from the early 1960s until the early 1990s). Certainly some would argue that what I have described so far is really television not cinema. The electronic screen, the lack of a

projector, multiple screens showing different material in the same room, and the lack of celluloid itself. The passenger cabin is a hybrid space: many activities take place in it that are not related to watching film, even during the showing of the film itself. This aligns the experience with domestic television viewing rather than theatrical filmgoing. Similarly the passenger cabin is often lit, although sometimes only dimly, during the presentation of films. The strip lighting from the aisle, the ambient light from the galley area, reading lights, and so on all make the cabin a space of heterogenous lighting compared to the movie theater. Additionally, the airplane cabin, while certainly subject to forms of domestication (the presence of multi-generation families, the removal of shoes, shared meals) uncommon in other quasi-public spaces, is hardly the domestic space that many television scholars see as crucial to the media specificity of television. To wit, Jason Jacobs' argument regarding television as *The Intimate Screen* relies on the domestic exhibition context, as well as small, informal, and live content. On board the airplane, the physical copresence of strangers, the dimming of lights, and the content on the screens are all elements inflight entertainment shares with theatrical exhibition of films. Inflight entertainment, then, is a hybrid form, accompanied by its own set of practices and protocols (including a different set of financial transactions), its own rules of viewership and its own set of viewing positions. Passengers treat the feature-length visual materials exhibited in air as films, recognizing the difference between television and film as one of content and generic conventions, not necessarily derived from the technological form of exhibition.

So far I have focused mostly on the visual aspects of inflight film viewing: what can one see on the screen, that passengers can see each other, the content of the visual materials themselves. There remains another important difference in the technological apparatus of inflight films that marks it as a form separate from theatrical film and domestic television: headphones.

The first instances of films shown on airplanes are from the 1920s. In 1921, Aeromarine Airways exhibited a 16mm promotional film, called "Howdy Chicago" on flights over Chicago as part of Chicago's "Pageant of Progress." A DeVry suitcase projector was strapped to a table in the aisle of the plane, plugged into a light socket, and projected onto a screen hung at the front of the cabin. British Imperial Airways exhibited *The Lost World* in 1925, utilizing a similar set-up advertising it as the "First Aircraft Cinema". Both were, of course, silent films. Historians of early cinema are quite correct to point out that so-called silent films were never really silent. But for these inflight films of the 1920s, in the face of the

noise produced by the planes' engines, listening to musical accompaniment, lecture narratives, and even the sounds of the projector were all less than feasible. In other words, the sounds of silent films were drowned out by the roar, drone, and whine of propellor engines.

I would maintain that engine noise was one of the chief obstacles to the institution of inflight entertainment. The pace of innovation and investment in fixed wing aircraft meant that planes with the space for passengers and a tabletop projector that also possessed an electrical system robust enough to power a projector appeared just a few years before the transition to sound-on-film. The concurrence of inflight entertainment experiments and the introduction of sound on film meant that, in order for inflight movies to be diverting and enjoyable, headphone technology had to be utilized. In order for headphones to work in such a situation, they needed to protect headphone users from outside noise, not just limit a set of certain sounds to the perception of the headphone user (or protect non-headphone users from those sounds, to put it another way).

In *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne traces the history of headphones back to the stethoscope, an instrument used by physicians to listen to the body, searching for signs of health and disease. The stethoscope is an instrument of intimacy, one that must be held close to the body, against an area that many associate with love and romance or just emotionality in general. The stethoscope is used to detect sounds from inside the body, sounds which, because they are often undetectable by the patient, comprise a private set of messages between the body of the patient and the physician; a kind of secret intimate communication. Sterne proceeds from the stethoscope to headphones used by 1920s radio enthusiasts, who found them helpful for "picking up faint, faraway stations," or, put another way, headphones brought the distant closer. Leaving aside arguments about how radio amateurs and short wave helped bring about a global village, this points to a kind of familiarity and intimacy produced through headphone technology. Sterne's analysis of the stethoscope and radio headsets is put into the service of an argument about privacy and private listening with headphones. And while such an argument — that headphones create private space for their users — has import for the study of inflight entertainment, I do not want to enter into that discussion here. What I want to elucidate is the intimate relationship headphones create between listener and sound source by focusing on some early adaptations of headphone technology for aviation.

Concurrent to the hobby and domestic uses of headphones by radio enthusiasts were a series of crises in airplane navigation that headphones

were called upon to solve. In the 1920s United States, fixed wing aircraft were primarily used for the air mail, and passengers were a secondary concern. Because air mail pilots were pressured to keep a schedule, night landings and flying in bad weather were routine, and pilot deaths were fairly regular. A series of navigational aids were employed in the 1920s to help ameliorate the risks of flying blind. One of these was a 1928 system in which the Morse code signals for the letters A and N were transmitted to planes, when the signals formed a continuous tone in the pilots headset, that meant the pilot was following the correct path (Conway). The resolution of these tones is analogous to the resolution of the separated romantic dyad of the melodrama, which must go through a series of maneuvers in order to attain the status of a single married unit.

Later, during the second world war, the system of sonic navigation switched from Morse code to a ground control operator interpreting radar signals and transmitting verbal directions to pilots headphones. The ground control operator functioned as the pilots eyes, guiding the plane by speaking directly into the pilots ear, almost as if the controller was in the cockpit of the plane with the pilot, but endowed with a special knowledge because the technology of radar had rendered the invisible visible. As Paul Virilio puts it in *War and Cinema*:

The war room in London filled up with senior officers and female assistants -- hostesses, one might say, of a strategic office imitating real war -- who organized the flow of 'Chain Home' radar information and coordinated the RAF combat formations. Brief exchanges between crews and their 'war hostesses' passed through the ether, as if the couples were together in the same room. Duly warned, guided, and consoled, the fighter-pilots were ceaselessly followed by these offstage voices. (Virilio 1989, p. 95-96)

Within the context of his book and larger work, Virilio is here pointing to the way in which sonic navigation also stands in for the heterosexual couple, and supports his more general argument regarding woman as supporting figure in organized violence. But what's clear here also is the way in which sonic navigation sets up a relationship of intimacy, entangling the romance of flight with the romance of arriving home to a waiting partner.

What I'm getting at here is the way in which headphone technology is a technology of intimacy: it brings distant sounds closer, personalizing them (ideally they are secret sounds that no one else can hear), and have

direct contact with the body. Unlike the screen, sound here is literally tactile, touching the ear, while the micro changes in air pressure touch the ear drum. Sound theorist Brandon Labelle argues that sound creates “a geography of intimacy” as sound travels from body to body, and yet “requires something between [...] a relational space” (LaBelle xvi).

In 1963, five years after John Koss developed stereo headphones, TWA started using them for their inflight entertainment systems which employed a large screen at the front of the cabin, closer to theatrical film exhibition, and an arrangement of the exhibition apparatus that hardly exists today. Sony’s Astrovision system, introduced in American Airlines jets in 1964, included a small personal (or semi-personal) screen close to the passenger and a set of headphones. This configuration of personal and proximate screen coupled with headphones, is the dominant model of inflight entertainment technology today. In this viewing situation, the passengers can see each other, but they often do not know each other. They can see what other passengers are watching, and, increasingly, other passengers are watching something else. But, because of engine noise and the technological response in the form of headphones, passengers cannot access the sound of other passengers’ viewing materials. And so this is why headphones are a form of commitment: to listen is to be involved in the screen, to become absorbed by the film. Otherwise, the passenger cabin is just a space of flickering images and flashing lights, something closer to an urban shopping district than a movie theater. It seems to me that this is crucial, because so many passengers already know the films shown on airplanes: either through intensive marketing campaigns or because they have already seen the film itself. This familiarity is another form of intimacy: inflight films are like acquaintances, or even old friends, with whom we already have a relationship, they make us comfortable, in their narrative and emotional rhythms, their stock characters, plots, and set pieces. The act of watching these pre-digested films further develops and deepens these relationships, and putting on the headphones is to give the film one’s undivided attention, analogous to one member of a romantic dyad looking the other in the eye and saying “I’m listening to you.” Inflight, sound motivates the film, turning the images on the screen from samplings to immersive narratives. Headphones brings the story closer — the characters of romantic comedies essentially whisper their feelings in our ears — and it is this intimacy, created by the technological apparatus of inflight exhibition, that can exaggerate the melodramatic elements of contemporary films, overriding other textual elements (not to mention their marketing) and producing affective responses from passengers.

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