The Problem of the Loop in Contemporary Electronic Music

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- Respond To This Article

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1. The loop is one of the primary means of structuration for electronic music from mainstream to avant-garde styles. Indeed, during forums at the recent 2002 AD Analogue 2 Digital event, organised as part of the Adelaide Fringe Festival, many practitioners of electronic music gathered together and, often, quizzed each other about the loop: why does everybody seem to be using it and just how useful is it? With very few exceptions, the loop was considered to be an essential tool for electronic music, and it is perhaps easy to understand why if one considers the "one-man band" nature of the majority of purely electronic music. Moreover, the loop is a trope common in many forms of contemporary music such as disco, minimalism, funk and hip-hop, all of which, as David Toop writes, "explo[es] entrancing elaborations and variations on repetition" (92).

2. While Western musical forms have, for many centuries, been characterised by recurring elements (pedal notes, refrains, choruses, variations and so on are all musical tropes that rely on the recurrence of repetitive elements), there is perhaps a difference in the kind of repetition that is deployed in many of these musical forms and that deployed in consumer-driven and much avant-garde electronic music. When looping elements return in many pre-electronic (or non-electronic) compositions they present an elaborated form of the original iteration of that element, whereas it can be argued that the break in hip-hop or the loop employed by electronic music forms a stable basis on which other changing, shifting, modulating and developing elements are laid. (It should not of course be surmised from this that all hip-hop uses breaks nor that all electronic music uses loops.) Rather than presenting an active repetitive element creating difference in itself, the kind of looping employed in much electronic music proposes a banal, Platonic form of repetition in which, as Deleuze states, "the model is supposed to enjoy an originary superior identity [...] whereas the copy is judged in terms of a derived internal resemblance" (126-127). In the terms of our discussion, then, the sampled fragment of music or break (the "original" which some take endless pleasure in trying to identify) constitutes an originary identity which is repeated or looped in a form identical to itself to create an absolute internal resemblance across a contiguous whole.

3. This reading of looping in electronic music finds extension in Jean-Jacques FranÃ§ois's criticism that electronic music produces only trigger timbre. FranÃ§ois argues that in electronic music, the "performer is reduced to a triggering device, and does not participate in any real physical production of the sound" as opposed to the dynamic timbre of "traditional" acoustic instruments which can be varied by the performer in an interpretation of a work ("Fixed Timbre" 113). Trigger timbre, then, signals the exact reproduction (or, rather, a copy with internal resemblance, for an exact reproduction is an impossibility for a number of reasons, some philosophical, some temporal, some physical) of a prior moment, an originary identity, a movement analogous to that created by the looped element in electronic music. The problem with this in regards to musical production as artistic creation is that such modes of structuration are, according to FranÃ§ois and Deleuze, eminently un-artistic or un-musical. For FranÃ§ois, trigger timbre "strikes our ears like a symbol and threatens the essence of pure music" ("Fixed Timbre" 116), whilst for Deleuze a model employing banal repetition such as the repetition of a decorative motif is "not how artists proceed in reality. They do not juxtapose instances of the figure, but rather each time combine an element of one instance with another element of a following instance" (19).

4. It might then be argued that electronic music is doubly prone to a Platonic mode of production removed from artistry, devoid of the desire with which, for Deleuze, all artistic creation is necessarily injected. To do so, however, is to propose a technologically determinist argument which maintains that electronic music is shaped by the very technology available to the artist, and emphasises the role of the engineer over the artist (even when the engineer and the artist are one and the same person, as is often the case in such music). That such a technologically determinist view might be levelled against electronic music is, nonetheless, perhaps not surprising since whilst most composers of electronic music use acoustic instruments, there is perhaps a set of instruments to draw on that has been relatively stable for a number of years (how many years will depend on the genre), it might be suggested that many electronic artists remain within the bounds of their tools' immediate and obvious possibilities because they do not have time fully to master them because the technology behind electronic music is still developing at an exponential rate. Whilst this is in many respects a gross overgeneralisation that neglects composers from both acoustic genres such as Luigi Russolo and Harry Partch who invented new instruments to broaden their sonic palette as well as electronic artists such as Kraftwerk or Aphex Twin who built or radically modified / deconstructed their own instruments, I do not think it entirely unfair given the technophile nature of many electronic artists, eager to keep abreast of the latest developments and software or hardware releases, and believe that it goes some way towards explaining the rate at which "movements" arise and disappear in contemporary electronic music. None of this would be of the least concern, of course, if this did not imply that the music made by many electronic artists is created as much by the hands of the engineer (and by engineer I refer not simply to a recording engineer but anyone involved in the development or programming of the hardware or software used for electronic) as in those of the artist. Even for those artists who serve as their own engineer, then, it is sometimes the case that their productions' bounds of possibility are determined not only by the artist's imagination but also by the very hardware and software used.
Electronic music can, then, fall prey to technological determinism, can function in a Platonic manner, relying on a priori principles encoded in its tools and deploying banal repetition, and can be negatively critiqued in the terms of FranÃ§ois's argument. This does not apply by any means, however, that it must be so. Indeed, in both her workshop and performance at the 2002AD conference, Kaffe Matthews proposed ways in which this quandary might be broached. Matthews takes her samples not from pre-existing recordings or intricately programmed "timbre objects" ("Fixed Timbre" 114), but from the "live" environmental sounds of the venue in which she is playing or the surrounding area. In this way, Matthews does not merely produce an exact repetition of an historical or prior moment (the sentimental potential of recorded media and electronic music which, according to FranÃ§ois, explains their seductive power and thus popularity (FranÃ§ois 1990, 114)), rather ensuring that every performance will indeed be an interpretation, a live performance which has no originary identity to refer back to or repeat.

To build a complete musical text from fragments such as this, Matthews does rely on the loop, but one of the primary means that she uses to create her loops does not rely on the pattern of banal repetition observed above. Rather, Matthews places microphones around the venue in which she is playing and into which, therefore, her work is being amplified, so that the work itself is looped back into itself, each successive iteration of the loop being altered by the shifting acoustics of the environment into which it is emitted. In this manner, the entire venue is used as the "resonant cavity", the "giant membrane", the "environment", the "atmosphere" that render possible a discursive structure and that, for FranÃ§ois, are the preserve of true timbre which cannot be produced by electronic technology ("Writing" 16).

This is not, of course, the first time that such loops have been used in experimental music: the notion of the loop is very frequent in the work from the 1960s and 1970s of Steve Reich, who lets series of loops fall into and out of phase with each other, Terry Riley and Pauline Oliveros. Perhaps the most significant precursor to Kaffe Matthews's approach, however, is Alvin Lucier's I am Sitting in a Room (1969). For this piece, the performer chooses the room whose musical qualities are to be evoked, then reads a text in that room. The recording is played back through a loudspeaker in the room, the playback itself recorded and amplified again with the original recording, the process being repeated over a number of generations. Lucier's piece and, indeed, all of the pieces employing loops by the aforementioned composers, use analogue tape technology in order to create their loops, however, which is to say that a deliberate manipulation of the hardware that rips it from its normalised and intended use is required for that hardware to create loops. This is not to say that the misuse of technology at one's disposal is particularly revolutionary; indeed, one might claim that it is a very common feature among avant-garde or progressive artists of the past and present in all musical genres using both digital, analogue, electro-acoustic and acoustic instruments â€” should one of the primary means of structuration in electronic music be to escape the technologically determinist arguments seen above, then, its coming into being must similarly be the result of a willed aesthetic decision and not merely a symptom of the technology used to produce it; it must, in other words, be infused with an artistic sensibility.

Much electronic music being pumped out of bedrooms and studios at an alarming rate, however, is not infused with this kind of artistic sensibility, a situation which, although I oversimplify once more in saying so, would only appear to be aggravated the closer one moves to the mainstream (hence phenomena such as "the Balearic sound"). By its nature more prone to banal Platonic repetition (because of the primacy of the loop) and the a-dynamism (and, by inference, stultification) of trigger timbre, the selections of the electronic music scene who are content merely to remain within the obvious uses of the music-making technology, whether their dâ©marche is born of a desire to pander to market forces or an inability or unwillingness fully to master the technology offered because of the speed at which it is moving, consequently produce songs which are themselves more than banal copies of each other. Constructing music around loops within a technological domain that no longer requires hardware manipulation for the creation of loops since the loop is encoded within it, Matthews, however, by integrating into this realm the kind of compositional dâ©marche noted in Lucier, liberates electronic music from these pitfalls. More than this, however, her approach also allows for an improvisational and dynamic aesthetic which is uncommon even in the avant-garde, the avant-garde artists who do extend the possibilities of the technology they use. For the majority of artists who can be included in this group generally rely, when processing samples in real time, on a bank of pre-recorded samples, regardless of how these were created, through the use or misuse of technology. In using the very space in or around where she is performing as a live sample bank and processing those samples in real time as they are looped and transformed by the very setup she has defined, Matthews simultaneously surrenders and reclaims her creation, reinstating an authorial presence into the absence around which Cage's 4'33" is based (his "silent" piece in which the ambient sounds of the audience, venue and surrounding space constitute the only sound matter), seeming, like the performer of 4'33" who merely marks off time in three movements, not to be involved in the physical production of sound that FranÃ§ois deems necessary for dynamic musical production ("Fixed Timbre" 113), only to reassert her presence in the text as a physical and dynamic entity.

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References


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