

**T**ravelling to Paris last week on a lunchtime Eurostar departure for the leisure classes, we have barely made it out of King's Cross before the carriage is overwhelmed with the plangent twang of a mother – American, as it happens – informing her two young charges of the trip, food opportunities and entertainments on-board. Despite the crowded carriage, her voice is carefully modulated so as to be audible as far back as the case racks by the exits, and well into the dining car beyond.

It's a type of parenting style one might describe as "presentational", enacted purely for the benefit of others to demonstrate how very, very good at mothering she is. But having suffered a full eight pages of whichever instructional tome she has deemed appropriate to read aloud in public – perhaps it was De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, or the Marquis de Sade – even she seems defeated by her progeny, who are hustling for snacks and the opportunity to punch each other in the face.

"Do you want to watch a movie?", she announces to the train, to which we mouth a silent "yes". And thus we are all treated for the remaining two hours of the journey to the joy that is the animated movie *Pokémon*, on full volume, while the sibling opts for *The Princess and the Frog*. "Be mindful," says the father in a solitary display of paternal responsibility as the children settle in to watch the show. Apparently, he is not referring to the volume at which the films are pitched.

Returning back to London on the last train home, I am surrounded by a pub-quiz sized cacophony of kidults (actually, that's too generous, they're far too ancient to be kids) who have decided to embark on a rumbustious parlour game, an exhumation of past japes called: "every funny thing that

has ever happened to me in my lifetime". It is all conducted at the kind of volume one might save for Wembley Park. And is uniquely unamusing. One woman in particular, the leader of the merriment, deserves a very special place in hell.

When did it become acceptable to play films at full volume when sitting on the train? Or spend hours screaming at a neighbour across the four-centimetre galley between one's seats? Once upon a time we used to bemoan the thumping bass beats that leaked from other people's earphones, but these were a soothing meditative balm as compared to the stereophonic abuse that is Princess Tiana belting out "Almost There" as she wanders through the Louisiana Bayou. Never mind the urban soundtrack of

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industrial drilling, sirens, roadworks and traffic noise that now accompanies daily life, we must now endure the horror of human amplification.

Noise pollution, which is a thing, is bad for our health. It has been linked to cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and depression. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 40 per cent of the population in EU countries is regularly exposed to road traffic noise at levels that exceed any recommendations. Furthermore, the WHO holds noise pollution responsible for the "impairment of early childhood development and education", which may affect future academic achievement, health and cognitive performance.

Arguably, listening to a woman

reading her child a story very loudly on a train isn't quite the same as being sat next to a pneumatic drill. But it still makes me murderously angry.

Why not get noise-cancelling headphones, you ask? Surely it's precisely the din described above that has transformed the humble ear can into one of the most fetishised technologies today – accounting for a global market that is expected to grow at roughly 6.8 per cent over the next five years, and reach \$1,560m by 2024.

With headphones you could roam the world, locked into any podcast of your choosing, marvellously cut off from pesky distractions. Of course, those around might have to screech to a halt in order to avoid flattening you as you step off the kerb oblivious to the noise of the traffic; or ask you repeatedly, and with creeping exasperation, to please move so they can get off the bloody train. But you will be blithely indifferent to the petty obstructions put in your way.

Which seems just as depressing a solution – the other extreme of a world in which our needs take centre stage. While the presentational parent assumes herself to be worthy of an audience, to shut out the world around you assumes a different kind of arrogance – the kind that suggests nothing worthy of attention. The noisy adult on the train is a violation of one kind of social contract, the one in which we consider our impact on other people's lives. But the widespread use of headphones symbolises another social ill. The death of the community – where you are attuned to the nuances of life around you, and moderate your behaviour to fit in. To quote another parental maxim: Can't we just dial it down? Modern life is deafening – but for all the shouting, no one's listening any more.

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