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Parallel Worlds in Performance

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ABSTRACT

The artistic techniques of mimesis—the representation of reality in art—make it possible to “render the unreal familiar or the real strangely unfamiliar.” The author, a composer and intermedia artist, uses mimetic techniques in acoustic composition, video art and field recording to reimagine everyday experience, as in his multimedia piece *Landscape: Home*. The author analyzes passages from the novel *Sputnik Sweetheart* by Haruki Murakami to understand Murakami’s use of “parallel worlds” and the “reality effect.” This literary analysis aims to highlight the potential of mimetic techniques for artistic practice in sound and image, particularly in the author’s *Landscape* series.

Haruki Murakami is a Japanese novelist, short story writer, essayist and translator of fiction from English into Japanese. In addition to commercial success, Murakami has won two of the world’s most notable literary awards (the Franz Kafka Prize and the Jerusalem Prize) and is the subject of an emerging body of scholarly literature [1]. In this article, I examine Murakami’s novel *Sputnik Sweetheart* to uncover some of the mimetic devices at work in the text. I then use this literary mimetic analysis as a toolkit for understanding my own creative work in the multimedia piece *Landscape: Home*.

Murakami’s novels and short stories are excellent case studies in mimesis because Murakami is able to create a subtly warping, unstable sense of reality using the realist mode of literary description [2]. To the reader, events that begin as a normal reality gradually become more surreal and intangible. This is an example of the mimetic devices used in science fiction and magical realism—authors use the same realist techniques as any other genre, yet with subject matter that can deviate wildly from everyday reality.

Murakami’s perspective on writing itself is illuminating when it comes to understanding his mimetic techniques. In an interview concerning his novel *Kafka on the Shore*,

Murakami spoke about a two-story house as an analogy for human existence (and regarding his creative process). The first floor of the house is a communal space for eating, watching television and talking; the second floor is a private space for sleeping or reading; and the basement is used for storage. Then, there is a subbasement:

This [subbasement] has a very special door, very difficult to figure out, and normally you can’t get in there—some people never get in at all. . . . You go in, wander about in the darkness, and experience things there you wouldn’t see in the normal parts of the house. You connect with your past there, because you have entered into your own soul. But then you come back. If you stay over there for long you can never get back to reality. My sense is that a novelist is someone who can consciously do that sort of thing [3].

As a novelist, Murakami tries to “connect with [his] past” and “[enter] into [his] own soul” in a mental space that is explicitly *not* everyday reality. By Murakami’s definition, a “novelist is someone who can consciously” travel to this “other world.”

Matthew Carl Strecher defines the “other world” in Murakami’s fiction as “the metaphysical realm . . . the inner narrative” and also “the collective Narrative . . . that results from the entire history . . . of human experience” [4]. This is a surreal (or unreal) expression of the self and the human experience. The “over there” is simultaneously external and internal—the magical resonating in the subconscious.

The “over there” is a realm of unique insight into the human experience. Moreover, Murakami’s “over there” blurs the real and the imagined—the realm of the metaphysical is made tangible as a physical space where actual events can take place, a so-called magical real.

My sense is that an *artist*—not only a writer of fiction—can consciously reach into the realm of the intangible, regardless of medium. One way the artist can accomplish this is through the use of mimetic artistic techniques—that is, techniques that evoke everyday reality and activate memories and

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experiences in the mind of the audience. Not only can the artist in any medium potentially explore the “other side” through playing with the representation of reality, but some artists create work that specifically focuses on this topic.

Time-based media such as film/video, acoustic music and sound recordings have a different potential to evoke reality than fiction because they relate differently to the audience’s experiences and memory. This is best evidenced through Roland Barthes’ “reality effect” and through my own proposed “audio reality effect.”

THE REALITY EFFECT AND THE AUDIO REALITY EFFECT

In his essay “The Reality Effect,” Barthes argues that literary realism is not actually tied to reality at all but is a mere social construction. This is the “social contract of realism,” in which a “realistic” work uses convention to represent reality. According to Barthes, a fragmentary, concrete detail in the midst of a realistic description of a scene will refer directly to the category of the real, thus creating an overall effect of reality for the reader [5]. This “reality effect” is one of the major artistic techniques of mimesis.

The “audio reality effect” is the application of the reality effect to the realm of sound. Specifically, this effect occurs when a listener, after identifying the source of a sound used in a musical context, infers and superimposes their own memories and experiences into their experience of the piece [6].

In his work, Murakami often uses concrete details such as musical recordings to achieve this effect of reality [7]. These references act to ground the text in the experiences and memories of the reader, making the experience of reading feel more true to life.

Murakami’s website (run by his publisher) even has streaming playlists of the music in his novels so that readers can listen to the works referenced [8]. This can expand the reality effects of the text even more for the reader, as they share a sonic experience with Murakami’s characters while reading. Since audio recordings are “exact” replicas of their original acoustic contexts (otherwise known as simulacra) [9], readers are sharing an imitation of sonic reality with Murakami’s characters, who are themselves mimetic constructions. This is a mimetic exponent; we are even more susceptible to Murakami’s bending of reality since we are sharing it with his characters in multiple (imagined) senses.

Murakami is not the only artist who is interested in creating an immersive and mimetic surreality for his audience. For example, in my *Landscape* series, I explore the idea of landscape as a multimedia experience rather than a two-dimensional representation [10]. By combining instrumental music, soundscape composition [11] and video art, I seek to juxtapose multiple places and streams of time through my artistic imagination. The result is a mimetic surreal comparable to the “other side” utilized by Murakami. I will examine this connection further by comparing techniques in *Sputnik Sweetheart* with my own *Landscape: Home*.

THE OTHER WORLD IN SPUTNIK SWEETHEART

The novel *Sputnik Sweetheart* showcases Murakami’s use of the “other side” to create a sense of the mimetic surreal [12]. One alluring example is the climax of the novel. In this section, the protagonist Sumire has mysteriously gone missing while on a trip with her boss, Miu, to a Greek island. As the narrator, “K.,” fruitlessly searches for Sumire, he realizes that “Sumire went over to the *other side*.” In her own words, Sumire had entered “the world of dreams.”

As K. reflects on the situation, he falls asleep while listening to a collection of Mozart works and wakes to some other, mysterious music coming from outside, a “far-off music, barely audible.” K. leaves the house, searching for the source of the music. Significantly, outside “the lights in the neighborhood are all out” and there is “no wind, not even the sound of waves.” All the normal sounds (and images) of the seaside neighborhood have been conspicuously suppressed, leaving only the music “coming from the top of the hills” and the moonlight “bathing the earth.”

Several factors in this passage illustrate our travel from the realm of everyday reality to the “other side.” For one, K. first listens to music mediated by technology—on a stereo playing a cassette—that has an understood process of recording, manufacturing and consumption. We are even provided the names of the composer and performers of the recording, fixing it in the mind of the reader as a product of reality [13].

The music that awakens K. from the “other side” is the music of dreams, memory or the subconscious and has no discernible source (or instrumentation). K. goes from listening to a recording that the reader may have heard before to a music that is intangible to both him and the reader. The reader is likely familiar with the sound of classical music recordings coming through speakers (and so the reader may insert their experience of these sounds into their reading by the reality effect). But then K. goes from this very tangible experience of listening to a *sourceless listening*—an experience outside the realm of reality, a sort of mimetic “unreality” effect. This progression is depicted in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Mimetic space resulting from music in *Sputnik Sweetheart* [27].
(© Chaz Underriner)

Fig. 2. Screenshot from demo version of *Landscape: Home*, using video shot in the interior of the Tokyo Station Hotel. (© Chaz Underriner)

This sort of mimetic turn is well understood in the electroacoustic music literature and can be categorized in multiple ways. This is an example of sound-and-source disconnect, a fracturing of what Denis Smalley calls “source bonding”—in which a listener associates a given sound with a real-world source [14]. In this case, the reader associates a given sound in the text with no source at all, a mimetic manipulation of R. Murray Schafer’s *schizophonia* [15] or an implementation of Trevor Wishart’s idea of imaginary landscape in electroacoustic music, an “unreal-object [in] real-space” [16].

Furthermore, this changing mimetic effect has been clarified by Simon Emmerson in electroacoustic music using his “Language Grid” of discourse (aural versus mimetic) and syntax (abstract versus abstracted) [17], refined by Rajmil Fischman as applied to the spectrum of mimetic results [18] and applied to “visual music” by Bret Battey and Fischman [19] and Diego Garro [20].

Murakami takes a topic relevant to electroacoustic music and smoothly integrates it into his work, using mimesis as a “kind of magical baptism” [21] to make the other side more tangible to the reader. He uses music as a transcendent agent, with the power to separate “soul from spirit.”

In my own work, I combine field recordings and video art with instrumental music in an attempt to achieve a related result—using instrumental music to alter the audience’s perception of sounds and images from everyday life and, conversely, using sounds and images from everyday life to recontextualize musical sounds within a mimetic real [22]. Use of materials that represent the real world, such as field re-

cordings, can act like Murakami’s “magical baptism” to make musical performances more vividly surreal and to create a tangible time for the embodiment of memory.

One conclusion I have reached in creating the *Landscape* series is that the careful use of mimetic artistic techniques has the capacity to transform the audience’s perception, to unlock the power of “realism” for musical expressivity and to act as a portal to the “other side.” This is by no means a new idea, but an understanding of the techniques of mimesis in literature can open up more possibilities for techniques that might plausibly be used in time-based media. For an exploration of one such possibility, let’s examine my piece *Landscape: Home*.

THE OTHER WORLD IN *LANDSCAPE: HOME*

Landscape: Home is a 10-minute multimedia reflection on the notion of “home” that uses electric guitar, two video projections and surround-sound audio [23]. *Landscape: Home* combines video and audio taken from Japan and Florida. The work reflects on the idea of home, examining it both as a single place and as a hypnotic, dislocated experience of the world (Fig. 2).

The electric guitarist in the work is meant to function as the “ground” or normal mode of perception for the audience (like the Mozart recording in *Sputnik Sweetheart*). To be more precise, the guitar utilizes the “abstracted” syntax and “aural” discourse associated with the Western classical music canon [24], and the work was composed in an intuitive, rather than systematic, fashion. Simply put, seeing a performer onstage is consistent with a “normal concert” situation, and the content

Fig. 3. Screenshot of the left screen in *Landscape: Home* at 3:00 into the performance. (© Chaz Underriner)

the guitarist plays sounds something like an audience member would expect to hear [25].

Musically, the guitar plays three sets of material composed around C-minor that, after a pause in the middle of the piece, are repeated with a kind of just intonation. This simple transformation alters the musical material by changing the acoustic beating patterns emphasized in the composition. This shift is intended as a small musical analogy, transforming the “normal” to the “surreal” through a subtle change in tuning.

In contrast, the images in the video projections evoke everyday reality but, through a process of layering and counterpoint, range from representational to abstract in appearance. The processed field recordings in surround sound were made using recordings in Japan and Florida. In general, the sounds in the speakers don’t line up with images shot from the same time or location. For example, at 3:00 the audience sees a rainy landscape collage in the left video projection (featuring traditional Japanese structures; see Fig. 3); this landscape is juxtaposed with rain sounds in the speakers.

The compositional intent is for the audience to associate the rain sounds together with the image—for the video to act as the mimetic surreal while the audio evokes reality. The image is a layered combination of three shots of Nijō Castle with two shots of Kyoto Station, and the sound is a combination of multiple filtered field recordings of rain from different locations in Florida and Japan, only one of which corresponds to a layer in the video.

Both the sound and the image are significantly processed, and yet they are intended to evoke a unified mimetic space/time—this is an example of “allegorical” audiovisual association, where “sounds and visuals are similarly manipulated,

but not necessarily in synch, so they may be seen as metaphors of one another on the basis of general descriptive categories, even when occurring at different times within the work” [26].

Set against the sounds of the guitar, the field recordings and video attempt to pull the viewer into a mimetic surreal or unreal. Depending on the subjective perceptions of the audience members, they may experience this combination as a kind of “other side,” an experience of the world that is fragmented, bent and recombined through memory and reflection.

As a piece that I wrote for myself to play, the work is inherently personal (and embodied). I view the video and field-recording material as a form of reflection—it’s almost as if the projected images and sounds are the “inner world” of the guitarist’s memories projected above them onstage as they play. In this way, *Landscape: Home* tries to articulate multiple spheres of thought at once—the externally expressive (in music performance) is juxtaposed with the subconscious, the internal. This matches Strecher’s definition of the “other world” in Murakami’s work; however, *Landscape: Home* asks the audience to simultaneously perceive both everyday reality and the “other side” through real-time performance, as shown in Fig. 4.

In place of a typical Murakami portal—e.g. a well, mysterious Greek music or a Ferris wheel in an abandoned theme park—the layering of high-definition field recordings is intended to act as a portal in *Landscape: Home*; the performer onstage embodies the everyday, individual experience of the world, while the “other side” is audiovisually projected around the performer.

Fig. 4. Mimetic design of the “other world” through multimedia counterpoint in *Landscape: Home*. (© Chaz Underriner)

CONCLUSION

In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, the “other world” is a different dimension that makes people disappear and that emits enigmatic signals to the land of the living. In *Landscape: Home*, the “other world” is evoked from the sounds and images that seem to float around the individual onstage, that project memories of places on top of one another, that articulate an intangible world of memory. Rather than music being a ghostly transmission, in *Landscape: Home* music acts as a stimulant for internal reflection.

My contribution to the catalog of mimetic artistic techniques in *Landscape: Home* is to propose that field recordings and video projection can be used to evoke an “other world” by merging multiple times and spaces into a surreal experience of the everyday. This proposition is grounded in the “reality effect” and the “audio reality effect” and is an application of Murakami’s “other world” to music and multimedia art.

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