"Open Ended" Interactions?

Exploring Similarities in Minimalist Music, Plastic Art and New Media*

Tristian Evans

Abstract: This article examines shared characteristics in minimalist music, the plastic arts and new media. With references to existential semiotics and other analytical techniques, a selection of case studies will be studied, in particular Philip Glass's Glassworks (1981) and Symphony No. 4 (1996); Richard Serra's "Open Ended" installation (2007—2008), and Chuck Close's artistic techniques as evinced in his portraits of Glass. The study will demonstrate how certain approaches, significations and perceptions are common across various media. The article will examine how minimalist music has been employed in new contexts, namely in the form of television commercials and, more recently, as applications for smartphones and tablet computers, for instance Glass and Beck's REWORK project (2012).

Key words: Minimalist music, art, sculpture, new media, Philip Glass, Richard Serra, Chuck Close

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"开放"的互动?

对极简主义音乐、造型艺术和新媒体的探讨 崔斯坦·埃文斯

摘要:本文讨论了极简主义音乐、造型艺术和新媒体的共同特征,用存在符号学等分析工具,选取艺术个案进行讨论,如菲利普·葛拉斯的音乐作品《玻璃》(1981)和《四号交响乐》(1996)、理查·塞拉的"开放"装置艺术和查克·克洛斯在葛拉斯肖像中展示出的艺术手法。研究旨在论证在不同的媒介中,艺术家所使用的方法、意味和引起的感知是共同的。本文同时检视了在新的语境之中,也就是在电视商业节目中,以及更为新近的,如智能手机和平板电脑的应用软件中(如葛拉斯和贝克的 REWORK 项目),极简主义音乐是如何被使用的。

关键词:极简主义音乐,艺术,雕塑,新媒体,菲利普·葛拉斯,理查·塞拉,查克·克洛斯

Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine intersections and interactions within the domains of minimalist music, the plastic arts and new media. The focus of the investigation will initially be placed on the relationships between the music of Philip Glass and the artistic outputs of Richard Serra and Chuck Close, before examining recent examples of new media in relation to minimalist and ambient music. The meanings formed in and between specific musical and visual texts will be unpacked with the aid of theories from the area of existential semiotics and music analysis. Firstly, however, it seems logical to begin by mapping out some significant points relating to the origins of minimalism in various contexts before delving into the semiological investigation that will subsequently ensue.

Minimalist music emerged in the mid-1960s when artists, dancers, filmmakers, composers and musicians, including Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Richard Serra, Chuck Close, Michael Snow, Yvonne Rainer and Meredith

Monk, were developing their styles and approaches, and they supported each other by interdisciplinary collaboration mainly in downtown New York. As Jonathan Bernard points out in his article on the aesthetics of minimalist music and the plastic arts, minimalism developed as an alternative to the earlier trends, including the abstract expressionism of Rauschenberg and Pollock, Higgins's intermedia, Brecht's Fluxus and Cage's musical happenings of the 1950s (Bernard, 1993, pp. 86 – 96). General commonalities between minimalist art and music included the repetition of material, the reduction the material, use of audible/visual process, and "an emphasis upon the surface of the work" (Bernard, 1993, p. 95).

Both in musical and visual terms, the term "minimalism" therefore maintains certain similarities. What is further apparent is the fact that the venues used for exhibition and/or performances were akin: Bernard notes that early performances of minimalist music often took place in art galleries (ibid., pp. 86–7), which consequently provided a natural environment for the cross-fertilisation of styles and ideas.

Glass and Serra

During the late 1960s, Glass and Serra worked together on various artistic projects—one of them was a silent film entitled *Hands Scraping* (1968), which featured the hands of both the sculptor and composer gathering steel filings—a gradual and laborious process of dissipating the raw material is depicted in the four-minute silent film. Also in 1968, Serra dedicated a sculptural piece for Glass entitled "Slow Roll", which exhibited the pliable nature of the materials employed in the artwork. Despite the close collaboration between sculptor and composer, Keith Potter refers to Glass's interview of 1972 in which he stated that references to minimal art were seldom made directly in his musical works (Potter, 2000, p 266). What is seemingly apparent, however, is a common interest by Serra and himself in

① Edward Strickland defines minimalism in its simplest form as "a style distinguished by severity of means, clarity of form, and simplicity of structure and texture" (Strickland, 2000, p. 4).

② Dean Suzuki draws attention to the fact that *Hands Scraping* is "a work singularly and obsessively concerned with materials (steel shavings) and procedures ('hands scraping')" (Suzuki, 2013, p. 122).

the concept of "structure and content becoming identical", as found in Serra's sculptures and Glass' own approach to musical form, ^①

We can also observe how the magnitude of Serra's sculptures characterising so-called "scale as content" (Battcock, 1995, p. 20) bears similarity to the length of minimalist musical works, which are generally performed over an extended period of time. A performance of Glass' seminal opera Einstein on the Beach (1976), for instance, can be of five hours' duration, and the audience are given the freedom to enter and depart from a performance at will, which could result in only a partial hearing of the work. With reference to Serra's large-scale Circuit sculpture (1972), Bernard notes that all aspects of such works cannot be fully observed due to their size, therefore the perceiver would have to make decisions on which part of the artwork they studied; moreover, Bernard notes that the scale of the works could induce a sense of "menace" for the perceiver, who could potentially be daunted by the imposing characteristic of such an installation (Bernard, 1993, p. 118). Citing references to "working class heroism" in Serra's works, Casey Nelson Blake writes that "the austere neo-Minimalism of Serra's steel sculptures may in fact heighten viewers' sense that they are confronting an aggressive work that orders their experience according to a hierarchy of social distinction" (Blake, 1993, p. 259). ²⁰ In her article entitled "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", Anna C. Chave argues that Serra's work from the late 1970s and early 1980s presents "bully and victim" relationships between the artwork and the perceiver, and that such works as Tilted Arc (1981) (which caused a considerable amount of controversy that led to its ultimate demolition) can provoke feelings of "oppression" (Chave 1990, p. 135). While Serra's works at that time maintained potent psychological and socio-

① See Maria Anna Tappeiner's documentary programme on the artist, which also features interview material with Glass, for further comments on their working practices. *Richard Serra—Sehen ist Denken* [*Richard Serra—Thinking on your Feet*]. DVD. Dir., Maria Anna Tappeiner, 2005—2007. WDR Mediagroup.

② From Serra's early works onwards, a clear working class aesthetic emerges: Benjamin Buchloh highlights the importance of industry and production in his work. *Hands Scraping* (which features the hands of Serra and Glass) for example represents "the hands of the labouring subject, unknown and invisible, occluded from the perception of the designing subject" (Buchloh, 2007, p. 57).

political meanings, more recent reactions to his work are ostensibly more placid, with certain installations being used to hold weddings and yoga sessions—events that are clearly of a happier and relaxing nature (Crow, 2013, unpag.).

Industry and Materials

With reference to his early works, Steve Reich once noted that both Serra's sculptures and his own music were "more about the materials and process than [...] about psychology" (Buchloh 2000, p. 5). Indeed, aspects of temporality and listeners' perception were equally at the heart of Glass and Reich's early manifestos, and also the minimalist artists—Serra recalled a common "belief in process and extended time and a relation to material" (Tusa, 2002, unpag.). In a documentary on Serra, Glass also recalled how "the content of [Serra's works] was a reflection of the process by which the piece was made, and [he] was doing a very similar thing in music [...] the structure of the piece was the unfolding of that process" (Tappeiner, 2005-2007). In terms of materials, unlike the so-called "high minimalists" who used plastics and stainless steels in their artworks, Serra chose to work with less refined resources such as rubber and lead—such material could "change or augment itself by its manipulation" and "did not have the pretention of the commodity" (ibid.). More recently, Serra employs sheets of oxidised steel, otherwise known as Cor-ten steel, which develops rust of a terracotta hue when subjected to the natural environment.

Glass' workmanlike adaptation of established musical forms and tonalities also associates aesthetically with Serra's choice of materials—crude steel with rust and patina, for instance, that forms a direct link the industrial past—as opposed to the sterility of stainless steel materials. Glass' employment of established harmonic progressions and recognised musical forms (such as the symphony, string quartet or theétude for piano) might again be regarded as references to the musical past, or what Bernard calls the "resurgence of tonality" (Bernard, 2003). In her analysis of "Opening" from *Glassworks* (1982), Susan McClary observes how the work presents an "old-fashioned version of subjective interiority", feelings of "melancholy" and "impossible

hope" that are reminiscent of Schubertian oeuvres (McClary 2001, p. 142), thereby demonstrating Glass' ability to reuse forms and tonalities within a postmodern context.

Glass and Bowie— "Heroes" and the Eurostar Commercial

While McClary's comments above reveal Glass' recycling of past traditions, we can also cite examples of Glass' postmodern music being used in new situations. Industry and tradition are both manifest topics in a recontextualised use of the Symphony No. 4 ("Heroes", 1996), as heard in Eurostar's television commercial (2007) to publicise the launch of the modernised London St. Pancras railway station and the high-speed connection it offers between the UK and Europe. ^① Glass' music conveys several different meanings here. Firstly, the music's repetitive element assimilates the motion of a train. Secondly, the grandeur of its symphonic form is compatible with the 19th century industrial productivity, neo-Gothic architectural splendour and industrial triumph. In terms of tonality, Glass' use of major chords reflects the brightness of the visual footage and the overall message of the commercial (promoting a sense of welcome and reflecting the magnificence of the rejuvenated Victorian railway station), which is in clear contrast to his often-employed minor tonalities that create a sense of greyness and bleakness, as in the case of "Façades" from Glassworks, as discussed later in this essay.

Significant also is the integration of the "old" and the "new" depicted in the visual narrative (the station's original architecture versus the technological achievement of the modern and rapid train), which is again somehow symbolic when we consider the fact that the music we hear is not only based on Glass' pre-existing symphony, but that the symphony itself is a reworked version of a song entitled "Heroes" written by art rock musicians David Bowie and Brian Eno for their eponymous album (1977). ^② Even the

① Music by yet another minimalist composer, Michael Nyman, had also been written to commemorate the launch of another high-speed train service; the TGV in France-Nyman's MGV (Musique à Grande Vitesse) was first performed in 1993.

② See also Jeremy Grimshaw's article for a further discussion on Glass' collaborations with Bowie and Eno (Grimshaw, 2002).

title "Heroes" of Bowie and Eno's song is in itself a quotation, being a reference to the title of a track by the German rock band "Neu!", released two years earlier. Within the context of popular music, Bowie and Eno's song suggests Romantic notions and ideals of love, heroism and yearnings for utopia. Moreover, the song alludes to the Berlin Wall, and is thus a reference to a socio-political revolution. If Bowie and Eno's song is discussed with regard to Glass' work, we can find further associations: Glass' music is used in a context that reflects other Romantic aesthetics and the 19th century developments, namely the construction of an grand railway station during the Victorian era, neo-Gothic architecture, the development of the symphony, and so on.

In short, by examining Glass' music both in relation to its precursors (Bowie and Eno's song), its original context (Symphony No. 4) and its recontextualised form (the Eurostar commercial), an intricate web of interconnections can thereby be delineated. Even Serra's "working class heroism" resonates in this context. Glass, Bowie and Serra all emerged from relatively humble backgrounds; in his formative years, Glass worked as a taxi driver, as a plumber and together with Richard Serra, as a furniture mover; moreover, Serra had experience of working in steel mills.

Experience and Existentialism

The accessibility of Glass's tonality and the use of a recognised musical form presents yet another parallelism with the accessibility of Serra's sculptures, most notably the recent walkthrough sculptures. ^② By exploring perceptions of temporality, relatively recent works including "The Matter of Time" (2005) and "Open Ended" (2007–2008) involves a potent psychological effect upon the perceiver, who journeys right through the middle of the work—a process that involves an "intensification of anticipation", as Serra once noted.

① "Neu!" was formed by former members of post-minimal electronic music band Kraftwerk, Klaus Dinger and Michael Rother.

② In an interview with Klaus Ottmann, Serra refers to the accessibility of the "Maillart" work in Switzerland, which "is accessible to anyone, whether you know anything about sculpture or not" (Ottmann, 1989, p. 1).

Some years ago, I visited the Gagosian Gallery in London to view Serra's "Open Ended" exhibition; and was immediately struck by the scale, shape and the direction of the pathway, which suggests gravitational ebbs and flows when walking through the sculpture.

My own personal observation is corroborated by reviews of the work around this time: in his article for the British newspaper The Independent in 2008, Michael Glover provides a detailed account of his experiences within the sculptures, noting the "velvety, terracotta-ish" texture and colour of the steel material, the altered nature of time and the "claustrophobic" effect of certain parts of the journey, before finally emerging "into the bright, relaxed space of the gallery" (Glover, 2008, unpag.). One can argue that an existential semiotic process takes place here, wherein we are literally "seeing the signs from the inside" (Tarasti, 2000, p. 6). Following Eero Tarasti's path of existential semiotics, we can observe a transcendence from everyday life to a domain that involves unknown experiences through these maze-like installations (disorientation, loneliness, "anxiety", etc.) before re-emerging from within the installation with new knowledge, or as The Independent expresses, as "a changed man" (Glover, 2008, unpag.). Duilding on Jacob von Uexhüll's model, Tarasti's discussion on the interactivity between the Umwelt (the subjectivity of "the self") and the objectivity of the "actual physical surroundings" of the *Umgebung* seems relevant here (Tarasti, 2000, p. 38). A walk through Serra's installation arguably involves direct involvement in endosemiosis, which entails an understanding of "the processes of sign transmission inside the organism" (von Uexhüll, Geigges and Herrmann, 1993, p. 5).

Such ruminations on the relevance of existentialism in Serra's work should be supported with the note that Serra had indeed studied existentialism as part of his undergraduate studies, and was influenced in particular by

 $_{\odot}$ See Eero Tarasti's chapter "On the Paths of Existential Semiotics" in Tarasti, 2000, pp. 3—16.

Alberto Giacometti and Albert Camus^①, although Serra once proclaimed that he did not consider himself "part of the existential tradition" (Ottmann, 1989, p. 4). Moreover, Buchloh discusses the influence of phenomenology on the sculptor—a branch of philosophy that clearly relates to the existential tradition due to its predilection with the subjectivity of experiences (Buchloh, 2007, p. 57), particularly in relation to space and time. ② Rocío von Jungenfeld's following statement provides a succinct explanation of such aesthetic involvements: Serra's "work is not about representation, but about process, movement, measure, *Dasein*, and the phenomenology of place" (von Jungenfeld, 2011, p. 7).

The site-specificity and subjective involvement in the perception of Serra's installations results inherently in a strong psychological and emotional impact upon the perceiver. In musical terms, Glass' works for string quartet or the piano holds resonances with the interiority of Serra's sculptures; his String Quartet No. 2, originally commissioned for Mabou Mines's production of Samuel Beckett's existential monologue, *Company* (1979), centres on the pervading inner thoughts of an individual lying in darkness. Indeed, String Quartet No. 2 is a prime example of a work that sees a shift in Glass' compositional style. Keith Potter writes: "From 1970, Glass began his move away from a hard-line structuralist approach to one involving a more malleable attitude to sound and an increased concern with the sensuous effect of his music on the listener." (Potter, 2000, p. 269) This notion of the "sense" forms an obvious association with Sartrean existentialism, as opposed to the objectivity and impersonal state of structuralism in Glass' earlier works up to *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) (see Tarasti, 2000, p. 105). We can argue

① Buchloh refers to the fact that Glass and Serra frequented the La Coupoule brasserie in Montparnasse during their period in Paris, where Giacometti was a regular customer, although they never met (Buchloh, 2007, p. 44). The brasserie was also popular with other existentialists including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Samuel Beckett to name but a few.

② Serra refers to artists' awareness of existentialism and phenomenology in Serra, 2003, p. 36.

³ Glass chose to write a string quartet for Beckett's play as he considered that the genre matched the contemplative nature of the work: "the musical equivalent of that kind of reflective piece is normally a string quartet. The works which are considered the most introspective and private works of composers are often string quartets" (Zurbrugg 1999, p. 144).

that the malleability of Serra's materials, and the natural curves of his sculptures are equally comparable to examples of Glass' approach to musical time and harmonic voice leading.

Glass' "Façades" is a work that can be drawn out as an example of a similarity between undulating musical and visual lines.

By adopting and adapting Schenkerian techniques for the study of the piece, as apparent in the graphical reduction of Example 1, we can notice how the upper and lower voices are clearly interweaving in contrary motion—the oscillating motion of Glass' harmonic progressions, often based on semitonal steps—creates curving musical lines comparable to Serra's "Open Ended" installation, for instance. The use of such harmonic progressions create a sense of gravitational ebbs and flows (also evident in "Opening" from Glassworks, as McClary noted), and the minor tonality creates a sense of bleakness within a repetitive framework altogether in contrast to the optimism of the "Heroes" Symphony as discussed earlier. Finally, the tension and release effect of Glass' harmonies form a direct connection with the terminology used by Serra to describe the resulting effect of his most recent works. "7 Plates 6 Angles" (2013) employs more defined angles than "Open Ended" for instance, creating a sense of "compression and release" according to Serra (Crow, 2013, unpag.).



Example 1 Harmonic Reduction of "Façades" from Glassworks (1981)

① The title of the piece reveals a predilection with the surface or outward appearance (which is compatible with the minimalist aesthetic as mentioned at the outset of the essay). The music was originally intended for Godfrey Reggio's film *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), accompanying shots of New York's Wall Street, but was not used in the final soundtrack.

② Buchloh notes that Giacometti also influenced another American sculptor, Barnett Newman, whose work addressed "the sculptural dialectics of liquidity and rigidity, of flow and arrest, of uprightness and gravitational pull" (Buchloh, 2007, p. 44).

Glass and Close

In addition (or indeed in contrast) to the fluidity of the harmonic progressions apparent in "Façades", Glass' modular repetitive structures (often based on the addition or reduction of material) can be compared to those apparent in Chuck Close's artistic techniques. Since the mid-1960s, Close has drawn numerous portraits of Glass, the first of which was entitled "Phil" (1969), based on photographs subsequently transferred by hand into repetitive modular blocks on an enlarged canvas. In return, Glass wrote a two movement work entitled A Musical Portrait of Chuck Close (2005) —the first comprises alternating major/minor chords, sequences extensive scallic passages and unexpected shifts in tempo, while the second movement opens with a more subdued and dark ambience. In response to the question of whether the pieces were an accurate portrait of the artist, Close once commented: "Unless you have music that attempts to sound like rain or something like that, it's not likely that visual images come to mind. But the first movement is more like my earliest work, much more minimal and reductive, almost black and white. And the second is the musical equivalent of a riot of color." (Kazanjian, date unknown) Close's observation highlights the subjectivity of the music, a comment that resounds with Glass' views on the distance between audience and artist—an open ended-ness that allows for a subjective interpretation of music and visual art.

The ability of Glass' music to coincide with the visual domain is also strongly apparent within a filmic or televisual context, as seen earlier in the case of the Eurostar commercial. In fact, Glass' entrance to the world of film music began with a documentary film on the abstract expressionist sculptor Mark di Suvero, entitled *North Star* (1978), which paved the way for his subsequent career in film music production—a career that has brought minimalist music to mainstream Hollywood blockbusters, art films and documentaries alike. Most recently however, Glass' work has even entered into the new digital media domain.

Glass Apps—Interactive Minimalism

The release of Glass and Beck's Rework album in 2012 brought together

Glass' pre-existing works and the contribution of twelve artists with backgrounds in a vast array of genres such as indie rock, folk, chillwave, acousmatic, electro pop, jazz and post-classical styles. Artists including Beck, Peter Broderick, Amon Tobin, My Great Ghost JóhannJóhannsson—to name but a few—remixed an extensive amount of minimalist works, including Einstein on the Beach, Glassworks and North Star. Both Glass and his music have ventured into techno and post-rock environments on several previous occasions, however what sets the REWORK-compilation even further apart from earlier efforts is its co-release with a downloadable multimedia application for iPhone and iPad. ^① The app offers graphical visualisations of eleven tracks whereby the graphical material interacts with such musical parameters as rhythm, tempo and structure, and offers scope for user's interaction due to the capability of adapting the patterns slightly by using the touchscreen. Jóhann Jóhannsson's reworking of "Protest" from the opera Satyagraha (1979), for example, features weaving lines and descending rectangles that correlate with the falling 4th intervals on violin, followed by shapes that loosely represents faces and mouths when lyrics are sung. Peter Broderick's ethereral interpretation of "Islands" from Glassworks is accompanied by images resembling constellation maps that are continuously changing.

Additional to the visual representation of the music tracks, the REWORK app offers a "Glass Machine" —a function that allows the user to create basic musical patterns in the style of Glass' early works. Glass' collaboration on the project consequently demonstrates a venture into a more accessible form of association between the perceiver and the perceived, and an increased involvement in the production of minimalist based sounds—whereby, as Glass notes, "the listener becomes the artist".

The desire to create such a system was evident during the mid-1990s, as

① The app was developed by Snibbe Studios, who have released numerous music apps, including Metric's Synthetica, Björk's Biophilia and Bubble Harp.

② See .

another composer influenced by minimalist music, Brian Eno^①, presented his manifesto for the development of user generated music, or "generative music"^②, in order "to be able to sell systems for making [his] music as well as selling pieces of music. In the future, you won't buy artists' work-you'll buy software that makes original pieces of 'their' works, or that recreates their way of looking at things. You could buy [...] a Brian Eno box (Kelly, 1995, unpag. in Dietz, 2013, p. 301).

Over fifteen years later, Brian Eno's ideas were indeed realised, and the release of his "Bloom, Trope and Scape" offered different ways of interacting with visualised ambient music on a smartphone or tablet computer. While Eno's apps are more exclusively involved in user generated music and graphics, Glass's REWORK app offers an array of reworked versions of Glass' music in addition to the pattern making capabilities of the "Glass Machine". The REWORK project is consequently situated at the crossroads of minimalist music, art and new media—a scenario in which the perceiver is empowered to develop the product even further.

Conclusions

This investigation has brought to light many interconnections between various media influenced by the minimalist style. Discussions have often hinged on binary relationships—musical/artistic material, individual/society, old/new, structure/content, inside/outside, subject/object, or similarity/difference. Yet despite these formal underpinnings, the relationships are mediated in different forms, particularly as a result of their involvement with new media. Such paradigms as colour, shape, space, time, form, emotion, signification, accessibility, repetition are seemingly occupying similar grounds within different minimalist contexts. As implied by the reference to title of Serra's sculpture, the potential for perceptual interpretation and development

① British composer Brian Eno initially studied art at the Colchester Institute, thus his formative interests in music and art were intermingled.

② Steve Dietz explains that in Eno's form of "generative music" "some part of the 'decision making' process is out of Eno's hands and mind" (Dietz, 2013, p. 301), thereby the involvement of users in the creation of the music is evident to a certain extent.

of minimalist music, art and new media is consequently "open ended".

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Author:

Tristian Evans, lecturer in School of Music at Bangor University, research coordinator for the "Companion to Welsh Music" project, founded by the Welsh Federal College.

作者简介:

崔斯坦·埃文斯,英国威尔士班戈大学院音乐学讲师,威尔士联合大学"威尔士音 乐指南"项目研究协调员。

E-mail: tristian. evans@bangor. ac. uk