The distributed *Gesamptkunstwerk*: Sound, worlding, and new media culture[☆]

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Abstract

This essay argues that musicians have been at the forefront of the multimedia revolution. Rather than limit multimedia's creative locus to individuals working with a small range of tools/instruments, we address the increasing dispersion of productive processes across communities, technologies, and spaces. New media culture has reached a point where one can compose on a laptop, sample, loop, and create mashups and heretofore-unknown musics. These developments indicate that contemporary re/mix/digital music culture offers vocabularies, models, and practices for new media writing and culture generations beyond the tradition of text-based composition or the singular work of art. The article traces a genealogy from Wagner's notion of the "total art work" up to contemporary digital/remix to show how new media extend techniques that have long been developing. Just as the dispersion of production across communities and technologies transforms musical aesthetics, so also the aesthetic experience itself changes. New media culture is less resonant with interpretation than with engagement, and to explain this experiential difference the article develops the concepts of "worlding" and "prosumer." Additionally, this article considers musical and multimedia attempts to incorporate new input streams, including those too often categorized (and excluded) as noise. Such input streams, in combination with other feedback-driven and distributed forms of production, can be theorized as part of an expansive, immersive, and experiential approach to new media we articulate as *worlding*.
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1. Introduction

We want to change the way you think about sound.

If we wished to attempt this by grounding ourselves in classical high culture, we might begin with Richard Wagner's idea of the "total art work" (*Gesamptkunstwerk*) and establish it as a key musical source for understanding what today we call "multimedia." We could claim that already at the end of Romanticism and at the dawn of the modern aesthetic, Wagner was marshaling multiple media in order to generate an immersive experience for the audience. Wagner's idea of the total art work brought every aspect of a musical dramatic work under direct compositional control in order to give it its most complete performance. If we were to establish this as a key genealogical moment, such a linking would usefully provide a powerful resonance between contemporary remix digital culture and early forms of musical showmanship. Indeed, the 2001 edited collection *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* has implicitly made this argument, tying Wagner's ideas about the total art work to other aesthetic advancements in music, painting, theater, and film (Packer & Jordan, 2001).[1] Randall Packer and Ken Jordan, however, were interested in the advent of virtual reality; our pathway is different. We are interested in production and composition not as the evocation of a virtual realm but as the aesthetic, and especially musical, evocation of a *world*. Rather than see technology moving us toward notions of virtuality, we want to remain grounded in a concrete world, regardless of possible fictionalized content. We want to know what worlds are evoked in sound: how melody, image, noise, beat, genre, fanfare, and band persona prepare a participating listener or user to experience a soundscape, a created world of sensual information. We argue that new media increasingly create these sensory experiences by marshaling a variety of technologies not as a virtual world *qua* "consensual hallucination" but through a sense of "worlding" that abandons the distinction between "real" and "virtual" as a generative resource.

From our vantage point (writing in 2005–2006), we see from the 1960s onward numerous examples of proto-multimedia, from the earliest attempts at multimedia with the technologies of the day to the hip "happenings," from poorly lit jam sessions to candle-lit slide shows accompanied by music, Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground, to The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper*. And whether or not we might want to claim some direct causal relation, some genetic link, Wagner's far-reaching ideas about total art—ideas we are transposing as proto-multimedia composition and prosumption—suffuse great swathes of this work. The Beatles are particularly exemplary. They achieved unprecedented aesthetic and commercial success as they evolved from being uniquely skilled songwriters to orchestrators of multiple media keyed to music and lifestyle. They created characters in the *Sergeant Pepper* album, went on stage as the pseudonymous Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band, even moved into film (*A Hard Day's Night*, *Help!*, and *Yellow Submarine*, which saw the Sergeant Pepper characters appear in animated form). When Wagner writes of total art in the nineteenth century, he could not have imagined how far such ideas might go, how, with broadcast technology (and *The Ed Sullivan Show*!), stage makeup and garish costumes, a film and a brand, these ideas would help The Beatles become an aesthetic juggernaut selling truckloads of albums and movie

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[1] We will not have space to make as many connections to these aesthetic advancements on the road to virtuality as we would like; suffice it to say here, there is still much to explore in looking back over this work.