

Between representation and self-reference

MIMESIS AND NOISE in Peter Ablinger

by Chico Mello

Peter Ablinger addresses the issue of mimetic processes in some of the pieces of the series *Weiss/ Weisslich* by investigating the paradoxical relation of sound-events and their depiction. Instead of striving for the non-referential character of sounds (as in "abstract" music), he searches for the temporary revocation of their reproductive function through a close approximation to the source of the sound and the anatomy of its sound spectrum. Sound images are not to be heard as representatives of the "real" source - that is, they operate as signs of something - but rather as enhancing the awareness of usually neglected properties of the source. In *Weiss/Weisslich 18*, Ablinger has recorded the characteristic rushing noise of various trees by microphone and strung together clips of these recordings so that they can be received as a series of "sound-photographs". As opposed to photographs, however, which evoke a strong reference to the original by visual similarity (iconic signs), these acoustic images are more enigmatic despite their faithfulness to their sources: the ear is not trained to recognise these impressions. We do not know the differences in noise for different kinds of tree. Only through practice does this become possible; such practice is not part of our cultural disposition. The impossibility or difficulty of (re-)cognition partly cancels the iconic symbolic character (similarity) of the sound impressions. Thus the representation becomes paradoxical and self-referential: the precise reference to the original (a sound-recording) creates a proximity which accentuates unfamiliar properties of the

original. At the same time, this unfamiliarity generates a distance between the sign (the recording) and the object of reference.

At issue here is the mimetic generation, the usage and the wear and tear of images. When Ablinger reproduces the sounds of trees mimetically while not hiding their origin he attempts to circumvent the conventionality of the symbolic character of being a "sign of something" by enabling an "entrance into the images" - turning them into merely audible qualities. Thus their rhetorical and musical communicability as well as their references are suspended: "In the reduplication of reality always lies a degree of its erasure - perhaps in the sense in which photography steals the soul of whoever is being photographed."¹ "The copy steals the image" - and hence the auditory copy is disposed towards the disappearance and what is "image-less within the image" is being found. Ablinger does not search for the *going towards some place* of the process of reference (similarity) or of the musical discourse but for the *remaining in place* of perception (contact).

This brings us to a recurring thought of Ablinger's: that art operates very much like a membrane between differing states of perceiving and recognising. The installation *Quadraturen III* („*Wirklichkeit*") [Squarings III ("reality")] was conceived in the context of this theme for a machine-controlled piano. The piano imitates the human voice and at the same time operates as an alienated recording and reproducing device. It has thus been replaced as traditional musical instrument: no artist operates it in order to play music. It becomes an oversized phonograph which is not used for the production of previously composed music but for the reproduction of the human voice. With some of the settings of the sound spectrum grid one gains the impression of hearing a distorted recording by phonograph - a *déjà vu* experience of the historical recording technology enhanced by the mechanical reproduction of the voice: it sounds as if the keys imitated the

gramophone needle. This double mimesis feeds off the paradox of presence: a piano, making an appearance, "plays" or lets absent and often unrecognisable human voices "speak". The hidden musical idiom of the speaking voice is rendered by the opening and closing of the approximate (in semitone steps) sound spectrum (temporal grid and number of keys hit) as "absent" voices: when the grids are coarse the sound is more musical; the finer the resolution the more closely the piano resembles the human voice - sounding increasingly like language. When the content of the spoken text becomes comprehensible the listener experiences a qualitative change in the reception of aesthetic signs: the piano-sound is no longer pure sound or music but also stands for something else. In this reduplication which links two differing symbolic worlds (music and language) various cognitive perceptions are questioned. Thus the occasional intelligibility of the spoken or rather "played" texts are perceived musically as recurring irritations or even hallucinations - the decoding of words encumbers the purely musical reception pushing it into the background.ⁱⁱ

Phantom, magic, reproduction machine

The sudden comprehensibility of single words, whenever the piano becomes the faithful representation of language, equally has the effect of a phantom's abrupt appearance: the close up reality of the voice is a ghostly apparition - as though the "forbidden" border between dream (music) and reality (language) had been crossed. The "talking" piano represents a mimetic machine which is capable of producing the mimesis of a mimesis: it absorbs, it imitates what has already previously been imitated, namely the recording of sound. The reduplication of mimesis recalls the remarks of Michael Taussig on the "surfeit of the mimetic" in mechanically reproduced art. Within the context of his investigation into the multi-layered roles of mimesis on the

interface between the technological West and the so-called primitive cultures he comments on the secret of mechanical reproduction inherent in Western culture. Even after the shock of the first encounter of the new technology has worn off, the mystery, the magic lives on in the unconscious. This is indicated among other things by the fascination of Western society with the marvelling of the "primitive peoples" at the mimetic machines to which they themselves have long grown accustomed. One such fascination in particular was stirred by the gramophone which formed part of the equipment of many ethnological expeditions. Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* testifies to this fascination, too: here, the gramophone becomes a fetish. Stripped of its cultural context, the gramophone is freed of the force of listening habits enabling us to observe its original mimetic function *from the outside*: "The magic of mechanical production itself seems to be the telling factor in the fascination with the fascination of the other with the speaking device."ⁱⁱⁱ What is referred to here is the revival of the magical, the poetical and mystical aspect of technology through the observation of the perception by the other.

Peter Ablinger does not take a gramophone to the jungle. It might be said, however, that his computer-controlled piano was an attempt at metaphorically reinventing the gramophone and the phonograph since language is scanned and translated into the "grooves" of the piano (its keys and strings). Oscillating between *approximate* fidelity and infidelity of the auditory images performed by the piano, the "incorrect" application of the piano as reproducing device lends an aura of a kind of technological primitivism to these language productions which is capable of reviving the fascination with the mimetic capacity of the reproducing mechanisms. Ablinger's automatic piano thus once more introduces the "mimetic capacity as a mystery into the art of mechanical reproduction" and generates "a surfeit of mimetic force".^{iv}

ⁱ What is referred to here is the belief of some indigenous peoples that their soul is stolen when their photograph is taken. (See: P. Ablinger, *Hören um zu Sehen*. <http://ablinger.mur.at>)

ⁱⁱ This phenomenon is experienced in everyday language usage where the clear distinction between listening to music and listening to language can be observed: even for accomplished musicians it is not easy to be aware of the melodic of language/ the musical idiom of language.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis und Alterität*, Hamburg 1997, p. 218 [Translation V.E.]

^{iv} *ibid.* p. 219