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LAPTOP MUSIC - COUNTERFEITING AURA
IN THE AGE OF INFINITE REPRODUCTION

Af Kim Cascone

Center for Digital Æstetik-forskning

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Kim Cascone

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IT-Parken Helsingforsgade 14, DK-8200 Århus N
e-mail info@digital-aestetik.dk • www.digital-aestetik.dk

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LAPTOP MUSIC – COUNTERFEITING AURA IN THE AGE OF INFINITE REPRODUCTION

“This function of music gradually dissolves when the locus of music changes, when people begin to listen to it in silence and exchange it for money. There then emerges a battle for the purchase and sale of power, a *political economy*.”¹

It was only a couple of hundred years before the advent of sound recording that musicians became free to perform concerts for the public (that is other than opera and jongleurs which are beyond the scope of this essay). Until the appearance of the concert hall in the 1700’s, music was primarily performed in the socialized settings of churches, European courts and in the parlors of the aristocracy, where the musician’s work and body were fully owned by their employers. Once freed, the act of performing music shifted from indentured servitude to entrepreneur, and thus became based on “exchange,” i.e., the transformation of value into money. Musical performance, now distanced from prior rituals of socialization, created a polarized axis of performer and audience. This polarity created a distance or “aura” which empowered the performer with an authenticity, that helped create value in their craft. Although a performance takes place in the moment, the original creation of the music, the “score,” occurs in a displaced time and space. The audience came to understand that music being performed (as *interpretation*, not *improvisation*) was not *created* on the spot, at that moment – but that the work of *creation* i.e. the score, occurred separately from the work of *performance*.

Music as experienced in the concert hall became a “performing art,” borrowing presentation codes from the theater arts of seventeenth century France “in which costume, dance and

¹ Jacques Atalli, “Noise: the Political Economy of Music”, Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

clever scenery and scene changes were more emphasized than acting and plot.”² This influx of theatrical codes ushered in the element of “spectacle.” “Music announces that the political economy of the nineteenth century could only be theater, a spectacle trapped by history.”³

REPETITION AND DISPLACEMENT

“Stated very simply, representation in the system of commerce is that which arises from a singular act; repetition is that which is mass-produced.”⁴

It took some years before phonograph records containing musical performances were mass-produced and marketed to the public. At first, the experience of hearing disembodied voices emanating from a machine seemed supernatural - some claimed the phonograph was a hoax, a parlor trick, or an act of ventriloquism. The phonograph was a “ghost box,” a device that captured and regurgitated the voices and music of people who did not exist. Eventually the recording became a generally accepted derivative form of live performance spurred on by the dance crazes of the early 1900’s. The record “transcribed, reproduced, copied, represented, derived from and sounded like performances.”⁵ The record presented a potent new aura created by the magic of technology - one of displacement, the magic of hearing music emanating from a different place and time by people not physically present.

²“The History of Theater”, <http://www.ebicom.net/~tct/oftheatre.htm>, as of February 2002.

³ Jacques Attali, “Noise: the Political Economy of Music”, Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Sarah Thornton, “Club Cultures, Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital” Hannover, New Hampshire; Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

After advances in sound technology gave birth to the recording studio, the record shifted from *document* to that of a highly crafted object of “ideal, not real, events.”⁶ The final product was created by an invisible assembly line of composers, musicians, producers and engineers, who created an aura that operated at a meta-level to the star performer. The recording studio became a laboratory in which cultural artifacts were concocted; audio technology could now enhance, repair, or even create a musical performance through the fusion of science and art.

Technological wizardry afforded the artist a “larger-than-life” aura/presence through the studio-produced record. The expectation for performers to maintain and reinforce this presence in concert resulted again in the appropriation of theatrical codes. Set design, props, costumes, pyrotechnics and lighting all served to create a heightened sense of spectacle that the recorded object could not. The use of spectacle increased the feeling of distance, distance from the mundane, distance from the recorded object, the ethereal distance of fabricated reality. Borrowing codes from opera perhaps more than theater, this brand of spectacle - the amplification and fabrication of personal aura through technology - resulted in a new type of aura: the rock concert.

COUNTERFEITING AURA

“Pop music hangs on to the folk-era image of the individual artist communicating directly to her or his listeners. Milli Vanilli became martyrs to this myth of authenticity. They were the recording industry's sacrifice meant to prove the integrity of the rest of their product - as if the music marketed under the names U2 or Janet Jackson *weren't* every bit as constructed and

⁶ Simon Frith, “The Making of the British Record Industry, 1920 – 1964”, in “Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century”, eds J Curran et al, Methuen, London, 1987.

mediated, just because the voices on the records matched the faces in the videos.”⁷

With the introduction of the phonograph, the aura of the musical performer had shifted to the record, but through the development of media technology, it now resides in multiple locations simultaneously. Within the pop culture apparatus, these locations are designed to exchange and share energy: a network of aura. For example, when Madonna releases a new CD, a song from the album (the single) is played on the radio, the music video is broadcast on cable television, articles and advertisements appear in print media, music retailers prominently display and sell her CD's and Madonna performs concerts for stadium-capacity crowds. Through the deft interconnection of cross-promotional tie-ins, give-aways, sneak previews, advance copies, email lists, web sites, and downloadable mp3 files, this promotional engine is tuned to produce demand.

The media's use of spectacle, which has little to do with the value of music, conspires to capture and maintain a constant focus on the artist, to establish a singular omnipotent presence. This omni-presence produces a demand for records containing the artist's aura. This system forms the basic apparatus by which the political economy of pop media operates: the production of demand by counterfeiting aura. The pop aura is artificial; a synthetic system of caricatures, each one designed to be most prevalent in a particular media. Aura can no longer reside in any one location – a pop star can only exist through their vast network of presence; which is powered by cross coupling its various instances, i.e. the flow of money.

⁷ Ted Friedman, “Milli Vanilli and the Scapegoating of the Inauthentic”, *Bad Subjects*, Issue # 9, November 1993. <http://eserver.org/bs/09/Friedman.html>, as of February 2002.

While not all art forms operate within this type of system, the constant din of pop media makes it difficult for the public to learn about alternative music operating in sub-cultural markets.

GHOST BOX REDUX

The recent adoption of the laptop computer in concerts and festivals by “post-digital” (i.e. I use this as an umbrella term for glitch, microsound, click-house, clicks & cuts, etc.) musicians and DJ’s has caused much controversy amongst concert promoters and audiences. Witness the strange report from a concert promoter in Australia: “I was nearly punched one night in Melbourne over the ‘laptop/performance’ issue - I do not want to be tagged with the ‘laptop’ stereotype.”⁸ The stereotype the promoter is referring to is that of laptop performances being considered counterfeit, fake. The antagonism arises when a performer generates music by a process unknown to the audience; using technology more at home in an office cubicle than a musical performance. The laptop’s signifier as a business tool is so ingrained in the public consciousness that its use as a musical instrument is considered a violation of the codes of musical performance. The audience feels *cheated*, because the laptop musician *appears* to be simply playing back soundfiles stored on their hard drive. The following tongue-in-cheek poke at the “laptop stereotype” clearly reveals a nagging suspicion. On a CD by the laptop musician Pimmon⁹, an emcee back-announces the artist after a performance and interjects: “...and while he was doing that he’d logged his tax return electronically!”

Usually, music performed on laptop is presented in a traditional proscenium setting, framed in the traditional performer-

⁸email from a concert promoter in Melbourne Australia, June 2001.

⁹“Electronic Tax Return”, Pimmon, Tigerbeat, Meow016 CD

audience polarity. This context frustrates the audience because they are unable to resolve the setting with a lack of spectacularized gestures (i.e. the lack of theatrical codes) which signify “performance.” Gesture and spectacle disappear into the micro-movements of the laptop performer’s wrists and fingers. From the audience’s view the performer sits motionless, staring into the luminous glow of the laptop screen while sound fills the space by an unseen process. The laptop ghost box plays sounds created not in a *displaced* space-time, but in one that is totally *absent*. The laptop musician is perceived as a medium conducting a séance, whose tricks of table knocks, wall rapping and spectral voices broadcast from nowhere are orchestrated to feign the *effect* of authenticity where none really exists. Thus, the cultural artifact produced by the laptop musician is deemed a counterfeit, leaving the audience unable to determine a use-value.

In a traditional musical performance, the aura of the score and the performer combine, yet both are able to be located separately. This is commonly experienced while listening to a cover band perform popular songs. The score has an obvious origin that is communicated through the simple act of interpreting it. In laptop performance, the score has no obvious origin; the performer does not serve as an animated conduit for it, and does nothing to reassure the audience that a score exists. Even the most perfect representation of laptop music is lacking in one element: its unique existence at the place where it happened to be created. This combination of the score’s lack of origin and the polarized artist-audience axis gives the laptop performance the quality of being “broadcast.” In the 21st century, music will not be performed, it will be broadcast.

However, in actuality an aura *does* exist, and resides in “the distance that separates a sound from its origins.”¹⁰

POP-ACOUSMATIC

“Hrvatski and Greg Davis use Apple Powerbook computers in performance and are deeply sorry for the lack of visual stimuli this creates. Please let them make it up to you...”¹¹

“What the absence of visual identification makes anonymous, unifies and prompts a more attentive listening.”¹²

Thankfully, the history of electro-acoustic music provides a pretext for this seemingly counterfeit manner of performing music. Typically, in acousmatic music, a composer, seated by a tape recorder, mixing board or computer, pushes a button and the music is “performed” for the audience. The academic music community has engaged in acousmatic music for many years without the need for “the social rituals prompted by the interaction of stage performer(s) and audience.”¹³ There is no suspicion of counterfeit because this particular audience holds little of the expectations that pop music encourages; the aura this type of music presents is located in the musical content, not stage sets and costumes. The location of aura in an acousmatic work is achieved via a different set of codes - ones that seem unnatural to audiences imprinted by pop music culture.

¹⁰ Jérôme Peignot, as quoted in Dhomont essay, Francis Dhomont, “Acousmatic, what is it?”, <http://www.electrocd.com/notice.e/9607-0002.html>, as of February 2002.

¹¹ Hrvatski, Greg Davis, Keith Fullerton Whitman spring tour, email announcement, February, 27 2002

¹² Francis Dhomont, “Acousmatic, what is it?”, <<http://www.electrocd.com/notice.e/9607-0002.html>, as of February 2002.>

¹³ Darren Copeland, “Cruising For A Fixing - in this 'Art of Fixed Sounds’”, <http://www.interlog.com/~darcocpe/cruising.html>, as of February 2002.

Although the sub-culture of electronica unabashedly appropriates symbology from electro-acoustic music, this surface skimming of cultural signifiers leaves much of its cultural and theoretical underpinnings unexamined. Falling into neither the spectacularized presentation of pop music nor the academic world of acousmatic music, laptop musicians inhabit a netherworld constructed from performance codes borrowed from both. The political economy of electronica/post-digital music places it squarely within a pop media context even if it operates at a sub-cultural level to the mainstream media. Therefore, this context raises many issues concerning *use-value*, *exchange-value*. The most difficult issue being how the expectations they bring into play mediates and impedes the development of new performance codes. The political economy of pop media produces *demand* through the promise of value disguised as the expectation of spectacle.

THE GRAVITATIONAL PULL OF SUPER-CULTURE

“Performance contexts and their evaluation are tightly defined, particularly for micromusics that need defining or, at least, public explanation, for their appearance, most commonly at officially sanctioned events celebrating “diversity.”¹⁴

A problem which sub-cultures experience when in proximity to super-culture (pop media) is that one will gravitate towards the other to co-exist in parasitic orbit. I will briefly examine both viewpoints.

Trend Surfing: Pop stars that look for ways to look “cool by proxy” have recently begun to incorporate signifiers from DJ and electronica culture into their stage shows and compositional process. One example is Bjork’s recent “Vespertine” tour that

¹⁴ Mark Slobin, “Subcultural Sounds – Micromusics of the West”, Hannover, New Hampshire; Wesleyan University Press, 1993.

employed a duo of musicians hovering over laptops, datamining gigabytes of glitchy beats and abstract loops. However, the token addition of the laptop in pop concerts helps little in achieving stability for the signifier of laptop. Drowning in a sea of pop spectacle, the signifier floats unanchored and remains unstable, unable to transmit aura, convey origin or demonstrate its musical contribution through gesture.

Recycling Signifiers: On the other side of the problem, the laptop musician often falls into the trap of adopting the codes used in pop music - locating the aura in spectacle. Since many of the current musicians have come to electronic music through their involvement in the spectacle-oriented sub-cultures of DJ and dance music, the codes are transferred to serve as a safe and familiar framework in which to operate. The use of spectacle as a solution to the lack of visual stimuli only works to reinforce the confusion of authenticity and aura and hence the “stereotype of the laptop.”

In order for the signifier of laptop to stabilize there needs to be a recuperation of codes that move away from the use of spectacle, that establish aura, and show the audience how to differentiate “representation by the machine” from “repetition of the machine.”

“Creating new circuits in art means creating them in the brain too.”¹⁵

Kim Cascone

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¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “Negotiations”, New York; Columbia University Press, 1995.

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