



Asiascape Occasional Papers (Asiascape Ops) are an internationally peer-reviewed publication series that are available free of charge via Asiascape.net.

In recognition of the under-representation of cyberculture in many of the mainstream academic journals (and hence the difficulty encountered by scholars, journalists and others in finding reliable, scholarly sources in these fields), Asiascape Ops deliberately utilises free, web-based distribution in order to assist in the dissemination of serious scholarship in the areas of cyberculture, animanga etc., with the goal of helping to establish a lively, rich, diverse and thriving field. Materials available here can be used freely in teaching and/or research, and we simply ask that proper scholarly conventions (including copyright) be observed when citing the material.

Submissions to the editorial board are welcome. In keeping with international academic practices, all submissions will be blind-refereed by at least two recognised scholars in the appropriate field. Asiascape Ops has its own ISSN (International Standard Serial Number) references. Applications for permission to reprint should be directed to the editors.

Inquiries and submissions to the editors: ops@asiascape.net



Young Sook Choi

Electrosonic Autonomy:

Building up Virtual Acoustic Space From Avant-garde Techné to Karaoke Singer

Introduction: Electro-sonic Autonomy

The King of Pop, Elvis Presley, died about thirty years ago, but in a way he still exists today. You can listen to his music any time you want by pressing play; sometimes a DJ remixes his song in a dance-floor-friendly and contemporary version, and you can hear his music on the radio while having a dinner at a restaurant or driving a car.

Where do Elvis's aura and his legendary songs exist? Physically, his aura and songs exist on the surface of magnetic tapes and the track of CDs in form of binary codes. Thus, they are technology. They reside there in technology of electronic music. Thanks to this, music has become free of the reign of space and time of musical performance and can exist by itself everywhere, to be played as an independent object. As Ferruccio Busoni (1907) predicted about the music of the future, music seems to be born free and win its freedom of destiny in the moment. On that point, Walter Benjamin was wrong with his insistence that reproduction would destroy the aura of originality, since all reproduced products still carry its aura, and commercialism packs and sells it.

As technology has become a welcome domain for independent sound objects, 'let them play' has become the key factor of sonic autonomy. As the 'where' of playing music no longer means a concert hall, virtual acoustic spaces have been built up. From gramophone to microchip music today, the clamorous history of electronic music technology has been about building up new virtual acoustic space as an expansion of sonic autonomy, more autonomous power to change our sonic environment.

The idea of sonic autonomy as human will, and the manipulation of the sonic environment for an ideological or cultural purpose, has perennially existed throughout human history. In order to differentiate it from the old sonic autonomy, I would like to call the new one, which is associated with electronic technologies, 'Electro-sonic Autonomy': it comes from a new perception of sound as an object and of empowerment as existing in virtual acoustic spaces.

I will discuss the origin of the concept of electro-sonic autonomy, and initiate further discussion into how the development of electronic music technology as a crucial force has allowed electro-sonic autonomy to evolve with the expansion of virtual acoustic space by looking back at the recent history of technological inventions and several contemporary debates that concern them.

Each topic consists of a key technological invention in terms of electro-sonic autonomy, from magnetic tape recording, the Walkman and earphones, to digitalized equipment and even to karaoke technology. To contribute to the evolution and expansion of the concept of sonic autonomy, their impact on our sonic environment will be discussed together with various rebels such

as avant-garde techné, DIY punk, righteous Plunderphonia, and even the drunken karaoke singer's secret sonic desire.



Music as Techné: Artist-engineer

In a broad historical sense, the concept of electro-sonic autonomy started with the concept of Modernism and its avant-garde artists, and had an especially strong connection with the Soviet Constructivists in the 1920s, who were influenced by Saint-Simonism, a vision of a new society built collectively by artists, engineers, and scientists. As the main manifestation of Modernism is the 'rejection of tradition', there was a spectacle of breaks and flashes in all arts during that period.

Modernism had proposed a new set of art for a new set of social and cultural desires on the way to its new dream world, and artists were fascinated with this violent rejection of any banality, and the dream of constructing a totally new future with utopian disciplines. In this dream, there was an accelerating development of technology that seemed to enable them to create a perfect future. That is why most modernists fantasized and glorified the technology itself with the fetishism of machine. Raymond Williams explains what the emphasis of both Modernism and avant-garde marks:

[...] there is a virtually unprecedented emphasis on the most evident features of a modern urban industrialized world: the city, the machine, speed, space – the creative engineering, construction of a future.¹

The idea of construction had been well established by Rodchenko's slogans for Constructivism. From his slogans, such as 'Construction is the arrangement of elements', 'Like every science, art is a branch of mathemat-

ics', and 'Constructively organized life is more than enchanting and stifling art of magicians', we can see that all breakthroughs of art were basically a combination of art and technology, bringing out the resurrection of a Greek concept: Techné.

As Andreas Huyssen puts, technology played a crucial, if not the crucial, role in the avant-garde's attempt to overcome the bourgeois concept of the art/life dichotomy and rebuild the concept of art in a productive way through the transformation of everyday life. He would go further with an ultimate viewpoint of technology determinism:

No other single factor has influenced the emergence of the new avant-garde art as much as technology, which not only fueled the artists' imagination (dynamism, machine cult, beauty of technics, constructivist, and productivist attitudes), but penetrated to the core of the work itself. The invasion of the very fabric of the art object by technology [...] can be grasped in artistic practices such as collage, assembles, montage and photomontage...²

El Lissitzky also pointed out the radical shift of the art of the Constructivists, which headed towards a new scientific and 'unsentimental' approach to nature by moving away from the sentimental imitation of it, and predicted the great possibility of combining art and technology:

The artist is turning from an imitator into a constructor of the new world of objects. This world will not be built in competition with technology. The paths of art and science have not yet crossed.³

For the moment, all modernist artists were fascinated with the concept of an 'artist-engineer' Sergei Eisenstein's glorification of the progress of montage is an example of such fascination with this concept:

What we need is science, not art. One does not create work, one constructs it with finished parts, like a machine. Montage is a beautiful word: it describes the process of constructing with prepared fragments...⁴

Pioneering musician Edgard Varèse's statement regarding his music, 'As far back as the twenties, I decided to call my music organized sound and myself, not a musician, but "a worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities"', and the first practical electronic instrument 'Theremin' invented by Leon Theremin, which was originally government-sponsored research into proximity sensors, also are on the same lines.

The most noteworthy idea of avant-garde techné is a constant belief in human autonomy associated with technology, which is also invented by human beings. With Utopian elements, they kept consciously building up the images for the spectacle of the perfect future. As Vertov believed, 'I am the Cine-Eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam was created... through montage I create a new, perfect man', there was a strong belief that human power reloaded with technology could construct the perfect world. Taking the negative side of

the meaning of the word 'perfect', however, perfection can only exist in a virtual world, never in reality.

In this respect, with the evolution of electronic technology, music has progressed to expand this virtual acoustic space, and thus the evolution of electro-sonic autonomy. As all avant-garde artists refused the legacy and the tradition, in this virtual acoustic space the very nature of music was also refused and started being forced into a stiflingly radical change. Behind the effects of innovative and artistic experiments by avant-garde techné, the history of virtual acoustic spaces really came into its own with the timely invention of the magnetic tape recorder.

Magnetic Infinity: [re]Production/ [re]Hearing

In 1935, Allgemeine Electricitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG) and I.G. Farben demonstrated the first practical magnetic tape recorder, Magnetophon K1, developed by Badische Anilin und Soda Fabrik (BASF), a division of I.G. Farben. Distinctly different from the 12" disc recorder, which was only for recording live acts, playing and repeating, the tape recorder allowed more possibility for the manipulating of sounds for a specific purpose. It made possible a variable speed of playing, it was reversible, cuttable, and most importantly mixable with any sonic component. Every sound basically became an independent and individual object.

Fascinated with this 'pure sound' enabled by the invention of magnetic recording, Pierre Schaffer established the term 'Musique Concrète', describing a music made by working directly with sounds. Later, this term became the name of certain electronic music combining fragments of natural and industrial sounds together. As he noted the infinite possibility of magnetic tape: 'A few centimeters of magnetic tape can contain a number of different sonorous objects', he assembled various sound objects such as the sound of a train whistle and militaristic voices into his compositional works. It is not just re-productivity, but re-production.

The most stirring issue of the experiments of musique concrète is an expansion of the concept of sound and music, raising the question of what could in fact be heard as music? Through the efforts of musique concrète, any sonic unit, whatever it was: whether played by a violin or just the sound of wind outside a window, came to be qualified as a compositional component. The definition of music encountered a seriously radical shift, and musicians and composers started concerning themselves with the sonic environment. The founder of the Acoustic Ecology Movement, R. Murray, emphasizes the importance of this change: 'This blurring of the edges between music and environmental sounds is the most striking feature of twentieth century music', since music no longer means only classical instrumental sounds.

The tape recorder, as a sampler and even as a percussion instrument (although very basic compared to current digitalized devices), also opened the door to the age of recording studios. Studios no longer exist for recording a perfect live act, but have been reborn, as Brian Eno insists, as 'a compositional tool', with an additive approach to recording in which the performance is no longer the final cut:

Initially tape recording was a single track, all the information contained and already mixed together on that one track. Then in the mid-'50s experiments were starting with stereo, which was not significantly different. [...] Then came three-track recording; it allowed the option of adding another voice or putting a string section on, or something like that. Now this is a significant step, I think; it's the first time it was acknowledged that the performance isn't the finished item, and that the work can be added to in the control room, or in the studio itself. [...] Where you no longer come to the studio with a conception of the finished piece. Instead, you come with actually rather a bare skeleton of the piece, or perhaps with nothing.⁵

One of leading classical pianists, Glenn Gould, also emphasized the repositioned role of the studio with the announcement of his retirement from public performance in 1964. He empowered the studio as a function of archival responsibility that enables a performer to explore the whole version given by composer, as well as post-performance editing to create an ideal performance, which hardly ever exists in live musical events. He also mentioned the autonomy of the 'participant listener' appreciating recording technology. He recognized the exact concept of virtual acoustic space, the only place in which a perfect performance can exist, and its electronically autonomous power:

Let us say, for example, that you enjoy Bruno Walter's performance of the exposition and recapitulation from the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony but incline toward Klemperer's handling of the development section, which employs a notably divergent tempo. [...] With the pitch-speed correlation held in abeyance, you could snip out these measures from the Klemperer edition and splice them into the Walter performance without having the splice produce either an alteration of tempo or a fluctuation of pitch. [...] There is, in fact, nothing to prevent a dedicated connoisseur from acting as his own tape editor and, with these devices, exercising such interpretative predilections as will permit him to create his own ideal performance.⁶

However, thanks to the invention of the tape recorder, flourishing recording studios and the golden age of radio, music came to be everywhere. Different times, different spaces, different situations: as technological determinist McLuhan puts it, 'all music at present'. But, music to whose ears? An issue started arising concerning the modes of listening.

The founder of Musique Concrète, Schaeffer, was extremely positive about this. He insisted this technological change made people aware of variations of listening with the infinity of sonorous possibility contained by a few centimeters of magnetic tape:

Assuming that we limit ourselves to a single recording, we can still read the latter more or less quickly, more or less loudly, or even cut it

into pieces, thereby presenting the listener with several versions of what was originally a unique event.⁷

Brian Eno also focused on one's variable choices for building up one's own acoustic environment in a more particular and sophisticated way. He believed recording technology brought the electro-sonic autonomy to ambient listening to afford listeners a new experience of music and sonic space.

However, Ola Stockfelt pointed out the limitation of Schaeffer's infinite variations with regard to more or less homogeneous cultural aspects. Even though one gets the whole freedom of variable modes of listening, it is not usually an entirely free choice in a given situation because a genre of music, even if it can make an appearance almost anywhere in a form of virtual acoustic space, determines the genre-specific relation between music and listener. He has chosen to call each event of listening in a genre-normative listening adequate listening, to use music as a language in a broader sense, and mentions its ideological aspect:

Adequate listening is, like all languages, always the result of an informal (although sometimes formalized) contract between a greater or smaller group of people, an agreement about the relation of the musical means of expression to this group's picture of the world. Adequate listening is hence always in the broadest sense ideological.⁸

Adorno may well be the most negative analyst of this phenomenon. He claims that 'ordinary listening' has not kept up with technological progress, is archaic compared to ordinary seeing, and indicates the pernicious ideological effects of passive listening, distraction and inattention from the demands of reality, in the context of musical ambience. He locates the origin of passive listening as coming from the commodity created by the promoters of commercialized entertainment, which is appropriate to the commercial purpose: the less the mass discriminates, the greater the possibility of selling cultural commodities indiscriminately. In his opinion, one's sonic autonomy is regressive by being replaced by a mere socio-psychological function. Music today is largely 'social cement', with its consequent mass obedience, either in a 'rhythmic' or 'emotional' manner.

Moving beyond the theorists' arguments, more and more noises, whether pop music or mechanical urban sounds, inevitably came into existence with increased crowdedness, and inversely the value of silence was uncovered. Besides a number of artistic experiments with silence as a compositional component by artists such as John Cage, there arose the issue of the individual right to silence. Finally, in October 1969, the General Assembly of the international Music Council of UNESCO passed a most interesting resolution in terms of everyone's right to silence.

We denounce unanimously the intolerable infringement of individual freedom and of the right of everyone to silence, because of the abusive use, in private and public places, of recorded or broadcast music. We ask the Execu-

tive Committee of the International Music Council to initiate a study from all angles - medical, scientific and juridical - without overlooking its artistic and educational aspects, and with a view to proposing to UNESCO, and to the proper authorities everywhere, measures calculated to put an end to this abuse.⁹

Mark Slouka pointed out how capitalism feeds this hunger, which it itself creates, for silence as its own 'antidote'. He insists that we can find immediate proof of this in any upmarket travel magazine: there we will find exclusive spas advertising the promise of silence - no pagers, no cell phones, just the sounds of lake water lapping. In his opinion, in a capitalist society, the option of silence is a privilege:

Money buys space, and space buys silence; decibels and dollars are inversely proportional. [...] The great advantage that money confers, now I realize, is not silence per se but the option of silence, the privilege of one's own music, of shutting out the seventeen-year-old whose boombox rattles my panes.¹⁰

Following this, more autonomous and alternative suggestions were introduced to prevent outer noise. Whether this is a positive or a negative phenomenon in terms of sonic autonomy, it is a way of building up one's own sonic environment in headspace, and the invention of Sony Walkman and the earphone realized this new set of virtual acoustic space.

Headspace: Micro-narrative Portability



In 1979, the first cassette Walkman TPS-L2 was introduced by Sony. This invention heralded the new way of listening: securing the owner's musical taste and subject-

ing personal selection. Even though it gained a negative reputation for being anti-social, it became ubiquitous in a short period of time, spreading so globally that its brand became the generic name for this kind of product.

The 'participant listener' that Glenn Gould suggested thus became even more of a participant with the invention of the Walkman: an arranger and producer of his own albums, with endless possibilities for customizing personal situations. Pop culture theorist Iain Chambers notes that this 'aural walk' provides a portable soundtrack actively produced for one's daily perambulations, and also considers the Walkman as the acoustic symbol of the modern nomad; partaking of virtual life in the context of nature, not caring where s/he is, but rather what s/he is carrying.

The Walkman is both a mask and masque: a quiet putting into act of localized theatrics. It reveals a significant symbolic gadget for the nomads of modernity, in which music on the move is continually being decontextualised and recontextualised in the inclusive acoustic and symbolic flux of everyday life.¹¹

Iain Chambers also mentions the positive possibilities of building up one's private acoustic narrative as a defense against capitalism's mega sound environment. He even implies that the act of private listening in public spaces could be provocatively political:

Here, as opposed to the discarded "grand narratives" of the city, the Walkman offers the possibility of micro-narrative, a customized story and soundtrack, not merely a space but a place, a site of dwelling. The ingression of such a privatized habitat in public spaces is a disturbing act. Its uncanny quality lies in its deliberate confusion of earlier boundaries, in its provocative appearance "out of place."¹²

With this awareness of the power of the 'micro-narrative', there were those who, wanting to distribute their own music without major record labels and without a commercial purpose, started building up small 'tape labels' backed up by 'cassette culture', which was an idealistic and purely democratic way of making and distributing music that could not appeal to mainstream taste, but satisfied people with specific tastes in common. Even though this DIY cassette movement by a small minority of users, with the popular slogan 'DIY not EMI,' produced on a very humble quality level, the quantities were large due to the ease of creation, and it was a beautifully challenging and ground breaking driver of sonic freshness against 'commodity listening' (Adorno) through conventional channels.

On the other hand, listening to a Walkman through the earphone is a process that involves both focusing only on the sound to which one is listening, and disturbing the infiltration of sound coming from outside. The earphone is like a border bisecting two different sonic environments, as well as an auditory circuit accepting sound directly from this small gadget. Its border and circuit create a specific aural space, the so-called 'headspace'. R. Murray describes the effect of the earphone with a description of what physically happens to 'head-

space' when one listens through it, and explains the reason for its popularity among youngsters as its fully loaded power of sonic autonomy, through which the listener comes to feel like the center of all the sonic environment:

In the headspace of earphone listening, the sounds not only circulate around the listener, they literally seem to emanate from points in the cranium itself, as if the archetypes of the unconscious were in conversation. [...] When sound is conducted directly through the skull of the headphone listener, he is no longer regarding events on the acoustic horizon; no longer is he surrounded by a sphere of moving elements. He is the sphere. He is universe. [...] headphone listening directs the listener towards a new integrity with himself.¹³

However, although the Walkman and earphone delivered an independent sonic space in one's headspace, and provided completely customized labels that outside commercial circulation, the enthusiasm for ultimate sonic autonomy still called for another set of auditory desires: looking for a sound that did not exist in an analogue world. This was made possible by pure digitalized music writing.



100% Plunder: Left Aesthetics

Since the first synthesizer Moog in 1964, electronic instrument technology has blossomed, with the first sampler Mellotron in 1963, the first emulator E-mu systems in 1983, the first MIDI embedded YAMAHA DX-7 in the same year, and, most decisively, the proliferation of personal computing. As electronic music has taken a radical

shift, the concept of sonic autonomy has come into an entirely new territory: Plunderphonics.

As the meaning of 'plunder' implies, plunderphonics became the frame of electronic music purely consisting of existing copyright recording sources. This name was coined by John Oswald with his CD, *Plunderphonic* in 1989, a free give-away to radio stations and for public use. This musical cut-up masterpiece presented innovative and cross-border remixes of Dolly Parton, Michael Jackson, Bing Crosby, Glenn Gould, The Beatles, James Brown and others with its sensational cover featuring a collaged photo of Michael Jackson as a nude woman.

Even though Oswald coined and theorized the concept of Plunderphonics, we can find work to which this aesthetics has been applied long before Oswald's work. In 1961, James Tenney and William S. Burroughs' work, the first cut-up method recording *Collage #1 Blue Suede* arrived. It was a total re-editing of Elvis Presley's hit record *Blue Suede Shoes*, and in 1967 Tenney remixed pop, classical and Asian traditional music together in his later piece *Viet Flakes*. Undoubtedly these practices and its radical cut-up method inspired Oswald to begin his experiments with 'macrosamples'.

At this point, we might wonder about the origin of Plunderphonics, since the concept sounds very similar to the photo-montage progress of *avant-garde techné* in the early twentieth century, *musique concrète*, and more recently John Cage's experimental works. However, Chris Cutler strongly denies this conceptual bridge.

Perhaps this accounts for the curious relationship between the art music world and the new technology which has, from the start, been equivocal or at least highly qualified. [...] why, although many creative innovation in the new medium were indeed made on the fringes of high art, their adoption and the subsequent extension has come typically through other, less ideologically intimidated (or less paradigmatically confused?) musical genres. Old art music paradigms and new technology are simply not able to fit together.¹⁴

When Cutler claims they are unable to fit, this inability of high art to fit comes from the existence of boundaries. As he insists that there is no sense of speaking in terms of high or low, art or popular and that 'where listening and producing, and criticism and creation elide', infinite reproduction, thus infinite possibility without boundaries is the key factor of the aesthetics of Plunderphonics. However, *avant-garde techné* set their works within the realm of art, often associated with a specific ideology, and secured its originality as a property. This is why James Tenney's innovation and Oswald's contributions differ from them, and this is why initial works of *avant-garde* failed to infiltrate the masses.

In an economic sense, Richard Barbrook points out the aspect of high-tech gift economy of this aesthetics. He insists that the passive consumption of fixed pieces of information would become the participatory process of interactive creativity as the 'intellectual commons' in a virtual space, and also mentions the ambiguities within the economics of music-making:

For instance, musicians have long appropriated recordings for DJ-ing, sampling and remixing. The popularity and capabilities of the Net is intensifying these ambiguities within the economics of music-making. The MP3 format doesn't just make the piracy of copyright material much easier. As importantly, the social mores and technical structure of the Net encourages enthusiasts to make their own sounds.¹⁵

Expanding electro-sonic autonomy, this righteous plagiarism has enabled us to recognize any sonic environment to which we are accustomed, or familiar acoustic space, as potentially creatively strange. Cutler points out the key aesthetics of Plunderphonics by saying 'Production is no more than critical consuming: an empirical activity of Pick'n'Mix'. However, plunders' purely digitalized writing of music, creating a totally virtual acoustic sound that could never exist in reality, has often been blocked by the question of 'what is originality?', and the issue of copyright legitimacy naturally followed. As Oswald said, 'If creativity is a field, copyright is a fence', and the unmodified concept of copyright and property has thrown obstacles in the path towards the dream of plunderphonia. With this issue, pioneering Oswald seriously suggested the necessity of a quotation system being established:

Musical language has an extensive repertoire of punctuation devices but nothing equivalent to literature's "" quotation marks. Jazz musicians do not wiggle two fingers of each hand in the air, as lecturers sometimes do, when cross-referencing during their extemporization, as on most instruments this would present some technical difficulties. Without a quotation system, well-intended correspondences cannot be distinguished from plagiarism and fraud.¹⁶

However, Cutler expressed his suspicions concerning the concept of originality itself in the recording age, and considered that all recording sounds are basically 'always the first, always the copy' with no aura, no connection to the present source:

The fact is that, considered as raw material, a recorded sound is technically indiscriminate of source. All recorded sound, as recorded sound, is information of the same quality. A recording of a recording is just a recording. No more, no less. We have to start here. [...] Thus plunderphonics as a practice radically undermines three of the central pillars of the art music paradigm: originality (it deals only with copies), individuality (it speaks only with the voice of others), and copyright (the breaching of which is a condition of its very existence).¹⁷

There is no doubt that it is impossible to apply current copyright legitimacy to this radical aesthetics. Since the current copyright system originated with capitalism, written musical notation is considered as property. Musicologist Kurt Blaukoepfe also pointed out the hackneyed and imperialistic aspect of copyright, saying 'the international conventions governing copyright are based in the Occidental idea of intellectual property'. In this respect,

this is not just plunderphonics' problem, it is also problem for other music cultures not using the Western system for their music, since traditional, non-notated music can be mutilated for commercial use without receiving any compensation.

Any sounds today are indiscriminately transformed into binary code as raw information and musicians play with these codes, usually with no conventional notation. When they build up their own context, even though it consists of 100% plunder, their music is new and fresh and as creative as Warhol's Brillo Boxes and Sherry Levine's re-photographed photographs. Just as Schaeffer dreamed of the sonic infinity of a few centimeters of magnetic tape, plunderphonics is an infinite dream of any slice of recorded sound, a realization of ultimate electro-sonic autonomy.

Sing-along: Fake Aura, 3 minutes' Stardom



Karaoke seems to be beside the point in this framework, as it is usually considered to be trivial. However, in terms of electro-sonic autonomy, karaoke or doing karaoke could be one of most controversial issues of this age, since karaoke space originated with and has evolved through technologically radical invention, which now becomes a global technology with the building up another set of virtual acoustic spaces. Even though criticism concerns its harmfulness to musical sensibility and sees its negative side effects as a 'hotbed of delinquency', karaoke has spread across continents with varying styles of specific singing cultures within local contexts.

Although most people suggest that karaoke started in Kobe in Japan, where a jazz festival is held every year, its origin is still unclear. One legendary story about its origin from a few websites goes that a snack bar owner once put on tapes of accompaniment recordings and encouraged customers to sing when a performer failed to show up due to illness or an unexpected accident. Whatever its origin, karaoke is now a global phenomenon of public musical activity.

Early karaoke was realized with the technology of the cassette tape. The prototype of karaoke was introduced in 1973 with the first ten decks made by Inuoe and his colleagues, which featured a built-in coin timer and microphone mixer with reverb echo mechanism, and the first accompaniment loop tapes they produced were in 12 volumes with forty-eight songs in all. This deck and tapes, a prototype of karaoke, was named 'Crescent Juke', and was regarded as an extension of a juke-box. When this first machine was leased to small bars, it also included was accompanied by handwritten and photostat-copied lyric sheets, usually preserved in a vinyl album to protect them from drinks spilt by drunken

Japanese businessmen. A passage from the novel *Small World* by David Lodge may be the first description in English of a karaoke episode, providing an explicit picture of early karaoke before the introduction of video with CDs.

Persse was encouraged or almost forced to sing a song himself. "I don't wish to sing at all!" Persse protests. "I just came in here for a quiet drink." The Japanese beams toothily and sits down beside him. "But this is karaoke bar." Hesitantly, Persse repeats the word. "Karaoke – what does that mean?" "Literally karaoke means empty orchestra. You see, the barman provides the orchestra," he gestures towards the bar, at the back of which Persse now sees that there is a long shelf of music cassettes and a cassette deck. "And you provide the voice" – he gestures to the microphone. "Oh, I see!" says Persse laughing and slapping his thigh. The Japanese laughs too, and calls something across to his friends, who also laugh. "So which song please?" he says, turning back to Persse.¹⁸

'And you provide the voice' is the key mechanism of karaoke. As in its original meaning, the context of karaoke can never be completed, but remains 'kara', empty, until one provides enthusiastic singing. In this respect, musicologist Toru Mitsui claims that the definition of karaoke in *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words* is not correct.

This machine was described, when the word was selected for inclusion in *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words* (1991: 172), as 'A sound system with prerecorded soundtracks of popular music from which the vocal part has been erased so as to allow an individual to sing along with.' It is incorrect, however, to say that 'the vocal part has been erased', because in fact the vocal part never existed at all in a karaoke recording. This non-existence is the very 'kara-' of karaoke, that is void.¹⁹

The foremost factor of this karaoke machine is the instantaneous selection of a song, more exactly the sound of a virtual backing band for a specific song. In this sense, karaoke is a term of active and autonomous implication. This is why the word karaoke also denotes the activity of singing using a karaoke machine, not only a singing space: associated with cheerful hand-clapping and enforced singing in turn, as an implicit social contract of karaoke.

As the context of karaoke is an imperfection in nature, it demands the users' concentrated passion to complete, and this mechanism means that karaoke is a space of contradiction, with opposing concepts: collectivism (as a member of a collective) and individualism (as a performer to express one's own voice); tension (standing on a stage in front of others and matching one's own voice to that of the stars who are the original singers of the songs) and relaxation (as an entertainment for releasing stress); and a dual role as an generous audience and a give-it-your-best-shot performer.

Despite its sophistication, Man Kong Lum called this the karaoke dilemma, and said that as long as the simple mechanism of 'pick the microphone and provide your voice' remains unchanged, the public's enthusiasm, even addiction, for karaoke will not wane. The size of karaoke industry provides strong evidence to support this prediction. According to Japan Amusement Monthly (January 1995), when it was at a worldwide peak the karaoke business reached annual sales of US\$10 billion, most of which was generated by hardware leasing and copyright accounts. If it is true, the size of the karaoke industry was then approximately one-third of the size of the record industry of Japan in terms of turnover. Recent statistics show its slight decline, but it is still a huge market, and now on a global level. With market forces, relevant technologies also have evolved radically due to investment.

What has been a crucial force behind the whole phenomenon? We can find an important tip for answering this question in Charles Keil's inspiration about karaoke from when he visited Tokyo for the first time. He writes retrospectively that the goal of each singer seems to be a perfect replication of a specific star in a specific style, and also mentioned the humanizing aspect of karaoke, in which people are not afraid to contend with the world's best singers, in the context of a promising audience of close friends or colleagues. Here is a raw sketch of this Western stranger's first impression of the karaoke scene from his field notes:

People really do hold the microphone. They put it very close to the mouth and seem to treasure the moment. Faces work into impassioned expressions. You pour your feelings into it, glancing at the words in the book before you as necessary.²⁰

Being wholly impassioned might come from a certain memory triggered by a certain song, but mostly from the spectacle of the original singer. With the affirmative support of one's collective audience, a nobody can certainly become a somebody: a star for the moment. Even though a critic may cynically remark that this is just vicarious stardom for a humble drinker, there is an uncannily fundamental aura of encouraging your individual expression, mingled with the fame of the moment.

As Adorno insists, reconsidering the culture industry, people want to be deceived more than ever. People want to join this spectacle and be part of it even though it is just an equivocal fake. Singing in public, with a promising, fan-like audience fuelled with alcoholic generosity is a quiet sensational experience. In terms of sonic autonomy, karaoke is a totally virtual acoustic space in which one can utilize the fame of stars, which was created by music industry but can now be made one's own: karaoke technology has evolved to further and further realize this fake aura and everybody's secret desire.

Alongside the evolution of karaoke systems, there has been always a microphone mixer which, as Charles Keil recollects, 'people really do hold'. The microphone is an amplifying technology that distinguishes one's voice from others'. Just as R. Murray claims that the huge noises of our civilization are the result of imperialistic ambitions, mostly territory expansion, and that the amplifier was also invented by an imperialist in order to

dominate others with one's own sound, without a microphone a singer can never be empowered and never occupy the domestic karaoke territory. Moreover, the essential echo system helps the singer to sound much better than their actual singing capability would allow.

The microphone is a symbolic context of representation, which shows on whom we should focus and to whom we should listen, and also has an iconography of the star fantasy in this virtual acoustic space, which implies the image of the professional singer and its public power. In a functional sense, self-amplification itself enables you to sing and make any sound as loudly as you want in an acoustically isolated place. Since ordinary workers sacrifice their own voices in order to harmonize with an organizational voice, it is certainly a sanctioned chance to turn up the volume on an individual's expression, probably in front of a drunken boss who is at that moment just another one of singers.

In 1982, visual karaoke was introduced including videos and laser discs, as well CDs, which gradually replaced cassette tapes. I believe that this invention certainly coincides with appearance of MTV in 1980s, opening up the age of Video Killed the Radio Star, which was the first song ever played by MTV. In actual fact, music videos did not kill the radio star, rather killed the radio and in fact accelerated the star system to make them and their music more expensive. With visual aids such as music videos, the aura of the star became strengthened and more visual. The karaoke system quickly adopted this visualization system to further satisfy the customer's desire for a vicarious stardom, the desire to get as close as possible to the aura of the star. This is why the karaoke system requires the a huge TV screen, even though this is without relevance to the singing function, to provide a better backdrop with video and graphics: a better stage for a singer fully loaded with the aura of stardom in the karaoke space.

Currently, cutting edge technology, called 'virtual reality' karaoke, has gone even further. It allows singers to watch themselves singing on a screen. When you sing, you are captured on a screen: just like a singing star on TV! In addition, you can customize a specific backdrop on a monitor with the touch of a button, and if you want to you can connect with other singing groups in other singing spaces, so that you can see each other singing together, virtually, at the same time. Even though this does not provide the sound of others' singing, it seems enough to share the other singers' joyful fake aura. It certainly raises questions as to whether this is breaking the spectacle of the star system, or still selling it as a media commodity or both.





Conclusion: Against Global Ventriloquism

It could be said that electronic music technology, all through its evolution and clamorous history, has kept trying to realize the freedom of music by creating a new series of virtual acoustic spaces and strengthening the sonic autonomy of musicians and listeners. Despite its contribution, commercialism has all the time infiltrated into this fresh air and polluted the new sonic environment by occupying all dominant positions.

In the USA, by 1969 Americans were listening to about 268,000,000 radios, and as R. Murray claims, modern life has been ventriloquized. The banality of popular music and its annoying repetitive broadcasting from the radios and loudspeakers of commercialized town centres bombards us by its very existence. As Oswald skeptically says, listening to pop music is not a matter of choice and it is impossible to refuse to be a passive recipient:

Although people in general are making more noise than ever before, fewer people are making more of the tonal noise: specially, in music, those with megawatt PAs, triple-platinum sales, and heavy rotation. Difficult to ignore, pointlessly redundant to imitate: how does one not become a passive recipient?²¹

Virtual acoustic spaces, and our electro-sonic autonomy, seem to be unconsciously and consciously losing their original concept through the colonization of commercialism. Music at present is all too frequently a poor selection arranged like the shelves of a mega records shop, with a very similar inventory of recording for headspace, for those whom Oswald calls 'Walkpeople'; the same inventory of hits played by DJs in different clubs on the same night, and a miserable representation of hundreds of drunken Frank Sinatras and John Lennons in karaoke rooms.

Jacques Attali considers that listening to music is listening to all noises, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflective power that is essentially political. By his implication, our political power of sonic autonomy seems today to be regressing. Historically, there has always been a challenge to the dominant conventions of music, such as avant-garde techné, DIY punk, or the techno movement, but all of these challenges and their attraction seem to have disappeared in history or

been absorbed once again into the commercial world again, losing their anti-establishment stance.

Where is our hope against today's global ventriloquism? In a sentimental sense, but nonetheless with fair reason, the answer to this question should be located in our ventriloquized voices, since all matters of sonic autonomy return to the power of the voice. Endless questioning about one's own voice and its identity seems to be the only way to guard against the global macro-voice. When someone asks you, 'So which song please?', you should ask in return, 'Are you sure you have my request?'



References

1. Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, p. 53
2. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, p.9
3. El Lissitzky, quoted in: Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetics: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*, p.133
4. Sergei Eisenstein, quoted in: Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, p. 150
5. Brian Eno, 'The Studio as Compositional Tool', in: Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, p.128
6. Glenn Gould, 'The Prospects of Recording', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.122
7. Pierre Schaeffer, 'Acousmatics', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.79
8. Ola Stockfelt, 'Adequate Modes of Listening', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.92
9. UNESCO 1969, quoted in R. Murray Schafer, 'The Music of the Environment', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.37
10. Mark Slouka, 'Listening for Silence: Notes on the Aural Life', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.45
11. Iain Chambers, 'The Aural Walk', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.99
12. *ibid.*, p. 100
13. R. Murray Schafer, 'The Music of the Environment', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.35
14. Chris Cutler, 'Plunderphonia', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.140-1
15. Richard Barbrook, 'The High-Tech Gift Economy', Hypermedia Research Center of Westminster University, <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-hightechgifteconomy.html>
16. John Oswald, 'Bettered by the Borrower', in: op. cit., (note 5), p.133
17. Chris Cutler, 'Plunderphonia', in: op. cit., (note 5), pp.142-143

18. David Lodge, *Small World*, quoted in Tōru Mitsui, 'The Genesis of Karaoke' in Tōru Mitsui and Shuhei Hosokawa (eds.), *Karaoke around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing*, pp. 291-3
19. Tōru Mitsui, op. cit. (note 18), p. 40
20. Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*, p. 253
21. John Oswald, 'Bettered by the Borrower', in: op.cit. (note 5), p.137

Bibliography

Theodor W. Adorno, with the assistance of George Simpson, 'Popular Music Theory', in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941, IX, 17-48.

Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Routledge, London, 1991.

Jacque Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, translated by Lee Hildreth, Constance Penley, and Andrew Ross, Indiana University Press, 1987.

Richard Barbrook, *The High-Tech Gift Economy*, The Hypermedia Research Center, <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/theory-hightechgifteconomy.html>

Karaoke Kanta <http://www.karaokekanta.net>

Karaoke scene <http://www.karokescene.com>

Kurt Blaukopf, *Musical Life in a Changing Society*, translated by David Marinelli, Amadeus Press, 1982.

Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Continuum, New York/London, 2004.

Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, Macmillan Press, 1986.

Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 1994.

Tōru Mitsui and Shuhei Hosokawa (eds.), *Karaoke around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing*, Routledge, London/New York, 1998.

Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetics: Karl Marx & the Visual Arts*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

L. R. Rutsky, *High Techne: Art and Technology from Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*, University of Minnesota Press; 1st edition, 1999.

Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, Verso, London/New York, 1989.



Established in September 2007, Asiascape.net is the home of the Contemporary East Asian Media Centre (CEAMC). It is an attempt to build a new international research coalition in the rapidly emerging fields of cyberculture (New Media, Convergence Culture, Video Games and other related media, such as fan-culture) and animanga (Anime and Manga), especially as they relate to (or originate from) East Asia.

It is well known that a large proportion of this type of media emerges from the East Asian region (Japan, China and Korea), and Asiascape seeks to sponsor and organize research into the importance of these media as a series of transformative, cutting edge, transnational global commodities, and/or as a series of cultural products that reveal much about East Asia itself.

There is a scattered (and growing) group of international researchers working in this field and, in addition to conducting its own original research, Asiascape aims to provide a hub for the organization and direction of this rapidly emerging field. With an international advisory board of leading scholars, Asiascape will sponsor a series of 'state of the field' conferences and disseminate research using new and old media, including via this website and its associated news-blog, vistas: <http://vistas.asiascape.net>

Asiascape is based at Leiden University and is funded through the generosity of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), Toshiba International Foundation (TIFO) and the Modern East Asia Research Centre (MEARC):

www.mearc.eu.

© 2008, Asiascape.net



Universiteit Leiden

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Young Sook Choi is a PhD student at Kings College, University of London, UK. She can be reached at:

youngsook.choi@kcl.ac.uk

INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD:

Prof Chris Goto-Jones (Leiden University)

Dr Mark Harrison (Westminster University, UK)

Dr Sharon Kinsella (Oxford University, UK)

Prof Tom Lamarre (McGill University, Canada)

Dr Angus Lockyer (SOAS, UK)

Prof Susan Napier (Tufts University, USA)

Prof Ivo Smits (Leiden University, Netherlands)

Prof Takayuki Tatsumi (Keio University, Japan)

Prof Mark Williams (Leeds University, UK)

Submissions

Please send submissions to the editors at: ops@asiascape.net

POSTAL ADDRESS

Asiascape.net,
Modern East Asia Research
Centre, Leiden University,
PO Box 9515,
2300RA, Leiden.
The Netherlands