



Mapping modernity: Sony Walkman and the London Underground Map

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Abstract

This study examines the London Underground Map, redesigned by Harry Beck in 1931, as a transformative object of modern spatial representation and a symbolic tool of visual culture. Beck's schematic map, which diverges from traditional geographical accuracy, is not merely a visualization tool for a transportation network, but also a design revolution that reshaped the perception of the modern urban experience. With its simplified lines, color codings, and abstract structure, the map reflects modernist principles—such as order, efficiency, accessibility, and network connectivity—while reconfiguring urban mobility both physically and mentally. In this context, the article argues that Beck's map functions not only as a historical artifact but also as a cultural text. Through the example of the 2008 Sony Walkman advertising campaign, it analyzes the map's various forms of reproduction in different contexts and shifting cultural meanings. The theoretical perspectives of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, and Stuart Ewen's critique of media culture offer a framework to interpret the map as both a technical and ideological object. The cultural space in which the underground map and the Walkman intersect provides significant insights into the urban individual's relationship with space, their understanding of mobility, and strategies of visual representation

Highlights

- This article examines the London Underground Map as a visual symbol of spatial representation and modernity.
- It establishes a new connection between the Sony Walkman, a prominent cultural archetype and urban identity.
- The map functions still shapes modern perceptions of space, mobility also consumer culture.
- Its reinterpretation in Sony's Walkman ad exemplifies how abstract cartographic logic informs globalized, networked experiences of everyday life.

Keywords

London Underground Map; Sony Walkman; Mobility; Urban space; Modernity

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Moderniteyi haritalamak: Sony Walkman ve Londra Metro Haritası

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Öz

Bu çalışma, 1931 yılında Harry Beck tarafından yeniden tasarlanan Londra Metro Haritası'nı, modern mekânsal temsilin dönüştürücü bir nesnesi ve görsel kültürün sembolik bir aracı olarak ele almaktadır. Beck'in, geleneksel coğrafi doğruluktan saparak geliştirdiği şematik harita, yalnızca bir ulaşım ağını görselleştirme aracı değil, aynı zamanda modern kent deneyiminin algılanma biçimini dönüştüren bir tasarım devrimi olarak okunmaktadır. Harita, sadeleştirilmiş hatları, renk kodlamaları ve soyut düzeniyle modernist ilkeleri – düzen, verimlilik, erişilebilirlik ve ağ bağlantısallığı – yansıtırken; kent içi hareketliliği hem fiziksel hem de zihinsel olarak yeniden yapılandırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda makale, Beck'in haritasının sadece tarihsel bir üretim olarak değil, aynı zamanda kültürel bir metin olarak da işlev gördüğünü savunmaktadır. Özellikle 2008 yılında Sony Walkman tarafından yayımlanan reklam kampanyası örneği üzerinden, haritanın farklı bağlamlarda yeniden üretim biçimleri analiz edilmekte ve onun değişen kültürel anlamları irdelenmektedir. Bruno Latour'un aktör-ağ kuramı, Nicolas Bourriaud'nun ilişkisel estetik yaklaşımı ve Stuart Ewen'in medya kültürü eleştirisi, haritanın hem teknik hem de ideolojik bir nesne olarak yorumlanmasına imkân tanımaktadır. Metro haritası ile Walkman'ın keşiştiği bu kültürel uzam, çağdaş kentli bireyin mekânla kurduğu ilişkiyi, mobilite anlayışını ve görsel temsil stratejilerini anlamada önemli ipuçları sunmaktadır.

Öne Çıkanlar

- Bu makale, Londra Metro Haritası'nı modernitenin görsel bir simgesi olarak ele alır.
- Makale, bir kültürel arketip olarak Sony Walkman ile kentsel kimlik arasında yeni bir ilişki kurar.
- Haritanın işlevi, günümüzde hâlâ mekân, hareketlilik ve tüketim kültürü algılarını şekillendirmeye devam etmektedir.
- Walkman reklamındaki yeniden yorumu, soyut haritacılık mantığının küreselleşmiş ve ağlarla örülü günlük deneyimleri nasıl biçimlendirdiğini örnekler.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Londra Metro Haritası; Sony Walkman; Mobilite; Kentsel mekan; Modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

The London Underground Map, first conceptualized by Harry Beck in 1931, is widely regarded not merely as a navigational tool, but as a seminal artifact in the visual culture of modernity. By abstracting geographic fidelity in favor of diagrammatic clarity, Beck's design marked a paradigmatic shift in cartographic representation—one that privileges legibility and systemic coherence over spatial realism (Hadlaw, 2003). Its iconic status stems not only from its practical utility but also from its enduring adaptability across cultural domains, from industrial design and advertising to contemporary art and critical theory.

This paper explores how the London Underground Map transcends its original function to become a site for negotiating modern spatial, visual, and cultural imaginaries. As Latour (2009) argues, modernity is structured around systems of abstraction that disembody individuals from local environments and re-embed them within networks—non-places where identity is formed less through rootedness and more through flow, connectivity, and representation. The Underground Map, by erasing topography and equalizing distances, embodies this logic. It does not depict a geography of places, but rather a diagram of relationships, rhythms, and transit flows—what Augé (1995) famously calls a “non-place” par excellence.

In parallel, Spinney (2007) emphasizes these non-places are not merely destinations but are constituted through lived experiences and sensory engagement. Contemporary transit environments—such as subways—represent “spaces of mobility” where encounters are not shaped by social interaction but are mediated by signs, signals, and systems. These are spaces where communication is symbolic, and where human presence is regulated by the rhythm of movement rather than by sustained engagement or meaning-making. While many civilizations uphold mobility as a human right, it is often interpreted narrowly—reduced to formally constructed, routine infrastructures that serve institutional purposes. Yet mobility should not be conflated with these prescribed routes. As Spinney notes, spontaneous or unstructured movement is often discouraged in urban planning, despite the emerging recognition of more dynamic, productive forms of mobility that lie outside rigid systems of access (Spinney, 2007, p. 26).

Through this lens, the London Underground Map can be understood not simply as a tool of transportation but as a cultural and ideological diagram—rendering a modern urban condition defined by circulation rather than destination, and abstraction rather than inhabitation. The enduring influence of this diagrammatic logic can be observed in its numerous cultural appropriations, most notably in the 2008 Sony Walkman advertising campaign. In this campaign, the map is reimagined with musical artists replacing station names, and headphone wires tracing

new symbolic lines of movement and identity. This repurposing reflects what Bourriaud (2002) describes as the aesthetics of “post- production,” where artists and corporations alike recycle and recontextualize existing cultural forms to generate new meaning. Sony’s use of the map exemplifies the convergence of consumer identity and urban abstraction; it positions the Walkman not just as a product, but as an enabler of individualized urban experience—what Du Gay et al. (2013) conceptualizes as “life-style encoding” within late capitalism (2013). The broader literature considers lifestyle not only as a psychological construct but also as a socio- cultural phenomenon encompassing daily habits, values, consumption patterns and modes of self-expression (Veal, 1993). Together, these perspectives suggest that lifestyle is a product of both internal motivations and external environments, offering insights into identity, social belonging and individual agency (Ansbacher, 1967, p.191).

These intersections between image, identity, and space reveal the London Underground Map as a deeply modern visual regime—one that not only reflects but actively shapes the conditions of mobility, perception, and consumption in contemporary urban life. This paper argues that the map’s abstraction does not erase meaning but opens it up to endless re- significations. As it migrates from infrastructure to icon, from function to metaphor, the map embodies the transformation of space itself in modernity: fragmented, fluid, networked, and mediated.

The London Underground map has been a significant subject for a growing body of academic literature, not merely a practical navigation tool, but also as a cultural text with far-reaching implications for design, media and urban theory. The historical evolution and influence of the subject on modern schematic transit mapping has been documented by foundational works by Ken Garland (1994) and Mark Ovenden (2007). It is noteworthy that scholars such as Hadlaw (2003) and Merrill (2013) have underlined the symbolic abstraction and enduring visual logic of the subject under discussion, positing that it functions as a representation of modernity itself. From a cognitive perspective, researchers such as Liu and Li (2016) and Rosenholtz et al. (2014) have examined the efficiency and recognition performance of Beck’s diagrammatic layout, in relation to task completion time and mental workload. In his 1992 work, the prominent artist Simon Patterson reinterpreted the map in his oeuvre, “The Great Bear”, by altering the station names to those of renowned individuals and celebrities. This approach resulted in a whimsical distortion of reality, culminating in the creation of a network of stars, as depicted in the work’s title (Pike and Gilbert, 2002). Design theorists, social historian and media scholars tackled its functionality in artistic and commercial mediums. While these studies’ focus lies with the map’s symbolic, functional or artistic qualities, few of them have explored its entanglement with lifestyle production in consumer culture. The present paper makes a contribution to the existing discourse by analysing the 2008 Sony Walkman campaign as a case study in which cartographic design and portable media converge. This analysis reveals how the schematic logic of the map is recontextualised to structure individual mobility, identity and cultural imagination in the late-modern urban experience.

London Underground Map and Its Impact on Identity and Space

Designed by Harry Beck in 1931, the London Underground Map (Figure 1) marked a revolutionary shift away from conventional cartographic practices. At a time when even subterranean transit maps were expected to maintain geographical accuracy and recognizable landmarks, Beck proposed

a radically different approach. His design prioritized clarity and legibility over spatial fidelity, abandoning scale and topographical realism in favor of a schematic, highly abstracted visual language. Iconic geographical elements, such as the River Thames, were reduced to minimalist, symbolic representations—so abstract, in fact, that the London Transport Passenger Board (LTPB) initially deemed the design “incomprehensible for the public” (McWhinnie, 2014), leading to its initial rejection.

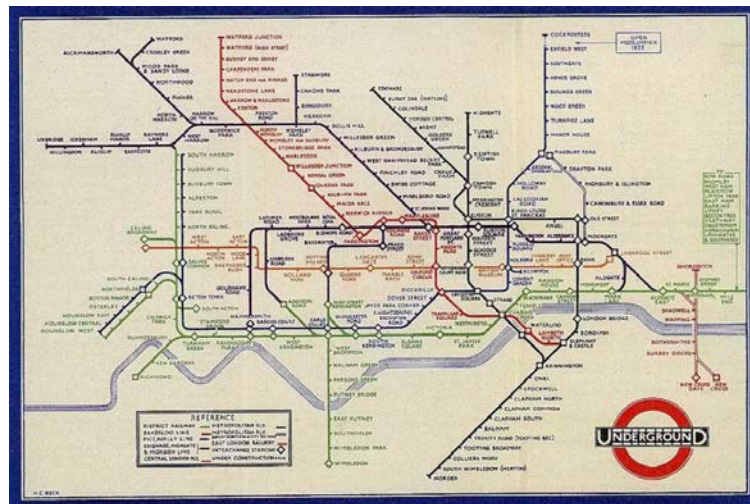


Figure 1. Harry Beck, London Underground Map (McWhinnie, 2014).

It is understandable to ask, why has the London Underground Map become a classic that has withstood the test of time? The answer lies in its adaptability and user-friendly design and these qualities have made it a foundational template for all subsequent maps produced since its adoption. It has become deeply embedded not only in the minds of Londoners but also in the memory of countless tourists. Beck’s diagram, though once dismissed, eventually became a cognitive map for a city in flux. In fact, when asked about the city, many Londoners are more likely to recall this map than the actual layout of the city itself.

Strictly speaking, it would be inaccurate to call it a “map” in the conventional sense—it is more accurately described as a schematic diagram. This is evident in the fact that more than half of the stations it depicts are located above ground. The design is not primarily concerned with physical geography; it disregards spatial distances and variations in travel time between stations. The only remaining geographical reference is the River Thames, rendered as a north-south orientation axis in a singular color. The rest is composed of color-coded lines, schematic nodes, geometrical shapes for interchanges, and a strict geometric grid formed by lines fixed at 90 or 45-degree angles (McWhinnie, 2014).

The design was ultimately accepted and published in 1933—just one year after its initial rejection. Conceived by Harry Beck, a 29-year-old electrical draughtsman, the map drew directly from his professional background. Rather than adhering to the conventions of geographic cartography, Beck approached the project with a technical mindset, describing his creation as a “common sense device.” His schematic network emphasized clarity and coherence over geographic accuracy, a radical departure from earlier models such as F.H. Stingemore’s 1908 map (Figure 2), which, while

topographically faithful, proved difficult to read and navigate. Beck’s diagrammatic vision not only redefined how urban transit systems could be visualized but also laid the foundation for countless maps that followed. Though considered groundbreaking at the time, today his design language has become almost intuitive, a testament to its lasting impact on the visual representation of urban space (McWhinnie, 2014). But Beck’s formal innovation was not occurring in a vacuum—it coincided with, and was shaped by, broader structural changes in capitalist urban life.



Figure 2. F.H. Stingemore, London Underground Map (McWhinnie, 2014).

It is also crucial to consider the broader sociocultural transformations occurring alongside Beck’s cartographic innovation, particularly the capitalist restructuring of urban life in the early 20th century. The rise of monopoly capitalism—from the late 19th century through to the interwar period—coincided with the consolidation of London’s fragmented transit systems. During this era, electric railways and tramlines were not merely infrastructural developments but instrumental tools in incorporating the working class into the expanding urban economy. By the 1890s, extensive investments in transit infrastructure had effectively transformed public transport into a commercial apparatus. The formal establishment of the “Underground” brand in 1907 marked a significant turning point: mass transit became more than a logistical solution; it emerged as a sophisticated marketing device designed to convert the working class into a mobile, urban consumer base (Hadlaw, 2003, p. 30). This commercial context gave rise to a new kind of spatial imaginary.

Every historical period produces its own spatial logic. However, space is not produced directly or spontaneously; it emerges through a dialectical process shaped by the social imaginary and the rhythms of everyday life. The representation of space, while seemingly descriptive, is itself a tool that reshapes the collective understanding of time and place. At the same time, such representations visualize spatial conditions that have already been socially and materially produced. For instance, in medieval times, the carefully aligned cypress trees used to demarcate urban land can be interpreted as a form of perspectival order—one that predated the formal codification of perspective in art. These alignments reveal an implicit spatial logic, embedded in the culture before

it was rationalized. In a similar sense, the London Underground Map can be seen as a representation of a space already constituted by the social and economic demands of its time (Hadlaw, 2003, p. 28). In this sense, the Beck map should not only be seen as a navigational device, but as part of the spatial discourse of its time

What distinguishes the London Underground Map from conventional cartographic representations is precisely the context Bruno Latour articulates regarding modern spatial perception. As Hadlaw (2003) explains, traditional maps depict space through topographical accuracy, where distances are represented according to real-world measurements. In contrast, the London Underground Map deliberately omits topography, thus abstracting the notion of place. The map eliminates the visual cues of scale and geography, reducing every station to an equidistant node in a symbolic network. Consequently, whether one resides in the suburbs or the city center becomes irrelevant—the distances between stations are normalized. While part of this abstraction was likely a rational design choice to fit the map into a clear, modern frame, its implications reach further. The map equalizes urban experience by visually removing socio-spatial hierarchies. As Hadlaw notes, it alters the public's perception of time and distance, effectively transporting individuals through a neutralized, depersonalized system that disregards their points of origin (2003, p.33).

What makes Beck's map particularly significant—beyond its practical function—is its capacity for reinterpretation across different contexts and mediums. It has transcended its original use as a transit guide and become a visual metaphor ripe with cultural and symbolic meanings. This polyvalence helps explain why Sony chose to use the map's imagery in its Walkman campaign.

Its schematic abstraction and immediate recognizability made it a powerful visual shorthand for modernity itself—qualities that Sony would later harness in its Walkman campaign, merging the logics of urban transit and portable sound. It is no coincidence, then, that Sony would choose this map as the visual icon for its campaign: an instantly recognizable image that symbolically captures the speed of urban life, the flow of movement over rootedness, individuality over collectivity, and a geography-less abstraction where distance and proximity collapse into placelessness: portable life-portable sound.

Designing Mobility: The Walkman, Flexible Specialization, and Urban Identity

The Walkman, first released in 1979, marked a turning point for personal music consumption. It revolutionized listening habits and became a global phenomenon among music lovers. Sony capitalized on this cultural shift by introducing nearly 500 different Walkman models, tailored to a diverse range of users. From colorful, playful designs for children to sophisticated models for adults, and even waterproof versions for athletes, Sony constructed the Walkman not just as a device but as a lifestyle product. This strategy exemplifies what Du Gay et al. (1997) refers to as “lifestyle encoding”—the process by which consumer products are imbued with meanings tied to identity, aspiration, and everyday life.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Du Gay describes Sony as “mapping” our culture. According to Du Gay, meanings are assigned to cultural objects and mediated through them, shaping our understanding of the world. While we cannot literally converse with or think through these objects, we nevertheless project values, memories, and collective social attitudes onto them. Cultural

artefacts, in this sense, serve as maps of our everyday life, encoding and reflecting personal and societal meanings. They actively participate in constructing identities and modes of being (Du Gay et al., 2013). Walkman remain a relevant topic of discussion in the 21st century since it still continues to offer valuable insights into “circuit culture”, prompting a reexamination of media and space through a fresh perspective (Pinder, 2010). The Walkman facilitates critical discourse on the concept of identity, the nature of mobility, and the intersection of music and modernity, encouraging an exploration of how these elements converge in shaping contemporary experiences.

Du Gay et al. (1997) describe lifestyle as a form of “flexible specialization” (Figure 3)—a marketing strategy that operates through responsive design and targeted visual communication. In this framework, products are tailored to diverse consumer identities, allowing individuals to see themselves reflected in what they purchase. In the case of the Sony Walkman, this meant designing a version for every demographic and lifestyle: from colorful models for children to elegant, minimalist devices for adults, even waterproof editions for athletes. The underlying idea was that the consumer should be able to identify personally with the product—that the Walkman would become a defining element of one’s lifestyle (Du Gay et al., 1997, p. 65). In this case, the identification was the urban commuter from home to work.

This notion of lifestyle and style extends beyond consumption. As Ewen (1988) argues, style is not only a means of aesthetic expression but a critical component of self-definition. It becomes a visual and behavioral lexicon through which individuals articulate identity, values, and social positioning: “If the ‘life-style’ of style is not realizable, it is, at the same time, the most constantly available lexicon from which many of us draw the visual grammar of our lives” (Ewen, 1988, p. 42). Style thus serves as a gesture of both opposition and apposition in matters of politics, sexuality, class, and cultural status. It forms a symbolic layer on the body that communicates who we are and structures how we live (Ewen, 1988, p. 43).

Historically, the emergence of style as a social necessity is deeply rooted in capitalist transformation. The Industrial Revolution and the rise of urban capitalism in the 19th century restructured not only labor but also the human experience. As Ewen (1988) outlines, waves of people left rural communities, family ties, and traditions behind, entering anonymous cities where they became “mobile individuals,” detached from their roots and forced to constantly navigate unfamiliar social terrain (p. 44). In such conditions, personal appearance and presentation became critical tools for negotiation and survival. Business encounters, social interactions, and even intimate relationships increasingly took place between strangers, elevating the importance of style as a means of communication and assimilation. Immigrants and migrant workers, in particular, learned that to “be presentable” was not just an aesthetic concern but a vital aspect of participating in urban life: “The appeal of style was not a matter of aesthetics alone—it was a functional acquisition of metropolitan life” (Ewen, 1988, p. 46).

Recontextualizing the Underground: The Sony Walkman and the Cultural Diagram of Mobility

In 2008, Sony Walkman released a series of advertisements for the new mp3 player, inspired by underground transit maps called *Cities of the World by Walkman* (Figure 3), designed by famous

company Saatchi & Saatchi. These advertisements were postproductions in the sense described by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002), where existing cultural forms are recontextualized in new settings. In this case, underground maps were reinterpreted within a new realm, music. The station names were replaced by musical artists and bands, and underground lines were reimagined using headphone wires and cables. Among the maps reworked was the iconic London Underground Map.

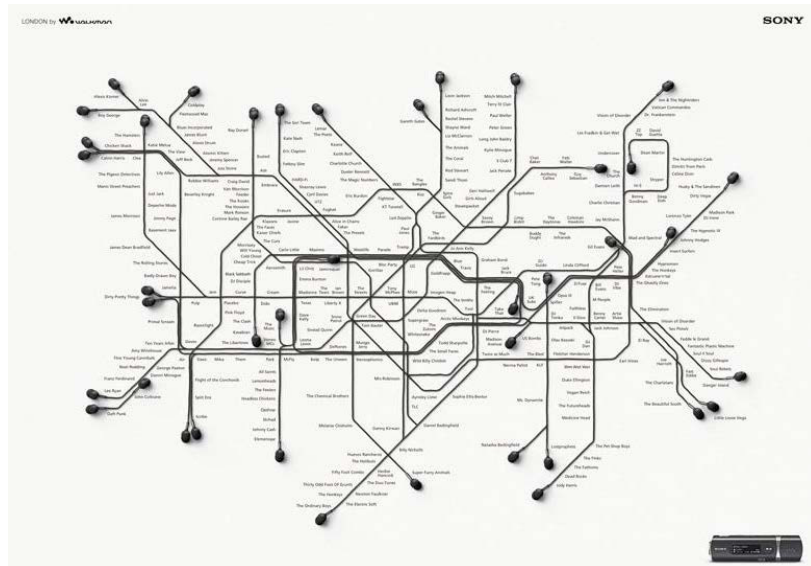


Figure 3. Saatchi & Saatchi, London Underground (Saatchi and Saatchi, 2008).

In the early 20th century, the expansion of metropolitan life gave rise to new forms of mobility. The movement of workers from suburban and rural areas to the city centre, driven by demand for labor and consumption, was a socio-economic reality that predated urban planning. The creation of the London Underground Map did not invent this mobility; rather, it visually reinforced and legitimized it. The cartographic representation of this phenomenon unveiled a contemporary reality: individuals were becoming increasingly mobile, dislocated from their places of origin and reintegrated into the urban landscape as both a labor force and consumers. In this context, the Sony Walkman can be regarded as a cultural artefact that is firmly embedded in this historical trajectory. Consequently, contemporary spatial practices and identity construction have rendered the Walkman a symbol of mobility, autonomy and the formalization of everyday life. The Walkman, akin to the London Underground map, can be regarded as a manifestation of contemporary urban realities and a depiction of a distinct spatial and social order.

Perhaps even more egalitarian than the London Underground map, this image no longer employed color distinctions - all musical genres were equal, and the usual symbols marking transitions between stations were removed. Everything merged into one continuous, fluid network, with only the stations and the music at its core. With this tiny device in hand, an endless mix of genres merges back and forth throughout the entire journey. From a semiotic perspective, as Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) observes, meaning as a production through differential relations within a system of signs (Saussure, 1959, p.117) and here by eliminating color-coded distinctions, the map constructed an egalitarian system of signs in which no genre enjoyed a privileged status and all gain meaning solely through their fluid interconnections.

Especially when considering daily subway commutes, the monotony and the equalness of the working class’s journey to the same job every day reflected one of the most prominent aspects of modern life. The desire to escape this routine, as part of an individualized urban experience, made portable music devices like the Sony Walkman particularly appealing. Indeed, during the 1980s, many advertising campaigns were created that centered around this very theme (Figure 4). One of them reads; “Every morning you go through the same routine. The same old train. The same old newspaper. The same old faces. And by the time you get to the office, you're ready to turn around and go home... So next time you make that long journey to work, just turn on the Sony and close your eyes. Because getting lost is sometimes the best way to find yourself.”



Figure 4. Sony Walkman vintage ads from 1980s (Left) Get lost on your way to work (Right), Choose your escape route (The Click Americana Team, 2019).

By utilizing the London Underground Map, Sony harnessed a potent symbol of modern navigation to align with its own narrative: presenting music as an accessible journey for all. The reinterpretation of the map as a musical diagram echo not only Harry Beck’s legacy of abstraction but also underscores Sony’s dedication to inclusivity—promoting the idea of "music for everyone," irrespective of age, social status, or background. Through this visual metaphor, the Walkman was positioned not merely as a technological device, but as a gateway to personal freedom and cultural connection. In this way, the Sony Walkman not only constructed its own cultural universe but also became integrated into the broader "map of meaning," influencing even those who never personally used the device. It transcended its functional role to emerge as a symbol of modernity. As Du Gay observes, "the image of the Walkman—with its sleek, high-tech, and miniaturized design—emerged as a metaphor for a distinctly late-modern, technological lifestyle." These associated meanings, practices, images, and identities allow us to situate, interpret, and critically analyze the Walkman not merely as a consumer product, but as a cultural artefact embedded within a complex symbolic system.

As Bruno Latour (1993) poignantly observes, "The Moderns have no place, no topos, no locus to sit and stay. The view from nowhere, so prevalent in the old scientific imagination, also means that there is nowhere for those who hold it to realistically reside" (p. 141). In this view, modernity is characterized by placelessness—a detachment from rooted geographies and an increasing reliance on abstractions such as maps, diagrams, and lifestyle artifacts to navigate a fragmented world. The London Underground Map and the Sony Walkman, therefore, are not merely tools of transportation or entertainment; they function as diagrams of the modern condition, offering individuals a means to orient themselves within the complexities of urban life.

In this sense, the London Underground Map, along with the corresponding maps of New York and Sydney used in Sony's campaign (Figure 5), becomes analogous to an electric circuit: commuters enter the system, are transferred like currents along predefined lines, and exit once the loop is complete. This metaphor closely aligns with Sony's ideological statement in the Walkman campaign: "music for everyone." In the advertisement based on the Underground Map, the essential element of the metro system—the color-coded lines indicating different routes—is entirely removed. Deprived of these colors, the map loses its functional capacity for navigation, foregrounding instead the symbolic network over geographical specificity. The resulting black-and-white composition renders destinations interchangeable, effectively neutralizing spatial differences, underlining the moderns' placelessness.

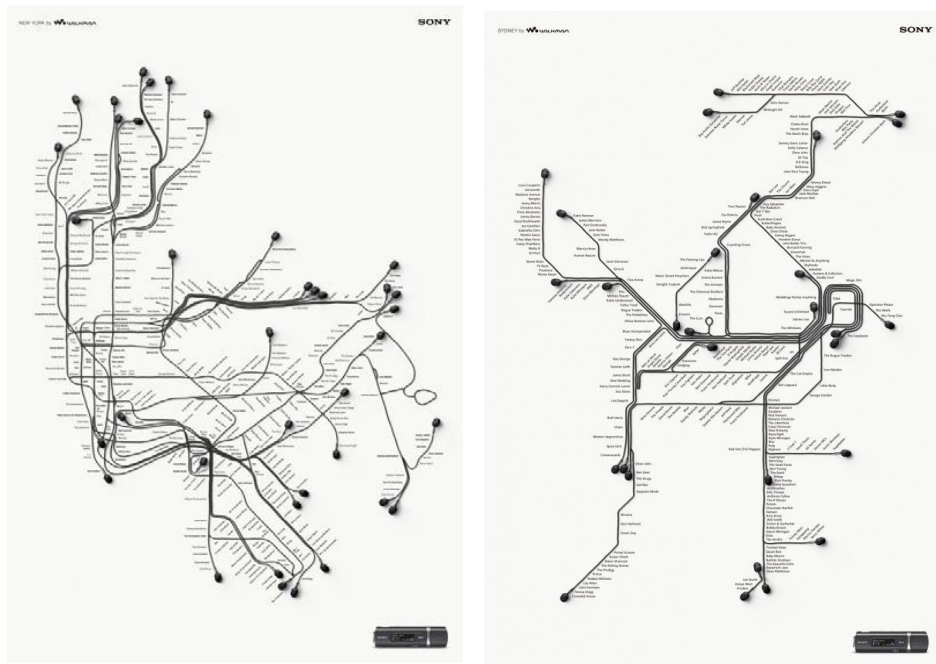


Figure 5. Sony Walkman's campaign's New York (Left) and Sydney (Right) maps (Saatchi and Saatchi, 2008).

Latour (2009) captures this phenomenon in *Spheres and Networks*, where he critiques the modern conception of space as void and abstract. He writes: "Imagine that—the real world confused with the white expanse of a piece of paper!" (p.142). Latour argues that modernity consists of interconnected networks rather than physical places. We traverse corridors linked to larger systems, but we do not inhabit them; there is no true space in which to dwell. He critiques the representation

of space on paper—as in architecture or design—as a manipulative act, especially in the age of digital rendering. The Cartesian concept of *res extensa*, or physical substance, has lost its grounding. Today, materiality is no longer natural but saturated with human intervention. Thus, space itself has become a confusion of symbolic geometries, devoid of organic presence (Latour, 2009, p.142).

Within this framework, the London Underground Map can be seen as a diagram of such a network—a space without *topos*, without *locus*, a liminal corridor integrated into a broader system. It does not represent a space to inhabit but a mechanism for transition, a symbolic abstraction of movement through form. Its visual language is one of manipulation, where spatial relations are reduced to geometric signs. And each network function with its own spheres as Latour (2009) articulates, “Spheres and networks are ways first to localize the global so as, in a second move, to provide more space in the end than the mythical outside that had been devised by the nature-and-society mythology” (p.143). The Walkman user embodies this shift—situated in a global, mobile network yet immersed in an intimate and subjective auditory space.

The Walkman played a significant role in shaping new forms of personal space, marking perhaps the first widespread adoption of earphones as tools for spatial self-isolation, as stated by Schwiengershausen (2015) “...and it didn’t take long for headphones to become a commonplace commuting accessory.” (Figure 6). By plugging in earphones, users simultaneously unplugged from their immediate environment, creating a highly individualized auditory sphere, which McGarrell coined beautifully as “what Sony actually created was personal space, made portable”. (2016) This sensory withdrawal often produced an intensely personal experience, at times perceived as socially disruptive or even as a form of quiet resistance—an “anarchy” against the conventions of the public realm. Through the Walkman, individuals were able to construct a sensory buffer between themselves and the external world, enabling them to navigate shared urban spaces while inhabiting private auditory bubbles. These isolated spheres, though highly personal, interconnected through the movement of bodies, forming a network of continuous yet discrete zones of selfhood.



Figure 6. “...and it didn’t take long for headphones to become a commonplace commuting accessory” (Schwiengershausen, 2015, Original Photograph NY Daily News / Getty Images).

The Walkman's introduction marked a pivotal moment in the widespread adoption of earphones as instruments of spatial self-isolation, empowering users to establish highly personalised auditory domains that effectively “unplug” them from their surroundings. This phenomenon, later termed the “walkman effect”, exemplifies the transformative impact of technology on our social and cultural interactions. As Bull further elaborates, Walkman users meticulously curate their auditory environment, thereby engendering a sense of autonomy and dissociation amidst the overstimuli of contemporary urban life. This practice has been demonstrated to transform public environments into intimate “auditory cocoons” and in this setting, sensory overload is reduced by this special mechanism, thereby engendering a state of entrancement (2001). By occluding ambient noise, it created a sensory buffer through which commuters could inhabit private soundscapes even in crowded urban environments. These discrete auditory zones—each carried through the movement of its wearer—bear a striking affinity to subway maps' abstract, impersonal logic, wherein passengers traverse fixed routes without meaningful interaction. In this context, the Walkman both acknowledged and shaped a nascent condition of modern mobility: a form of solitude in public space that, at times, assumes the character of quiet resistance or “anarchy” against the demands of the collective as the advert (Figure 7) reads: “Look around. It's happening everywhere. More and more people every day are listening to music in a revolutionary way.”

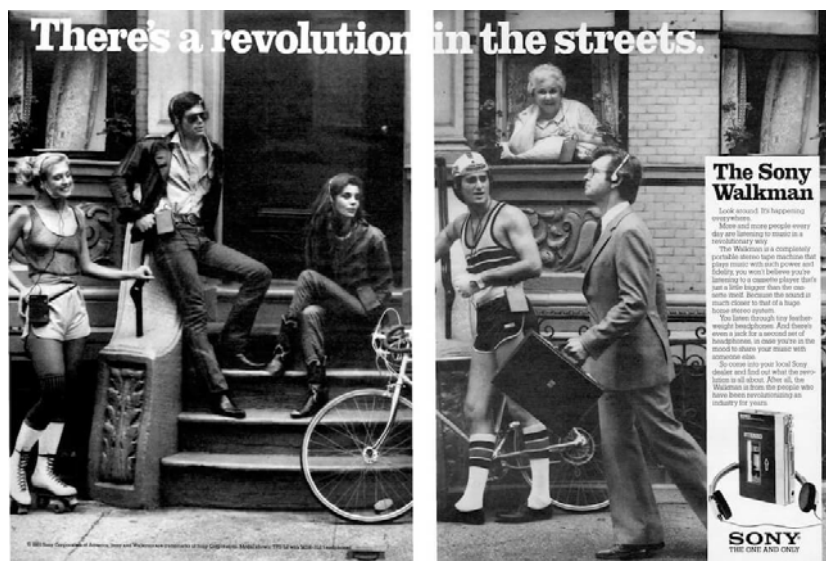


Figure 7. Subway passengers using early Walkman devices (McGarrell, 2016).

Other Interpretations of London Underground Map

Beyond Sony's advertisement, the London Underground Map has been reinterpreted and reimagined across a wide range of cultural and artistic contexts. Its repeated postproduction is not coincidental but reflects the broader transformation in the nature of contemporary art within modernity. As Bourriaud (2002) observes, since the early 1990s, artistic production has increasingly moved away from the idea of creating from a blank slate. Instead, it now emphasizes reinterpretation and recontextualization of existing materials. Artists working within this “postproduction” paradigm challenge the traditional binaries between production and consumption, originality and appropriation. In this framework, an artwork is no longer a finished object but a process—an evolving contribution to a shared cultural archive. This shift is deeply

linked to the knowledge-based society, the proliferation of digital networks, and the reshaping of the “mental space” of contemporary individuals (p.23).

Simon Patterson’s “The Great Bear” (1992) has been identified as one of the earliest works to reinterpret the map. This lithographic work revisits the map, transforming it into a system of stars derived from its name, Ursa Major. In this manner, the London Underground map, which is renowned for its iconic status, transitions to a map featuring notable figures, including comedians, footballers, scientists, saints, and philosophers. Nonetheless, the linear organisation and the general idea remain intact. However, Patterson subverts its functional purpose into a conceptual artwork that questions systems of classification and cultural hierarchy. The piece, which was produced in an edition of fifty, is part of the Tate Gallery’s collection and was created with the permission of London Underground with numerous negotiations. In the aftermath, the work was also incorporated into critical social theory, as evidenced by the reviews from Russell (2006) and Moran (2005). These reviews commented on how the work distorted reality and opened up new ways of representing and questioning social and cultural values. David Pike further interprets the piece as uncovering the latent utopianism of modernism. In this sense, *The Great Bear* can be said to exemplify the kind of “postproduction aesthetics” described by Bourriaud (2002), where existing cultural forms are recontextualised to generate new symbolic and critical meanings.

A plethora of recent examples have accumulated over time, thereby serving to reinforce this phenomenon. One of the publications is entitled *Map Anatomy* (Figure 8) by Dr. Jonathan Simmons, M.D, a resident physician at Tufts Medical Center, which is based on human anatomy. Designed with clarity and familiarity that even a layperson can comprehend, the project aims for maximum precision and minimal misdirection. Each bodily system is represented with a distinct color code, and interconnected organ systems are indicated with dashed lines. Although not drastically different from the previous map, this representation of human anatomy also draws on modernist notions such as efficiency and scientific rationality. As Marshall suggests, the human body is depicted not solely in terms of anatomical accuracy but “more like cities: just as busy, just as interconnected, just as dependent on connections and routines, and just as improbably functional” (2019).

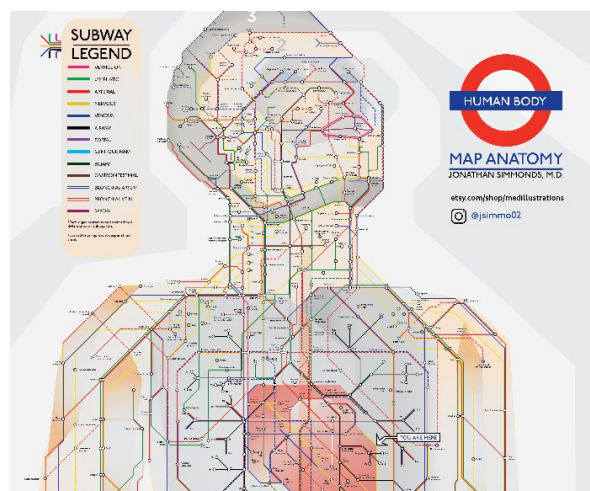


Figure 8. Jonathan Simmons, *Map Anatomy* (Simmonds, 2019).

Džamić and Srđić's metro map (Figure 9) presents a reinterpretation in the form of a “closed circuit” based on the destructive effects of capitalism as their description clearly puts forward their intent; “I was intrigued by the fact that people in liberal capitalist societies tend to feel less happy than in many others with significantly (sometimes shockingly) less wealth. Which made me think of the role of persuasion industries in that phenomenon”. Influenced by the field of social psychology, this map includes even the positive aspects of capitalism as metro line stops. However, the first stop on the loop is Capitalism, and the final stop is Misery. The main junction is “Effects on people: stress, status anxiety, and greed”, even though the route leads to stops like “Individual freedoms: private property, human rights” (Krum, 2010).

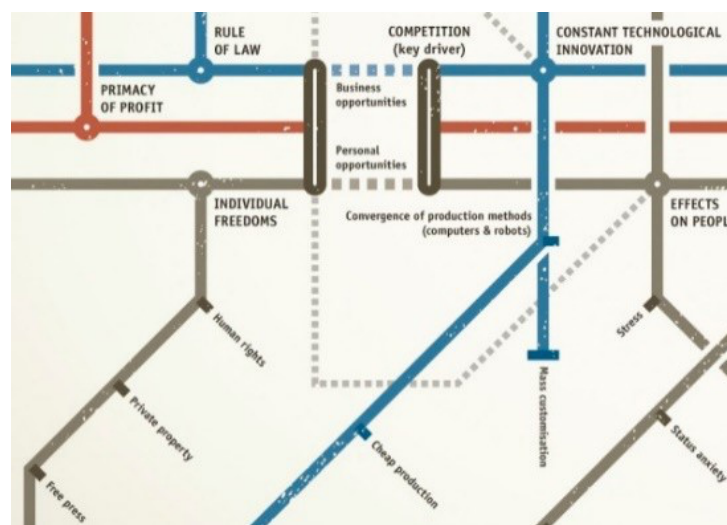


Figure 9. Partial from Lazar Džamić and Vladan Srđić's Map (Džamić and Srđić, 2010).

As cartographer Kenneth Field (2024) observes, the London Underground Map has not remained static in its evolution. The recent redesign has been undertaken with the intention of rectifying certain visual and functional deficiencies inherent in the traditional version. These include the uniformity of line thickness and the cumbersome use of color schemes, which have the effect of obscuring variations in frequency and transit type. By incorporating contemporary cartographic techniques—for example, scaled route thickness to indicate service frequency and mode-specific colors—Field's schematic offers a more legible, inclusive, and informative approach to understanding urban mobility through design.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the London Underground Map can be regarded as a pioneering work of its era, and it continues to serve as a potent symbol of modernity, urban life, and spatial representation. The radical departure of the 1931 map from conventional cartographic practices led to initial resistance, as designed by Harry Beck. However, its abstraction from topography and its focus on the geometrical representation of spaces eventually allowed it to transcend the boundaries of mere transportation logistics. By eschewing geographical details and instead focusing on symbolic

relationships between stations, Beck's map not only reshaped how people navigated the city, but also influenced broader conceptions of urban space and modernity itself.

The London Underground Map has been appropriated in numerous other contexts over the years, most notably in advertising, art, and popular culture. This is because its simplicity, universality, and geometric clarity lend themselves to various reinterpretations. As Hadlaw (2003) posits, the map functions as a representation of more than a mere guide to the city's transit system; it embodies the abstraction of space in the modern world. Its visual language has proven to be a successful medium for both artists and advertisers alike. The visual language in question communicates the essence of mobility, networks and connections, which are all themes that are of central importance to contemporary life. As Spinney (2007) states the classical approach defines place with 3 premises such as territoriality, sociality and inhabitancy. The spaces of a car is a non-place since there are no encounters, the roads where people interact with the use of labels, where there is only a transitory movement. Although these "autospaces" signify a new meaning with culture and technology, a new understanding where nature is a pleasurable background. As opposed to the approach where these places lack experience, the feeling and the transient, floating, instant senses that these non-places awake should not be defined as meaningless (p.28).

The map's correlation with the contemporary, networked nature of existence has rendered it a persistent cultural artefact. As stated by Pinder "Walks, games, investigations and mappings are discussed as manifestations of a form of 'psychogeography', and are set in the context of recent increasing international interest in practices associated with this term, following its earlier use by the situationists."

The adaptation of the map in Sony's 2008 Walkman advertisements is a prime example of this phenomenon, as it symbolized a world in which individuals, such as commuters, navigate a vast and impersonal network of connections. These individuals are disconnected from their geographical origins but integrated into a globalized, commodified system. The Walkman, akin to the map, symbolizes the contemporary experience of mobility, autonomy and the individualization of space. Both of these works reflect the shift towards a more abstract, de-territorialized understanding of space, where personal and collective identities are continuously negotiated through the manipulation of symbolic representations.

Furthermore, as Bourriaud (2002) discusses, contemporary art's shift towards "post- production" – where existing works are recontextualized rather than created a new – has contributed to the ongoing relevance of the London Underground Map as a cultural symbol. The London Underground has evolved from a mere means of navigating the city's transport network to a metaphorical representation of modern existence itself. Its re-use and reinterpretation signal the changing dynamics of how space, identity, and culture are understood and represented in the contemporary world.

This analysis opens up promising opportunities for future scholarly contributions at the intersection of visual culture, media theory and urban semiotics. Beck's visual legacy provides a foundation for further academic research in the field of digital navigation interfaces, with a particular focus on the continuous abstractions and transformations of spatial reality. These

transformations span from paper-based schematics to algorithm-driven digital environments and even AI-powered tools, which underscore the potential for novel cartographic representations and their practical applications. The study will facilitate an understanding of the factors that influence individuals' decisions regarding navigation in the context of emerging technologies. As these systems evolve, they have the potential to significantly transform individual mobility, urban experience, and spatial perception. Interdisciplinary approaches that link design studies with smart technologies, particularly those that integrate digital mapping platforms and music software, offer promising directions for extending the scope of cultural studies. This study engages with design history and cultural representation, and it is important to note that it establishes a foundation for a conversation around smart technologies, AI-powered tools, the privatisation of urban space and the evolving aesthetics of mediated mobility.

It is evident that the London Underground Map is not merely an exceptional product of its era; it is also a cultural artefact of significance that transcends its original function. It can be argued that the work serves as a visual embodiment of the modern city, the individual's mobility within it, and the increasingly abstract nature of spatial and social relationships. The symbol continues to be regarded as unique and powerful, representing the intersection of geography, technology and culture in ways that resonate in the present day, particularly in our modern, networked lives.

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