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Distracting Music

Dylan Robinson

> I deplore 'stunts'. Those tediously meandering compositions that endeavor to distract the listener from the lack of musical content by various gimmicks such as flashing lights and projections! [1]
>
> - Interview with Canadian composer Barbara Pentland
>
> Music in a concert-hall must rely on itself and the perfection of its execution; it is, as it were, under glass.[2]
>
> - Ezra Pound

Barbara Pentland's statement demonstrates a typical modernist distaste for interdisciplinary influence, a tendency representative of the larger modernist project to distill each art form to its purest essence. Pentland here rejects the inclusion of visual elements in concert music performance as a mere strategy to draw the listener's attention away from a lack of compositional skill and toward the sensational and dazzling content of visual disruption. Her statement, moreover, implies that proficient composers should require only the purity of musical content in order to communicate their ideas. To raise the infamous musicological spectre of "the music itself," music is here understood as self-sufficient, then, while the extra-musical elements are relegated to frivolous ornamentation, as "gimmick".

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[1] "Barbara Pentland: a Portrait," Musicanada, no.21 (1969): 8-9.
[2] R Murray Schafer, ed., *Ezra Pound and Music. The Complete Criticism*, (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1977): 82.

Ezra Pound's dictum provides a similar conceptualization of artistic autonomy. Pound's image, however, takes Pentland's case for musical purity a step further, depicting a scene wherein the event of performance itself is secured against outside influence. The latent imagery in Pound's description is suggestive of the stage and musicians behind the glass of a museum display case or a Petrie dish. These controlled and contained environments will, in Pound's conception, allow the listener to objectively evaluate the music they hear. These examples of the ideal concert experience describe situations of 'pure contemplation', in which the listener may examine the musical object in order to pinpoint its essence. Indeed, this idealized (purist) performance aesthetic could be considered an aural microscope, allowing the listener to hear the form and structure to the same degree of detail. The ascetic environment of the concert hall becomes the ideal space for pure contemplation.

This article will focus primarily on the development of autonomous reception across the arts and music, and the associated assumption that the alternative to this pure contemplation, distracted reception, promotes a disengaged attitude toward the work under consideration. The particular conceptualization of distraction in the context of this article contrasts the term's standard characterization as lackadaisical or careless, instead using the term in its capacity for critique of tacitly approved systems of reception as processes for uncovering truth claims. In essence, this article proposes a re-inscription of distracted reception as a foil to directed and authoritarian viewing practices, acting in opposition

to normative, teleological, and structural regimes of contemplation. This article thus purposefully re-deploys distraction as a practice that actively critiques the very assumed values of creative and critical production and reception that it also relies on. In effect, distraction is an act of complication, complicating both the efficiency and primacy of 'clear communication' promoted in formalist and structural listening practices, and objectivist discursive traditions. Ultimately, distraction acts as a method for wresting agential power from the artist in order to increase the agency of the spectator, who thereby is able to engage in reception as a continuous dialectic process of examination in which contradiction and polysemy are embraced instead of eliminated. Related to the Situationist practice of the *dérive*,[3] distraction provides a method to circumvent normative structures for reception, propelling the viewer to enter into self-determined dialogic relationships. The autonomy of pure viewing practices, directed by the spaces of viewing themselves (the petrie dish under the microscope, the glass case of the museum), fetishizes art-as-object and curtails the possibility of reading the event, the syntax of the overall

[3] "One of the basic Situationist practices is the dérive [literally: "drifting"], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." Guy-Ernest Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," *Internationale Situationniste* #2, (1958): 1.

presentation, as a practice of critical inquiry and meta-cognition. Distraction thus promotes perception of the object as part of a system of presentation: the spectator is not only able to contemplate the object, but to read the work as a part of its periphery.

To begin, I will situate distraction in relation to structural listening, the privileged listening regime (and fantasy ideal) for the autonomous contemplation of Western Art music. Despite structural listening's arguable usage in actual listening practices, the discourse that surrounds this practice hangs heavily over both non-specialist and specialist audience engagement, and is reinforced though the physical immobilization of non-embodied listening that takes place in the concert hall. Following my conceptual examination of structural listening, I will examine the larger historical and epistemological contexts of distraction, while paying particularly close attention to early modernist debates surrounding the effects of distracted reception in film and theatre as exemplified by the writings of Walter Benjamin and Bertold Brecht. Though of limited use to my final formulation of *viewer-centered distraction* due to their emphasis on the teleological synthesis of the dialectic, these early modernist writings do provide a useful framework in their description of the 'shock' of distraction; they gesture toward the re-appraisal of juxtaposition, difference, and otherness of context as an important factor in understanding the object itself. Benjamin and Brecht's theorizations of what can be called techniques of *forced distraction*[4] are a direct assault upon

[4] Acknowledgement is given to David Cecchetto for first suggesting the terms forced distraction and viewer-centered

historical theories of distraction constructed not merely a passive form of reception, but condemned as immoral and degenerate behaviour. Benjamin and Brecht thus provide a useful starting point for theorizations of distraction as an effective method to heighten critical awareness and the spectator's engagement with the artwork. Extending these theories further, I will argue that, within the (anti)genre of interdisciplinary performance, of which works by John Cage and R. Murray Schafer will be considered as representative, distracted reception provides a model for viewer-centered interpretation. This paradigm cultivates distraction's value as a state of peripatetic critical inquiry, as a process of creation wherein the viewer participates in an authorial capacity.

Implicit in such a mobilization of reception in distraction is the simplistic construction of current practices of artistic engagement as wholly privileging authoritarian teleological regimes. Though I will begin this article with a survey of the development of these regimes, and end with two artists that critique these through their artistic practices, it is important to clarify that my aims here are not simply to renounce all forms of formalism in analysis and reception, nor to promote distraction as unqualified play. I will also here clarify that I do not of course subscribe to distraction as apathy or dis-engagement. The argument I make here is rather for a (re)engagement with distraction as a model of deconstructive

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distraction in response to the first presentation of this research, to clarify the distinction between these modes of engagement.

reception (and listening in particular).[5] Distraction, as argued in this paper, is thus itself a form of attention, though in contradistinction to what has become the commonly held understanding of 'attention' in normative listening and viewing practices. The point, then, is not to present distraction as the binary opposite of attention, but rather to draw out the ways in which the two are co-implicated in one another. Thus distraction is always attention, and attention always distraction.

Autonomous Listening, or 'Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain'

Despite some very recent attempts to move music performance into site-specific contexts,[6] alternative formats for engaged or close listening remain under-implemented in performance and almost completely un-theorized in research. Although a great deal of recent musicology, most notably Lydia Goehr's *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works,* has critiqued the concept of the autonomous musical 'work,' within the realm of performance itself the dominant tradition of structural listening continues to dominate the curriculum of Western Art Music education, and is a strong indication that this

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[5] Though not developed in this paper, my broader intention with this line of research is to provoke dialogue on what modes of perception formalist approaches "in distraction" might engender.

[6] The Canadian Music Centre's *New Music in New Places*, in operation in cities across Canada since 2003, is one such program that seeks to challenge the dominant paradigm wherein the audience is immobilized in the concert hall.

autonomy of the musical object is still upheld in contexts of musical practice.[7] Rose Rosengard Subotnick describes the development of structural listening in the writings of Adorno, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky as the aural recognition of musical structure from which one apprehends musical unity as musical meaning. As the imaginary real-time aural equivalent of formalist analysis, Subotnick shows how structural listening has often been privileged in musicological discourse as the ideal strategy for comprehending the unity of a musical work. In this paradigm, the structural development of a compositional idea operates as an organic metaphor that guarantees greatness under a transcendental rubric regarding the perfection of its autotelic ineffability. Thus, the work's organicism, represented through its unified systems and structural integrity, becomes the essence of 'musical meaning', obviating an understanding of the work's multiple social contexts and extra-musical significances. Despite Adorno and Schoenberg's claims that structural listening entails a heightened engagement with the work, Subotnick suggests that it may actually reinforce passive listening, as it is based in a reception strategy of type recognition. This is to say that structural listening, in its emphasis on acknowledging works as instances of, or clever deviations from 'masterstyles', plays a game of matching works to what they exemplify generically or stylistically. Such a

[7] Goehr traces the emergence of the concept of the autonomous 'work' of music as an object conceived by composers in the eighteenth century. Composers began to consider their compositions discrete, perfectly formed, and completed products.

practice is unmistakably apparent in program notes, for example, which clearly align the trajectories of the works in relation to style, genre, or historical period. The value of structural listening is thus its ability to aid listeners in recognizing how a work demonstrates a specific form in its various levels of structural development, rather than reflecting on the work as part of the broader intertextual network it exists within. Moreover, as in other spaces for autonomous reception, including the white cube of the gallery, the space itself blinds the subject toward all matter extraneous to the object of contemplation itself; the illuminated stage and darkened periphery here act as an obvious metaphor of concealing the presentation apparatus. Not only, then, does structural listening elide the broader social and cultural contexts of music, but it's dominance is reinforced by the actual situation of the work's presentation in which the contextual elements of the event are eliminated from the field of perception. While there is indeed much writing on the eighteenth century reception practices wherein music and theatre were only a small part of a larger event, the tendency of these writings is to whimsically dismiss disbursed listening. These traditions, in which the music alternates between foreground and background to social activities, are viewed as antiquated remnants of the past, before the birth of the modern listener.[8] True listening, according to these writings, does not occur in situations where the attention is divided. Disbursed attention is equivocated to inattention.

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[8] J.H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris, A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford, 1992).

The general mistrust of distraction's polyvalent nature also spills over into the often-encountered aesthetic response from those not trained as expert structural listeners. The statement of frustration, that one doesn't 'get it', frequently made in response to anti-teleological contemporary works, is revealing not so much as a comment on the difficulty of these works' accessibility, but is instead indicative of the myth of understanding a singular 'it' as the ideal outcome of an aesthetic experience. Shifting the discourse of distraction from its current connotations of inattention, to a polyvalent, de-centered method of reception allows us to re-conceptualize reception from a goal-oriented search for understanding a product (disrupting the flow of information as stable commodity) to an understanding of reception as a continual process. This process then feeds back to reconstitute the viewer as de-centered, implicated in the becoming of the work.

The Threat of Distracted Viewing

It is difficult to consider distraction as a positive framework for contemplation. Why should we want to introduce something into our processes for reflection that threatens the clarity of perception?

Everyday sight, as described by James Elkins, is already naturally:

> …irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious. Our eyes are not ours to command; they roam where they will and then tell us they have only been where we have sent them. No matter how hard we look, we see very little of what we look at. ... Seeing is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love. It is entangled in the passions, jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and it is soaked in affect, in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain.[9]

The development of the Gaze then, according to interdisciplinary scholar Norman Bryson, can also be understood as a coping mechanism that develops in response to the unrestrained process of the distracted Glance. Unlike the focus of the Gaze, with its promise of reliable information,

> The flickering, ungovernable mobility of the Glance strikes at the very root of rationalism…unable to participate in the unitary mysteries of reason, the Glance is relegated to the category of the profane, of that which is outside the temple. Before the geometric order of pictorial composition, the Glance finds itself marginalized…Against the Gaze, the Glance proposes desire, proposes the body…[10]

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[9] James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: on the Nature of Seeing*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996): 11.
[10] Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of The Gaze*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983): 121.

Against the scopic regimes of the Gaze represented by the disembodied 'eye' of Cartesian Perspectivalism, the distracted Glance, then provides an alternative:

> To dissolve the Gaze that returns the body to itself in medusal form, we must willingly enter into the partial blindness of the Glance and dispense with the conception of form as con-sideration, as Arrest, and try to conceive of form instead in dynamic terms, as matter in process…[11]

Norman Bryson's call to action, against Descartes' presentation of vision as a capturing device for knowledge acquisition, proposes a more process-oriented visual mobility. He urges us to consider the poly-scopic practice of the Glance that correspondingly results in polysemic interpretation. The distracted quality of the Glance should not, however, be equated with unengaged reception. This is perhaps the most important point I would like to make in my introduction to distraction: I do not suggest we adopt reception practices that reject rigorous reflection, but indeed that distracted reception can act as such a form precisely through its suspension of form itself. Distraction thus performs a relational troubling of the limited formalist-based procedures for purposeful reception that are privileged in institutional and pedagogical frameworks. In its state of constant suspension, distraction undermines the established notion of rigour itself precisely by insisting on rigour as an active form of relation; as a 'rigouring'. In contemporary society, where, as Richard Schusterman

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[11] Bryson, 131.

writes, "art increasingly [has come] to function as a locus for our habits of sacrilization,"[12] to embrace distraction then also implicitly entails moral judgment wherein the rejection of pure contemplation becomes immoral. The threat of distraction thus becomes the threat of elements that lead the viewer astray from the word of the author-god. Here one is reminded of the rules of sacred music, wherein ornamentation, harmonic innovation, and other generic deviation (as distraction) were disallowed for these very reasons. Art historian and founding member of the Art and Language Group Charles Harrison describes how the 'proper proceeding' for the modernist concept of 'beholding' in gallery space "was to stand before the work of art, passive, alert and dis-engaged from all interests and preoccupations."[13] Harrison relates how this method engendered "a kind of formality or closure within Abstractionist discourse, functioning much like the notion of 'seeing the light' in the discourse of a religious believer."[14] As similarly noted by Christopher Small and Leon Botstein, the role of the concert hall has, for the general public, replaced the role of the church, where spiritual edification is received within the silent space of contemplation.[15] Here the composer-god is revered; the metonymy in

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[12] Richard Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43, 3 (July 2003): 13.
[13] Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991): 154.
[14] Ibid., 35.
[15] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening,* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998); Leon Botstein, "The Audience," *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 83, 4 (Winter 1999): 479-486.

hearing 'Mozart', becomes hearing the word of Mozart.

Historical Contexts of Attention and Distraction

As articulated by Rousseau, "all the fine arts have some unity of object, a source of pleasure they give to the mind: for the attention divided settles nowhere, and when two objects occupy us, it is proof that neither of them satisfy us."[16] This statement is reminiscent of the familiar axiom that great works of art transfix the beholder in a sublime state. It logically follows that the art that promotes distraction is not successful because it does not possess sufficient presence to provoke a meaningful or pleasurable reaction in the viewer. As earlier demonstrated by Pentland's admonitions, distraction is a result of art that lacks coherence. Distraction is here portrayed as the terminus to artistic experience; as soon as the viewer's contemplative state is broken, the meaningful interaction with the work is terminated. Distraction is thus condemned, as it precludes the spectator from properly assessing the singular truth of a work. Reception is positioned as an autonomous act in which the viewer avoids meta-cognitive inter-perceptiveness between content and context.

The beginnings of this fixed viewing practice can be located in the development of perspective in Alberti's treatise *Della Pittura* of 1436. As Norman Bryson notes, prior to the development of perspective

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[16] Jean-Jacuqes Rouseau, quoted in Matthew Riley, *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment*, (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2004): 48.

"…the construction of the viewing subject is in fact multiply determined; the desired homophony devolves into the polyphonic zigzag of voices mutually out of phase."[17] Thus, pre-Albertian painting condenses multiple viewer vantage points within the same work. Reacting against painters who "…fail to practice composition, and instead scatter everything about in a confused and haphazard fashion, so that the narrative seems rather to be disordered, than enacted,"[18] Alberti formulated a method which enabled the painter to "locate and measure in perspective all the figures and objects in his picture, which would then appear to the spectator placed at the predetermined viewpoint as a real scene."[19] This statement also understands the epistemology of painting as an act of locating and measuring through fixed perspective. Although writers sometimes also discuss this tradition of positioning the viewer as if s/he was looking out of a window, it is equally apparent that the perspective that the viewer participates in is also that of the painter who records the scene. The viewer is directed by the painting. Consequently, once the viewer stands in the place of the painter, s/he can then retrieve the painter's perspective. The fixed position of the viewer can be correlated with the single statement the viewer is meant to discern from the work.

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[17] Bryson, 102.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Harold Osborne, "Perspective, 7. The perspective constructions of Brunelleschi and Alberti," in *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*. Ed. Hugh Brigstocke. Oxford University Press, 2001, available at Grove Art Online, http://www.groveart.com/ Oxford University Press, 2005, accessed on 28 January, 2006.

The etymology of the word distraction can be traced to the latin *distractus*, past participle of *distrahere*, to "draw in different directions," from *dis*-, "away" and *trahere*, "to draw." Although neither of the definitions "to draw in different directions" or "to pull apart,"[20] suggest any particular valuative judgment, the word has, through the years, come to acquire many negative connotations. Firstly, as a noun it implies frivolous pleasure. Here one may think of seventeenth century French *divertissement* and the later *divertimenti*, both forms of 'table music' or background music that provide a pleasing diversion to a main event. These forms reflect the social function that music played in gatherings where it was customary to let one's attention move between conversation, eating, listening, and even singing along with (or sometimes against) the music. Similarly, the sense of distraction as light entertainment is also reflected in Brecht's description of the German word *Zerstreuung*. Although the term has a similar etymology to distraction, with *streuung* meaning to scatter or spread, Brecht defines it as a passive form of viewing for the "sated class".[21] Secondly, the term distraction suggests a potentially hazardous action (such as when driving a car) or a vice such as laziness. As noted by William Bogard, distraction is also a threat to the social

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[20] William Bogard, "Distraction and Digital Culture," available at http://ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=131, accessed on 22 March 2004.

[21] Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," *Boundary 2*, 30, 1 (2003): 51.

control desired by institutions:

> In Catholic theology, for example, a world without distraction is one where nothing disturbs one's prayers to God – distractions, such as uncontrolled or impure thoughts, are a sign of man's imperfection and inherent sinfulness. For bureaucracy, it is a world of dutiful, law-abiding, on-time citizens; for the school, a classroom of focused and docile students; for Capital, a shop of committed workers.[22]

Distraction, as opposed to these forms of control, provides a site of resistance.

Nineteenth century writings in psychology demonstrate how what was taken to be distraction's binary opposite, attention, became the moral standard by which proper contemplation was judged. The late nineteenth century psychologist Max Nordau thus links degenerate behaviors with distraction:

> Untended and unrestrained by attention, the brain activity of the degenerate and hysterical is capricious and without aim or purpose. Through the unrestricted play of association, representations are called into consciousness and run riot there. Weakness or want of attention produces, then, in the first place false judgments respecting the objective universe, respecting the qualities of things and their relations to each other. Consciousness acquires a distorted and blurred view of the external world…Culture and command over the powers of nature are solely the result of [focused] attention; all errors the consequence of defective attention.[23]

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[22] Bogard, http://ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=131 accessed 5 December 2005

[23] Max Nordau, quoted in Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999): 17.

This quote, taken from Nordau's 1892 book *Degeneration* paints a clear portrait of normative attentive behaviour in the nineteenth century. It presents distraction as an intellectual deficiency, as a symptom of illness, or, as Théodule Ribot claims, of cultural inferiority.[24]

As early as Descartes' writings on attention as the key to "intellectual illumination [that] brings our ideas out of obscurity", focused perception, in the tradition of Cartesian Perspectivalism, has been aligned with moral standards and the precision and clarity of knowledge.[25] These claims are difficult to dispute, as it is commonly assumed that attention (here used in its commonly misconstrued form as a combination of time and energy spent) applied to study most often results in some form of appreciation of the work in question; however, in relation to the understanding of distraction as an unacceptable or immoral model of reception within the positivist paradigm, the concept should be analyzed as a viable form of artistic reception. As a mode of critical reception and inter-perceptiveness, distraction is a tool that compliments other forms of artistic reception through the very process of undermining them; the constitution of the 'appreciation' that is gained through the (traditional) concept of attention is itself attended to through the mobilization of distraction. Again, then, I posit a definition of

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[24] Crary notes that Ribot *Psychologie de L'Attention* (1889) was a primary source for Nordau's *Degeneration*. In *Psychologie de L'Attention* Ribot classifies distraction as the characteristic of "children, prostitutes, savages, vagabonds and South Americans," 35.

[25] Riley, 11.

distracted reception that promotes moving between, as an inter-perceptive mode that de-privileges hierarchical, autonomous, and teleological regimes of reception. Even further, I posit distraction as the very foundation (sic) that interdisciplinary scholarship is built upon.

Techniques of *Forced Distraction*

Although the response to distraction has been historically linked to a lack of control over one's perceptual abilities, Benjamin and Brecht argue (against prevailing modernist attitudes) for distraction as a positive method of heightening perception and increasing engagement. These methods are what could be called methods of forced distraction: distraction used as a structuring device to provoke the viewer into adopting a critical attitude to the work at moments of jarring juxtaposition.

In Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", the concept of 'reception in distraction' is treated not only as a method of appreciating cinema, but also as a defining feature of modern society. As Frederic Schwartz describes,

> Benjamin defines distraction by contrasting it with the immersion of traditional aesthetic contemplation; he sees the latter as passive and the former, in its dispersal of attention, characteristic of the cognitive state of the competent, experienced practitioner of a trade or profession.[26]

[26] Schwartz, 420.

Coinciding with the constant barrage of advertising images, the fast-paced nature of city life and the rapid transitions of mass media, Benjamin presents distraction as a form of perception demonstrated most clearly in cinema's use of montage, the technique by which a single pictorial composition is made by juxtaposing several sequences. In film, Benjamin reasons, "reception in distraction" finds its true training ground because of its suitability for capturing the fast-paced essence of modern life.

Benjamin continues his essay with a critique of the French writer Georges Duhamel, who expresses anxiety that the cinema is:

> …a pastime for helots, a diversion for uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries…a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence…which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a 'star' in Los Angeles…[27]

Like Descartes, Duhamel assumes that while the masses seek distraction, pure concentration is an essential requirement in order for the spectator to appreciate the full message of a work. Moreover, Duhamel treats the genre of cinema itself as a distraction, as a frivolous activity opposed to the serious act of artistic contemplation. Cinema, as distracting entertainment, is built from an array of

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[27] Duhamel, quoted in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hanna Arendt, ed. *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968): 239.

distractions used in montage. Since cinema promotes viewing a quick succession of visually pleasing images that interrupt each other, the viewer does not need to engage in the artistic act of contemplation. His argument presupposes that for the work to be of value, the viewer needs to engage with it in a focused and uninterrupted meditation. A later quote reveals Duhamel's reaction to the futility in contemplating cinema, for as soon as his eye has grasped a scene it is already changed: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images."[28]

To counter Duhamel's distaste for the shock effect of the film, Benjamin argues that montage instead creates a heightened presence of mind *through* distraction. The moment of shock, or interruption of one image by another causes the viewer to fuse together the two meanings into a single reading. Benjamin thus argues that distraction through montage from one image to another results in a dialectical transformation and a more complex engagement with the work as a whole. Notwithstanding Benjamin's thesis, it is important for us to distinguish between the uses of montage in specific works as well as to place the reception of montage in a historical context. As with any utterance, the speed and intensity of the material (in this case the juxtaposed film clips) determines the legibility of the language. Moreover, whereas a greater intensity of montage is legible now, the inceptive stage of montage's development was more similar to the point at which one tries to understand a full conversation of

[28] Duhamel, 238.

a language they are just learning. The reactionary critiques of Duhamel and Kracauer should ultimately be read in this light.

What further complicates Benjamin's theorization of distraction is the inconsistency of a second characterization of the concept.[29] Later in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin discusses the concept of distracted viewing as similar to the *tactile appropriation* that occurs in the reception of architecture:

> Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception - or rather, by touch and sight…the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.[30]

The viewer, in effect, understands the work through embodied reception, though passing through the art/architecture and contemplating and exploring its form through experience of attentive distraction. In viewing film, Benjamin reasons that the viewer develops a kind of virtual tactile appropriation in response to the sensuous and overwhelming nature of

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[29] As further noted by Howard Eiland in his discussion of Benjamin and distraction, due to a simultaneously "positive" and "negative" attitude toward the concept, a clear understanding remains particularly elusive. Although, as with the meta-conceptual aspect of Benjamin's *Arcades*, it could be argued that the lack of continuity mimics the concept of distraction itself.

[30] Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hanna Arendt, ed. *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968): 240.

the form. In this, Benjamin calls to mind the previously discussed critique of beholding and of Duchamp's rejection of the retinal effect of painting in favour of activating critical thinking in his presentation of 'undecidable' situations and objects. Although we may critique the power of film to create the jarring disjunctions that provoke the viewer into critical reflection in the current shock-centered violence of movies today, in the historical context of the early 1930s this technique would have had a much different effect. It is clear from both of Benjamin's essays that the new role of the viewer was to be that of an examiner, a role also advocated by Bertold Brecht.

This new role of the audience member as an examiner is reflected in the didactic potential of art that is a consistent theme in the writings and Epic Theatre creations of Bertold Brecht. In Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt,* loosely translated as alienation effect, but also referred to as defamiliarization, distanciation and 'making strange', the sudden interruption of the narrative with non-naturalistic elements such as song, placards, and gestures promotes conscious reflection through breaks in the realism of narrative. Like montage, the interruption of the image with another causes the viewer to step back from viewing the work as a pleasing entertainment and adopt a more critical stance to the fractured moment of abstraction. As

Howard Eiland notes:

> Whether by means of sudden intervention of song, the use of caption, or what Brecht calls the gestic conventions of the actors, the interruption of sequences creates gaps that undermine the audience's illusion of a 'world' on the stage and make room for critical reflection…it brings the action to a halt, occasioning surprise, and hence compels the spectator to adopt an attitude toward the situation in question.[31]

Through this technique, Brecht sought a kind of reception in which the audience would experience discovery through alienation, though the shock of otherness. Rather than soothing or warming the audience, the 'alienation effect' defamiliarizes ordinary actions and objects and consequently promotes contemplation through distraction from realism. In Brecht's writings he describes this break in narrativity as a type of distraction with a pedagogic function, promoting critical reflection. The alienation effect has the ability to counteract "the 'witchcraft' (*Magie*), the 'hypnosis,' 'the fog,' the state of trance induced in spectators of bourgeois theatre – a state which Brecht compares to that of "sleepers dreaming restlessly with their eyes open."[32] Brecht viewed his technique of distraction as a positive method able to enhance the didactic nature of theatre. Again to historically contextualize this practice, we must make note that, as with the effect of film montage, Brecht's alienation technique would also have had greater currency in its time. Since the inclusion of non-narrative or absurdist

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[31] Eiland, 53.
[32] Ibid., 34.

elements of contemporary theatre is more commonplace, an audience member may not be distracted at all when an 'out of place' element is introduced into a performance. The overall success of *Verfremdungseffekt* as distraction is dependent on the preceding seamlessness of the work. The audience needs to be enrapt before this rapture can be broken.

Unlike Wagner's conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where the arts are unified in service of developing the dramatic narrative, Brecht promotes the radical separation of artistic elements so that they can be used as tools to break the narrative. This idea of disparate media working in conjunction, or what Sergei Eisenstein would later call 'polyphonic montage' is here understood as an attempt to create a system in which all the elements would be equal, as if each were functioning as a circus attraction, contributing to the whole. In his 1923 essay on theatre, "The Montage of Attractions," Eisenstein proposed a system of 'attractions' – aggressive actions in the presentation of a theatrical work – that subjected the audience "to emotional or psychological influence… calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator," an idea that Eisenstein relates to the model of Grand Guignol and the traditional circus.[33] Eisenstein's metaphor of circus attractions as polyphonic montage is somewhat misleading, however, for circus attractions are often experienced as discrete events within a larger whole, and within this structure it is the viewer, not the artist, who ultimately determines how these events are enjoined. More importantly, the spectator of

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[33] Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," in Richard Taylor ed., *The Eisenstein Reader*, (London, BFI, 1998): 30.

attractions at a circus-fair is less likely to experience distraction as an abrupt confrontation, or an instance of alienation or shock that leads to a heightened critical reflection toward a *particular* end. In experiencing a circus, attention is engaged in the 'flow' of distraction rather than punctured by artist-dictated montage. Thus, the carnival experience of viewer-centered distraction is more likely to function as a method whereby the spectator is unceremoniously distracted by the proximity of simultaneous events; the spectator allows him/herself to move freely though the artwork, using distraction as a sorting machine to gather meaning. As Umberto Eco would argue, the alienation effect and montage, as conceived by Brecht and Eisenstein, are techniques of the 'closed' artwork, while viewer-centered distraction techniques belong to the 'open' work as a perpetual mobile.

Viewer-Centered Distraction

> The distracted mind, more susceptible to external influence, no longer addresses the world in terms of its own subjective concerns, but now is capable of a more dialogic, less authoritarian, engagement with the world.[34]

Montage and the alienation effect, as techniques of author-controlled distraction, operate as structural devices in the writings of Benjamin and in Brecht's

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[34] Kathy Walker, *Dreaming, Working, Mourning: The Role of Teleology in Early Twentieth Century Marxis,* available at http://www.yorku.ca/jspot/5/kwalker.htm, accessed 28 May 2006.

Epic Theatre practice. In contrast with this kind of artist-planned distraction is that of viewer-centered, chance-determined distraction models advocated by John Cage and R. Murray Schafer. Cage and Schafer present us with theorizations of distracted reception that allow for spectatorial freedom to create the macro-structure of the work, while the artist retains control over the micro-structure. Cage's *Musicircuses* and R. Murray Schafer's *The Greatest Show* present clear examples of aleatoric, chance-based methods for viewer-centered distracted reception.

Cage's early happenings and events with Kaprow, Rauschenberg and Cunningham at The Black Mountain College in the 1950's eventually led to the development of his first *Musicircus*, first performed at the University of Illinois in 1967. Without providing scores or other performance instructions, he invited artists, musicians and performers to simultaneously present their works within the same space, while the audience was free to move throughout the space at their leisure. Cage intended that these works have "no unique sonoric source, or for that matter, any aesthetic element…privileged over another."[35] The individual music works within the *Musicircus* were dispersed in random order; string quartets playing in administrative offices and sitar players, pianists, and harmonica players within hallways. Despite Cage's acknowledged preference that the spectator create the links between the music and find the meaning within the chaos, the very opposite of this would frequently occur. Jazz musicians in particular, with many years of

[35] Simon Shaw-Miller, *Visible Deeds of Music: Art and Music from Wagner to Cage*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 12.

training in improvisation would naturally begin to respond to and join together the various pieces around them.

The collaborative role in the *Musicircuses* was also extended to the spectator. Cage created the *Musicircuses* to generate a field in which the spectator was required to use distraction as a tool to "make an individual whole"[36] from the materials s/he was presented with. Cage believed that the mere presentation of simultaneous sound events would motivate the spectator to devise individual meaning of the work instead of responding with frustration. Indeed, the results of the work, documented by Charles Junkerman in "'nEw / foRms of living together': The Model of the *Musicircus*" and following a presentation in Chicago in 2003 show an overwhelming positive reaction to the open form of audience-determined interpretation;[37] however, in analyzing the reception of these recent performances it should also be noted that Cage's status might significantly have influenced the legitimacy of the process. Furthermore, at the Stanford presentation in 1992,[38] it is necessary to take into account that the audience was engaging with the presentation within the walls of highly respected academic institution, and in proximity to Cage's own performance of *Muoyce*.

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[36] Shaw-Miller, 12.

[37] Charles Junkerman, "'nEw / foRms of living together': The Model of the Musicircus," in *John Cage*: *Composed in America*. Perloff, Marjorie and Charles Junkerman, eds., (Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); http://musicircus.chicagocomposers.org/, accessed 21 April 2006.

[38] The performance was designed as part of Stanford's Department of Music's 50th year anniversary celebration.

These factors would add an even greater legitimacy to both the macro- and micro-events of the *Musicircus* and thus influence the degree to which one would approach work with the intent of vigorous examination.

No such atmosphere of reverence is apparent in R. Murray Schafer's *Patria 3: The Greatest Show*, devised as a village fair to be held in a large outdoor space. Influenced by Marinetti's "Variety Theatre" written in 1913, Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and Cage's ideas of simultaneity and audience participation, the composer R. Murray Schafer began to conceive of what he came to call the *Theatre of Confluence*:

> …a transformable environment like a circus…I would call such an arrangement *a form of possibilities*. By rearranging some of the time and space zoning, by allowing improvised blocks to modulate within a highly organized whole, a theatre would be created that would be truly a 'theatre of first nights only.'[39]

Schafer's *The Greatest Show* is just such an attempt. The setting of the performance is outdoors at night where a network of booths, towers, tents and kiosks is grouped about like at a small-town fair. The other performance areas include a large stage, called the Odditorium, at which the show opens and closes, and three large coloured tents called the Rose Theatre, the Blue Theatre, and the Purple Theatre. These venues contained "restricted shows", so-called because one cannot obtain entry with normal coupons but must win entry by playing a game or participating in other

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[39] R. Murray Schafer, *Patria and The Theatre of Confluence*, (Indian River, Ont.: Arcana Editions, 1991): 40.

activities offering tickets as prizes. There is even a University Theatre where professors discuss the significance of Schafer's other *Patria* works before a single bench seating four people at most, as a parody of the nature of musicological discourse. Schafer's overarching image for all of these areas is the maze:

> One feels at the epicentre of a great and uneven disturbance of colours, noise and music erupting everywhere throughout the grounds. Yes, all this is similar to walking down a busy street in one of the more cockeyed towns of the modern world. Both are colourful, simultaneous and haptic. But the fair is not contoured for quick passage. It leads you out in all directions and holds you back at the same time; it demands participation.[40]

Moreover, *The Greatest Show* represents a retrospective of the artistic issues that Schafer had been reflecting upon until 1986. The performance is a collage of Schaferian ideology: his beliefs of the role of music to stimulate community-based interaction, thoughts on Canadian identity, on the soundscape and the neglected art of listening, an amalgamation of performances of works form his *Patria* cycle, his thoughts on opera, and the theories of C.J. Jung. The show also creates a meta-structure wherein his earlier Patria works are deconstructed, "literally pulverized to pieces, shaken down scene by scene and action by

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[40] This description of this work is taken from Schafer's notes found on Jerrard and Diana Smith's costume, set and mask design webpage: *The Greatest Show: Site-specific The search for a Location* available at http://www.patria.org/pdp/ORDER/SSGS.HTM, accessed 5 December 2005.

action until only the siftings remain."[41] As further described by Schafer:

> Here is a very special ritual - completely without a sense of striving, and promising no rewards. You wandered about amused and amazed, never sure whether you were there to be entertained or entertaining - for the moment you won a balloon or lost your money while upside down on a sky ride, you became an actor, watched by others and excited by their watching.[42]

Later, Schafer restates that the work "the hooks, yanks, lunges, and thrusts of the hawkers and hucksters make *you the centre of attention.*"[43] Finally, Thom Sokolosky, the director of the Peterborough festival production in 1988, describes how "the performer should understand that it is the spectator who becomes the surrogate hero or heroine [or victim] once the volunteer hero and heroine have disappeared and been chopped up respectively during the opening unit.[44] Of note in these statements is Schafer's intent to redirect the audience's attention away from the performance of the work and toward the roles they are playing within the ritual. Thus Schafer's practice approaches the meta-cognitive aspect of distraction earlier discussed. Instead of a singular focus on music as object, the listener is urged

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[41] Schafer, *Patria and The Theatre of Confluence*, 121.
[42] Ibid., 122.
[43] http://www.patria.org/pdp/ORDER/SSGS.HTM, Schafer's emphasis, accessed 5 December 2005.
[44] Schafer, *Patria and The Theatre of Confluence*, 129.

to move between mobile sound sources:

> The real musical interest of *The Greatest Show*, its final excitement and satisfaction, is not to be found in the individual attractions, but in the interaction between them, the interstices, the sound spill, the cross-talk – what one hears peripherally as much as directly.[45]

The Greatest Show envisions the listener as a *flâneur* who enjoins the 'pulverized pieces' of *Patria*, and indeed creates meaning through a kind of interstitial listening.

The Greatest Show can also be understood as a variation on Sergei Eisenstein's concept of montage as "circus of attraction" actualized as interdisciplinary performance. *The Greatest Show* is a clearly developed form of Schafer's *Theatre of Confluence,* in which "all the arts are fused together, but without negating the strong and healthy character of each other."[46] Drawn from the metaphor of tributaries flowing into a river, the idea relates to my definition of viewer-centered distraction, in which attention flows from one tributary into another, gradually swelling with the meaning of the larger whole. Attention flows from one thing to the next and is "not forced, but nevertheless inevitable."[47] Opposed to the uncontrolled sensory overload he felt Cage's *Musicircuses* engaged in, Schafer wanted the audience to be able to experience each module in a "discrete act of discernment." Schafer's interdisciplinary works are a direct response to what he perceived as the "messy excretions" of happenings and 'mixed media' works he criticizes as an "intra-psychic 'trip' [that] is

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[45] Schafer, *Patria and The Theatre of Confluence*, 130

[46] Ibid., 27.

[47] Ibid., 28.

no more a work of art than a trip to the dentist."[48] Although Schafer felt that "chance promotes new modes of perceiving…[and] delight in the unexpected,"[49] he also believed that a balance was necessary between total chance and total control. Schafer's devising practice for this work, and others, what he terms *form of possibilities*, consists of mediated, loosely structured modules that are, in themselves, chance based. *The Greatest Show* is an attempt for confluent relationship between control and indeterminacy. Just as "one understands nothing when one is totally involved," the audience of *The Greatest Show* is given opportunities to move between states of participation and contemplation. Continuing Schafer's metaphor of confluence, at times the spectator's attention moves with the gentle flow of a brook, at other times it is swept away by the intensity of the rapids.

These works of Schafer and Cage provide models that allow the viewer to explore the space that they share with the work, a space wherein distraction becomes the method by which the viewer creates a whole from the parts. Unlike a concert hall where these interdisciplinary works would be presented in a highly contained environment in which they are to be observed from a fixed perspective, the fluid forms of circus and installation create a space for an embodied viewer, a terrain in which the listener can move between fragments (and where the fragments move between listeners). The practices integrate the simultaneity of concepts and structures that, like distraction, pull the viewer's attention between layers

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[48] Schafer, *Patria and The Theatre of Confluence*, 29.
[49] Ibid., 32.

because these layers are themselves always in a state of in-between; they are properly a 'layering'. The *micropolyhony* of a work, to re-appropriate the composer Gyorgi Ligeti's terminology, creates tension within the very act of viewing that produces engagement of its own. For when one's focus is distracted, they may be missing something equally important; the hierarchy of the most important thing to view is dismantled. Thus, these works tend to engender a peripatetic rather than paralytic model of distracted reception. Or, as Schafer asserts, "so what if instead of a five-act *fauteuil* monstrosity we produce a confection of 100 atrocities; amusing, ironical, linked only in the head of the wandering visitor."[50] As has been demonstrated in my examples, these confections of atrocities, built around distracted reception, effectively critique the concept of the music performance as an autonomous object, and as a mere instantiation of a score and style.[51] The question thus opened, and which I will here leave to be answered by the reader, is to what extent this deconstruction of the musical object extends to a deconstruction of music itself? And, further, to what extent we might look in the future to distraction as a concept through which we might engender a new music that is not constructed within the walls of the imaginary museum of authorial dominance.

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[50] Schafer, *Patria and The Theatre of Confluence*, 123

[51] For a further analysis of object-status of music, and the objectifying discourse of musicology see Dylan Robinson, "Musicology Objects," in Collision: Interarts Practice and Research, (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008).

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Abstract

This article focuses primarily on the development of autonomous reception across the arts and music, and the associated assumption that the alternative to this pure contemplation, distracted reception, promotes a disengaged attitude toward the work under consideration. The particular conceptualization of distraction in the context of this article contrasts the term's standard characterization as lackadaisical or careless, instead using the term in its capacity for critique of tacitly approved systems of reception as processes for uncovering transcendental signifieds. Distraction acts as a counteractive to normative, teleological, and structural regimes of contemplation.

To re-cast distraction as a foil to directed and authoritarian viewing practices, the article provides a historical overview of distraction, tracing its development from the moralistic rhetoric of 18th century writings, to the modernist debates on distraction in film and theatre. By way of conclusion, the article considers works that employ distraction: John Cage's *Musicircuses*, and R. Murray Schafer's *The Greatest Show*. In effect, distraction is here examined as an act of complication; complicating both the efficiency and primacy of 'clear communication' promoted in formalist and structural listening practices, and objectivist discursive traditions. Ultimately, distraction acts as a method for wresting agential power from the artist in order to increase the agency of the spectator, who thereby is able to engage in reception as a continuous dialectic process of examination in which contradiction and polysemy are embraced instead of eliminated.