

# The Spectacle and Computer Music: A Critical Assessment

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**Abstract:** In *The Society of The Spectacle*, French theorist Guy Debord identifies "the spectacle" as the essential lie-making mechanism of contemporary capitalist culture. Similarly, some French acousmatic composers praise the acousmatic presentation of music for avoiding "the spectacle" of the live performer. But the multi-speaker arrays on which this music is presented make their own kind of "spectacle," one which promotes a new kind of exclusivity in computer music. Can computer music ever be anything more than either a hobby practiced in universities and other institutions, or an accompaniment to the market-forces of capitalism (film-scores, commercials, dance-music)? How would it be possible for computer music composers to assume a critical stance towards capitalism, and with their art, to contribute to discussions of the creation of alternative modes of culture, and society? The author draws on 30 years of experience in creating community art and music centres, politically engaged technological art, and designing interactive installations for Expos, art museums, and public spaces.

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Despite the rather forbidding ideological nature of this paper's abstract, I want to stress at the outset that it's not my intention to tell anyone else how to run their artistic lives. I'm too much of an anarchist for that, and I recognize that what is inherently unsatisfactory for me may indeed provide total satisfaction for someone else. Nor do I wish to criticize the organizers of this conference in any way for providing such a superb listening environment for us to experience our sound-art in. To do so would not only be ungracious, it would be hypocritical on my part. I love a good sound system, and my ears are having a ball here, as I'm sure yours are. However, what I would very much like to do here is to raise some issues - issues of artistic satisfaction, and how the structures we set up, or choose to fit into, imply various kinds of social behaviors, and how these behaviors may, in the end, contribute to our sense of dissatisfaction with what we do. Or, to put it more concretely, the multi-loudspeaker systems we love so much come from a certain tradition of music making and bureaucratic organization of the arts, they need a certain level of support for their upkeep, they channel us into certain modes of artistic behavior, (modes which I, at least, am finding less and less satisfactory) and, at least as far as Australia is concerned, they may not be the best, or most artistically or socially (politically?) useful environments we can set up, given current artistic and economic conditions. Despite this, I do not wish to return to performing all my computer music on home stereo systems. What I do wish to investigate is ways in which the multi-loudspeaker environment can be made as subversive and portable as the equipment we generate our music with.

My thinking along these lines began with a comment Curtis Roads made in Melbourne in May 1998. Describing his love of loudspeaker orchestras, he said that people want to experience music as a special event, and the setting up of a large loudspeaker orchestra certainly does that. This was in the context of the 1998 Next Wave festival in Melbourne, where Lawrence Harvey and Michael Hewes had overseen the setup of a superb loudspeaker

orchestra in the cavernous South Melbourne Town Hall. Interestingly enough, when it came time for Roads to perform his own work, he actually used a loudspeaker set up that incorporated speakers that were closer to the audience than the ones used by the majority of the composers. He recognized that the variety of sonic perspectives he wanted, from intimate sonic clarity to a kind of grandiose distant sonic perspective was not provided by the setup as it existed. This got me thinking that the concept of "music as a special event" was, in fact, exactly what the majority of my current artistic practice was NOT. That is, I had become involved, especially since the advent of the laptop computer, with computer music as a realtime, ongoing, improvisatory performance art. Rather than one performance a year, I was giving a performance a week, performing with improvising dancers, actors and musicians, as well as, at that point, doing a sound-installation a month in a series of Victorian regional art galleries. I was much happier performing in dance spaces, improvisation venues, community centres, and small local art galleries than I was in large concert halls or theatres. So the concept of "music as a special event" was one that was becoming alien to me. I was involved in "music as an ongoing part of life," if you will, and I found this mode of process-oriented music making much more satisfying than making "finished works" for presentation in large public spectacles. While I was very happy to see 700 people turn up for the Next Wave's excellent performance of Stockhausen's "Mantra," I was just as happy that only 30 of them would ever turn up to any of our gigs. I place a great value on intimacy and individual communication in my performances. I felt that the form of music-making I was most comfortable with was more akin to folk music, with its continual performances among friends, than to classical music, with its codified performance venues and behaviors, where the norm, it seemed to me, was to take months to write a fixed piece, which would then be performed once or twice, but which had the potential to be performed - repeated - many times. I had very much left this world of repetition, fixity, and special events, and Curtis' comment crystallised this for me. In short, I felt that I was approaching that state of continually socially involved music making that Jacques Attali described in his oft-quoted *Noise, The Political Economy of Music* as "composition", and that Benjamin Boretz deals extensively with in his *Interface* series of essays. (Boretz' comments on the nature of classical music's "masterpiece" culture are especially relevant here.)

About the same time, I read a comment in some CD liner notes, what CD it was I can no longer remember, where the author talked about the idea that acousmatic music - music played through an orchestra of loudspeakers - gained its unique qualities because it eschewed the "spectacle" of the live performer. The use of the word "spectacle" in connection with an artform that had its most prominent exponents in France automatically made me think of Guy Debord's Situationist magnum opus, *The Society of the Spectacle*, that users manual to the events in Paris in May 1968. Since Attali's *Noise*, Debord's *Society*, and the acousmonium were all products of French culture, I began thinking about the nature of that culture, and its relationship to that amorphous thing called "the spectacle." Debord is clear. His very first statement in *Society* is "The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation." Representation, and repetition (for which Attali reserves special venom), are essential elements in the domination of modern life by the forces of the contemporary economic fundamentalist state. (And, alas, they also seem to be essential aspects of the tape piece and the CD! I can very well understand the desire of acousmatic composers to introduce an element of live variation in their multi-loudspeaker performances.) One of the first things that stuck me about the musical life of modern France was how bureaucratized it was. Whether your tastes were IRCAMed or GRMed, whether you were a fan of Paris Automne or of UPIC, the way of cultural life in France was to form a

large organization and to crusade for government support for it. Along the way, the path would be littered with those who could not survive in this environment. Historically, the musical world of Paris has been able to marginalize such figures of genius as Erik Satie and Ivan Wyschnegradsky, a practice that continues up to the present day with the marginalization of powerful composers such as Eliane Radigue, who find far more performance opportunities outside France than in it. Certainly, on all my visits to France, I've felt acutely uncomfortable. The small scale community-conscious music making I'm interested in seems to have no place there. Maybe I just haven't met the right people. (Or, rather, maybe the problem is that I *am* meeting the "right" people. If I were to meet the "wrong" ones, I might find that kind of small scale music making I'm searching for.) But it seemed no coincidence to me that the concept of an orchestra of loudspeakers, as appealing as it was, would have evolved in a society in which the conditions of musical production were sufficiently bureaucratized to have made this an economically and socially viable option. Moving across the channel to England, I then noticed the gallant efforts of my many British colleagues to attempt to set up a National Centre for Electronic Music. This effort has been going on for at least the past 20 years, and is finally bearing fruit. (But that it took 20 years tells us much about the very different cultural conditions that exist in England and France!) Other groups, such as the BEAST, which Jonty Harrison will be telling us about, evolved - with presumably the same difficulty that all other academically based activities have faced - within the context of the university, another bureaucratic support structure. So whether it was with government or university support, it was obvious that these loudspeaker orchestras required a considerable level of institutional support to be sustained. And as one who had been thrust out of the institutions back in 1981, and then rethrust out on my second attempt to join them in 1985, this did not seem like a viable option for me. The nature of my personality, as well as the kind of music making I did, seemed to mitigate against my being involved in, or accepted by, this kind of institutionally based music making.

It now turns out that my experience of institutional rejection was simply premature. In Australia, as economic fundamentalism wins the day, artists of all sorts have been experiencing this level of rejection. In the field of computer music, the case of Melbourne is extreme, but probably representative. The Music Department at La Trobe University is closing down in November. Melbourne University has decided for this year not to appoint a full time lecturer in Music Technology, and Monash University has one half-time position in computer music. The only lively academic centre for computer music work in Melbourne seems to be the multi-media based sound course at RMIT, led by Philip Brophy and Philip Samartzis. Just at the time when fast and cheap computers are making computer music one of the most inexpensive forms of music making, the academic sector is withdrawing support from it. And the various government arts funding bodies show very little interest in funding the kinds of infrastructures necessary to support this music. Melbourne now has a substantial community of internationally recognized unemployed (or employed in fields other than that of their primary expertise) computer music composers and performers. Given this lack of support, it would seem futile to invest a lot of time in trying to find support for an institution such as an acousmonium, although I must acknowledge the excellent work done by my colleagues Lawrence Harvey, Philip Samartzis, and Terry McDermott in setting up such systems on a temporary basis. (It is possible to get funding to rent equipment to set up a temporary loudspeaker orchestra, but not, under current rules, to buy such equipment to set up a permanent institution for that purpose.) But my fundamental point remains - if one is primarily interested in getting satisfaction from music making as a continuous, on-going socially engaged practice, one that is as non-exclusionary as one can make it, then the attempt to import European-based models such as the acousmonium into current Australian

conditions may not be the best way to go. Rather, the development of smaller, lighter, more portable, and more individually affordable sound systems may be preferable. Some examples of this might be Ernie Althoff's recent "Heliosonics", a series of 26 solar powered sound sculptures. The entire set of 26 was specifically designed to fit into two foot lockers. Each sculpture takes less than five minutes to set up and install. An installation of four of these sculptures can be installed in a city park in about 10 or 12 minutes, and removed just as quickly. Computer loudspeaker systems have also come down in price drastically. While many of these systems are lo-fi, a bit of shopping around can find light-weight, good quality systems with internal amplifiers which can be set up quickly in smaller spaces (they can even be carried there on public transport!), and provide quite adequate sound. An example of this was the 10 loudspeaker orchestra temporarily set up at the Queensland Conservatorium a few years ago by Rodolphe Blois, which provided excellent sound quality and placement with 5 sets of domestic hi-fi loudspeakers. Another idea is my as yet unrealized concert for multiple boom-boxes and an audience with eyes closed. The idea is this: an audience is seated, with their eyes closed, on the (hopefully carpeted) floor of a performing space. Multiple performers, in stocking feet, move about the space. Each one has a cassette or CD player boom box. As they move about the space, each member of the audience hears sound moving - physically moving - through space. Multiple boom boxes means multiple sources of sound, and multiple paths of sound movement. The ideal here is to keep the systems light, portable, inexpensive, able to be set up quickly, and able to disappear at a moment's notice. Again, this is not only for artistic reasons, but for social ones as well - keeping it accessible, and friendly, too. Indeed, the presentation of music in a friendly, non-evaluative, non-hierarchical manner may be one of the most truly revolutionary things we can do as artists. If done in the proper spirit, this could provide a model for other friendly, non-evaluative, non-hierarchical behaviors, something I'm sure our society could do with a lot more of. The ethos that says that only the most absolutely high-fidelity sound is acceptable may, in the end, be a fetish that will socially do us more harm than good.

A word here, about musical style. In this paper, I'm not dealing with musical style. In my installations and performances, I've used many musical styles, from funky disco robot macarenas to microtonal serialized noise complexes to collages of quotations from Hollywood movie soundtracks. I am not concerned here with one *kind* of music being more acceptable than another. (Let's get rid of this modernism vs. post modernism crap once and for all.) It is my firm contention, based on 30 years of experience, that if presented in a friendly, inviting manner, *any* musical style can be acceptable. However, what I am concerned with here is that the style of our musical presentations, and the social institutions surrounding them, may not only be sending crossed signals about our musical intentions, but may be a source of our own artistic dissatisfaction as well. In a field where our means of production are being reinvented daily, it may be that we are going to have to be similarly socially inventive in the quest for proper environments in which our music can be best presented. I do not make an exorbitant request, surely.

#### REFERENCES:

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