

## *Three Tales* by Steve Reich and Beryl Korot – Sounds, Samples and Representations

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**ABSTRACT.** The article deals with a multimedia project by Steve Reich and Beryl Korot called *Three Tales* (2002). This unique collaboration is a three-part musical piece accompanied by visuals created with digital techniques. Each part is an individual story about the risks and dangers of technological progress. Their subjects are respectively, the famous Hindenburg disaster, atomic bomb experiments at the Bikini Atoll, and the cloning of Dolly, the sheep. The author of the article attempts to show how musical and visual elements of the piece correspond with each other, and how Reich uses this unique compositional technique. *Three Tales* goes beyond standard visualisation with video projection accompanying the music. Reich and Korot managed to create an “audio-visual opera” in which sonic and visual strategies are connected in a much deeper sense. The piece traces the development of audio-visual technologies in the 20th century, and shows how the relationship between reality, its representation, and finally simulation changes in time.

**KEYWORDS:**

Steve Reich,  
Beryl Korot,  
minimalism in music,  
video art, technology,  
representation.

Contemporary music is very often accompanied by images. Many composers work with visual artists, and numerous works, initially created without any visuals, are presented with various kinds of visualisations: computer animation, films, light shows, lasers or holographic projections. Each year during the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz (Austria) a number of such works are played live. Yet, very rarely are these audio-visual presentations truly creative collaborations between musicians and media artists. Of course, there are examples of successful projects in which music and visuals cannot be separated, for example, the works of Bill Morrison, who closely collaborates with musicians such as Bill Frisell, Michael Gordon, Jóhann Jóhannsson and others – and successfully redefines the aesthetic of a “film soundtrack”.

Steve Reich is also an artist who continuously transgresses the boundaries of a musical composition. His pieces are not only elaborate explorations of formal structures, but very often go far beyond the experience of music. For a long time, Reich has been

interested in the possibilities of including narrative elements in his music. However, his “stories” are much more than just lyrics. The American composer makes the sounds themselves tell the tale. He uses samples or “sound documents” in a way which makes their diverse functions inseparable. Sampled sounds are often “tuned” and replace notes that could be played on instruments, whilst creating original narrative forms which have very little to do with literature. In his *Different Trains* (1988), the sounds of American locomotives and sampled voices of Holocaust survivors are used to execute his strategy of “speech melodies” – “Reich’s term for a type of musical transcription that attempts to replicate the distinctive rhythm, intonation and inflection of human speech” (Wlodarski 2015: 127). This strategy can also be found in other compositions created together with visual artist Beryl Korot – *The Cave* (1993) and *Three Tales* (1998–2002). While Reich does not abandon his minimalist strategies, both pieces are attempts at redefining minimal music. Eric Pietsch writes on the significance of “speech melodies” in his study about *The Cave*:

This (...) interdependence of the semantic and the acoustic enables Reich to transcend many of the self-imposed limitations of minimalist music, and to do so without abandoning the basic principles that had governed the intellectual project of minimalism. The use of speech-melody technique humanizes his music, allowing it to grow in organic, rather than mechanical, patterns. It also has the effect of enabling Reich to engage more directly in the extra-musical world of human concern, bridging the gap between political content and abstract formal procedures (Prieto 2002: 41).

*The Cave* and *Three Tales* extend strategies from *Different Trains*, not only because sound samples are much more diversified, but also because of the visual component, which plays an important role especially in the second piece. Reich does not use Korot’s visual to simply illustrate three stories behind three parts of his composition. Rather, he explores the visual material as another sample which can be used both as a semantic element, and as a part of the formal structure of the composition. In an early essay called “Music as a Gradual Process”, Steve Reich writes:

I am interested in perceptible process. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.

To facilitate closely detailed listening a musical process should happen extremely gradually (...).

What I am interested in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing (Reich 2004: 34–35).

These words have lost none of their meaning in the context of *Three Tales*. Listening to the piece allows the audience to reconstruct the process of creation of a structure, in

which every element – visual and sonic – plays a significant role. The composition is approximately 65 minutes long and consists of three separate movements linked not only by musical qualities, but also by common subjects of “playing God”, human creation and the use of technologies.

The composer describes his project thus:

The first tale, *Hindenburg*, utilizes historical footage, photographs, specially constructed stills, and a videotaped interview, which provide a setting for the archival material and text about the Zeppelin. Starting with the final explosion in Lakehurst, New Jersey, in 1937 it includes material about the Zeppelin’s construction in Germany in 1935 and its final Atlantic crossing. The unambiguously positive attitude toward technology in this era is presented through newscasters of the era.

The second, *Bikini*, is based on footage, photographs, and text from the atom bomb test at Bikini atoll in 1946–1954. It also tells of the dislocation and relocation of the Bikini people, living totally outside the Western world, which determined their fate. While *Hindenburg* is presented more or less chronologically in four discreet scenes with silence and black leader separating them, *Bikini* is arranged in three image/music blocks that recur in a non-stop cycle repeated three times, forming a kind of cyclical meditation on the documentary events. A coda briefly explores the period of time after the explosions and ends the tale. Interspersed throughout are the two stories of the creation of human beings from Genesis. Not sung but, rather, “drummed out” by the percussion and pianos, as if they existed (as indeed they do) in another dimension.

The third tale, *Dolly*, shows footage, text, and interview comments about the cloning of an adult sheep in Scotland in 1997. It then deals extensively with the idea of the human body as a machine, genetic engineering, technological evolution, and robotics. While *Hindenburg* uses only one “cameo” interview from the present to comment on the past and *Bikini* uses none, *Dolly* is filled with interview fragments from members of the scientific and religious communities.

The three tales refer not only to three moments in history, when humans wanted to master the forces of nature and replace its ways with technology, but also to three media, which provided visual samples used in the piece, and defined the realm of audio-visual experience in the 1930s, 1950s, and in the present.

Film was a dominant visual medium in the late 1930s. When the famous Zeppelin arrived in Lakehurst, journalists waited for it not only with photographic but also film cameras, ready to capture the triumph of German technology. Instead, they witnessed its catastrophe. The nuclear experiments at the Bikini Atoll were also covered by the media. Yet, in the late 1940s and especially in the 1950s, another medium attained the dominant position: television. And when *Dolly* was cloned, the Internet became the most important medium of information.

*Three Tales* are not only a successful attempt to tell stories with music, but to also deal with the problem of the presentation of reality in media. All three stories were in some way mediated or “narrated” with the use of “language” specific to film, television and the Internet respectively. Additionally, some of the elements of “visual language” were translated to the “language” of musical composition; e. g. slow motion or freeze frame. The composer explains this process in one of the interviews:

In the first movement of *Hindenburg*, for example, there’s an augmentation canon (influenced by Proverb) sung by three tenors on the words, “It could not have been a technical matter” – which is what the German ambassador said to the New York Times back in 1937 when the Zeppelin went up in flames. As the tenors augment these words, longer and longer, you also hear the famous radio announcer Herb Morrison (“Oh the humanity!”) first at normal speed, and then with his voice stretched out to many times its original length. When anyone speaks, their vowel sounds are not just a particular pitch, they’re actually glissandi sliding up or down, depending on context. Normally, the vowels go by much too quickly for us to perceive that, but when Morrison’s manic voice is enormously slowed down, you hear these glissandi with the vowels sort of smearing against the tonally stable voices of the tenors. The effect, when coupled with images of the explosion in slow motion, is definitely unsettling. Later, once in *Bikini* and constantly in *Dolly*, I use another technique I imagined in the ’60s, but couldn’t realise until just now. It’s the musical equivalent of “freeze frame” in films, when the action just stops – freezes to a still single frame. In terms of sound it can be the final vowel in the word “zero” just continuing as “oh” for several bars of music after the speaker has finished. The final sound of a spoken word is continued with no change of pitch or timbre. It’s creating a new kind of “choral” texture in *Dolly* (Reich 2004: 239).

In *Three Tales* samples (both visual and sonic) are then used in a new and innovative way:

The basic assumption in *The Cave*, and in *Different Trains*, too, was that the music would follow the speech melodies of the speakers exactly. As they spoke, so I wrote. This was completely in keeping with the subject matter; the Bible and the Koran in *The Cave* and the Holocaust in *Different Trains*. I felt it would be inappropriate to electronically manipulate the speakers in those pieces. But when I finished *The Cave*, I felt I had gone far enough in the direction of having the music determined by speech melodies of those interviewed – so many fast changes of tempo and key. I wanted to use documentary material again but make the music take the lead instead of following. In *Three Tales*, I found the solution. *Prima la musica!* Quarter-note equals 144 and I’m in three flats and if the radio announcer describing the Zeppelin’s crash isn’t speaking in three flats and quarter-note equals 144, well, he will be soon! The idea in *Three Tales* is to maintain the musical momentum of constant tempo that is such a basic part of my music as well as

the slow changes of harmonic rhythm that give it its “specific gravity” and then digitally change the sampled sound of Zeppelin motors or B-29 bomber drones or speech samples so that they fit the music. The musicians keep on playing and the sampled material just “rains down” (Reich 2014: 238–239).

The strategy used by Steve Reich is not only a tool allowing him to combine sampled material with music played live by the performers. Jelena Novak notices that the unusual technique implemented in *Three Tales* supports the meaning (or the message) of the piece:

Techniques of changing and deforming the vocal sphere in *Three Tales* coincide with the artist’s implicit critique of producing the monstrous, or “deviating the human as a clone, robot or machine. Technologically modified voices indicate that hybrid connections’ between nature and culture force us to rethink the borders between different regimes of representation (like science, politics and art). *Three Tales* deals with intersections and interrogations of science, technology, and politics. It is a polemical case study for discussing the issue of rethinking the human, which also manifests itself through body-voice relations in this post-opera (Novak 2015: 59).

Beryl Korot’s video goes far beyond the strategies of a typical visualisation. Visual and sonic components are closely linked and interwoven. Reich and Korot use the visual material not only to reconstruct historical events, but also to create a kind of matrix for innovative strategies of musical composition based on manipulated samples. What is more, they also explore the very nature of images that inspired the piece.

The first part of *Three Tales* refers to cinema (and in part photography) as a medium of representation. The event – in this case the crash of Hindenburg – pre-dates its representation, but at the same time loses its integrity and becomes a spectacle. Bill Nichols in an excellent article “The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems” expands upon concepts of Walter Benjamin:

Mechanical reproduction involves the appropriation of an original, although with film, even the notion of an original fades: that which is filmed has been organized in order to be filmed. This process of appropriation engenders a vocabulary: the ‘take’ or ‘camera shot’ used to ‘shoot’ a scene where both stopping a take and editing are called a ‘cut.’ The violent reordering of the physical world and its meanings provides the shock effects Benjamin finds necessary if we are to come to terms with the age of mechanical reproduction (Nichols 1988: 25).

The process, initiated by the medium of film, evolves with subsequent media technologies. Television replaces representation with transmission and collage, while the computer does not re-present or even present reality, it simulates it.

The transformation of the relationship between reality and its media reflection can be perfectly seen in *Three Tales*. *Hindenburg* brings back a story of a crash, which became an excellent metaphor of the haughtiness of the Third Reich. The Zeppelin was supposed to symbolise the power of Hitler. Instead, it prefigured the collapse of the Nazi empire. Thanks to photography and cinema, the catastrophe became a spectacle accessible not only to the people who waited for the Zeppelin in New Jersey, but also to others who watched the spectacular explosion on newsreels in cinemas around the globe.

Nuclear tests at the Bikini Atoll were a spectacle too. First and foremost, regardless of the official propaganda, after the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Americans knew exactly how new the weapons worked. The explosions, that led to total annihilation of the atoll, were primarily meant as a demonstration of American power, and were a part of a cold war with the Soviet Union. Yet, the nature of the spectacle was substantially different. While the crash of Hindenburg was just an unexpected accident, the explosions at the Bikini Atoll were deliberately organised to be filmed and broadcast. In this case the event did not really predate the spectacle. It was a spectacle! The images from Bikini were obviously televised almost “live”.

The cloning of Dolly became a media event too. Paradoxically, the process in itself was not spectacular at all. There was almost nothing to show:

(...) in Act 3 – *Dolly* – the story is basically short. She was cloned and we’ll see how she’s doing – not too much to tell. What’s interesting are the potentially useful and the undoubtedly terrifying genetic possibilities floating around now. For instance, are we going to continue to sexually reproduce or are we going to go to the baby store? This seems to be on the way (Reich 2014: 240).

This is why the public was so excited, and wanted to “see” the story of the most famous sheep in the world. What could not be shown in the traditional sense, had to be simulated with the use of diagrams, visualisations, schemata, etc. Cloning experiments of the late 1990s coincided with the transformation of the Internet. It was after 1995 when the new medium became a multimedia platform containing all antecedent media technologies. It also became a perfect tool to tell the story of Dolly.

It may be a little surprising, that the final part of *Three Tales* is the longest, and – as we can assume – the most important, despite the sparse visual material it was based on. Yet, it can be easily explained, when we consider Steve Reich’s fascination with Jewish tradition. The composer discovered the legacy of his people through music. He started studying Hebrew cantillation after his visit to Israel in the late 1970s, where he recorded Sephardic Jews singing holy scriptures. Their vocal technique became one of the most important influences on Reich’s music together with West African drumming and Ba-

lines gamelan music. Later, Reich started discovering the meanings behind traditional Jewish music, and referred to them in many of his works including *Tehillim* (1981) and obviously *Three Tales*. In *Dolly*, Reich relates to the Jewish legend about Golem – a creature created by Jehuda Löw ben Becalel. Golem, which despite being able to act like a human lacked *neshamah* – the Hebrew word for soul or spirit. He was made of clay, and was unable to speak or feel any emotions. The story of Golem refers to the relationship between humans and God. A human being is God's creation, but he himself cannot play God pretending to be able to create new life.

The cloning of Dolly may be the first step in the attempt to create “artificial” human beings, and as such it is a violation of God's order. Reich and Korot decided to discuss three moments from history, when people tried to master the forces of nature. The catastrophe of the Hindenburg and nuclear tests at the Bikini Atoll led to obvious destruction. The story of Dolly seems different: instead of death and annihilation, new life was created. But is playing God really safe? Reich and Korot do not criticise science as such, but remind their audience about the origins of the Zeppelin's crash and the destruction of the Bikini Atoll. Both acts occurred as a consequence of breakthrough scientific discoveries. Yet, in both cases new technologies were used improperly.

*Dolly* also refers to the process of simulation. Representation and broadcasting (in cinema and television) were obviously entangled in some kind of ideology. No media-transmitted image is neutral, not only because of a possible intentionally concealed “message”, but also because of the very nature of the above mentioned processes. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* – as Rene Magritte puts it. No image is innocent, and every representation is no more than a representation, no matter how “realistic” it seems. Yet, in the computer age, we take another possibly dangerous step forward. Simulation can break with reality completely, and yet be so alluringly real. At this point, let me quote Bill Nichols again:

Simulacra introduce the key question of how the control of information moves towards control of sensory experience, interpretation, intelligence, and knowledge. The power of the simulation moves to the heart of the cybernetic matter. It posits the simulation as an imaginary Other which serves as the measure of our own identity and, in doing so, prompts the same form of intense ambivalence that the mothering parent once did, as a guarantee of identity based on what can never be made part of oneself. In early capitalism, the human was defined in relation to an animal world that evoked fascination and attraction, repulsion and resentment. The human animal was similar to but different from all other animals. In monopoly capitalism, the human was defined in relation to a machine world that evoked its own distinctive blend of ambivalence. The human machine was similar to but different from all other machines. In post-industrial capitalism, the human is defined in relation to cybernetic systems, computers, biogenetically

engineered organisms, ecosystems, expert systems, robots, androids, and cyborgs all of which evoke those forms of ambivalence reserved for the Other that is the measure of ourselves (Nichols 1988: 30).

*Three Tales* is certainly much more than a musical piece accompanied by visuals. The composition by Steve Reich and Beryl Korot is a rare example of a true multimedia work, in which visual and sonic elements are closely interrelated. It is also a critique of technology articulated in the language of... technology. We must not forget that *Three Tales* can only exist thanks to computers.

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## Steve'o Reicho ir Beryl Korot „Trys istorijos“ – garsai, ruošiniai ir reprezentacijos

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnis apžvelgia Steve'o Reicho ir Beryl Korot multimedijos projektą *Three Tales* („Trys istorijos“, 2002). Iš šio unikalaus bendradarbiavimo gimė trijų dalių muzikinis kūrinys su skaitmeninėmis technologijomis kurtu vaizdiniu. Kiekviena dalis – tai individuali istorija apie technologinio progreso riziką ir pavojus. Jų temos – garsioji Hindenburgo katastrofa, atominiai bandymai Bikini atole ir avies Dolly klonavimas. Straipsnio autorius siekia pademonstruoti muzikinių ir vizualinių elementų ryšį šiame kūrinyje, taip pat unikalią Reicho komponavimo techniką. *Three Tales* pranoksta įprastinį vaizdo projekcijos ir muzikos derinimą. Reichui ir Korot pavyko sukurti „audiovizualinę operą“, pasižyminčią gilesniu garsinių ir vaizdinių strategijų ryšiu. Kūrinyje pristatoma audiovizualinės technologijos raida XX a., demonstruojama, kaip laikui bėgant kinta ryšys tarp realybės, jos pateikimo ir simuliacijos.

#### REIKŠMINIAI

#### ŽODŽIAI:

Steve Reich, Beryl Korot, muzikinis minimalizmas, videomenas, technologija, reprezentacija.