

# 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. (Antin, 36-45)

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. (Brecht, 129, seg. 134)

Just after Hitler's assumption of power in January 1933, and a full year before the invention of the "volksmpfaenger," the people's wireless set, model V.E. 301, Brecht had realized the extent toward which radio could become an ideal apparatus for control. How different, indeed, is Brecht's critical comprehension of the uses of radio technology in the indoctrination of the masses from that of Hans Bredow, the 'father' of German radio who in 1927 enthusiastically endorsed its "general communication and educative possibilities"; or from that of Albert Einstein, who upon opening the seventh German Radio Exhibition in 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 reconciling the family of nations. Until now nations got to know one another only through the distorting mirror of the daily press. (von Eckhardt and Gilman, 57)

"Radio," he continued, 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. Under the

direction of Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda, wireless wardens appeared in rural villages and towns to ensure that communal wireless sets were installed (and listened to) in the correct fashion. This dispelled the identity of a radio system with the "capacity for reconciling the family of nations." Leading members of the National Socialist Listener's 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 programmes must shape the character and the will power of the German nation, and *train a new political type.*" (Sington and Weidenfeld, 273, emphasis added)

From a relatively privileged middle and upper middle class clientele in the mid-1920s, radio was by the mid-1930s being purveyed to the masses in individual receiver sets. The emancipatory potential of the new communicator's 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 the same technicians he was suggesting were responsible for democracy could at the same time be responsible for the formation of fascism.

There are still those today who believe that the democratization of the communications system is possible. Questions relating to production and reproduction, and the "shaping of other systems" remain

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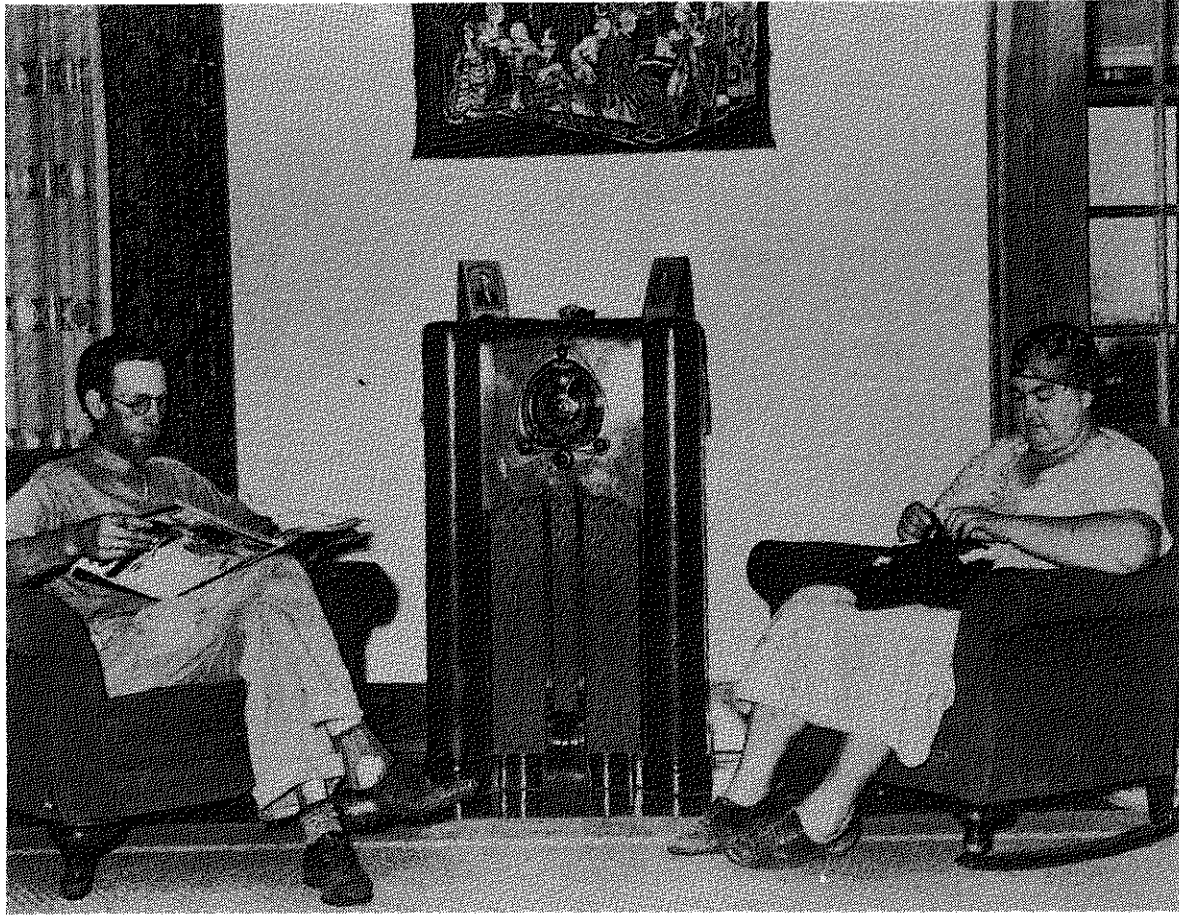
central to contemporary debates about the nature and extent of emancipation, both within the media and the society to which it conforms. These questions, as they were presented by Brecht in 1932, may be irresolvable within the present conditions of actual or incipient control and may be best explained by the abstract yet totalizing concept of hegemony. While the issues besetting inter-community exchanges and the control thereof can be examined within 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 re-constitution 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 airwaves, the dialectic implied in Brecht's rejoinder — "unrealizable in this social system, realizable in another..." — continues from the interstate and national to the community, and finally, to the level of the individual. 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.

## II

Within the history of broadcasting there are few instances of broadcasts which demonstrate the peculiar and absolute power of the medium. Aggrandizing public addresses — we may call these the classic use of radio — have usually been generalized under the term propaganda. The authority of radio is confirmed in wartime documentary newscasts, which today evidence a peculiarly melodramatic and fictive character.<sup>1</sup> The powerful propaganda speeches of Churchill, Hitler, Stalin and Roosevelt are paradigms of radio's propensities toward mass indoctrination. Goebbels and others argued convincingly that indoctrination was the necessity, the very actuality of the medium.

One very famous instance of radio's peculiar ability to convince has been im-



mortalized 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 on Halloween, Sunday 30 October, 1938 at 9:00 pm. The occasion was Columbia Broadcasting System's production of H.G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds*. Produced by Orson Welles and the Mercury players, the play documented the "landing" of hundreds of Martian aliens in an obscure New Jersey town called Grover's Mill. The Martians' 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 audience reacted accordingly. They panicked.

At the programme's end, Orson Welles read a statement suggesting that the broadcast had been a Halloween 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 programme. 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 programme could spark the same response today. Sociologists and psychologists who conducted "post-invasion" studies suggested that the responses of the approximately six million people to the broadcast, and the estimated one and 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 alien airships and extra-terrestrial visitors, and the traditional effulgence of paranoia associated with All Hallows' Eve. However, the fact that one short radio programme can 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, which invades the sanctity of 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 popular representation of the schizoid nature of the medium, early newspaper and magazine advertisements for radio tended to emphasize its intimate qualities, or at least its *capacity* for providing intimacy and companionship. The wireless was 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 technological apparatus was de-emphasized in favour of its decorative (aesthetic) values which were in keeping with other objects in the household.

**The radio is represented as the substitute for the absent friend on those cold 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.<sup>2</sup>**

At home with the radio,  
1930s

These familiar conditions of radio-as-friend, or surrogate "love object", in a multiplicity of images, have provided the lyrical content for many musical performers as diverse as Bing Crosby, Dolly Parton, the Beatles and Queen. They have provided the necessary reflection and nostalgia base for "when I was young movies" like Woody Allen's *Radio Days* and 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-ghettoblasted, hip hop "ra, ra, ra, dio, dio, di, 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 of contemporary societies (R. Murray Schafer's term in *The Tuning of the World: Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design*.)

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 and analysis of culture (and society) as well as contemporary post-structuralist and feminist film theory have been particularly useful for those exploring the psycho-social and socio-political

aspects of audio production and consumption. During the past fifteen years the locus of debates within film theory and film analysis has tended to revolve around the nature of sexual sublimation, voyeurism and filmic pleasure. The work of the 70s *Screen* group — Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen et.al., who have based their theories on the writings of Christian Metz (*The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*), Jacques Lacan (*Ecrits* and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) and Julia Kristeva (*Desire in Language*) among others — has done much to isolate and identify significant aspects of *cinematic pleasure*, the construction of meaning and the production and 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 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 the recipient of the 'code', has begun to be more widely understood in psychoanalytic terms. The *pulsion invocante*<sup>3</sup> so eloquently evoked by Lacan, is a process which 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 and phone-in shows are favourites), is used as an analgesic. In such instances, radio acts as both an "upper" and a "downer."

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 broadcasting: the privileging of reception over transmission, and of consumption over production. There is a paradigm in the historical developments which 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 with the machine was soon lost. Once connected to the body by a cord, the radio soon became an instrument of collective listening, part of the furniture and, by extension, the architecture — or in Murray Schafer's terms, taking his cues from McLuhan, the

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Göring, Himmler, Hitler and Goebbels in Brecht's *Schweik in the Second World War*





"bio-sphere." During the past decade we have regained the intimacy of this vital umbilical contact with the audio apparatus.

Some 70 years after de Forest's invention we have returned to savour the severely individualistic hyper-phonic listening on the 'new' equipment of the 1970s and 1980s. The listening tube has been replaced by the umbilical cords represented in 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 that the machines marketed so successfully in the 1980s were those focusing on play-back and reception — the Walkman/Walkwoman with AM/FM and mini audio tape players — and not the machines of production with multiple features like stereo or multi-track recording capabilities; although recent indications reveal that the decrease in prices of such equipment has led to an increase in purchases. Still, such equipment still maintains an emphasis on consumption, insofar as its productive use is primarily 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, to the community and, prior to World War II, the masses. For the last 20 years it appears that we have been reversing this trend, traversing the terrain of choice, which is less fully articulated than advertisers of audio equipment would have us believe.

**And the choice now is not so much between signal and noise, or the sound and its source (Schafer's "schizophrenia"), but between a 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, is manifest as a form of critical schizophrenia.

That radio has the capacity to both combat or resist 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 programming and content as a means of engendering an information "exchange" in step with contemporary social reality. The fact that radio in its ac-



tive form could be used to examine and change this reality has rarely 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"<sup>4</sup> which can assist in ameliorating the social impact of change. It has also 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 superficial. Listeners, potential social actors, remain isolated consumers. Domestic listening programmes tend to domesticate their audiences.

### III

As Hans Magnus Enzensberger observed in his famous Brechtian essay "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" (1974), radio, since its raw beginnings in the minds of mid-19th 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 technology became subordinated to a one-way distribution and passive reception system. The value of Enzensberger's ideas, and before him those of Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, is that they each questioned in different ways this emphasis on consumption.

It is wrong to regard media equipment as a means of consumption. It is always in principle also a means of production. The contradiction between producers and consumers is not inherent in the electronic media; on the contrary, it has to be artificially reinforced by economic and administrative measures. (Enzensberger, 56)

While many of the examples Enzensberger used in his essay to demonstrate the undialectical uses of the media (network broadcast radio and television, satellite communications) still hold true, others used to illustrate his thesis — the telephone, the computer, electro-static copiers, user/producer audio and visual equipment and services — have been altered by (usually) subtle emphases and/or reconceptualizing in order to adapt to either the changing demands of the market and consumers or the new determinations of the communications systems. The telephone, for instance, can no longer be considered primarily as a single line speaker/receiver apparatus, as Enzensberger argued. It must now be understood in terms of its dialectical potential as a multiple tele-conferencing (networking) system as well as a place where a number of communications systems (computers, copiers) can interface simultaneously.

Within the past decade, theory has preceded the practical applications for the new technologies. Technologists point to the "education gap": the fact that people are unable to adapt quickly enough to the newer generations of technological apparatuses. Moreover, the new technologies

The Martians invading Los Angeles from *The War of the Worlds*



War-time news room,  
National Broadcasting  
Company

themselves have demonstrated their fallibility as interactive systems. Information flow is often marked by conflicts, drop-outs, or, to use a political metaphor which may become more instructive in the next few years, *anarchy*. The counterpart to the AIDS virus among the human population is the computer virus (system bug) and other "new age" syndromes which have increasingly given new meanings to the "science" of cybernetics and particularly to the notion briefly explored by Enzensberger: stochasticism, the randomness of interactive communications systems.

Stochasticism, while it reduces the Orwellian spectre of *total* control, is no reason to applaud the impending arrival of democracy. Neither is the late capitalist hyper-consumption of user/producer audio and video equipment, cam-corders, micro-wave video broadcast systems, citizen band and low frequency transmitters, etc., etc. — none of which can 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 remains unrealized. (Enzensberger, 56)<sup>5</sup>

Control and the undialectical use of the media will continue as 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)<sup>6</sup>, is best assisted by the reproduction of the masses.

Even where it can be demonstrated by "futurolgists" like John Naisbitt (*Mega-trends*) 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 individuals whose lives are, to a major extent, "controlled" by the major media conglomerates and other institutions of capitalism. The consumption of local media programmes by these groups is limited and while they may own a cam-corder, C.B. radio, VCR, stereo or four track equipment which allow production, they remain amateurs.

It has long been clear from apparatus like miniature and 8mm movie cameras as well as the tape recorder, which are 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*. (Enzensberger, 57)

The emphasis given by Enzensberger on the term *producer* is derived from the importance given it by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Author as Producer" (1937, reprinted in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections* 1982) in which he argues that the artist/author must relieve him/herself of the traditional stereotypical roles and class alliances and identify with the struggles of the proletariat and other disenfranchised or marginal groups within society. Enzensberger re-offers this problem of "conscientization" to those within the left as well as those liberals who wish to locate conditions ripe for change — including their own consciousness.

#### IV

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 fulfills his task when he is no longer necessary. (Enzensberger, 76)

Both Enzensberger's and Benjamin's positions encourage the articulation of a new role for the artist, one which is premised less on the production of aesthetic objects or events for exhibition or broadcast, than on the provision of objects or actions which have some kind of social and cultural utility. Their insistence on the artist's 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 autonomy of the institution — art. The use of new technologies and

the emphasis on developing critical strategies for the attack on the status quo of conventional artistic practice — both of these have 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 1970s and 80s. And yet, often the attack on the status quo — the hegemony of bourgeois culture — merely resulted in what Peter Bürger has suggested is a "re-newing of the stereotypes" (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*). 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 aggrandizement 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 "outsider" 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 figure, has habitually recorded, on each of his birthdays, the principal events of that year. During the recording for 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 a man in his late middle ages whose creative impotence is coupled with his imagined (or actual) sexual impotence. His audio reminiscences reveal his lost youth; the mistakes he has made have been carefully chronicled in the stacks of tapes which 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 reconstruct his (life's) identity from his remembered history (his tapes become his *aides-memoire*), even where his acts and those of others around him refute 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.

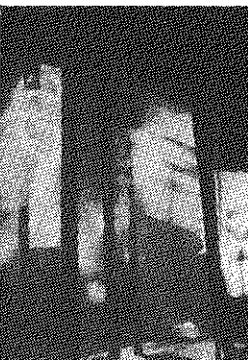
The implicit materiality of crap, and the scatological references throughout the play, further reinforce the existential aspects of Krapp's intellectual onanism. The cultural significance of shit, or rather its purging — within literature, from Rabelais to Swift, Sade, Jarry, Artaud, Beckett, and the visual arts, from Bruegel to Duchamp, Manzoni and Warhol — is too large a subject to discuss here. Suffice it to suggest

that Beckett's repression and cultural alienation and bodily dysfunctions, is one which may also be a rumination on the idea through a focus on the type for an artist like

Day after day I look still see something dunk a Johnson an alcohol and rub the pimple. And while drying I think about always in style... Well, I'm ready for an acne-pimple medicine pimple's covered. (Warhol, 7)

Warhol's mirror and his ghost, as do in his audio recordings. This engages the twin aspects — self-aggrandizement (effacement or self-ab) at the basis of the power entirely under examination

Beyond the historical neo-avant-garde's attitude of radio remains many of the works from



Vito Acconci's *Other Voices*

riod and particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s presents a watershed for artists' audio. Vito Acconci's *Studio for Air Time* and *Voices for a Second Site* are examples of production as (paradigmatic) institution being described as the radio, the manner in which the exhibition of audio in this manner in which the haunts all film. These acts of consciousness, ideological underpinning of this period since the invention of other technological apparatus.

Acconci is acutely aware of the public aspects of

that Beckett's representation(s) of social and cultural alienation through Krapp's bodily dysfunctions, is a powerful trope, one which 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 while the alcohol is drying I think about nothing. How it's dry, I'm ready for the flesh coloured acne-pimple medication... so now the pimple's covered. But am I covered? (Warhol, 7)

Warhol's mirror and scrapbook become his ghost, as do in similar manner Krapp's audio recordings. This image of narcissism engages the twin aspects of this syndrome — self-aggrandizement and self-negation (effacement or self-abnegation), which is at the basis of the power dynamic presently under examination.

Beyond the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde's attitude to the *absolute power* of radio remains. It is evident in many of the works from the post-war pe-

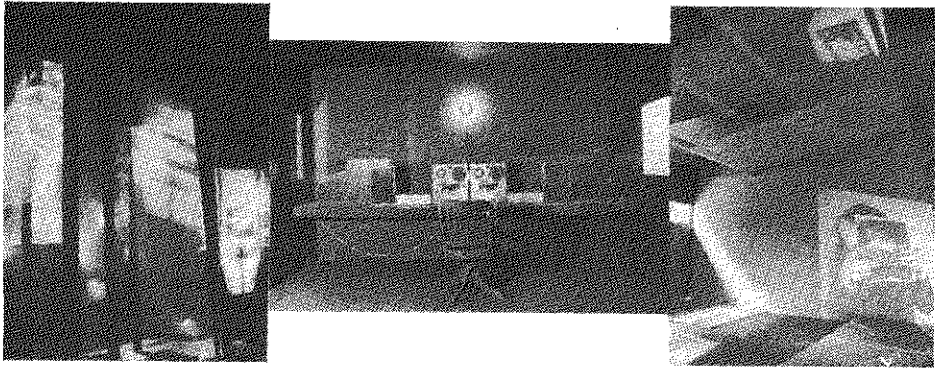
formance work, his attitude of sitting in front of a mirror or camera often approached the condition of self-abnegation of the individual at confession. Like Beckett's Krapp, the presence of an audience, albeit one distanced by technology (video and audio players) in a work such as *Air Time* assists him in being "honest" with himself. The videotape of the 1973 performance/installation, produced for the 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 fifteen minute break and then return. A closed circuit video system revealed Acconci talking to himself, looking again into a mirror and acting out scenes from his five year relationship with Dillon. Audio tape players and speakers were placed in seven wooden boxes and 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, de-

Although Acconci's audience, like Beckett's, may be an indispensable aid 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, a judge, nor even the jury. Like the audience for the typical radio programme, they are merely asked, like Peter Sellers' character Chauncey Gardner 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 the disc-jockey or talk-show host moving into and controlling the hearts and minds of his listeners, while locked into a hermetically sealed sound-proof chamber with an audio projection device — radio: "Like building a life on an all night talk show" (my emphasis). The middle gallery space contained a recording/transmission studio and on either side was 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./host is the "voice that drifts through the dark, that lulls you into the night that makes you forget (emphasis added)"; yet the radio show is a final hour, a final program that seemingly may go on forever." 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.



Vito Acconci's *Other Voices for a Second Site*

riod and particularly those from the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time which represents a watershed for the development of artists' audio. Vito Acconci's works *Recording Studio for Air Time* (1973) and *Other Voices for a Second Site* (1973) are useful examples of productions from this period. Within Acconci's oeuvre they may stand as (paradigmatic) instances of what is being described as the residual effects of radio, the manner in which it "haunts" the exhibition of audio art in the same manner in which the experience of movies haunts all film. These affects become products of consciousness. They represent the ideological underpinnings of the dominant culture of this period, and perhaps all periods since the invention of radio and other technological apparatus of reproduction.

Acconci is acutely aware of the private and public aspects of his art. In his early

lude them, transport them." (Sondheim, 26-68)

Like Krapp, Acconci is ultimately ambivalent about his audience's presence in what is essentially a private affair between himself and Dillon (and in Krapp's case, between Krapp and himself). Yet Acconci needs their presence to remain truthful to himself, even if this might place him in the position of "acting out something for them." He may wish to reproach (efface) himself and gain absolution for his sins by placing himself under confession, yet he also wants to make it clear that in some of the instances which he outlines, he believes he is above reproach. The isolation chamber, simultaneously reminiscent of cells in prisons, psychiatric institutions, confessionals and sound-proofed recording booths (the tape's full title is *Recording Studio for Air Time*) reveals Acconci's deliberate obscuring of the public and private.



While he attempts to provide his work with some kind of socio-political 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 aggrandizing 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 behaviour, producing the products which 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 determinations 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 avant-gardist's intentions. While a small number of artists have obtained 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.

We have witnessed the power of radio and tape recording in other ways since the late 1940s when Pierre Schaeffer began to manipulate audio recordings to produce some of the first electro-acoustic works. John Cage's celebrated *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, the work of Cage and others was perceived as an intrusion into the conventional ear and airspace of audio reception. The title *Imaginary Landscape* is somewhat ironic given the technical aspects of the recording itself and the material objects, including hub caps, bottles, etc., which produced the sounds. Much of the broadcast work produced in the late 1950s and early 60s by artists in the U.S. and Europe shocked its listeners with its non-musical form. However, it did not take long for Cage's music, composed 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 apprehension of the airwaves which, after McLuhan, has tended to obliterate cultural, class and ethnic boundaries in favour of a total homogenizing of the eco-sphere.

Murray Schafer's celebrated *Soundscape* projects place much significance on the reception analysis of periodized content. And yet this analysis is limited, providing

material for the subsequent rendering of radio transmission into rhythmic confirmation of bio-harmony. The work of a number of 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 Theberge, for instance, produced a radio-phonetic work which is based on an entire day (18+ hours) of programming from the Radio Canada FM network. Brief extracts of music, news and cultural programmes 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. About this work Theberge has written:

...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. (Theberge, 3)

A similar approach to radio broadcasting and hence audio composition is apparent in the work of many artists producing audio art. As we have seen, however, radio broadcast and tape recording 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 many 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 programmes for regular broadcast, and attempted to develop alternative audiences. A few community-based radio and television stations, 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, many 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 discernable. 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 strategies of MGM, Warner Brothers, CBS, et al, the major institutions of capitalism, developing styles, behaviour packaging and marketing formulae which 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, fashions and behaviour: the Sex Pistols, the clothes, the jewelry, the food tastes, hairstyles, the language, the looks, beliefs, etc., all conforming to and reinforcing the sustaining ideologies of punk. Successful as his operation was, McLaren diminished his profit margins by not adequately protecting his patents.<sup>7</sup>

The second option does not exhibit the conventional extremes of the first. Artists adopting the "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 which tends to conform to the styles and tastes of a highly phonoliterate minority group of consumers who may also be artists themselves. Worldwide, this market constituency is of substantial size and developing and yet by the standards of 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 within 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 form of this kind of marketing strategy was that of 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 their 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 micro-wave transmitting in urban areas has often become an alternative for those who feel excluded from the dominant centres of production and distribution. Why run the risk of having your

programming rejected or to operate successfully on a national marketing/broadcast level. Around the world imitative religious factions, various and lobby groups, environmental groups, special interest wave musicians, poets, various denominations that the risks associated outside of the law are particularly given the satellite waves and the control of major networks of broadcast.

The relationships between the options are more fluid than they appear. Many permutations within the native distribution model. The third option is given to those who recognize the risks within the present system of recording and broadcast to be understood through *powerlessness*.

In the past decade and particularly audio art has been demonstrated in Iran. The Khomeini example and Irangate all emphasize the magnetic recording event has focused attention and fallibility of the system in which wire-tap support and strengthening, or undermine art to reel and the humbled into their own, upset the visual which had to secondary status for at least since the invention techniques of representation and the subsequent of photo-mechanical early 19th century. Of audio-image films of Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* depicts the impact of audiophonic representation of *The Conversation* symbolic representation of power ultimately real.

It is to the example of Irangate, *The Conversation* that artists must address is within these examples and potential power in all its negative and becomes intelligible. The nation of the institution of production and consumption condition to the re-negotiation of the artist's role from the author.

Perhaps the most of the power relations between the all power consumer and the alien — is contained in *Nature To Andy Mannix* (sent/audio installation presented at the Kitchen and Performing Arts) tribute to Andy Mannix who had converted the former Mercer Arts Center performance space. P

programming rejected or altered if one can operate successfully outside of the conventional marketing/broadcasting 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 the major networks of broadcast systems.<sup>8</sup>

The relationships between these three options are more fluid than the brief description above would suggest. There are many permutations which allow for alternative distribution methods to develop. The third option is gaining 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 Irangate 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 an 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 had 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 19th 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, Irangate, *The Conversation* and Khomeini that artists must address themselves. For it is within these examples that 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 re-negotiation 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 (Centre 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 Centre into the Kitchen performance space. Paik's *Tribute*, de-

scribed 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 cords and scales and Beethoven, broadcasting recorded tapes backwards — as only Paik can "play". While on stage, Lois Welk performed a discrete strip to a Sony Walkman (so as not to be disturbed) by Paik's cacophonous, less than rhythmic score. (*LIVE* Vol 1. no. 6/7 1982)



Sony advertisement, 1980s

#### NOTES

1. 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. See Frith, S. "The Pleasure of the Hearth: The Making of BBC Light Entertainment" in *Formations of Pleasure*, Bennet, T., Burgin, V. et al, eds. London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1983: 101-123.
2. See Frith, S. "The Pleasures of the Hearth: The Making of BBC Light Entertainment" in *Formations of Pleasure* (eds) T. Bennett, Burgin, V. et al. London, Routledge, Kegan, Paul 1983: 101-123.
3. The desire for listening. Metz suggests that the distance of the look has its corollary in the distance of listening. As opposed to other sexual drives, the perception (perceiving) drive combining into one the scopic 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. Metz relies fairly heavily on Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.
4. See Atheide, D.L. and Snow, P.R. "The Grammar of Radio" in *Intermedia* 273-281, reprinted from the authors' *Media Logic*.
5. Benjamin, W. "The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction" (Benjamin's footnote 21 reads "Mass reproduction is aided especially by the reproduction of the masses," 251. In Arendt, H. (ed) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken 1969, 1977.
6. Beckett also produced two plays under the titles of *Radio 1* and *Radio 2*.
7. See Hebdige, D. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen, 1979 and Frith, Simon. *Sound Effects: Youth Leisure and the Politics of Rock*, London: Constable 1983, and *Music for Pleasure* New York: Routledge 1988, for some interesting and at times conflicting insights into capitalist appropriation, within and outside of the new music and subculture/style industries.
8. For some interesting descriptions of these forms of radio see Wilson, Alexander, "Self-Serve Radio: A Conversation with a Pirate." *FUSE* volume 6, No.6, April 1983, and Kogawa, Tetsuo, "Japan Free Radio" in *Cultures in Contention*, Neumaier, D. and Kahn, D., eds.

Seattle: Real Comet Press 1982. For a useful introduction to the state control of the air waves see McPhail, T., *Electronic Colonialism: The Future of International Broadcasting and Communication*. Beverly Hills, London: Sage Library of Social Research, Vol. 126, 1981.

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