Bernhard Lang

Cuts'n Beats: a Lensmans View
Notes on the Movies of Martin Arnold

1. Transcriptions

For many years one of my main influences beside the work of Philip Jeck were the movies of Martin Arnold: they more or less became the trigger for the series of pieces called Difference/Repetition, now comprising some 20 pieces ranging from solo works to full orchestra, including the two hour music theatre "Theatre of Repetition". Introducing my work I have always come back to these influences, so nowadays it seems right to explain this a little bit more detailed.

At the first look it seems to be a common place statement, a composer being influenced by cinema, since most contemporary composers and musicians seem to claim this for themselves, starting with at least Berg. It should be the issue of another treatise what is the reason for this, and where film took over the function of literature and painting as legitimizing and inspiring sources for music.

With the work of Martin Arnold it seems to be a little different and very special case, which I would try to show in the following.

The movies of Arnold have become the source for different **trans-medial transcriptions** as I prefer to call them, and there seem to be some definite reasons for this I will come to. Besides the musical transcriptions I did Arnolds' music was the conceptual or actual basis for dance performances by Xavier Leroi (Ghizelle), by Christine Gaigg "Trike" and by Willi Dorner, who actually worked with Arnold. Here I realized that the Greek root Kinesis, movement, in the term cinema turned out to be some kind of pivot-notion for all this transferences, including the musical transcriptions. And since all of Arnolds movies focus on the **moving human body and its disappearance**, the affinity to dance theater is evident.
In the meanwhile the work of this pioneer has found entrance in advertising, video-clips and other media, the crucial trilogy of films I'm referring to already having been created between **1989 (pièce touchée) and 1998 (Alone. Life wastes Andy Hardy)**

2. The world as a movie

Austrian experimental filmmaker Peter Kubelka once said, that we have to differentiate between a **pre-cinematographic and a post-cinematographic** view of man. Thinking about this thesis, it seems, among others, to be a very good key for an analysis of the work of Martin Arnold.

Gilles Deleuze says in the introduction to the first volume of "Kino" that cinema on the one hand tries to simulate our perception and, on the other, changes it. He quotes Bergson who, as he says, uses cinematographic notions for the first time as a model for the explanation of human perception of movement. Basically Plato's cave-metaphor is an earlier kind of cinema-model, it does not focus on movement, however, as Bergson does.

Without doubt our whole field of perception has been changed by cinema, the way we see being changed by our experiences of possible modes of seeing. Moreover the movies we have seen tend to from a part of our memory: within memory they become similar to the actual memory and sowith change our erpierience of the real. In the sense of a common discourse our personal history of cinema forms a new collective memory we also like to talk about. Movies fill in the role of stories, the telling of which had been an important means of communicating in earlier societies.

3. The Cut is the Beat

When analyzing the notion of movement in cinema Deleuze, interpreting Bergson, further differentiates between the immobile cuts within time, the single frames, and the mobile cuts within movement; the immobile cuts disappear in cinema, whereas the mobile ones constitute the rhythm of the film.

If we watch Arnolds Movies, regarding this relation between the macroscopic cuts and the microscopic frame-points, theses micro cuts suddenly appear in the foreground, structuring time in a very suggestive way. It seems as if Arnold leads us back to the point, before the cinematographic illusion became common place. The stuttering projection, not able to constitute the narrative movement necessary for the kinematic movement, becomes aestetic medium and principle:

Arnold discovers that the presentation of visual cut frequencies creates rhythms and beats. So there arises the impression, that Cuts are equivalents of the movies beat, a relation most commercial music videos live on. It is remarkable, however, that the clips rarely sync the visual beats strictly with the acoustic beats as it happens in Arnolds work, maybe because this would have a destructive effect on the opera-like dramaturgy of most of this clips. The visualisations of techno and new electronic music do use this strict sync, however. This results in effects similar to Burroughs dream-machine, if the beats are of a symmetrical kind.

With Arnold we see the dialectic interplay with the visual and acoustic cut sequences being explored: Thorough the three movies the treatment of sound and synchronicity undergoes an interesting development:

1 in piece touchée the sounds consists of the single drone-pulse, which at the first look seems to be completely disassociated with the trancelike visual beat, which clearly is being transformed in a dance-movement. Arnold uses a technique called brain-sync in Techno music: a visual stream with a similar density/beat probability is layered with an audio track, and our brain does the rest of the work: it progressively starts to synchronize both streams, increasing the intensity of both.

2 in passage à l'acte Arnold now focuses on the original sounds of the movie sample, including ambients as the closing of a door and the clatter of a spoon and the actors speech, deconstruction both by the single mean of looping, turning the individual events into beats and rhythms; basic musical structures like call and response are being introduced here.

3 In Alone: Life wastes Andy Hardy Arnold finally focuses on the notion of music, speech and singing become a central part of the soundtrack, Judy Garland's looped singing became the prototype of my later loop-studies.
This third film is perhaps the highlight in this trilogy, from my point of view it uncovers the strongly erotic subtext of the Hollywood original, deconstructing it in both a very humorous and simultaneously menacing way.

4. The Destruction of Pathos

This deconstruction brings about a new reading of the immanent Pathos of the original: Deleuze says about repetition in DR:

"Repetition belongs to humour and irony.It is by nature transgression or exception".[DR,5]

In this sense it is opposed to pathos, a central notion of theatre, opera and their late offspring, action cinema.

In "Das Bewegungs-Bild" Deleuze says on pathos: [translation by myself]

„Film, however, seems to lives on exceptional moments. It has often been said, that Eisenstein extracted certain critical moments out of movement or developments and made them the very subject of the movie. This he called the "Pathetique"."[Kino1,18]

So Arnold breaks the power of pathos in a twofold way: instead of the exceptional moment he samples the unimportant scene, the "off-scene", sometimes dumped scraps from the archives, and simulates the pathic moment by looping them. On the other hand, by this very looping, pathos disappears in favour of an ironic view of a gesture, a sign. Further we may progressively get into the perception of something comic, but also of something oppressive,

menacing. The actors seem to be obsessively imprisoned within the looped scene, alluding to Freuds **"Zwangshandlung" or "Wiederholungszwang".**

In music we can observe something similar, that it is not necessary to take the pathic climax of a sample for looping, very often the trivial, the fringe event is more fit for being used in a loop, turning into something which becomes of interest.

The deconstruction of pathos goes with the **redefinition of the subject** and of representation within postmodern thinking. In film the actor as the representation of the subject gets lost, in Arnolds films he or her becomes machine, or it becomes evident, that he/her was always part of the machine called cinema. Another reading could be, that looking into the loop we discover the basic robotic nature of our everyday movements (Gurdjew).

5. The Loss of the Subject

This **robotic/technoid** dimension which is being brought to perception by Arnolds Technique of looping is similar to the redefinition of role of the musician in techno music. In Rock music the musician was still representing the old subject and its desire, very similar to opera. The composer in classical music still was the artistic representation of the subject of the ruler or of creator god. In techno music this subjects seems to disappear, there are no more composers, no identifiable musicians, no performers. So also Arnolds role as a director changes, he seems to be more of a vj or a visual artist in the context of the fine arts.

Nevertheless it is a surprising fact, that all three of the films discussed here focus on actors, on ensembles of them. In "Piece" it is a couple, in "Passage" two structurally paired actors: father/mother son/daughter, in "Alone" again two pairs: the father/mother and the young couple.
Perhaps the focussing on these subjects underlines their disappearance.

With the loss of the representing subject goes **the loss of the narration**, at least on the surface. The technique of looping breaks with the linear thread of narration in action cinema which is very similar to 19th century opera. This results in the emerging of a network of subtexts and manifold sub-narrations, representing the subject as a schizophrenic multitude. This network is linked to the significant networks in perception, an open system of interpretation.
As Hume says, repetition does not change anything in the object repeated but in the mind of the observer.
Arnold breaks with the linearity of the original narration, on which action cinema is based, replacing it with the **circularity** of the loop, therewith developing a new narrative: here he represents the tradition of European

experimental cinema as opposed to American action cinema, which still sticks th the narrative methods of the 19th century.

Deleuze states a **crisis of action cinema**, which was tried to be answered by directors like Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Fassbinder and others around 1968. All of them have something in common: they were looking for a new form of the narrative.

Arnolds Explosion of the visual sample is a most radical version of this, nearly completely destroying the original context, bringing about the emergence of the mentioned subtexts, very often astonishingly erotic or violent. ("Alone").

6. The loops & the samples

So the foundation of this strategy is looping and sampling, nowadays used both in visual and acoustic art. This fact is also a reminder, that this very usage becomes the mapping structure for the above mentioned transmedial transcriptions, from the visual to the acoustic, from cinema to dance and music and back again.

So not the "Zeitbild", the singular image within a timeaxis, becomes the medium of transference between picture and sound as in former notions, but the "Bewegungs-Bild", the Moving Picture. Not time in itself as a sequence of rigid points, but the **differential of time connects image and sound**.

With Arnold this shows with all its consequences: he originally samples a single gesture, a single movement, consisting out of a few frames, and composes a certain macro-rhythm composed of loops and cuts. What happens thereafter is a certain **shift, Verschiebung, differànce** from our perception of the original signifier toward the pure movement, which somehow creates a new signifier.

An acoustic illustration would be the continuous repetition of a single word, which progressively loses its original meaning, and either turns into sound or in a Joycean re-reading of the many possible meanings contained in any combinations of morphemes.

7. The Archives, repeated

The fact of using sampling as the basis of artistic work deserves further evaluation. Nowadays it seems to be a widely used technique without being further questioned, in spite of it have a lot of important implications and conditions.

Sampling mostly refers to two basic sources:

1 Ambients: footage directly recorded from the recording environment.
2 Archives: everything that has ever been recorded on any medium and is still available. Using the archives often implies working with the medium as **memory**, and its tendency to forget information. So working with old film

scraps implies a certain usedness, a certain wearing off of the information. The same goes for vinyl, whereon information eventually fades by being read. The whole Lo-Fi Renaissance is based on this. The aesthetics of fading information seems also to be crucial for the work of Phil Jeck and Austrian experimental film maker Dietmar Brehm.

At this moment we are in a state of nearly total availability of the archive within the net. The Archive outside the net does not exist for most of us any more, it is certainly endangered. On the other hand, never before in the history of the Archive has so much information been lost or been forgotten. It is an artistic and political challenge to work within this state of the art.

In both cases Sampling is based on **repeating and re-reading** something existing. Synthesizers in this regard are opposed to Samplers, since they create sounds from scratch in real time, whereas Samples are basically Playback-Machines.
This is not to be taken as a critique, but as the starting point of a new aesthetic. What we experience now is the rise of an aesthetic which was prophesied and prepared by William S. Burroughs and his Playback – machines, at his time based on tape-recorders, the predecessors of samplers:
He says again and again: Play it Back, Play it all Back. And he focuses on the **perception-changing** function of this techniques.
This new aesthetic is based on a kind of repetition culture, wherein not the production of original sound is focussed, but the way of repeating the archives.

Examples for this is the rise of the vinyl culture, the whole of Hip-Hop music, the usage of retro instruments, amplifiers in Rock music, the usage of experimental techniques from the sixties and seventies in new avant-garde music (sampling from the supermarket of new music, as Helmut Lachenmann criticised this) and many others, ranging from intellectual to life-style fashions.

Like in post-modern philosophy like Deleuze's, Derrida's and others, the scientific/artistic work is based on the re-reading of something existing. This is not what Derrida called the "dead repetitions", but an ecstatic and creative transformation of an old text into something new, striving for a new intelligence.

8. Time and Memory

Another characteristic property of sampling is the so-called **sample explosion**. In former eras of the sampler computer memory was very limited, so early sample experiments were limited to short loops. In techno music this led to the discovery of the entrancing effect of short loops, the duration of which lay between 50 and 5000 milliseconds, in other words, within approximately the range of short time memory. Up to today, with only a few exceptions, most loop-based compositions function within this time span. The vinly loops, "der

Sprung in der Rille" characteristically used by Phil Jeck and others, is another good example for this.

Sample explosion means, that the whole richness of perception of a musical structure is developed from a **very limited selection** from the original. This leads to something Phenomenologists might have called **eidetic view** of a signifier, of a gesture, a sound, looking into the core of something. The loop becomes a sort of phenomenologic microscope, a way to look at the other hidden side of an object.

This limitation of the basic footage is something very astonishing, since it substitutes the techniques of development with those of **unfolding**, of uncovering, of recalling, exploding and memorizing. The whole technique is closely linked with the **functioning of memory**, as already mentioned above. The original sample is not changed, varied and prolonged as in classical techniques of development, but re-read in different ways, all information being there from the start. In this sense it is based on a **remembering** of something which is already there as a whole, like in the classic definition of knowledge by Plato.

So all of Arnolds Samples are **very short** indeed, and in pièce touchée strong allusions to techno-samples might be found. Moreover he unfolds/explodes a cosmos of details and information, of texts and sub texts out of this few scraps of un-pathetic footage, or he alternatively draws it from a single moment of pathos (Judy singing) by graining it into dust clouds.

This leads us to the second important notion with Arnold, the **visual loop**.

9. Grains and Images

An analysis of loop-types used in these 3 movies can be based on the following differentiations:

I Temporal difference: three main categories deduced from the temporal phenotypes of loops.

1 granular loops (up to 50ms and sometimes a bit more, depending on the cross fade parameters and the context): they tend to deconstruct the signifier and turn it into an atom of a new synthesis, **granular synthesis.** With Arnold they are often being associated with the Video-"Freeze", a Still which jitters like on VHS players switched on pause; another musical association is the beloved damaged CD-player which in some rund down bar can turn any piece of muzac into interesting electronic pieces.

2a extragranular loops type a "Micro-Image": (50ms up to 7000ms) these loops feature the image of a recognizable visual gesture or musical phrase, a recognizable entity, a signifier of sorts. The length of the loop lies within short-time memory.

2b extragranular loops type b "Macro-Image" (more than 7000ms): here a sequence of "Images", gestures constitutes a structure, which in music creates phrases, sentences, form. This loops are harder to recognize and to remember, sometimes they tend to disappear as such for perception. They occur not too often within Arnolds work.

II Difference in Repetition
1 static repetition "Pulse": here the loop parameter as length, startpoint, endpoint stay static, difference is shifted towards the difference in perception. Granular "freeze" might be an example for this. The soundtrack of pièce touchée is another.

2 modulated repetition: here either
a) the loop length,
b) the start point or
c) the endpoint are varied. Also
d) the reading direction of the sample can change, the loop can move forward and backward within the sample.

An important example for this is the **loop walk**, a grain of the sample shifting its startpoint within the sample, jittering through until it reaches the end. Without jittering this is used in time-stretching a sample.

2.1 the modulation can be based on linear functions, so the outcome can be foretold after a while like it happens in minimal music and phase shift compositions.
*2.2 the modulation can be based on a **jitter***, which means, the loop parameters are modulated randomly, based on chaotic operators. This jitter is much more evident in Arnolds work and generates a nervous intensity based on **unpredictability**.

10. Die Unerträgliche Wiederstandslosigkeit des Materials „the unbearable resistancelessness of matter"

An American art historian once said, within the seemingly endless possibilities of processing techniques in the didgital age it supposedly might be easier to do a stone sculpture that an artistic computer video.

In spite of this evident variety of techniques it might come as a surprise to us, that Arnold reduces his processing methods to **very few basic** ones. The films where mainly created by handmade **cutting and pasting** in an era, where nearly limitless effects where already available on the computer. It becomes clear, that these **very limitations** contribute to the artistic intensity of these films, perhaps they even constitute it.

Another limitation which is not evident on the first look is Arnolds **ellipsis of polyphony.**
Since his way of cutting and looping strictly avoids crossfades and any form of picture on picture layering (pièce touchée perhaps the exception, using mirror techniques), the cut is always **global**. Since the cut is equivalent with the Beat, this results in a monophonic line. This again reminds of cuts in techno music, where cuts and breaks are global ones most of the time.
The global cut on the other hand focuses our attention onto the **polyphony of gestures and sounds within the loop**, which is being brought in the foreground by repetition.
This methodological reduction can be seen as in affinity to the Phenomenological reduction, which also strives to filter out essential layers of significance by ellipsis.

11. The New Monadology

Another restraint is the preferred usage of small cells, the loops work upon. The whole composition consists in a cut sequence of looped **cells**.These cells often function **monadic**, there is no communication between them in the form of a narrative thread, the overall composition, the cut beats harmonize the parts within a certain logical system we can only feel, but never are able to formulate. This cellular thinking seems to be also part of a new aestetic approach.In music one is reminded of Morton Feldmans Pattern orientation, of Hans Peter Kyburz piece "Cells" and "Parts", and of some of the late Ligeti pieces.
This reemergence of Leibnitzian thinking in art will be the issue of another lecture. It seems necessary to mention that the late Deleuze focussed on this in La Plie/the Fold/Die Falte.

Bernhard Lang, Bergen (Norway), 10 March 2006