From Repetitive Structures to Loops in Contemporary Sound Poetry[*]

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Abstract: In this paper I investigate the compositional use of loops and audio technologies in contemporary sound poetry. I suggest a definition of 'loop´ in this context and provide an overview of theory concerning repetition and loops in literary studies. Exploring the aesthetics of loops through a survey of contemporary sound-poetic practices, I show how loops influence sound and musicality as well as the textual level and semantics. Loops not least associate a work with various aspects of meaning, up to tautological accordance of form and content. They therefore qualify as a self-evident, independent compositional feature that can make words 'dance'.

Keywords: Repetion, loop, sound poetry, phantom words, technology

Introduction

Repetition interweaves with nearly all areas of our life (Csúri/Jakob 2015, 8) and can therefore be considered a universal principle accountable for movement and rest, for change and perpetuation, difference and identity alike (cf. Mathy 1998, 7). Loops, an extreme form of repetition, have an ambiguous effect on our cognition, oscillating between stasis and movement, apathy and hypnotic excitement, and turning the time-axis from a linear into a cyclical structure. "Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but in the mind that contemplates it." (Deleuze referring to David Hume, cf. Deleuze 2001 [1968], 70). In the context of the arts, especially in poetry and music[1], repetitive structures play an utmost important role and can be considered a key element. Adjacent artforms like experimental film or performance-art also make use of blatant repetitions (concerning performance-art, cf. Benthien 2017). In addition to that, serial procedures may also be an indicator for challenging the concepts of originality and artistic creativity.

Conventional poetry already makes use of repetitions in various forms; a rhyme for example as a repetition of similar sounds. When repetition becomes the main structural aspect of composition it influences the work as a whole, foregrounding the repetitive structure – especially in the case of loops – as a self-evident feature. Examples of explicit repetitions in poetry can be found throughout history: litanies or magical spells that use repetition to strengthen invocation (for their alleged ability to evoke physical or psychological reactions; cf. Baumbach 2015, 49), poems of different epochs that draw on wordplay (like the *15th Kühlpsalm* by Quirinius Kuhlmann, late 17th century, cf. Jacob 2015, 61-63, 70-72) and later examples in modernist and concrete poetry where words[2] or sections of a verse or a stanza repeat throughout a poem, in works by Velimir Chlebnikov, Inger Christensen, Friederike Mayröcker, Robert Lax, amongst others.[3] But poems that use repetitions – or lists[4] and enumerations – as a feature among others have to be distinguished from what I define as loops in sound poetry, because I define loops as iterating identical elements for seemingly innumerable cycles.

Loops were also important in the early stage of 'musique concrete'[5] and are crucial features in the repetitive branch of 'minimal music'.[6] Works ascribed to the latter genre that deploy tape loops (e.g. Pauline Oliveros' *Bye Bye Butterfly*[1967] or Terry Riley's (*Music for the Gift* [1964] and *Reed Streams* [1965]) presumably inspired experimental poets like Allen Fisher, who recorded and pro-

duced *The Art of Flight* (1974-76) at the studios of the Industrial music collective Throbbing Gristle[7], or Clark Coolidge, who realized *Dews* (1969) at Mills College Tape Music Center[8], both deploying multi-channel technology and loop structures. The electro-acoustic poetry of Fisher and Coolidge are furthermore examples of how poets utilize studio technologies to redefine poetic performance and composition (cf. Montgomery 2015, 137–138). In the field of experimental music, a more recent work has also been inspired by minimal music and deliberately deploys and compositionally exploits the analog medium of tape loops: *Disintegration Loops* by William Basinski is based on field recordings as material and uses the specifics of the magnetic tape medium by including the hisses and cracks that emerge during long-durational and iterant playback (because of the loop-structure), also causing a deterioration and eventually a 'disintegration' of the sound information stored on the magnetic tape.

Sound poetry, an experimental avantgarde genre of poetry open to (electronic and digital) media-technological treatments[9], emphasizes the sound shape of spoken language as one of its main features, turning speech into music – even more than conventional poetry – and combining "the exactness of literature and the time manipulation of music" (Hanson 1982, 16). Without promoting techno-determinism, my aim here is to show how the compositional use of media-technologies influences the aesthetics of sound poetry. Because sound poetry has an "ongoing relationship" with repetitions and loops (Ellison 2020, 50) they can be considered prime structural elements to create rhythm and highlight speech melody by iterating identical sections. Due to this, loops in sound poetry can create what could be defined as 'speech-music'.[10]

Repetitions and especially loops are moreover influencing the semantic level due to their ability to emphasize but also to erode meaning, including effects of pareidolia or apophenia, a disposition to perceive meaningful patterns or connections between unrelated things, in this case sounds. Because "[t]he musical sound of poetic speech is a means of transmitting information, that is, transmitting content", loops as a form of utmost increased poetic musicality bear significance in itself, foregrounding its form as a self-evident sign and turning a phenomenon of structure into a phenomenon of meaning (Lotman 1977 [1971], 120).

The material of a loop can be spoken live by the author(s) or other human or synthetic (computer) voices and immediately captured by a loop-machine or effect pedal (utilized by artists such as LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, Jörg Piringer, AGF, and others) or recorded and post-produced in a sound studio or any other location. It is also possible to 'sample' found material – pre-recorded and pre-mediated samples from internet, TV, radio, CDs, records etc. comparable to 'found footage' in film – which adds an additional layer of association to an external origin, a specific context, or to the person the sampled voice belongs to.

Theories of repetition and loops

Repetition has been defined as a main structural feature of artistic texts, especially phonological repetitions having a high value in the poetical structure, indicating that a repetitive structure of sounds bears significance in itself. A phenomenon of structure in artistic texts eventually proves as a phenomenon of meaning, establishing poetic meaning through a specific form (cf. Lotman 1977 [1971], 104–136). If highly repetitive structures are converted into an artistic principle they produce the opposite effect to automatization, therefore de-automatizing language (cf. Hansen-Löve 2006, 46).

Because of the general relevance of repetitive structures, several studies in literature and poetry exist, many dating from recent years (Csúri/Jacob 2015; Mathey 2015; Lüdeke/Mülder Bach 2006; Hilmes/Mathy 1998; Rimmon-Kenan 1980). Some have acknowledged the relevance of repetition as a central device of artistic and poetic composition (cf. Lobsien1995, 29) but only few explicitly mention the term 'loop' (relating to the work of Gertrude Stein, cf. Delville 2013), defining loops loosely as repetitions of certain segments of a poem (Rakusa 2016) or using the term in a rather metaphorical sense (Eco 1994 [1990], 83–100). In a (yet unpublished) paper from the field of

musicology, Dean Suzuki examines "origins and practices of minimalist processes" in sound poetry focusing on repetitive structures, loops, and permutations (in works by Brion Gysin and Charles Amirkhanian), concluding that "minimalism and the unfolding process are among the most influential and profound styles, techniques and aesthetics" of some sound poetic works. (Suzuki 2015). While Suzuki concentrates on only two sound poets in relation to 'minimalist' aesthetics I provide a wider overview of several artistic examples and various approaches as well as a definition of sound poetic loops. A seminal and extensive study on sound poetry discusses loops in a short excursus only (cf. Lentz 2000, 598–599), citing a study on experimental radio play that contains a sub-chapter on loops (cf. Maurach 1995, 194–197). A more recent study on sound poetry in the 21ˢᵗ century briefly mentions repetitions as a compositional method in relation to redundancies and that the repetitiveness of a loop necessarily leads to a loss of meaning (cf. Nuno 2019, 21 and 239). In a sub-chapter about 'repetition' in a book about 'sonic phantoms', Barbara Ellison looks closer into the methods and effects of repetitive structures and loops in experimental music, sound art and sound poetry, also mentioning psycho-acoustic effects such as apophenia in the perception of speech-loops (Ellison 2020, 45–55). Providing a history of loops and its aesthetics, mainly in the field of (popular) music but also discussing a few examples of speech-loops, a monograph by Tilmann Baumgärtel argues for a loop's dependency on the cyclical repetition of *identical* material, as well as a loop's ability to turn "ennui into transcendence" – aspects that I will make productive in this article (Baumgärtel 2016, 22).

Exhaustive repetitions and loops can also be described as tautological, overturning a perceived pattern and emerging into a variation of the repeated, thus subverting the concept of identity (cf. Cheie 2015, 403). In the identical, tautological iterations of (speech-) loops, the differences occur in the perception of the listener, with a potential – if listened to long enough – to create phenomena of apophenia and 'phantom words' (cf. Ellison 2020, 45–55; Deutsch 2019). This resonates with what has been written in relation to Gertrude Stein's use of repetitions, that the loop "creates a self-generating dynamic that strives for a constant renewal and actualization of text and sound" (Delville 2013, 78).

Arguing for repetition to not only bear self-generating power but also to be a self-containing entity, Gilles Deleuze proposes a critique of representation by arguing that repetition has a value in itself: "when the modern work of art develops its permutating series and its circular structures, it indicates to philosophy a path leading to the abandonment of representation. [...] The totality of circles and series is [...] a formless *ungrounded* chaos which has no law other than its own repetition" (Deleuze 2001, 68-69). Deleuze also depicts an "ontological repetition" (Deleuze 2001, 293), emphasizing the principle of a self-sufficient repetition, which has been described as a "semiotic negativity" (Lobsien 1995, 226). "In a certain sense, the ultimate repetition, the ultimate theatre, therefore encompasses everything; while in another sense it destroys everything; and in yet another sense selects among everything." (Deleuze 2001, 293). This can be applied to the concept of a loop as a tautological entity. The destruction "of everything" can be linked to the concept of 'semantic satiation' (cf. Jakobovits 1966) that can occur in speech-loops, emptying the semantic content and foregrounding the loop itself. The signifier counts more than the signified, the gesture of 'again' and 'evermore', until what is spoken exhausts itself (cf. Rakusa 2016, 9). Loops can therefore be classified as a disruption (cf. Jäger 2010; Bolter/Grusin 2000) that makes the materiality and structure of language perceivable and allowing to semanticize the sign itself.

Defining the late 20ᵗʰ century, a period of "postmodernism aesthetics", as the "era of repetition [...] when iteration and repetition seem to dominate the whole world of artistic creativity", Umberto Eco proposes a definition of "to repeat", as making "a replica of the same abstract type" (Eco 1994 [1990], 84, 86, 85), which resonates with the definition of a loop as repetition of an identical element.

Definition of Loops in Sound Poetry and its Cognitive and Aesthetic Effects

To distinguish loops as a distinct feature in sound poetry from mere repetitions and to work out its specific aspects, modes of composition as well as aesthetic and cognitive effects, I will hereby propose

a definition. It depends on the examination of artistic examples as well as on research mainly from the fields of literary studies and musicology.

A loop in sound poetry can be considered a distinct form of repetitive structure that repeats short and identical aural text fragments (or speech-sounds) for a seemingly innumerable duration. The brevity of the iterative cycles is crucial to constitute a loop: if the repeated selection is too long, the perception of a mere repetition might occur, but not the notoriously pulsating rhythmicality of a loop, which has the aesthetic ability to emerge into a musical 'beat' that consolidates the overall structure. Thereby the emphasis shifts from the repeated material to the loop structure itself. A loop, or 'non-classical' repetition (cf. Lobsien 1995, 224), as an independent and self-contained aesthetic feature that, in reception, oscillates between boredom and mesmerizing ban, stasis and movement: the loop as an ambiguous structure turning ennui into transcendence (cf. Baumgärtel 2016, 22). Loops bear an aesthetic value which relies on repetition as a signifying element, creating meaning through its distinct form and not on hermeneutic mediation of its content, oscillating between cumulation and emptying of meaning.[11]

The challenge of loops is to elicit something new out of a repetition, to obtain a "difference" in "repetition" (cf. Deleuze 1994 [1968]). This can result in a paradoxical state of perception in which the repetition of short segments of speech (single words or phrases) "call[s] upon the mind's natural inclination towards 'order-seeking' in order to produce […] disorienting effects" (Ellison 2020, 51). This 'order-seeking' also intensifies the musical aspect of speech-loops because it pushes the ear to the nearest tonal interval, foregrounding the tonal and micro-tonal aspects of speech by means of repetition (cf. Scott Johnson cited in Suzuki 2018, unpaginated). The aesthetic and cognitive effects of looping can therefore lead to highly diverse states such as regularity and order, hypnotic mesmerizing, as well as unnerving impatience and chaotic disorientation. Identical repetition not only realizes a rationally accessible order but also bears an irrational component.

It needs to be pointed out that although orally uttered repetitions that do not mechanically iterate identical material can assume the character of a loop, primarily if a given selection is repeated long enough in utmost resemblance, it may still feature slight but perceivable variations in each cycle.[12] The difference lies in the precision and identity of mechanically generated loops: by deploying audio-technologies, human limitations can be bypassed, such as the inability to repeat without variations or aberrations. This supports, as an aesthetic effect, the sameness of the iterations resulting in a higher grade of tautology (cf. Cheie 2015, 403) and redundancy, inducing an ambiguity of stasis and motion.

This ambiguity can hold sense and meaning in suspension and even multiply it, resulting in apophenia effects and 'phantom words' that are not actually spoken but perceived in the listener's perception when listened to over a longer period of time.[13] The psychological effect of 'phantom words' can be exploited in a poetical context by deploying tight repetitions and loops to provoke the appearance of – however subjective and indeterminant – words and phrases in perception only, creating poetry with deliberately unforeseen content. This constitutes a highly exceptional and also challenging aspect of speech-loops: not only the interpretation of a text is open, but also the very production due to a loop's ability to generate 'phantom' texts in the listener's cognition is unpredictable! Apophenia effects and 'phantom words' are examined by Barbara Ellison in her work as a researcher and composer. Ellison's compositions *Cybersongs* (2021) feature "hypnotic textures of vocal utterances through the intensive and extensive use of repetition"[14]; some pieces (like *Wanseets kussa*) exclusively consist of densely looped words uttered by a synthetic voice, resembling the word-loops that psychologist Diana Deutsch used for her psychoacoustic experiments. Referring to Ellison's series of compositions that also concentrate on loops, *Vocal Phantoms*, she points out that they oscillate between the "'semantization' of sonic elements that were initially meaningless and would remain so in the absence of repetition–a clear example of apophenia", and the opposite effect of the "dissipation of meaning by 'semantic satiation'" (Ellison 2020, 46). Ellison's compositions are therefore

examples for the ambiguity of loops and their ability to erode meaning and at the same time generate apophenia-effects like 'phantom words'.

At last, the distinction between the 'speech mode' and the 'nonspeech mode' of listening is also of importance. Reuven Tsur argues that a cognitive difference exists of how a listener perceives sounds, noises, or music and the perception of speech in which acoustic signals are excluded and only an abstract phonetic category is perceived and decoded. But Tsur proposes a third "'poetic mode' of speech perception in which some precategorical sensory information is subliminally perceived", being "the source of the 'mysterious' intuitions concerning speech sounds" (Tsur 1992, viii). Speech-loops may even reinforce this 'poetic mode' because of their rigid rhythmical structure – an additional expressive pattern, inducing monotony as well as reappearance and steadiness – and because the perception constantly shifts between a loop's sound and textual qualities, even more than in other poetic forms. I would therefore argue that loops in (sound) poetry are an outstanding example for this 'poetic mode' because the nonemotional (linguistically referential) use of speech sounds and the emotional (linguistically nonreferential) use converge in an intensified manner, with the highly repetitive structure being an additional, self-evident feature that raises the poetic function of language, the self-reference and "palpability of signs" (Jakobson 1960, 356).

Non-technological repetitions

Loops can be generated by a wide variety of technological devices, analog and digital alike. In the analog era mainly by banding together magnetic tape to create a circular, coiled structure that repeats the same snippet over and over again. Also, vinyl discs are able to create loops by forcing the needle to skip back one cycle of a groove or by using a closed groove (although limited to a duration between approximately one and two seconds). In some cases of looping that do not make compositional use of media technologies I would consider excessive repetitive structures to be influenced by the knowledge of media and sound technologies – or in earlier times by imagining or foreseeing such technologies (e.g. the simultaneous poems by dada artists). With nowadays' digital technologies, a loop can be produced quite easy and effortless with an audio-software's loop function, a digital loop-machine or effect pedal.

Already in the early stage of sound poetry (e.g. *Sonate in Urlauten* composed 1922 to 1932 by Kurt Schwitters) non-technological repetitions were deployed as a striking feature that increased musicality. In literature and poetry not considered sound poetry, short and stupendous repetitions can also be found. Gertrude Stein deployed repetitive structures throughout *The Making of Americans* (1925) or in the line "Rose is a Rose is a Rose…", most strikingly in *The World is Round* (1939) where the phrase is carved all around the stem of a tree, creating a loop-structure that can virtually go on ad infinitum. Many of Stein's works invest "in a literary use of the loop as a structuring device which returns upon itself and thereby undermines traditional expectations regarding narrative, descriptive progression, and closure" (Delville 2013, 78). Later examples already contain certain specifics of loops: A poem by Dieter Roth[15], in which the sentence "eine Blume stand darin" [a flower stood in it (in a vase, MM)] is repeated about two-hundred times so that the number of cycles becomes innumerable and – if articulated steadily in constant prosody – resembles the aesthetics of a technologically created loop. Closely related to concrete poetry is *Four-Directional Song of Doubt for Five Voices* (1964) by Emmett Williams, a sound poetic composition in which a repertoire of five single words is repeated by five human voices in cycles of various lengths, additionally calling forth the audio-technological method of multi-tracking due to the precise and interlocked speaking-process of several voices in overlapping layers. These examples request a steady and quasi-mechanical repetition from the reciter(s), like a machine, therefore evoking a technological process without deploying it.

Utmost consistent repetitions that resemble machine-like steadiness are paramount in the following examples which point out the difference from mechanically created loops. Lacking the mechanical iteration resulting from audio-technological treatment they are nonetheless being informed

by, or addressing, technology by imitating, or even opposing, it. Compiled under the title *Skip It If You Can* (2017) by German artist Schuldt, this "angry street corner poetry" uses "words as percussions" (subtitles of the work) and is inspired by recordings of rhythmically pounding machinery. It consists of short phrases that Schuldt overheard in the streets of New York during everyday situations in the 1980s.[16] Published as a book with accompanying CD (spoken by the author) and also performed at live events, these pieces repeat phrases like "Run. Run if you can", "Beat it", or "No way, don't even try" in an energetic manner, maintaining utmost sameness. But Schuldt instructs the performer that the pieces are to be spoken live and "none of it [repetitions] should come from means of reproduction such as a loop or the replay of a shorter recording", making the slightest variation in performance a deliberate element (Schuldt 2017, instructions for performance in the book's appendix). Although the stoic, umpteen repetitions of short phrases come close to what I define as loops, not least because of its pounding rhythmicality and the highly repetitive structure being the main compositional feature, it explicitly refuses to use media-technology which would enable identical repetitions, instead deliberately incorporating slight variations due to the incapability of human feasibility. The highly repetitive structure indicates the ubiquity of the short phrases as a part of colloquial speech and the everyday soundscape nonetheless. The capability to bother or annoy due to the "angry" character of the chosen phrases converges with the unnerving effect of loops itself. Another work addressing media-technological means without actually deploying them, featuring mere vocal repetitions as a compositional element amongst others, are the *Synth Loops* from Christian Bök's *The Cyborg Opera* (2005). Bök himself describes this work as "a long poem in progress—a linguistic soundscape that arranges words, not according to their semantic meanings, but according to their phonetic valences, doing so as a literary response to the ambient chatter of technology" (Bök 2005, 80). He notes that the *Synth Loops* "constitute a kind of amateurish experiment, documenting some of my initial efforts to master the elementary vocabulary for a few of the drum kits typically mobilized by beatboxers" (Bök 2005, 86). In *Synth Loops*, electronic and digital machinery is mimicked by a human and the examination of digital technology is additionally pointed out by the reference to beatboxing, a performative genre in which humans imitate sounds of electronic (pop-) music. But this work is a special case as he mainly imitates technological sounds instead of using lexical material, therefore creating a kind of mouth-music, although composed and performed by a poet and with an alleged intention of creating poetry, underlined by his use of terms like "verbalized" or "vocabulary". With the *Synth Loops*, Bök approaches sound poetry directly from the musical side, the steady repetitiveness of the loop being the structural element that realizes the intended musicality of this work. Anton Bruhin's *rotomotor* (1978) is also evoking a loop but actually consists of a rhythmically pounding recitation of an ever-rhyming list of short, individual words, generated by a constraint that changes, adds, or erases one letter per cycle. Besides the rhyming similarity of these words, a subtle and precisely calibrated delay-effect makes the words sound even more similar to each other and therefore emphasizing the impression of loop *one* word only.

  Although some features of loops may also be found in mere repetitive recitations, the repetitiveness appears stronger in technologically created loops due to the identity of the iterations, repeating the very same element in each cycle. While mere repetitions can emphasize the repeated speech segments and – if repeated for a longer time – lead to semantic satiation, the preciseness, insistence and endurance of loops created by deploying media-technologies increases the potential for inducing apophenia effects like 'phantom words'. Identical repetitions generated by media-technologies highlights the sameness and identity of the repeated material and the exactness of timing, preventing even the slightest variations in sound, structure and tempo, thereby exceeding human capacities. Besides media technology's limited accessibility for poets in earlier times, some sound poetry works used (and still use) mere repetitions without productively using media technologies to address or challenge human capacities, deliberately integrating slight variations in their works. Others are mimicking electronic sounds and media, or may be inspired by the aesthetics of media-technologies without actually deploying them. The deliberate and productive use of media technologies in (sound)

poetry acknowledges and broaches the issue of technology in artistic processes and society alike, making use of its affordances but also, in specific cases, expanding and challenging them. Media technologies enable poetic procedures and effects that would not be possible without them, for they intervene in the acoustic "raw material of all poetry" in order to profitably bypass the coding of the alphabet through "timeline manipulations" and being able to break up individual words, syllables, or sounds at any point and to reassemble these acoustic fragments (Kittler 1999 [1986], 36). An additional aspect is that the use of media technologies in some cases results in unforeseen outcomes (e.g. Steve Reich discussed below), surprising even the author of a work, which calls for interpreting the process between human and machine as rather dialogical than unidirectional.

Analog loops in 20th century sound poetry

Numerous sound poets deploy loop structures produced with audio-technologies since the introduction of the analog magnetic tape machine in the 1950s: it can be considered the main technological device for compositional use in sound poetry before the advent of digital media technologies, because of its ability to record, playback, edit, overdub and loop by coiling a string of tape (cf. Lentz 2000, 598-599; Olsson 2011). Although lacking the precision of digital technologies, analog technologies already allow the repetition of identical material to achieve what I define as a loop. The productive use of media-technologies for composition in sound poetry thereby outstrips human limitations by repeating the exact same material potentially infinitely and also enabling to repeat shortest snippets of speech. This affects the artistic possibilities as well as the specific aesthetics of sound poetry.

Among the earliest examples for the productive use of the tape machine are early tape compositions by Steve Reich that have been considered sound poetry because they solely use recordings of speech as material (cf. Lentz 2000, 1223) – and Reich has been influenced by poetry in his early work.[17] They are examples for composing as 'gradual process' where a set of rules is pre-defined and then played out without further action by the composer: "once the process is set up and loaded it runs itself" (Reich 2004, 34). Regardless of the phenomenon of 'semantic satiation' Reich claimed that repetition intensifies the meaning of the words (cf. Reich 2004, 19). The voice on *Come Out* (1966) is by Daniel Hamm, one of six Black men falsely accused for murder. The original recordings of about ten hours duration were handed over to Reich by author and political activist Truman Nelson to compose a piece based on them and to present it at a beneficiary event for a re-trial of the accused. In one recording Hamm describes that "I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them", because a hospital refused to treat him as emergency patient after he was beaten by the police but couldn't show any bleeding wounds. This sentence by Hamm is the sole material of the piece which begins with three cycles of the sentence in its entirety. After this initial opener indicates the context of the sentence – a context still present and exigent at the first public presentation of the piece at the beneficiary event in April 1966 – the loop is divided onto two tapes and step by step reducing the length of the tape-loops to fractions of the sentence (like "come out" for several cycles) and progresses further in reduction to mere particles and tight repetitions only achievable by technological editing and looping. An important feature is the gradually increasing divergence of the loops' durations that Reich discovered by accident while working on the piece (cf. Reich 2002, 20), resulting in phase-shifting that may trigger psychoacoustic effects.[18] As Reich discovered these effects by accident but nonetheless embraced them as a compositional feature, it is moreover an example for a productive dialogue between machine and human. The piece features a highly energetic, dense, unnerving and troubling rhythmical structure that can be associated with the heated atmosphere of racism, juridical bias, and police brutality.[19] A striking example of how form – the tight structure of speech-loops – achieved by electro-acoustic treatment has the ability to emphasize and expand its content (even by reduction!), associations and meaning. Although Reich's pieces have been acknowledged for their social-political implications, it seems a challenge to situate

the music and its appropriate social and political context as well as the role of the composer in relation to the sound material and its vocal source(s) – maybe even more so from today's perspective concerning discussions of ethnicity, identity and power-relations (cf. Scherzinger 2005).

Making use of the possibilities of vinyl discs and shifting the productive audio-technological potential to the means of *re*production (!) are two pieces on the vinyl anthology *10+2: 12 American Text Sound Pieces* (1975).[20] They are cut into the end-groove of the record, thus resulting in a closed locked-groove, virtually running endlessly: *Crickets* by Aram Saroyan repeats the title-word 'crickets' over and over again, creating a sound pattern resembling the noise made by actual crickets, highlighting the onomatopoetic character of this looped word; in *Population Explosion* by Anthony Gnazzo a 'bang' is repeated over and over again, creating a kind of nano-narrative by indicating the birth of yet another child with this onomatopoetic utterance. Both pieces have a fixed duration of the respective loop due to the material limit of a vinyl record (at 33,3 r.p.m. resulting in a loop of 1.8 seconds).[21]

Slightly evoking a skipping record because of 'hard' cutting but produced with magnetic tape and using pre-recorded material is Nicolaus Einhorn's *Don't You Maybe / The Essential Interview* (1975). It consists of an isolated fragment of colloquial speech of John Cage and a second voice in conversation. By featuring Cage's voice and words (allegedly recognizable to a wider public at the time) it can trigger further references and associations. Considered to be produced, according to Einhorn, out of 'recording-waste'[22] and applying tape loops partly because of the relative effortlessness, there is however at least some structural development: the stoical repetition of the loop combined with the question and its stuttering, unfinished answer by the second voice makes *Don't You Maybe / The Essential Interview* an unrelenting questioning for the question's sake, indirectly addressing the listener. It "establishes a series of tautological circularities, underlined by the repetition of Cage's 'smile / little laugh'".[23] It could be interpreted as an iterative, quasi-therapeutic means to find out something about oneself, to pose general questions about oneself while listening, but when the piece finally turns into Cage's laughter it subverts this interpretation and reveals the character of a humorous little 'hoax'.[24] Another example by Einhorn is *Arbeiten* (1973) which completely relies on loops of the word "arbeiten" (working) by various voices, including the author's own. By layering the different voices over another, the piece also features multi-tracking as its second main structural element achieved by the productive use of media technology. Its loop structure addresses – and performs – the monotony and repetitiveness of work emphasizing the work's content through its specific form.

Exploiting steady repetitiveness of single words or short phrases for its sound and musical qualities is American composer and sound poet Charles Amirkhanian. Influenced by modernist writing such as Gertrude Stein's (cf. Davis and Stone 1986, 254), he loops his own voice on tapes and chooses his language material "for […] sonority, rhythmic profile, and texture rather than their meaning" (Suzuki 2015, 9). The dense and mesmerizing *Seatbelt Seatbelt* (1973) solely consists of the energetically intonated word 'seatbelt'. It features a dense loop structure with varying start- and end-points, causing overlaps and percussive clusters of speech particles resulting in a high grade of musicality. Already indicating repetition in the title, the dense and energetic loop structure makes the word material seemingly dance.[25]

These examples show that analog media technologies already enable the creation of loops that exceed the possibilities of mere oral recitation: by making use of the technological affordances – like tape loops – the creative possibilities for the compositional process are manifold, sometimes even surprising the author/composer. Although there are significant differences between the use of analog compared to digital technologies, deploying media technologies for creation can thus be considered a distinctive and important aesthetic quality in general.

Digital loops in contemporary sound poetry

Applying digital technologies in the compositional process facilitates the usability and increases the aesthetic potential compared to analog technologies. Nowadays' digital audio technologies (like

simple and free-of-cost DAWs on personal computers) are relatively easy to handle and widely accessible. They offer a higher precision in editing and looping material because the position of a cut and the length of a loop can be determined with an exactness down to the granular level (about 1/24.000[th] of a second, depending on the resolution). This allows to precisely iterate nano-snippets of speech or create extremely subtle phase-shifts of two loops running slightly out of sync – what Steve Reich discovered by accident and with limited precision by using analog tape can be obtained much more predetermined and precise with digital technologies. Another factor is the increased handiness and affordability of digital effect pedals such as loop-stations which are frequently used in sound poetry performances. Furthermore, online resources such as databases for (speech) recordings make a difference in the compositional process due to the effortless availability of various material to sample – from poetry readings to news and colloquial speech.

Making use of online resources and easy-to-use digital technology is Dagmara Kraus in *Xurf your Zwöbes. Lied aus Pastior* (2016). Composed on a laptop with a simple sound-software and made out of a recording of a poetry reading by Oskar Pastior found on the internet[26] it features excessive editing of the source material, re-composing it due to an intuitive musicality and creating a poetic fictional language. While Pastior himself created his very own poetic language full of lexical mutations and neologisms, Kraus moves this 'neological' (and literally *poietic*) approach up a notch by including the sound-glitches that result from the rough editing manner as elements of the displayed fictional language, integrating these audio-technological glitches as imaginary quasi-phonemes. The piece features several passages consisting of loops, some of which may be capable of creating apophenia due to the short duration of its cycles. This is remarkable because the 'language' that we actually hear is an electro-acoustically constructed language (with hardly any lexical references), the loop passages open up the potential emergence of phantom words in the mind of the listener (with lexical references)! The loops can even be interpreted as a special feature of this phantasy language, pointing out its artificiality and imaginative potential. The musicality of the work due to the loop passages as well as the method of composition and the underlying material is already indicated in the work's subtitle 'Lied aus Pastior' (song made out of Pastior). The small-scale structure of the editing induces density and nervousness and refers to electroacoustic processing which comes to the fore as an intrinsic element which could only be realized as an electroacoustic text (cf. Kriwet 1970, 42).

Loops as an additional but prominent feature are deployed in the series *Evénements 09* (2011) as a background-track. Composed and spoken by Anne-James Chaton, this "poor literature"[27] uses the names of established persons (Pina Bausch, Barack Obama), political movements (Taliban), slogans (Pop is dead), as well as terms of political origin (Le Printemps de Teheran) taken from news headlines, referring to topics of high public awareness and the time of the pieces' creation. They consist of two layers: in one layer, these found texts are mechanically looped and generate a pounding rhythm as a cohesive structure; in a second layer the author recites other found texts taken from everyday contexts (e.g. receipts, shopping lists, metro tickets) in a dense, monotonous manner. A special feature of the album is that the nine finished pieces, *Evénements No. 20-28*, are accompanied by nine short loops as additional tracks that make accessible the mentioned cohesive structure of the actual pieces by exhibiting the isolated loops for the duration of a few cycles. The loops are audio-technologically filtered to enhance the lower frequencies and to generate a beat (close-mic) as a pounding base – like a bass-drum in techno or hip hop music. Because of the mixing and sound design, these pieces are rich of rhythmical musicality and challenge a figure/ground hierarchy by levelling its two tracks at the same volume. They can thus be interpreted as supporting the textual content of recurring news and data of everyday-life, converging the levels of form and content.

An example in which an algorithmically generated loop-structure is the sole and superordinate principle of composition is *Could Change. A Word Composition* (2022) by myself [Marc Matter]. Gradually shifting the loop's start- and endpoints with utmost precision only achievable with digital technology, it features a custom-made algorithm programmed by Florian Zeeh. Short text fragments

of a few syllables taken from news headlines and voiced by a tweaked speech-synthesis are looped and replaced throughout the piece with other selections of the exact same length resulting in pounding iterations displaying cut-up aesthetics and excessive editing. The strict and utmost precise gradual process that cuts into words, revealing new text-loops over and over again, turns it into 'speech-music' that at times resembling a technologically enhanced phantasy-language including mechanical stutters and glitches as its elements. Explicitly inspired by Diana Deutsch's concept of 'phantom words' it invites listeners to let words or sentences associatively appear in their perception. It deliberately mixes an openness of interpretation with the urgency and determinacy of news headlines, opening up the discourse of news with all its political and social implications to an infinite reflection.

A special case of loops are mechanical repetitions without repeating an identical speech-fragment but different ones with an identical content: *Frank Walter Steinmeier* (2021) by Jürgen Stollhans uses various samples from TV or radio broadcasts (enabling further associations due to the samples' origins) that tightly repeat the name of German president Frank Walter Steinmeier.[28] The fact that the various samples are spoken by different voices – not repeating just a single, identical sample – indicates that they have been taken from more than one source. Due to the sole and stupendous repetition of the politician's name by radio and TV-voices the piece evokes a ubiquity of Steinmeier in public discourse and his role as President, referring to a collective impression of omnipresence. The loop structure and the sole use of the politician's name has a semantic effect of overflow by amassment of material.

These examples illustrate the general influence and additional possibilities of digital technologies used in a compositional manner compared to analog technologies: Micro-scale editing and the use of online resources make works like *Xurf Your Zwöbes. Lied Aus Pastior* or *Frank Walter Steinmeier* possible; the precision of algorithmic editing and looping enable a gradually shifting structure like in *Could Change*; and *Evénements 09* features a combination of analog audio aesthetics and a digital sensibility informed by techno music, furthermore associating it to raw-material in online databases and a 'prosumer' (productive-consumer) approach by making accessible isolated elements of the work. In *Evénements 09* and even more so in *Could Change* the loop structure evokes the impression of infinity, also resonating with the works' contents by supporting the aspect of the never-ending flow of everyday texts and news headlines. The productive use of digital technologies increases compositional features such as precision of editing and iterations, the shortness of the looped snippets, or the layering of loops. Additional features of digitality such as algorithmic[29] coding, speech synthesis and the inclusion of online resources related to sound poetry open up new compositional possibilities and interpretative contexts.

Conclusion

As I have shown, there are several examples of loops in sound poetry where the structural element of repeating short, identical speech material dominates the overall character of a work and influences its associations and meaning. Loops can be produced relatively easy due to todays' technological possibilities and make use of the possibilities of audio- and media-technologies in production and composition. Digital technologies enable utmost precise iterations of identical material which in relation to sound poetry means that the very same speech-sounds, words, or phrases can be iterated for an innumerable duration, exceeding human capacities. Loops also challenge linear concepts of time, turning the time-axis from linear – a fragment of speech with beginning and end – to cyclical – when beginning and end seemingly vanish due to the cyclical structure. Turning the linearity of speech into a cyclical structure bears meaning on a meta-level and can be considered a significant poetic information, adding to the meaning (semantic level) of a (sound) poem. Whether spoken by the author(s), sampling 'found speech' and thereby expanding the range of associations, or making use of speech synthesis closely related to digitality, loops also (but not exclusively) show the variety of 'voices' used in sound poetry. Loops explore and exploit the aesthetic effects of extreme

repetition and rhythmicality resulting in an ambiguous state between stasis and movement, apathy and mesmerizing, therefore enabling the association with different aspects of meaning, up to tauto-logical accordance of form and content by repeating again and again. They are an example of the poetic mode of perceiving spoken language, in which referential and nonreferential aspects converge. The repetitive structure of a loop can become a self-evident element which can itself be semanticized and furthermore has the ability to transform the semantics of a piece to either support, subvert, erode the meaning, or even result in apophenia effects like 'phantom words' that only emerge in the mind of a listener. Increasing the musicality of spoken language, loops in sound poetry are a distinctive feature with a high aesthetical impact that can make words dance.

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Notes

[1] For a general discussion of loops with an emphasis on music, see Baumgärtel 2016.

[2] On the repetition of single words, see Lausberg 1960, 311–332.

[3] For more examples, see Rakusa 2016.

[4] For lists as a poetic form in concrete poetry, see Cotton 2008.

[5] Created by using closed (locked) grooves on gramophones and later magnetic tape loops, the repetitive structure helped to render raw sound material into 'sound objects' by making sounds more "abstract" while tearing them "from their context" (Schaeffer 2017 [1966], 8, 310–311).

[6] Opposed to 'static' approaches of minimal music by La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela, Tony Conrad, John Cale, Phil Niblock, amongst others.

[7] Released on cassette tape by Balsam Flex, 1981.

[8] Released on the vinyl anthology *Disconnected*, released by Giorno Poetry Systems, 1974.

[9] The "ever-expanding technical facilities" in "sound poetry can create effects that have never been produced before, thus opening a new frontier for poets" (Burroughs 1979, 9).

[10] A recent album of digital sound poetry that highlights the musicality of looped speech fragments is *dark dad* (2021) by c l 0 v 3 n (aka cris cheek).

[11] "Die unklassische Wiederholung […] hebt die temporalisierte Zeit auf, sie zielt ab auf die Herstellung einer virtuellen Gleichzeitigkeit, in der kein Platz mehr ist für hermeneutische Vermittlungen." (Lobsien 1995, 224); and: „Noch die banalste, mechanischste, stereotypischste Wiederholung hat ihren Wert darin, daß sie die Verwobenheit der Wiederholungsebenen erschließt […], begriffslos, in der ästhetischen Erfahrung als Gewärtigung einer paradoxen Doppelbewegung aus Sinnkumulierung und Sinnentzug. (Lobsien 1995, 226).

[12] An example for the monotonous repetition of a short, self-referential sentence in media art is *I Am Making Art* (John Baldessari, 1971), cf. Benthien et al. 2019, 53.

[13] Psychologist Diana Deutsch, who coined the term 'phantom words', produced tight loops of bi-syllabic words to investigate "how our knowledge, beliefs and expectations create illusions of speech" (Deutsch

2019, 103). Deutsch showed that 'phantom words' are not intersubjective but rather represent what is on the listener's mind at the moment of reception, also depending on a listener's mood, emotional stress, the specific listening situation, as well as expectations and previous knowledge, comparable to how a viewer interprets a Rorschach test.

[14] Info-text on Bandcamp https://barbaraellison.bandcamp.com/album/cybersongs-2 (7 February 2023).

[15] In *Frühe Schriften und typische Scheiße*. Darmstadt und Neuwied: Sammlung Luchterhand, 1973. Unpaginated.

[16] Ezra Pound noted that one can "imitate the sound of machinery verbally" and by that making "new words"; although remarking that these procedures are "insufficient equipment for the complete man of letters…" Pound 1968 [1927], 52–53.

[17] Even in the early 2000s he stated that, besides digital sampling as a method, he is mainly interested in the human speaking voice as material (cf. Reich 2004, 184).

[18] "First the loop is in unison with itself. As it begins to go out of phase, a slowly increasing reverberation is heard. This gradually passes into a canon or round for two voices, then four and finally eight." (Reich 2004, 22).

[19] For a critical examination of this composition, its historical context, mode of production/composition, and aspects of ethnicity, whiteness, and privilege, and the problem of the political in this work, see Biareishyk 2012; Gopinath 2009.

[20] To my knowledge there are only few any examples of the productive use of turntables as compositional tools in sound poetry; for an early approach in productively using the affordances of gramophones by composer Ernst Toch see Katz 2001; a contemporary sound poet working with turntables is W. Mark Sutherland

[21] Given that the listener does not alter the playback speed of the turntable!

[22] Described by Einhorn as such in an interview conducted by the author in Düsseldorf, October 2020

[23] Liner-notes to the piece in the accompanying booklet to the vinyl anthology *Futura Poesia Sonora*. Ed. Arrigo Lora-Totino. Milan, Cramps Records, 1978.

[24] Einhorn, although extremely humble about his own works, used the very term in the above-mentioned interview.

[25] It comes as no surprise that one of Amirkhanian's records is entitled *Lexical Music* (1979). A compilation of sound poetry by Lily Greenham is entitled *Lingual Music* (2007).

[26] On the online archive of poetry readings, https://www.lyrikline.org (20 February 2023).

[27] A term used in the release-info of the album by Chaton himself: https://raster-media.net/shop/evenements-09 (20 February 2023).

[28] Published on a compilation released as audio-cassette and download/stream: *Incident Occurred by Incoherent Accident*. Berlin: Carrots Tapes, 2021. https://carrotstapes.bandcamp.com/track/j-rgen-stollhans-frank-walter-steinmeier (09 February 2023).

[29] Although algorithmic processes in literature and poetry are not dependent on electronic or digital media technologies and have been realized for centuries, cf. Cramer 2005.

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