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SCREEN: MEDIATOR/PLAYMATE

Technoscience, technoculture, cyberculture are just some of the favorite and widely accepted terms for denoting the complete interweaving and interplay of all forms of human life in a hypertechnological age[1]. They express the presence of technology and its devices in our lives, as well as send the message about the impossibility of creating one, totally defined and 'completely true' theory on various aspects of human activity. Space of culture, understood in its widest as a "geographic, material-social space,"[2] has always included technological achievements. Today when technology influences and helps life – we inhabit technology in the sense that we are surrounded by various technological appliances from air-conditioners to computers, or technology inhabits us (medical devices)[3] – it is understandable why our cultural space gets the prefix 'techno'. Such a world logically gives birth to terms as techno art, techno music, which, once again, confirms the interdependence of high technology means and artistic creation.

As one of the most characteristic and omnipresent phenomena in technocultural milieu, and in techno art as well, is the phenomenon of the **screen**, the concrete component and a symbol of the existence of some of the most important technological achievements (television, computer). Its presence permeates every segment of contemporary life from ultra sound diagnostics of the fetus's sex to numerous applications in medicine, military strategy, sports, entertainment, science (i.e. from tamaguchi to GPS). That it is why the screen not only changes our way of seeing things, but it also changes us. (Reactions to that state of affairs range from the catastrophic visions of our world's future to excited expectations and predictions of events to come).

Screen (primarily television) in Baudrillard's ecstasy of communication becomes a metaphor for a vanishing system of objects in relation to which a

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[1] Menser, Michael, "Becoming-Heterarch: On Technocultural Theory, Minor, Science and the Production of Space" in *Technoscience and Cyberspace*, ed. by S. Aronowitz, B. Martinsons and Michael Menser, Routledge, NY and London, 1996, 294.

[2] Ibid, 294.

[3] Menser, Michael and Aronowitz, Stanley, "On Cultural Studies, Science, and Technology" in *Technoscience and Cyberspace*, ed. by S. Aronowitz, B. Martinsons and Michael Menser, Routledge, NY and London, 1996, 9.

subject defines itself. Screen substitutes the scene and mirror through which a subject used to recognize the outer world as well as itself. In Baudrillard's opinion the way in which people use computers testifies to the lack of contents, of operational and obsessive nature of communication ecstasy.[4]

Donna Haraway admits that the world of technology is a bit, to use her term, "scary,"[5] but she and her aficionados, opposite of Baudrillard, are trying to separate themselves from postmodern theories concerning the technological age, because these usually involve linguistic explanations. They are, also, trying to reject any kind of pessimistic visions of our civilization's future. "Scary" is at the same time "tempting" and in the case of Haraway it results in the "birth" of new creatures, hybrids of human and cybernetic organisms – cyborgs.

Somewhere in-between these two attitudes[6] let us try to observe some characteristics of the electronic screen phenomenon considering its potentials in the scope of contemporary arts and music. Is the screen/subject/artist the one that looks at TV/computer screen, or is the artist the one who looks at screen/ /"another artist"? Automatically rejecting the possibility of a passive artist who does not have any influence in creating with the computer, the above-mentioned questions offer two possible roles of the screen in the creation, presentation and reception of the piece of art: 1. the screen as a *mediator*, which is primarily connected with presentation and reception, and 2. the screen as a *playmate*, collaborator in the creation of a work of art. In the latter role, the screen is understood as a symbol of the machine whose part it is – the computer.

MEDIATOR

Our story is somewhat inspired by John Mowitt's "The sound of music in the era of its electronic reproducibility."[7] The author deals with a completely different problem with different intentions and goals, but at one point, in telling the story about a TV commercial (featuring Ella Fitzgerald) for MEMOREX, he

[4] Baudrillard, Jean, *L'autre par lui-même*, (Serbian translation), Lapis, Belgrade, 1994, 7.

[5] In Penley, Constance and Ross, Andrew, "Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway" in *Technoculture*, ed. by. C. Penley and A. Ross, Univeristy of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, 1–21.

[6] We think that here is the right place to say something about our position, since the technology we are speaking of is something that belongs primarily to American culture. Living in the Balkans at the end of the century and speaking of high technology, as well as regarding it in an American way, may seem a little Utopian. Since we think that both European and American (i.e. Haraway's and Baudrillard's) point of departure has their good and bad sides, "somewhere in between" would be (considering our cultural space and economic power) closest to some kind of "positivistic Utopia."

[7] Mowitt, John, "The sound of music in the era of its electronic reproducibility" in Music and Society, *The politics of composition, performance and reception*, ed. by R. Leppert and S. McClary, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 173–198.

comes to the assumption that we have to "see" music in order the "hear it." Since this idea has been expressed in a completely different context we took it very cautiously and tried to reveal how, thanks to the omnipresent electronic screen, our changed way of seeing things had influenced our way of hearing as well? If seeing confirms what we hear, does that fact changes the way we are listening to music?

We have the habit of watching music performances, a routine of "something happening" on the stage. It is the result of the old concert tradition and in the world of contemporary technology it is transposed to the realm of TV. The stage/scene has, in a certain way, been replaced with the screen. In a certain way, since concert halls are still full, the interesting thing is that we occasionally experience the stage as a big screen, not to mention the inevitable video-screens at mega music events. Forms of visual presentation of music are various: from video-spots (a practice which classical music took over from popular music), concert recordings, festivals, direct coverage of various screen versions of classical music works of bigger dimensions (operas, ballets). If we are lucky to have stereo TV, our experience is complete. The role of the electronic screen in all this is indisputable. Its function is to transmit as faithfully as possible the picture/information of the event. In this "faithful" transmission of the picture we come to today's big problem of the *real* and its production.

The *real* that the picture on the screen shows us is not within our reach. That *real* is simulated, virtual. In the case of TV it is someone else's choice, in the case of the computer we deal with the virtual presentation of the visually audible *real* of the "thinking machine."

Thinking about change of the importance of picture, i.e. the way we accept it, conceived from the screen, Paul Virilio says that the way of looking, the look has changed from a mobile, wondering look (as with newborn babies) to the "frozen" look; from "I can do that" look to a kind of "diffused' sight."[8] In such a context of seeing things, with Virilio's projection toward an automated reception of the mechanical sight, could we make any parallel with listening?

Honestly speaking we don't need visual stimuli (but it is also often needed – think of some "unhappy" presentations of electronic music pieces deprived of visual context in concert halls) in order to listen to music. If our sight has experienced changes in the technocultural space, has the same thing happened with our ear? Avoiding the acoustic, physiology, and other aspects of this problem, we can say at first glance that it has changed. The possibilities of electronic media have widened the frontiers of hearing capacity in a creative as well as receptive sense, so that surely our way of listening is changed. Has the ear, like the eye, confronted with a wide range of different information, lost its capability of "prehearing," or something that we can, in the realm of music reception, call 'expecting'? If the eye can no longer handle mental presentations, has the ear lost the same power? If the image is "frozen" in time, does the ear also catch just some

[8] Virilio, Paul, *La Machine de Vision,* (Serbian translation), Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1993.

particles of sound? Could it be that from such a form of reception derives repetitiveness of music material shaping, characteristic for popular techno-music practice?

The screen's mediator role does not expire with the reception of the musical piece. The electronic screen is also a mediator in the presentation of the work, in the interpretation of the pieces of electroacoustic (with live electronic) and computer music. It now mediates and controls the performer's actions, and on its surface shows the virtual score of the composition, a new type of music presentation. Of course, this score can become real (by printing), but for the performance it is necessarily presented on the computer screen. On this occasion we shall not explain all the demands which new instruments, and also the new way of scoring make on performers, but they are surely very different from old ones, so we can speak of the screen as the mediator in a new way of music interpretation.[9]

PLAYMATE

In our description of the screen's role as mediator we have already implied its transforming into "something more," primarily in the case of the computer screen. The term "playmate" came spontaneously: the computer is our opponent in many computer games, but is it a potential playmate in a creative game of art?

The screen, as we have already emphasized, the irreplaceable part of a computer, the part through which we communicate with the "machine's brain," is more often called a "monitor" – a Latin word of interesting meaning: "consultant," "reminder." How many times has the little window asked you "Are you sure you want to do that?"; its options are possible advice, aren't they? Admit, how many times have you caught yourselves in conversation with "it"? But, these are all the forms of "playmating," which can exist in all segments of technocultural life.

The "thinking machine" is the object of exploration in artificial intelligence. Baudrillard notes that artificial intelligence lacks the most important thing, and that is the skill which man has.[10] The artist, we assume, has the skill, but does the way the machine function influence this skill? Most probably yes. The application of the computer in music is multiple, but it is most characteristic in the genres of so-called computer music, i.e. music that is meant for the computer and is conceived from it, and also in the already mentioned electroacoustic music, which includes live performance on digital music instruments, i.e. MIDI

[9] Interesting description of this problematic we find in Zorana Erić, "Signs by Srđan Hofman, a Directory for the Use of Live-electronics in the Process of Creating Real Musical Time," *New Sound*, No. 6, 101–106.

[10] Baudrillard, Jean, La Transparence du Mal, *Essai sur les phénomnes extrêmes*, (Serbian translation), Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1994, 50.

synthesizer.[11] In the first case, the computer (composer follows that on the screen!) operates with given data at the request of the author. It offers numerous variants of the sound data. The composer will decide which is the right one, but the fact is that, in spite of the composer's skills, computer operations and their results influence the final choice and form of the data. The other case seems more interesting. Digital music instruments made possible sounds generating in real-time by which the electronic music has been not only enormously enriched, but the creative process has become much easier. At the same time the computer has the opportunity to generate sound instantaneously, as well as to participate in the creation of the work itself (by means of the sampler and sequencer), which automatically results in "chance" operations during the performance (the "chance" operation is given to the computer). In neither case does the composer have to know something about the mode of realization of the computer's hardware or software, but what he has to have is a (besides a creative) "user's" skill. Let us add that the computer/screen, besides its role in varying the given material and generating sounds, is also a playmate in the creation of the sound's spatial distribution, which in fact depends on its potentials. Making music in "playing" with the computer is obviously an interactive process, which counts on two players of which one is faster, the other more skillful, one has the face, the other a screen.

Baudrillard has rightly observed that the question "am I a man or a machine?" is pointless, but without regarding the positive sides of this fact he predicts the human homeostasis by machine. Since there is no turning back, we witness the opening of new spaces in which we are going to observe and experience the outer world in completely different way. We have already reached a touchscreen technique (perhaps future compositions will be performed by touching a virtual score?) and more often visits to cyberspace are possible, too. The present phase in the development of technology has opened the questions of *real* and its production/representation, some future time will solve them. Until that moment, we are sure that man will be capable of acting wisely and creatively, that he will be a curious explorer of the new "scary" worlds, and that he will always have emotions, but will express them differently, perhaps like Jamiroquai in *Cosmic Girl* – "Sends me to hyperspace, when I see your pretty face."

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In this text we used the term techno music, and that was not only when we were speaking of popular music practice in which the term exists from the beginning of the nineties. As we have seen, our life passes in technocultural space and all its manifestations could be rightfully denoted with the prefix "tech-

[11] On the use of computers in the composer practice a precious source of information is the book by composer Srđan Hofman: *Osobenosti elektronske muzike* (Characteristics of electronic music), Nota, Knjaževac, 1995.

no," so perhaps we could apply the term techno-music to the practice of art music as well. Reasons for doing this are not the above mentioned fact concerning technoculture, and the fact that the new art is born from the mixture of high technology devices and artistic creativity, but also this taking over the term from popular music practice would confirm its great (typical for postmodern) and accelerated approaching (thanks to high technology) to the practice of art music. The term techno-music in the context of art music is perhaps the one that will make an end to the dilemmas concerning denotations of various genres of music achieved with the help of machines. Since their common characteristic is the use of the products of high technology in creating and realizing a work of music, they definitely belong to the technocultural space, so they can be seen as a various form of techno-music.