Radio: Audio Art's Frightful Parent

Bruce Barber

I

No matter how different from television the works of individual video artists may be, the television experience dominates the phenomenology of viewing and haunts video exhibitions, the way that the experience of movies haunts all film.

Among the many media theorists on the left who have realized the inherently undemocratic and undialectical nature of radio (and television) communication, we owe to Bertolt Brecht, the seemingly self-evident notion that neither the emancipation of the (tele)communication systems, nor the emancipation of the listening public can occur independently of the other; they are, in fact mutually dependent.

Radio must be changed from a means of distribution to a means of communication. Radio would be the most wonderful means of communication imaginable in public life, a huge linked system — that is to say, it would be such if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of allowing the listener not only to hear but to speak, and did not isolate him but brought him into contact. Unrealizable in this social system, realizable in another, these proposals, which are after all, only the natural consequences of technical development, help towards the propagation and shaping of that other system.

A year before the invention in Germany of the volksempfaenger, the 'people's wireless set,' named model V.E. 301, after the 30th of January, the date of Hitler's assumption to power, Brecht had realized the extent toward which radio could become an ideal apparatus for control. How different indeed is Brecht's critical understanding of the uses of radio technology in the indoctrination of the masses than that of Hans Bredow, the reputed 'father of German radio,'
who in 1927 enthusiastically endorsed its 'general communication and educative possibilities' or Albert Einstein, who upon opening the seventh German radio exhibition, August 1930, enjoined his audience to:

remember that it was the technicians who made true democracy possible. They have not only simplified daily work they are also disseminating true thought and art to the public at large. Radio, furthermore, has a unique capacity for recording the family of nations. Until now, nations got to know one another only through the distorting mirror of the daily press.  

'Radio' he reminded his listeners at this exhibition, oblivious to the neo-colonialist pretensions of his statement:

acquaints them in the most immediate form and from their most immediate side.

Three years later Einstein's eulogy on radio as the putative technological vehicle for democracy was destroyed. The appearance, under the direction of Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda, of wireless wardens in villages and towns in the rural areas to ensure that communal wireless sets were installed (and listened to) in the correct fashion, dispelled the identity of a radio system with the capacity for reconciling the family of nations. Leading members of the National Socialist Listeners' Union realized the extent to which party unity and, further, the education of the whole German people to the ideologies and ambitions of the Third Reich were to be obtained:

The German radio programs must shape the character and the will power of the German nation, and train a new political type. [my emphasis]  

From a relatively privileged middle and upper middle-class clientele in the mid-1920s, radio by the mid-1930s, was being purveyed to the masses on individual receiver sets. During the five years between 1933 and 1938, German radio purchases, particularly of the 'people's set' grew nearly 50% from 4.5 million to 9.5 million with some 3.5 million 'people's sets' being sold at this time. With the careful administration of the daily programming the scene was set for authoritarian control. The emancipatory potential of the new communications medium had been denied in favour of its limitless capacity to order information in such a manner as to ensure the unilateral demonstration of power. It must have been of little comfort to Einstein in America to realize that these same technicians whom he was suggesting were responsible for democracy, could be similarly responsible for the formation of fascism.

Of course, German technicians and government bureaucrats were not the only ones ordering their communications systems or programming in such a way as to guarantee the sovereignty or omnipotence of the state. Britain, U.S., Japan, Italy and the U.S.S.R., along with many of the other countries involved in WWII, were promoting partial or full government control of their communications systems, either through direct intervention or by proxy through control of the corporate boards. A noteworthy characteristic of the behaviour of both autocracies and democracies, during times of actual or incipient crises, wars or civil conflict, is that laws ensuring democratic or quasi-democratic processes in times of peace, are revised, suspended or, as in the case of the Third Reich, totally eliminated. War Measures Acts, enacted by parliamentary or congressional bodies, placed central importance on the control of the presses and other communications systems. During WWII radio was of crucial importance, both internally, to reinforce government control and minimize dissent, and externally, for morale boosting and direct propaganda purposes. Since its invention, the power of radio has been revealed, in one simple yet crucial sense through the manner in which transmitters and radio stations become prime military targets for sabotage and take-over. In contemporary terms, the superpowers' communications satellites would be high on the 'hit list' during the early stages of increased tension and potential for war.

II

An interesting aside to the control of the public airspace and the power of radio and other telecommunications apparatus was the rather haphazard approach taken to the distribution of frequency bands in the early years of telecommunication. In his book, *Electronic Colonialism*, Thomas McPhail has drawn attention to the manner in which the technologically advanced countries gained extended use of the major frequency bands in the first decades of the
twentieth century. His text details some of the major concerns of the less developed countries at the infrequent meetings of the World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC) which meets every twenty years. WARC's last meeting, in 1979, witnessed the tabling of a number of non-aligned countries' concerns regarding the increasing trans-national control of the media, the concentration of ownership generally, satellite access for direct broadcasts and the controls established over the use of the frequency bands. This last issue has proved the most difficult to confront, for the frequency bands have been virtually at the total control of the developed countries since the appearance of international telegraphy and radio navigation at the turn of the century.

McPhail underlined the less developed countries' fears about cultural imperialism. Quoting statistics from the international communication regulation bodies, he reveals that the developed countries with less than 10% of the world's population have the use and control of 90% of the frequency bands. He cites the proceedings of the Berlin (1960) and Washington (1927) meetings of the International Telegraph Union, which set the stage for the allocations of the sections of the frequency band most in demand. The frequencies were distributed to users virtually on a first come, first served basis which 'did not take into account the limited nature of the resource.' McPhail suggests that a form of 'squatters' rights prevailed' and during the 1920s this open policy allowed countries to 'footnote' or reserve certain uses for various frequency bands as these became functional. For the technologically advanced countries in Europe and the United States, this ensured their control over almost the entire communications system. In the post-war years, as capital, industry and communications were further concentrated in the West, the spectre of almost total control through the use of direct broadcast satellites has become a distinct possibility.

The next meeting of the WARC will take place in 1999, at which time it is expected that the less developed and non-aligned countries will continue to press forward their claims - that the West relinquish its control or at least consider restructuring, on a more equitable basis, the frequency allocation system. Like the world banking 'crisis,' incipient or actual, depending on which economist one believes, the onus, from the perspective of the less developed countries, is on the West, particularly the 'Big Seven' economic leaders, but also the Eastern Bloc countries to recognize their colonialist intentions and to alter their behaviour, or at least the rules of the game, accordingly.

While discussions have been underway with respect to formation of the more equitable designs of the so-called New World Information Order (NWIO), these may be too late to alter the formation and determination of a communications system worthy of a Brave New World. However, McPhail also suggests that critics who characterize the communications system as a behemoth with Big Brother (usually Uncle Sam) holding the reins, are far from the truth. In reality, he argues, the international communications systems are (proverbially) as 'leaky as an old boat.' However, these critics also stress a more commonly agreed upon concern; that the information flow between states is too dependent upon editors, programers and other gate-keepers in the West and the suggested future NWIO restrictions such as the licensing of news gatherers (already a fact in many countries), may further reduce the already meagre and heavily edited news diet that the West now receives from the 'Third World.' Debates have centred upon differing opinions as to what properly constitutes the 'freedom of the press.' The West presumes this to be the basis of Democracy, while the less developed nations contextualize their understanding of existing inequities as a continuation and extension of neo-colonialist trade practices which privilege the more powerful economies at the expense of the weaker ones.

What both sides appear to agree on at this juncture is that there is need for some substantial changes in the delivery systems. While there has been much lip-service paid to the 'free' and 'balanced' equation of reportage, the difficulties inherent in the organization of the information gathering and distribution systems have undermined the capacity of the primary agencies' and the states' attempts to sustain the ideological linchpin of post-Enlightenment concepts of democracy - the (actual) freedom of the press.

Today, there are still those who believe that the democratization of the communications system is possible. Those questions relating to production and reproduction, and the 'shaping of other systems' remain central to debates about the nature and extent to which emancipation is realizable, both within the media and the society to which it 'conforms.' The questions, as they were presented by Brecht, in 1932, may be irresolvable within the present conditions of actual or incipient control and may best be explained by the abstract, yet totalizing concept of hegemony. While the issues besetting
inter-community information exchanges and control therefore can be examined under the terms of 'electronic colonialism,' their resolution, may not be achieved simply through a re-negotiation of the uses and abuses of the media, although this would help for starters; it may have to begin with a radical refocusing of the problems and possibly as well the reconstitution of the terms of discourse.

Power, however, remains a good starting point. While the macrocosmic conditions of power may be seen in the international contestation of wills over the distribution of the airwaves, the dialectic implied in Brecht's enjoiner 'unrealizable in this social system' continues from the interstate and national, to the community and, finally, the individual level - that is, to the authority that each consumer / producer has vested within him or herself. The reproduction and contestation of power relations continues at every level. It is toward this examination we must now turn to recognize these determinations on the production of contemporary audio artists.

III

Within the history of broadcasting, there are few instances of broadcasts that demonstrate the peculiar and absolute power of the medium. The aggrandizing public address, what might be called the classic use of radio, has usually been generalized under the term propaganda. The authority of radio is confirmed by the wartime documentary newscasts, which today evidence a peculiarly melodramatic and even fictive character. The powerful propaganda speeches of Churchill, Hitler, Stalin and Roosevelt represent paradigmatically the mass indoctrination propensities of radio, which Goebbels and others argued convincingly were the necessities and the very actualities of the medium.

One very famous instance of radio's peculiar ability to convince has been immortalized in the annals of broadcast history. Since the publication of Howard Koch's book, it has become known simply as The Panic Broadcast. The event took place at 9 pm on Hallowe'en, Sunday October 30th, 1938. The occasion was the Columbia Broadcasting System's (CBS) broadcast of Koch's radio play based on H.G. Wells' novel, The War of the Worlds. Produced by Orson Welles and the Mercury Players, the play documents the 'landing' of hundreds of Martian aliens to an obscure New Jersey town called
Grover's Mill. The Martian's establishment of their destructive machines, the total disruption of communications and the defeat of thousands of 'defenders,' took the listening public by surprise. For a total of 40 minutes hundreds of thousands of demoralized listeners believed that Martians had occupied whole sections of the country, indiscriminately mowed down hundreds and incinerated whole villages with their 'heat rays.' The CBS network listeners reacted accordingly. They panicked.

At the program's end, Orson Welles concluded with a statement suggesting that the broadcast had been a Hallowe'en prank but this did little to dispel the fear of those caught off-guard by the totally convincing character of the first half of the program. According to one of the many studies undertaken after the event, these were the people who subsequently lobbied for legislative powers to prohibit 'such pranksterism' on the airwaves. It is unlikely that a similar program could spark the same response today. Sociologists and others who conducted 'post-invasion' studies suggested that the responses of the approximately six million people to the broadcast, and the estimated one and a half million who took the story literally, were the result of a number of factors, including the approach of conflict in Europe, previously reported sightings of extra-terrestrial visitors and the traditional effulgence of paranoia associated with 'al' hallow's eve.' However, the fact that one radio program could have such extraordinary effects gives some pause for reflection on the power of radio in general and art in particular.

Within popular culture there are many representations of radio as 'the disturber of the peace,' the public intruder, invading the sanctity of the domestic space, filling up warm and intimate rooms and substituting the natural sounds and harmony of everyday life with noise. In marked contrast, revealing the public representation of the schizoid nature of the medium, early newspaper and magazine advertisements for radio tend to emphasize its intimate qualities, or at least its capacity for providing intimacy and companionship. The wireless is often illustrated in the 1920s as a piece of furniture amid the other material possessions of the petit-bourgeois interiors in which it was most often found. The radio's function and its existence as a technological apparatus was de-emphasized in favour of its decorative (aesthetic) values which were in keeping with those of other objects in the household. The radio is represented as the substitute for the absent friend on those cold and lonely winter nights, or
alternatively, as the additional (indispensable) ‘family member’ surrounded by adoring siblings, parents and household pets, exuding its ‘warmth’ like a coal fire.

These familiar conditions of radio-as-friend, or surrogate ‘love object,’ in a multiplicity of images, has provided the lyrical content for many musical performers as diverse as Bing Crosby, Dolly Parton, the Beatles and Queen. It has provided the necessary reflection and nostalgia base for ‘when I was young movies,’ like Woody Allen’s Radio Days, and it has reproduced the stereotypical images and sounds of Americana: Vaudeville’s ‘Oh, de doh doh’s’ (via megaphone); the ‘movin’ on out ‘n’ up’ of Nashville; the Motown refrains of ‘turn on (off) that radiooo;’ and the post-ghetto blasted hip hop ‘ra, ra, ra, dio, dio, di, di, io, o.’ The extent to which these cultural representations have become social and ideological indicators of some significance has begun to be explored by a growing number of popular culture researchers examining the soundscapes (R. Murray Schafer’s term) of contemporary societies.

Some of this work on the social effects of radio, which includes the examination of sound imaging and audio / cultural analysis generally, has taken its theoretical cues from recent debates within post-structuralism and Marxism. The Marxist interpretation / analysis of culture (and society), and contemporary post-structuralist and feminist film theory, has been particularly useful for those exploring the psycho-social and socio-political aspects of audio production / consumption. During the past ten years the locus of debates within film theory and analysis has tended to revolve around the nature of sexual sublimation, voyeurism and filmic pleasure. The work of the Screen group, Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen and others, who have based their theories on the work of Christian Metz (The Imaginary Signifier), Jacques Lacan (Ecrits and The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis) and Julia Kristeva (Desire in Language) among others, have done much to isolate and identify significant aspects of cinematic pleasure, the construction of meaning and the production and the reproduction of ideology through the agency of the cinematic apparatus. Similar theoretical work (‘textual’ analysis) is beginning to be undertaken with respect to sound and has located its points of reference in psycho-social terms rather than in bio- or eco-social terms, as had previously been the case in the work of Schafer and others.

The desire for listening, which places emphasis on the passive

subject as recipient of the ‘code,’ has begun to be more widely understood in psychoanalytic terms. The pulsion invocante, so eloquently evoked by Jacques Lacan, is a process that involves the sublimation of sexual desire into the level of imagining(s). These imaginings, reveries or semi-conscious states allow feelings of pleasure (jouissance) to be obtained.

In (practical) audiophonic terms, Lacan’s thesis allows us to understand a range of listening behaviours described by those studying the social behaviours of audio consumers: why, for instance, many people listen to the radio or other audiophonic equipment in darkened rooms, or just prior to sleep; why listening aids digestion; why muzak increases commodity production in factories and commodity consumption in shopping malls. The power of radio is more readily understood if we consider the less public concerns of radio listeners (and some television viewers) who use their listening behaviour to almost literally stay alive. For somewhat obvious reasons, little is understood about the behaviour of those who, fearing or nearing death, maintain a semi-alert, somnolent, often hypertensive state by keeping the radio on while they attempt (not) to sleep. In such cases, the intrusive presence of sound, of ‘noise,’ often regardless of content (although talk-show and phone-ins are favourites), is used as an analgesia. Radio, in such instances, acts as both an ‘upper’ and a ‘downer.’ This is far from a simple-minded behaviourism; rather, to use Raymond Williams’s socio-analytical terminology:

The cheap radio receiver is (then) a significant index of general condition and response. It was especially welcomed by all those who had least social responsibilities of other kinds; who lacked independent mobility or access to the previously diverse places of entertainment and information. Broadcasting could almost come to serve as a unified social intake.

This notion of ‘unified social intake’ can be likened to the manner in which ideology ‘cements’ and allows super-ordination to be subsumed, or better, assumed naturally within the hegemonic ‘order.’ In more opaque terms than is perhaps necessary here – control is always a function of something, its presence signals or manifests difference, inequity, which in the process of being contested or resisted on one side is reinforced by the other.

The split yet interdependent nature of listening, its intrusive yet
friendly character as well as its source of pleasure and unpleasure (distinguished from displeasure), finds its corollaries in the general problems associated with broadcast – the privileging of reception over transmission, consumption over production. There is a paradigm in the historical developments that link the first radio receiver with those of today. It is of some significance that the first speaker was in fact a listening tube placed in the ear rather like a stethoscope. From the first, the experience of listening was very much an individual one. Dr. Lee de Forest’s invention of the vacuum audio tube hastened the development of the audio speaker, which became, simply because of its shape, size and power, a communal reception device. The wireless is aptly named in more ways than one. The intimate contact of the body to the machine was replaced in a short period of time with the instrument of collective listening. Previously connected to the body by a cord the radio soon became part of the furniture and, by extension, the architecture, or in Schaferian terms, taking his cues from McLuhan, the bio-sphere. During the past decade we have regained the intimacy of this vital umbilical contact with the audio apparatus. Although now it is Plato’s Harmony of the Spheres stamped with the Sony Corporation logo.

Some seventy years after Forest’s invention we have returned to savour the severely individualistic hyper-phonics listening on the ‘new’ equipment of the 1970s and 80s. The listening tube has been replaced by the umbilical cords representing the advanced generation of mini-phones and stereo headsets. And where, in the late sixties, Timothy Leary enjoined his followers to ‘drop out and turn on,’ we now have a situation of ‘turn on and turn in.’ It is particularly interesting to note that the machines marketed so successfully in the early 1980s were those focusing on consumption – play-back reception (AM, FM and mini audio tape players; the ‘Walkman’) and not the machines of production with multiple features including stereo recording and play-back, although recent indications show that the decrease in prices of such equipment has lead to an increase in purchases. However, the equipment still maintains an emphasis on consumption rather than production in that the recordings made with such equipment are restricted to the passive duplication of records, tapes and radio broadcasts.

The history of audio traces a vector of listening behaviour from the extremely individualistic, to the family, the community and, prior to WWII, the masses. For the last twenty years we have been reversing this trend, traversing the terrain of choice, which is actually less fully articulated than the advertisers of audio equipment would have us believe. The choice now is not so much between signal and noise or the sound and its source (Schafer’s schizophrenia) but between narcissistic withdrawal and self-imposed isolation or advanced commodity fetishism and hyper-consumption, the latter conditions associated with various states of alienation. The first involves a form of self-abnegation, the second self-aggrandizement. The rough terrain in the centre, which must be negotiated, includes a form of critical schizophrenia.

That radio has the capacity to both combat alienation and assist in its reproduction, is not yet fully understood in human terms. Within recent theoretical discussions acknowledging this fact the primary tendency has been to focus on programing and content as a means of engendering a more compatible information ‘exchange’ in step with contemporary social reality. The fact that radio, in its active form, could be used to examine and change this reality has never become a major item on the agenda at any of the debates attending discussions about the role of public broadcasting services. Radio has been discussed as a ‘social lubricant’ which can assist in ameliorating the social impact of change. It has been suggested that talk-back radio shows give maximum opportunities for community input into crucial decision-making processes. However, it has often been demonstrated that most of the situations where public responses have been invoked, have remained on a superficial level. Listeners, potential social actors, remain isolated consumers. Domestic listening programs tend to domesticate the listeners.

IV

As Hans Magnus Enzensberger observed in his famous Brechtian inspired essay, Constituents of a Theory of the Media (1974), radio, since its raw beginnings in the minds of mid-nineteenth century technologists, has been reinforced as an apparatus for broadcast. While there is nothing intrinsic to the technology which privileged consumption at the expense of production, the interactive communication possibilities inherent to transmission/reception (radio-telephonic) technology became subordinated to a model of one-way distribution and passive reception. The value of
cast systems, citizen band and low frequency transmitters - none of which, in themselves, usher forth the emancipation of the masses. For as Enzensberger noted:

Until these instruments find their way into the actual working lives of people, that is into the schools and factories, farms and government bureaus rather than their lives as consumers, then their potential use as instruments of emancipation will remain unrealized.25

Control and the undialectical use of the media will continue so long as the consuming masses are buying the ideology of autonomous production imbricated together with hyper-consumption. Mass production and mass consumption (as it is implied by Benjamin, via Marx),25 is best assisted by the reproduction of the masses.

Even where it can be demonstrated by 'futurologists' like John Naisbitt (Megatrends) that in the U.S., for instance, the increased number of radio and television stations is allowing greater flexibility in programming to ever increasing numbers of special interest constituencies, this does not offer cause for celebration. These constituencies are still composed of isolated consumers whose lives are, to a major extent, 'controlled' by the major media conglomerates and other institutions of capitalism. Their consumption of local media is limited and while they may own a camcorder, C.B. radio, VCR, stereo or four-track recording equipment, which allow production, they remain, at best, amateurs:

It has long been clear from apparatus like miniature and 8mm movie camera as well as the tape recorder, which are in actual fact already in the hands of the masses, that the individual, as long as he remains isolated, can become with their help at best an amateur and not a producer.26

The emphasis given Enzensberger, in his essay, on the term producer, is derived from the importance given it by Walter Benjamin in his 1937 essay 'The Author as Producer' (1937),27 in which he argues that the artist / author must relieve her / himself of the traditional stereotypical roles and class alliances and identify with the struggles of the proletarian and other disenfranchised groups of society. Enzensberger re-offers this problem of conscientization to those within the left as well as those liberals who wish to locate conditions that are ripe for change, including their own consciousness.
For the old-fashioned ‘artist’ – let us call him the author – it follows that he must see it as his goal to make himself redundant as a specialist in much the same way as a teacher of literacy only fulfils his task when he is no longer necessary. Both Enzensberger’s and Benjamin’s positions encourage the articulation of a new role for the artist, one that is premised less on the production of aesthetic objects/events for exhibition or broadcast, than on the provision of objects or actions that have some kind of social and cultural unity. Their insistence on the artist relinquishing the exhibition (cult) and hence commodity value of his or her work carries with it the indications of alternative practices, at minimum the transposition or substitution of work beyond its service as a bearer of ‘spiritual’ or economic signs. The critique of the specialist role of the artist, as this identity has been historically constituted, is at base a critique of the institution of art.

The use of new technologies, the emphasis on developing critical strategies for the attack on the foundations of the status quo of conventional artistic practice, has been at the core of many so-called avant garde theories, from the Futurists of the first decade of this century to the conceptualists and contextualists respectively of the early 70s and 80s. And yet, often the attack on the status quo, the hegemony of bourgeois culture, merely resulted in what Peter Burger has suggested is a ‘renewing of the stereotypes.’ Too often the works of contemporary artists, including those using audio technology, have capitulated to the production of discrete objects for exhibition and sale in the conventional manner associated with the dealer gallery system and its surrogates. This, or the agrandizement of the artist’s persona-as-star; the result is the same, the construction of a commodity.

An ‘alternative,’ which many audio and intermedia artists have intentionally adopted as a quasi-critical strategy, is the role enactment of the marginal (Wilsonian) ‘outsider’ figure. This role becomes iterative (in Eco’s use of the term), one which, in its played-out ‘narrative scheme’ ultimately reproduces the mid-nineteenth century ideologies subsumed within its sphere – identity(ies) – of the alienated artist figure.

The most compelling images of this role are represented in many of the major works of audio art, performance, theatre and film produced within the past 75 years, including arguably one of the most influential, Samuel Beckett’s play, *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958). The narrative of the play is deceptively simple. As it progresses we learn that Krapp, Beckett’s artist (writer) figure, has habitually recorded, on each of his birthdays, the principal events of that year. During the recording of his ‘last’ birthday, Krapp chooses to review and reflect upon some of the previous years’ recordings, playing back significant portions of his tape collection.

As a few critics have suggested, the play contains one major theme – impotence. *Krapp’s Last Tape* is informed by a kind of narcissism broadly represented in the deliberations of an old man whose creative impotence is coupled with his imagined (or actual) sexual impotence. His audio reminiscences reveal his lost youth and the mistakes he has made have been carefully chronicled in the stacks of tapes that have become his electronic diaries. Without these diaries Krapp would become the contemporary (Nietzschean) man-without-belief forced into the existential anguish of willing himself to power. His attempts to re-construct his life’s identity from his remembered history (his tapes become his *aides de memoire*), even where his acts and those of others around him refuse that his existence has any higher meaning, offers little consolation to those who have rejected the solace offered by religion. And to Krapp, art and sex provide necessary, yet ultimately poor substitutes.

The implicit materiality of crap, and the scatological references throughout the play further reinforce the existential aspect of Krapp’s intellectual onanism. The cultural significance of shit or rather its purging – within literature, from Rabelais to Swift, de Sade, Jarry, Artaud to Beckett, and the visual arts, Breugel to Duchamp, Manzoni and Warhol – is too large a subject to discuss here. Suffice it to suggest that Beckett’s representation(s) of social and cultural alienation through Krapp’s body disfunctions, is a powerful trope, one that may also be found in the works of many contemporary artists. Krapp’s ruminations on the identity of self through a focus on the body are the prototype for an artist like Andy Warhol:

Day after day I look in the mirror and I still see something ... a new pimple ... I dunk a Johnson and Johnson cotton ball into Johnson and Johnson rubbing alcohol and rub the cotton ball against the pimple. And
effects of radio. Radio 'haunts' the exhibition of audio art in the same way movies 'haunt' all film. These effects become products of consciousness. They represent the ideological underpinnings of the dominant culture of this period, and perhaps, since the invention of radio and other technological apparatus of reproduction, all periods.

Acconci is acutely aware of the private and public aspects of his art. In his early performance work, his attitude of sitting in front of a mirror or camera often approached the condition of the self-abnegation of the individual at confession. Like Beckett's Krapp, the presence of an audience, albeit one distanced by technology (video and audio players) in a work such as Air Time, assists him in being 'honest' with himself. The videotape of the 1973 performance/installation, produced for Sonnabend Gallery in New York is arguably the most intimate of any that Acconci produced. It deals specifically with the ending of, and making public his decision to do so, his long term relationship with Kathy Dillon. The artist had himself locked in an 'isolation chamber' for three hours each day for two weeks. After each one and a half hours he would emerge for a 15 minute break and then return. A closed circuit video system revealed Acconci talking to himself, looking into a mirror and acting out scenes from his five-year relationship with Dillon. Audio tape players and speakers were contained in seven wooden boxes dispersed throughout the gallery. Stools were placed beside each tape box for the listeners' convenience. Acconci's voice, at low volume, could be heard from each box:

What I'm doing here may be hard for me to reveal to them (the audience) ... so my voice from the past (on the tape recorders) can be used to get rid of them, insult them, delude them, transport them.33

Like Krapp, Acconci is ultimately ambivalent about his audience's presence in what is essentially a private affair between him and Dillon (and in Krapp's Last Tape, between Krapp and himself). Yet Acconci needs their presence to remain truthful to himself, even when this might place him in the position of acting 'something out for them.' He may wish to reproach (efface) himself and gain absolution for his sins by placing himself in a confessional, yet he also wants to make it clear that in some of the instances that he outlines he is above reproach. The isolation chamber, simultaneously reminiscent of cells in prisons, psychiatric institutions, confessional and sound-proofed recording booths (the tape's full title is after

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all, Recording Studio for Air Time), reveals Acconci's deliberate obscuring of the public and private. Although Acconci's audience, like Beckett's, may be indispensable aids for securing the proverbial 'whole truth and nothing but the truth,' the confessions are for the most part egocentric affairs. The audience members are not requested to be givers of absolution, witnesses, judges, nor even jury. Like the audience for the typical radio program, they are merely asked, like Peter Sellers' character Chauncy Gardiner in the film Being There, to be there. The audience members support Acconci to come to terms with himself. And arriving at some kind of resolution regarding the 'other' is ultimately a marginal operation. At the conclusion of the tape Acconci affirms his prior intention and admits, 'Maybe coming to terms with our relationship means ending our relationship.' And the parallel identification of the 'other' with the audience results in his ending his relationship with them as well.

The recording studio in Air Time was further developed in an exhibition the following year for New York's Museum of Modern Art. It represents an interesting comparison for later works by a number of other artists including Eric Bogosian's (and now Oliver Stone's) Talk Radio. Titled Other Voices for a Second Sight (1974), Acconci's performance/installation represents the self-writ-large aspects of a disc jockey or talk-show host moving into and controlling the hearts and minds of his listeners, while locked and hermetically sealed in a sound proof chamber with an audio projection device - radio: 'Like building a life on an all night talk show.' [my emphasis] Three spaces were used by the artist. The middle space contained a recording/transmission studio and on either side were the light room (right) and the dark room (left). The right room contained slide projections and films of the artist in various poses projected across thin fabric fields ... 'transcendence calls to me.' In the left room, slides were projected through acetate banners revealing the artist's naked body as well as a series of political figures. As Acconci has written: 'Like a room of the world - public life comes down to me' and the D.J. is 'the voice that drifts through the dark, that lulls you into the night that makes you forget ... yet the radio show is a final hour, a final program that seemingly may go on forever.' [my emphasis]

And later, in a perfect description of the dialectic we have been attempting to describe:

it's a power dream, a dream of glory, yet my voice ... like a machine; the voice becomes an undercurrent, it sneaks in a frame of mind, installs a habit. Abdicate, it says; refuse, withdraw, don't make a move. 35

While he attempts to provide his work with some kind of sociopolitical use value, Acconci is frustrated in his attempts, because as he says, he may not 'believe anymore in the efficacy of art.' He is trapped, as surely as is Krapp, in the ineffectuality of his own actions. He is forced into a position of either aggravizing his persona, renewing the stereotypes of the neo-avant garde and / or finally capitulating to the safety of the art market. In Benjaminian terms, he reproduces the conventional social powerlessness of the isolated author, acting out the behaviours, producing the products that will secure the autonomy of the institution art and deny its potential to achieve, through the aims of its authors as producers, a critical praxis.

The determination of alienation on the production of audio artists is a larger subject than there is space for here. Suffice it to say that the denial of art's social utility for the sake of transcendence, both social and cultural has always been subsumed under the avantgardist's intentions. While a small number of artists have attained a truly praxiological condition for their art (Tatlin, Brecht, Heartfield, among them) this has usually been for a short time only. It is a well known function of the art world's institutions that they have the capabilities of co-opting that very work which presumes to announce their redundancy.

The one thing I've been convinced of is that the best thing to do in these shows (Contemporanea) is to hang something on the wall, because as it turns out, unless you're there to turn on the tape recorders, you don't have a piece in the show. I used the easiest kind of stuff, tape loops so they didn't have to rewind anything, and I had it all plugged in so that as soon as they turn on the lights, the tape recorders and slide projectors would automatically turn on. After setting it, I went the next day and everything was unplugged. 36

We have witnessed the power of radio and tape recording in other ways since the late 1940s when Pierre Schaffer began to manipulate audio recordings to produce some of the first electro-acoustic works. John Cage's celebrated work Imaginary Landscape
No.5 (1952) has been described as one of the first uses in the U.S. of magnetic tape to produce a musical work for radio broadcast. In keeping with the Duchampian ready-made aesthetic, this work by Cage and others, which quickly followed, were perceived as intrusions into the conventional ear and airspace of audio reception. The title, *Imaginary Landscape* is somewhat ironic especially given the technical aspects of the recording itself and the material objects, including hub caps and bottles, that produce the sounds. The broadcast of this work and other examples produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s by artists in the U.S. and Europe shocked their listeners with the non-musical form of the work. However, it did not take long for Cage’s music compositions and their variants to be accepted as conventional high art practice. Like Duchamp’s anaesthetic ready-mades, they have found their place as classics in the cultural hall of fame. An unanticipated result of this institutionalization process is the manner in which Cage’s avant-gardist strategies have become a justification, in aesthetic terms, for a bio-social appreciation of the airwaves that, after McLuhan, has tended to obliterates cultural, class and ethnic boundaries in favour of a total homogenization of the eco-sphere.

Murray Schafer’s celebrated *Soundscape* projects place much significance on the reception analysis of periodized content. And yet the analysis is limited, providing material for the subsequent rendering of radio transmission into rhythmic confirmation of bi-harmony. The work of many Canadian composers and audio art producers has been influenced by Schafer’s book *The Tuning of the World* – (even its title echoes McLuhan’s global village) although most have neglected the salient criticism of the culture of consumer capitalism implied in his work and have opted for the grandiloquence (and aesthetic potential) of his metaphors. Montreal audio artist and composer Paul Théberge, for instance, produced a radiophonic work that uses as the basis for its structure an entire day (18 hours) of programming from the Radio Canada FM network. Brief extracts of music, news and cultural programs were montaged together on an eight-track recorder, then mixed down to form a one-minute to one-hour ratio of recorded time to transmission time. Théberge wrote that:

> through this extreme compression of material, themes, juxtapositions and modulations characteristic of Radio Canada perhaps became, more apparent and, hopefully, a certain *global rhythm* inherent in the programming structure begins to emerge.\(^5\)

A similar approach to radio broadcasting and hence audio composition is apparent in the work of many artists producing audio art. However, radio broadcast and tape recording technology, as we have seen, can be recognized and understood in more diverse ways. The naturalization of the technology in the hands of artists who believe in the neutrality of the media, can only hasten the depoliticization of culture and the further alienation of individual producers.

**Postscript**

During the past five years, artists using audio and video technology to produce their work have become increasingly aware of the problems associated with the traditional venues for distribution and broadcast. In response to these problems, they have adopted new methods of distribution, collectively produced programs for weekly broadcast and attempted to develop alternative audiences. A few community based radio and television stations, including many based on university campuses, as well as the more community service oriented galleries have allowed access to artists for alternative programming. However, even when they have the instruments and institutions of mass communication at their disposal, artists still address a limited, usually elite audience. They have done little to confront some of the intrinsic problems of the media, especially those associated with the power dynamic underscored in this essay, nor have they altered the content of their work accordingly.

At least distribution is now understood as a problem of some magnitude and with it a slowly changing orientation to the content of audio is discernible. Strategies for distribution have been varied. Audio artists have usually distinguished between three market models for the distribution and / or sale of their work.

The first may be dubbed the Hollywood option (Brian Eno and Laurie Anderson are good examples): artists emulate the marketing strategies of MGM, Warner Brothers, CBS – the major institutions of capitalism – developing styles, behaviour, packaging and marketing formulae that will address the conditions of the so-called free market. For the successful few, co-optation is the happy result.
Even as punk entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren demonstrated, the 'anti-capitalist' products and behaviours of the counter (sub-) cultures can, and in fact need to, conform to the capitalist models of appropriation. McLaren successfully adopted a systems marketing approach to the selling of punk products, fashion and behaviour: the Sex Pistols, the clothes, the jewellery, the food tastes, hairstyles, the language, the looks, the beliefs – all conforming to and reinforcing the sustaining ideologies of punk. Successful as his operation was, McLaren diminished his profit margins by not protecting his patents.  

The second option does not exhibit the conventional extremes of the first. Artists adopting the second 'high culture' option usually follow the paths of least resistance and attempt to market their work through the museum system and the small scale alternative recording industry. Alvin Lucier is a good example of this, the preferred marketing model for most audio artists today. Artists from this group usually aspire to graduate to the first option, they produce work that tends to conform to the styles and tastes of a minority of a highly phonoliterate minority group of consumers who may also be artists themselves. World-wide, this market constituency is of substantial size and developing, and yet by the standards of album and tapes (video and audio) produced by the industry giants, it is minimal.  

The third 'underground' option, is characterized by an extremely small market and a relatively closed system of production/consumption. Tapes and records are produced at the margins by groups subscribing to various left wing, right wing and occasionally liberal causes. Often the work produced within this category has the look and feel of that produced by political cells or cadres. It is produced in limited edition, often anonymously or under the cover name of a group and is sold, exchanged or given away. The most celebrated forms of this kind of marketing distribution strategy was that of the Ayatollah Khomeini before the Iranian revolution and the fall of the Shah. From his place of exile in Paris, Khomeini purportedly orchestrated a major religious coup by clandestinely exporting cassette tapes of his speeches, which were subsequently dubbed in the thousands for distribution among the faithful and disaffected in Iran, thus giving new meaning to the phrase exported revolution.  

This third option is also the preferred one for alternative broadcasting. Airwaves piracy and microwave transmitting in urban areas has often become an alternative for those who feel excluded from the dominant centre of production and distribution. Why run the risk of having your programming rejected or altered if one can operate successfully outside of the conventional marketing / broadcast systems? Around the world immigrant groups, religious factions, various left wing activist and lobby groups, environmentalists, anti-nuke groups, specialist producers, new wave musicians, poets and other artists of various denominations have often decided that the risks associated with operating outside of the law are worth taking, particularly given the saturation of the airwaves and the control exercised by major networks of broadcast stations.

The relationships between these three options are more fluid than the above brief description would suggest. There are so many permutations that allow for alternative distribution methods to develop. The third option is gaining in popularity for those who recognize their powerlessness within the present system. The power of recording and broadcasting is beginning to be understood through its agency – powerlessness.  

In the past decade, the power of radio and particularly audio tape recording has been demonstrated in spectacular ways. The Khomeini example above, Watergate and Iranagate all emphasize the importance of the magnetic recording apparatus. Each event has focused attention on the fidelity and fallibility of the technology; the manner in which wire-tapping / bugging can support and strengthen the existing institution or undermine and destroy it. The reel to reel and the humble cassette have come into their own, upsetting the primacy of the visual, which has subjected the aural to secondary status for hundreds of years, at least since the invention of illusory techniques of representation in the Renaissance and the subsequent development of photo-mechanical apparatus in the early nineteenth century. One of the classic audio image films of the 1970s, Francis Ford Coppola's The Conversation, accurately depicts the importance and power of audiophonic representation. While the plot of The Conversation is imaginary, its symbolic representations of the contestation of power ultimately give way to the real.

It is to the examples of Watergate, Iranagate, The Conversation and Khomeini that artists must address themselves. For it is within these examples that both the actual and potential power of audio production, in all its negative and positive aspects, becomes intelligible. An extensive examination of the institutional conditions of production and consumption is also a precondition to the renegotiation of
the artist’s role from author to producer.
Perhaps the most appropriate image of the power relations flagged in this essay – between the all powerful radio, the passive consumer and the alienated author/artist – is contained in Nam June Paik’s A Tribute to Andy Mannix (1982). This performance/audio installation work was presented at The Kitchen (Center for Video and Performing Arts) in New York as a tribute to Andy Mannix, a stage carpenter who had converted the kitchen of the former Mercer Arts Center into The Kitchen. Paik’s Tribute described by John Howell for LIVE magazine consisted of the following:

He (Mannix) put together a stage platform while Paik wandered around eating rice-cakes. As a classically trained/Cage student, Paik always wanted to work a burlesque house and so he played, smashing old Victrola records, banging out snatches of chords and scales and Beethoven, broadcasting recorded tapes backwards – as only Paik can ‘play.’ While onstage, Lois Welk performed a discrete strip to a Sony Walkman (so as not to be disturbed) by Paik’s cacophonous, less than rhythmic score.40

Notes
1. A version of this essay was presented at the Kunstradio/Radiokunst Art Symposium, Styrian Festival, Graz, Austria, in October 1988.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 274.
10. Ibid., p. 152
11. This is a larger subject than there is space for here. Within the past ten years much has been written on the ‘constructed’ and fictive characteristics of documentary film and photography.
16. The desire for listening. Christian Metz suggests that the distance of the look has as its corollary in the distance of listening. As opposed to other sexual drives, the perception (perceiving) drive – combining into one the scopic drive and invocatory drives – represents the absence of its object in the distance at which it maintains it and which is part of its very definition: distance of the look, distance of listening. C. Metz, The Imaginary Signifier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). Metz relies fairly heavily on Jacques Lacan’s The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (London: The Hogarth Press 1977).
23. Ibid., p. 56.
24. Ibid. Enzensberger concludes with: 'Any socialist strategy for the media must, on the contrary, strive to end the isolation of the individual social learning and production process. My emphasis. This is impossible unless those concerned organize themselves. This is the political core of the question of the media. It is over this point that socialist concepts part company with neo-liberal and technocratic ones. Anyone who expects to be emancipated by technological hardware, or by a system of hardware however constructed, is the victim of an obscure belief in progress. Anyone who imagines that freedom for the media can be established if only everyone is busy transmitting and receiving is the dupe of a liberalism that, decked out in contemporary colours, merely peddles the faded concepts of a pre-drained harmony of social interests.' pp. 58-59.


30. Umberto Eco, The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts. See 'The Myth of Superman,' p. 120. The iterative scheme as redundant message: 'The taste for the iterative scheme is presented then as a taste for redundancy.'

31. Krapp's Last Tape was written in English in early 1958, published in Evergreen Review (Summer 1958) and first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London, October 28, 1958. Beckett also produced two plays under the titles Rough For Radio 1 (1961) and Rough For Radio 2 (1961-2).


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.


